



Aleksandr Rodchenko. Osip Brik. 1924.

OSIP BRIK

“The Democratization of Art”

A state of bewilderment among our art workers is now evident. Why have they taken to forming organizations such as “Freedom for Art,” “Art for the People,” “Unions of Art Workers” and linking them to the revolution? Why this talk of art’s democratization, of its autonomy and separation from the state, etc.? What have democracy and art in common? Or art and revolution? This bewilderment points to a complete lack of understanding of art, democracy, and above all, the meaning of the Russian Revolution.

Had the meaning of this revolution been limited to politics, to the establishment of a state system, then art would not have mattered, and art workers would not have had to raise issues whose resolution depends on neither a monarchical nor a republican Russia. However, the essence of the Russian Revolution and its creative effect are not limited to the construction of the state. Its project is the formulation and solution of problems of social and cultural life and in the establishment, through its new approach, of its worldwide significance. This is neither the last in the series of national upheavals, nor the first of the series still to come. The great French Revolution gave humanity a new culture, that of the liberal bourgeoisie. The great Russian Revolution is also intended to lay the foundations of a new culture, that of future democracy.

It’s therefore not surprising that workers in the arts—the greatest branch of our culture—felt they could not just stand by, but wanted to offer their energy to the radical reconstruction of life whose development they were witnessing. And if some art workers insist that this is no concern of theirs, they’re hopeless individualists for whom nobody else matters, or fools with no comprehension of the immense scale of events.

What is the relationship between democracy and art? What questions about art are to be asked and answered during the construction of democracy? What is meant by the democratization of art?

A correct answer, free of premature conclusions, requires our understanding

that the word “art” is a combination of two wholly different concepts: art as personal creativity and art as socio-cultural phenomenon. Confusion of these two ideas generates a widespread conviction that democracy in art is simply art in the People’s service, that a painter, poet, or musician must create for them. And objectors to this view are correct in that a true artist creates solely for himself and for those who have need of him, and that creativity is possible only on this condition. They’re mistaken, however, if they think this objection eliminates the very possibility of applying democratic principles to art.

Of course art should be free. We know that true democracy has never encroached upon this freedom. Democracy has always and in all forms of cultural life advocated spiritual freedom and self-determination. If democracy wishes to remain faithful to its basic principles, it cannot, on the one hand defend the freedom of religious and scientific work, and on the other, violate the freedom of artistic work.

As stated earlier, all misunderstanding is based on the confusion between two concepts within the term “art.” We cannot apply democratic principles to personal creativity. In no case does democratization mean the education and, even less, the forcing of an individual to follow a given path. However, the idea of art is not limited to the demands of individuality. Freely formed poets, painters, and musicians who offer the fruits of their creativity enter into a complex relationship among themselves and with society, thereby creating art as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Democracy is then faced with an entire range of tasks to be performed.

Unfortunately, until now art workers have shown hardly any interest in questions of artistic life, and they allowed them to be played out with no interference. Democracy is thus only now preparing to raise questions and formulate problems. The art workers’ societies and unions that arose immediately after the revolution can help significantly in this respect. They must prepare documentary material and work out practical measures for the fundamental transformation of artistic life.

Democratic art’s main problem now is that of so-called folk creation. We’re so accustomed to dividing art into “real” and “folk” that even raising this question may seem strange. However, it’s far stranger that poems, symphonies, and paintings in museums are respected as art, while *chastushkas* and *luboks* are considered mere daily doings. The former are evaluated as works of art, the latter as ethnographic material. Ballet is art, but *trepak* is ethnography.¹

Anyone in search of an explanation of this strange phenomenon through formal analysis discovers all such efforts to have been in vain. However, once we begin to think about the social aspect of this phenomenon, everything becomes clear. Real art is that of the privileged class as distinct from that of the people, those without privilege. In this, as in all other spheres of cultural life, the privileged insist

1. *Chastushkas* are short folk songs, usually humorous in nature; *luboks* are brightly colored folk prints and drawings; *trepak* is a Russian folk dance.

that their tastes, their outlook, and their interests are absolute; their culture is the true, genuine one. All others are mere facts of life that should be noted, but as occurrences of a completely different order. It must be said that the art world has recently shown considerable interest in folk art and in related questions of the People's aesthetic education. However, this was precisely the area of confusion, now revealed, and which invariably accompanies unprincipled initiatives of the People's Friends.

One group of artists treated the products of folk art with frank contempt, regarding them as indicators of the low level of the People's development, the inadequacy of their cultural level. Folk art was discussed in terms of children's art or that of savages, still to be raised to the level of true culture. Here was the source of the only vital task—to raise popular aesthetic taste. A whole range of measures was adopted to reach this goal, the propagation of genuine art among the people: the number of art schools was increased; instruction in drawing and other artistic skills was introduced in schools of general education; samples were produced for craftsmen; plays were staged for the people, etc. All these initiatives, which at first glance appeared highly democratic, were reduced, however, to one thing: the People's repudiation of their artistic taste, their aesthetic norms, and the unequivocal acceptance as true art of that which is merely the art of a particular social group.

As usual, however, forced conversion to "one's own faith" had regrettable results. Instead of art we had various sorts of pitiful falsifications bombastically called "art for the people" or, more precisely, "art for the unprivileged." Art workers condescendingly manufactured samples of "genuine" art that were accessible and easily understood; and the People, in their longing for healthy, nourishing, even uncultured, food, automatically swallowed this watery aesthetic pap.

A second group of art workers, unlike the first, looked upon folk art with a kind of unhealthy rapture. Satiated with cultivated food, they pounced avidly on the people's "lack of culture," hoping to stir up their dormant aesthetic appetite. As it turns out, the spirit of folk art is really the basis of true art, only its spirit—of course—providing its general direction. Its form is actually imperfect; people must be taught to make art, while its spirit must remain untouched. And this does not suffice: the people must be shielded from all sorts of outside influences, from the pernicious influence of contemporaneity. It would even be preferable to move them two or three centuries back, to a past with its originality wholly undisturbed. The zeal of the People's Friends sometimes meant the near prohibition of art imported from abroad, and as to Russian art, only ancient work would be allowed. At the same time, artists started to assiduously make works that looked like folk art, treating folk "motifs" according to the rules of "genuine" art—which strongly suited the taste of satiated aesthetes—most of them foreigners.

It's plain to see that the groups had similar attitudes, for they infantilized the people. They differed only in that the first sought to assist in development towards adulthood, while the second, captivated by popular naïveté, did everything to intensify and prolong this infantilism for the public's satisfaction. Naturally, all this was done for the good of the People. The People continued, however, to follow their own artistic path; they created their own art with no regard for the thoughts of their esteemed patrons and educators, and it had nothing to do with "art for the people" or "imitation of popular art."

It could not have been otherwise, of course. It's impossible to do anything for the People: what is to be done must be done by the People themselves. And cultured populism is nothing but a nobleman's fancy, which never does any good for the People. Griboedov was right when he said: "More than any sorrow/Let lordly wrath and lordly love/Pass us by."²

The People can develop awareness of their cultural needs without outside help and will find ways to satisfy them. The purpose of democracy lies in popular representation through their most fully conscious members.

Democracy can have no division of art into "true" and "folk." All art workers are equal, no matter whose aesthetic taste they satisfy. While insisting on the abrogation of any and all protective and educational means in art, democracy must demand full rights in the realm of the arts. Democracy must insist on acceptance of its painters, poets, and musicians as equals within the family of artists, and the People's art must not be considered of ethnographic interest only, but as art, no less real than that of the ruling class.

"But what would happen to art?," those in power would exclaim. "It would perish under the pressure of the ignorant mass!" But, we may ask, who gave those eminent academics the monopoly of judgment on what's good or bad for art? Weren't they the same monarchs who said, "The state—that's myself," and who were then overthrown by the revitalized masses? You'd have a hard time, I think, finding a different pedigree for that supremacy. Democracy can consequently ignore the clamor of their threats.

However, we ought not to minimize the difficulties facing democracy in the implementation of its artistic program. All official artistic institutions (academies, museums, state theaters), all artistic education, and an overwhelming majority of commercial artistic enterprises are in the hands of the privileged. Difficulties are exacerbated, for within the ranks of democracy, there's no clear understanding of the tasks facing democratic art; many initiatives of democratic institutions are thus converted into anti-democratic ones. A recent example is our ministry of agriculture's organization of a division that includes an art council, which included artists known for their imitations of folk art. They are to supervise the artistic development of craftsmen and the production of samples

2. Quoted from Aleksandr Griboedov's comedy *Woe from Wit* (1823), which ridicules "high society" of provincial Russia.

for the cottage industry.³ The distance between these measures and the democratic program is clear from our preceding observations.

We must start to work out all questions of artistic life and trace out a path to their resolution in accordance with democratic principles. Such is the People's demand of those responsible for the culture of the future.

Letopis' 7–8 (July–August 1917), pp. 298–302

“My Position”

An acquaintance has informed me of my appointment to the Bolshevik list as a member of the new City Duma. It was a complete surprise: no one asked my consent nor did I give it to anyone.

I am not a politician, I belong to no party—I am a cultural worker; therefore I don't know if the Bolsheviks' politics are good. The arresting of those who think differently from them, for violations of speech and of the press—these and other manifestations of physical force are not characteristics exclusive to Bolsheviks. Their behavior is the same as that of any power—in autocratic Russia, monarchic England, or in democratic France. Such was the way of the Cadets after July 3rd and 4th, and Kerensky's intentional action on the eve of October.⁴

However, the Bolsheviks' cultural program is impossible. I was convinced of this on attending the conference of Proletarian Cultural-Educational Organizations. If they're allowed to operate freely in this area, the results will have nothing to do with culture. This is why I consider any sabotage, any refusal of active cultural work a crime committed against culture and the People. Only a philistine finds honor in waiting to see everything fall into place. Only the hopelessly retrograde can insist that the victory of the counterrevolution will result in the triumph of culture. The true path lies only in firm adherence to one's cultural convictions; one must propagate them wherever culture is in danger, defending it with courage against all vandalism, including that of the Bolsheviks.

Given the thoughts outlined above, I shall not refuse my unexpected appointment. I want also to state that I do not belong to the Bolshevik party, that I am not subject to any party discipline, and that I shall not take part in any political

3. “Cottage industry” is the closest translation of the phrase *kustarnaia promyshlennost'* in Russian, which refers to a form of production wherein the goods are made by a private producer but sold on the market rather than to private customers. The production method is private, but distribution is oriented toward the mass market, which distinguishes cottage industry from craft-making.

4. “Cadets” is the acronym for the party of Constitutional Democrats, formed in October 1905. It was a liberal party, having as the cornerstone of its policy universal suffrage, freedom of religion, and national self-determination. Brik refers to the so-called July Crisis of the Provisional Government, initiated by Cadets on July 3, 1917. By threatening to split up the coalition government headed by Prime Minister Aleksandr Fedorovich Kerensky (1881–1970), the Cadets succeeded in forcing the other factions in the coalition—Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks—to suppress popular uprisings calling for the transfer of all power to the Soviets. On the eve of October 25 (immediately after the onslaught of the Bolshevik coup), Kerensky was waiting for government troops to quell the insurrection. Because the troops never arrived, he departed for the Northern Front to get them.

demonstrations. Their cultural program as expressed in the activity of the Central Committee of Proletarian Cultural-Educational Organizations is absolutely unacceptable to me; I consider it my duty to energetically oppose this program in particular.

If my position does not suit the Bolsheviks, I ask that my name be deleted from the list (of the elected).

Novaia zhizn' (December 5 [18], 1917), p. 4

"Autonomous Art"

In presenting his program of culture and education at the Third Congress of Workers, Soldiers, and Peoples' Deputies, A.V. Lunacharsky underscored that from then on there should be no state art; that the people themselves would determine its needs. It is with complete confidence that we maintain that all avant-garde art workers will greet this announcement with deep satisfaction, viewing it as the only correct plan for the state's building of a democratic art, one in which the powers-that-be must organize and assist, not command and dictate. But one can with equal confidence predict that this freedom will provoke unanimous protest from art's venerable commanders, who see themselves as the only rightful spokespersons for "genuine" art. They are going to reject, with indignation, the right to display creative work without approval or encouragement from any intermediate artistic organization. We'll hear again the tired phrases on the death of art, on the ill-mannered ignoramuses and laymen, the high artistic and educational importance of government-sponsored art, etc. Of course, no one openly dares propose the preservation of the pre-revolutionary system of state patronage and surveillance of art: this would be politically incorrect and hopeless in practice. However, the elasticity of human language, which, as we know, was created not for revealing but for concealing thought, has presented to art's higher guardians that pretentious term "autonomy," in strict conformity with the spirit of the times. It may be impossible to retain hold on the entire state apparatus or to legitimize the existence of a ministry of the arts, but each particular art organization can be allowed to remain at the disposal of art's true representatives. Such is the hidden meaning of all the academic, theatrical, and other autonomies: the handing over of the national patrimony to a fortuitously formed group of individuals united only by their place of work.

I should like to think that the Commissariat of Enlightenment will not be deluded by the deceptive notion of "autonomy," but will reveal its pseudo-democratic meaning as applied to art and draw the appropriate conclusion.

Vecherniaia zvezda (January 22, 1918), p. 2

"A Preserved God"

Many gods are cast down by the proletariat; many sacred objects are dethroned. But one god is preserved; one temple is out of bounds for the victorious proletariat. That god is beauty; that temple is art.

The longer we listen to what representatives of the proletariat are saying in their orations and meetings, both in speech and in print, the greater our perplexity as to the source of the unexpected timidity, the incomprehensible trembling in the presence of a sacred object. It's strange to see a ruthless terrorist ready to put to death hundreds of soldiers of the White Army, hostages for the triumph of communism, and capable of wiping entire cities and villages off the face of the earth, it is strange to see this same cruel, pitiless revolutionary ardently defending Pushkin, Raphael, Michelangelo, and other artistic "holy fathers" from the blasphemy of Futurists.

We all know that no one is going to destroy Pushkin's works or burn Raphael's paintings or smash Michelangelo's statues. Everyone well understands that we're talking about the aura of sacredness surrounding these infallible popes of the aesthetic church. We're not surprised when the bourgeoisie and their intelligentsia, stinking of ideological incense, are prepared to tear limb from limb anyone who dares to approach with disrespect the iconostasis sanctified by the traditions of centuries. It is strange, however, to see the proletariat assume the posture of an indignant priest.

"We must spit daily on the altar of art," said Marinetti. He was right. There's too much idolatry in our approach to art and not enough sober criticism.

No one denies the importance of historical monuments or argues against the enormous cultural value of museum collections. But to think that they could satisfy our thirst for creativity and that contemplation of past grandeur can replace our will for the splendor of the future is absurd.

What is to be found in an old painting if not an artist's spasmodic attempt at the destruction of insurmountable obstacles to his dream?

To admire an old painting means projecting one's sensibility onto a funerary urn rather than propelling it forward with the firm thrust of active creativity. Do you really want to waste your energy in futile admiration of the past, from which one always emerges reduced, with increased fatigue, subdued?

Actually, for an artist, the daily visit to the museum, the library, and the academy (those cemeteries of wasted effort, those Golgothas of crucified dreams, those registers of checked impulses) are the equivalents of prolonged parental care for bright young people drunk with their own talent, ambition, and desire. This may be acceptable for dying invalids or prisoners. This miraculous past may be balm for their wounds, since they are barred from the present. We, however, don't want any of it—we, the strong, young, alive futurists. (Marinetti).

Isn't this the battle cry of all constructors of the future? And those

attempting to array the proletariat in the dead beauty of the past rather than the new, aren't they the object of Marx's remark?

"The traditions of all bygone generations weigh terribly upon the heads of the living. It is precisely at times of revolutionary crisis—when these traditions are apparently engaged in radical change, in the creation of something new, unforeseen—that they sheepishly appeal for help from the spirits of the past. They borrow their names, their slogans for their struggle, even their dress. Sanctified by the (passing of) centuries, they enter, thus attired and with a borrowed language, upon a new episode in world history."⁵

Let's have a little less of the sacred, Comrades, a little less priestly window dressing and a little more revolutionary consciousness and revolutionary creativity!

Iskusstvo Kommuny (December 29, 1918), p. 2

"Our Agenda"

The problem of artistic production has been placed on our agenda. We must outline its principal conditions and immediate tasks.

The bourgeoisie knew of two kinds of art: pure and applied. Pure art created spiritual treasures: temples, palaces, statues, and paintings. Applied art decorated material objects (houses, furniture, clothes, cups, cigarette cases). Pure art was considered the highest type of art; applied art, the lowest. When the bourgeoisie spoke of artistic production, they meant the commercial side of business. Merchants noticed that an "object of beauty" commanded a higher price; therefore they stood for artistic "production." Creativity and culture were not even mentioned. Creativity and culture were the monopoly of pure art.

The bourgeoisie despised the labor of production; therefore they thought of workers and artists working in production as people of lower culture. Do you think the exploiter could ever compare himself to the exploited?

Our opinion on this matter is different.

We know that so-called pure artistry is, like anything else, professionally oriented. We don't understand why someone who makes paintings is spiritually more elevated than one who makes fabric. We think that one's spiritual height is determined not by the type of work he does but by the degree of his creative talent. We know hundreds of painters who fabricate paintings mechanically, following a pre-established pattern. We also know of the weaver Jacquard, the brilliant inventor of the loom [for the weaving of figured fabrics].

We declare that architects, sculptors, and painters are workers of the same kind as engineers, metal workers, textile workers, wood workers, etc., and that there is no basis for the designation of their labor as creative in contrast with other noncreative sorts.

5. Brik took this quotation from Marx's 1852 pamphlet *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

The bourgeoisie divided all people into creators and creatures, according to occupation. We don't do this.

