

ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE
FILM AND TV SCHOOL

BACHELOR'S THESIS

Prague, 2021

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ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE

FILM AND TV SCHOOL

Photography

BACHELOR'S THESIS

**Aleksei Gastev and His Relevance in Art
Practice**

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Date of thesis defense:

Academic title granted: BcA.

Prague, 2021

AKADEMIE MÚZICKÝCH UMĚNÍ V PRAZE

FILMOVÁ A TELEVIZNÍ FAKULTA

Fotografie

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

**Alexei Gastev a Jeho Důležitost v Umělecké
Praxi**

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Datum obhajoby:
Přidělovaný akademický titul: BcA.

Praha, 2021

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Abstract in English

My bachelor work focuses on the vision of Soviet Russian ultra-Taylorist Alexei Gastev and his fascination with turning man into steel, and so into a machine. Gastev`s ideas are compared to broadly contemporaneous discussions in avant-garde arts, specifically to the programme of the constructivist group. In addition to an overview of his thoughts and intentions I examine the political ideology of Gastev, showing possible similarities of him and the Italian futurists. The inevitable relationship with the USSR`s political regime is looked into, and reviewed on ideological and practical levels regarding Gastev`s life and work.

Abstract in Czech

V mé bakalářské práci se zaměřuji na vizi sovětského ultra-Tayloristy Alexei Gasteva a na jeho fascinaci přeměňovat člověka na ocel a stroj. Gastevovi myšlenky přirovnávám k současným diskusím v avantgardním umění, a to konkrétně k programu konstruktivistické skupiny. Kromě přehledu jeho myšlenek a závěrů zkoumám Gastevovu politickou ideologii, jež ukazuje možné podobnosti s italskými futuristy. Dále se v práci zabývám jeho nevyhnutelným vztahem k politickému režimu SSSR, což převádím do ideologické a praktické roviny Gastevova života a díla.

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Introduction

In this paper, I will focus on the vision of Soviet Russian ultra-taylorist Alexei Gastev and his fascination with turning man into steel, and so into a machine. Gastev's ideas will be compared to broadly contemporaneous discussions in avant-garde arts and specifically to the programme of the constructivist group. In addition to an overview of his thoughts and intentions, I will hypothesize how the constructivist group could have fit into Gastev's new culture of the proletariat as well as ask whether Gastev was tied to any ideology, or if the Soviet state was the only one to give a platform for his ideas. I will examine some themes of Gastev and their similarities to Italian futurism and fascism. Gastev's romantic fascination with the man as an apparatus and his goal to turn the whole proletariat into one big collective mass was a highly controversial and utopian project. Notwithstanding Gastev's utilitarian reasoning, it is interesting to notice that it might just have been an aestheticization of a society, rather than being a real plan to transform it.

Gastev's Life

Alexei Gastev was one of the most prominent proletarian poets and revolutionary labor organizers. Gastev had a relatively short life, spanning only from 1882 until 1941, when he was executed as part of Stalin's purges. Even though he was very popular during the revolutionary period, and Lenin was one of his most reliable supporters, during Stalin's era, he was simply swept under the rug. Only in 1956 after the fall of Stalin's regime and 15 years after Gastev's death, was he rehabilitated.¹

Gastev started his studies in the teacher's college in Moscow in the very last years of the 19th century, either in 1898 or 1899. During his time in school, he developed an interest in industrial technology and started to attend courses for carpentry and metal work. After three years of studies, Gastev was expelled from the school for "revolutionary activities" and he was sentenced to prison. This started Gastev's long period of being in prison, fleeing the country and returning to work under a pseudonym. He mostly worked as a political agitator, journalist or a metalworker. Changes between prison, life abroad, and pseudonyms came to an end shortly before the October revolution. During the period from 1902 to 1917 he was sentenced to prison and/or exile for about 10 years. He always managed to escape, and only did approximately two and half years of his sentences.² As Paris was a popular destination for Russian revolutionaries, Gastev lived there for quite some time with his fellow like-minded comrades, occupying his time with metal work and journalism.³ During his time there he grew fond of Syndicalist ideas, as he was able to observe them up-close.

¹ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp.9

² Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 57

³ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 12

Syndicalism included anti-political and parliamentary features that he preferred over the socialist democratic principles.⁴

After his permanent return to Russia in 1913, he was exiled to the city of Narym, where he worked as a journalist and an agitator in many proletarian gatherings. During his time there he produced many literary and journalistic works portraying the working-class. In 1915 he fled his exile to the city of Tomsk, where he worked for a cold storage plant. In Tomsk, Gastev contributed to the local socialist democrat magazine and later became its main editor for a short period of time. It was during the same year that he published a short autobiography in the magazine, announcing that he would be using his official name again. The fear of prison declined and after years of writing under the pseudonym "*Odinokij*" (*the solitary one*) Gastev "came out" as Aleksej Kapitonovic Gastev.⁵

