

Translated, edited and introduced by Richard Sherwood

Of the numerous literary journals taking part in the cultural battle that raged in the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1932 *LEF* was the most exciting and most controversial. From one literary camp to the next polemics on the nature of the new art needed for the new society were carried on in an atmosphere that frequently involved personal attacks, bombastic self-aggrandisement, and preposterous claims to a monopoly of Communist culture. This type of literary campaigning was not new for the Futurists. To establish their presence on the literary scene their earliest pre-war publications and manifestoes had been designed to shock established literary and social conventions, as in the famous lines of the manifesto 'A Slap in the Face of Public Taste' (1912):

Only we are the face of our Times. The horn of time is sounded by us in literary art. The past is cramped. The Academy and Pushkin are less comprehensible than hieroglyphs. Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc, etc, from the steamer of modernity.

One of the features of early Futurism was the use of 'trans-sense' language – a semi-comprehensible collation of nonsense-words and neologisms – a play on words, their roots and suffixes. The Revolution forced all artists to reappraise their aesthetic aims. The early Futurists, and Mayakovsky in particular, had foreseen that new demands would need to be met, and for the first time Futurism underwent a profound change. The Futurists were the only art group to cooperate wholeheartedly with the new regime, though for the Party this was regarded very much as a matter of convenience until the chaotic period of the Civil War ended, and more attention could be given to Party policy in the arts.

On March 15, 1918, the Futurists issued the *Futurists' Paper No. 1* from the 'Poets' Cafe'. It continued the attacks on old art, and demanded the separation of art from the state, the abolition of titles, ranks, diplomas, etc, artists' control of all art schools, galleries, theatres, etc, universal art education, and the requisitioning and fair redistribution of all 'aesthetic stockpiles'. David Burlyuk Vasilii Kamensky and Mayakovsky announced 'The 3rd Revolution – the Revolution of the Spirit'. Futurist aims were still idealistic, lyrical, and partially utopian. Burluik called for equitable distribution of art studios among all the various arts tendencies to promote free competition between them.

The tone changed significantly in the paper *Art of the Commune* (19 issues, December 1918 to April 1919), the first of the three

successive post-Revolutionary Futurist journals. The editor was Osip Brik. This paper was 'officially the organ of the Section of Fine Arts (IZO) of the Narkompros, and was therefore published by the authority of A. V. Lunacharsky, the first Soviet Commissar for Education. As no other body of artists was yet willing to cooperate with the Party (the 'proletarian writers' were not yet sufficiently organised) the Futurists managed to secure control of leading positions within IZO (along with other 'left' artists), and for a short time Futurism became the *de facto* Party-supported art tendency. The 'old knights' of Futurism, as Chuzhak called them – the poets Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Kamensky, were replaced in the vanguard of Futurism by new men, principally the art theorists Osip Brik, Nikolai Punin, Boris Kushner. Artists Kasimir Malevich and Ivan Puni, the leading Formalist theoretician Viktor Shklovsky, and the artist head of the Petrograd IZO Natan Altman also made valuable contributions to the paper. Mayakovsky remained as leader of the new-found movement, but his very first Futurist friend, the artist David Burlyuk, had emigrated in 1918, and the other two Burlyuk brothers, also artists, had been killed in the War. The 'Ego-Futurists' – Igor Severyanin, Vadim Shershenevich and others – after a brief period of cooperation with the main group of 'Cubo-Futurists', split away from them through aesthetic differences of opinion.

For a few hectic months the new Futurists trumpeted their claims on Soviet art. 'Old art' continued to be attacked. The man-made object became a cult – the physical presence of material things, whether made by artists or factory workers, was held to more valuable than any 'idea' behind them. 'Embellishment' was to be replaced by participation in production processes, imitation of natural objects by creation of man-made objects. Art was to be 'organised', instead of the destructive 'bomb-throwing' of early Futurism, as Punin put it. The Futurists claimed to represent the proletariat (they thought it axiomatic that Futurism should be the art counterpart of the social revolution), and called on the political controllers of the Narkompros, for example, to exclude from the Literary Arts Section all writers not of a 'left art' tendency, ie they demanded official adoption. Brik explained that proletarian art was not 'art for the proletariat', or 'art of the proletariat', but 'art created by an artist with talent and a proletariat consciousness'. Kushner led the Com-Fut organisation, founded in January 1919, which attempted to fuse Communism and Futurism into a single way of life. At this stage the Futurists still emphasised the importance of the artist's skill, defended art that was 'not intelligible to the masses', and still talked of the 'creation' of art objects. The idea of 'collective creation' was formed, ie that the individual artists should be thought of as expressing the feeling of the collective through an intuitive consciousness of the collective will. This notion was the

genesis of the later theory of the 'social command' in art.

There were certain conflicting views within *Art of the Commune*, for example Punin hopefully called for the distinction between 'left' and 'right' artists to be abolished, so that the artist's sole criterion should be his talent, while at the same time calls were being made for a 'left art' dictatorship in Soviet culture; and while claiming that Futurism was proletarian art Punin hinted that true art could always only be led by an avant-garde elite. Malevich's Suprematist theories of pure form and colour co-existed with Tatlin's preference for texture and relief in art objects.

The period of *Art of the Commune* was one of real influence and power in Soviet art for the Futurists, but one that found them rather uncertain and sometimes divided about the future trend of Futurism. The attacks on old art, on Symbolism and classical realist art, Shklovsky's and Brik's Formalist/Futurist ideas, the theoretical justification of the early Futurist experiments as necessary groundwork for the future and the defence of the 'difficulty' of Futurist art: all these were distasteful to the proletariat, to the old bourgeoisie, and to the party leaders, including Lenin, whose tastes in art were generally very conservative. But certain ideas in *Art of the Commune* pointed the way to a further adaptation of Futurism to suit the changing social conditions, Mayakovsky stated in the poem 'Poet worker':

'I also am a factory, And if I have no chimneys then perhaps it is harder for me. Who is higher – the poet or technician, who leads the people to material benefit? Both – their hearts are similar motors, their souls the same cunning engine. We are equal'.

Brik anticipated production art as early as December 1918:

'Go to the factories, this is the only task for artists. Creation of beauty is necessary not only for exhibitions and private mansions, but it must be brought into production . . . Artists must become producers. We must think less about beauty and create real things'.

Kushner said that 'art is simply work, expertise, a profession, a craft'.

Vs. Dmitriev took the most extreme view at the time, and declared:

'Art, painting as it was previously understood, is now giving way to *craft*. . . . Craft – the manufacture of furniture, utensils, signs, clothes – as basic creation in life, is becoming the foundation for new inspiration, is becoming the basis and meaning of art. . . . The artist is now simply a constructor and technician, a leader and foreman. . . . In this *craft* which we are going over to we need a refined knowledge of materials, stubborn experience, we must get used to stone, wood, metal, we must have a faultless, exact eye, and a muscular arm'. (March 1919).

' in the " creation of life " and the production of new things art cannot be in any way useful . . . it contradicts the general, indubitable principle of *utility* in modern production, for aesthetics does not lead life but trails along in its wake . . . the construction of a thing is *totally* dependent on its *intended purpose*, artists can only add to it something superfluous from this point of view, for everything that is good in it is made without the artist's aid . . . the unity of the principle of construction, utility, will create beauty, and beauty will create us as artists. All modern things are therefore beautiful and good, because the combination of their parts, the necessity of each part, is dictated solely by usefulness, and the more basically this principle is applied, the better the thing will be '. (January 1919).

Significantly it was a practising artist who predicted most exactly the shape of things to come. Punin rather sadly concluded that the artist would be left with only petty applied art such as designing trade-marks. In the last issue of *Art of the Commune* Punin correctly predicted the trend to the eventual anti-art movement of production art, and the tendency to liquidate art altogether as a separate discipline.

Futurism had now passed from the early ' embellishment of life ' theory to advocacy of art in productional processes, and the notion of the artist as a constructor of materials had now been raised.

Art of the Commune was closed by the Narkompros after numerous attacks on the Futurists' strident demands for art dictatorship. Mayakovsky's poem ' It is too early to rejoice ' (No 2 December 1918) had, if taken literally, called for the physical destruction of old art (*And does Tsar Alexander still stand on Uprising Square? Dynamite it! . . . Why has Pushkin not been attacked, along with the other generals of the classics?*). With this poem, and a following one in the next issue, in mind, Lunacharsky wrote the article ' A Spoonful of Antidote ' in issue No 4 (December 1918), condemning the destructive bent towards past art of some of the Futurists, stressing that the Narkompros must be impartial to all art groups, and rejecting Futurist demands to be acknowledged as the official State Art school. Even Lunacharsky, liberal and tolerant though he was, could not condone the militant exclusiveness and dogmatism of the new Futurist platform.

