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ABSTRACT: This chapter invites the reader to rediscover Nikolai Marr's scientific work, which is situated at the intersection of archaeology, linguistics, and anthropological language theory. Marr's linguistic models, which Sergei Eisenstein compared to a reading of Joyce's *Ulysses*, underwent however multiple waves of critique. His heterodox materialism, originating in an archaeological vision of history and leading to a speculative 'palaeontology of speech', reveals a complex vision of time, one traversed by 'survivals' and anachronisms.

KEYWORDS: palaeontology; gesture; survival; linear speech; material culture; linguistic theory; materialism; historiography; social conflict; Benjamin, Walter; Marr, Nikolai

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Nikolai Marr's Materialist Palaeontology of Speech

ELENA VOGMAN

Today the Soviet archaeologist, palaeontologist of speech, and inventor of the theory of 'linear' or 'gestural speech', Nikolai Marr (1864–1934), seems to be almost forgotten. The Georgian-born author is mostly known for his 'New Theory of Language', otherwise called the Japhetic theory, yet Marr's work on the disciplinary margins, his incessant invention of new fields of knowledge, and his 'archaeological' vision of history is comparable to such lateral thinkers as Aby Warburg or Carl Einstein. In contrast to these authors, however, Marr practiced archaeology, which led him to some crucial discoveries in the Caucasus and a vast materialist theory of culture, which he understood as evolving by 'strata'¹ and conditioned by historical and economic relations. Regarding the impact of labour on the development of culture, Marr's 'palaeontology of speech' emphasized the role of the gesture as genuine component of language and thought. At the same time, Marr's Marxist disposition did not prevent him from publishing the first Russian translation of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *Méantalité Primitive*, accompanied with a special foreword by the author. Shortly after the publication, Lévy-Bruhl was decried as one of the 'bourgeois' and 'idealist' philosophers along with Marcel Proust and Sigmund Freud.

1 A geological layer of rock, soil, or other material.

Marr's theory of language, which is also known as Japhetology (*iafetologia*), implied the existence of a 'Japhetic' family, which the languages of the Caucasus, the Near East, and some non-Indo-European languages of Eurasia and Africa were supposed to belong to. After the Russian Revolution, Marr founded the Japhetic Institute in Saint Petersburg, which was part of the State Academy of History of Material Culture, where in the 1920s several poets and artists attended lectures, including Sergei Eisenstein. Marr ventured to produce alternative models of temporality, which involved a new perspective on the history of culture, and at the same time questioned the epistemic ground on which such a history had been written and perceived until that point. This epistemic shift went hand in hand with a critical opening of the inherited disciplinary boundaries provoking Marr to create new fields of knowledge, disquieting and sometimes disturbing other fields, which became the reason why his critical attempts remained underacknowledged or were even forgotten.

On the one hand, Marr's materialism operated in close proximity to the materiality of culture — its archaeological objects, its traces and linguistic manifestations — and, on the other hand, it operated in a more speculative anthropological dimension by addressing language's origins. This dimension challenged the orthodox model of historical materialism and introduced a series of ingenious and apocryphal claims. In this non-linear, 'fossilized' time Marr discovered a crucial form of life, a 'survival', which served as the basis for his materialist palaeontology of speech. It was this model of time that transformed Marr's theory of language into a critical instrument aimed at both the racist linguistic theories of his time and the dominant Indo-European linguistics that was based on the arbitrariness of the sign.

In order to better seize the drifting trajectory that led Marr to a paleontological model of history and language, my text will first draw upon his archaeological expeditions to the Caucasus by examining a number of photographic documents which are preserved at the Institute of History of Material Culture in Saint Petersburg. These materials symptomatically reveal the impact that archaeological practice and palaeontology had on Marr's linguistic theory, or 'Japhetology', with particular regard for its implied temporality. Secondly, I will briefly trace Marr's language theory, especially his late text 'On the Origin of

language'. Japhetology became the object of different waves of critique formulated from both philological and linguistic perspectives following the official ban of Marr's theory, which was pronounced by Stalin personally in the 1950s. An analysis of manifold parallels between Marr's approach and the poetico-theoretical methods of his contemporaries, in particular the poets Andrei Bely and Velimir Khlebnikov, remains still to be written, insofar as they tempted to reconfigure teleological temporalities in order to lay bare the vertiginous complexity of historical events. A different model of history would appear once Marr's linguistic approach is located in a constellation with these other authors' approaches. The rhythmical occurrences and re-occurrences of historical events which Khlebnikov and Bely observed in their investigations reveal history's entanglements with psychic and poetic economy rather than with the irreversible course of history.