From 1917 Gastev was elected the general secretary of the All-Russian Metalworkers' Union. In 1918 the Bolsheviks started to favor the Taylorist system, and Gastev could start his first job as a re-organizer of the Soviet industry. Two years later, Gastev founded the Institute of Labor (TSIT). Its one and only goal was to revolutionize the industry and to educate the Russian proletariat by using modified methods and principles of Taylorism.⁶ Gastev had many opponents, such as the ideologues, who criticized his proposition to adopt Taylorism methods as they didn't want capitalist products to influence the socialist state. They believed that the USSR should develop their own methods of organization. Gastev belonged to the *pragmatists*, who believed that the Soviet state should take everything it could from the far further developed Western countries, and only modify their innovations to serve the socialist state.⁷

⁴ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 45

⁵ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp.54-56

⁶ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 63

⁷ Sochor, Zenovia A. 1981. "Soviet Taylorism Revisited." (In *SOVIET STUDIES*, vol. XXXIII, no. 2, April 1981, pp., 246-264.)

In the mid 1920's, out of the 117 million people in Russia, 78 million were illiterate and only 24% had received any vocational training.⁸ Gastev's Institute of Labor had to provide the training needed to get the Soviet state back on its feet. According to Gastev, the medicine for this was a combination of strict rules and organization. His keenness to machine-like precision can be noticed from his brochure "*How to work*"⁹:

"Before getting down to work, you must think it through, get a firm mental grasp on a model of the finished piece of work and the entire series of work operations leading to it. If you cannot think it all through to the end, then think about the main points, and get the first parts of the work down pat."

His goals of turning the proletariat into a mere mass were not only criticized because of Taylorism methods, but also because of the overall goal. Gastev's opponent, P. Kerzencev (part of the ideologues) said: "*Oh, Taylor, it is you! The CIT people have learned well your approach to the worker – from on high, with money in your fist, with obscure formulas and a distrust of his (workers) consciousness.*"¹⁰ One can clearly notice that the ideologues didn't think well of Gastev's goal to form a collective mass as they thought it was degrading towards the workers abilities. As a huge percentage of Russians were uneducated and illiterate, Gastev didn't believe that the Russian worker could revolutionize the industry¹¹ which is why drastic reorganization and education was needed.

Gastev was the head of TSIT for its whole existence, spanning over 17 years. He had great influence on Soviet industry from the revolution until the end of his life. His enthusiasm of practicality and his emphasis on the importance of everyday life sums up the whole mindset of 1920's Russia. Already in the mid 1920's, Gastev had managed to train about half a million workers and another 20 thousand instructors. According to prediction, Gastev's institute would have managed to educate about a

⁸ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 106

⁹ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 110

¹⁰ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 107

¹¹ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 51

million workers before the 1940's.¹² Besides educating the proletariat, TSiT introduced many scientific studies of work, revolutionizing the whole industry¹³. Sadly, Gastev's life ended prematurely on October 1, 1941, in the Moscow suburbs where he was shot after a short trial.¹⁴

¹² Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 106-107

¹³ Gastev, The ultra-Taylorist Soviet utopianism of Aleksei. n.d. *The Carnel House*. <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2011/12/07/the-ultra-taylorist-soviet-utopianism-of-aleksei-gastev-including-gastevs-landmark-book-how-to-workкак-надо-работать/>.

¹⁴ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 117

What Gastev Wanted to Achieve

Gastev's ideas were not limited to the factories but ranged to all parts of life. Thus, his goal was to create a whole new proletarian culture, in which the principles of Taylorism were applied to all aspects of life. To achieve this, Gastev envisioned the fusion of the man and the machine, calling it "machinism". His desire for complete uniformity would mean the standardization of the factory and the life outside. Gastev thought that the factory would eventually merge with the rest of the world, becoming one big laboratory of life.¹⁵ Standards would answer all aspects of being: food, housing, intellectual questions, aesthetics and even intimate sexual relations were to be under strict control. Machinism would inevitably result in the loss of individuality, and so transform the society into a one big harmonious mass of collective beings.¹⁶

In search of machinism, metal and iron played a huge role – both in their physical and ideological essence. It was an important part of modern industry, but it also worked as a metaphor for the workers revolution. Gastev's goal was to turn the proletarian into a machine. He sought to transform the flesh of the worker to the hard essence of the machine: metal. The revolutionary idea of organizing the proletariat was thought of as the transformation of iron to steel. The proletariat was to become one big flow of metal with limitless possibilities for different transformation: "*Steel; it is malleable; it can be made to flow like water; but it can also be hard, even brittle; and it can rust.*"¹⁷

¹⁵ Vaingurt, Julia. 2013. *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde*. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.) pp. 41

¹⁶ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 67-68

¹⁷ Hellebust, Rolf. 1997. "Aleksei Gastev and the Metallization of the Revolutionary Body." (In *Slavic Review Autumn, 1997, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997)*), 500-518. Cambridge University Press.) pp. 502

Importance of Foreign Technologies to Soviet Russia

Gastev believed that the only way he could achieve his goal was to “self-colonize” Russia.¹⁸ He wanted to introduce foreign systems and technologies to the backward Russian industries. America had a good reputation among Russian people at the time, especially in the circles of avant-garde artists and the proletarian intelligentsia. The United States was seen as realization of their futurist ideas.¹⁹