A small booklet of Futurist-inspired articles called *Art in Production* (published by the Art-Productional Council of the Section of Fine Arts of the Narkompros, 1921) developed the theory of bringing art into production, but retained also the early Futurist ' transformationalist ' ideas of transforming life itself through art. The term ' production-art ' was now firmly established.

The first years of Lenin's New Economic Policy, from 1921, were

a bitter disappointment to the left artists. NEP was regarded as a betrayal of the social revolution, and attacks were also made on the 'NEPmen' in art – the traditional writers from the intelligentsia whom Trotsky called the 'fellow-travellers'.

In the atmosphere of considerable artistic freedom and relaxed social conditions Mayakovsky attempted to galvanise left artists into concerted action to maintain the momentum of the new art. Futurists had lost their domination of Russian art, and new groups were now contesting for influence (ironically summarised in the manifesto 'What is Lef fighting for?')

Mayakovsky described *Lef* in his autobiography 'I Myself' thus:

1923. We organise *Lef*. *Lef* is the envelopment of a great social theme by all the weapons of Futurism. This definition does not exhaust the matter of course – I refer those interested to *Lef* itself. Those who united closely together: Brik, Aseev, Kushner, Arvatov, Tretyakov, Rodchenko, Lavinsky. . . . One of the slogans, one of the great achievements of *Lef* – the de-aesthetisation of the productional arts, constructivism. A poetic supplement: agit-art and economic agitation: the advertisement.

Mayakovsky adds that he considered the latter type of work 'poetry of the highest quality'.

The editorial office of *Lef* was the 2nd floor Moscow flat of Osip and Lily Brik, to which people were constantly coming and going, and where lengthy discussions were frequently conducted. The piano was both played and used as a flat surface for drawing. Mayakovsky also often drew placards there on the bare floor.

Lef stands for 'Left Front of the Arts'. But who were the 'left' artists exactly? The 'we' of the *Lef* collective editorial board contained several new adherents. Arvatov was a theorist and critic, who, with Brik, supplied the theoretical reasoning behind the Constructivists. Aseev was a poet very close to Mayakovsky, who also made experiments in prose. Chuzhak and Tretyakov supplied the 'heavy' theoretical reasoning behind *Lef's* programme, and Chuzhak in particular stressed the importance of Marxist dialectics in the theory of contemporary art. He resigned from the editorial board after issue No. 3, dissatisfied with the persistence of the old Futurists' influence within the journal, and with the lack of emphasis on Marxist political thought by Futurist art and art theory. Tretyakov was also a poet and dramatist, and experimented with new forms such as the 'travel-film'. Aseev, Chuzhak and Tretyakov had come from the Far East, where Futurist propaganda had been carried on simultaneously with the campaign in Russia. Brik and Kushner survived from *Art of the Commune*. Kushner played a lesser role now but Brik was as always one of the most active organisers behind the scenes; his own literary output was limited, his contribution in *Lef* being experimental prose and the theory of Constructivism, but one of

his most important roles was to be a link between Futurism and the Russian Formalist school. The Formalists contributed to *Lef* from time to time, chiefly Viktor Shklovsky with valuable studies of Babel' and Pilnyak, and a theoretical article on the novel, and the linguist Formalist Grigorii Vinokur, giving several studies of Futurists and language. Yuri Tynyanov also published an important article on the development of Formalist theory: 'On the Literary Fact'. Issue No 5 of *Lef* was chiefly composed of Formalist articles on Lenin and language (shortly after Lenin's death) by Shklovsky, Tynyanov, Boris Eikhenbaum, Lev Yakubinsky, V. Kazansky and Boris Tomashevsky.

The other major group participating in *Lef* were the Constructivists. Constructivism was started as a conscious movement in 1920, its origins being the 'art in production' theories of *Art of the Commune*, and the Cubo-Futurist style of painting from which emerged the three-dimensional abstract sculptures of Tatlin and Rodchenko. The latter designed all the covers of *Lef*, with bold square lettering in two colours, that of No 2 being one of the first experiments in photo-montage – one minor aspect of Constructivist activity. Rodchenko worked with Mayakovsky directly from 1923 on placards, agit-posters, and designs for Mayakovsky's books and stage productions. Lavinsky contributed practical designs, and Lyubov Popova. Varvara Stepanova (Rodchenko's wife), as well as Rodchenko himself published designs for textiles as one of the spheres of production in which the artist could usefully take part. Stepanova and Popova, and Tatlin too, actually went to work in textile factories to put production-art theory into practice. The three Vesnin brothers printed their Constructivist architectural designs. The terms 'production-art' and 'Constructivism' were now used interchangeably.

Some of the original Futurist poets contributed; Khlebnikov, Kruchënykh, Kamensky (whose 'The Juggler' helped stir up opposition to *Lef* from hostile critics in other camps), and Mayakovsky himself printed the important poem 'About That' in issue No 1. Mayakovsky also drafted the manifestoes in No 1 (published collectively) and most of the other editorial material. The survival in *Lef* of the experimental poets was one of the factors causing constant disputes within the journal. The new 'production artists' considered that it was time for the 'trans-sense' period of Futurist verse to be quietly consigned to the archives.

Other notable occasional contributors were rather outside the scope of the 'left front': Pasternak, who had been connected with the Futurists from their very early days, Babel (extracts from *Red Cavalry* appeared before publication of the book) and the prose of Artem Veseluy. Finally there was an article each from film directors Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov on the theory of the 'montage of attractions' and 'eccentrism', and the 'cinema-eye', each of which has substantial connections with the theory of left art.

The 'Left Front of the Arts' was therefore a rather heterogeneous grouping of artists in many fields who felt that the new art spread over and blurred the old dividing lines of art. The term 'left artist' could only be defined roughly as an artist influenced by Futurist, Formalist or Constructivist theories on art, ie a general hostility to imitation of life, in favour of 'creation' or 'construction' of life; hostility to realism in art, or a tendency to utilitarianism; rejection of '*belles-lettres*' in literature, of 'pure' or 'easel-art' in painting, and of 'applied art' (in the sense of art 'applied' to a ready-made object). The term 'left' artist does not, of course, imply any specific political allegiance on the artists' part. The range of theories, too numerous to discuss in detail, went from the 'trans-sense' poetic experimentation of some of the Futurists, supported by a part of Formalist theory, all of which was impatiently dismissed by the most rapidly evolving section of Constructivists as 'laboratory work', to the 'production art' theory of these same Constructivists, that was already not only an anti-aesthetic tendency, but one leading rapidly to an anti-art programme. As Shklovsky later said: *Oftentimes, in destroying ornamentation, we also destroyed the construction.* This latter tendency had already dismissed the terms 'creation' and 'inspiration' (still used in *Art of the Commune*) for 'production' and 'technical expertise'. The 'creation of life' now became 'construction of life', and the efficiency of the machine was to be the ideal standard for human production (by artists). In short, the 'art in production' of 1921 had now become simply art *as* production. The making of an art 'thing' was to be of the same nature as the manufacture of a pair of shoes or a motor-car. Organisation or 'Taylorisation' of art meant that the only justification left for the existence of the artist would be his traditional feeling for the possibilities of his materials, organised into forms according to a utilitarian principle. This would be his only advantage over the factory specialist-engineer.

The literary Constructivists, headed by Zelinsky and Selvinsky, published a manifesto in the last issue of *Lef* in which they extended the theory to the realm of literature, adding to it the principle of 'loadification' of the literary language.

LEF ceased publication with the single issue of 1925. The number of copies of the journal printed declined from 5,000 to 1,500 for the last issue. In his autobiography for 1924 Mayakovsky claimed that in spite of falling printing figures the activity of *Lef* was still increasing. He claimed that the figures showed *just the usual bureaucratic lack of interest in the separate journals of the large and cold-blooded mechanism of GIZ* (State Publishing House). But the fact was that *Lef's* programme was just not popular with the public (the old accusation of 'unintelligibility to the masses' was still being flung at the Futurists) who still preferred the literature of the 'fellow-travellers'. After high initial hopes *Lef*, with all

its internal contradictions and under pressure from elsewhere, seemed to exhaust for the time being the evolution of left art, and publication was terminated by the State Publishing House.

Mayakovsky revived the journal in 1927 under the title *New Lef*, which was, he said, to be 'left of *Lef*'. 24 monthly issues were published until the end of 1928, but Mayakovsky, for rather mysterious reasons (probably a disillusionment with the relentless continuing anti-art trend of left art) resigned the editorship to Tretyakov in July 1928. *New Lef* took production art to its logical limit. A new emphasis on the 'fact' as the sole valid material for literature, and on the writer as the craftsman of language, just like a craftsman in any form of industrial activity, became almost the sole theme of this latest evolution of Futurism. Art genres now considered most worthy were those comprising 'factography', ie the newspaper report, the diary, the travel-sketch, the documentary film, etc. This *Literature of Fact* was collated in a book of that title (made of articles drawn mostly from *New Lef*) published in 1929 under the editorship of Chuzhak.

