

# DIGITAL PUBLICS: PROMISES AND PROBLEMS OF A CYBER-REVOLUTION

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Reconsidering the historical avant-garde's engagement with the "mechanization of experience," organizations like Mikro.fm seek social innovation through digital technology, facilitating a redistribution of the ownership of the means of knowledge production. Looking to Brecht's radio theory, the Berlin-based group engages in a heterotopia of pragmatic collectivism, wary of making the bourgeois public sphere's empty gestures of participation.

## Digital Publics: Promises and Problems of a Cyber-Revolution

Reconsidering Sergei Eisenstein's unfinished *Capital* project, German filmmaker Alexander Kluge recently contemplated the abiding potential of cooperative production: "A constellation of corresponding works. That's how Eisenstein's spherical dramaturgy is to be understood. Not a utopia but a heterotopia: right next door something is possible." [1] What sounds vaguely like a nostalgic, rhizomic relativism is in fact a strategic demand for the fulfillment of the historical avant-garde project. Kluge's own films, including his 2008 *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike: Marx – Eisenstein – Das Kapital*, promote "relationality": the notion of the cultural arena as a site of struggle over meaning and visibility, the means of making sense and spreading it around by establishing connections, or "striking sparks," between positions. Emphasizing the use-value of artistic labor and the functionality of its products, Kluge's Eisenstein project aims to make the relationships of production tangible – between the real and the ideal, history and myth, experience and fantasy – to, in Eisenstein's own words, "teach the worker to think dialectically." [2]

For Kluge, the procedures and proceedings of 1920s and '30s radical art imply the very pragmatic possibility of implementing substantial contemporary socio-cultural transformation through art nearly a century later. Indeed, conditions central to the historical avant-garde project no longer seem as antiquated as they did during and even immediately following the Cold War. New networks of information dissemination and economic dependencies, the political and social struggles in the East and Middle East, and the recent crisis of global capitalism have shaken traditional ways of governing people, properties, and worlds to their foundation, giving questions of socialism, technological progress, and class a renewed validity and urgency. New media art and activism in particular has for well over a decade acknowledged, considered, and elaborated on the changes in our socio-technical landscape. As digital forms of information exchange and knowledge-labor blur traditional boundaries of community and identity, "tele-" and "cyber-communism" declare the dawn of a new sociopolitical era that in many ways harks back to that of the historical avant-garde.

New media art and activist organizations sound a strikingly Productivist and Brechtian tone in their avowals to employ digital technology to turn consumers into producers, availing mass participation for social innovation. These groups reprogram GPS devices to map new ways to navigate urban environments, devise open-source software for redrawing eco-political landscapes, and organize festivals and workshops for the collaborative production and broad dissemination of information and technological know-how. As such practices seek to reconstruct the public sphere, the question remains whether the access to information and the technological means of its production actually redistribute ownership of

knowledge, labor, and experience, fomenting real action and agency, or whether such projects further institutionalize an ideal bourgeois public sphere by creating a mere semblance of cultural participation.

The Berlin-based collective mikro.fm provides an example of a contemporary practice seeking to combine and maximize the potential of both old and new media to form evolving and strategically contingent constellations. Like many other new media communications initiatives, mikro.fm provides free, non-commercial public access to online and airwave studios as well as the know-how necessary to fabricate and use portable transmitters. Steeped in the traditional conflict of communicative technologies (the radio apparatus as much as the Web) between the material promise of unregulated, democratic exchange on the one hand and its populist and private appropriation on the other, mikro.fm holds workshops and gives presentations, circulating ideas and instructions via airwaves and the Internet advocating the portable transmitters as a way to produce, receive, and pass on stories and news, fantasies and perspectives excluded from or marginalized in the mainstream media.

If indeed, as some have observed, today's socio-economic and psychological climate recalls that of the Weimar Republic and its "experience of mechanization," a critical look at the medium of radio at its moment of original popularity, at the historic crossroads between barbaric instrumentalization and emancipatory utility, proves instructive in contemporary debates about the revolutionary function of new media art and activism. Regarding its own heterotopia of direct, proximate usefulness through the active everyday production and dissemination of broadcast programs, mikro.fm has looked to Bertolt Brecht's "Radiotheorie." [3] Like culture in general and theater and film in particular, to Brecht the radio has no value in and of itself but is defined entirely by its use. In the hands of the bourgeoisie, according to Brecht, the radio is anything but a "mass medium": delivering "Viennese waltzes and cooking recipes," pseudo-debates and purely commercial art, it has, in a reversal of the potential function of the broadcast apparatus, an individualizing and inactivating effect on its audience. [4] In this case a new medium is used paradoxically to reproduce old contents, habits, and relations.

In his 1932 essay "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication," Brecht famously remarked that "the radio is one-sided where it should be two," advocating the ability to literally talk back, to discuss via the apparatus of transmission. [5] Perhaps more importantly, Brecht's call for material as well as ideological innovation through the transformation of the radio demands that what is being communicated must have relevance to the audience and engage the listener as a speaker. The objective is to turn the audience "not only into pupils but into teachers." [6] Accordingly, "re-transmission" is as important to mikro.fm as the distribution of original content. Listeners are encouraged to engage with themes like nuclear power and the census, anti-Semitism and "medial creativity," navigating and contending with a multiplicity of official narratives, alternative concepts, and personal experiences. Topics are discussed in contexts ranging from the general to the local, the historical to the present-day. The soldering workshops connect technical labor with the anticipated intellectual and social labor of using the apparatus as a communicative device, fostering an awareness of the way in which the skill of "making" functions on several levels. It furthermore imparts a sense of sober functionality over techno-euphoric spectacle. The utility of the self-made transmitters, as well as the collective's recent "editorial" work with the Berlin station "PI Radio" (the PI standing for "pilots" or "pioneer"), is part of their effort to counter "anonymous media consumption" by producing and promoting online networks and "radio clouds," echoing Brecht's idea of the radio as "a network of pipes" that "turns listeners into suppliers." [7] True innovation means to go beyond participation as a gesture and turn it into an action of agency.

As with the Eisensteinian constellation, the relationality afforded by mikro.fm's projects is not restricted to the technological dimension of accessibility. To strike sparks between positions does not suggest to

merely plug into the apparatus, but rather to establish an exchange between different modes of production – of experiences, ideas, identities – to acknowledge the public sphere as an arena where one’s position as spectator and producer stands in critical proximity to the institutions of information distribution and their discursive regulations. The redistribution of ownership demands that for cooperative production to be truly cooperative, it needs to impart the ability to participate in an evolving project of knowledge production (rather than reproduction), to articulate existing dependencies, limits, and possibilities. New media establishes proletarian public spheres where, as Brecht observed, the material and technical abilities to say anything to anybody are used to transform rather than maintain the existing social order, by “putting the listener into relation rather than isolating him.” [8]

### **References and Notes:**

1. Alexander Kluge, *essay accompanying the DVD Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike: Marx – Eisenstein – Das Kapital* (Frankfurt: Filmedition Suhrkamp, 2008), 40.
2. Sergei Eisenstein, “Notes for a Film of Capital,” *October 2* (Summer 1976): 10.
3. Mikro.fm’s Heiko Thierl and Johannes Wilms, presentation at the 2008 dorkbot conference, Berlin.
4. Bertolt Brecht, “Radio – eine vorsintflutliche Erfindung?” (1927), in *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp and Aufbau, 1992), 21/217.
5. Bertolt Brecht, “The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication” (1932), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett, 51–53 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).
6. *Ibid.*, 52.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*