As most of the technologies Gastev wanted to import to Russia were developed in the United States, a term called Americanization became relevant. In Gastev’s eyes, the goal of Americanization was not to turn Russia into the same old America, but to another, new, and even greater America. In this vision, Gastev imagined miracles of technology and industry; beautiful cities filled with skyscrapers and steel rails showing the way to a better, more technologically advanced society.²⁰ Taylorism was one of Gastev’s main sources of inspiration and it appealed to Russian leaders as it didn’t require a skilled laborer. As the Soviet proletariat was not educated at all, the idea fit perfectly to the situation of the industry in the USSR. Italian communist Antonio Gramsci’s note resonates with Gastev: “*Ford’s industrial techniques constitute the biggest collective effort to date to create, with unprecedented speed, and with a consciousness of purpose unmatched in history, a new type of worker and man.*”²¹

Getting Rid of Russianness – a Cultureless Society

“Gastev sought to expel everything he associated with Russianness (disorder, weakness, wastefulness), transcending the concept of nationality and replacing it with the universal identity of the machine.”²² In search of universality, Gastev’s plan of the new society included the abolition of personal qualities such as names, language and traditions. He wanted to regulate food and other “pleasurable” acts. These restrictions

¹⁸ Bailes, Kendall E. 1977. "ALEXEI GASTEV AND THE SOVIET CONTROVERSY OVER TAYLORISM, 1918-24." (In *SOVIET STUDIES*, vol. XXIX, no. 3, July 1977, , 373-94.) pp. 385

¹⁹ Vaingurt, Julia. 2013. *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde*. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.) pp. 149-150

²⁰ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp.100

²¹ Vaingurt, Julia. 2013. *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde*. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.) pp. 158

²² Vaingurt, Julia. 2013. *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde*. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.) pp. 26

were to constitute for the creation of the new anonymous psychology of the proletariat.²³

Gastev was far from satisfied with Russians' working morale. He felt that they were lazy, only waiting for something to happen, rather than taking action to achieve change: "...our first thought is not of action, but of how to get out of exertion and action."²⁴ People who were not satisfied with their working conditions but expected a revolution to happen with zero effort annoyed Gastev. He saw laziness as the main obstacle for the revolution. For him military precision, discipline and efficiency were key values of his new culture. The climax for the new society was the formation of the "red army" of workers. "*We must infect the people with the demon of work and turn the USSR into the Devil of Energy. Then we will triumph. More, then we will conquer the entire world.*" – manifested Gastev.²⁵

Russian working morale was not the only thing that Gastev sought to change in the Russian culture. He wanted to modify the Russian language, for it to be more utilitarian and machine-like. He didn't like its old "sluggishness", with entire philosophies for saying simple sentences like "yes" or "I'm listening".²⁶ To Gastev, the transformation of language was only a natural step towards machinism: "*If the body works like a machine, the language it produces to signal its needs should correspond to machine-like rhythm.*"²⁷ Gastev's closest attempt to create such language was his *Packet of Orders*.²⁸

²³ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp.68

²⁴ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 109-110

²⁵ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 112

²⁶ Vaingurt, Julia. 2013. *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde*. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.) pp. 48

²⁷ Vaingurt, Julia. 2013. *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde*. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.) pp. 49

²⁸ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp.93

Order 02:²⁹

Chronometer, report to duty.

To the machines.

Rise.

Pause.

A charge of attention.

Supply.

Switch on.

Self-propulsion.

Stop.

The New Standardized Psychology of The Proletariat

To get rid of the distinction between work and leisure time and to realize the utopia where the factory and the outside world are merged into one big laboratory of life, not only did society require major changes, but also the mind of the people. According to Gastev, the key element in creating a new kind of psychology was to produce a completely new way of educating people. Gastev's goal was not only to change the mindset of the working-class, but to make their physical appearance and precision as machine-like as possible.³⁰

Standardized psychology was to create harmony and regularity in the society. According to Gastev, it would help to organize the proletarian mass, which was the first and foremost important step in order to make Soviet Russia catch up with the more developed West. He thought that the proletariat was in need of "psychological sorting". Each individual would go through a training of approximately six months, after which the worker would acquire a psychological passport, outlining their traits and suitability for different positions of society.³¹

Gastev was very keen to study the methods by which acrobats, magicians, and athletes gained their strength and reflexes. He thought of it as a living proof that the

²⁹ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 52

³⁰ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 111-112

³¹ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 112

human body could indeed be trained to become extremely precise, strong and agile.³² He envisioned the future of traineeship and education to be systemized and to begin already from the age of two – not from the age of 16, as the law of the time mandated.³³ Biomechanics played a huge role in Gastev's vision of creating a machine out of a man. Biomechanics were examining humans from a very instrumental and technical point of view. Gastev described his institute's (TSIT) attitude to the study of the human body in following terms: "*Our first task consists in working with that magnificent machine that is so close to us - the human organism. This machine possesses a sophisticated mechanics, including automatism and a swift transmission. Should we not study it? The human organism has a motor, "gears", shock absorbers, sophisticated brakes, delicate regulators, even manometers . . . There should be a special science, biomechanics, which can be developed in refined laboratory conditions.*"³⁴