Futurism had therefore passed through a whole revolution in outlook, from the original 'art for art' view of the earliest experimental verse, through 'art in production', utilitarian or 'production' art and Constructivism, and on to mere reportage or 'literature of fact'. As an art movement Futurism had destroyed itself, partly in a voluntary attempt to change with the changing times, and partly through public and Party hostility or indifference. In 1930 Mayakovsky committed suicide and in 1932 all writers were forced to join the single Union of Soviet Writers, and all previous groupings were abolished. The articles in *Lef* show us left art theory and practice somewhere rather past the middle stage of its evolution.

R.S.

What is *Lef* Fighting For? (Manifesto),

Vol I *Lef*, Vol I pp 3-7

1905. Then reaction. Reaction set in with the autocracy and redoubled oppression of the merchant and factory-owner. Reaction created art, life – its own image and taste. The art of the Symbolists (Bely, Balmont), of the Mystics (Chulkov, Gippius) and of the sexual psychopaths (Rozanov) – the art of the petty bourgeois and philistines. *The revolutionary parties waged war on reality, art rose up to wage war on taste.* The first impressionistic outburst – in 1909 (the collection 'The Fishpond of Judges').

The outburst was fanned for three years.

It was fanned into Futurism. The first book of the union of Futurists – 'A Slap in the Face of Public Taste' (1914 – Burlyuk D., Kamensky, Kruchënykh, Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov). The old order correctly assessed the experimental work of the future dynamiters.

The Futurists were answered with castigations of censure,

prohibition of expression of views, with the *barking and howling* of all the press. Capitalists, of course, never patronised our whip-lines, our splinter-strokes.

Surrounding diocesan life made the Futurists jeer with their yellow shirts and painted faces.

These scarcely 'academic' devices of the struggle, a presentiment of our subsequent range, immediately scared off the adhering aesthetisers (Kandinsky, Knave of Diamonds group and others). So, whoever had nothing to lose tagged on to Futurism, or draped themselves with its name (Shershenevich, Igor Severyanin, the Ass's Tail and others). The Futurist movement, led by people in art, who scarcely understood politics, was sometimes also painted with the colours of anarchy.

Alongside people of the future went those trying to look young, screening their aesthetic putrefaction with the left flag.

The 1914 war was the first test of our social spirit.

Russian Futurists once and for all broke with the poetic imperialism of Marinetti, having already whistled at him earlier during his visit to Moscow (1913).

The Futurists, first and alone in Russian art, smothering the clanking of the poets of war (Gorodetsky, Gumilev and others), *execrated war*, fought against it with all the weapons of art (Mayakovsky's 'War and the Universe'). War set off the Futurist purge (the 'Mezzanine' poets broke away, Severyanin went to Berlin).

War forced us to see the future revolution ('The Cloud in Trousers'). The February revolution deepened the purge, split Futurism into 'right' and 'left'.

The rights became echoes of democratic fascinations (their names are in 'Fashionable Moscow').

The lefts, waiting for October, were christened the 'bolsheviks of art' (Mayakovsky, Kamensky, Burlyuk, Kruchënykh).

Joining this Futurist group were the first production-Futurists (Brik, Arvatov), and the Constructivists (Rodchenko, Lavinsky).

The Futurists from the very outset, even while still in the Kshesinsky Palace, *tried to come to an understanding with groups of worker-writers* (the future Proletkult), but these writers thought, looking around at things, that revolutionary spirit is totally encompassed by agitational content alone, and in the realm of organisation remained complete reactionaries, quite unable to weld themselves together. *October purged*, shaped, reorganised. *Futurism* became the left front of art. We became 'We'.

October taught us through work.

Already on October 25 we set to work.

It was obvious – at the sight of five members of the hot-footed intelligentsia they didn't ask us much about our aesthetic beliefs. We created, at that time revolutionary, 'IZO', 'TEO', 'MUZO'; we led participants in the storming of the academy. Together with

the organisational work *we gave* the first things of art of the October era (Tatlin – Monument to the 3rd International, ‘Mystery-Bouffe’ staged by Meyerhold, Kamensky’s ‘Stenka Razin’). We did not aesthetise, making things for self-admiration. We applied acquired skills for agitational-art work demanded by the revolution (placards for RosTA, newspaper feuilletons etc).

In order to propagate our ideas by agitation we organised the paper ‘Art of the Commune’ and a tour of factories and workshops with discussions and readings of our things.

Our ideas gained a workers’ audience. The Vyborg region organised the Com-Fut. The impetus of our art showed our strength of organisation of fortresses of the left front throughout the whole RSFSR. Parallel to this was the work of our Far-Eastern comrades (the journal ‘Creation’), who asserted theoretically the social necessity of our movement, our social unity with October (Chuzhak, Aseev, Palmov, Tretyakov). ‘Creation’, after undergoing all sorts of persecutions, took upon itself the whole struggle for the new culture in the confines of the Far Eastern Republic and in Siberia. Gradually becoming disillusioned in their belief in the nine-day wonder existence of Soviet power the academics, singly and in bunches, began to knock at the doors of the Narkompros.

Not risking using them in responsible work Soviet power gave them, or, more exactly, their European names, the cultural and educational backwaters. From these backwaters began the baiting of left art, which culminated brilliantly in the closure of ‘Art of the Commune’ etc.

The authorities, busy with the war fronts and devastation, hardly enquired into aesthetic disputes, trying simply to keep the rear from making too much noise, and to make us see reason out of respect for the ‘most eminent’. Now there is a respite from war and hunger. *Let is obliged to demonstrate* the panorama of art of the RSFSR, to set perspectives and to occupy our rightful place.

Art of the RSFSR on February 1, 1923:

(1) Prolet-art. One part has degenerated into trite writers, wearying you with their bureaucratic language and repetition of their political ABC. Another part fell under the total influence of academism, reminding you of October only by the names of their organisation. The third and best part, leaving behind the rose-coloured Belys, is re-learning with our things as guides, and, we believe, will go further with us.

(2) Official literature. In the theory of art each has his own personal opinion: Osinsky praises Akhmatova, Bukharin – Pinkerton. In practice they simply deck out the magazines with all the names in circulation.

(3) The ‘latest’ literature (the Serapions, Pilnyak and so on), having mastered and diluted our devices, lard them with the Sym-

bolists and respectfully and ponderously adapt them to facile NEP-reading. 35

(4) Change of landmarks. From the West the invasion of the enlightened venerables is drawing nigh. Alexei Tolstoy is already polishing up the white horse of the complete collection of his works ready for his triumphant entry into Moscow.

(5) And finally, violating the blessedly sedate perspective – in various corners the *individual 'lefts'*. People and organisations (INKHUK, VKHUTEMAS, GITIS of Meyerhold, OPOYAZ and others). Some strive heroically on their own to raise up over-weighty virgin soil, others with their file-sharp lines still sever the shackles of antiquation. *Lef must collect together the forces of the left. Lef must review its ranks, rejecting the surperfluous past. Lef must unite a front for the explosion of antiquity, for the fight for the embracement of the new culture.*

We shall resolve the problems of art not by the majority of voices of the mythical left front, which has existed up to now only as an idea, but by deed by the energy of our enterprising group, which year after year has been leading the work of the lefts and guiding it ideologically all the time. The Revolution taught us a lot.

Lef knows:

Lef will:

In working for the strengthening of the victories of the October Revolution, while reinforcing left art. *Lef will agitate art with the ideas of the commune, opening up for art the road to tomorrow. Lef will agitate the masses with our art, acquiring organised strength in them. Lef will support our theories with active art, raising it to the highest working skill.*

Lef will fight for the art-construction of life. We do not lay claim to a monopolisation of revolutionism in art. We shall find things out by competition. We believe that: by the correctness of our agitation, by the strength of the things we make, we shall prove: we are on the correct road to the future.

N. Aseev, B. Arvatov, O. Brik, B. Kushner, V. Mayakovsky, S. Tretyakov, N. Chuzhak.

Whom is Lef alerting? (Manifesto)

Lef, Vol I pp 10-11.

This is addressed to us. *Comrades in Lef!*

We know that we, the 'left' master-craftsmen, are the best workers in today's art. Up to the Revolution we piled up highly correct draft-plans, clever theorems and cunning formulae, for the forms of the new art.

One thing is clear: the slippery, globular belly of the bourgeoisie was a bad site for building.

During the Revolution we amassed a great many truths, we studied life, we received the task of building a very real structure

36 for the centuries ahead.

A world shaken by the booming of war and revolution is difficult soil for grandiose constructions.

We temporarily filed away our formulae, while helping to consolidate the days of revolution.

Now the globe of the bourgeois paunch exists no longer. Sweeping away the old with the revolution we cleared the field for the new structures of art at the same time. The earthquake is over. Cemented by spilt blood the USSR stands firmly.