By artistic production the bourgeoisie meant the decoration of things. Decoration raised the price. We're not interested in price. Therefore we have no need of all these useless curlicues and trinkets, attached by the wretched applied arts to household articles (cigarette cases with Vasnetsov's "three bogatyrs,"⁶ inkpots in the shape of elephants, ashtrays as nude women, plates with portraits of great men or Italian landscapes, etc.) By artistic production we mean simply the conscious, creative attitude to the process of production. We want each worker to know why he renders an object in a particular form and a particular color. We want the worker to cease being an executor of some plan unknown to him. He must become a conscious, active participant in the creative process of making the object. We'll not need artist-decorators then. Artistic merit will become part and parcel of making the object.

For the bourgeoisie this point of view was unthinkable. They thought that only an individual could create, that creation by a collective was absurd. The possibility of any artistic or creative achievement was excluded from factory and plant. Only an artist working with brush and chisel, or perhaps an artisan working manually, could lay claim to the status of a creator; the collective of workers in a factory or a plant—never.

We know this is not the case. We know that the creative force of a collective is incalculably greater than that of single individuals. We know that until now the view that only individuals and not collectives were creative can be explained by the fact that the creative forces of a collective were liberated from the power of exploitative individuals only through the victory of the Communist Revolution. For us, factories and plants are tools of the collective's creativity, and from them we expect miracles incommensurable with the tricks of individual handicraftsmen.

These are our basic theses. Our most urgent task is that of propaganda. We should prove to the workers that production labor is the greatest of cultural forces and help them to master creativity. We must show artists that the production process is the inexhaustible source of creativity and convince them to direct all of their creative energy there. We must open everyone's eyes to the fact that the value of the object lies not in its beauty and decoration but in the extent to which its making is a conscious act.

This is an enormous task. However the Revolution has placed it on the agenda and demands that it be fulfilled.

Iskusstvo v proizvodstve (1921), pp. 7–8

6. Brik refers to a popular painting by Viktor Vasnetsov, *Bogatyrs* (1898; sometimes referred to as "Three Bogatyrs"). It depicts three Russian knights in helmets and on horseback standing guard in the steppes and gazing into the distance as if trying to discern the country's unseen enemies.

“The Constructivist School”

From the very first days of its reorganization, VKhUTEMAS, the advanced artistic-technical workshops (formerly the Stroganov School), became the center of the artistic current Constructivism. By Constructivism we must understand a movement that does not consider art’s task to be the fashioning of sculptured busts or groups, of trinkets or paintings, of the picturesque, but the application of the entire accumulation of artistic mastery for the making of things for everyday life, that is, useful objects.

Constructivist artists have stopped working for museums and toward exhibitions and for the satisfaction of “aesthetes”’ desires. They have decided to fill only production orders: covers (jackets) for publications, posters, models of furniture, projects for kiosks; they make signs, inscriptions, tokens; they paint automobiles, trains, airplanes, etc.

Constructivism is not to be confused with applied art because there’s a world of difference between them. Makers of applied art decorate something that’s already made. Constructivists make this thing, rejecting all decoration. Constructivists believe that an object that’s well made and without decoration has value.

But what is a well-made object? It is one that best fulfills its purpose. A general recipe for a good object is impossible; everything depends on a concrete order and the conditions of production. The Constructivist’s task is to take all these orders and conditions into account and to find the right solution. The metalwork department at VKhUTEMAS headed by Rodchenko, one of the most famous Constructivist artists, has already begun to put ideological commands into practice.

For his students, Rodchenko sets tasks that look strange from the point of view of the old artistic pedagogy: a “folding bed,” a “chair-bed,” an “extendable table,” a “movable kiosk,” etc. And old art teachers disdainfully say this is not art, but craft, that work of this kind suits a trade school, but not an art school.

Constructivists are not, however, intimidated by remarks of this kind. And to them the labeling of what they do—whether art or craft—is not important. What’s important is that they are doing what’s needed now; they are preparing work in factories, plants, in the very thick of production.

Of course, these student works aren’t perfect and haven’t the finish of well-made objects. These are first attempts, tests, but these attempts are momentous demonstrations that art has emerged from the narrow limits of tasks set by the easel and by portraiture and is slowly but surely making its way into production, where the material culture of the future will be created.

Ogonek 20 (1923), p. 6

“Production Work”

The pull toward production is growing stronger and stronger. Young artists have become convinced that production offers the only environment for

creativity. They're convinced that easelism⁷ narrows one's creative path: that the artistic "thing in itself" has no value, neither aesthetic nor social. Unfortunately, our production is far from ready to accept this influx of creative forces. It is still very weak. Quantity still has priority over quality. In some areas, however, we are beginning to gain ground.

We want to draw your attention to an article by Professor Viktorov in *Pravda*. He calls upon artists to join the textile industry. We expect that people working in other sectors of production will answer his call. The fate of our proletarian culture depends on the success of our economy. For the time being, young production artists are trying to work where they can.

Lef 4 (1924), p. 59

"Photomontage"

Long ago, when the photographic camera was not yet invented, people and things were drawn, not photographed. They were not drawn with precision, but "by sight." The work was difficult, slow, expensive. Now, since the invention of photography, it would seem that there's no reason to prefer primitive drawing "by hand" and "by sight" to the precision of the mechanical photograph.

However, reasons abound. And they are, in the opinion of many, very substantial reasons—artistic ones. The following argument is advanced: "The photographic camera is a dead, lifeless organism; it mimics reality blindly. A drawing is a completely different matter; it is alive, it reflects reality, it changes the appearance of this reality."

This is absolutely correct. A drawing changes the appearance of reality: that is, drawn reality, doesn't look, so to speak, like itself. However, we must ask ourselves if this is a virtue or a defect. Of course, it's a defect in all cases for which we need a precise representation of facts—as, for example, in a portrait.

A painter renders reality in his own way. And this is precisely what we do not need. The task of a portrait is to represent the fact itself, not to alter it artistically. We are absolutely not interested in knowing how the fact was "refracted through the prism of the artist's soul"—be it Ivanov's, Petrov's, or Sidorov's.⁸ Even if the "refracted" fact is more interesting, nobler, more artistic, we need reality as it is. We need a document, not an artistic image.

There was a time when it was considered improper to render life in all its misery, when its "ennobling" representation was demanded. Those times are long gone. Now we know that a real fact is a thousand times more meaningful than an artistic invention. We need facts in order to know life, to study it, to change it. And for this, the artist is not our helper, but a hinderer. Now we need

7. Brik uses the term *stankovism*, literally "easel painting" in the original text.

8. Ivanov, Petrov, Sidorov are common last names in Russian. In English, the equivalent would be Smith or Jones.

photography, precise and artless. For this we cannot substitute drawing.

That's why all attempts to cultivate genre and portrait painting are meaningless. They cannot measure up to photography's competition, to its precision and low cost. It's time to shed the filth of habitual aestheticism that regards the photograph as base, as against the "noble drawing by hand." Although the camera does lack soul, photography is done not by a camera, but by a person with soul, reason, and understanding. This is forgotten. The photographer's work is not mechanical, but creative. "What" and "how" to photograph are perfectly serious questions and it takes a great deal of understanding to make photographs that are truly necessary and of value. And it's not from "art" photographers, but from the talented photo-correspondents of newspapers or magazines, that we should learn about these matters.

An "art" photographer spoils a photograph; he wants it to look like a painting. And this is precisely what we do not need. It spoils everything. If the photograph resembles a painting, this means that it doesn't look like the photographed fact. Fidelity of transmission is thus sacrificed to "aesthetic form." The photograph is thus totally deprived of its value; to "refract" the fact "through a prism"; to distort, to ennoble, etc. is to do precisely the opposite of what we expect from photography. The photograph's merit is determined not by its "artistry" or its resemblance to a painting but by completely different qualities.

A photograph is good if it represents a significant fact in such a way that its significance is prominently and emphatically exposed. To photograph trifles, even very artistically, is a waste of effort. To photograph a significant fact in such a way that its significance is evident, not from the photograph itself but from the inscription below, is futile. The picture should speak for itself without superfluous words and embellishments. Only then will it realize its task: to serve as an indispensable document of everyday life.

Lef artists, artist-productivists, those artists who have quit painting little pictures correctly assessed the enormous significance of photography and they created a new art—that of photomontage. A photograph provides us with a fact. Photomontage combines these facts to influence the spectator in a certain way (for example, an agit-poster). Suppose we are given a subject: "Help the prisoners of Capital!" We're talking about revolutionary workers thrown into prisons of the bourgeoisie. It is possible, of course, to paint this poster using our imagination. But it can also be done with photomontage. We choose suitable pictures and combine them in such a way that the effect will be far greater than that of a painted poster. Why? Because photomontage does not imagine things, does not make them up, but provides us with real facts. And facts, in this case, are much more forceful than even the most fervent imagination.

In Berlin, communists put up posters calling for help for workers' starving children. The poster carried a representation of an exhausted woman-worker holding an emaciated child. Next to this was a photograph of an enormous and

lavishly decorated bed on which, sinking into pillows and blankets, lay a chubby pink baby. Under the photograph, there was a title: “The youngest son of Bleichroeder, the banker.” The poster produced such an overwhelming impression that the police determined it had to be torn down and destroyed. Of course, no drawing could produce such an effect. Here were a fact and a document in action. The chubby baby is not invented or imagined. He exists, and he has a name.

Photomontage very quickly became popular. Book jackets, illustrations, posters, even caricatures began to be made by the photographic method. And, of course, as in any new undertaking, many hacks appeared, speculating on this novelty without understanding its nature. But that’s inevitable.

The masters of photomontage are Rodchenko and Lavinsky. Their works for VTsSPS, for Mossel’prom, for Gosizdat, for Glavsvetlit [sic], and others may serve as examples.⁹ Their photomontages are also, of course, very far from perfect. What kind of perfection can something in its initial stages possess? But they can teach the basic principles of photography, of its economic and effective use, with no excessive emphasis.

Photomontage is destined for a brilliant future in replacing representation “by sight,” “by hand,” “by imagination.” Our level of consciousness demands facts and combinations of facts. Photography and photomontage provide them. Drawing or painting cannot.

Drawing and painting were once the only ways to convey facts. Those times are gone and will not return. The “resurrectors” of easel painting and of drawing by hand should bear this in mind.

Zaria Vostoka 683 (September 21, 1924), p. 4.

*“The Breakdown of VKhUTEMAS:
Report on the Condition of the
Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops”*

The ideological and organizational breakdown of VKhUTEMAS is a fact that has already taken place. The only Higher State Artistic School in Soviet Russia ekes out a miserable existence, disconnected from the ideological and practical tasks of today and of future proletarian culture.

The production departments are empty. Technical equipment is being sold or rented. People are leaving. But to make up for this, various individual studios of painting and sculpture are being opened by second- and third-rank easel artists.

9. VTsSPS (1918–1986) stands for the All-Union Central Soviet of Professional Unions, an organization overseeing all trade unions in Soviet Russia; Mossel’prom (1922–1937) was a trust uniting a variety of food-producing industries, such as flour mills, chocolate factories, beer, and cigarette factories; Gosizdat (1919–1930) was the State Publishing House of the Russian Federation, the largest publishing company in Soviet Russia organized under Narkompros; the word “*Glavsvetlit*” is probably a misspelling of Glavlit (1922–1991), the Central Directorate on Literature and Publishing, the organ of censorship that monitored the ideological content of literary production.

The graphics department, one of the most important in the production sector, is singled out and absorbed by the sector of “pure” art, while mainly emphasizing its so-called creative branches, such as etching and engraving, which belong in handicraft and cottage industry. At the same time, technologically advanced contemporary work made for the masses is being suppressed.

The introductory courses, charged with the initial preparation of students, have been completely in the hands of “purists” easelists, from the Wanderers to the acolytes of Cézanne.¹⁰ There’s no talk of production, not a whiff of social tasks. There are no posters, caricatures, no social satire or grotesque depictions of everyday life, only “pure,” “sacred” painting and sculpture with their nudes, landscapes, and still lifes, existing outside time, space, and the Party.

The situation of the workers’ faculty is the same.¹¹

The meager sums allotted to VKhUTEMAS are spent entirely on the maintenance of parasitic “purity” and “saintliness,” supporting an enormous staff of ideologically harmful and artistically backward “purists,” on payments to nude models and on heating bills for classes where they “draw from the nude.”

The pedagogical method is apparently reviving long-forgotten times of the School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture and of the Stroganov School of Applied Arts.¹² We see the same painting, the same drawing and sculpture, the same compositions and the same stylization. The only novel aspect is the “mystical” interpretation of the laws of art, practiced by a small group of painter-mystics headed by the priest Florensky.¹³

VKhUTEMAS is performing no practical tasks. It’s taking no part in the country’s artistic life. It has no links to factories, to organs of economic planning, to political education centers, publishing houses, or any other users of artistic labor. Their orientation is directed solely at bourgeois, parochial demands, for “pictures,” for embroidery.

10. “Wanderers” [*peredvizhniki*] is a name given to a group of artists who broke off from the Russian Academy of Fine Arts in 1863 by refusing to participate in the final competition, which required them to create a painting on a mythological subject. Instead, the fourteen painters—among them Vassily Perov, Nikolay Ge, Ivan Kramskoy, Ilya Repin, Isaak Levitan—insisted on painting subjects that concerned the everyday lives and struggles of Russia’s lower classes. They created their own “itinerant” exhibiting society in 1870, showing their works in various corners of the Russian Empire, hence the name.

11. *Rabfak* in the original text. Workers’ faculties, departments in institutions of higher education that admitted workers and peasants, were ratified by a Sovnarkom decree on September 17, 1920. VKhUTEMAS opened a Workers’ Faculty in 1921 as part of the Preparatory Division. There was a tension within the faculty between the orientation toward the decorative arts, favored by the Rector, Vladimir Andreevich Favorsky (1886–1964) and the productivist orientation, favored by most students. See Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Vkhutemas: Moscow, 1920–1930*, vol. 1 (Paris: Editions du Regard, 1990), pp. 203–9.

12. These two pre-revolutionary art schools located in Moscow were transformed in 1918 into State Free Art Workshops. The woodworking and metalworking workshops at VKhUTEMAS were based in former studios of the Stroganov school.

13. Pavel Aleksandroovich Florensky (1882–1937) was a Christian philosopher, scientist, and art historian close to the Symbolists.

All the proletarian revolution's achievements in the areas of artistic ideology, labor, and pedagogy are brought to naught. Urgent decisive measures must be taken.

It is necessary:

1. To reduce significantly the "pure" half of VKhUTEMAS and to enlarge its production half.
2. To unite industrial departments, including the graphics department.
3. To reorganize the graphics department, eliminating all mystic flair and cottage industry.
4. To introduce classes on social types of visual art in the department of painting: on the poster, caricature, illustration, grotesque depictions of everyday life, cartoons, satire.
5. To introduce compulsory teaching of basic production subjects within the programs of the Workers' Faculty and the Basic Division.
6. To link VKhUTEMAS with centers of the State Economy and political education.
7. To organize within VKhUTEMAS plan-centered acceptance of orders for fulfillment of practical artistic tasks.
8. To establish equality of production artists with "purists" in their right to receive the diploma of "engineer-artist."

We, the undersigned members of INKhUK, who for six years have been fighting to establish the foundation of proletarian artistic culture, appeal to everyone concerned with the fate of this citadel of the future proletarian artistic culture—unique in the world—to support us in our struggle against the artistic reaction that has been revived within VKhUTEMAS.

O. M. Brik, The President of INKhUK
Members of INKhUK: Rodchenko, Anton Lavinsky, Nikolai Tarabukin,
Varv[ara] Stepanova, A. Vesnin, A. Babichev, L. Popova,
G. Stenberg, V. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky

Lef 4 (1924), pp. 27–28

“A Man Beats Another”

We ought not to confuse two different things: cinema as a technological device and cinema as a spectacle. A lot—though still not enough—has been written on cinema’s value as a technological device. A lot has also been written—and also still not enough—on the adverse effects of cinema as spectacle.

The damage comes from the training of viewers to look at certain facts from a spectator’s point of view, despite its inappropriateness. For example: when a man is beaten by another. This is something to which every live, valid human being must respond by action. One must either finish him off or save him from the beating. It depends upon the side one takes. To treat this fact as spectacle however, is utterly wrong.

It may be a drunken brawl, an organized massacre or an episode from the Civil War. Moreover, the greater the significance of the fight’s underlying cause, the more disgraceful is the relation to spectacle.

Some will say it’s important to react in life, that we don’t have to react to what we see on the film reel, which we can look at calmly. This is wrong. Film trains us to relate to life as to a spectacle. A man influenced by a cinematic spectacle—and they number in the millions—begins unwittingly to translate the facts of life into the language of cinema reels and to relate accordingly to them.

A man beats another man. Fine. We have to find a point from which we might comfortably view the fight in full detail. It’s too bad that their blows hit only the face. It would have been more interesting if one had whacked the other in the stomach, or lower. A militia man is coming. He stops the fight. A pity! The reel is interrupted at the most interesting moment. The spectator leaves, unsatisfied.

The interests of the militia man and the spectator are directly opposed. The former wants the action to stop as quickly as possible, the latter to last as long as possible. The former is a live, active citizen; the latter is a maniac poisoned by cinema.

Conclusion: not every fact should be exploited from the spectator’s point of view. There are facts that cannot be viewed through binoculars.

Kino 27 (September 22, 1925), p. 2

*“Against Cinematic Drama
(A Private Opinion)”*

Soviet cinematography, it seems, can’t get enough of comedy. From every corner comes a strong demand for comedy scripts. Everyone has finally realized that commercially speaking, Soviet comedy is no less serious than Soviet cine-drama, and maybe even more so.

About two years ago the perspective was different. One victim of that attitude was the script for “The Adventures of Alvist,” by Sergei Iushkevich and myself.¹⁴ It was a cheerful script about a Komsomol member who went to Moscow

14. Sergei Iushkevich was a scriptwriter at Mezhrabpomfilm.

for a soccer ball. Goskino approved, bought and paid for it, but did not produce it, saying it was inappropriate for a state firm to bother with such trifles. They also said that Komsomol members do not travel to Moscow in search of balls, but stay at home and read Marx.