MARR'S ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPEDITIONS

Marr studied every discipline offered at the faculty of Oriental Studies in Saint Petersburg. He specialized in the Armenian, Georgian, and Iranian languages, and swiftly became one of the leading orientalists of his time. In 1892 — aged only 27 years old — Marr undertook his first archaeological expedition to Ani, the ruined medieval Armenian city situated on the territory of the Russian Empire, in today's Turkey alongside the closed border with Armenia. In the following decades Marr undertook foundational archaeological work in Sinai, Palestine, and the ancient sites of Armenia, such as Dvin, Garni, Ani, and the lake Van. Marr's research into the buried culture, architecture, and language of the city of Ani (the first traces of which date back to the fifth century) was pioneering in its approach and still remains an important point of reference. His book *Ani, a Written History of the City and the Excavations*, published many years later in 1934, included materials from eleven expeditions between 1892 and 1917.²

Marr's study of the excavated monuments of Ani opens with a folded leaflet: a map of the ancient city. The author marks different sites

2 Nikolai Marr, *Ani, knizhnaia istoria goroda i raskopki na meste* [Ani, a Written History of the City and the Excavations] (Moscow: OGIZ, 1934).

and multiple discoveries are depicted in his text, such as the Church of the Holy Redeemer, the wall of Ashot, King Gagik I's church of Saint Gregory or 131 fragments of an Armenian Inscription, etc. Already in 1905, Marr had critically qualified the title as the 'written history of Ani', that is, 'the history of the Armenian Bagratid Kingship based on literary evidence, such as the traditional history of Armenia in general', as 'limited and legendary'. Without an account of its silent material traces, its surviving remnants, the past appears as 'poor and dead'.³ Marr opposes such traditional literary history to the astonishing 'life' of Ani's excavated ruins: archaeological landscapes that offer an insight into history's 'concrete materiality'. The evidence of a vanished culture that Marr obtained from his excavations reverses, in his view, the certitude of a 'nationally constituted Christian cultural history', which is anachronistically claimed as 'Armenian'. Opposing such assertions of literary history, Marr assembles a series of syncretic elements, of Chalcedonian influences alongside Georgian ones, which he analyses in his text.⁴

One quality of Marr's text seems remarkable: while deciphering fragments from Ani's lost culture he emphasizes the destructive forces of history, which attest, in each recovered monument, to an irreversible loss. One can identify in this leitmotiv of destruction, which traverses Marr's archaeological gaze, a dialectical attention to the vanished layers of culture and memory. This dialectics of residues returns in his future research in the palaeontology of language: Marr will try to recover the history of language— especially the history of oral languages — from ephemeral contemporary vernaculars. In his work history appears not as a homogeneous and teleological flow but rather as an archaeological layering inhabited by survival and coexistence.

Another important element of Marr's early archaeological work, one that marks his entire oeuvre, is his attention to material culture. 'Material culture', which he sometimes writes as a compound noun, appears at decisive junctures in Marr's texts, expanding the semantic field of this conceptual constellation. While in his early archaeological investigations it describes the methodological focus he uses for the

3 Nikolai Marr, *O raskopkakh i rabotah v Ani leta 1906* [On the Excavations and Works in Ani in Summer 1906] (Saint Petersburg: Imp. akad. nauk, 1907), p. 2.

4 Ibid.



Figure 1. Nikolai Marr, The palace of Paron, Ani, ca. 1898. Archive of the Institute of History of Material Culture, Saint Petersburg, inventory number Q756-76.

objects of the Institute of History of Material Culture — excavated monuments and concrete material evidence from Ani, for example — in his theory of language ‘material culture’ refers to the conditions in which linguistic material is produced and studied in the field of the palaeontology of language: It describes the method of reading the history of thought in its relation to the origins of language and Marxist theory. He writes, ‘the problem of thought is one of the most relevant if not the most relevant theoretical issue in the world, precisely because its roots lie not in itself and not in nature, but in the material basis, described in the framework of dialectical materialism.’⁵ In this passage written shortly before his death in 1934, Marr takes the stance of historical materialism; but far from abandoning an anthropological perspective on the history of culture, an archaeological vision of time,

5 Nikolai Marr, ‘Iazyk i myshlenie’ [Language and Thought], in *Izbrannye raboty* [Selected Works], 5 vols (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennaia akademiia istorii material’noi kul’tury (GAIMK), 1933–37), III (1936), pp. 90–121 (p. 104).

and a highly syncretic and speculative method of research, Marr's 'materialism' embraced different stages of his scientific investigations beginning with his early archaeological work.