It is time to start *big things*, *The seriousness of our attitude to ourselves is the one solid foundation for our work.*

Futurists!

Your services to art are great; but don't dream of living on the dividend of yesterday's revolutionary spirit. Show by your work today that your outburst is not the desperate wailing of the wounded intelligentsia, but a struggle, labouring shoulder to shoulder with all those who are straining towards the victory of the commune.

Constructivists!

Be on your guard against becoming just another aesthetic school. Constructivism in art alone is nothing. It is a question of the very existence of art. Constructivism must become the supreme formal engineering of the whole of life. Constructivism in a performance of shepherd pastorals is nonsense. Our ideas must be developed on the basis of present-day things.

Production artists!

Be on your guard against becoming applied-artist handicraftsmen.

In teaching the workers learn from the worker. In dictating aesthetic orders to the factory from your studios you become simply customers.

Your school is the factory floor.

Formalists!

The formal method is the key to the study of art. Every flea of a rhyme must be accounted for. But avoid catching fleas in a vacuum. Only together with the sociological study of art will your work become not only interesting, but necessary.

Students!

Avoid giving out the chance distortions of the dilettante striving for innovation, for the 'dernier cri' of art. The innovation of the dilettante is a steamship on the legs of a chicken.

Only in craftsmanship have you the right to throw out the old.

Everyone together!

As you go from theory to practice remember your craftsmanship, your technical skill.

Hackwork on the part of the young who have the strength for colossal things, is even more repulsive than the hackwork of the flabby little academics.

Master and students of 'Lef'!

The question of our very existence is being decided. The very greatest idea will perish if we do not mould it skilfully.

The most skilful forms will remain black threads in blackest night, will evoke merely the annoyance and irritation of those who stumble over them if we do not apply them to the shaping of the present day, the day of revolution.

Lef is on guard.

Lef is the defender for all inventors.

Lef is on guard.

Lef will throw off all the old fuddy-duddies, all the ultra-aesthetes, all the copiers.

Lef

Into Production!

Lef, Vol I pp 105, 108.

Rodchenko was an abstract artist. He has become a Constructivist and production artist. Not just in name, but in practice.

There are artists who have rapidly adopted the fashionable jargon of Constructivism. Instead of 'composition' they say 'construction'; instead of 'to write' they say 'to shape'; instead of 'to create' – 'to construct'. But they are all doing the same old thing: little pictures, landscapes, portraits. There are others who do not paint pictures, and work in production, who also talk about material, texture, construction, but once again out come the very same age-old ornamental and applied types of art, little cockerels and flowers, or circles and dashes.

And there are still others, who do not paint pictures, and do not work in production – they 'creatively apprehend' the 'eternal laws' of colour and form. For them the real world of things does not exist, they wash their hands of it. From the heights of their mystical insights they contemptuously gaze upon anyone who profanes the 'holy dogmas' of art through work in production, or any other sphere of material culture.

Rodchenko is no such artist. Rodchenko sees that the problem of the artist is not the abstract apprehension of colour and form, but the practical ability to resolve any task of shaping a concrete object. Rodchenko knows that there aren't once-for-all set laws of construction, but that every new task must be resolved afresh, starting from the conditions set by the individual case.

Rodchenko knows that you won't do anything by sitting in your own studio, that you must go into real work, carry your own organising talent where it is needed – into production. Many who have glanced at Rodchenko's work will say: 'Where's the Constructivism in this? Where's he any different from applied art?' To them I say, the applied artist embellishes the object, Rodchenko shapes it. The applied artist looks at the object as a place for applying his own ornamental composition, while Rodchenko sees in the object

the material that underlies the design. The applied artist has nothing to do if he can't embellish an object – for Rodchenko a complete lack of embellishment is a necessary condition for the proper construction of the object.

It is not aesthetic considerations, but the purpose of the object which defines the organisation of its colour and form.

At the moment things are hard for the Constructivist-production-artist. Artists turn their backs on him. Industrialists wave him away in annoyance. The man in the street goggles and, frightened, whispers: 'Futurist!' It needs tenacity and willpower not to lapse into the peaceful bosom of canonised art, to avoid starting to 'create' like the 'fair copy' artists, or to concoct ornaments for cups and handkerchiefs, or daub pictures for cosy dining-rooms and bedrooms.

Rodchenko will not go astray. He can spit on the artists and philistines and as for the industrialists he will break through and prove to them that only the productional-constructive approach to the object gives the highest proficiency to production. Of course, this will not happen quickly. It will come when the question of 'quality' moves to the forefront; but now, when everything is concentrated on 'quantity', what talk can there be of proficiency!

Rodchenko is patient. He will wait; meanwhile he is doing what he can – he is revolutionising taste, clearing the ground for the future non-aesthetic, but expedient, material culture. Rodchenko is right. It is evident to anyone with his eyes open that there is no other road for art than into production.

Let the company of 'fair-copyists' laugh as they foist their daubings onto the philistine aesthetes.

Let the 'applied artists' delight in dumping their 'stylish ornaments' on the factories and workshops.

Let the man in the street spit with disgust at the iron constructive power of Rodchenko's construction.

There is a consumer who does not need pictures and ornaments, and who is not afraid of iron and steel.

This consumer is the proletariat. With the victory of the proletariat will come the victory of constructivism.

Osip Brik

Materialised Utopia

Lef, Vol I pp 61, 64

Towns of the future have existed in the past too: More, Fourier, Morris etc. Yet Lavinsky's project has a quite special new significance. Lavinsky has also created a town of the future. And this was naturally only to be expected. Not from Lavinsky. From today's revolutionary artists in general. For Lavinsky, of course, is only one particular case.

The romance of the commune, and not the idyll of the cottage.

That is the first thing. Secondly: previously it was only discussed (Wells and others), but Lavinsky has simply sketched it out. He has drawn it in his own style, unusually depictive – but what of it! There was just one purpose: to demonstrate, and not to discuss, and the purpose has been achieved. Thirdly, and most important: *the artist wanted to construct.*

One could name hundreds of professors, academics and so on who did not even ‘want’. Yet architecture turned into form, ornamentation, the aesthetic cult of beauty. But what of the engineers? Of course they have been building, and still are. They build straightforwardly, in modern fashion, on the basis of the latest industrial techniques. But there’s one odd thing: as long as they occupy themselves with specific structures (bridges, cranes, platforms) all goes well; but as soon as they take on a larger-scale construction it’s enough to make the old familiar face of the aesthete peer out from beneath the mask of the engineer. Brought up on the canons of bourgeois art the engineer is almost always just as much of a fetishist as his blood-brother the architect. So engineering falls into the sweet embrace of aestheticism, and thereby voluntarily condemns itself either to a narrowing of the problems, or to social conservatism.

With all these facts in mind I maintain that Lavinsky’s project, using engineering in its future dynamics, engineering as a universal method, engineering released from beneath the moulds of art and subordinated only to the law of socio-technical expediency, this project strikes at both the artist and the engineer. To the former it says plainly: *hands off the business of life, you who have remained on Parnassus.* The latter it summons to revolutionary boldness and to a break with traditional aesthetising, towards the organisation of life in all its extent.

This does not exhaust the significance of Lavinsky’s experiment, however. Lavinsky is a Constructivist. What is Constructivism?

When the former artist set about using his material (paint etc), he regarded it only as a means of creating an impression. Such an impression was attained in the various forms of depiction. The artist ‘reflected’ the world, as people like to say. The furious growth of individualism broke up depictive art. Abstract art appeared. And at one and the same time, while some (the expressionists for example) were highly delighted with such a novelty, and, even though they did not crawl from the swamp of ‘impressionistic’ creation, tailored it in the style of metaphysics – others saw in the abstract form a new, unprecedented possibility. Not the creation of forms of the supremely ‘aesthetic’, but the expeditious construction of materials.

Not the ‘end in itself’, but ‘value of content’. Replace the word ‘content’ by the word ‘purpose’, and you will understand what it’s all about. But how can one speak of a ‘purpose’ in an abstract construction? Between the construction and the object there is a

gulf: the same sort as between art and production. But the Constructivists are still artists. The last of the Mohicans of a form of creation divorced from life represent themselves as the finish of the 'end in itself' nonsense, which eventually revolted against itself. Herein lies their great historical significance. But therein also is the tragedy of their situation. The crusaders of aestheticism are condemned to aestheticism until a bridge towards production can be found. But how can this bridge be built in a country where production itself is scarcely alive? Who will turn to the artist, who will permit himself the luxury of a gigantic, unprecedented experiment where it is necessary at present simply to 'hold-out'? And the proffered hand of the Constructivist will stay hanging in mid-air. That is why I do not smile when I look at Lavinsky's sketches. Pioneers always hold in their hands just a banner, and often a torn one at that. Surely they do not cease to be pioneers for that?

