



ESSAY

Reflections on the Process Behind *Talking Hands*¹

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THE RESEARCH BEHIND *TALKING HANDS* was a slow and fragmented process (I do not speak Russian), shaped by language barriers and geographic distance (I was based in Stockholm, London and New York at the time). I first encountered cultural-historical psychology in 2013. My interest in socialist education and pedagogy predates this encounter, but it wasn't until friends, philosophers Maria Chehonadskih and Alexei Penzin, introduced me to Vygotsky and Sokolyansky's work with disabled children in the 1920s that I became interested in Soviet psychology.² This eventually led me to the history of the Zagorsk School outside Moscow in the 1960s and early 1970s, the philosophy of Evald Ilyenkov and his deaf-blind student Alexander Suvorov. So began a research process that brought me to conferences and meetings with researchers and archives in Russia and Finland, alongside conversations with scholars such as Vesa Oittinen and Irina Sandomirskaja.

I spent the summer of 2014 on my first long research residency in Moscow. During this trip, I met with Suvorov for the first time. At this point, I did not know how the project would evolve. All I knew is that I wanted to make a film about the Zagorsk School. I visited Suvorov in his Moscow suburb several times. We would always sit in his kitchen.

1. This article is an adaptation from chapter 2 in Emanuel Almborg's PhD thesis, *Towards a Pedagogy of the Utopian Image*, Kungl. Konsthögskolan, Stockholm, 2021.

2. Ivan Sokolyanski was a pioneer in deaf-blind education and close colleague of Lev Vygotsky.

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We spoke with the help of two translators, from English to Russian, by Maria Chehonadskih, and from Russian to tactile signing, a slow and fragmented conversation marked by mistranslations and misunderstandings. The person translating into tactile signing was Oleg Gurov, whom Suvorov introduced as his adoptive son. They had met in a summer camp for orphaned children that Suvorov visited in the 1980s.

The dialogue between Suvorov and myself would continue over email for about a year, unfolding with the help of numerous translators. Gradually a text emerged from our conversations, mainly based on questions and answers. I proposed to develop these fragments into a script for my film and Suvorov agreed. We wrote and edited together, sending the text back and forth. I asked long and complex questions in the hope of gaining philosophical understanding of the ideas behind the Zagorsk School. Sometimes he answered them, at other times he would reply with something unrelated, a biographical account, memories or a dream. It was unclear to me if this was due to a misunderstanding, mistranslation or was intentional, an ambiguity I accepted. The process allowed us both to imagine the film's narrative and negotiate different ideas and positions before filming. Sometimes we had disagreements about edits, sometimes they concerned content, spanning Ilyenkov's philosophy, Marx, communism, and pedagogy. Eventually, however, we came to an agreement. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that I more or less accepted Suvorov's point of view, his understanding of Ilyenkov, the Zagorsk School and communist pedagogy. During one visit I noticed a drum; it turned out that Suvorov learned to play percussion as a child by "feeling" sounds and vibrations. I proposed that he should make the soundtrack for the film and he agreed. To me, it made sense: the film was dealing with notions of both seeing and hearing beyond the eye or ear. In the late autumn of 2015, the script was finished in a form with which both of us felt happy. To me, it was important to keep some of our miscommunication in the film and Suvorov didn't seem to mind so long as he got to say what was essential to him. It was also important for him to have Oleg, his adoptive son, in the film. I proposed that we staged it in his kitchen, the same way we first met, with the help of the two translators, Oleg and an acquaintance, Liza Bobriashova, who supported the project. I wanted to show how our meetings were constructed, not as a meta-level reflection or to make the viewer critically evaluate documentary truth claims; I wanted to show how both the film and our "dialogue" were situated within a process where "subjectivity" was reliant on and distributed over multiple bodies and objects, a social "ensemble." What's

more, the layers of translation—marked by slowness, pauses, and breaks—conveyed something true about language in general: it is a social, external and material process of mediation, rather than an innate capacity for immediate communicability. Dialogue, as such, is a precarious process, only made possible through friendships and social networks of support and containment.

While in Moscow, I visited archives and academic institutions in search for materials related to the history of the Zagorsk School. I knew that films had been made as this was mentioned in various texts. One of the school's main psychologists and close collaborator with Ilyenkov, Alexander Meshcheryakov, wrote in his book *Awakening to Life* from 1979,

Instruction in the first habits of independent eating were recorded on film and then carefully analysed. A micro-analysis, so to speak, of the training in what at first glance appears a simple skill reveals a fairly complex pattern underlying the emergence and development of this activity on the child's part, as can be seen from the extracts of this analysis. (Meshcheryakov 1979)