There's apparently been a change of point of view and cinematic comedies are no longer considered "inappropriate trifles." Let's hope this is a real gain. Cinematography's basic task is to show life. It can present life as a demonstration of fact or as a caricature, in documentary film or in comedy. All drama is not suited to this purpose. Dramas possess qualities of a psychological sort, impossible to show and requiring narration.

Cinematic drama is the bastard child of the movie camera and of theatrical hackwork, the sin of cinema's youth. When film was thought to be theater without words, they forgot that in what remained we had a few "psychological" gestures, a couple of "tragic" expressions and an "excited" gait. That's not enough for a film. It's impossible to make a spectacle out of this theatrical trash.

That's why we don't have good dramatic films, though we do have many good comedies. That's why the best film actors—Fairbanks, Pickford, Chaplin—are comic actors. That's why advanced film studios don't make dramas any more and experienced spectators don't go to see them.

Here, we still go to see them, because we still haven't gotten rid of the attraction of sham sentiment, sham tears and sobs. But Soviet cinematography doesn't have to imitate this philistinism. Cinematic drama corrupts. Open pornography is a thousand times healthier than erotic understatement in film novels. Film drama is commercial production in the worst sense of the word, even when it's presented in an "artistic" guise of the type offered by *The Collegiate Registrar*.¹⁵ The struggle against cinematic drama requires documentary films and cine-comedies. To fight seriously, we must realize that documentaries and comedy are not appendages of drama, but healthy spectacles that will rescue film from the bogs of mediocrity and cheap thrills to which world philistinism has consigned it.

Kino 32 (October 27, 1925), p. 2

"A Fact versus an Anecdote"

Sovkino has begun to make documentary films.¹⁶ This is an event of enormous cultural significance. No one's elated, however. On the contrary, everyone's in panic. "Documentaries, how horrible! 150 meters, eight minutes, three parts: three times eight equals twenty four; twenty-four precious minutes. In that time, you can show a minimum of three murders, five catastrophes, eight of Fairbanks's jumps and fifteen of Mary Pickford's smiles (in close-up)—and now, suddenly documentaries! What a nightmare!" What happened? "The public won't go for it; the

15. *The Collegiate Registrar* is a 1925 film made in the studio Mezhrabpomfilm after Alexander Pushkin's story "The Postmaster." It was directed by Yuri Zheliabuzhsky.

16. Sovkino (1926–1930) was a film studio in Leningrad, a predecessor of Lenfilm.

public doesn't like documentaries." Why? Because philistines have no interest in facts and they adore anecdotal narration.

That's right. You can't possibly convince Soviet ladies and their Soviet gentlemen that facts are a thousand times more interesting than anecdotes, that the Japanese flight across Siberia is more interesting than Fairbanks's leap over a fence, and that Kashirstroi's work is more interesting than Harold Lloyd's.¹⁷ Soviet ladies and gentlemen have their own interests. They look for a screen they can relate to, and they find it in cinematic drama with cine-horrors, cine-joys, and cine-kisses. Nevertheless, not all Soviet film-goers are philistines; Komsomol members, Soviet employees, workers, and party members also exist. They have different interests and a different "relationship." That's why we address them.

When there's a lack of interesting facts, they're invented and the result is anecdote. Our time is filled to bursting with interesting facts. We have no need of anecdotes. Kashirstroi is a fact; Fairbanks is anecdote. Show us Kashirstroi and we'll need no Fairbanks. Spend as much creativity, talent, and attention on presenting the factual as on the anecdotal, and the public won't take offence. Our public is interested in facts.

To see facts, to record them, to relate them and show them to the spectator is an art, tremendous and necessary, that should be taken seriously. For with documentary films we can fight cine-kitsch and cine-philistinism. And isn't this Soviet cinematography's main task?

I know that today box office receipts outweigh ideology. But does this mean that we must altogether give up the fight? No. And that's why we look forward to documentaries.

We await the fact as against the anecdote.

Vecherniaia Moskva (October 14, 1925), p. 3

"Photo in Film"

Photography is the basis of cinematography. There is no cinema without photography. This sounds like ABC. This truism is nevertheless forgotten by those who get carried away by the problems of film actors, film directors, film scripts. The central figure in film production is the cameraman. Camera-work is the basis of all cinematography.

You can easily imagine a film made by a cameraman alone, but not one made only by a director, actor, or a scriptwriter. Meanwhile, in our cinema, given the importance for production of problems raised by photography, they are not given the place they deserve. We speak of good and bad photography, effective

17. Kashirstroi is the directorate on construction of an electric hydraulic station in the Kashira district of the Moscow oblast, which began in 1919.

framing, successful shots, but only in passing, casually, in discussion of a film's other strong points and drawbacks.

This does not suffice. The problem of film as photography should be foregrounded. Film professionals ought to focus their attention on their work and on the question of "what to film and how to film" (and not only on directing). These questions must become central to our cinematography. Inattention to photographic problems has an adverse effect on the work in other sectors of film production, notably that of the scriptwriter. In a great majority of cases, our scriptwriters don't see their scripts, don't take visual representation as their point of departure, and they can't imagine how something is going to look on screen. Consequently, our scripts are of very poor quality.

Our scriptwriters should be given a photographically oriented objective and trained to think of a script, not as a chain of plot conflicts, but as a succession of frames. The quality of scriptwriters' work will then improve. The same goes for actors and directors. Poor acting is that which "does not project out" from the screen. It looks excellent in the studio, but empty on film. The actors and the director were unable to achieve the photographic goal, could not translate their playing into photographic terms. Only instruction in photography can improve the quality of work. Any film worker, no matter his branch of production, any film enthusiast and spectator, must follow with special, heightened interest all the advances and successes of photographic art. The future of cinematography depends on that. With this goal in mind, *Sovetskoe kino* is presenting a new column entitled "Photo in Film," which will print photographically interesting film and photo shots.¹⁸

This interest is not to be understood in strictly technical terms. We're talking of the spectator's interest, of a successful translation of real, visual impressions into the language of photography. Knowing how to take a picture means producing a frame with maximum effect on the spectator. Very commonplace things—faces and landscapes that we ignore can be photographed so that they appear unusual and unusually interesting.

And the opposite is also true. Highly unusual things can, when photographed, vanish, producing no impression. The cameraman's art consists in the production of maximum spectatorial effect. Herein lies the essence of all cinematography.

Sovetskoe kino 4–5 (1926), p. 23

"Film in Meyerhold's Theater"

Theater influences film, the acted film. This is common knowledge. However, not everyone knows that film also has an influence on advanced theater. Meyerhold's theater is the most advanced in the USSR. Film was its major influence.

Old theater had to deal with plays; new theater deals with scripts. As in

18. *Sovetskoe kino* was a monthly journal published by the Film Art Council [Komitet po delam kinematografii] from 1925 until 1928.

film. There's a great difference between a play and a script. A play is a literary fact; a script is a spectatorial fact. A play is a finished literary unit; a script provides motivation for a stage act.

Film scripts are now being printed as individual books, in an attempt to have them look somewhat like literature. The result makes no sense, like serving empty cans and the hole of a bagel at the table.

Film isn't about words, and that's why it doesn't need plays, but scripts. Similarly, new theater is gradually shifting away from the word, and moving action, gesture, mime, and intonation to the forefront. That's why Meyerhold remakes plays into scripts. He divides *The Forest* into episodes, not into acts.¹⁹ Out of many things, he makes one. He transforms literary material into something suitable for the stage.

If the text begins to hinder the action, he moves it to the screen and provides us with a subtitle. The same goes for slogans, citations from speeches, documents. The result is a cinematic division of action and text, picture and title. In the old theater, movement reinforced the word; in the new, the word explains the movement. Their roles have changed. As in film.

The principles of the actor's performance changed accordingly. The old actor impressed through his declamation, his oral expression. Mimicry, gesture, movement, intonation merely supported the declamation. In themselves, by themselves, they were meaningless. In film, declamation is out of place, because film is silent. It requires people who move, who are active. The same happens at Meyerhold's theater. The old declamatory playing is replaced by that of bio-mechanics. Gesture, mimicry, movement, no longer servants of the word, became independent, acquiring a life of their own.

A play was transformed from a sum of monologues, dialogues, and polylogues into a series of acting episodes, stunts, and movements. The word moves to the background, it becomes almost unnoticeable; theater becomes silent, like film.

Old theater produced plays and furnished them with various props and decorations. It needed a setting for people engaged in conversation. It needed a background, either realistic or fantastic.

Film has no need of this. People in films act and exist in real houses, streets, cities, and on real bodies of water. They don't need things to furnish backgrounds, but to engage them in the action. Why do we need theatrical props, theatrical illusions, when we have real things and real life?

The same thing happens at Meyerhold's. The stage set disappears and instead, we have a platform for action. There's no scenic background for conversa-

19. *The Forest* is a play by Nikolai Aleksandrovich Ostrovsky (1823–1886), premiered by Meyerhold in his theater on January 19, 1924. For its accounts in English, see Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*, trans. George Petrov (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981), pp. 329–52; Edward Braun, *The Theatre of Meyerhold: Revolution on the Modern Stage* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1979), pp. 193–201; James M. Symons, *Meyerhold's Theater of the Grotesque: The Post-Revolutionary Productions, 1920–1932* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), pp. 111–24.

tion; instead, there's a set within which actors work. There are no things for the embellishment of daily life, but there are objects with which the actors act. What need is there for illusions, when you can show a real act? As in film. We'll be told that the circus and variety shows and revue also possess all these attributes (the script, the act, the set). This is absolutely correct, because they're all things of the same order.

The struggle of acting genres against discursive ones began a long time ago. Meyerhold was one of its first leaders. Now, they are joined by a powerful ally—"the great silent one." It brings his own devices, his own weapons. Why shouldn't we use them?

Sovetskii ekran 19 (1926), pp. 6–7

"I Remain Faithful!"

I began working in cinema as a publicist. I had a motto: "For the newsreel; against narrative film." To this day I remain faithful to it. I'm working in production now, heading the Literary Section of Mezhrabpom-Rus'.²⁰ Here I have to work not only on documentary films, but mainly on narrative films. I am often reproached for this. However, ninety-nine percent of film production is supported by them. This is due to the country's general cultural level. We have to fight for the newsreel, against acted film. And writing about it does not suffice; it's important to work in production. We have to speak up widely for the newsreel and, at the same time and from the inside, push production in this direction. There is no contradiction here. These are two forms of the struggle for survival of one and the same goal.

Kino 45 (November 8, 1927), p. 4

"Victory of Fact"

The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty, the brilliant work of the film editor Esfir' Shub, is an important event in Soviet and world cinematography. The overall significance of this event derives from the possibility of montage created from exclusively documentary footage, and the resulting moving image is of a quality surpassing that of all other films. Had a scriptwriter come to Sovkino proposing to make *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, Sovkino would have agreed immediately. After spending hundreds of thousands of rubles on such a film, it would not have achieved a hundredth of the effect of Esfir' Shub's work.

No director—not even the most talented and resourceful—could create

20. Mezhrabpom-Rus' was a semi-private and therefore relatively independent film studio, funded by the international organization of Workers' Aid, based in Berlin. According to Valérie Posner, Brik began working at Mezhrabpom Rus' on September 14, 1926 as a regular scriptwriter and was promoted to the head of the scriptwriting department on November 27, 1926. See Valérie Posner, "Les Scénaristes," in *Le Studio Mejrabpom ou l'aventure du cinéma privé au pays des bolcheviks*, ed. François Albera et al. (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux: Documentation française, 1996), p. 82, n. 5.

the mass scenes in this film. No actor—not even the most brilliant—can impersonate Nicholas²¹ better than Nicholas himself or Kerensky²² better than Kerensky himself. As a result, enormous funds would have been wasted and the effect would not even approximately resemble the one we now have.

The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty has many things to teach us. First of all, it's good that Sovkino's library happened to have some newsreel material. All this material might very easily have been thrown away a long time ago. Nevertheless, for this film, Esfir' Shub had the enormous task of searching for the material, which was scattered in various places. Some had to be rejected, since its bad condition made it impossible to use. Conclusion: we must immediately start attending to the material remaining in our possession and which, in one way or another, continues to come in.

Our film executives must by now understand that they are not dealing with production waste, but with raw material of the most valuable kind, and that any carelessness in its storage and conservation must be counted as criminal mismanagement. Secondly, haven't our film industrialists begun to notice that the manufacture of raw material for the newsreel has already become an important branch of work—of interest not only ideologically, but commercially as well? And isn't it time to change their scandalous attitude toward the organization of newsreel production?

Secondly, Esfir' Shub has dealt a mighty blow to the prestige of artistic cinematography and studio production. The studio's dominance is seriously challenged and we need to draw the appropriate conclusion. Of course, the most radical solution would be to close all studios, sending all cameramen to film things that are real. We would then win dozens of victories like that of *The Romanov Dynasty*. Failing this, it's quite possible to reduce studio work by fifty percent for work in real life. Summer, the cinematic season, will soon be here. Everyone inside and outside the studios will start filming all kinds of scenes of (historical) lives, from that of Ivan the Terrible to those of American billionaires. No one, however, will think of filming scenes from our everyday lives. That, if someone could think of it, would be wonderful.

Third, Esfir' Shub's work demonstrated that newsreel work is not a mechanical task of gluing strips together, but a significantly creative one. It required, first of all, the ability to choose from all available material those frames that were important in three ways: for their factual value, for their effect on the spectator, and for their ideological direction. There were many of Nicholas; the task was to choose precisely those that showed Nicholas in an environment characteristic of him and of the monarchy—and in a way that was both visually interesting and representative of our attitude toward him. Only if the frame fulfilled these three conditions, could it find a place in the film. To choose the shots correctly,

21. The Russian tsar Nicholas II (1868–1918).

22. See footnote 4.

with no mistakes, one has to be enormously sensitive to cinematic values, backed up by strong ideological conviction and maintain a steady attentiveness to the document. In these respects Shub's work proved brilliant.

In the film, there is the following shot: a peasant is plowing, and the landowner pokes his stick into the drawn furrow. This shot, at first glance quite artless, makes an enormous impression within the film, visually and ideologically. It's difficult to imagine a more expressive relationship between labor and capital; yet, it's quite simply an accidental shot. The director and the scriptwriter of an art film would have had to pile up a huge number of episodes to produce the same political effect. Despite all efforts, the power of this straightforward shot could not possibly have been attained. *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* is brilliant proof that the theory of cine-truth is correct and that it has dealt a serious blow to artistic cinematography. The leaders of the film industry should be drawing the appropriate conclusions.

Kino 14 (April 5, 1927), p. 3

“A Cinematic Antidote”

Everyone repeats Lenin's famous statement that cinema is now one of the most important arts in our Soviet land. These words, expressive of a completely justified opinion, are used in the service of a goal that has nothing in common with culture and the construction of culture.

The façade of a provincial movie theater featured this saying of Lenin's in large print and below it, a poster advertising some trashy foreign film entitled *The Green Manuela*.²³ The attaching of Lenin's phrase to *The Green Manuela* typifies not provincial cinematography alone but the entire cinema of the USSR as well. Lenin was used for publicity, not as guidance for cultural work. No one, I think, would argue that Lenin had *The Green Manuela* in mind when he spoke of cinema's enormous significance for our country.

It is clear from Lenin's entire cultural objective that his first concern was the education of the masses for a correct, straightforward attitude towards reality. Speaking of cinema, he meant that this technical apparatus could transmit most rapidly and to the greatest number of people, the most essential facts of reality. In fact, here is really no other more convenient way to bring world events to the attention of huge numbers of people.

On the other hand, the same technology and the same advantages of the camera, when compared to those of other modes of distribution, render it most harmful to real culture if it is mishandled.

What is our cinematic culture now? What need do our many film theaters

23. *Die Grüne Manuela: Ein Film aus dem Süden* (1923; dir. Ewald André Dupont). The film was distributed in the USSR after 1926. For a brief commentary on this film and on Brik's reaction to it, see Yuri Tsivian, “Man with a Movie Camera—Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties,” in *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema*, ed. Ted Perry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 85–110; p. 103 in particular.

fulfill? If we conduct a survey among the many thousands of people at the movies every day, we shall find that the majority are not going in order to see and learn things not yet seen or known, but to satisfy the need for a light, emotional high.

For an overwhelming majority of spectators, films offer the attraction of a "beautiful" life, a philistine disease the world over. One has to see the deep dissatisfaction incurred by films without dapper men and women of elegance. Once a man in tails or a woman in evening dress appears on screen, the public's attention reaches its height.

In a children's library a little girl has been observed asking frequently for a book about "rich people." The child's parents would go to the movies asking to see films on the lives of rich people. Every philistine of modest means has an uncontrollable urge and respect for anyone who spends more than he does. If he takes a horse-drawn carriage, he respects a person who goes by car. If he uses the tram, he respects those who travel by bus, because that ticket costs two kopecks more. On the other hand, he despises those poorer than himself. Therefore he finds films about poor people unpleasant.

Foreign films are so successful here because careful consideration of this philistine attraction to money and stylish living goes into their making. This is why they are foreign. Our Soviet production, not far behind in producing forms of this sort, is even more idiotic. Our film producers could not, in their pursuit of the spectator's rubles, find anything better to do than to copy the style of foreign films. Of course, the demands of the so-called ideological directive restricted this imitative sweep somewhat, but in the end the commercial side solved this difficulty. They found a wonderful formula for combining the display of stylish life with the ideological directive. All this takes place through subtitles on the "decay of the Western bourgeoisie"; everything's invoked "to show the rotten state of Western culture." Suppliers of this production say, "As a matter of fact, the proletarian has to see the decay of his class enemy." The result is the opposite kind of effect. Ideology is easily eliminated, like skimmed milk, from the film, and the spectator enthusiastically absorbs this same corrupting picture of stylish life.