Manilov busied himself with utopias in his spare time: a little bridge, and on the bridge etc, etc. His utopias were born passively. The economist Sismondi created utopias of another sort – it was the past that fascinated him. Fourier was also a utopian, his utopia was a revolutionary one. Taking root in the bosom of the historical process such a utopia becomes a material force, which organises mankind. And that is when we can say with a capital letter: Utopia. For who does not know that without Fourier and others there would have been no Marx? It is to this particular category of utopias that Lavinsky's project belongs. If a 'materialised' utopia is at present only alliteratively similar to a 'realised' utopia, then one conclusion must follow: *help to realise the path indicated*. Or, finally: develop, continue further, reform, but do not turn aside. May this individual attempt, this romantic leap across the abyss turn into a collective, deliberate collaboration organised on laboratory lines. Abroad (eg in Germany) we are already aware of a series of experiments and projects for a future city. These efforts are considerably nearer to present-day Western resources than is Lavinsky's project to Russian resources. They are 'simpler', more realisable, more production-like. But they have a bad heredity: with an old architect for a father, and an expressionist painting for a mother, you won't get far beyond aestheticism!

A city in the air. A city of glass and asbestos. A city on springs. What is this – an eccentricity, a modish novelty, a trick? No – simply *maximum expediency*.

In the air – to release the earth.

Made of glass – to fill it with light.

Asbestos – to lighten the structure.

On springs – to create equilibrium.

All right, but as to the circular plan, surely it's that cursed old symmetry again? Yes, but not as form, but as an economic principle.

It's marvellous, but what purpose is there in these strange houses rotating? Who will dare say that this is not Futurism, the Futuristic aesthetisation of life? In other words: surely this is that same old aestheticism, but in a new guise? Such an objection may apply not only to the houses: it bears down even more heavily on the unusual appearance of the springs and the radio-station. This is surely Futurism, dynamics, a fracture, a confusion of planes and lines, antiquated displacements, all that old assortment of Italian Futurist pictorial rubbish.

Not at all! Because:

1. The rotation of the buildings pursues the very same everyday object as do Japanese houses made of paper. The difference is in the technique.

2. The springs and the radio are built as they are, and not otherwise, in the name of freedom and economy of space.

There is still one question, this time the last: are such systems technically possible? How will theoretical mechanics react to them? I do not know. I am ready to assume the worst – that a literal realisation of the plan in all its details is unthinkable either with today's or with any other level of technique. 'My business is to make suggestions . . .' as Mayakovsky declared to the angels. Lavinsky declares the very same thing to the engineers, since what has chiefly concerned Lavinsky is the social side of the matter – *the form of the new life*. Let the engineers now say (they are not angels, fortunately) what is possible and what is not possible, how they can amend, and where they can amplify. That would not be useless work.

Boris Arvatov

Our Literary Work

Lef, Vol I pp 40-1

The ancients divided artistic literature into poetry and prose. Both poetry and prose had their own linguistic canons. Poetry: sugared metres (iambics, trochees, or the mishmash of 'free verse'), a special poetic vocabulary ('steed', and not 'horse'; 'offspring', and not 'child', and all the other 'moon-June', 'eyes-sighs' rhymes), and its own petty little 'poetic' themes (previously love and the night, nowadays flames and blacksmiths).

Prose: specially stilted heroes (he + she + lover = the short-story writers; intellectual + girl + policeman = the realists; someone in grey + a strange woman + Christ = the Symbolists) and its own literary-artistic style (1. 'the sun was setting behind the hill' + 'they loved or killed' = 'outside the poplars are rustling'; 2. 'I'll tell you this, Vanyatka' + 'the chairman of the orphans' court was a hard drinker' = 'we will glimpse heaven in diamonds yet'; 3. 'how strange, Adelaida Ivannovna' + 'the terrible secret was spreading' = 'in a white halo of roses').

Both the poetry and the prose of the ancients were equally distant from practical speech, from the slang of the streets, and from the exact language of science.

We have dispersed the old literary dust, using only the scrap-iron of antiquity. We do not want to know the difference between poetry, prose and practical language. We know only a single material of the word, and we throw it into a modern treatment. We are working on the organisation of the sounds of language, on polyphony of rhythm, on the simplification of word constructions, on the greater preciseness of linguistic expressivity, on the manufacture of new thematic devices.

All this work is for us – not an aesthetic end in itself, but a laboratory for the best possible expression of the facts of the present day.

We are not priest-creators, but master-executors of the social command. The practical works published in 'LEF' are not 'absolute artistic revelations', but merely specimens of our current work.

Aseev: Experiment of a linguistic flight into the future.

Kamensky: Play on the word in all its tonality.

Kruchēnykh: Experiment of using the phonetics of slang to construct anti-religious and political themes.

Pasternak: Application of dynamic syntax to a revolutionary task.

Tretyakov: Experiment of a marching-type construction, organising revolutionary spontaneity.

Khlebnikov: Attainment of maximal expressivity through conversational speech free of any former poetic spirit.

Mayakovsky: Experiment of polyphonic rhythm in wide-ranging poetry of social and everyday matters.

Brik: Experiment of laconic prose on a contemporary theme.

Wittvogel: Experiment of the Communist agit-stage without the usual Kaiser/Toller revolutionary mysticism.

V. V. Mayakovsky

O. M. Brik

The So-Called 'Formal Method'

Lef, Vol I pp 213-5

'Opoyaz' and its so-called 'formal method' has become a bugbear to the literary pontiffs and priestling dabblers in literature. This impudent attempt to approach the poetic icons from a scientific point of view evoked a storm of indignation. A 'league of resistance to the formal method' was formed, or, to be more exact, a 'league of resistance to the removal of poetic values'.

This would not be worth mentioning, were there not several Marxists, albeit motheaten ones, among the 'resisters'. This calls for an explanation.

'Opoyaz' maintains that *there are no poets and writers – there*

are just poetry and writing. Everything that a poet writes is meaningful as a part of his general work, and is totally worthless as an expression of his 'I'. If a poetic work can be comprehended as a 'human document', like an entry in a diary, it is interesting to the author, to his wife, relatives, friends and maniacs of the type who passionately seek the answer to the riddle 'was Pushkin a smoker?' – and to no one else.

The poet is an expert in his own business. And that is all. But to be a good expert you must know the needs of those for whom you are working, you must live one life with them. Otherwise your work won't come off and will be useless. The social role of the poet cannot be understood from an analysis of his individual qualities and habits. *A mass study of the devices of the poetic craft is necessary*, these devices to be distinguished from the estimative areas of human labour; also the laws of their historical development. Pushkin was not the founder of a school, but simply its leader. If Pushkin had never existed 'Eugene Onegin' would still have been written. And America would have been discovered without Columbus. We have no history of literature yet. There is just a history of the 'generals' of literature; 'Opoyaz' will make possible the writing of this history. The poet is an expert of the word, a word-creator, serving his own class, his own social group. What to write about it intimated to him by the consumer. *Poets do not invent themes, they take them from their surrounding milieu.* The work of the poet starts with the processing of the theme, with finding a corresponding linguistic form for it.

Studying poetry means studying the laws of this linguistic processing. *The history of poetry is the history of the development of the devices of linguistic fashioning.* Why poets have taken this or that actual theme, and not others, is explained by their belonging to this or that social group, and has no connection with their poetic work. This is important for the poet's biography, but the history of poetry is not a book of 'Lives of the Saints', and must not be like one.

Why poets used certain devices, and not others, in the processing of themes, what causes the appearance of a new device, how an old one dies off – this is the subject for the most thorough research of scientific poetics. 'Opoyaz' marks off its work from the work of adjacent scientific disciplines not in order to go 'out of this world' but in order to establish and expand a series of the most vital problems of man's literary activity in the neatest way possible.

'Opoyaz' studies the laws of poetic production. Who will dare prevent it doing so?

What does 'Opoyaz' contribute to the proletarian construction of culture?

(1) A scientific system instead of a chaotic accumulation of facts and personal opinions.

(2) A social evaluation of creative people instead of an idolatrous interpretation of the 'language of the gods'.

(3) A knowledge of the laws of production instead of a 'mystical' penetration into the 'secrets' of creation.

'Opoyaz' is the best educator for the young proletarian writers.

The 'prolet-poets' are still afflicted with the thirst for 'self-revelation'. They constantly tear themselves away from their class. They do not want to be simply 'prolet-poets'. They look for 'cosmic', 'planetary' or 'deep' themes. They think that in his theme the poet must leap out of his milieu, that only then will he reveal himself and create – the 'eternal'.

'Opoyaz' will show them that everything great has been created in answer to questions of the day, that the 'eternal' today was then a topic of the time, and that the great poet does not reveal himself, but simply carries out the social command.

'Opoyaz' will help its comrade prolet-poets to overcome the traditions of bourgeois literature, by scientifically proving its moribundity and counter-revolutionism.