The idea of laboratory examination of the human body and psyche was very influential after the first world war. "Psychotechnique" was a specific area of psychology, focusing only on experimental observations extensively used in industry and labor studies. Frederick W. Taylor, after whom Taylorism is named, was a pioneer in certain areas of psychotechnique.³⁵ He used it to create principles and methods for organization of work. His studies were made to find the perfect position of the body, tools, and materials, as well as lighting and ventilation of the working spaces. Taylor's main goal was to make the worker as efficient as possible, with no regard to one's working conditions. Each of these areas was a huge inspiration to Gastev. He executed many studies regarding "psychotechnique", so that he could modify Taylorism to the needs of the Soviet state.³⁶

³² Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 104

³³ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 113

³⁴ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 113

³⁵ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 70

³⁶ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 70-71

This new psychological order would allow the abolition of individual names, and instead let the workers to be categorized and classified as A, B, C or 123. There wouldn't be lyricism anymore, and the proletarian mass would be formed: "...*emotions are measured not by screams, not by laughter, but by manometers and taxometers.*"³⁷ The desirable outcome is that after the necessary steps have been taken, the machine would take control of the crowds. This so-called "engineering" of the masses is what Gastev thought of as *Iron mechanics*.³⁸

Gastev's Poetry and Journalism

Gastev was one of the most prominent proletarian writers, both in poetry and in journalism. Before the revolution Gastev dedicated himself to writing, as it was an effective way to agitate the working class through different forms of publication. He was actively pushing his writings to be published up until the early 1920's when his Institute of Labor (TSIT) took shape, after which he fully devoted himself to the management of labor.³⁹

The style of Gastev's writing was very succinct, rarely conveying his subjective opinions of the given issue. However, once his feelings became visible, one might notice a rather strong impact from symbolism. His writings are not beautiful depictions but rather standing raw and utilitarian.⁴⁰ He is intentionally restricting himself, as Julian Vaingurt notes: "*Falling in love with one's oppressor can be said to constitute a reappropriation of the will; welcoming oppression, Gastev ceased to be oppressed*".⁴¹ His aims to restrict and standardize the society are reflected also in the style of his writing. He regulates himself and generally categorizes his observations of individuals, thus creating collective depictions.⁴²

³⁷ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 68

³⁸ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 68

³⁹ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 109

⁴⁰ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 43

⁴¹ Vaingurt, Julia. 2013. *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde*. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.) pp. 39

⁴² Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 43

The themes in Gastev's writing come from his observations of the surrounding society and of the proletariat in particular. Gastev's criticism towards the capitalist working environment can be seen in his writing; in many examples Gastev describes the capitalist factory as depressive and oppressive. Especially after his experience of work in Paris, his hostility toward capitalism grew. He describes the conditions of the capitalist factory as "grey and joyless", the workers being enslaved to "fast tempo, punctuality, and precision". In a capitalist factory, Gastev sees the ultimate oppressive power to be the rhythm "between life and the clock".⁴³ The shift between his descriptions of the capitalist and the socialist factory is remarkable. Whereas in a capitalist system Gastev portrays the factory as oppressive, under socialism, a factory is the heart of the society. Precision and regularity blossom, and they even become desirable. It is a contradictory shift, but it only emphasizes Gastev's optimism regarding socialism overall, and how he hoped it would turn the capitalist factory into something attractive.

After the Transformation of the Society

Gastev's prognosis of the future of the proletariat was that in 20 years, it would have lost all of its individuality and be completely collective. Even though Gastev was the most prominent advocate for Taylorism, even he was a bit skeptical of its direct adaptation to the Russian industry and was cautious of its exploitative dangers.⁴⁴ He predicted two possible outcomes of what would happen after the collective mass was assembled: the proletarian mass will either be oppressed by the bourgeoisie, as machinism would make it submissive to the dominant class, or the new mass "*will use its collective enthusiasm and power to create a new world.*"⁴⁵ Gastev was quite pessimistic in regard to what he thought the Russian proletariat would be able to conquer. As he did not believe in its working morale, he did not believe in its overall morale either. Gastev came to a conclusion that the proletarian must undergo a moral

⁴³ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 47

⁴⁴ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 60

⁴⁵ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 50

transformation, to cease to be oppressed by the ruling class. He described the following transformation as follows:⁴⁶

“Then a new mysterious stranger would appear at the factory, an unnamed epic bard of the struggle for a new and profound understanding of the human soul; the verses of his song would be sung by millions of voices spontaneously, without any prearranged plan. Music would be born - nameless, moving, enormous poetry . . . Great art would throb in the depth of the class marching toward liberation; present-day man would feel cramped in the old, tattered clothes of his too prosaic world. Joyously, perhaps at times not without suffering, but with a suffering that is great and shared by all, we would give birth to a new, as yet unheard-of people who are proud, great, superior to ourselves.