The passage is followed by a series of reproduced film stills of a deaf-blind child slowly learning how to eat with a spoon. A teacher guides her hand with the spoon in it, from plate to mouth. It suggests that at least part of the purpose of the film was research-related and meant for internal documentation and study, a so called “micro-analysis.” Such film studies were not uncommon at the time. I was eager to see the film, but it took months to locate. I started at the archives of the Institute of Correctional Pedagogy of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, a name given the institution in the 1990s to reflect a new perspective in psychology and education. Although they kept other materials from the Zagorsk School, the archivist claimed to be unaware of the film. After six months of following various other leads, I was back where I began, at the Institute. I asked the archivist again. This time, it transpired, they had it. Two weeks later, the 16mm film reel was delivered in a black plastic refuse bag with no other information than its title, “Talking Hands.” I could use it in whatever way I wanted, they said. I was even offered to keep it; I declined, unwilling to assume such responsibility. The film was scanned at Mosfilm and returned to the archive (a process about as difficult as obtaining the film). The author and exact date are unknown but it was made sometime in the late 1960s and/or early 70s. It is ninety minutes long and shows examples of deaf-blind education, followed by plays, school trips, leisure time and everyday life at the boarding school. The period over which the film was shot is unknown,

but it seemed to have been made in parts over a longer time. Perhaps it was filmed by different people. It also seemed as if the film wasn't edited but rather composed of a series of film reels edited in camera and stitched together, one after another, perhaps in the order in which they were filmed. The first fifteen minutes are taken up by the scene described by Meshcheryakov, a girl learning to eat with a spoon. But only the very beginning of the film keeps a clinical and staged aesthetic reminiscent of "micro-studies" in developmental psychology. As the film continues, arranged examples of teaching methods and learning tools are abandoned and the film turns towards a more personal and playful mood, shifting from a fixed camera-eye to handheld footage, dislocated but not disembodied. A durational and aesthetic progression runs alongside a narrative of development, from child to young adult. From stationary shoots aimed at capturing a controlled environment and set of actions, to free movement, tracing the trajectories of a group of deaf-blind students as they move through public spaces. Around the same period the film was shot, Meshcheryakov's friend and colleague the Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov also made a reference to film when writing about his work at the Zagorsk School, more precisely "slow-motion film," but this time as metaphor:

Here we have the unique opportunity to fix with almost mathematical exactness the real conditions which solely determine the birth of such phenomena as consciousness, self-consciousness, thinking, imagination, aesthetic and moral feelings (...) The process of forming the specificity of the human psyche is extended in time, especially in the first—decisive—stages, and therefore can be viewed under "time's magnifying glass," as if it were being seen in slow motion film.³

Method

The first contradiction I encountered when making the film was this: How do I approach a subject matter centred around the absence of sight through a visual medium? To Ilyenkov, an image is constructed in the mind through activity with the external world, tools, objects, people. Seeing is an ability that we learn by forming images in the mind, in imagination, from the simplest geometrical form to abstract concepts. An object interferes with a body's trajectory and motion, or an object is used as a tool to overcome obstacles in order to satisfy a need. Through

3. Ilyenkov quoted in Maidansky "Metamorphoses of the Ideal". *Studies in East European Thought*, vol. 57, no. 3–4 (2005, 295)

activity, with objects and people, images appear as something close to a “movement-image” in the mind that plays an essential part in a child’s ability to make sense of the world. An understanding of a spoon is acquired through using it: slowly, not only is its image constructed in the mind but so is the cultural practice of eating with it grasped, the movement of the hand holding it learned. To Ilyenkov, drawing on Vygotsky, imagination plays a crucial role in cognitive development. For Vygotsky, children’s play, with objects and others, is a practical form of external imagination, internalised and abstracted as the child develops. Seeing, therefore, is a form of imagination for Ilyenkov that needs to be trained. This is the task of aesthetic education. Its purpose is to develop imagination’s power, understood not as the ability to think up what does not exist but as the ability to see what does exist, what lies before one’s eyes. It is not innate but an acquired skill. Someone with a limited imagination perceives only that with which they are already familiar. To Ilyenkov, such a person might be “looking” but not “seeing.” To such a person, concrete situations are not an object of examination and reflection but simply an external trigger that activates readymade stereotypes in consciousness, readymade images that have been internalised without ever encountering the object itself. That is what Ilyenkov means when he says, he *looked* but he *did not see* (Ilyenkov 2007, 82).

I asked myself: does a similar distinction between “looking” and “seeing” apply to the camera-eye? How would such a distinction affect the film’s foundational contradiction, i.e., the depiction of sight’s absence through a visual medium? Attempting to answer such a question with Ilyenkov’s notion of seeing—as an image constructed in the mind through activity with an object—would probably not provide a resolution. It did, however, help foreground the contradiction within the film, pushing it in a new direction.

I decided to start from close-ups when shooting the kitchen scene with myself, Suvorov and the two translators, Oleg and Liza. Without an establishing shot, the close-up was intended to push the viewer to “see,” or at least be aware of, that which was outside the frame. Layers of translation and out-of-shot voices were layered over fragments of body parts, hands, objects and details of the space. My intention was to force the viewer, gradually, to construct an image of the situation and space in the mind rather than showing it. A long lens captured partial objects, scanning surfaces and shapes, slowly allowing the viewer to assemble them, bringing them into a whole. It is not until the final shot that Suvorov’s face is revealed and the scene gains clarity for a brief moment.