'Opoyaz' will come to the aid of proletarian creation not with hazy little chats about the 'proletarian spirit' and 'communist consciousness', but with the exact technical meanings of the devices of contemporary poetic creation. *'Opoyaz' is the gravedigger of poetic idealistics.* It is useless to fight it. And all the more so for Marxists.

O. M. Brik

* *Richard Sherwood's introduction and the preceding translations were first published in Form No 10 (October, 1969).*

Ideology and Problems of Soviet Architecture (extract)

Lef Vol 7, pp 95, 97-108

Two Words about Constructivism

Soviet Russia desperately needs techniques, developed techniques in all spheres of culture without fail.

This period of attack on techniques on a wide front is a transitional period to socialism, the Constructivist period.

And the Constructivists are those people, as Plekhanov says, 'who find detrimental the old order' of abstract-aesthetic ornamentation, and with all their strength they put stress on technical problems with the new unbending spring of ideology, sometimes with total lack of consideration for artistic problems.

However, it is still a very long way from here to the narrow-minded liquidation of art and dumping it overboard. Not a single serious Constructivist would try to deny the tremendous significance in architecture – of art. The nub of the matter is simply that art must be placed in a subordinate position, corresponding with practical aims, and must be employed functionally.

Korneliy Zelinsky

The Basic Tenets of Constructivism

(1) The character of contemporary production techniques – rapid, economical and large-scale – also influences the methods of ideological conceptions, subordinating general cultural processes to these internal, formally organised demands.

Constructivism is also an expression of this heightened attention to technical and organisational problems.

(2) Here in the USSR Constructivism is acquiring a wide social and cultural significance, as a result of the need to cover, in a relatively short time, the space which separates the proletariat, as a culturally backward class, from high-level present-day techniques, and from the entire developed system of cultural superstructures which, in the context of the intensifying class struggle throughout the world, are exploited by the bourgeoisie, as also are the technical weapons of the struggle.

(3) An organisational ordering of this problem, which was designated by Lenin as a problem of cultural education, is represented by Constructivism.

(4) Thus, Constructivism is a set of systematised ideas and social attitudes of mind which emphatically reflect the organisational impact of a working class which, in a predominately peasant country, has been forced, after the attainment of power, to build the economy and lay the foundation of the new socialist culture.

(5) This organisational impact in the cultural sphere is directed primarily at its technology in all spheres of knowledge and learning, beginning with the simple mastery of literacy.

(6) The bearer of the Constructivist (ie energetic and organised) and cultural education movement must be, above all, the proletariat, and, after that, the intermediate social groups who are under the ideo-political influence of the proletariat.

(7) Constructivism, transferred into the realm of art, is formally transformed into a *system of maximum exploitation of theme*, or into a system of mutual functional justification of all the component artistic elements. That is: as a whole, *Constructivism is motivated art*.

(8) In a formal respect such a requirement is based on the so-called principle of loadification, ie the increasing of the loading of demands on the unity of material.

(9) Rightist social strata, the intelligentsia and petty-bourgeoisie groups, are adapting the formal demands of Constructivism to use as aesthetic fox-holes in which to sit out the onslaught of revolutionary modernity, which seeks to consolidate its place in the themes of art. In this case Constructivism changes into a special easel-art genre, ie a non-motivated demonstration of the device.

This is equally true in respect of both painting and poetry.

For the leftist social strata this demand for maximal exploitation is naturally fused with the search for a great epic theme and for a compact form for this theme, which, through the logic of the subject, introduces the devices of prose into poetry.

(10) The principle of loadification, in its application to poetry changes into a need for the construction of verse to the pattern of local semantics, ie the development of the whole textures of the verse out of the basic semantic content of the theme.

(11) The group of Constructivist-poets, taking the above-mentioned tenets as its banner, is an organised grouping of people with a Communist ideology, who take it upon themselves, by way of the joint practical study of the formal-technical, and theoretical aspects of Constructivism, to give a real sense to poetry in the contemporary social setting.

The Constructivists consider it essential in their poetic work to reflect revolutionary contemporaneity, both thematically, *and in relation to its technical needs*.

The Constructivists aim to take possession of the poetic section of the general front of cultural education, seen as being a broad constructivism of the working class in the transitional era of struggle for communism.

Moscow, August 1924.

Utopia or Science? (extracts)

Lef Vol 4 pp 16-21

The production-artists from 'Lef' believe that art must fuse with socio-material life-construction, and demand this fusion immediately.

Since an effective and full penetration of art into everyday life is possible only in a constituted Communist society, the production-artists are no more than Utopianists.

The Utopianism of the production-artists is evident also in their rejection of depictive and decorative art, and in their dogmatic approach to constructional art. . . .'

In fact the 'Lefists' believe that, in spite of the remoteness of a *full* realisation of their forecast, it is necessary right at the present moment to proceed to a *partial* realisation of the problems of production art.

The 'Lefists', finally, postulate a polytechnical transformation of our art schools, the setting up of experimental work in model factories and the invention of standard forms of material existence, if only in the sphere of furniture, clothing production etc, which would be *not only economically but also ideologically* advantageous by the one fact that this would be a blow to the debauched applied art which has flourished in proletarian art (witness the uniform of the Red Army, the equipment of the Agricultural Exhibition etc).

. . . Decisively repudiating the easel-painting of the drawing-room

and museum the 'Lefists' are fighting for the placard, for the illustration, the advertisement, photo- and cine-montage, ie for those types of *utilitarian-representational art* which could be art for the masses, put into effect by means of machine techniques, and closely tied to the material life of the urban industrial workers. In this sense the 'Lefists' are 'applied artists'.

. . . The easel-painting, which fosters passive admiration of illusion and diverges from life, is for this very reason not suited to become an efficient weapon in the hands of the proletariat.

. . . *The problem of proletarian transitional, depictive artistic creation is the problem of agit-art – of art that is propagandistic not only in theme, but in its devices of material structure.*

. . . The 'Lefists' are convinced and consistent industrialists in art. This is their maximum programme. Only through it can the 'Lefists' build their minimum programme, their present-day tactics.

. . . Two contradictory views were evident after Lef's appearance:—

The first:

Those devices and forms of creation which are produced on the stage of the theatre must be brought into life – to theatricalise life. This is the view of N. Evreinov, the view of an aesthetiser of life, the view of the 'pure' artist, of the stage director wanting to subordinate reality to the devices of his own narrow, little speciality, – to introduce into life so-called 'beauty'.

The second:

The theatre must be reconstructed on the foundations of an overall social, extra-aesthetic science and technology (physical culture, psycho-techniques and so on), with aesthetic formalism expelled from it. Only those artists who have grown up in this new 'life-infused' theatre will be able to give us a strictly utilitarian, Taylorised shaping of life, instead of the theatricalisation of life.

To 'transform' life – this is what Evreinov wants.

To construct life purposefully – this is what the 'Lefists' are striving for.

The 'Lefists' are against, and not for the theatricalisation of life.

The 'Lefists' demand production methods, a production-consciousness, production-attitude and approach to every sphere of art without exception. We must not sanctify industrial, collective life with the 'beauties' of easel-art theatre, but totally subordinate the theatre to the constructive methods and problems of collectivised industrial life.

We must not speak about the art of the revolution without a precise maximum-programme. We must not, while mastering Marxism, consider this sufficient and mark time while manoeuvring among the contemporary art movements, granting them complete 'independence' of action. The arbitrariness of social development

48 opposes the interests of the working class, even where it is a question of such a 'high' matter as art. The working class will construct its own art on the basis of scientific foresight and consciously planned and organised practical work, ie in the same way that it acts in politics and economics. The theory of production art offers the working class here and now the prospect of progressing from Utopia to Science.

B. Arvatov

From Picture to Calico-print

Lef Vol 6 pp 27, 30-31, 34

The propaganda of production art is now crowned with success.

It is becoming obvious that art culture is not totally covered by objects for exhibitions and museums, that, in particular, painting is not 'pictures', but the entire aggregate of the pictorial designing of life.

The calico-print is just the same sort of product of art culture as the picture, and there is no foundation for drawing any sort of dividing line between the two.

Moreover, the belief is growing that the picture is dying, that it is inextricably bound to the forms of the capitalist system, to its cultural ideology, and that the calico-print is now moving into the centre of creative attention, – that calico, and work on it, are now the peaks of art work.

This is a fact. Our cultural creative work is now entirely purpose-orientated. We do not think up for ourselves any cultural work that does not pursue some definite practical aim. The concepts of 'pure science', 'pure art', and 'self-valuable truths and beauties' are foreign to us. We are practitioners, – and in this lies the distinguishing feature of our cultural consciousness.

The easel-art picture can find no place in such a consciousness. For its strength and significance lie in its non-utilitarianism, in the fact that it serves no other purpose than that of pleasing, of 'delighting the eye'.

All attempts to turn an easel-painting into an agit-picture are fruitless. Not because no talented artist could be found to do it, but because it is unthinkable in its very essence.