That which has never yet happened would then come to pass: millions of people would begin living by the marvelous thought of giving birth, giving birth at any price. For the first time in the history of the Earth they would give birth to a man who in suffering, in death and destruction, through the mass effort of the great collective, would subdue the old, blood-spattered, grief-soaked world.”

⁴⁶ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastej – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 50-51

The New Art and Culture of the Proletariat

Besides the psychological transformation, the proletariat needed an aesthetical revolution. Although Gastev's writings are mainly concerning the organizing of the society, and not much emphasis is given to art, it is interesting to examine what the artist's place would have been in his utilitarian society. One thing is for sure, art as it was known had no place in Gastev's mind. His eagerness to transform the society was on the same level as the constructivist's need to abolish old, bourgeois art. They both strived for truth, not sincerity.

Gastev envisioned art to be a big mass creation and as everything else, completely free of lyricism and intimacy. In his eyes, the theatricals and chamber music of the current state were to be forgotten and instead "*purely human*" manifestations of art were to be created. It was important to explore unknown areas and to seek a completely new way of art. "*We are moving toward an unprecedentedly objective manifestation of things, mechanized crowds and a stirring explicit grandeur...*", Gastev proclaims in his paper *on the tendencies of proletarian culture*.⁴⁷ The goal was to create an "*impersonal and joyful epic*",⁴⁸ in which truth was valued more than the beautiful depictions and lies of old bourgeoisie art.

In this chapter, I will take into consideration how the Constructivists conception of artistic production would have fit into the society Gastev envisioned.

⁴⁷ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 70

⁴⁸ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 69

Constructivism and Gastev's New Culture

Aleksei Gan announces art to be dead in his text "*Constructivism*", which was one of the first manifestations of the group.⁴⁹ He believed that it was part of the natural evolution for art to disappear. Constructivist ideas were based on the interconnection between art and technology. According to Gan, the three main points of how to understand *Constructivism* were: "*Tectonics is synonymous with the organicness of thrust from the intrinsic substance. Texture is the organic state of the processed material. Construction should be understood as the collective function of Constructivism.*"⁵⁰ In the proletarian revolution and the development of industrial culture, they thought Constructivism was unleashed and the society was freed from its ties to the old, bourgeois art. They announced a new age to have begun.⁵¹

In the manifestations for new industrial art, constructivists, I believe, were quite close to what Gastev envisioned his new proletarian culture to be like. The Constructivists were eager to take art from attic studios to the factory floors. They wanted to fuse the technical knowledge of the factory worker to the artistic practice and vice versa – as they both lacked the knowledge the other had – as Osip Brik explained in his paper: "*From pictures to textile prints*".⁵² Utilitarian reasoning was a key goal of their constructions. They believed the machines were vital in order to make the complex modern society more simplified. "*Hence the principles of simplification, acceleration, and purposefulness emerge as the constant attributes of a constructivist worldview.*" stated Yakov Chernikov.⁵³ Constructivists wanted their products to serve the society's function, contributing towards its overall goal. They fought to break free from the old definition(s) and practice(s) of art, especially eager to abolish the old and dominant easel painting. For constructivists, the old art was only focused on extreme

⁴⁹ Gan, Aleksei. 2017. "Constructivism (extracts)." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowlt, 215-225. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 221

⁵⁰ Gan, Aleksei. 2017. "Constructivism (extracts)." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowlt, 215-225. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 221

⁵¹ Gan, Aleksei. 2017. "Constructivism (extracts)." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowlt, 215-225. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 222

⁵² Brik, Osip. 2017. "From Pictures to Textile Prints." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowlt, 244-249. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 249

⁵³ Chernikhov, Yakov. 2017. "The Constructions of Architectural and Machine Forms." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowlt, 254-255. London: Thames & Hudson.) pp. 259

individualism and amusement of subjective beauty, and it had no room in the new proletarian society.⁵⁴

An interesting critic of constructivist views on art in the new society was *Viktor Pertsov*, who was also part of Gastev's TSiT. Pertsov was an advocate for industrial art, and was in many ways close to the constructivists while remaining critical of their weak points.⁵⁵ Pertsov thought that productional art was to solve the problem of aesthetics in small items of everyday life, but the constructivists were only interested in the monumental constructions of the revolution. He criticized them especially for being vague, abstract, and too full of aesthetic art: "*They (constructivists) talk about an artist's constructing a "material installation" (an algebraic sign that mean heaven knows what), but it is difficult and scandalous to set about building a viaduct or a station when your head is full of impressionism and suprematism and such technological authorities as Tatlin and Malevich. Such are "good intentions" of the constructivists.*"⁵⁶

It is clear that Pertsov was not thrilled by the influences cubism or suprematism had on the constructivists. Their old ideas of art didn't bring the society any closer to the solution of the overall problem industry and art. He thought the products of these -isms were only "*...witty rapprochements with the tendencies of contemporary technology...*".⁵⁷ He believed the solution was to be found in the education and evolution of the artists. The problem was not to be taken as a contemporary disagreement of the different artists groups and the industry, but as a "*serious social problem*" (as otherwise it will only result in hobby-like solutions, Pertsov concluded).⁵⁸ For example, many of the Constructivist artists did not have any training in industrial or technological methods, which resulted in constructions striving for utilitarian reason, becoming unusable, aesthetical objects.