Chekhov has a story about a senior priest in a monastery who went to the city, stayed there a few days, and upon returning called all his flock and told them in vivid colors about all the horror, the debauchery, and the decay that he saw in that city. He spoke very well, fervently stigmatizing this debauchery and decay and retired to his chambers very happy with his speech. However, in the morning he discovered that there was not one monk left in the monastery; all had left for the city. Our film producers, thinking they can curb the corrupting influence of philistine ideas with ideologically correct subtitles, are taking the position of this priest. No matter how often lives of the wealthy are shown from our point of view, or denigrated through our subtitles, its aesthetic charm is too strong; it's irresistible. We need a completely different approach. We need to cast off, once and for all, film's romanticism, its psychological emotionalism. We need to declare

with absolute candor that in film we'll not arouse joy or sorrow, but that we want to show facts and events only in so much as they require understanding.

In a film about life in the Caucasus, we don't need to imitate Western cinematography and present its ethnography as mere background for some futile romantic or detective action. For this romantic or detective action is so strong that it will destroy the ethnographic reality of a given milieu, consuming the spectator's entire capacity of perception. Then it won't matter where the action takes place—in the Caucasus, Spain, or Australia, whether in our time or a hundred years ago. We're not intent on learning a new fact or (seeing) something unusual; we content ourselves instead with the familiar excitement of traditional dramatic conflicts. We can and must break this emotional contagion, this attraction to emotionally induced excitement, and replace it with a sober relation to reality, an active relation to known facts.

An emotional relationship to the world is characteristic of the passive person, someone who wants to act, but cannot, and is thus consumed by dreams. The emotional relations of an active man are completely different; he wants to achieve, and he can. Therefore he is not consumed in dreams; he needs only new material and a new weapon to realize his impulses to action. For a passive man, everything in this world is beyond reach; his only connection to the unreachable is longing. For an active man, everything in this world is within reach, and the only connection with what's reachable is possession. It is clear what kind of people we must raise in our Soviet country.

It is generally said that out of necessity our cinematography takes the path—learned from the business-like West—of indulging the philistines, that if we do not make such films, no one will come to see films and Russian cinematography will perish from lack of funds. This may be true. But some things are too important, too serious to be made objects of commercial speculation. Our country may have to pay too heavy a price for the spiritual poison exuded by our movie screens; the result of this film commerce may be a balance that's not in our favor. It may pay to make less money and obtain instead a group of people raised in our Soviet way.

Krupskaya once wrote that we had to reach the point at which the psychology of an intelligent worker would become dominant in our everyday lives, so that his tastes, his needs, and his interests would guide our entire population.²⁴ These words of wisdom have the sound of an ironic utopia, given the conditions of our daily life at present. In reality, we observe the opposite. Everything is done in order to cut off—and significantly so—any initial attempts to form this consciousness of the worker-intellectual. Everything is done so that the rare worker-intellectuals, who possess vague impulses toward a new culture, have no place to go, no place to anchor this impulse. Really, where could such a worker go after work? We had

24. Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya (1869–1939) was Lenin's wife and an active member of the Commissariat of Enlightenment. From 1920 until the reorganization of Narkompros in 1929, she headed the department of political education (Glavpolitprosvet) within it.

clubs, but they withered; no one goes there. Articles and theses were written about this; now it's as if everyone forgot them. Nevertheless, clubs were the only places where this new consciousness could take form.

In our cinema, interestingly, an idiotic division into first, second, and third levels remained. The first-run were understood to be a group of centrally located movie theaters, prosperous and well equipped. The second-run are regional movie theaters, poorer and badly equipped. And, finally, third-run and even lower-level theaters belonging to clubs, villages, and other extremely poor cinematic locations. Films are distributed accordingly: the best and the newer ones go to the first-run theaters; the worse and older ones, to the second; and the very worst and very old to the rest. Who goes to first-run movie theaters? Philistines with money. They are shown the best that we have. One can ask what kind of conclusion a worker should draw from this, a worker who doesn't go to first-run movie theaters, but to a club and waits for a good film? Only one conclusion remains. You have to have more money; you must not be poorer than a philistine if you want to frequent a centrally located theater and see an interesting film. Given this state of affairs, what kind of hegemony, what kind of leading role for a worker-spectator can we discuss? Once again, commercial reasons are brought into play, and once again, we would argue that we can easily lose by such commercial calculation.

Commerce is not solely to blame, however. There is another aspect—and a very dangerous one—of this attraction of our cinema merchants to first-run theaters. When they say that we must take into account, that we are forced to take into account these bourgeois with thick wallets, their words reveal not only a business proposition, but the same philistine attraction toward a man with money. There is an unwitting respect for this spectator concealed by this seemingly purely business-like approach. Of course. A prosperous man: he has seen so much in his life, has been abroad, has gone to the best movie theaters! He knows everything there is to know about good cinema!

This rich cultured spectator hovers over the director's imagination as he makes the film, over the actors' who play in it, over Sovkino's when producing it. They consider this spectator's approval as the indicator of the film's quality. No matter how many agit-posters we make, how many speeches we give on the stupidity and rudeness of the bourgeoisie with their thick wallets, in the philistine imagination the link between wealth and culture is unbreakable.

One of our most important cultural tasks is the destruction of this senseless prejudice. It is responsible for the disease of ninety percent of our country, which is normal, because we live in a philistine country. However, if this sickness spreads to the remaining ten percent, to those called upon to pull the country out of the bog of philistinism, the result will be catastrophic.

Our cinema is undoubtedly infected with this disease. And we're in urgent need of radical means to turn Soviet cinema from a hotbed of philistinism into a live cultural force. We must abandon the exaggerated deal-making,

this ruinous application to our most important sphere of spirituality of the formula of monetary gain. You can deal, in accordance with commercial considerations, in vodka. The worse that could happen—you'd get drunk and sleep it off. But you can't deal in spiritual vodka, because this poison acts not openly but secretly, and is thus much more dangerous.

Novyi Lef 2 (1927), pp. 27–30

“To Teach Writers”

There is absolutely no doubt that in current artistic production—in literature, in theater, and in film—there is a gap between the up-to-date subject matter and the methods of its artistic realization. This gap is expressed by the fact that thematically interesting and important artworks are much less artistically impressive than those that are thematically extraneous and unimportant. Moreover, we know that thematically hostile and reactionary work turns out to be artistically better.

On the basis of these observations, many critics and enthusiasts of our Soviet community are arriving at a rash conclusion. They assert that this sort of effect is due to the insufficient ideological consistency of our Soviet authors. While understanding nothing of the laws of artistic creativity, such critics look for causes not in the characteristics of an artistic process, but in the psychology and thinking of certain people, the authors. Meanwhile, paying more attention to some very telling facts would suffice for the dissipation of this false conviction.

We know as a fact that people of the most political consistency begin making things that are either worthless or ideologically inconsistent when they turn to making art. We know that someone with a brilliant political education turns out to be more illiterate in his art than any non-party person. And the opposite is true: people who are not fully consistent politically, but know artistic principles, turn out to be the best political editors of artworks. The best example of this is Victor Shklovsky, who, in the opinion of Glavrepertkom, turned out to be the most ideologically consistent scriptwriter in all of Sovkino.

Elementary incomprehension of the laws of artistic creation is to blame for our writers' crude confusions about the author's ideological make-up and the effect of his work. They [the critics] still persist in a false conviction that a work of art is simply the author's direct expression of his inner thoughts and feelings. They still believe that the author's consciousness is fully responsible for a work of art.

Of course, we cannot say that the role of the author in his work does not exceed the role of a master working at a metallurgical plant. However, just as a missile made at a weapons factory indicates nothing of the ideology of the workers who made this missile, similarly, the ideology of a work of literature does not depend upon that of its author. Every artwork is a result of a complex relationship among various elements of artistic creation. The author uses these elements and combines them into a definite artistic product. The elements that comprise an artwork exist apart from the author and in spite of him; the author only uses them more or less successfully for his work.

In every epoch, an artistic practice has a certain stock of methods and devices. Alterations of these methods and devices do not depend on an author's will, but are a result of art's evolution. We are not to imagine that an author-genius comes and begins to invent his own methods. We know from the history of culture that every genius completes the long and imperceptible process of a gradual decomposition of old elements and the accumulation of new ones. The struggle between them is continuous and its results cannot be instantly assessed. The October Revolution brought to art an entire gamut of thematic tasks, which were previously extraneous to art. It is not surprising that artistic practices lacked the methods and devices that could be used to solve the set tasks. Today, we still have an incongruity between the set tasks and the possibilities of their solution.

Some authors—those who strongly clung to their artistic skills—tried to denounce these new thematic tasks, declaring them too topical, too fleeting to be subjected to artistic treatment. Art, they said, should not respond to burning topics of the day, but to eternal tasks, which relate to all mankind. Those of greater sincerity said that even if these new tasks were justifiable, they personally could not fulfill them, for they did not know how to do this, and they considered any unskillful fulfillment of a task to be hackwork.

Our critics saw political sabotage in this refusal to fulfill the tasks of the day. They insisted that these authors were simply unwilling to do these tasks and that our artistic policy should make provision for forcing them in one way or another. There were other critics who, vaguely sensing the incorrectness of this approach, began to assert that artists are entitled to refuse the order and to make art independently. They were saying that any coercion of an artist's creative freedom is harmful and inexpedient. However, both sides were in the wrong.

They were wrong, because they had one and the same point of departure: they were convinced that authors want or do not want to get involved with a task and that the only aim of the debates about art is to put a stronger or weaker pressure on authors to make them do it. This is why in our debates about art we have on the one hand *napostovstvo*²⁵ with its political pressure, and on the other, *voronshchina*,²⁶ with its aesthetic tolerance. As a matter of fact, we are not talking about the authors' willingness or unwillingness to engage in thematically important tasks, but about their skill in doing so. It is absolutely obvious that they lack this skill, because before the revolution, they did not have to do it. This is why the crux of our debates about art should not be the question of political pressure or tolerance, but the question of how to teach authors to fulfill the tasks set before them.

Literary subject matter does not coincide with social subject matter. It is impossible to give form to a social fact with artistic methods without mediation. Between a work of art and a social fact there is literary subject matter in the same

25. A noun meaning "On-Guard criticism" derived from the name of the journal *Na postu* (*On Guard*, 1923–1925), characterized by its extreme emphasis on proletarian subject matter. The journal was one of the founding organs of RAPP (The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers).

26. From Voronsky (see note 46).

way as there is a technical drawing between a piece of wood and a chair. Literary subject matter is the same as the technical drawing on the basis of which a thing is constructed. In this subject matter, we have the growing together of the social fact and the methods of its formation. The literary subject matter is a place where a sort of chemical mixing takes place between the task and its fulfillment. If a literary subject matter does not succeed, if there is no union, then in the completed work of art, the task and its fulfillment will remain separate.

Old literature made a habit of working these themes out through a long process of evolution and accretion. Social facts and the methods of their formation found an adequate expression in literary subject matter. Genuine literary creativity is possible only when we have the skills of developing literary subject matter. We cannot think that methods and devices exist somewhere apart from material, that we can use these methods and devices for any other material. In reality, methods of artistically generating form and the social material to which this form applies itself exist as a unity resulting from a long process of literary development. Pushkin's iambs cannot be separated from his subject matter. Turgenev's style is inseparable from the literary subjects of the 1850s.

Literary tradition produced an entire host of skills with which it solved thematic tasks. It is not at all surprising that the appearance of new thematic tasks took authors by surprise. The authors knew very well how they could show romantic collisions, for example. Various combinations of romantic themes were well worked out in the course of a centuries-long literary evolution and it was not very difficult to apply any of these combinations.

Similarly, playwrights and directors had a wide choice of settings for any dramatic situation. It was well known how many hundreds of ways one could pronounce "I love you" or "I do not love you" and how to stage romantic scenes of jealousy, faithlessness, etc. However, no one knew how to say the words "I announce the meeting of the factory committee open" or "I bring this question to a vote." It was very well known which gestures and mimicry a lover uses when he leaves his beloved who betrayed him, but it was not known at all with which gestures and mimicry a person leaves a meeting, because he is outraged by the behavior of the majority. It is ridiculous to think that for some reason authors are more sympathetic toward a betrayed lover than toward a public figure who is exasperated by the behavior of his comrades. The problem here lies not in empathy, but in knowing how to generate a form for this fact.

Our critics are very upset that authors take their themes mostly from the lives of the intelligentsia and that there are very few who want to write about the lives of workers and peasants. Once again, these critics think that there is some sort of bias toward this social group. In fact, an honest author understands very well that he absolutely cannot write about a worker's life, because he does not know this life and because for him all workers look the same, like a Chinese person to a tourist. It seems to him that the material of workers' lives is so uniform that it is impossible to build a literary plot around it. This is why, in the best of

cases, a worker appears to him as a kind of a slogan, which he inserts into his works for ideological consistency. The same applies to peasants, of course.

It would be a mistake to think that the problem could be corrected by the author's closer acquaintance with the lives of workers and peasants or, as some of our critics are fond of saying, that he could mingle with [*potolkalsia sredi*] workers and peasants. From this mingling literature will gain nothing, of course. The problem lies in the generation of form in literary subject matter from the material of workers' lives, in the possibility of literary construction from the specifics of workers' and peasants' lives. Without these purely technical attempts, without this literary drafting, no knowledge of the worker's life will help.

Usually, "mingling" with workers and peasants results in the author, who has collected his observations, writing stories derived from the lives of workers and peasants, following old literary examples. Consequently, there's nothing surprising in the way in which his workers and peasants have all the features of the Onegin, Pechorins, Rudins, and of the other heroes of Russian literature.²⁷ This happens not, as our critics think, because the author doesn't understand the psychology of workers and peasants, but because he generates the same form for them as for heroes from the intelligentsia. It's not enough to understand a worker's psychology—we must find methods and devices for the expression of this psychology. Our authors do not have them.

All attempts at finding models for today's literature in old literature are hopeless. All attempts to force authors politically to make them write about workers and peasants are senseless. The path of literary evolution lies only in the creation of conditions in which authors can learn to respond to current tasks. The crux of the matter and the guarantee of the successful development of our Soviet literature lie in this literary instruction.

Novyi Lef 10 (1927), pp. 33–37

"Lef' and Film: Report from a Meeting"

It seems to me that we still commit a host of gross errors. Let's begin with the so-called distortion of material. Since when have we talked of a possible transmission of fact by conventional signs? Since film is two-dimensional, it already distorts. Therefore we don't have discussion of distortion. [Esfir] Shub is correct in raising the question of what's to be filmed and not of what distorts to a greater or lesser degree. Everything is equally distorted. The question is: what should we show on screen, what should we film? Should we film only facts or adaptations for the screen? Allow me to offer an example: *Poet and Tsar*.²⁸ Shklovsky and I attacked

27. Evgenii Onegin is the hero of Pushkin's eponymous poem, written from 1823 until 1832; Grigorii Pechorin is the hero of Mikhail Lermontov's novel *The Hero of our Time* (1838–1840); and Dmitrii Rudin is the hero of Ivan Turgenev's novel *Rudin* (1856).

28. *Poet i tsar'* (1927; dir. Vladimir Gardin) is a film about the last days of the poet Aleksandr Pushkin.

Gusman:²⁹ “It’s a dirty trick, because it presents a distorted, vulgar Pushkin.” He [Gusman] said: “Quite possible, but our task is to make Pushkin a point of interest for many millions of viewers, to make them love him.” And he’s right, because confronted with this task, it would be absurd to show Pushkin as Shklovsky proposed: as a man sick with venereal disease, prostrating himself at Nicholas’s feet. He cannot evoke love. Thus, when we film, the question of our goal arises.

It is not correct to state that as *Lef* members we’re only for filming the truth. If someone told us to show Nicholas I as he really was—and some say that he was not that bad—we would not do it. The question is, what do we consider important to show in cinema? We respond: above anything else, in cinema—just as in literature—we strive to teach people to appreciate facts, documents, and not artistic interpretations of such documents.

What’s Shklovsky doing with Tolstoy? What is the cultural significance of this work? It consists in the fact that if you want to understand the war and peace of 1812, then you should read documents and not Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. If you want an emotional charge from Natasha Rostova, then you should read *War and Peace*. A person of culture gets an emotional high from real facts and not from inventions. An argument between Babel and Budenny is remarkable in this respect.³⁰ Budenny says: “You distorted the Red Cavalry,” and Babel responds: “I was not going to write its history. I chose the material I needed. If you want to read about the Red Cavalry, then you should get the documents and read them.” Budenny demands faithfulness to facts from a writer, and we agree with him in this.

It’s imperative, above all, to raise the cultural level—not only of filmmakers, but also of the consumers of cinema, so that they lose interest in the various *Collegiate Registrars* and *Malinovskaias*.³¹ It is ridiculous to deliver fiery speeches and denounce Protazanov;³² he will still make money on *The Man from the Restaurant*.³³ Protazanov is going to make money as long as people are willing to pay to see *The Man from the Restaurant*. We must defeat the spectators paying for this and those distributors who support such films.

At this point the role of the party meeting emerges because luckily, in our country we do not have free competition and we have an organization that can speed up cultural growth. We must demand that the organization maintain this objective. When we started our fight against Shvedchikov³⁴ and Sovkino, we were

29. Boris Gusman (1892–1944) was a theater director and the head of *Pravda*’s theater section.

30. Isaak Emmanuilovich Babel (1894–1940) was a Soviet writer, author of the novel *Red Cavalry* (1926); Semyon Mikhailovich Budenny (1883–1973) was a famous commander of Red Cavalry.

31. Vera Stepanovna Malinovskaia (1900–1988) was a Russian film actress who took part with Mary Pickford and Igor Il’inskii in *A Kiss from Mary Pickford* (1927).

32. Iakov Aleksandrovich Protazanov (1881–1945) was one of the leading directors of silent films in Russia.

33. *Chelovek iz restorana* (1927) was a film directed by Protazanov, with Vera Malinovskaia and Mikhail Chekhov in the leading roles.

