



**Roman Schmidt**

## Utopian failing

*Two magazine projects*

Depression, revolution and the threat of fascism provided the impetus for Bertolt Brecht's and Walter Benjamin's magazine "Krise und Kritik" in the 1930s; thirty years later, in a world shaped by decolonization and bloc confrontation, Maurice Blanchot's "Revue Internationale" was a similar attempt at an engaged form of publishing. Yet its internationalist ambitions ultimately proved to be its downfall, writes Roman Schmidt.

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*

In early 1963 they admitted defeat. Conceived in late 1960, *Revue internationale* was intended by its French, German and Italian founders to be the historic realization of the idea of a "plural writing". Yet it remained a project and no more. In 1964, a record of the collated material<sup>1</sup> appeared in Italy. Hans Magnus Enzensberger called it the "remnants of a shipwreck".

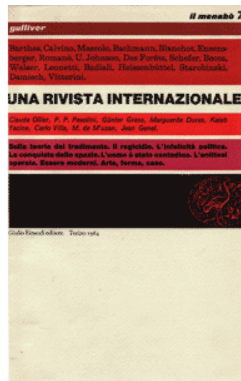
Ships run into trouble not when they are in the harbour but when they are on the high seas. If the boards shatter, then the collapse, in all senses, is the result of great activity.<sup>2</sup> Failure results from aiming too high.

This is where the idea of an international journal comes into its own. At the point of failure it is most true to itself. "For indeed", as Daniel Defoe noted as early as 1697 in his *Essay upon Projects*, "the true definition of a project, according to modern acceptance, is [...] a vast undertaking, too big to be managed, and therefore likely enough to come to nothing."<sup>3</sup> Defoe portrays the project-maker as a Promethean figure drawing up plans at the margins of the era, stretching the limits of what the era allows. Fascinated yet at sea, he knows that, as he steps into the realm of practice, he may run aground. As he wrote these words, Defoe, the writer and businessman, may well have been thinking of the mountain of debt his own commercial failures had saddled him with.<sup>4</sup>

From the perspective of a "poetics of failure", then, successful enterprises are suspect of having played it safe from the start. Whatever can be achieved effortlessly, without a critical mass of aspirations, hopes and adversity, cannot claim the title of "project" in the emphatic sense. Somewhere below there runs a line separating projects from things one simply does (admittedly, this line has been drawn absurdly low in recent years, so that today even the most banal tasks in life qualify).

Not so when planning a journal. For Defoe, this would rate as virtually *the* archetypal project. Success is the exception. If a journal does make it past the planning stages, then situations of crisis and radical change, particularly economic ones, are propitious moments for it. Sometimes, frontal attacks on the public sphere subsidized by the state and private trusts help get magazines established and temporarily keep them afloat (naming no names). Sometimes the time is simply right. More honest than relating the history of journals chronologically, as a never-ending succession of titles and media innovations since the *Journal des Sçavans* of 1665, would be a kairological account, as the history of plans, desires, latent possibilities and the odd successful coup.

An archaeology of the unpublished is thus posed with the task of unearthing the foundations of the established periodicals of our era. The first stratum contains the archived plans for the many journals that folded before their first issue; further below lies an almost incalculable number of ambitions that never made it as far as index cards in the archive, but were recorded at some point in footnotes, if that.



*Lignes* 11 (1990) and *Menabo* 7 (1964), the two journals that published the *Revue internationale* archives

Those who wish to drill deeper require the instruments of psychoanalysis. It is unlikely, though, that there is much to discover down there that furthers our understanding of journals. Certainly, writer's block, moments of hesitation and the problematic

biographies of project-makers all have their place in the intellectual economy of desire. But as we explore, we should not forget what is central. In magazine projects, it is the *communal* in communicating (*Mit-Teilung*) that is the key: the attempt to take advantage of historical constellations in order to open up a space for collective thought and action. What follows, then, is an account of two such projects: Walter Benjamin's and Bertolt Brecht's *Krise und Kritik* (Crisis and Criticism), and *Revue internationale*.

## Krise und Kritik

During the Great Depression, c.1930, Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht sat down together to discuss plans for a journal (other leading figures in the project were Herbert Ihering, Bernard von Brentano, Ernst Bloch, Siegfried Kracauer, Alfred Kurella and Georg Lukács). The literary historian Erdmut Wizisla has rescued the plans for this ambitious project from oblivion.<sup>5</sup> *Krise und Kritik*, the magazine's working title, makes clear that Benjamin and Brecht were setting out to broaden the concept of criticism by assigning it a crucial mediating role between aesthetic commitment and worldly engagement. The criticism in their magazine was not supposed to remain confined to literature and the theatre, but rather would embrace all areas of life. Wizisla summarized the editorial discussions as follows: "Criticism, as envisaged by the participants in the discussions, was drastic, effective and consequential, a criticism which [...] [in Brecht's words] [...] would be perceived in such a way that 'politics is its continuation by other means'."<sup>6</sup>

Convinced that revolution was imminent (this was before the experience of 1933), Benjamin and Brecht went as far as wanting to help the decisive "crisis" on its way. "The journal's field of activity", wrote Benjamin, "is the present *crisis* in all areas of ideology, and it is the task of the journal to register this crisis or to bring it about, and this by means of criticism".<sup>7</sup> The relationship of leftwing intellectuals to their publications could not be more clearly formulated: if M. Rainer Lepsius' famous comment that "criticism is the profession of intellectuals" holds true, then what we have here is a subversion of that job description, one that reconnects the critic with the revolutionary project. Brecht and Benjamin work towards what Brecht henceforth calls "interventionist thinking" (*eingreifendes Denken*): criticism not as a final judgement, but as collective action. A plan for a journal was, typically, their chosen medium for reconciling literature and revolution.