This early focus on 'material culture' — its concrete objects and traces — is symptomatic of his early work with images. While preparing for his first archaeological expedition to Ani in 1891 Marr took a three-month-course in photography, and insisted that the Imperial Academy of Science provide him with expensive equipment and a camera.⁶ Marr's travel diaries bear witness to his emphasis on documentation and to the transmission of his archaeological experience. He even refused to continue his trip without a camera, which should have been sent to him a week after his departure for Ani's archaeological site. We read in his diary: 'I am deeply concerned while waiting for the camera, the site can be damaged by unforeseen events.' Weeks later, after the camera finally arrived, Marr's entries became very laconic: 'I'm exclusively occupied with taking images (documenting excavated fragments of paintings) and developing them.'⁷

Photographs constitute a considerable part of Marr's surviving archive, which today numbers approximately 10,000 pieces from different archaeological expeditions and his later study of 'gestural' or 'linear speech'.⁸ These materials helped Marr to establish a research instrument for the Institute of History of Material Culture, which became part of the Historical-Archaeological section of the St. Petersburg University. Marr also made use of these documents in his research and lectures, an approach which was prescient for understanding images as arguments in their own right. For several reasons, this visual archive and its use value in Marr's theoretical work have remained neglected. Furthermore, a major part of his archive was destroyed during the 1917 revolution, as the train which Marr used to send his collection to the Caucasian Historical Institute in order to establish the first museum of Ani was destroyed during its journey. Surprisingly, this traumatic loss

6 Archive of the Institute of History of Material Culture, Saint Petersburg, fonds 1, inventory 61/1893, pp. 94–95.

7 Nikolai Marr, Diary from 23 May and 9 June 1892, Archive of the Institute of History of Material Culture, Saint Petersburg, fonds 1, inventory 33/1892, pp. 41 and 173.

8 See also T. M. Devel and T. B. Tomes, 'Sobranie N. Ia. Marra v fotoarchive LOIA AN SSR' [N. Ia. Marr's Collection in the Archive of the Institute for History of Material Culture], *Istoriko-filologicheskii zhurnal*, 3 (1971), pp. 289–95.

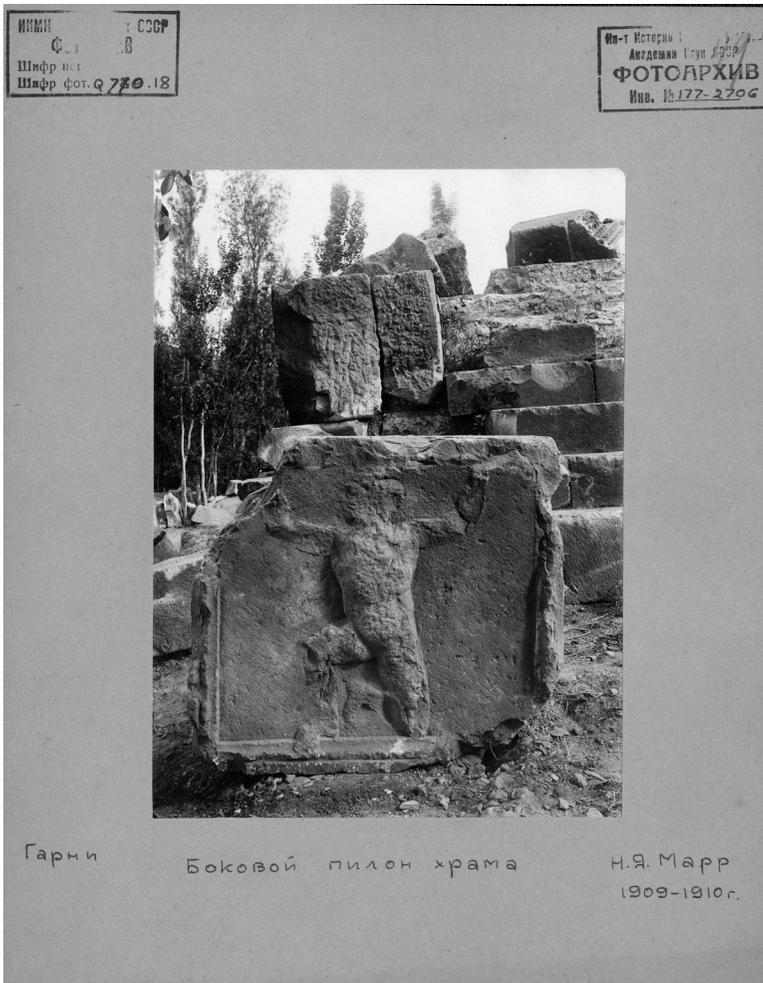


Figure 2. Nikolai Marr, The side pylon of a church, Garni, 1909-10.
Archive of the Institute of History of Material Culture, Saint Petersburg,
inventory number Q 77-18.

of the archive coincides with Marr's shift from archaeology to language theory, leading him to more speculative, anthropological, and paleontological perspectives.