34. Konstantin Matveevich Shvedchikov (1884–1952) was a Bolshevik functionary. In 1917, he directed the publication *Pravda*; in 1918–1924, he was the head of the papermaking industry; in 1926–1929, he was the head of the board of directors of Sovkino and in 1930 the deputy head of Soiuzkino.

asking, “What happened?” Shvedchikov behaves like a capitalist in a market. He doesn’t make use of his organization to speed the growth of culture. Everyone will now start making newsreels. While filming, even Protazanov says, “Here, I will have to take some documentary footage,” meaning a village landscape. What no one knows and what the party meeting does not know is that Shvedchikov gives advances for *What a Woman*³⁵ and doesn’t even provide film stock for *The Mechanics of the Brain*.³⁶ The same happens with *Chuvash Country*³⁷ and many others. This must be made public. It’s fine to talk about self-financing, about commercial interests—these are all wonderful things—but there are other considerations that should be emphasized. *Lef* is not alone in this. Glavrepertkom and Glavpolitprosvet are also to speak on this matter.³⁸

However, there is something else. Glavrepertkom says, “Make [documentary] films about Votiaks and Chuvashs,³⁹ but make artistic films also, based on the daily life of these nationalities.” They say, “Film all this, but see, at the same time, that it’s self-financed. As we know, if a film is a class hit, it’s also a hit at the box office.”⁴⁰ Why should we know this? Who does know this? It’s true that a contemporary spectator wants to see a contemporary film, but he doesn’t want to pay for this film. In *What a Woman*, Malinovskaia plays a supporting role, but the film’s publicity proclaims that she has the leading role. *Chuvash Country* should be able to compete with Malinovskaia. It’s not that easy. It can’t be done with pious words.

Why were we so overjoyed when *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* appeared? Because it was such a popular success. Right now, we’re involved in a fight for spectators and we want help from the party. Apart from this, we have another task. It is not clear if we should insist on making only documentary films or if we should allow for the production of an intermediary form—that is, a broader form of the same material. This isn’t clear to me. Shklovsky’s recollection of a famous example, of Turgenev’s incorporation into his novel of a letter to his friends, is pertinent: it is the directive that’s important, and not the author. But do we need this or not? Chernyshevsky began *What Is To Be Done?* in the most improbable way.⁴¹

35. *Takaia zhenshchina* (1927; Mezhrabpom-Rus’, dir. Konstantin Eggert).

36. *Mekhanika golovnoy mozga* (1926; dir. Vsevolod Pudovkin) was the first Soviet scientific documentary.

37. *Strana Chuvashkaia* (1927) was a documentary film by Iokim Stepanovich Maksimov-Koshinskii, made in the studio Chuvashkino.

38. Glavrepertkom, the Main Repertory Committee, was a censorship organ established at the beginning of 1923 under the aegis of Narkompros to screen works of performance as well as film. Glavpolitprosvet, the Main Political and Educational Committee, was an organ of the Soviet state responsible for political and educational work among the population. Established in February 1920, it also formed a part of Narkompros.

39. The Votiaks or Udmurts are a people inhabiting the Udmurt Republic in the Russian Federation, a territory in the Ural Mountains between the Viatka and Kama rivers; the capital is Izhevsk. The Chuvashs are a Turkic people living in the Chuvash Republic in Central Russia; their capital is Cheboksary.

40. Brik quotes a joke here based on a linguistic pun: “Kak izvestno, klassovaia fil’ma eto i kassovaia.”

41. Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky (1828–1889) was a Russian revolutionary, philosopher, and a writer, author of the 1863 utopian novel *What Is To Be Done?*.

Having written three chapters, he wrote in the fourth that nothing in the first three was true and that he wrote them because otherwise no one would read the book. We are doing cultural work. We want to convince the spectator that documentaries are a thousand times more culturally valuable and productive than staged monotony and studio distortions.

If you look at foreign films, you will see that any acted film includes documentary footage. I saw a film with Pat & Patachon.⁴² While strolling about, they find themselves in a ski race—a 150-meter competition—in which they take part. This is very interesting. Even if at first we don't care to watch the film, we end up watching anyway. We might even say: "You can take away Pat & Patachon but leave the race." In the villages, however, they would probably go to see only Pat & Patachon. This is a matter of tactics.

Our task is to demand and to insist that the best conditions be available for making the most interesting and most necessary documentary material. I call this "filming for the cinematheque." I often hear that it's easier to build a St. Isaak's Cathedral in a studio than go to Leningrad and film it. You could arrive and wait for an entire month for the rain to stop. A filmmaker who thinks like this is correct. His view is that if he has a bleak, poor sequence, then it's bad. This person is not convinced that he has to film St. Isaak's Cathedral in Leningrad rather than produce its illusion in the studio.

I have the following directive: first of all, our fight in *Lef* should be conducted not so much against cinematic production, as against its administrators and managers who don't even work in film factories. We need to defend our position to our ideological centers. Secondly, we need to put pressure on the spectator, raising the overall level of culture, because if he starts making demands, this will speed up the process. Third, we ourselves, those interested in and working for documentaries, need to see what we are doing well and badly. Until now there have been complaints—not only here, but also in Germany—that everyone praises what we do, but no one watches us. It would be better if we were criticized more. Otherwise, we have the impression that everything is wonderful and no one says what we are doing badly, and then, all of a sudden, we are blamed.

We are not going to put irrelevant questions on the agenda and perhaps would do better to limit ourselves to the following questions: 1) the formulation of absolutely firm and precise theses on the question of how a party meeting can be of assistance to that cultural cinematography I described, instead of everything else that fills the cinematheque. We do not have encyclopedic dictionaries. They think that cinematography has no need of an encyclopedic dictionary, but that Malinovskaia is necessary. We must show that a dictionary is perhaps more useful than Malinovskaia.

And a second point, specifically for us: it would be very interesting to discuss ways of creating a film that could knock the acted film out of material we see as important and necessary. In literature now we have attempts to present a document.

42. Carl Schenstrom (1881–1942) and Harald Madsen (1890–1949), a pair of Danish comedians who became world-famous through silent films.

Tynianov is trying to do this. He wrote *Kiukhlia*.⁴³ We may also need to revert to various tricks. When Rodchenko takes pictures from both above and below—why does he do this? Because no one would want to look straight at Kuznetskii Bridge again, but from above, one might.⁴⁴

Therefore, the second point is necessary to back up what we are going to say. We can declare our intentions. However, if we are told: “All right, here is an opportunity for you,” we need to know the material [that we can use in a film]. If we’re not able to do anything, then our words are wasted. Dziga Vertov suffocated, because he didn’t know what to do next. What happened to Vertov happens in literature as well. It’s the longing for a big form, as when someone who has fewer than thirty pages is ashamed to show up at a publishing office. When you take it to a publisher, he will look at the length and say: “This is a trifle—not worth discussion.” We have to think of a newspaper or something else, find an appropriate format. Dziga Vertov decided to use the little material he had to make a grandiose film. As a result, he ran out of material.⁴⁵

The second task: it is not enough to campaign for (propagandize) the newsreel, but we need to know what to do and what measures we must adopt to raise our newsreel to a level that would strengthen it both in the market and in a spectator’s conscious mind.

Novyi Lef 11–12 (1927), pp. 63–66

“Against Creative Personality”

Ever since the invention of photography, it has been said that “this is not simple photography; it is creative interpreting.” By this is meant that a given writer or painter not only “reflects” a real fact, he also modifies it in his own way. It is thought, quite correctly, that no one needs a simple exposition of a real fact. Any exposition of a fact must be justified by the aim of this exposition. Apart from this, it’s impossible to simply retell a fact or describe an event. It is possible to convey a fact or to describe an event only in a certain relation.

In any retelling, in any description, it is always clear who is conveying a fact and why. The expression “simple photography” implies the mechanical nature of the photographic apparatus, which supposedly photographs blindly anything that gets in front of its lens. A man is not supposed to become like this mechanical apparatus, but must consciously and purposefully choose and retransmit facts and events. This is indisputable. It is indisputable that a man cannot refrain from retelling facts from his

43. Tynianov’s novel written in 1925 about Pushkin’s classmate and friend, a poet Vil’gel’m Kiukhel’beker (1797–1846).

44. Kuznetskii Most is a street in the center of Moscow.

45. Brik probably means *The Sixth Part of the World*, released on December 31, 1927. It aroused controversy because of its perceived lyricism and the resulting lack of political muscle. Shortly after the film’s release, Vertov was fired from Sovkino, allegedly because he spent too much money on its production and worked without an officially approved plan and script. See Yuri Tsivian, ed., *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* (Sacile/Pordenone: La Giornate de Cinema Muto, 2004), pp. 215–20 and 252–56.

own personal point of view. It is indisputable that he cannot be a mechanical transmitter of facts and events. However, it is absolutely wrong to conclude therefore that a man must modify facts and events in his own way.

The theory of creativity elaborated by the bourgeois intelligentsia and “fine-tuned in a Marxist manner” by Voronsky and Polonsky says that the main task of creativity is to convey facts and events “transformed through the prism of the soul of the artist.”⁴⁶ In other words, the tendency and directive necessary for the conveyance of facts and events is to be found in the individual qualities and opinions of a particular artist. The artistic individual in question is presumed to be so valuable in himself that tasks of external origin cannot and must not make him consider facts and events from a different point of view. The supposition is that a man who writes so-called works of art (poems, stories, dramas) doesn’t have to think about facts and events from a common point of view accepted by others.

Of course, both Voronsky and Polonsky know that the individual in question, with all his peculiarities and points of view, somehow is linked to a certain class and that in this consists the “Marxist” treatment of bourgeois theory. Both Voronsky and Polonsky, however, consider it unthinkable to threaten the artistic individual in question, to strip him of his “uniqueness,” and pull him into the cultural work of a different class. Voronsky and Polonsky strongly respect this sum of individual peculiarities and “unique qualities,” thinking that if this whole is destroyed, then some artistic center will also perish. Essenin’s friends did not want to cure him of his heavy drinking, because they feared that if he felt better, he would stop writing poetry.⁴⁷

Due to a completely false understanding of the character of artistic work, due to the boundless overvaluation of the importance of the so-called creative personality, Voronsky and Polonsky halted the natural transition of senior literary masters to the performance of new cultural tasks. Had Voronsky and Polonsky attended less to those they deemed creative individuals, had they expended less energy in the admiration of their artistic splendor, had they more frequently indicated the necessary transition to other forms of literary production, our Soviet literature would have acquired work that was far more needed and of much greater interest.

However, the harmful influence of Voronsky and Polonsky is not limited to stopping the natural process of senior literary workers’ transition to the new tasks. This influence is harmful to the new, young literary forces as well. Having read Voronsky and Polonsky, every new, beginning writer tries, first of all, to become a “creative personality.” He understands that having received this honorary title, he acquires the right to write about anything in any way he wants, without regard for any tasks “from the outside.”

46. Aleksandr Konstantinovich Voronsky (1884–1937) was an editor of the journal *Krasnaia Nov’* (Red virgin soil), an opponent of RAPP and a supporter of the intelligentsia’s increased role in Soviet literature. Viacheslav Pavlovich Polonsky (1886–1932), a Bolshevik, was a member of the Literary Department of Narkompros, editor of the journal *Pechat’ i revoliutsiia* (Print and revolution; 1921–1929)

47. Sergei Aleksandrovich Esenin (1895–1925) was a Russian lyrical poet, known for wild behavior and a proclivity for alcohol. He died, a suicide.

The young writer knows that if he worked in a newspaper or a journal, he couldn't flaunt his creative personality fully; he'd have to run around and write what the editorial office told him. He would have to write about what's needed and important today, needed and important for a reader, needed and important for the process of our culture's construction. He also knows that no matter how many interesting facts he would gather, or how many good essays he would write, neither Voronsky nor Polonsky would write a single article about him. They would not announce to the world the appearance of a new creative personality and hand him a mandate for the "free" expression of his creative potential. And the same young writer knows very well too that he would have only to write a dozen or two bad verses or a couple of mediocre stories to be immediately discussed as a new creative personality.

It doesn't matter if he's cursed or praised. It is important that articles on him begin with the words: "The artistic path of the new writer X is marked . . ." etc.—and then invariably, there would follow further flattering or unflattering comparisons of this new young writer with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, indicating what he has in common with them and what he doesn't. He would thereby receive the mandate for his creative personality. He can quarrel with publications, lawfully pass from the House of the Press to the House of Herzen, borrow money, and then, sitting in his lair, think up "free" rhymes and "generalized" symbols. And some time later, could come complaints about the censor's strictness and, sitting in a beer hall, he can write letters to Gorky about how difficult it is for a writer to truly realize himself in Soviet Russia.

We, the members of *Lef*, together with the leaders of VAPP, have fought this plague of individualism. We have tried, with all possible forms of persuasion, to prove to the steering committees and to young writers that the path laid out by Voronsky and Polonsky means disaster for Soviet literature. It looks as though we have succeeded in this regard.

Now, however, as members of *Lef*, we're bewildered to notice that VAPP's leaders have begun to repeat Voronsky's and Polonsky's words—little by little for the present, and with reservations. Proof is to be seen in their speeches at the VAPP's last conference, published as "The Creative Paths of Proletarian Literature." We of *Lef* continue to advance our old theses. We continue our fight against individualized creative writing and for practical literature centered in newspapers and periodicals. We believe that the move of VAPP leaders to Voronsky and Polonsky's position threatens to redirect proletarian writing youth to a pernicious path. These new ideas of VAPP reveal their bourgeois essence, their emphasis on the individual, their repetition of Voronsky and Polonsky's error, and our attack will be vigorous.

Novyi Lef 2 (1928), pp. 12–14

—Translated from Russian by Natasha Kurchanova



Aleksandr Rodchenko. Osip Brik. 1924.

Osip Brik and the Politics of the Avant-Garde*

NATASHA KURCHANOVA

*It is not difficult to be a Futurist of one's future—
but this is not real Futurism.*

—Osip Brik

Critic, editor, impresario of “Left” art and a lifelong friend and collaborator of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, Osip Brik aroused—and still arouses—controversy.¹ Although his centrality to the Soviet avant-garde is recognized in foundational studies and anthologies on the subject, hostile views of him abound, especially in Soviet accounts.² In 1968, during the Khrushchev “thaw,” two articles appeared in the popular Soviet periodical *Ogonek* in which Brik was defamed as

* I would like to thank Stuart Liebman for his encouragement and help in bringing this publication into being, as well as Malcolm Turvey and Annette Michelson for their support and editorial advice.

1. I commented on the ironic aspect of this portrait by Rodchenko and on Brik’s irony in general in my paper “Half-Blind Brik: Reduction of Visuality in Constructivism,” presented in Russian at the First Brik Readings held at the Moscow University of Print Media (MGUP), February 10–12, 2010. The proceedings of this conference are being prepared for publication as *Poetika i fonostilistika. Brikovskii sbornik*, vypusk 1. *Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii “Pervye Brikovskie chteniia: poetika i fonostilistika,”* ed. G. V. Vekshin (Moscow: Moscow State University of Print Media, 2010).

2. Among scholars who laid the groundwork for an in-depth study of Russian modernism, Victor Erlich considered Brik an important member of the group of critics and writers who became known as the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOIAZ). See V. Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine* (1955): 4th ed. (The Hague, Paris, New York: Mouton Publishers, 1980), p. 68. In several publications, Bengt Jangfeldt provided groundwork for a detailed historical account of Brik’s efforts to institutionalize Futurism. See Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky and Futurism: 1917–1921* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1976) and “Osip Brik: A Bibliography” in *Russian Literature* 8 (1980), pp. 579–604 among others. Christina Lodder presented Brik as an active participant in the reorganization of Soviet art education and the major critic behind the movement of artists into production. See Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 49, 76–77. The writer and translator Maria Enzensberger and the historian of photography Christopher Phillips have positively evaluated Brik’s attempt to bring together revolutionary art and politics and translated a selection of his writings. See Enzensberger, “Osip Brik: Selected Writings,” *Screen* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1974), pp. 35–120 and *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), pp. 213–20 and 227–33.

Mayakovsky's "sham friend" who "abused the great poet's trust during his life and after his death began to use his fame for his own aggrandizement."³ In addition, memoirs denouncing Brik and his wife, Lili, were published with encouragement from Mayakovsky's sister, Liudmila. Evgeniia Lavinskaia, the wife of the artist Anton Lavinsky, authored the most hostile of these. Their gist was the same as that of the *Ogonek* articles: the Briks did not appreciate Mayakovsky's talent and did not care for him personally, but cultivated his friendship for political and material advantage.⁴ As the Iron Curtain fell and details emerged about Brik's service in the Cheka, the fearsome Soviet secret police, even Western scholars' confidence was shaken.⁵ Today, studies of the art and culture of the period preserve Brik's enigma by either attempting to absolve him of all sins or avoiding the issue of his close connection to the repressive organs of the state.⁶ He therefore emerges as a split, misaligned figure: on the one hand helping to establish the avant-garde as a viable cultural force, but on the other undermining its freedom by subordinating it to a political dictatorship.

3. V. Vorontsov and A. Koloskov, "Liubov' poeta [A Poet's Love]," *Ogonek* 16 (April 22, 1968), pp. 9–13; and A. Koloskov, "Tragediia poeta [Poet's Tragedy]," *Ogonek* 23 (June 3, 1968), pp. 26–31 and *Ogonek* 26 (June 24, 1968), pp. 18–22.

4. E. A. Lavinskaia, "Vospominaniia o vstrechakh s Maiakovskim [Memoirs about the meeting with Mayakovsky]," in *Maiakovskii v vospominaniakh rodnikh i druzei* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1968), pp. 321–74.

