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FILM REVIEW

The Absent Educator: Following the Development of Deaf-Blind Children in *Talking Hands*¹

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ABSTRACT: The paper focuses on Emanuel Almborg's movie *Talking Hands* (2016)—the documentary that presents a perspective on the Zagorsk experiment, an educational project directed by Meshcheryakov in the Soviet Union that challenged the notions of disability, thinking, and education by teaching deaf-blind children to become independent and intellectually capable individuals. The text deals with the experiment's legacy along with the voice of Alexander Suvorov, one of the participants of the Zagorsk experiment, and raises questions about humanness, education, and the bond between a teacher and student. The relationships, as well as the origin of humanness, are revealed in the analysis of the educator's role in their deaf-blind students' mental development, where at first there is a constant and necessary presence of the educator, which is then followed by their disappearance. The poignant impact of Ilyenkov's absence on Suvorov sheds light on the importance of an educator as a guide not only to understand the objects which surround us, but also to comprehend the self as an independent subject.

KEYWORDS: Zagorsk Experiment, Education, Ilyenkov, Meshcheryakov, Vygotsky, deaf-blind children, cognitive development, humanness.

Introduction

The boarding school for deaf-blind children was opened in Zagorsk in 1963 under the direction of Meshcheryakov. The school was inspired to teach deaf-blind students to be a part of society. The aim of the school was to prove that these students are not deprived of intellectual abilities, and that they are able to study in schools, get a degree, and be a part of society. As noteworthy as this idea is, there is little information available about this school in open sources. Even the footage of the film

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about the school was found as a surprise in some archives in Moscow. This footage did not contain any particular information about the director, dates or any specific details but the name Talking Hands.

After about half-century since the Zagorsk experiment, Emanuel Almborg started his research for a film about Zagorsk students. He communicated with one of the four students who received a university degree, Alexander Suvorov, and discovered the original footage. These conversations and the footage later were used for the 2016 movie. The script was written by Almborg in collaboration with Suvorov. The film is a video essay that tells about Ilyenkov, his ideas and their realization in Zagorsk. The logic of the film guides the viewer from a particular example of how a child's mind is formed, to the cosmic ideas about the true history of humanity as a society of talented individuals.

Education and Humanness in Zagorsk

The revelations brought forth in the course of the experiment call into question and contemplation the very nature and importance of education. What is education? How does it take place? What are its essential aims?

The Zagorsk experiment was unfolding on the basis of the boarding school for deaf-blind children; moreover, the experiment itself revolved around children that have lost their sight and/or hearing. What is observed of such a child prior to tuition, Meshcheryakov writes, is that along with the loss of senses, they also lose the behavioral habits acquired earlier—such children are described as “deprived of the capacities of human behavior and thought” (Meshcheryakov 1979, para. 2)—and, consequently, deprived of humanity. Selecting pupils for the Zagorsk school, Meshcheryakov found that, due to the over-abundance of parental care, some children could not have been regarded as independent organisms, as many of them “were not even able to regulate their body temperature” (Meshcheryakov 1979, para. 21) on their own.

Meshcheryakov (1979) sets out to elucidate the ways in which the foundation shall be laid for the consequent development of such a child's thought and behavioral patterns. The popularity of hasty attempts to develop speech skills in the pupil is to be rejected as erroneous – in no way can it provide any basis for the development of the child's mind insofar as there is no immediate system of images of the surrounding environment for the child to situate themselves in, to which speech is to refer in its operation. Instead, he highlights the importance of the interaction with the world of objects and with the world of people, claiming that successful development of the deaf-blind child necessarily starts at acquiring self-care habits, an uninterrupted flow of action which in-

volves the mastery of everyday household objects—using a spoon for eating, for one—which accumulate, embody, and have inscribed in them thousands of years of human experience (Meshcheryakov 1979).

This brings into light a hypothesis, namely, that there is an ambiguous relation between education and humanness. That is, as a process, education fundamentally aims to transmit humanness from the educator to the pupil. In the case of the education of the deaf-blind children, the process necessitates the turn towards an object, in which human activity is inscribed. With the help of the educator, the deaf and blind child unlocks and appropriates this human activity and, consequently, humanness, via appropriating the object and gaining independence in regards to their action, which is, largely, a characteristic of the conscious human action—genetically indeterminate, marked by deliberation, choice, and guided by experience. The question of humanness is then posed in the same breath as that of education. Yet, what is left to ask is the following: where does humanness really lie—in the educator, the object, or does it come into being in the relational modality of the two, necessitated by its transmission?

Touching upon the origin of humanness and how it is acquired during the development of children, the film focuses on the products of human labor as objects that transform and regulate human activity. In the example of a spoon, it is “a pass into the realm of human—social—culture, into the sphere of human life activity and of the human mind” (Ilyenkov 1975, 89). Thus, through mastering the use of a spoon, the child opens a path to humanness itself. Yet, the spoon is not only an entrance to human thinking, but also it is a “first shared action of a teacher and a child” (Talking Hands 2016, 07:50). This shared action aims to teach a child to use the object that he or she has no way to know how to use on their own. Only with the guidance of the other, a child can acquire the knowledge and possess the understanding of the object and its use.

This can be emphasized with Vygotsky’s idea of the zone of proximal development—“the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky 1978, 86). The zone elucidates the importance of the more knowledgeable Other to make the process of pupil’s maturation “currently in an embryonic state” (Vygotsky 1978, 86) possible. If a child, due to the teacher’s guidance, acquires a technique or an object, “the functions for such-and-such have matured in her” (Vygotsky 1978, 86).