LANGUAGE'S ORIGINS

Marr's groundwork for the 'New Theory of Language' dates back to his talk at the Academy of Sciences on 21 November 1923, when he formulated a double hypothesis. On the one hand, he refused a prevalent racial genealogy of language by stating that there is no Indo-European language family based on race. On the other hand, he claimed that 'there is no primal unitary language, but a multitude of tribal languages.' In this way he disqualified the theory of the *Ursprache* as 'an instrumentalized ideological fiction.' In contrast to such a fiction, Marr constructed a materialist perspective that regards language in Marxist terms as a class phenomenon: 'There is no language which is not class language, hence there is no thought which is not class thought.'⁹ Yet, despite this radical claim, Marr was far from merely adapting any dogmatic stance of historical materialism. In his theory of 'material culture' he proposed that language is a tool that evolves in relation to labour and, as a consequence, that it is a fundamental element of the class struggle. At the same time, he considered labour as being part of a complex cultural process which required a meticulous study of its objects, traces, and 'survivals' — a crucial concept in Marr's palaeontology of language. In this way, Marr's highly productive period of linguistic palaeontology, which dates from 1923 to 1934, was marked not only by a remarkable transposition of his archaeological experience to the level of language theory and culture, but also by an invention of his own syncretic version of historical materialism evolving alongside a constant reformulation of his own positions.¹⁰

The dialectical doubt present in Marr's thought, which can be described as 'perpetually drifting' because it is perpetually seduced by new linguistic cases — which Marr conceived of as new 'material' bases as well as a 'formal and ideological' frameworks for his analysis — was inspiring for many contemporary artistic practices, especially those of poets. At the same time, Marr's critics, such as the linguist and founder of Eurasianism Nikolai Trubetskoi, dismissed his linguistic approach

9 Marr, 'Iazyk i myshlenie', p. 91.

10 Nikolai Marr, 'Novyi povorot v rabote iafeticheskoi teorii' [New Turn in the Work of Japhetic Theory], in *Izbrannye raboty*, I (1933), pp. 312–46; 'Aktual'nye problemy i ocherednye zadachi iafeticheskoi teorii' [Current Problems and Imminent Tasks of the Japhetic Theory], in *Izbrannye raboty*, III, pp. 61–77.

as well as his anti-colonial positions as those of a ‘half-mad graphomaniac’, and advised his works to be reviewed by a psychiatrist more than a linguist.¹¹ Such criticisms followed the formula, ‘First the conclusion comes, and only afterwards the analysis of the material’,¹² which was a way of alluding to Marr’s seemingly biased method and consequently of ignoring his archaeological and materialist investigations. Beginning with Stalin’s personal ban of Marr’s theory in the 1950s, his Institute was closed, and his theories regarded as an obscure perversion of science and a linguistic aberration. To a large extent, Marr’s critics have accused him of being non-systematic; at the same time, it must be said that Marr’s genealogical approach, which takes places at the margins of different disciplines, as well as his syncretic reading of the history of culture cannot be understood from within a narrow historicist perspective. This is why critics considered Marr a pseudo-scientist who sought to ‘prove the unknown by the unknown’,¹³ and principally referred to Marr’s lack of a properly ‘linguistic education’ and ‘a concrete method of comparative historical research in linguistics’ in order to discredit him.¹⁴ Ultimately, his ‘new theory of language’ has been characterized as ‘a highly attractive myth’, even in recent scholarship.¹⁵

In his text from 1925 entitled ‘On the Origin of Language’, which was quickly also published in a German translation, Marr recalled the central theses of Japhetic theory. In this text he claims that Western Indo-European linguistics were merely oriented ‘to the data of

11 Trubetskoi to Jakobson, 6 November 1924, in *N. S. Trubetzkoy's Letters and Notes*, ed. by Roman Jakobson (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 74. See also Stefanos Geroulanos and Jamie Phillips, ‘Eurasianism versus IndoGermanism: Linguistics and Mythology in the 1930s’ Controversies over European Prehistory’, *History of Science*, 56.3 (2018), pp. 343–78 (p. 363).

12 Such was the formula against Marr’s theory articulated by V. V. Gornung in the beginning of the 1950s, quoted after Vladimir Alpatov, *Istoria odnogo mifa: Marr i marrism* [The History of One Myth: Marr and Marrism] (Moscow: Ed. URSS, 2004), p. 15.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 33. Alpatov questions the attractiveness of Marr’s theory of language far beyond the ideological instrumentalization through the official Soviet dogma and the pre-revolutionary tendencies of universal regard. ‘The popularity of Marr’s ideas [...] was already considerable in the beginning of the 1920s and grew further with the formulation of “the new theory of language”’. Alpatov quotes a recent publication of Olga Freydenberg, who is one of the most prominent scholars of Marr. Alpatov characterizes the attraction of Marr’s theory as the ‘attraction of a [scientific] myth’.

dead and traditional written languages' and largely proceeded on a philological basis. Similar to the example of Ani, where Marr opposed the living materiality of the ruins to the dead literary historiography, his palaeontology of speech critically discredits contemporary Indo-European linguistics based on racial theory. In opposition to such idealist tendencies in philology, as well as to the reconstruction of ethnic identities, Marr sought to uncover a hidden link to social relations surviving in homonymic affinities between different linguistic clusters. In this regard he countered the Proto-Indo-European theories — such as Otto Schrader's *Sprachforschung und Urgeschichte* — with his own socio-biological approach and paleontological research method. He states: 'Indo-European linguistics cannot deny that it is a science about language from historical epochs. However, regarding the issue of its genesis leading to the prehistory of human speech, it is helpless, it doesn't say anything meaningful.'¹⁶ In this way Marr not only refused an ethnic perspective on language but also introduced a historical temporality into the very notion of 'prehistory', which up until that point was regarded as a homogeneous space-time where nature prevailed over culture and biological life prevailed over social processes.¹⁷