5. According to the available documentation, Brik worked for the Cheka as a "legal consultant" from 1920 until 1924. In 1989–1994, Valentin Skoriatin, a Moscow journalist, published a series of articles in the popular journal *Zhurnal'ist*, tracking down every detail of Mayakovsky's life during the last months, days, and minutes before his death, which looked like a suicide. He tried to figure out if Cheka agents following the poet might have staged his murder. Although the in-depth scrutiny revealed no proof of Brik's connection to the poet's death, the fact of his and his wife's service in the Cheka was definitely established. See "Pochemu Maiakovskii ne poekhal v Parizh?" [Why did Mayakovsky not go to Paris?], *Zhurnal'ist* 9 (1989), pp. 87–95; "Mezhdu dekabrem i martom [Between December and March]," no. 1 (1990), pp. 56–63; "Vystrel v Liubianskiom [The shot in Liubanskii (alley)]," *Zhurnal'ist* 2 (1990), pp. 52–57; "Posleslovie k smerti [Postface to death]," *Zhurnal'ist* 5 (1990), pp. 52–62; "Mne by zhit' da zhit' [I wish I could keep living]," *Zhurnal'ist* 5 (1991), pp. 70–71; "Prozrenie [Seeing again]," *Zhurnal'ist* 6 (1991), pp. 84–93; "Moment lzhi [A moment of lie]" *Zhurnal'ist* 5 and 6 (1992), pp. 84–90; "Zeus' osvedomliaet ['Zeus' informs]," *Zhurnal'ist* 1 (1993), pp. 68–73 and *Zhurnal'ist* 2 (1993), pp. 43–47; "Sretenka. Mali Golovin 12 . . .," *Zhurnal'ist* 7 (1993), pp. 50–53; and "Skazano eshche ne vse [Not everything is said yet]," *Zhurnal'ist* 10 (1994), pp. 37–44.

6. See Anatolii Valiuzhenich, *Osip Maksimovich Brik: materialy k biografii* (Akmola: Niva, 1993). Selim Khan-Magomedov, by far the most prolific scholar of the avant-garde in Russia today, barely mentions Brik in his many books and articles on the subject. Among his writings, those translated into English include: *Alexander Vesnin and Russian Constructivism* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986); *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987); and *Rodchenko: The Complete Work* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987). However, he does acknowledge Brik's importance for Mayakovsky and the avant-garde in one of his latest publications, *Konstruktivizm: kontseptsiiia formobrazovaniia* (Moscow: Stroiizdat, 2003), pp. 199–206. In her recent study of Constructivism, Maria Gough refers in passing to various roles Brik performed as an administrative and critical functionary of the avant-garde, but she does not emphasize his central role in the formation of the avant-garde's identity; see Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Christina Kiaer, on the other hand, discusses Brik's involvement at length, but leaves aside the question of the corruption of art by political violence. See Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

A Literator

Osip Maksimovich (Meerovich) Brik was born in 1888 to a Jewish merchant's family in Moscow. Like his future Formalist colleagues Roman Jakobson, Victor Shklovsky, and Boris Eikhenbaum, he belonged to the second generation of assimilated Russian Jews who were historically persecuted but gradually allowed some measure of civil rights, among them the right to live in the capital cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg.⁷ Many Jews fought czarism by joining illegal revolutionary parties, but Brik, who was not a revolutionary by temperament, chose to study law and stated his intention to fight the system from within by legal means, using intellectual weapons. After graduation, however, Brik moved to the capital city of St. Petersburg to frequent poetry readings and theater performances.

Why Brik ultimately chose bohemia over the law is not clear. But his meeting, in July 1915, with Mayakovsky—a Futurist who strove to abolish the boundary separating art from life by spurning the artistic establishment and attempting to make his poetry relevant to middle-class and working people—proved to be a fateful event that profoundly shaped his future.⁸

7. On the emancipation of Russian Jews, see *Russian Jewry (1860–1917)*, ed. Jacob Frumkin, Gregor Aronson, Alexis Goldenweiser (New York: T. Yoseloff, 1966).

8. This is how Lili Brik described her husband's and her own reaction to Mayakovsky's recitation of his new poem "The Thirteenth Apostle" (1914–15), later titled "The Cloud in Trousers": "A door



Rodchenko. Vladimir Mayakovsky and Osip Brik. 1926.

In 1929, when his work on behalf of the avant-garde was behind him, Brik responded to a questionnaire for a playwright's union by describing his occupation as a "literator," a word that can be translated as "publicist" or "man of letters."⁹ Both translations fit because they relate to different aspects of his literary work. As a publicist, Brik wrote short critical and journalistic texts—mostly manifestos and reviews—and produced several important longer publications. His first steps in this direction were inspired by Mayakovsky's poem "The Cloud in Trousers" (1915). After hearing Mayakovsky recite the poem, Brik wrote a panegyric to it, "Give Us Bread," which he published in the Futurist almanac *Took* in 1915, alongside contributions by Mayakovsky; the poets Velimir Khlebnikov, Vasily Kamensky, and Boris Pasternak; and the literary critic Shklovsky. Already in this text, which extolled the poem as "daily bread" as opposed to the "sugary eatables" of the Symbolists, a prominent theme in Brik's writings over the course of his career emerges: the triumph of "low" folk art over "high" art. A contribution to Maxim Gorky's journal *Annals* followed, in which Brik published a few reviews of poetry and plays. Gorky's journal provided a particularly suitable forum for Brik, because it covered both literature and left-wing politics. After the abdication of the czar and the formation of the Provisional Government in February 1917, Brik became active in reorganizing the arts by joining the Left Block of the Union of Art Workers.¹⁰

"The Democratization of Art," his first article on the relationship between art and politics, appeared in *Annals* in 1917. In it, Brik argued for the necessity of artists' connection to the changes taking place in the political structure of the country but also insisted on the separation between art and the state in order to preserve artistic freedom. This text stands out among the others he wrote because of its liberal bent: Brik explained that freedom of the arts allows for a social interaction in which "freely formed poets, painters, and musicians . . . enter into a complex relationship among themselves and with society, in the process creating art as a socio-cultural phenomenon." He claimed to be a middleman of sorts

had been removed between the two rooms. Mayakovsky stood there, leaning back against the door-frame. He took out a small notebook from the inside pocket of his jacket, looked in it, and put it back in the same pocket. He pondered, and then looked around the room as if it were an enormous auditorium. He read the prologue and then asked—not in verse, but in prose—with his quiet, never to be forgotten voice: 'You think it is raving malaria? It happened. Happened in Odessa.' We lifted up our heads and did not take our eyes off the unseemly miracle till the end" See Lili Brik, "And Now About Osip Maksimovich," in Valiuzhenich, *Osip Maksimovich Brik*, p. 138. Valiuzhenich did not date Lili Brik's memoirs. However, parts of it were first published in 1934 under the title "Iz vospominanii," in *Al'manakh 'S Maiaikovskim'*, ed. N. Aseev, O. Brik, and S. Kirsanov (Moscow: Sovetskaia literatura, 1934), pp. 59–79.

9. RGALI, fond 2852, opis' 1, delo 323. Notably, Brik did not call himself "*pisatel'*" ("writer"), which would have implied a broader reference to imaginative writing.

10. The Union of Art Workers, set up to defend the interests of independent artists and art professionals, was established on March 12, 1917, less than two weeks after the February revolution. See V. P. Lapshin, *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn' Moskvy i Petrograda v 1917 godu* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1983), pp. 87, 88, 90 and Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 48.

who would facilitate the artists' transition to the new, ostensibly democratic society.¹¹ With this text, Brik inserted himself in a conflict that Benjamin Buchloh has called "one of the most profound . . . in modernism itself: that of the historical dialectic between individual autonomy and the representation of a collectivity. . . ."¹²

In addition to his work as a publisher and critic, Brik was a founding member of the group of literary scholars who later became known as the Formalists and who were members of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOIAZ) in Petrograd.¹³ This association makes the translation of "literator" as a "man of letters" more pertinent. In his tribute to Brik, the linguist Roman Jakobson acknowledged his friend's active participation in the discussions of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and especially his proclivity for "subjecting art to rigorous scientific analysis."¹⁴ Indeed, in his studies of poetic language, Brik left no room for indeterminacy. In "Sound Repetitions," for example, he analyzed hundreds of individual examples from Pushkin's and Lermontov's verses to illustrate the argument that in poetry, repetitions of sounds and "sound combinations" that did not carry any semantic charge stood on a par with imagery and "served not only as euphonic additions, but were the results of an independent poetic striving," anchoring the work structurally.¹⁵

This position diverged somewhat from the tenets of *zaum* poetry but was generally in agreement with the OPOIAZ opposition to the nineteenth-century Romantic school of Veselovsky and Potebnia, which considered "thinking in images" as the prevalent form of poetic creation. The most well-known rebuff to this theoretical model in literary criticism was, of course, Shklovsky's "Art as Device," which immediately followed "Sound Repetitions" in the famous 1919 collection of OPOIAZ essays, *Poetika*. Instead of analyzing textual properties, Shklovsky focused on how such properties are perceived—essentially, on our psychological reaction to artistry. Unlike Shklovsky, Brik avoided psychology because of the intuitive, subjective nature of the reader's response, which, he felt, resisted strict

11. The ideas elaborated in "The Democratization of Art" first appeared in the program Brik drafted for the Left Block, in which he was one of the most active members. See my dissertation, "Against Utopia: Osip Brik and the Genesis of Productivism" (City University of New York, Graduate Center, 2005), ch. 2, pp. 94–96.

12. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Faktography," *October* 30 (Fall 1984), p. 114.

13. See Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, pp. 52–69. Andrei Krusanov specified that OPOIAZ received its official name only in October 1919. Before this date, the group was known through the name of its publication, *Collections on the Theory of Poetic Language* (Petrograd, 1916 and 1917). See Krusanov, *Russkii avangard: istoricheskii obzor, 1907–1932*, vol. 2, *Futuristicheskaia revoliutsiia, 1917–1921* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2003), pp. 296–97.

14. Roman Jakobson, postscript to "Two Essays on Poetic Language by Osip Maksimovich Brik," *Michigan Slavic Materials* 5 (Ann Arbor: Department of Slavic Languages and Literature, 1964), pp. 77–81; p. 81.

15. "Sound Repetitions" was first published in 1917 and reprinted in the 1919 compendium of articles *Poetika: Sborniki po teorii poeticheskogo iazyka* (Petrograd: OPOIAZ, 1919), pp. 58–98; "Rhythm and Syntax," another Formalist analysis of poetry by Brik, appeared in 1927 in *Novyi Lef* 3, pp. 15–20; *Novyi Lef* 4, pp. 23–29; *Novyi Lef* 5, pp. 32–37; and *Novyi Lef* 6, pp. 33–39.

categorization: he mentioned only that sound repetitions can have “emotional” content, but left the development of this thought for Shklovsky.¹⁶

Brik’s reliance on hard “scientific” facts, free of psychological overtones, was much closer to Jakobson’s approach to poetic language, which was informed by the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure. In fact, Brik was the only member of the Formalist circle whom Jakobson explicitly praised, which he did on account of the Saussurean idea of the “sound-image” that could be found in Brik’s “Sound Repetitions.”¹⁷ Brik’s methodological disregard for history and for such “nebulous” psychological phenomena as emotions and memory can also be linked to the Swiss linguist’s theory. Saussure’s emphasis on the synchronic axis of language replaced the search for the original meaning of a word with a binary system of signs in the present in which the meaning of a sign is thought to be produced through its differences from other signs. Brik transformed this insight into a method for the study of not only poetry and literature but also the relationship between the individual and society; he began to think, to use Fredric Jameson’s formulation, in relational as opposed to substantive terms, where the immediate context determines the meaning of an utterance.¹⁸ As Jameson has noted, there are obvious disadvantages to this synchronic model: Saussure’s “prison-house of language” does not allow for the dynamism of the Hegelian notion of history to come into play, and this model led Brik to think of the relationship between an individual and a society as a static, self-sufficient, metaphysical system. Moreover, judging by his analysis of sound repetitions in poetry, Brik tended to ignore Saussure’s emphasis on the arbitrariness of the sign and underscored instead the willful, purposeful nature of artistic design.

An Ideologue of the Bolshevik Utopia

After the Bolsheviks’ capture of power in October 1917, Brik continued mediating between the avant-garde and the rapidly changing political structure. Unlike his fellow Left-Block members Mayakovsky, Vladimir Tatlin, and Nikolai Punin, he refrained from cooperating with the new authorities and supported the convention of the Constituent Assembly until the Bolsheviks forcibly dissolved it on January 19, 1918. Brik’s maneuvering through muddy political waters during this turbulent period resulted in shifting allegiances. In December 1917, he publicly avowed

16. Viktor Shklovsky, “On Poetry and Zaum Language,” *Poetika*, pp. 13–26.

17. Brik must have been particularly taken by the Saussurian idea of the sound-image, because in Jakobson’s book *Noveishaia russkaia poeziia* (The newest Russian poetry), Jakobson mistakenly attributed this concept to his friend: “Form is perceived by us only when it is repeated in a given linguistic system. A lone form dies away. Similarly, a sound combination in a given verse . . . becomes a ‘sound-image’ [Brik’s terminology] and is perceived only when it is repeated.” Jakobson, *Noveishaia russkaia poeziia* (Prague: Politika, 1921), p. 48.

18. For a brilliant discussion of Saussure’s thought and its implications for Formalism and Structuralism, see Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972).

that Bolshevik politics were not only objectionable—because, “like any power,” the Bolsheviks “arrest those who think differently from them” and “violate the word and the press”—“the cultural program of the Bolsheviks was impossible,” and as a “cultural worker” he refused to join the parliament on the Bolshevik ticket.¹⁹ The following month, however, he reversed his stance and submitted to the authority of Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet People’s Commissar of Enlightenment, who was responsible for art and culture. As a practical man attuned to the actual turn of events, he realized that the Bolsheviks had gained a firm hold on power and by siding with them he would have a better chance of enacting his artistic agenda. His January 22, 1917, article “Autonomous Art” extolled the People’s Commissar’s speech at the Third Congress of Soviets, which took place immediately after the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. He praised Lunacharsky’s promise to allow artists freedom from the state and, in the same breath, attacked the established “generals of art” who misused art’s autonomy to fortify their positions.²⁰

After agreeing to serve the Bolsheviks, Brik worked not for one but for several government organizations. He joined the party and the Art Department of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (IZO Narkompros) as the head of the Subdivision of Artistic Labor. There, he was charged with the organization of artistic competitions, participation in festivals, and sponsorship of artistic projects as well as with the editorship of the newspaper of the Art Department, *The Art of the Commune* (*Iskusstvo Kommuny*).²¹ In the fall of 1918, he was involved in the creation of Pegoskhum (Petrograd Free Art Workshops), which replaced the Academy of Art in April 1918. In November 1918, he joined the Art and Art Industry Collegium of IZO Narkompros, an administrative organ responsible for reorganizing and regulating the artistic life of the country. After the government moved to Moscow in March 1919, he became a representative of the commissariat in the Second Svomas (Free Workshops), which was the former Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. In his official capacity, Brik also participated in organizing projects sponsored by the Art Department, such as Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* and the competition for designing book kiosks with the participation of members of Zhivskulptarkh (the Painting, Sculpture,

19. Brik, “My Position,” *Novaia zhizn’* (New life), December 5 (18), 1917, p. 4.

20. Brik, “Autonomous Art,” *Vecherniaia zvezda* (The evening star), January 1 (22), 1918, p. 2.

21. Brik remembered joining Narkompros in the summer of 1918. See his “IMO—Iskusstvo Molodykh [IMO—The art of the young],” in *Maiakovskomu* (Leningrad: 1940); repr. in Valiuzhenich, *Osip Maksimovich Brik*, pp. 81–95; p. 84. Also, on October 24, 1918, David Shterenberg, the head of the Art Department of the Commissariat of Enlightenment, issued a certificate stating that Brik was the head of the Subdivision of Artistic Labor (*zaveduiushchii buro khudozhestvennogo truda*) (RGALI, fond 2852, opis’ 1, delo 317). As far as party membership is concerned, Valiuzhenich cited Brik’s membership card, dated May 6, 1920: “. . . Brik has been listed as a member of RKP [Russian Communist Party] from 1917” (Valiuzhenich, *Osip Maksimovich Brik*, p. 16). It seems unlikely that Brik joined the party as early as 1917, considering his harsh critique of the Bolsheviks up to the end of that year. He probably became a member of the party simultaneously with joining Narkompros in the summer of 1918. Krusanov confirms this dating. (Krusanov, *Russkii avangard*, vol. 2, bk. 1, pp. 455–90). In 1921, Brik was expelled from the party during a purge.

and Architecture Collective), one of whom was Rodchenko. He became the third director of INKhUK (the Institute of Artistic Culture) after Kandinsky and Rodchenko, and he helped organize VKhUTEMAS (The All-State Artistic-Technical Workshops).²² He also continued his writing and editing, all the while advocating for the changes he was effecting.²³

Brik's utopianism was more practical than theoretical—he concentrated on tasks that had an immediate pragmatic effect in the present, such as agitation and propaganda, rather than speculation about the future. From the moment he joined the Bolsheviks, his rhetoric and vocabulary shifted their emphases and his writings took on a manifesto-like urgency and ideological fervor. In his articles for *The Art of the Commune*, he called for building a foundation for proletarian art and elaborated on what this entailed, dedicating each to a key point of his plan to transform the arts. In “Artist-Proletarian” (December 15, 1918), for example, he repudiates the notion of artistic talent and amateurism and argues that artists should move from an individual to a collective consciousness. As for the nature of art, he called for its desublimation and urged that it move in the direction of the Futurist creation of life (“A Preserved God”; December 29, 1918).

