

Russification project

Notes to the talk by Zeigam Azizov (Mori Museum/Tate Modern), 20.10.2020

1. Due to the shortage of time I will only briefly mention artistic and theoretical intentions of the piece called ‘russification project’ as the working title and move to the case study which is in itself a fascinating story. It is the case, when one can repeat after Walter Benjamin, that ‘all actuality is already theory’, something he has asserted in his 1920’s book *Moscow diary*.¹

2. My work includes exploration of limits of the language at the conjecture of the mixture of ideas coming from philosophy, semiotics and topology. Language is producing a pharmacological effect since the limit of language is also the point of transgression. The pharmacological effect constitutes language as both the instrument of domination and in the same way it is the instrument of liberation. The language has not only power to speak but also power to explain. The notion of pharmacy (language as a poison and remedy) derives from Socratic philosophy, yet remains a true dialectical method in the epoch of globalisation as it also was true for the epoch of imperialism, which used the language as a main technique to colonise.

3. Imperialism carefully used languages to dominate and played the role in formation of historical subjects to the degree that its impact is still visible today. In this sense Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt are right: imperialism may be over but the Empire is still here.² It continues not only in political forms but also in codes of culture and the language as a decoder. For me the encoding/decoding nature of language is very important, which also includes its transformations through the technique of writing in both hemispheres either in the Orient and/or in the Occident. For instance, the Japanese philosopher Kojin Karatani brings the deconstructionist element into the space of ideograms of Japan and the Asian philosophy. He argues that the invention of calligraphy imposed upon the imperial world dominating Chinese, Korean and other parts of the South East by controlling the popular consciousness in far more restrictive ways than it is made by the power of advertising dominating the world of consumerism today.³

4. The same is true of the Russian language, with its specific Cyrillic alphabet, the language which I learned as a child in order to be able to become a part of Soviet society. **(Image1: the cover of the Russian language book) .**

Starting from the 1990s I have been investigating above mentioned questions and the 'russification project' as a part of it. This project started with my attempt to 'decode' my school exercise book as Azerbaijani child to learn to write Russian. One of my ambitions all these years included the study of my own school exercise book in relation to larger questions of the cultural geography and philosophical aspects of speaking and writing. (**Image 2: The slide, school book, Lisson gallery, 1995**) .For me my school book is the basic art object, which provides the possibility to become engaged with the critique of the impact of imperialism. An art object is a model of reality, which necessarily provides the way for the critical reading of a certain reality. It is a model of reality, a compressed image of the world. The content of this compressed image is determined by language, including the refined and controlled type of language that comes from historical cultural memory and exteriorised through this language.

5. Language in the form of speaking and writing is an external image of the world. As soon as words are spoken or written they become exteriorised and as such recorded for the collective memory. It may be internalised by subjects for their individual use, but also used by politics to dominate subjects through the language. I wanted to treat my school book as 'the dialectical image', which means that language is an exterior image of the event or events which took place and in this sense the study of the language is not limited to an expression, but also the discovery of the narrative of history. In this case the colonizing aspect is articulated in the Russian Empire's attitude to the surrounding smaller countries with their own diverse languages and cultures. Since I started my work with this school book I have been continuously investigating archive materials combined with personal observations and reports on russification in the news etc. It is also my experience of the engagement with what I call the media linguistics, which includes the study of the russification.

6.The process of russification has started in the Russian empire and has been fully realised during the existence of the Soviet Union and continues after the fall of this empire in 1991.To draw on the process of russification through *promiesse de bonheur*, of Lenin's thesis of the 'self- determination' of nations as a certain type of identity policy and its adventures in everyday reality is both exciting and confusing. Russification as the governing body politics in the Russian Empire opened- up the unique way for the Socialist October revolution in 1917. As it is well known one of the aims of the communist ideals was based on the internationalisation as a radical form of universalism, with the project of the uniting socialist

brotherhood. The Empire already had a ground for it through the joining all countries around itself and the Russian language as the main means of communication.

7. After the abolishment of serfdom in 1861 in the Russian Empire, which to this time already occupied the third part of Eurasia, the russification of the nations of empire was initiated by the Tsar. One of the documents includes a declaration about the printing of books and newspapers in Russian only while printing them for smaller nations in their own languages was not allowed. It accelerated the proliferation of the spoken and written literacy of the Empire. **(Image 3: A letter)** Vladimir Lenin, who called the Russian Empire as ‘the prison house of nations’ paid special attention to the question of language. The Soviet state was founded by Lenin as a “free union of the free nations.”⁴ He stressed that this union unquestionably had to be voluntary and that no nation should use violence against one another. Such a union was necessary to combat both the threat of internal counter revolution and external intervention but the Bolshevik party made it clear that the right to self-determination was subordinate to the needs of socialist construction. The Russian language, along with the military power of the Red Army has been used as a major force in the self-determination of “free nations” which differed in ethnic character, language, religion, culture and level of economic development.

8. The Soviet state provided “for the needs” of these nations by sending to their lands thousands of teachers, scientists and other specialists. Russification spread across all of the country transforming 400 nationalities speaking in, apart from Russian, 36 Iberian-Caucasian, 25 Turkic, 24 Indo European, 22 Mongolian, Tungus-Manchu and Paleoasiatic and 20 Finno-Ugric languages (this list is incomplete). These languages have been regarded as secondary in relation to Russian. During the long period studying and speaking in Russian was very popular, because breadlines in industrial and cultural life run by being fluent in Russian.