Our approach is socioeconomical. Even tribal society is economic-tribal, not zoologico-tribal. And when a tribe is constituted according to its active being and not its native descent, this tribe is a class formation. As such, it is in struggle with other equal class-tribal formations — in a struggle for materials and the subject-matter of production, or for sale of its production, and for this reason we can't exclude the prehistoric tribes from the class society.¹⁸

Following this argument Marr aimed to reconsider the relation between language and thought: he saw language not merely as means of communication but rather as an instrument (Russian: *instrument*)

16 Nikolai Marr, 'Ob iafeticheskoi teorii' [On Japhetic Theory], in *Izbrannye raboty*, III, pp. 1–34 (p. 33).

17 On the 'invention of prehistory' in the second half of the nineteenth century as well as on the discovery of the deep time of the earth, see the excellent study by Maria Stavrinaki, *Saisis par la préhistoire. Enquête sur l'art et le temps des modernes* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2019).

18 Nikolai Marr, 'Sredstva peredvizhenia, orudia samozashchity i proizvodstva v doistorii' [Means of Transportation, Instruments of Self-protection and Production in Prehistory], in *Izbrannye raboty*, III, pp. 123–51 (p. 141).

closely tied to the labour process. For this reason, he recognized language in the first bodily tool: the gesture. Marr conceptualized such communication, which he saw as conditioned by economic and social relations, 'kinetic' or 'linear speech'. In this way the theoretical foundation for the genesis of language concerned the origin of vocalization or auditory language from motoric language.

Marr's methodological approach examined 'the picture of the transformation of language in the various eras of language creation by way of comparison', which he called 'diachronic comparative grammar'.¹⁹ By reconstructing, from contemporary linguistic forms, the surviving archaic 'residues', this procedure was said to reveal the historical 'stages' of linguistic development. According to Marr, the primary phonetic speech consisted of four phonetic elements: *SAL*, *BER*, *ION*, and *ROSH*. He derived these from tribal names of people from the Mediterranean area. According to the Japhetic theory, all human languages were formed from these four elements, which survived in them and provided the ground for Marr's linguistic palaeontology.

Conceiving of the hand as an evolutionary primal linguistic tool, Marr wrote:

Primeval man, who did not possess any articulated language, was happy if he pointed to or drew attention to an object, and to do so, he had a particularly well-adapted tool (instrument), the hand, which distinguishes man so sharply from the rest of the animal kingdom [...] The hand or hands were a person's tongue. Hand movements, facial expressions, and in some cases body movements as well, were the only available means (*sredstva*) of linguistic creation.²⁰

From such an irreducible phenomenality of the hand, Marr derived the primal language as being the 'fundamental quality of *japhetic* language'. This is how, following Lévy-Bruhl's '*loi de participation*' and Hamilton Cushing's 'Manual Concepts',²¹ he stated that concepts were not connected by means of logical relations but instead by means of sensuous and expressive elements. Cushing described how in Zuni language

19 Nikolai Marr, 'O proischozhenii iazyka' [On the Origin of Language], in *Izbrannye raboty*, III (1936), pp. 180–215 (p. 182).

20 *Ibid.*, p. 201.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 202–06.

particular hand gestures and intonations, which accompanied speech, could radically modify its signification. According to Cushing these gestures or intonation nuances preserved aspects of the designated object or acted as a trace pointing at its concrete meaning. On the one hand, this anthropological foundation allowed Marr to formulate the most speculative and provocative thesis in which he identified the hand as the primal operator of language. On the other hand, Marr grounded this anthropology of the hand within a new materialist framework: he replaced the 'mystical' elements of Lévy-Bruhl's concept of '*participation mystique*' with constructive ones, speculating on the social and economic organization of life. Lévy-Bruhl conceived of 'mystical participation' as a mode of perception in indigenous cultures where 'objects, beings, and phenomena can be, though in some way incomprehensible to us, something other than themselves [...] that they give forth and receive mystical powers, virtues, qualities, and influences which make themselves felt outside without ceasing to remain what they are.'²² Although Lévy-Bruhl never intended to characterize the 'mystical' or 'pre-logical' mode of thinking as a failure of logic or an inability to think rationally, he admitted that there was a nuance of obscurity which accompanied his concept, leading to its inadequacy. 'However', he wrote, apparently confused by his own idea, 'in default of a wholly satisfactory formula, we can make an attempt to approximate it.'²³ For Marr, Lévy-Bruhl's actual confusion could only have arisen from an absence of a materialist standpoint, namely the obscuration of the fundamental relation between thinking and labour, between language and the conditions of cultural production. Marr, who agreed with the radical alterity and singularity of the phenomenon of 'mystical participation', also sought to demystify this concept by tracing its historical dimension.