⁵⁴ Gan, Aleksei. 2017. "Constructivism (extracts)." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowl, 215-225. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 221

⁵⁵ Pertsov, Viktor. 2017. "At the Junction of Art and Production." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowl, 230-236. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 230

⁵⁶ Pertsov, Viktor. 2017. "At the Junction of Art and Production." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowl, 230-236. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 233

⁵⁷ Pertsov, Viktor. 2017. "At the Junction of Art and Production." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowl, 230-236. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 235

⁵⁸ Pertsov, Viktor. 2017. "At the Junction of Art and Production." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowl, 230-236. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 235

Camera as The Apparatus to Abolish Lyricism and Sincerity

From the Constructivist writings I find Alexandr Rodchenko's manifesto "*Against the synthetic portrait, for the snapshot*" the most relevant to Gastev's ideas of collective mass creation of art. In this short text, Rodchenko describes why and how the old synthetic portrait has no value in a modern world. A synthetic portrait is a work of a "genius" artist and it includes only the opinions and thoughts of its author, allowing one to either idealize or reject it. And in all cases, the portrait is only depicting beautiful lies of the bourgeois. He outlines the fact that there are no "eternal truths" as there used to be in the times of encyclopedias, but now (1920's) the people live by newspapers, magazines, catalogues, etc., in which new truths are brought up everyday.⁵⁹ "*Paint the truth. Value all that is real and contemporary. And we will be real people, not actors,*" manifests Rodchenko.⁶⁰ He believes in and advocates for collective creation, demonstrating why only by large volumes of photographs can we paint the real, objective truth. These thousands and thousands of images from different authors will show the subject from all sides possible, leaving no room for romantic nor false interpretation. Rodchenko, as the whole Constructivist group waged war against the old art, said, "*art has no place in modern life. It will continue to exist (only) as long as there is a mania for the romantic and as long as there are people who love beautiful lies and deception.*"⁶¹

In Rodchenko's writing, the loss of authorship in masses of images is set against the tradition of a portrait. He gives an example of grand depictions of Lenin, and why one cannot say that any of them would be a truthful portrayal of the revolution. There is, nor will ever be any "genius" who could portray him (or anything) in a way that would make the spectator say: "*this is the real V. I. Lenin*".⁶² The only way one might achieve a truthful representation of him (or anything) is by enormous masses of different

⁵⁹ Rodchenko, Aleksandr. 2017. "Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowlt, 250-254. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 252-253

⁶⁰ Rodchenko, Aleksandr. 2017. "Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowlt, 250-254. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 254

⁶¹ Rodchenko, Aleksandr. 2017. "Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowlt, 250-254. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 254

⁶² Rodchenko, Aleksandr. 2017. "Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowlt, 250-254. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 252

photographs. Variety of images won't allow the author to either idealize, falsify, or invent the subject. "*Everyone has seen this file of photographs, and as a matter of course, no one would allow artistic nonsense to be taken for the eternal Lenin.*"⁶³ The fact that Rodchenko completely abolishes the position and the relevance of the "genius" artist is exactly why I think this text comes so close to what Gastev is aiming for. There is only mass creation, which is freed from all ties to subjective beauty and individual's creation.

I find it especially interesting to think of using photography as means to achieve what Gastev envisioned art to be. Photography differentiates completely from other artistic forms of creation, and it wasn't even thought of as an artform in the 1920's. A camera creates parameters, and if one uses it by its manual, the only difference in the photograph will be the composition; overall, the image created is more or less realistic and fitting into a standard. Photographs are produced by an apparatus, a machine, and it lacks a certain individual touch, as opposed to for example painting or sculpture. If used by the manual, it makes images impersonal and truthful, free of lyricism. A camera was indeed a perfect device for a collective society, whose envisioned goal was to turn its back to the genius artist.

⁶³ Rodchenko, Aleksandr. 2017. "Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot." (In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, by John E. Bowl, 250-254. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) pp. 252-253

Gastev's Political Ideology

Gastev, with his innovations, served the regime of the USSR very well until he fell into disfavor, as Stalin favored socialist realism over avant-garde experiments. Gastev was indeed a very cruel man, who thought that catastrophes and deaths of millions were an inevitable part of life; "*These are the fundamental, dominant elements of proletarian psychology.*"⁶⁴ With the individual's complete surrender to the common cause, the ideology will become immortal. In a way Gastev was a victim of his own cruelty. He was killed during Stalin's purges because he wasn't a good "fit" with society anymore. Although being a highly appreciated figure amongst the Soviet officials, Gastev managed to keep out of politics almost for his whole career. He was not part of any political party from 1907 to 1931.⁶⁵ Only then was he forced to join the communist party, as it was unacceptable for a high-ranking personnel under Stalin's regime to not be part of the communist party.⁶⁶

Gastev's political anonymity makes me wonder whether he cared about political orientation or not, if he was only seeking out a possible environment to create his utopian society. Because similar admirations of violence, the exploitation of nature, and even some racist tendencies can be found both in Gastev's writings and the Italian futurist Marinetti – who identified as a fascist – I question whether Gastev actually cared for the well-being of the people, or if he just obsessed with his "master creation". Another interesting connection between Gastev and far-right movements is USSR's and nazi Germany's notable enthusiasm of symbolism regarding metal and the man. In the this chapter, I will go through Gastev's poetry and some futurist manifestoes. What differentiates them and what are some possible common points.