9. Later after Lenin’s death, under Stalin Leninist nationalities policy encouraged even stronger trends towards assimilation, rejection of the specifics of national development, the political accusation of all nations, and the resulting arbitrariness and lawlessness with regard to certain peoples. It also tightened the thread of russification, this time under the ‘internationalism’ and socialism. 10. Stalin specifically engaged in the enlargement of the Soviet influence in Eastern Europe while planning the victory of the October revolution throughout the world. The internal policy was strengthened by the bureaucratization, collectivization and an administrative command system. Stalin’s administrative command

system completely ignored the requirements of national development. Repressions, including the infringement of the rights of peoples and their enforced resettlement in other republics, played their part in the undermining of inter-ethnic relations. Stalin was dealing with these questions “scientifically”. In the same way, Stalin’s involvement in language policy as a dominant force resulted in his theory of linguistics. In his book ⁵ “*Marxism and Linguistics*” by altering the Marxist theory of base and superstructure, Stalin turned the theory upside-down. In investigating this phenomenon as a fact of the unconscious Lacan noticed:

(...)that we may recall that the discussion of the necessity for a new language in the communist society did in fact take place, and Stalin, much to the relief of those depending on his philosophy, cut off the discussions with the decision: language is not superstructure.

11. The ‘cutting-off’ of the discussions was based on Stalin’s belief that language is superstructure “for a society divided into hostile classes; it is not compulsory for a society not divided into hostile classes and:

(...) this was revolution which eliminated the old bourgeois economic system, but this revolution did not take place by means of explosion, that is by the overthrow of the existing power and the creation of a new power, but by gradual transition from the old bourgeois system of the countryside to a new system. The old base and the old classes were eliminated, so there was not superstructure, but a new base, a new language, a new society, a new power which replaced the old...the transition of a language from an old quality to a new one does not take place way of explosion, by the destruction of an existing language and the creation of a new one, but by the gradual accumulation of the elements of their new quality.⁶

12. It was the 'revolutionary' Russian language, which had these qualities. Stalin’s book was considered an irreplaceable guide, which existed in order to prevent arbitrary interpretations. For this reason authority was given to Stalin’s 'cadres', dealing with 'cleanisation' of bourgeois elements. One of the victims of this “cleanisation” was, for example, a philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, who published his book under the nickname of Voloshinov. His book “*Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*” was occluded for its insistence on the “class struggle at the level of the sign”, contradicting Stalin’s ideas quoted above, as well as his notion of a strictly economic causality in the links between base and superstructure. Repressions followed of others for similar reasons, which also exposed the full meaning of Stalin’s aggression. It included historically important linguistics associated with Russian Formalism, the movement which predates the movement of structuralism and semiotics,

amongst them Marr, Propp, Jacobson and many others. The ferocity against Jewish intellectuals and other minorities continued Stalin's policy. His suspicion of anything "cosmopolitan" combined with anti-Semitism resulted in massive repressions. This rectification found "scientific" foundations in the form of Stalin's linguistic and geopolitical policy, controlled by a centralized command system, which effected passport regime (*propiska*), still existing in Russia, as well as the rectification of names. Many Jews and some other minorities were forced to be nationalized as Russians, others had Russian endings added to their names: like mine: *Aziz+ov*.

13. At the earlier stage of perestroika in 1986 the intention of "independent" republics was Stalin's policy other way round: cutting of Russian language. But because opposed to Stalin's "cutting-off" policy this kind of opposition proved to be a mistake. The binary opposition didn't seem to be the right way. Perhaps theorised in the work of Bakhtin the dialogical nature of negotiating would be a more appropriate way, since it seems that acting in the same aggressive way as Stalin's policy is bringing only sadness. Cutting -off isn't a choice, since in Lacan's powerful words "the unconsciousness is structured as a language" and cutting-off is unconsciously confirming Stalin's policy. At the beginning of perestroika rejecting the Russian language in the number of satellite republics was a step towards independence. Once proved to be more interdependent, rather than dependent, this policy turned into the tool for everyday business. Signs of this are visible from the education system to the business institutions. Today for anyone trying to make any business is impossible while moving across the territories of the former Soviet Union and not being able to speak/use Russian. Like creolization in Caribbean Islands and pidginisation in the former British colonies, the russification is active in the work of "cutting" and "mixing".¹⁴ This is also the on-going story of the limits and transgressions of language, the story of the letter.¹⁵ This process now receives its dramatic forms as it continues like in the recent annexation of Crimea and the current conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, to mention but just two. After the break-up of the Soviet Union the former satellite republics became 'independent 'ones', however in order to own money many people from the Central Asia travel to big Russian cities in order to own a little money as a cheap labour. Ironically even in Russian official circles these migrants are called not even 'immigrants' or 'migrants' but '*Gastarbeiters*'. The following image is the job advertising in Kyrgyz language, written in the Cyrillic and printed on the street in St. Petersburg. **Image 4: the image of street advertising.**

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¹ In the winter of 1926 Walter Benjamin journeyed to Moscow with Asja Lacis, wondering whether he should join Communist Party. This intense political engagement pushed Benjamin to new thinking about the relation of theory and critique, exemplified in his promise that his *Moskauer Tagebuch* (1980, trans. 1986) “will devoid of all theory...I want to write a description of Moscow at the present moment in which ‘all actuality is already theory

² Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri. *Empire*, Harvard University press, Cambridge, MA, 2000

³ Kojin Karatani, *Nationalism and Ecriture*, and the response by Jacques Derrida, see:
<https://pum.umontreal.ca/revues/surfaces/vol5/derrida.html>

⁴ V. Lenin, *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, 1914

⁵ Lacan, J. The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious, in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge, Longman, London and NY 1988

⁶ Stalin, Marxism and Linguistics, in C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists*, Penguin, London, 1977, pp. 291-292