Having fulfilled his role in guiding the pupil’s maturation process, the educator is no longer required to be present. The educator needs to disappear to foster the independence that has already been supported

and made possible in students' development. Only with the act of disappearance can students realize that they can firmly stand on their feet, walk on their own, and bring forth their achievements. Thus, humanness does not solely lie either in the spoon as an object of culture or in the educator. It lies in the pupils' understanding of their own separation from educators, their ability to live independently, without everlasting guidance.

In this case, the question of the independence of students gained with the help of educators is no longer the aim made by the educator himself but becomes the ultimate goal that education should strive to lay out. Expanding the role of education, Evald Ilyenkov strives to show how education needs to redirect itself from being solely the accumulation of knowledge via memorization towards the cultivation of "the ability independently to solve tasks that require thinking in the proper and precise sense of the word" (Ilyenkov 2007, 16–17). The primary task of education, then, lies in realizing the independent process of acquiring the "intellectual culture" (ibid.) one is always surrounded with.

After the Last Class

However, Almborg's film reveals a more delicate link that is established between an educator and a student—an intimate link between Suvorov and Ilyenkov being the role model for the former. At the end of the documentary, the mournful break of such a fragile connection captured our attention. When the political shift had revealed its positivistic nature by taking off "its Marxist mask," (Talking Hands 2016, 42:54) the Zagorsk experiment ceased to be the focus for the exposed political regime. This left Suvorov and the lives of the Zagorsk's participants isolated, as their life turned out to be solely "his or her own way" (Talking Hands 2016, 43:18). At the end, when the experiment collapsed, Suvorov chose not to take sides, claiming to be "[his] own party" (Talking Hands 2016, 43:38).

The discontent with the political focus, the sense of abandonment, and the confinement in one's solitude—all of these puzzle pieces are recollected as Suvorov tells the viewers how "[he] solemnly miss[es] Ilyenkov" (Talking Hands 2016, 42:29). The exposure of the political regime showed that the shift of the world, as Ilyenkov wanted it to be, was no longer possible. The abandonment, due to the ceased focus on the project of the Zagorsk experiment, revealed that there was no more interest in the paradigm where the primary question was of understanding what comprises each of us as human. Finally, Suvorov is left alone since Ilyenkov's attempt—the attempt to show the underlying and material nature of every person's thinking and being—has left its (last) mark on Suvo-

rov's view of human (world) from which he could not refrain. To renounce it meant "renouncing [him]self" (Talking Hands 2016, 41:45), leaving Ilyenkov's influence no longer present in his surroundings but left solely to himself.

As we saw how Suvorov misses Ilyenkov, we also recognised how Suvorov had lost his guiding educator—the mentor that has brought forth a lens that allowed him to see an individual's thinking in a renewed light. This realization left us with crippling sadness that came with the undertones of despair. The feeling is reinforced the moment we see a shot of Ilyenkov's photograph in the frame, which stresses the importance of Ilyenkov's guidance for Suvorov. At first, we deeply sympathized with Suvorov's loss, taking such loss of an educator as something that should not have happened when the guide, as it seems, is needed the most. At the moment of one's loneliness, when the surrounding world seems to be shattering, should not educators remain with the ones they have influenced to the greatest extent as Ilyenkov influenced Suvorov?

The truth is that Ilyenkov went nowhere. Several times in the documentary, Suvorov mentions the importance of Ilyenkov in cultivating the conviction that deaf-blind children could, too, acquire talent. We see scenes of children creating statues made out of clay and playing chess with each other as clear representations of their developed skills. However, for Ilyenkov, this is only a stepping stone in the process of the formation of the minds of these deaf-blind children. Throughout the movie, there are numerous scenes which show the students go out on a trip and feel different monuments, statues, huts, and even a fireplace. The scenes signify their ability to discover the world on their own and that they are able to, without guidance, become familiar with complex and deeply historical objects. These young adults, who used to require help from the educator to use a spoon, were now able to interpret the world independently and discuss their observations with each other. Finally, they have become individual persons. This development is beautifully illustrated by the beach scene where a group of three students held each other's hands as they walked into the water but soon after, we see them freely swimming on their own with smiles plastered across their faces.

Ilyenkov cannot be directly found in these moments. We did not see Ilyenkov jogging alongside them across the sand or guiding their hands across the door and explaining every mold. Yet, it was exactly Ilyenkov's intention for the deaf-blind children to realize that they could reach a point in life where they could do everything on their own. In other words, Ilyenkov's disappearance was necessary for them to become independent humans. Following Vygotsky, Ilyenkov, too, deeply understood that "it is impossible to teach a child—or, indeed, an adult—anything, including the ability (skill) to think independently, without

adopting an attitude of the closest attention to his individuality” (Ilyenkov 2007, 16).

Ilyenkov will always be in the students. Suvorov deciding to “go his own way” (Talking Hands 2016, 43:25) and not follow any political parties may be contrary to Ilyenkov’s political views, but certainly it is an internalization of Ilyenkov’s teachings, as Ilyenkov “reject[ed] idolization (or as is also said, ‘alienation’) of any given institutionalized form of human activity” (Ilyenkov 1971, 13), the very situation Suvorov declined by his decision. Though Suvorov wishes that Ilyenkov was still there for them, it is clear that Ilyenkov never left at all. Suvorov, through his independent stance, comprehends his humanness. His longing for Ilyenkov to be around is merely the essence and desire of any human—the longing for social relations. Through Ilyenkov’s words, “the old philosophy and pedagogy used to call such an attitude ‘love’” (Ilyenkov 2007, 16).

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