In December 1917, when Brik expressed his contempt for the Bolsheviks' cultural program, he referred to his experience at the First Conference of Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organizations, which took place a week before the October uprising.²⁴ The conference was dominated by supporters of Aleksandr Bogdanov,²⁵ a Bolshevik cultural philosopher and Lenin's nemesis, who promoted a proletarian cultural hegemony through educating workers in the humanities, arts, and sciences. Lunacharsky was just one among many organizers of the conference, which included other prominent Bolsheviks as well as members of Proletkult, a proletarian cultural-educational organization set up according to Bogdanov's tenets that, at one point, rivaled the party in popularity.²⁶

Brik had a markedly different approach to culture, which was based not on educating workers in order to ensure their cultural hegemony, but on what he called, in “The Democratization of Art,” “individual creativity”—what we would call talent. Brik's articles in *The Art of the Commune*, with their insistence

22. See Pamela Kachurin, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: The Retreat of the Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era” (Ph. D. diss., Indiana University, 1988), pp. 94 and 126; Krusanov, *Russkii avant-gard*, vol. 2, bk. 1, pp. 91–94; Khan-Magomedov, *Vkhutemas*, vol. 1 (Paris: Éditions du Regard, 1990), p. 40. On the history of INKhUK, see Selim Khan-Magomedov, “Vozniknovenie i formirovanie INKhUKa (Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury),” *Problemy istorii sovetskoi arkhitektury* 2 (1976), pp. 24–27; and *Inkhuk i rannii konstruktivizm [INKhUK and early Constructivism]* (Moscow: Arkhitektura, 1994). Brik became director of INKhUK on September 21, 1921. See Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*, p. 201.

23. Privately, Brik lived with a new family structure: he and his wife, Lili, remained legally married, but at various times had amorous liaisons with others. Mayakovsky and Lili Brik had an affair from 1915 until 1924. From 1919 on, Mayakovsky lived in the same apartment with the Briks.

24. See Kurchanova, “Against Utopia,” p. 111.

25. Pseudonym for Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Malinovsky (1873–1928).

26. On Proletkult, see Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

on a non-imitative, creative approach to art as production, served as a riposte to Bogdanov's philosophy, which in 1918 dominated the cultural life of Russia. Unlike Bogdanov, Brik refused to engage in utopian theorizing and speculation about the future. It might appear that he simply lacked the ability to envision grandiose social changes that would radically improve peoples' lives. Jameson reminds us, however, that alongside visions of a better future, utopias have always had a rough-and-tumble political dimension, which necessarily involves local, often unseemly and violent, political struggles in the present.²⁷ In this respect, Lenin's pamphlet "State and Revolution," written a month before the October uprising but published in 1918, provides an insight into Brik's practical, militant utopianism.²⁸ In this text, Lenin upheld Marx and Engel's tenet that the state is an apparatus of forced political domination by a hegemonic class over others, and argued against both the liberal idea of the state as a means of reconciling class antagonisms and the anarchist claim that the state becomes obsolete following the capture of political power by the proletariat. Typical of the writing of the Bolshevik leader in its polemical ferocity and its refusal of compromise, "State and Revolution" insisted on the necessity of the state as a political tool for annihilating the enemies of the proletariat.

Bogdanov, whose vision determined his practice, was primarily a theoretician despite being a revolutionary. He had a critical perspective on the realization of the Bolshevik utopia not only because of his theoretical prowess, but also because he was cast out of it by Lenin's political ambition.²⁹ Because Bogdanov's theory was based on the principle of historical progression, in the aesthetic realm, it advocated the study of the past and the anticipation of the future. Brik, unlike Bogdanov, had no proclivity either for revolutionary struggle or for devising expansive theoretical schemas. He was an aesthete who repudiated history for full immersion in the present moment. For Brik, revolution was not about studying the past and imagining the future, but about destroying the past and actualizing the present by making every moment count as a transformative revolutionary event.

After joining the Bolshevik government, then, Brik's efforts were directed at the destruction of traditional artistic culture and ensuring favorable conditions for Mayakovsky and Futurist poetry. Brik's most direct challenge to the traditional institutions of the visual arts in Soviet Russia came at the end of 1921, during one of the first meetings of his tenure as director of INKhUK, when he proposed that INKhUK be moved out of Narkompros's art department.³⁰ According to art historian Pamela

27. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), p. xi and pp. 10–12.

28. V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1943).

29. Lenin began challenging Bogdanov's vision as soon as it became threatening to him politically. See Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: the Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.) p. 7 and T. C. Prot'ko and A. A. Gritsanov, *Aleksandr Bogdanov. Mysliteli XX stoletia* (Minsk: Knizhnyi zdom, 2009), pp. 28–62.

30. Khan-Magomedov, *Inkhuk i rannii konstruktivizm*, 231–34. The critic Viktor Pertsov was the first to notice publicly Brik's favorable treatment of literature at the expense of the visual arts. See Pertsov, *Reviziiia levogo fronta v sovremennom russkom iskusstve* [*Revision of the Left Front in Contemporary Russian Art*] (Moscow: Vserossiiskii Proletkult, 1925), pp. 33–37. See also my dissertation, pp. 196–97.

Kachurin, this must have been prompted by the concerns of officials such as Ol'ga Anikst, who argued that education in the applied arts should be removed from the purview of IZO Narkompros and placed under the control of professional unions and the Council on National Economy. IZO, in her opinion, was dominated by the "most extreme Left trends," and was capable of producing "a few hundreds of thousands of unsuccessful Futurists" instead of "such a number of artistically trained workers."³¹ Brik responded to Anikst's charges by enthusiastically agreeing to this move, which would have placed INKhUK among institutions concerned with the economic base as opposed to a derivative cultural superstructure, thereby assuring that the government consider it an organ of the first order. Had Brik succeeded in this undertaking, independent artistic activity would have been curtailed even further by being placed under the direct control of a body that had nothing to do with visual creativity or visual production or art in general. Fortunately, Lunacharsky was against such a radical change, and despite Brik's wishes, this transfer never occurred. Instead, on January 1, 1922, INKhUK became part of the newly formed Russian Academy of Art. Brik, however, had not relinquished the hope of remaking the Institute into the base of technological labor: at the meeting on October 6, 1923, he proposed to rename INKhUK as INDUK (the Institute of Industrial Culture). Brik's proposal was formally accepted, although in the long-term the old name remained in use.³²

Art in Production

Because Brik had to take into account Proletkult's popularity and provide a theoretical justification for his stance, his first book, *Art in Production*, appropriated Bogdanov's vision and presented it in the form of a politically expedient Futurist manifesto.

The book came out in 1921, at the onset of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which shifted the orientation of the Soviet government from war-time terror and expropriation to reconciliation with private proprietors and small-scale entrepreneurs. The introduction, most likely written by Brik, stated that the aim of the publication was the "clarification and working out of issues concerning the role of art in the production process."³³ Following the introduction, in "Our

31. Olga Anikst, minutes of a meeting at IZO Narkompros, GARF (State Archive of the Russian Federation), Fond A-2306, opis' 2, delo 104, list 101. Cited in Kachurin, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back," p. 115.

32. See Minutes of INKhUK meeting on October 6, 1923, RGALI, Fond 2852, opis' 1, delo 317.

33. "Ot redaktsii," *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve* (Moscow: IZO Narkompros, 1921), p. 3. In 1994, Svetlana Boym singled out the word "*byt*" as designating "the reign of stagnation and routine, of daily transience without transcendence," which became current with the Symbolists and the avant-garde, but gradually entered common parlance. In its absolute opposition to *bytie*, the realm of spiritual pursuit, *byt* became a reviled symbol of everyday retrograde, dirty, and unorganized. (See Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* [London: Cambridge University Press, 1994], pp. 29–40.) For more on the political currency of the question of the transformation of *byt*, see Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, esp. ch. 1 and 2.

Agenda,” Brik called for the abolition of the distinction between “pure” and “applied” art on the grounds that it reflected a social hierarchy between “architects, sculptors, painters” and “engineers, metalworkers, woodworkers.” Instead, there were only “workers” who had to “understand why [they were] applying a certain form and a certain color to an object,” so that they could become “conscious, active participant[s] in the creative process of the making of the thing.”³⁴

Whereas Brik’s rhetoric in *Art in Production* remained consistent with his earlier thoughts on the democratization of art, the book as a whole ran counter to his ahistorical approach. All the essays—except for the introductory ones by Brik—offered an abridged, limited, and simplified historical perspective that was camouflaged by the new rhetoric of the “machine aesthetic.” The four central texts of the collection, written by Brik’s protégés, traced the historical trajectory of Productivism as a progressive movement.³⁵ Nietzsche’s proactive philosophy was claimed as a source of the Productivist impulse, and the Symbolist idea of remaking the world through art was seen as carrying it further. The abolition of the hierarchy between pure and applied art was also viewed as part of this progression. As a result, *Art in Production* replaced artistic creativity with technological acumen. Context—which, under the influence of Saussure, had been the defining element of Brik’s thinking about language, art, and society—had now taken priority over the individual creativity that Brik had been so concerned to preserve four years earlier in “The Democratization of Art.”

“Lef”

In contrast to *Art in Production*, which dealt exclusively with the visual arts, Brik’s next publication, the journal *Lef* (1923–1925), devoted most of its space to poetry and short stories—genres that determined in large measure the journal’s success and proved resistant to iconoclastic forays into Productivism. In the initial plan for the journal, which Brik launched together with Mayakovsky in 1923, the poet omitted the visual arts completely.³⁶ It was Brik, as a co-editor, who invited visual artists to participate. The journal had typographic covers and included occasional photomontages by Rodchenko and designs for theater, textiles, book kiosks, and clothes by Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Lavinsky, and Liubov Popova, which were often squeezed into the practice section and confined to a few pages.

Many of Brik’s major articles from the *Lef* period have been translated: his call for artists to go “Into Production” is well-known, as is his explanation of the significance of the “so-called formal method” and his appeal for moving “from pictures

34. Brik, “V poriadke dnia,” *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve*, pp. 7–8.

35. A. Filipov and David Arkin were former Svomas students; A. Toporkov was picked out by Brik as early as March 1919 to give a lecture on the subject of “Artist and Machine.” See Krusanov, *Russkii avant-gard*, vol. 2, bk. 1, pp. 108–09 and p. 205.

36. See Halina Stephan, “LEF” and the Left Front of the Arts (Munich: Otto Sagner, 1981), pp. 38–39.



Rodchenko.
Cover for *Lef* no. 1.
March 1923.

to textile prints.”³⁷ The texts offered here highlight Brik’s persistent concern with limiting the power of imagistic representation. In “The Constructivist School” (1923), he emphasizes the orientation of VKhUTEMAS toward producing utilitarian, non-artistic objects. In “Photomontage” (1924) one of the earliest articles on the subject, he highlights the value of photography for the avant-garde, citing its inherent ability “to fixate the fact itself,” as compared to drawing (a “primitive”

37. “V proizvodstvo,” “T.n. ‘formal’nyi metod,” originally published in *Lef* 1 (March 1923), pp. 105–8, 213–15, and “Ot kartiny k sitstu,” *Lef* 2 (1924), pp. 27–34 were translated by Richard Sherwood as “Into Production,” “The So-Called ‘Formal Method,’” and “From Picture to Calico-Print,” in “Documents from *Lef*,” *Screen Reader I: Cinema, Ideology, Politics*, ed. John Ellis (London: The Society for Education in Film and Television, 1977), pp. 268–69; 279–82; and 273–75. A translation of “Into Production” was also published in Stephen Bann’s anthology *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), pp. 83–85. “Ot kartiny k sitstu” appeared as “From Pictures to Textile Prints,” in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism: 1902–1934*, ed. and trans. John E. Bowlt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp. 244–49. Some of Brik’s important collaborative manifestos, “Za chto boretsia *Lef*? [What Does *Lef* Fight For?]” and “Nasha slovesnaia rabota [Our linguistic work],” appeared in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes*, ed. Anna Lawton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 191–95 and 202–3.



Rodchenko.
Cover for Lef no. 3.
June–July 1923.

medium) because “it lives, it reflects reality, it changes the appearance of this reality.”³⁸ For Brik, photographic representation was superior because it was created by a machine, which, for him, was the paradigm of scientific objectivity. Manual drawing lacks this objectivity because it “chang[es] the appearance of reality.”³⁹ Unsurprisingly, “The Breakdown of VKhUTEMAS” (1924), which deplores the school’s return to traditional artistic mediums, emphasizes the graphics department as one of the most important sectors to be kept within the purview of Productivism.

38. See Brik, “Fotomontazh,” *Zaria Vostoka* 683 (September 21, 1924), p. 4. Another article from 1924 entitled “Photomontage,” appeared in *Lef* 4 (1924), pp. 43–44. As Leah Dickerman noted (in “The Fact and the Photograph,” *October* 118 [Fall 2006], p. 135), it was unsigned and misattributed to Gustavs Klucis, who was not a member of the *Lef* circle (see *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 211–12). I agree that there is little doubt that the text in *Lef* was authored by Brik, because it reiterated not only the title, but also the argument of the article in *Zaria Vostoka* (albeit in a much more concise format). Moreover, the *Lef* “Photomontage” praised the three artists most favored by Brik: Mayakovsky, Rodchenko, and George Grosz.

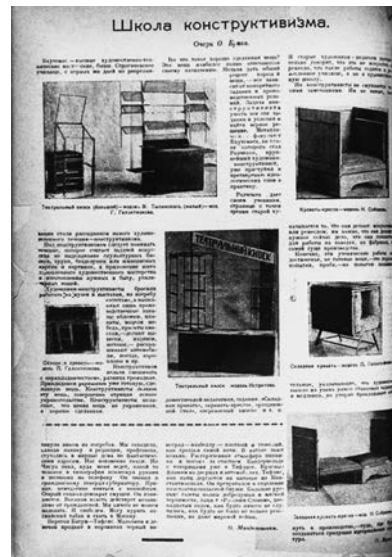
39. In his subsequent articles on photography, the gist of Brik’s argument is essentially the same. See “The Photograph versus the Painting” (1926); “What the Eye Does Not See” (1926); and “From the Painting to the Photograph” (1928), in *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 213–20 and 227–33.

Because *Lef* was essentially a literary journal, it became embroiled in bitter disputes about the proper character and direction of literature in the workers' state.⁴⁰ The struggle between various literary groups was so intense that none other than Leon Trotsky, President of the Revolutionary War Council, felt compelled to intervene. In 1924—shortly after Lenin's death—he published *Literature and Revolution*, analyzing the various writers, literary schools, and movements that had emerged since the turn of the century. Despite his reserved praise for Mayakovsky's poetry, he lambasted the Formalists for their scholasticism and derisively dismissed Brik's story "Not a Fellow-Traveler" as evidence of the author's total lack of "perspective" on the "vulgar environment" he portrayed.⁴¹

In general, Trotsky's criticisms of Futurism and *Lef* focused on their lack of perspective, distance, and vision. With a deep knowledge of the subject atypical of a Commissar of War, Trotsky charted the development of Futurism, mentioning

40. Even before the formation of *Lef*, Brik and Mayakovsky were ceaselessly attacked for favoring artists of bourgeois descent by advocates of proletarian art, who were first concentrated in Proletkult, and later in its various offshoots, such groups as October, MAPP (The Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers), and VAPP (The All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers). During the years of the Civil War (1918–1921) and in its immediate aftermath, Brik and his allies could openly attack ideas propagating "art by proletarians." With the change of the political climate during the years of NEP (New Economic Policy), they allied themselves with some of the earnest proletarian rhetoric, to which the agreement of cooperation between *Lef* and MAPP, published toward the end of 1923 in the fourth issue of *Lef*, bears witness. This union was directed mainly against "fellow-travelers," non-Communist writers who sympathized with the revolution and who were grouped around the journals *Red Virgin Soil* and *Press and Revolution*.

41. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 138. Brik's story "Ne poputchitsa," in which the plot was structured around an unsolvable conflict between struggle for Communism and everyday life, appeared in the first issue of *Lef*. See *Lef* 1, pp. 109–42.



Page of Ogonek no. 20.
 "The Constructivist School." 1923.

Constructivism and Futurism in the context of their tendency to join forces with trends and movements that were foreign or even hostile to them.⁴² The Commissar here hit the nail on the head: Brik's allies-in-Futurism, whom he invited to cooperate in the journal—the theoreticians Sergei Tret'iakov, Nikolai Chuzhak, and Boris Arvatov—did not share his debt to Saussure; they also had extensive connections either to Proletkult or Marxism and were not as adamant on the absolute dispensability of historical and psychological approaches to art.⁴³ However, they united around *Lef*, drawn by Mayakovsky's leadership and the Futurist rhetoric with its revolutionary pedigree and uncompromising hostility to art of the past.

“*Novyi Lef*”

In 1925, spurred by Trotsky's preemptive strike, the party (then coming increasingly under Stalin's control) accepted a “Resolution on Literature,” for the first time, which established official guidelines for the development of art in Soviet Russia.⁴⁴ The resolution spelled out the party's support for proletarian groups and image-oriented representation based on traditional artistic techniques, that could be easily understood by the masses. This led to a reorientation of the journal: after its closure in 1925, it reemerged two years later under a new title, with photographs gracing the covers of all its issues. They were also prominently displayed inside its pages.⁴⁵

Ever attuned to the slightest change in context, Brik responded to this official sanctioning of imagistic representation by leaving the editorship of *Novyi Lef* (1927–28) to Tret'iakov.⁴⁶ Ostensibly, his exit was prompted by Mayakovsky's

42. “. . . Articles are continually being published on the complete futility and on the counter-revolutionary character of Futurism between covers made by the hand of the Constructivist. In most official editions, Futurist poems are being published side by side with the most destructive summings up of Futurism. The Proletkult . . . is united to Futurists by living cords. . . .” Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, p. 141.

43. Sergei Mikhailovich Tret'iakov (1892–1937)—a Futurist critic, poet, and playwright, a close colleague of Eisenstein at Proletkult. Before moving to Moscow in 1922, Tret'iakov was active as a writer and journalist in the Far East. Nikolai Fedorovich Chuzhak (1876–1937)—an old Bolshevik, journalist, and critic sympathetic to Futurists; Boris Ignatevich Arvatov (1896–1940)—an art historian and critic, active participant in Proletkult. On Tret'iakov and Chuzhak, see Devin Fore, “The Operative Word in Soviet Factography,” *October* 118 (Fall 2006), pp. 95–131; on Arvatov, see Christina Kiaer, “Boris Arvatov's Socialist Objects,” *October* 81 (Summer 1997), pp. 105–18. Tensions between Brik and Chuzhak surfaced even before the first issue came out: Chuzhak vehemently protested the publication of “Not a Fellow-Traveler” because of its unflattering portrayal of Communists and demonstratively quit the journal after the story was published over his objections. See Nikolai Chuzhak, “Vokrug ‘Nepoputchitsy,’ [Around ‘not a fellow-traveler’],” *Lef* 2 (April–May 1923), p. 69. Brik responded to Chuzhak in “Otvét tov. Chuzhaku [Response to Comrade Chuzhak],” *Izvestiia*, April 15, 1923.