He argued that 'it is entirely inconceivable that the hand could have been replaced as the producer of a mental value-language, before it was replaced by tools as the producer of material goods, or that an articulated language of sounds could have taken the place of a hand language at that time'. Rather, the foundation for the creation

22 Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think* (1910), trans. by Lilian A. Clare (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 61.

23 *Ibid.*

of an auditory language must have been laid ‘by some process of productive work.’²⁴ The origin of an auditory language gained not only a fundamental processual dimension, but it is also inseparably linked to the economic and ergonomic organization of society. In consequence, Marr argued that an articulated language ‘could not have emerged before mankind’s transition to productive work with the aid of artificially fashioned tools.’²⁵

SURVIVING GESTURES

Marr’s attempt to introduce a materialist ground into the history of language radically differs from the teleological framework of orthodox historical materialism. Marr understood history not as a linear progression of time but as a multi-layered and polydimensional process closely related to matter, itself conceived as a concrete material involved in the production of time. His notion of ‘survival’ paradigmatically crystallizes this epistemic shift. However, *survival* would not survive without a history in which its latency, its transformations, and its possible reoccurrence is inscribed. Marr therefore carefully distinguished historical phases or strata which mark the evolution of language — understood in its complex historicity and not as a mere evolution.

Language [*yazyk*] has nothing to do with a mere sound, but with a phoneme, an articulated sound produced by mankind and accompanied by the labour of the brain apparatus which previously effected the hand with the same ends. Language has to do with a sound directed by thought in the same way as thought directs the hand, the gesture, and the facial expression of linear speech. Ant movements, for instance, do not dispose of any particular technically adapted tool. The entire body moves here. Animal sound language can be the origin of the latest human artistic production in the sphere of sounds, singing and music, while the vibration of the body can be the

24 In this article, ‘auditory language’ refers to a language composed of sounds, and it differs from vocalizations or sounds which Marr saw as a complement to gestural language. He regarded written language as a historically more advanced stage of these forms of communication.

25 Marr, ‘O proischozhdenii iazyka’, pp. 202–08.

foundation of the linear artistic creation, of dancing etc. But neither the one nor the other led to the human language.²⁶

For Marr the caesura which separates linear or gestural speech from articulated language lies within the cultural and economic shift: literary understood as the physical impact of the new conditions of production emerging with the use of the tools. But what does it mean when Marr speaks of surviving gestures as elements of linear speech?

It comes as no surprise that the archival materials show Marr's palaeontology of language documenting and interpreting cases of 'surviving' linear speech. A series of images from Marr's photographic archive, captioned as 'the Gestural language of a Georgian Woman', are preserved at the Institute for the History of Material Culture in St. Petersburg. In a text from 1932 entitled 'Language and Thought', Marr criticized Western linguistics which he saw as indifferent to genealogical problems of thought and to marginal linguistic phenomena, such as gestures, argot, and vernaculars. Paying great attention to women's gestures within patriarchal societies, Marr observed and interpreted kinetic speech as a 'survival', in Russian: *perezhitok*. As a consequence of Stalin's progressive dictum of the first five-year plan, which postulated to 'overcome the survivals [*perezhitki*]' of the past, the concept of *perezhitok* could henceforth only be used in a pejorative sense. Nonetheless, after Stalin's ban, Marr's texts shift from the discredited concept of *perezhitok* to an intimately related one: *perezhivanie*, a neologism in the framework of his language theory. This word, which is based on the same root *zhit*, 'to live', also denotes an emotionally charged 'experience' in the Russian language. The use value of this silent shift of meaning, in which Marr's concept itself *survives* despite negative political impositions and associations, in the context of Marr's Japhetic theory seems significant.

To return now to the images of Georgian women, what does '*perezhivanie*' mean when manifested in their hand gestures? According to the author, the surviving element of 'linear speech' could only survive because 'its use' relates 'to the everyday life' and to its 'normative pressure'.²⁷

26 Ibid., p. 200.

27 Marr, 'Iazyk i myshlenie', p. 108.

Such bodily manifestations led Marr to reject Western anthropology's perspective on the 'primitive mentality' as an evolutionary stage of society in favour of a more complex political and social argument. Marr gave examples of colonial countries, such as Australia or South America, where the expression of women's grief, especially that of widows, traditionally manifested itself through a ban on speech. The resulting silence was accompanied by gesticulation: for Marr, these examples were of the 'survival' [*perezhivanie*] of linear speech *par excellence*.²⁸ He observed similar gestures as a part of a different type of patriarchal society: following their marriage, women in the Caucasus were only allowed to speak silently, in gestures. In such a female 'linear speech' he envisioned a survival of a conflict, a 'women's language' which was used in the 'struggle of women's matriarchal organization'.²⁹ Marr's hypothesis also took into account the dissemination of hand language in highly heterogeneous geographical and cultural regions and formations. Through his analysis of the gestures which women performed in two different photographs, one signifying the sun and the other the full moon, Marr pointed to the structural similarity of the two different expressions. In both cases hands were raised to form a half-circle of the 'orans posture'.³⁰ However, while the expression of the sun was emphasized through a light smile, this facial expression is absent in the case of the moon. Marr's archive also preserves studies of collective expressions of manual speech, although they do not feature references or further interpretation.