The easel painting is intended for a prolonged existence, to last for years and even centuries. But what agit-theme could last for such a time? What agit-picture would not be obsolete within a month? And if the theme of the agit-picture were obsolete, what would there be left in it?

A theme of short-lived effect must not be dealt with by devices intended for a lengthy existence. A one-day object must not be built to last centuries.

This is why the agit-picture cannot bear comparison with the agit-poster, this is why there are no good agit-pictures.

The 'pure' easel-artists have exercised good judgement in refus-

ing to work on agit-themes. They realise that this way the easel-painting will perish, that it loses its basic values – its ‘timeless’, ‘non-utilitarian’ significance, and that the poster will outdo it. They are therefore making desperate attacks to save it by another method:—to impress on one and all that the easel-painting is, in its purely formal sense, a huge cultural fact, that without it any art culture is unthinkable.

They maintain that if no easel-paintings are made, then art culture will perish, that the creative ‘freedom’ which is apparent in the making of these easel-paintings must not be extinguished for a single second, otherwise art will end.

Let the theme of the picture be trivial, let there be an abstract ‘free’ play of the pictorial forms, – this is unimportant; what is important is that this non-temporal, non-utilitarian, ‘purely aesthetic’ value will continue to exist, that one will be able to glance at it, be imbued with it – and art culture will be saved.

This is how monks reason. Their righteous life outside the world saves the world.

And yet the easel-artists are right. If the painting can be saved it is only in this way.

If it is true that the easel-painting is necessary for the existence of art culture, that without it art culture will perish, then, of course, we must take every step to encourage its development and well-being.

But it is not true. The easel-painting is not only unnecessary to our present day art culture, but is one of the most powerful brakes to its development. And this is why.

Of course, the chief evil is not in the monkish reasonings of the ‘pure’ easel-artists. These can easily be dispelled by the light of anti-religious, anti-aesthetic propaganda. What is bad is that these monkish dogmas are turned into productional and pedagogical principles.

The nub of the matter is that the easel-artists do not deny the importance and necessity of other forms of art culture. They fully allow the existence of agit-posters, sketches for calico-printing, and book covers; they simply maintain that without easel-painting all these ‘secondary’ aspects are unthinkable, that easel-painting is the creative base on which all the culture of painting is constructed.

Hence the conclusion that if you want to make good calico-prints, learn how to paint landscapes.

The easel-artists argue thus: the artist, wherever he works, whatever he does, must be master of an art culture, must be artistically educated. This art culture, this art education, is given to him by easel-painting.

Having mastered the ‘secrets’ of easel-painting, he thereby masters the ‘secrets’ of every sort of painting work, be it calico, the book-cover, the poster, or theatre decoration.

And this is where the easel-artists are cruelly wrong.

The painting is the product of a certain aspect of artistic work. To make a painting one must expend a certain quantity of technical devices and skills, namely those devices and skills with which a picture can be made. Why does it follow that these devices and skills are universal? Why does it suddenly turn out that the devices and skills suitable for one craft are right for any other?

Let us admit that partial coincidences are also possible, that part of the devices may be universally used; but why should one craft be basic in relation to another? Why should the making of a still-life be more basic than the making of a calico-print? Why should one first learn to make still-life pictures, and then proceed to calico-prints, and not the other way round?

The easel-artists like to compare pure easel-painting with pure mathematics. They say that both of them give general principles, general propositions, which can then be applied in practice.

But the easel-artists forget that a picture is not science, but practical work, and cannot establish any 'general' propositions. The experience of the easel-painter is not the experience of the artist in general, but merely the experience of one particular case of pictorial work.

The easel-artists want to vindicate their right of existence.

If easel-art died, as a socially necessary aspect of artistic craft, then, they say, let it come back to life as a universal artistic method, as the highest school of all artistic practical work.

This is how the zealots of classical antiquity tried to vindicate the need for Greek and Latin in secondary schools.

But the pedagogic universality of easel-art can be disproved not only by theoretical arguments, but also by everyday practical experience.

The sad fate of artists who have passed through the easel-art school, and then try to apply their knowledge and skills in production, is well known. Nothing comes of it.

However, the easel-artist, by and large, doesn't care a thing about production. The acknowledgment of production art is an empty phrase in his mouth.

If work in production were always to remain art of the lowest sort it would be all the same to him. This is why it is not the easel-artists who will find methods for this type of work, and it will not be from easel-art that the solution of the problems of production art will come.

Only those artists who have broken once and for all with easel-artistry, who have in fact recognised production work as not only an equally legitimate aspect of art work, but as the only one possible, — only these artists can undertake the solving of the problems of present-day art culture productively and successfully.

Among these artists, as yet still few in number, are the members of INKHUK:—Rodchenko, Lavinsky, Vesnin, Stepanova, Johanson, Senkin, Klutsis and the late Lyubov Popova.

There is one very serious objection that the easel-artists make against the production artists. They say: *Your works are no different from the most primitive sort of applied art; you are doing just what applied artists have always done, 'applying' easel drawings to factory-produced objects. But what will you do if there are to be no easel-works? What will you 'apply'?*

It is true that art work, and factory or workshop work, are still separate. The artist is still an alien in the factory. People react suspiciously to him, they do not let him get close. They do not trust him. They cannot understand why he must know the technical processes, why he should have information of a purely industrial nature. His business is to draw, to make drawings – and it is the business of the factory to choose suitable ones from among them and stick them on ready-made manufactures.

The basic idea of production art, that the external appearance of a thing is determined by its economic purpose and not by abstract, aesthetic considerations, is still insufficiently apprehended by our industrialists, and it seems to them that the artist, in seeking to delve into the 'economic secret' of the object, is poking his nose into other people's business.

Hence the inevitable applied art, – a result of the alienation of the artist from production. As he does not receive the necessary economic directives he involuntarily falls back on aesthetic stereotypes.

What conclusion can be drawn from this?

Forward! – to the overcoming of this alienation.

Forward! – to the union of artist and factory.

And never: backwards – to pure easel work, or backwards – to little pictures.

Leading artists have already set out on the road from picture to calico-print, and of course they will not turn back. But this is only the beginning. The entire mass of young artists must understand that this road is the only true one, that it is along this road that the development of art culture will proceed.

It is necessary for our industrialists to understand their rôle in this matter, since on this depends the acceleration of this historical process.

The initiative of the director of the first cotton-printing factory in Moscow (formerly the Tsindel), comrade Arkhangelsky, and of Professor Viktorov, who invited the artists Stepanova and Popova to work there, is worthy of great attention and praise.

And if it still too early to speak about the results of this first experiment, then it is essential to mention its huge cultural value.

The art culture of the future is being made in the factories and workshops, and not in attic studios.

Let young artists remember this, if they want to avoid falling prematurely into the archives, together with the haughty easel-artists.

O. Brik

Lef Vol 3, pp 135-143

Looking at the pictures that have come to us from the West and from America, and bearing in mind the information we have about the work and experiments abroad and at home, I arrive at this conclusion:—

The death sentence passed by film-directors in 1919 on every film without exception is effective to this very day.

The most thorough observation reveals not a single picture, not a single experiment directed, as they should be, towards the *emancipation of the film-camera*, which remains wretchedly enslaved, subordinated to the *imperfect*, undiscerning human eye.

We are not protesting at the *undermining* of literature and the theatre by the cinema, and we fully sympathise with the use of the cinema for all branches of science, but we define these functions of the cinema as side-lines diverging from the main line.

**The basic and most important thing is:
CINEMA-PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD.**

The starting-point is: *use of the film-camera as a cinema-eye, more perfect than the human eye for fathoming the chaos of those visual phenomena which evoke spatial dimension.*

The cinema-eye lives and moves in time and space, apprehends and fixes impressions in quite a different way from that of the human eye. The position of our bodies at the moment of observation, the number of features perceived by us in one or another visual phenomenon in one second of time is not at all binding on the film-camera, which, the more perfect it is, the more and the better will perceive things.

We cannot make our eyes better than they are already made,

**LEGALISED
SHORT-
SIGHTEDNESS**

**Make way for the
machine!**

**DOWN WITH
16 frames a
second!**

but we can perfect the film-camera without limit.

Up to today the film-cameraman has many a time suffered rebukes about a running horse which on the screen moved unnaturally slowly (rapid turning of the film-camera handle), or, conversely, about a tractor which ploughed a field too quickly (slow turning of the film-camera handle) and so on.

**ACCIDENTAL
dislocation and
concentration of
DISLOCATION**

These are accidents, of course, but we are preparing a system, a contrived system of cases like these, a system of *apparent* irregularities which probe into and organise phenomena.

Up to today we have *coerced the film-camera and made it copy the work of our own eyes*. And the better the copying, the more highly was the shot considered.

**Do not copy
the eye**

From today we are liberating the camera and making it work in the opposite direction, furthest away from copying.