The archival material posed another challenge. It was already full of meaning and an aesthetics that felt immanent to the subject matter; editing was difficult. The material followed a narrative from child to young adulthood, from an enclosed school to deaf-blind youth exploring environments through touch, where students climbed public monuments and traversed urban space, “appropriating” and “examining” whatever objects they encountered in such a way as to complicate its status as a research film. While reading a biography of Meshcheryakov by Soviet psychologist Karl Levitin, I encountered another mention of the film, which confirmed the cinematic quality of the work:

Meshcheryakov was showing a film about how his pupils were wrested from the darkness and silence, how reason and judgment, feelings, will, and imagination were created in them. Everything was so simple, as if they had purposely made an antifilm hit. (...) Any movie, however, even a down-to-earth one, is nonetheless a skilful fabrication compared with life: it condenses time and creates its own film truth. (Levitin 1982, 160)

I decided to retain the archive material’s original order. Initially, I simply tried to edit it down, removing repetitions or long stretches of low quality or damaged material. I then began to make some of the “scenes” shorter, reducing them as much as I could while keeping what felt most important. Eventually, I ended up with about half the material and brought it together with that filmed with Suvorov in Moscow.

The archival material had a quality that felt precious and precarious; it was difficult to edit. But the footage lacked a soundtrack and that presented another possibility for experimentation alongside the dialogue’s multiple voices. Much like the close-up’s intention to “see” outside the frame, I wanted the sound design to trace shapes and scan surfaces, adding a layer of tactility that separated seeing from the visual. Furthermore, the 16mm film’s surface itself carried historical meaning as a material form of mediation and translation. I decided to add two layers of sound as a starting point, sounds that would capture the feeling of surfaces in the environment and the objects depicted, as well as the surface of the 16mm film itself. These two surfaces, the environment and the film, would bleed into each other, making one an implicit part of the other. A third element was added, Suvorov’s drums, that would disrupt the soundscape, adding a sense of individuality or character, directing or framing the narrative through punctuation and rhythm. I used contact microphones on surfaces, materials and film projectors and recorded foley together with a sound designer, experimenting in a studio for two weeks. In addition to these sounds, we added “drones” or tones

that would reflect the mood in each scene and bridge moods in the dialogue with the archival material.

To be clear, these ideas were starting points, and in the process of their realisation, other things happened and choices were made for intuitive rather than conceptual reasons. According with filmmaker Raul Ruiz' poetics (Ruiz 1995), the film took shape through a dialectical process of structure and construction. While structure, here comprises the basic ideas, the plan and framework, the construction is the process of making the film, where things do not go as planned, new ideas emerge, one does things out of "gut feeling" or one finds something that makes sense by accident or from experimentation. The relation between the structure and the construction produces a third object: the film.

A friend recounted that filmmakers Straub-Huillet once declared all their films "affirmative." I have looked for the quote many times but never found it. If such a statement exists, it resonates with how I think about my work. Another way of putting it would be to say that I see my films as "reparative," to borrow a term from psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, or what queer theorist Eve Sedgwick describes as an alternative to the paranoid "hermeneutics of suspicion" dominant in critical theory. For Klein, the reparative is connected to the "depressive position," it is a sort of coming to terms with fragmented part objects and the splitting of "good" and "bad" associated with the paranoid in order to establish a new sense of the whole. Interestingly, Klein associates this position loosely with a developmental stage relating to language acquisition, one of Vygotsky's "higher mental functions" that are social in origin. For Klein, of course, this is a position, not a stage: one can come in and out of it at any time in life. Were one to attempt a Vygotskian reading of Klein, perhaps, one could say that the reparative first happens between people and is subsequently internalised as a social function of the psyche. Without dwelling on this argument, I merely want to propose that such an understanding of reparative or affirmative filmmaking would need to imply not only a positive vision but a certain socialisation of authorship and a process of making the film with subjects rather than *about* them. It would make the social and its contradictions, which underpin all filmmaking, an implicit part of the film's form and construction. Shortly after finishing the filming in Moscow, Suvorov wrote me the following e-mail:

Ilyenkov actually made a revision of a revision—returning from falsified "bolshevised" Marx to true Marx. Ilyenkov revised official real revisionists. I don't know who will watch our film, and which kind of reaction it could

cause. But I am pleased with your attention to this, which others are trying to ignore. And I am pleased to explain my understanding of communism at least in our film—it is a rather rare chance and I feel the effort, or tension, of an interlocutor. Thank you for giving me a chance to speak.

Your Hedgehog, November 7th, 2015.

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Biography

Emanuel Almborg is an artist based in Stockholm and London. His practice is primarily moving image-based and engages with pedagogy, psychology and theatre. He was a Whitney ISP fellow in New York, 2015 and finished a PhD at The Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm (KKH), 2021, with the dissertation; *Towards a Pedagogy of the Utopian Image*. He is the facilitator of *Switchers*, a film and theatre collective with young people from London and rural Wales. He has studied psychoanalysis and child development at the Tavistock in London. He is currently doing a Postdoc across art and psychology with KKH, Stockholm and University of East London, BabyDevLab. He has recently taught and lectured at Goldsmiths, London, Konstfack, Stockholm and Yale University, New Haven. His work has recently been shown at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Whitechapel Gallery, London, Kunstverein Munchen, Munich and CAC Brégnny outside Paris.