44. Nikolai Bukharin, the chief editor of *Pravda* and Stalin's new favorite, was the author of this resolution. A comprehensive summary of the resolution is provided by Leah Dickerman in “The Fact and the Photograph,” p. 136.

45. Dickerman provides a detailed account of negotiations led by Mayakovsky in the State Publishing Company on behalf of *Lef*. See Dickerman, “The Fact and the Photograph,” p. 137.

46. Brik, Rodchenko, Mayakovsky, and the poet Nikolai Aseev quit in 1928 after the seventh issue allegedly to found a new cultural organization Ref (Revolutionary Front of the Arts); see Stephan, pp. 55–56.

resignation from the journal in protest at the marginalization of his poetry by the prosaic “literature of fact,” or “factography,” taken up by *Lef* in opposition to the heroic canon of proletarian literature. Instead of individual heroes, this literature would feature the collective; instead of plots, it would present the unimpeded flow of life. In terms of language, the single authorial voice had to cede the place of honor to the voices of the millions of workers and peasants. Factographic literature was overwhelmed by detail and became indistinguishable from newspaper reporting.⁴⁷

In contrast to Tret'iakov, Brik wrote on factography as a critic, not a practitioner. In addition to explaining the advantages of factual knowledge as opposed to imagined experience, in “To Teach Writers” (1927) he also attempted to examine the reasons for factography’s failure as a literary genre. Having absolved authors of sabotage, he insisted that they simply did not have the skills with which to approach the new subject matter. In his opinion, the inability of writers to produce successful factographic literature was caused, ultimately, by the lack of a suitable context, “conditions in which authors could learn to respond to current tasks.”

It was not literature but photography that became the leading medium in factography, as Leah Dickerman has correctly argued. In contrast to the problems he encountered producing factographic literature, Tret'iakov's photography—an integral part of his factographic practice—flourished.⁴⁸ The suitability of photography to factography was the result of its indexical nature, and while he had no desire to become a professional photographer, Brik was an avid amateur.

Film

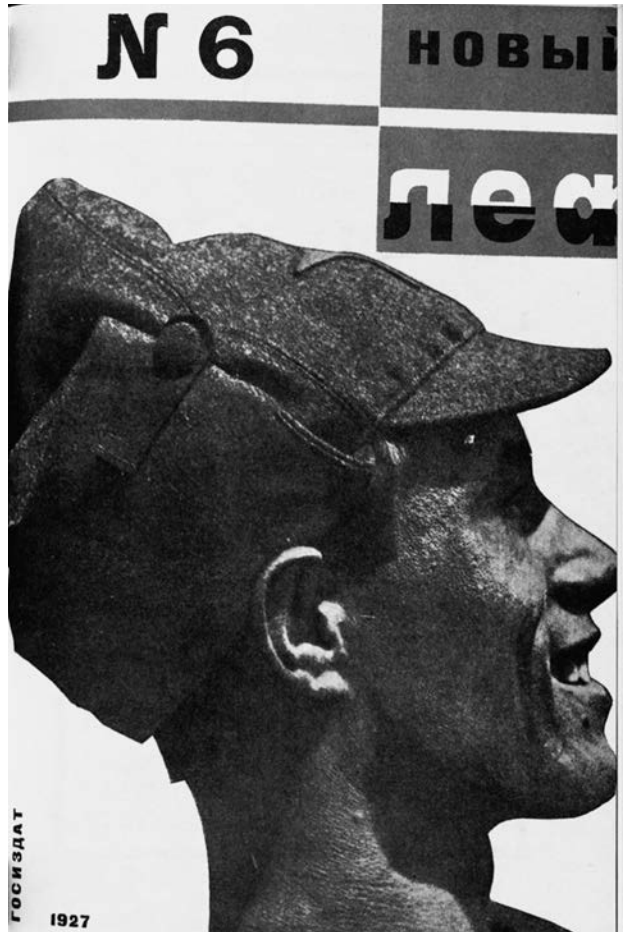
The shift from text to image, sanctioned at the highest echelons of the party, led Brik in 1926 to begin working as a scriptwriter at the film studio Mezhrabpom-Rus', a predecessor of Mezhrabpomfilm. While Brik's articles on photography are well-known, his texts on film have received less attention. This may be because he considered photography to be the foundation of film, and stated so explicitly in “Photo in Film” (1926).⁴⁹ More likely, it is due to what he saw as film's tendency to evade the “fixation of the fact” and create spectacle. Whereas “the task” of a photograph, as he put it, was to “document the new life” and “see and record what the human eye normally does not see,” film, in his opinion, was ideally suited to igniting human passions, including those of the basest kind.⁵⁰ His first article on the

47. See the special issue on Soviet factography in *October* 118 (Fall 2006) edited by Devin Fore, and Fore's “The Operative Word in Soviet Factography,” p. 95.

48. Dickerman, “The Fact and the Photograph,” p. 139. On Tret'iakov, see Maria Gough, “Radical Tourism: Sergei Tret'iakov at the Communist Lighthouse,” *October* 118 (Fall 2006), pp. 159–178. As Gough explained, Tret'iakov took more than two thousand pictures with his Leica when living in the kolkhoz, many of which were published in the Soviet press as photo-essays. On the importance of photo-essays during the Five-Year Plan, also see Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph: 1924–1937* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

49. “Foto v kino,” *Sovetskoe kino* 4/5 (1926), p. 23.

50. “The Photograph versus the Painting,” in *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 215.



Rodchenko. Cover for Novyi Lef no. 6. 1927.

medium, "A Man Beats Another" (1925) was concerned precisely with what he considered to be the inherent perversity of spectatorial pleasure.⁵¹

Brik's subsequent texts on film developed the theme of ethical responsibility, which he linked to communist morality. "A Fact versus an Anecdote" (1925) extols the virtues of documentaries, those by Vertov in particular, while disparaging the indulgence of emotions in fiction films.⁵² Other articles condemn the domination of Soviet screens by foreign films⁵³ and ridicule the stylized and exaggerated emotionalism of traditional acting.⁵⁴ "Against Cinematic Drama (A Private Opinion)" (1925) asserts the priority of communist morality over whatever aesthetic qualities can be found in a work of art by claiming: "Cinematic drama corrupts. Open pornography is a thousand times healthier than erotic understatement in cinematic novels."⁵⁵ However, it abstains somewhat from polemicizing and contains more reflective passages that help explain the author's preference for documentaries.

As its title suggests, the article proposes replacing cinematic drama with documentaries and comedies, because tragedy and drama are, according to the author, essentially literary and cannot be represented visually without demoralizing effects, particularly in film. Brik's statement about the undesirability of visualizing drama is surprising given that drama is normally thought of as a theatrical genre. Brik, of course, was talking about "cinematic drama," whose conditions of representation are different from those in the theater. As Adrian Piotrovsky explained, theater and film differ fundamentally in their representation of space, time, and, "most importantly, a specifically will-filled action."⁵⁶ The "will-filled action" of a living person in the spectator's phenomenological space is the keystone of theater and is lacking in film, which separates the space and time of the actor from those of the spectator and transposes them into the domain of dream, fantasy, and imagination. Evidently, Brik was against this propensity of film to create imaginary, dreamlike experiences that could take spectators away from the practical tasks of the day.

The first piece of film criticism in *Novyi Lef* was by Brik.⁵⁷ Entitled "A

51. "Chelovek b'et cheloveka," *Kino* 27 (September 22, 1925), p. 5.

52. "Fakt protiv anekdota," *Vecherniaia Moskva* (October 14, 1925), p. 3; "Nastezh li?" *Kino* (November 24, 1925), p. 2; "Net i neizvestno," *Kino* (April 6, 1926), p. 3.

53. "Konkurs pod lozungom 'Sovetskaia fil'ma na sovetskom ekrane,'" *Kino* 26 (June 29, 1926), p. 2.

54. "Pissi Puk," *Sovetskii ekran* 17/18 (1926), p. 4.

55. "Protiv kino-dramy (chastnoe mnenie)," *Kino* 32 (October 27, 1925), p. 2.

56. Adrian Piotrovsky, "K istorii kino-zhanrov," in *Poetika kino*, ed. Boris Eikhenbaum (Moscow and Leningrad: Kinopechat, 1927), p. 147. Adrian Ivanovich Piotrovsky (1898–1938) was a well-known translator, philologist, historian, and director of the State Institute of the History of Art.

57. Brik, "Protivokinoiadie," *Novyi Lef* 2 (1927), pp. 27–30. This article was the first critical piece of writing on film in the journal. Immediately preceding it, was Mayakovsky's satirical description of his attempts to overcome the bureaucracy of a Moscow film studio and the publication of one of his scripts, see Mayakovsky, "Karaul [Help]" and "Kak pozhivaete [How do you do]," *Novyi Lef* 2 (1927), pp. 23–27. Mayakovsky's writing was satirical, not critical in nature. Also, Sergei Tret'iakov discussed documentary film positively, if briefly, in his "B'em trevogu [The state of alarm]," in the same issue, which explained the political strategy of the journal. See *Novyi Lef* 2 (1927), pp. 1–5. The first of Mayakovsky's articles was commented upon and translated in Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of Russian and Soviet Film* (1960; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 227–30. *Lef* no. 3 had articles by Vertov and Eisenstein.

Cinematic Antidote” (1927), it reiterated an argument from his earlier writings about the indiscriminate exhibition of films that promote bourgeois ideology foreign to the interests of the Soviet people. This time, Brik invoked Lenin’s authority in arguing his case. Referring to Lenin’s praise of cinema as “one of the most important arts,” Brik insisted that the meaning of these words had been distorted by “Nepmen” mentality: “Lenin’s entire cultural program indicates that his first concern was bringing forth in the masses the correct, real attitude to actuality. Speaking about cinema, he meant that this technical apparatus can transmit the most necessary facts of the present day in a very short time and to a maximum number of people.” Instead, lamented Brik, the Soviet movie-going public preferred the passive emotionalism of decadent bourgeois films to educationally valuable material based on the factual representation of reality.

The article opposed the fiction-based “play” or narrative (*igrovoi*) film to the documentary “unplayed” (*neigrovoi*) one, and this dichotomy was taken up in a number of critical reviews of recent films by Shklovsky, Tret’iakov, and Viktor Pertsov as well as in a discussion published in the last issue of *Novyi Lef* in 1927.⁵⁸ Shklovsky did not distinguish between narrative and documentary films, insisting that the line separating the two was blurry and that elements from the latter were frequently used in the former for either informational purposes or to convey authenticity, while some parts of documentaries were clearly staged.⁵⁹ Tret’iakov wanted to maintain the distinction. He defended the merits of both “unplayed” documentaries by Esfir’ Shub and ideologically correct, albeit “play,” films by Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin. He objected to the exclusive focus on documentary films and insisted on the validity of an “agitational” Eisenstein along with an “informational” Vertov.⁶⁰

Brik, meanwhile, changed his mind about filming truth. The year 1927 saw Stalin’s resounding defeat of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, and during that year’s discussion of film in *Novyi Lef*, Brik explicitly stated that “filming the truth” [*snimat’ pravdu*] was not the aim of *Lef* as he envisioned it, if this truth was out of line with

58. “Lef i kino: stenogramma soveshchaniia [*Lef* and film: report from a meeting],” *Novyi Lef* 11–12 (1927), pp. 50–70. This material was translated into English by Diana Matias in Ben Brewster’s “Documents from *Novyi Lef*” in *Screen Reader 1: Cinema, Ideology, Politics*, pp. 305–11.

59. Shklovsky praised Eisenstein for his proclivity for the “play film,” Esfir’ Shub for “the authenticity” (*podlinnost’*) of her films, and Pudovkin for the quality of his montage. See his “Sergei Eisenstein i neigrovaia fil’ma [Sergei Eisenstein and unplayed film],” *Novyi Lef*, 4 (1927), pp. 34–35, translated in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896–1939*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, Harvard Film Studies (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 161–62; “Po povodu kartiny Esfir’ Shub (Velikii Put’) [About a picture by Esfir’ Shub (Velikii Put’)],” *Novyi Lef* 8–9 (1927), pp. 52–54; “Oshibki i izobreteniiia [Mistakes and inventions],” *Novyi Lef* 11–12 (1927), pp. 29–33.

60. Unlike Brik, Sergei Tret’iakov stressed the importance of evoking emotion in a viewer, albeit not through titillating subjects, but through the expert filming of historical material. In order to classify films based on fiction versus documentaries, Tret’iakov proposed a complicated system of the “gradation of falsification of the material,” according to which Vertov (strangely) would represent the tendency for its least distortion; Eisenstein would be in the middle, because of his use of actors for historical figures and his staging of historical events. The extreme would be a conventional fictional film, which used professional actors and was adapted from a literary work. Tret’iakov, “Kino k iubileiu,” *Novyi Lef* 10 (1927), pp. 27–31. Translated in *Screen Reader 1*, pp. 305–08.



Кадры из фильма „Падение династии Романовых“, работа Э. И. Шуб

*Esfir' Shub. Film stills from
The Fall of the Romanov
Dynasty. Illustration for
Novyi Lef no. 4. 1927.*

accepted ideology. Now he considered that the important question was not “how to film,” as he had argued a year earlier in “Photo in Film,” but “what to film,” and “what aim to pursue when filming.” At the same time, he concurred with Tret'iakov about the importance of changing public taste—of educating people to like documentaries and to experience the excitement of “real facts and not inventions”—and he insisted this was one of *Lef's* tasks. Brik juxtaposed the films of Iakov Protazanov to those by Shub,⁶¹ praising the latter's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) as a high-quality film created entirely out of documentary footage made legible by montage.⁶²

61. Iakov Aleksandrovich Protazanov (1881–1945) was a film director in pre-revolutionary Russia who fled the country during the Civil War and returned during NEP to continue making sentimental cinematic dramas as well as such films as *Aelita* and *The 47*.

62. “Lef i kino: stenogramma soveshchaniia [*Lef* and film: report from a meeting],” *Novyi Lef* 11–12 (1927), pp. 63–66; see also “Victory of Fact,” *Kino* 14 (April 5, 1927).

Brik, of course, was one of the first critics in Russia to support montage in photography. However, his reluctance to acknowledge a nonideological role for “the interval” within cinematic montage led him in 1927 to a confrontation with Vertov over the latter’s *The Eleventh Year* (1928).⁶³ Brik faulted the film not for Mikhail Kaufman’s camera-work, which was “brilliantly done,” but rather for what he considered to be the centrifugal effects of the montage. In his first published manifesto, Vertov identified filmic intervals as “elements of the art of movement,” which govern “transitions from one movement to another” and “draw the movement to a synthetic resolution.”⁶⁴ As Annette Michelson demonstrated in her comparative study of the Theory of the Interval’s sources for Soviet film, Eisenstein’s model was music, whereas Vertov’s was mathematics—although both, like so many artists of the time, proclaimed their debt to Einstein’s theory of relativity.⁶⁵ Brik, however, disapproved of the way Vertov’s use of montage and intervals granted semantic independence to individual pieces of footage, thereby exempting them from the ideological message of the script. If in 1926 Brik had praised Vertov unreservedly for his experiments with the medium of film,⁶⁶ by 1928, the first year of Stalin’s unimpeded reign and his all-embracing industrial offensive known as the First Five-Year Plan, Brik was faulting Vertov’s films for their lack of ideological consistency.⁶⁷

Five years after launching *Lef*, Brik’s tendency to overvalue context at the expense of text found its ultimate expression in “Against ‘Creative’ Personality” (1928), where, speaking of literature, Brik used the example of photography to argue for the necessity of submitting to the ideology of the collective rather than dwelling on the development of an artist’s or a writer’s “creative individuality.”⁶⁸ This article summarized Brik’s attitude toward individual creativity and it completely reversed his pre-revolutionary perspective as outlined in the “Democratization of Art.” Although he had begun as an ardent supporter of the avant-garde’s self-determination, he now renounced his commitment to the freedom of art and ultimately advocated its service on behalf of a totalitarian state.

63. Brik’s article criticizing *The Eleventh Year* and Vertov’s response are documented in *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, ed. Yuri Tsivian (Sacile/Pordenone: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), pp. 310–17.

64. “We: Variant of a Manifesto,” in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 8.

65. Annette Michelson, “The Wings of Hypothesis: On Montage and the Theory of the Interval,” in *Montage and Modern Life: 1919–1942*, ed. Matthew Teitelbaum (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 61–81; p. 80.

66. See “There is Nothing and No One Knows about It,” *Kino* 14 (1926).

67. It is interesting to note that Aleksei Gan (1885, 1889, or 1893–1940), Vertov’s former friend and an editor of *Kino-Fot* (where Vertov published his first manifestoes), defended Constructivism in film even in 1928. Without mentioning Vertov, Gan extolled cinema as “an optical and mechanical apparatus,” able to show movement and thereby “capture immediately and dynamically the processes of all kinds of work and activity in society.” See Gan, “Constructivism in the Cinema” (1928), in *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), pp. 129–32. I am grateful to Kristin Romberg for consulting me about the bibliography on Gan.

68. “Protiv tvorcheskoi lichnosti,” *Novyi Lef* 2 (1928), pp. 12–14, reprinted in *Literature of Fact [Literatura fakta: Pervyi sbornik materialov rabotnikov Lefa]*, ed. N. Chuzhak (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1929), pp. 75–76.