The design of the project puts aesthetic-material questions — of media technologies and styles of writing, for instance — on to a level with questions of content. But while the "overall approach" of the journal was to have a "heavy leftward slant", issues of form and editorial process were not to be sacrificed to political ends. On the contrary, Brecht and Benjamin's high standards derived from their view that the formal radicalism of literary modernism was an unavoidable precondition of socially effective criticism — a view that also explains the ease with which they were able to connect with the artistic avant-garde. It was important to maintain the resulting tension. Any "scientific" founding of criticism had to respect the "technical standard" of literature and make it productive, even if this clashed with the taste-based criticisms of the middle classes. The crisis in the 1920s and '30s seemed to serve Brecht and Benjamin perfectly in their aim of confronting the "bourgeois" camp with the progressive elements inherent in their own literature, driving these beyond themselves, so to speak. Benjamin later wrote: "The journal was meant to contribute to the propaganda of dialectical materialism by applying it to questions that the bourgeois intelligentsia is forced to acknowledge as those most particularly characteristic of itself."<sup>8</sup>

On their way towards journalistic praxis, both editors began to develop a "catalogue of writing styles" for *Krise und Kritik*. Benjamin introduced the idea of a "physical" style of writing that would "require experimentation". Brecht qualified this further, insisting that literature of this kind, which he called "practice" (*Übung*), corresponded ultimately to a "stage of social life realizable only through actual revolution, or a totally literarized life".

Here the project dynamics came into play. Having dealt with the question of the articulation of politics and literature, *Krise und Kritik* reached the second threshold of ambitious journal-making: "How do we want to work?" "Together!" answered Brecht and Benjamin, and thus found themselves in uncharted waters from which no editorial collective has ever returned to tell the tale.

According to Edmund Wizisla's version of events, they planned to guarantee, by means of committees and collective responsibility of all collaborators, that the journal would work towards common principles and be publicly answerable for what had been written. The idea was as far as possible to anticipate the literary communism of the "practice" in the editorial circle. This went too far for some. Ernst Bloch, for one, was hesitant to hand over his authority and growing fame to the "guidelines" of a collective. There was something of the "cliquey" about it, he wrote to his later wife, and besides "the alliance of the pure man of genius, Benjamin, with the unwashed genius Brecht

is exceedingly curious".<sup>9</sup> Wizisla concludes prosaically that "the collective to which the group aspired remained a pipe dream".

When the first essays for *Krise und Kritik* eventually arrived, Benjamin backed down in disappointment. They had not succeeded committing their collaborators to a new critical and collective form. It would have been possible to put together a leftwing magazine with the contributions they had, but the Weimar Republic had enough of those already. What the editors were attempting was more of an "experimental arrangement", which as Brecht remarked "gives a picture of a factory in operation". The planning went on for a little while more, but the momentum was gone. In the final analysis, the same was true of *Krise und Kritik* as what Joachim Kirchner had, in his history of journals, said about Schiller's prototypical *Horen* project: "[The journalistic enterprise] demands our attention perhaps more on account of what its editor, pursuing the ideal flight of his thoughts, was striving for with this monthly journal, than the actual results [...] The outstanding writers of the age, such as Goethe, Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Kant, Fichte, Woltmann and many more, had been invited by Schiller and had promised to collaborate. But even before the first issue of *Horen* appeared in 1795, the editor realized that the promises were not being kept and that the few articles that had been received in no way matched up to his expectations."<sup>10</sup>

## Revue internationale

There is no indication that Maurice Blanchot was aware he was setting forth the ambitions of *Krise und Kritik* when he started up his project for an international journal in the winter of 1960–61. The moment was every bit as promising as it had been thirty years before. As Reinhart Koselleck wrote in 1959 in the introduction to his book *Critique and Crisis*: "The present world crisis, characterized by the polar tensions between the world powers America and Russia, is from a historical point of view the consequence of European history. European history has expanded to become world history and has found its logical conclusion therein, in that the whole world has reached a state of permanent crisis..."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As Vol.7 of Elio Vittorini and Italo Calvino's journal *Il menabò di letteratura*, Turin 1964.

<sup>2</sup> "Collapse": the German word "Scheitern" means to "fail" and, literally, to "break up into pieces" — trans.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Defoe, *An Essay on Projects* (1697), [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)

<sup>4</sup> For the figure of the project-maker, see Markus Krajewski's book *Projektmacher*. Berlin: Kadmos 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Ermut Wizisla: *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*. New Haven: Yale UP 2009. Trans. from the German by Christine Shuttleworth. I follow Wizisla's version of events.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 80.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>9</sup> Ernst Bloch to Karola Piotrkowska, quoted according to *Benjamin and Brecht*, 90.

<sup>10</sup> Joachim Kirchner: *Das deutsche Zeitschriftenwesen, seine Geschichte und seine Probleme. Teil I: Von den Anfängen bis zum Zeitalter der Romantik*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1958, 251–2.

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