Such cases open up a double perspective within Marr's thought: on the one side, there is what he calls the 'manifold semantic emanations' of the 'hand', meaning that one word unfolds a multitude of potential meanings.³¹ Such a polysemic quality proves the hypothesis of a phonetic speech that originated out of a handful of primal elements or particular *Urworte*. Alongside words like 'sky', 'cosmos', and 'man', Marr identified the word 'hand' as a significant part of these primary linguistic elements. Regarding the question of the primacy of the sky or the hand, Marr answered from the standpoint of Japhetic theory:

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., p. 107.

30 Ibid., p. 108.

31 Marr, 'O proishozhdenii iazyka', p. 209.

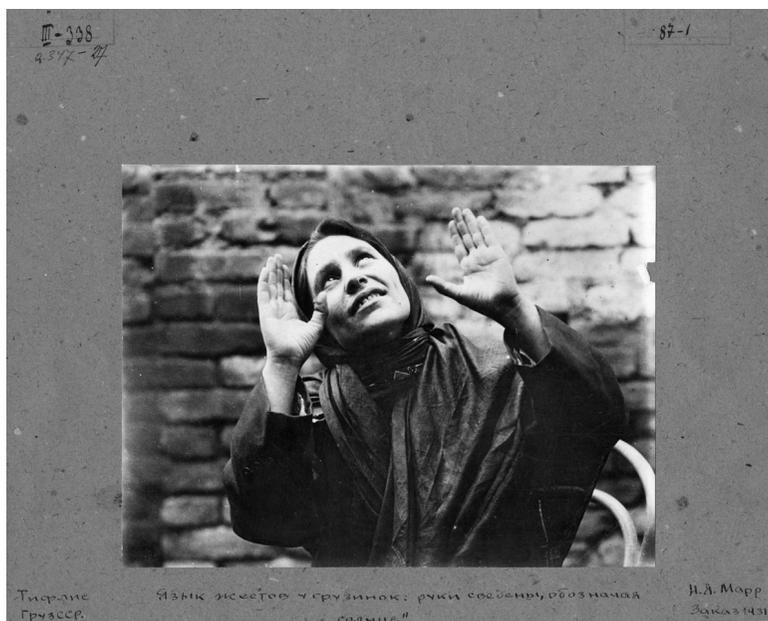


Figure 3. Nikolai Marr [image ordered in 1931], ‘Georgian women’s gestures: the hands are brought together expressing “the sun”’, Tiflis ca. 1931. Archive of the Institute of History of Material Culture, Saint Petersburg, inventory number Q 347-27.

‘Guided by the palaeontology of language, it points from the “sky” to the “hand” as to the *Urwort*: the hand of the working man, the creator of the entire material culture, including language.’³² Hence, the etymology of the word not only implies the gesture, but also provides a knowledge of gestures, which operates by means of its expressive a-mimetic potential (Marr further derives verbs like *giving*, *taking*, and *offering* from the word *hand*). On the other side, Marr’s analysis of the gesture genealogically locates language within the gesture, which then becomes not only a proto-word but an operative prototype of linguistic instruments.

32 Ibid. See also the excellent study by Susanne Strätling, *Hand am Werk: Poetik der Poiesis in der russischen Avantgarde* (Paderborn: Fink, 2018), pp. 69–84.



Figure 4. Nikolai Marr [image ordered in 1931], ‘Georgian women’s gestures: the hands are brought together expressing “the full moon”, Tiflis ca. 1931. Archive of the Institute of History of Material Culture, Saint Petersburg, inventory number Q 347-28.

However, without providing any readymade answer to the problem of the origin of language, Marr dialectically claims: ‘Without an interest in the origin of language, no linguistics is possible. Every theory of language supposes a positive relation to this question.’³³ For Marr, language is a ‘belt in the sphere of the superstructure of society’; it originated in different cultures simultaneously and independently from one another. But the creative function of labour that effects the transition between different cultural formations, ‘is unitary regarding its origins, and all its manifold manifestations result from a unitary creative process affecting the different stages of its development.’³⁴

33 Marr, ‘O proishozhdenii iazyka’, p. 183.

34 Ibid., p. 189.

WALTER BENJAMIN AND MARR

This paradoxical figure of thought, which both supposes a loss of origin and the necessity of researching the origin's 'traces and "becomings"' strongly echoes Walter Benjamin's understanding of history. Benjamin, who used a quote from Karl Kraus's *Words in Verse* as an epigraph for one of his theses on history, 'Origin is the goal', composed a virulent critique of history regarded as a linear progression of time. Instead, for Benjamin '[h]istory is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [Jetztzeit]'.³⁵