⁶⁴ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 69

⁶⁵ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 60

⁶⁶ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 115

Gastev and Italian Futurism (Fascism)

In the first manifesto of the Futurists, Marinetti shows immense enthusiasm for speed, patriotism, aggressive militarism, and abolition of the past.⁶⁷ These themes are all present throughout Gastev's career, but they are especially noticeable in his poem "*Ekspress*". It describes Gastev's travels through Siberia as well as his visions and hopes for the region's development. Siberia was indeed one of the places which fascinated Gastev the most, as he saw enormous developmental potential in it.

For Gastev, the trans-Siberian rail is the symbol of rapid technological achievements. It runs through Siberian cities, which Gastev imagines to be technologically far ahead of their time. "Moving sidewalks" and "automatic elevators" are instruments normal to the Siberia he is envisioning. Gastev's speculative depictions share the same values and ambitions as the Italian architect Antonio Sant'Elia's manifesto for Futurist Architecture. *Sant'Elia* illustrates the future city to be agile, mobile, and dynamic in every detail: "...the street will no longer lie like a doormat at ground level, but will plunge many storeys down into the earth, embracing the metropolitan traffic, and will be linked up for necessary interconnections by metal gangways and swift moving pavements."⁶⁸ Gastev praises Siberia, perceived to be throbbing with the same pulse as America – the futurist dream. The railroad is the vision of future internationalism dominating the life of men.⁶⁹

What is exceptional in this particular poem is the fact that Gastev steps aside from his usual manifestation of an equal proletarian collective into a more capitalistic world of class division. He describes a working environment in which labor tasks are separated between people according to their ethnicity. For the first time, Gastev mentions differences between races, and according to him, hard labor is reserved for non-whites.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Marinetti, F. T. 2011. "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism." (In *100 Artists' Manifestos From the Futurists to the Stuckists*, by Alex Danchev, 1-8. Penguin Books.) pp. 1-8

⁶⁸ Sant'Elia, Antonio. 2011. "Manifesto of Futurist Architecture." (In *100 Artists' Manifestos From the Futurists to the Stuckists*, by Alex Danchev, 84-89. Penguin Books.) pp. 87

⁶⁹ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 89

⁷⁰ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 91

*The train swings north on a single-track line. We pass through
Bodajbo, a gold-mining town and exile colony on the Vitim River.
On one side chained convicts and deported Chinese, Africans,
Indians and Jakuts slave in the hellish dust and filth of the gold-mines,
while on the other side stand the shining residences of the rich.*

In “Ekspress” Gastev’s view on humanity’s abilities and superiority to nature is significant. Not only does he divide humans by their race into different classes of workers, but also awards humans the right to exploit natural resources completely for the sake of achieving technological advancement.⁷¹ Despite some similar tendencies with Gastev and the futurists, he criticized them for dismissing the social question of art. “Contemporary futurism is a child of the street — the street of consumers, not the street of producers”⁷² His new society has no space for consumers, but only for producers.

Man to Machine

Turning man into a machine is a recurring theme in Gastev’s writings, and even though his usual demand for a proletarian future is absent in his poem “Ekspress”, the need for the fusion of flesh and metal is immediate;⁷³

*The Express is entirely of the Earth, entirely of man. It drills away, it
summons forth an unheard-of clatter of steel, the roll of subterranean
seas, the breath of lava.
Oh, it wants to cut through the entire Earth, exhale its hot breath
over it, surrender to it all its fiery passion; it wants to inspire it with the
demon of cold and the demon of heat and make them battle eternally;
it wants to drown man in metal, melt all the little souls into one big one,
it wants to infect the stones with a human voice and make the frozen
ground sing hymns to the fire.*

⁷¹ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 93

⁷² Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 66

⁷³ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 92

Metal was a greatly admired material in the Bolshevik group, both in its practical usage with new, revolutionary technologies and what it represented, as *Rolf Hellebust* points out in his study: *Aleksei Gastev and the Metallization of the Revolutionary Body*.⁷⁴ For the Bolsheviks, the transformation from iron to steel was a metaphor for the proletarian revolution. It meant the development from the earthly iron (the old, oppressed man) into something new, man-made (the powerful proletarian mass). The revolutionary Russia enjoyed the limitless transformation steel possessed, both literally and symbolically. It was used to characterize the whole revolution.⁷⁵ Similarly, the rising Nazi ideology in Germany in the late 1920's revealed in the metal-flesh symbolism.⁷⁶ Germany was already at the time a well-industrialized nation, and Hitler used metal's nuance to portray its "hard-as-steel" soldiers in their conservative, pagan utopia – whereas in the Soviet Russia, it connoted mainly industrialization.⁷⁷