When the origin is conceived as an *Urphänomen*, one can understand why Benjamin attentively read the German translation of Marr's text 'Über die Entstehung der Sprache' and discussed Marr's theory in his own text from 1935 entitled 'Problems in the Sociology of Language: An Overview'. Despite this interest, Benjamin's reading of Marr is marked by a particular reluctance provoked by the scope of Marr's thought: 'Marr has attempted in his writings to introduce a number of new and generally rather strange ideas into language studies', Benjamin states, helplessly characterizing Marr's ideas as 'too important to be ignored yet too controversial to be adequately discussed here'.³⁶ The epistemic doubt contained within Benjamin's assessment could derive from the speculative character of Marr's approach and not only from the vast field of his work which was unknown to the German author. But despite this critical hesitation, Benjamin referred to three major points in Marr's theory. The first — Marr's materialist foundation of language in gesture — echoes Benjamin's own concept of 'Stimmgebärde', or voice gesture. The second, intimately related to the first, is Marr's derivation of language from labour: 'This can be linked dir-

35 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings*, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), iv: 1938–1940, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and others (2003), pp. 389–400 (p. 395): 'The concept of mankind's historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself.'

36 Walter Benjamin, 'Problems in the Sociology of Language: An Overview', in *Selected Writings*, iii: 1935–1938, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and others (2002), pp. 68–93 (p. 74).

ectly to Marr's theory, according to which the manipulation of tools must have preceded that of language. But since the former activity is impossible without thought, there must have been a kind of thought which antedated speech.³⁷ The third point, which is highly important for Benjamin's political position at that time, is Marr's critique of the racial foundations of language in the idea of a unitary national language. Highlighting this argument, Benjamin quotes a passage from Marr's 'On the Origin of Language':

In a word, it would be unscientific and lacking in any real foundation to approach this or that language of a so-called national culture as the native language of the whole population, used by the mass of the people. For the present, the national language as a phenomenon independent of social strata and classes is a fiction.³⁸

Marr even went so far as to oppose class affiliation to such national unity of language. In this way Marr could even suppose that in cases of similar social structures different national languages would show more typological class affinities — as affinities between the same classes — than relations between languages of different classes within the same national language. Benjamin could not be indifferent to this idea in the framework of his inquiry into the 'sociology of language', in particular regarding his attention towards minor languages and slang, when he claims:

Current linguistics, the author constantly reiterates, has little inclination to seek out the sociological problems concealed in the languages of oppressed strata of populations. Indeed, it is remarkable how seldom linguistics, including the most recent linguistics, has concerned itself with argot, except from a purely philological point of view.³⁹

The diachronic connection between hand language and auditory language, which forms the methodological core of Marr's palaeontology of language, also provided a crucial aspiration for a materialist approach to the history of culture by politicizing it without reducing

37 Ibid., p. 81.

38 Ibid., p. 75.

39 Ibid.

its speculative dimension. On the one hand, there was the possibility, in *living* Japhetic languages, of tracing the archaic structures — anachronistic residues travelling through time — that *live on* in contemporary vernaculars and gestures. In this way, Marr's palaeontology of speech aimed at reconstructing the erstwhile whole from the 'part' represented by the 'fossil remains'.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the idea that human culture and language developed in stages, changing step by step in the context of political, social, and economic conditions, suggests the image of a co-presence and co-existence of different societal and socio-historical formations. In conclusion, Marr not only provides evidence of the continued fossil existence of gestural, expressive and sound-language remains in modern languages through analysing their semantic and morphogenetic relationships, but he also reveals their active influence in cultural and religious practices. Important scholars of Marr's work, such as the philologist Olga Freudenberg, have devoted great attention to this last. Thus, Marr refers to the continuing 'magic' effect of the repetition of sound complexes, which he saw in pagan and Christian prayers, in cuneiform inscriptions and in architecture, in Abkhazian 'songs without words', and in Georgian refrains. This anthropological scope of Marr's theoretical preoccupations broadened, from the outset, the narrow perspective of linguistics as a single discipline. Furthermore, it denied any dogmatic or rigid version of historical materialism by privileging the analysis of material culture in its most marginal and temporally remote dimensions (prehistory, vernaculars etc.). This is how materialism paved the way for Marr's linguistic method, which emphasized the importance of gestures and bodily expressions. Against the backdrop of rising nationalisms, Marr insisted on a materialist constitution of language that originated beyond land and race in social relations between labour, culture, and thought. In this way Marr's materialist explorations of the origin of language — an origin that is also forever lost — involves a processual and a-teleological understanding of history and culture.

40 Marr, 'O proishozhdenii iazyka', p. 202.

Elena Vogman, 'Language Follows Labour: Nikolai Marr's Materialist Palaeontology of Speech', in *Materialism and Politics*, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and Ayşe Yuva, *Cultural Inquiry*, 20 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 113–32 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-20_06>

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