Even though Gastev's beliefs were far from conservative Nazi ideology, he did enjoy Germany's technological advancement and hardened doctrine. And already in 1913, during Gastev's trip to Berlin, on the way back to Russia from Paris, he admired the German efficiency and militarist precision. Gastev predicted Germany would become "a new god of war" (in which he indeed was right).⁷⁸

To come to some sort of conclusion on Gastev's political views, it is notable that because of his preference for syndicalist anti-political and parliamentary tendencies, he would have preferred to keep out of politics completely and perhaps was not attached to the Soviet political system at all. Socialism was the only mode of society, which gave him a chance to try out his principles of mass organization. He preferred syndicalism, because it puts the power straight to the hand of the workers through unionizing and the act of striking, without a central government. These unions would therefore work as regional governments, generating the means for direct democracy.

⁷⁴ Hellebust, Rolf. 1997. "Aleksei Gastev and the Metallization of the Revolutionary Body." (In *Slavic Review*, Autumn, 1997, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997),, 500-518. Cambridge University Press.)

⁷⁵ Hellebust, Rolf. 1997. "Aleksei Gastev and the Metallization of the Revolutionary Body." (In *Slavic Review*, Autumn, 1997, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997),, 500-518. Cambridge University Press.) pp. 501

⁷⁶ Hellebust, Rolf. 1997. "Aleksei Gastev and the Metallization of the Revolutionary Body." (In *Slavic Review*, Autumn, 1997, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997),, 500-518. Cambridge University Press.) pp. 502

⁷⁷ Hellebust, Rolf. 1997. "Aleksei Gastev and the Metallization of the Revolutionary Body." (In *Slavic Review*, Autumn, 1997, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997),, 500-518. Cambridge University Press.) pp. 502

⁷⁸ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 45

Even though Gastev stayed out of politics, he was in many ways very politically active. Before the revolution, Gastev was solely investing himself in literature and poetry, concentrating on agitating the working class. Nevertheless, after TSiT was formed in the 1920, Gastev devoted himself to his institute.⁷⁹ He described it to be his “last work of art”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 115

⁸⁰ Johansson, Kurt. 1983. *Aleksej Gastev – Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikseil International) pp. 105

Conclusion

First and foremost, I have to note that, in spite of Gastev's revolutionary utopian ideas and his great overall importance to the industrial re-organization of the Soviet Union, one cannot ignore the problems regarding his cruel tendencies and violent, racist writings. Especially in today's setting, where far-right nationalism is on the rise, one must stay especially cautious and critical. Nevertheless, I think Gastev was a truly remarkable figure, who had one of the most intriguing plans to organize the society.

To understand the ideas Gastev pursued and the attempts he made to re-shape the society, it is important to emphasize one thing. As socialism was thought of as a "pre-mode" of communist society, Gastev thought the same of his machinist world. As Rolf Hellebust points out, Gastev did not count himself into the society he was envisioning, but he was only the master creator of the better, brighter future of the proletariat.⁸¹ And if Gastev indeed thought of himself as the individual genius, Julia Vaingurt's assertion of the possibility that Gastev's hypothesis is a complete aestheticization of biomechanics and that his "*man is drawn from art rather than observable reality*",⁸² becomes true. Gastev's plan for the new society falls for its own critique of old bourgeois art; thus, it becomes just another aesthetical, non-functional construction the society does not really need.

After all this reading and contemplation, I still cannot commit to say whether Gastev's plan for a new proletarian society was completely insane or utterly brilliant. I can't deny the fact that my deep interest and romanticized idea of the 1920's post-revolutionary setting might blind my critical thinking of Gastev's beliefs, which brings me to realize that I cannot, nor do I desire, come to a final conclusion regarding the efficiency or sanity of his overall idea of a society.

⁸¹ Hellebust, Rolf. 1997. "Aleksi Gastev and the Metallization of the Revolutionary Body." (In *Slavic Review*, Autumn, 1997, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997),, 500-518. Cambridge University Press.) pp. 510

⁸² Vaingurt, Julia. 2013. *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde*. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.) pp. 46

Today's world is heavily impacted by identity politics, nationalism, and now, by the global pandemic. By all means, a larger emphasis on the common good wouldn't hurt anyone. Even if Gastev's ideas are in many ways completely inhuman, worshipping machines and anonymity, I think there are many things which could learn from these radical collectivistic propositions. Perhaps we should try to break free from the predominant sentiment of art as an individual act and from the idea that we live in this world alone, as individuals. We should realize that freedom does not only mean the privilege to go out and speak freely. This pandemic has shown that regulations and restrictions indeed can help us gain freedom. The societies that have managed to obey the rules of the government have broken free from the restrictions. Thus, Julia Vaingurt's note of Gastev becomes a reality: "Falling in love with one's oppressor can be said to constitute a reappropriation of the will; welcoming oppression, Gastev ceases to be oppressed."⁸³

⁸³ Vaingurt, Julia. 2013. *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde*. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.) pp. 39

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