All the weaknesses of the human eye are external. We affirm the *cinema-eye, that gropes in the chaos of movements for a resultant force for its own movement, we affirm the cinema-eye with its dimension of time and space, growing in its own strength and its own resources to reach self-affirmation.*

**THE MACHINE
and its career**

2.

. . . I force the spectator to see in the way most advantageous for me to show this or that visual phenomenon. The eye is subordinated to the will of the film-camera and directed by it onto those consecutive moments of action, which in the briefest and

THE SYSTEM OF CONSECUTIVE MOVEMENTS

clearest way lead the cinema-phrase to the heights or depths of resolution.

For example: a shot of boxing, not from the point of view of a

spectator present at the match, but a shot of the consecutive movements (methods) of the boxers.

or: a shot of a group of dancers – but not from the viewpoint of a spectator sitting in a hall with a ballet on stage in front of him.

It is known that a spectator at a ballet watches haphazardly sometimes the general group of dancers, sometimes separate dancers at random, and sometimes somebody's feet:—a *series of incoherent impressions, different for each single spectator.*

We must not present the cinema audience with this.

The system of consecutive movements demands shots of the dancers or boxers as an exposition of the tricks presented one after the other, with the *forced* transference of the spectator's eyes onto those successive details which must be seen.

The film-camera drags the eyes of the audience from hands to feet, from feet to eyes, and so on in the best order possible, and organises details into a regular montage-study.

The most disadvantageous, most uneconomic transmission of a scene — is a THEATRICAL ONE

3.

You can be walking along the street in Chicago today, in 1923, but I can make you bow to the late comrade Volodarsky, who in 1918 is walking along a street in Petrograd, and he will return your bow.

Another example: the coffins of national heroes are lowered into their tombs (taken in Astrakhan in 1918), the tombs are filled in (Kronstadt, 1921), a gun salute (Petrograd, 1920) eternal remembrance, hats are removed (Moscow, 1922) – such things can be fitted together even from thankless material which was not specially filmed (see *Kino-Pravda* No 13). A further example of this is the montage of the greetings of the crowd and the montage of the salute of the vehicles for comrade Lenin (*Kino-Pravda* No 14), taken in different places, at different times.

The cinema-eye – the montaged 'I see !'

**MONTAGE
in time
and space**

... I am the cinema-eye. I am a constructor.

I have set you down, you who have today been created by me,

in a most amazing room, which did not exist up to this moment, also created by me.

In this room are 12 walls filmed by me in various parts of the world.

Putting together the shots of the walls and other details I was able to arrange them in an order which pleases you, and which will correctly construct by intervals the cinema-phrase, which is in fact a room.....

I am the cinema-eye, I create a man more perfect than Adam was created, I create thousands of different people from various preliminary sketches and plans.

I am the cinema-eye.

I take from one person the strongest and deftest hands, from another I take the strongest and swiftest legs, from a third the most beautiful and

expressive head and I create a new, perfect man in a montage. . . .

4.

. . . I am the cinema-eye. I am a mechanical eye.

I, a machine, can show you the world as only I can see it.

From today I liberate myself for ever from human immobility,

I am in perpetual motion, I approach and move away from objects, I creep up to them, I climb onto them, I move alongside the muzzle of a running horse, I tear into the crowd at full speed, I run before the fleeing soldiers, I tip over onto my back, I ascend with aeroplanes, I fall and rise together with falling and rising bodies.

Here am I, the camera, rushing about guided by a resultant force, manoeuvring in the chaos of motions, fixing motion from motion in the most complex combinations.

Freed from the obligation of 16-17 frames a second, freed from the limits of time and space, *I can contrast any points in the universe*, wherever I might fix them.

**FELLOWSHIP OF
FILM-DIRECTORS
THE COUNCIL
OF THREE
Moscow,
Today 3 Today
APR 3 IL
Hall of Intervals
LECTURE
By Dz. V. on
THE ROOM
CINEMA-PHASE
START at 8 p.m.**

**ELECTRIC
YOUTH .**

**FILMING
from
MOTION**

My way leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world.
And this is how I can decipher anew a world unknown to you.

5.

. . . Once again let us settle one thing: the eye and the ear.

The ear does not spy and the eye does not eavesdrop.

A division of functions:

The radio-ear – the montaged 'I hear!'

The cinema-eye – the montaged 'I see!'

This is for you, citizens, for a start, instead of music, painting, theatre, cinema and other castrated effusions.

Amid the chaos of motions rushing past, rushing away, rushing forward and colliding together – into life comes simply *the eye*.

The day of visual impressions has passed. How can a day's impressions be constructed into an effective whole in a visual study?

If everything that the eye saw were to be photographed onto a film there would naturally be confusion. If it were artistically assembled, what was photographed would be clearer.

If the encumbering rubbish were thrown out, it would be still better. We shall obtain an organised manual of impressions of the *ordinary eye*.

The mechanical eye – the film-camera refusing to use the human eye as a crib, repelled and attracted by motions, gropes about in the chaos of visual events for the path for its own motion or oscillation, and experiments by stretching time, breaking up its motions, or, vice versa, absorbing time into itself, swallowing up the years, thereby schematizing prolonged processes which are inaccessible to the normal eye. . . .

. . . To the aid of the machine-age comes the *cinéaste-pilot*, who not only controls the motions of the camera, but who *trusts* in it during spatial experimentation, and the *cinéaste-engineer*, who controls the cameras at a distance.

**organisation of
observations
of the
HUMAN
eye**

**organisation
of observations
of the
MECHANICAL
eye**

**Dislocation and
Concentration of
Visual
Phenomena**

controls the cameras at a distance.

The result of this sort of combined action of the liberated and perfected camera, and of the strategic brain of man directing, observing and taking stock of things, is a noticeably fresher, and therefore interesting, presentation of even the most ordinary things. . . .

THE BRAIN

. . . How many people are there thirsting for spectacular shows that wear out their trousers in the theatres?

They flee from the daily round, they flee from the prose of life. And yet the theatre is almost always just a wretched counterfeit of that very same life plus a stupid conglomeration of the affectations of ballet, musical squeaks, lighting effects, decorations (from the daubing-type to the constructive-type) and sometimes the excellent work of a literary master, perverted by all the rubbish. Certain masters of the theatres are destroying the theatres from the inside, breaking the old forms and declaring new slogans for work in the theatre; brought in to help this are bio-mechanics (a good exercise in itself), the cinema (glory and honour to it), writers (not bad in themselves), constructions (there are good ones), motor-cars (how can one not respect a motor-car?), and gun-fire (a dangerous and impressive trick in the front rows), but in general not a single feature stands out in it.

Theatre, and nothing more.

Not only not a synthesis, but not even a regular miscellany. And it cannot be otherwise.

We, the film-makers, are determined opponents of premature synthesis ('to synthesis as the zenith of achievement!'), and realise it is pointless to mix up fragments of achievement: the poor infants immediately perish through overcrowding and disorder. And in general –

THE ARENA IS SMALL

Please let's get into life.

This is where we work – we, the masters of vision – organisers of visible life, armed with the ever-present cinema-eye.

This is where the masters of words and sounds work, the most skilful montage-makers of audible life. And I venture to slip in with them the ubiquitous mechanical ear and mouthpiece – the radio-telephone.

It means **THE NEWSREEL FILM**
and **THE RADIO NEWSREEL**

I intend to stage a parade of film-makers in Red Square on the occasion of the *Futurists'* issuing of the first edition of the montaged radio-newsreel.

Not the 'Pathé' newsreel-films or Gaumont (a newspaper-type 'newsreel') and not even 'Kino-Pravda' (a political 'newsreel'), but a genuine cinema newsreel – a *swift review of VISUAL events deciphered by the film-camera, pieces of REAL energy* (I distinguish this from theatrical energy), *brought together at intervals to form an accumulatory whole by means of highly skilled montage.*

This structure for the cinema-thing allows any theme to be developed, whether comic, tragic, contrived or anything else.

The whole trick lies in this or that juxtapositioning of visual features, the whole trick lies in the intervals.

The unusual flexibility of the montage-construction permits any political, economic, or other motifs to be brought into the cinema-study. And that is why

FROM TODAY neither psychological nor detective dramas are needed in the cinema

FROM TODAY theatrical productions taken onto film are not needed

FROM TODAY neither Dostoyevsky nor Nat Pinkerton need be scripted

Everything can be included in the new concept of the newsreel film.

These two things now make a decisive entry into the muddle of life:

- (1) the *cinema-eye*, which disputes the visual presentation of the world by the human eye, and presents its 'I see' and,
- (2) the *cinéaste-montageur*, who organises moments of life-construction now seen in *cinema-eye* fashion for the first time.

Dziga Vertov

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Edited and introduced by Ben Brewster

In the 1930's, the adjective 'formalist', originally a derogatory designation for the Russian school of literary criticism centred around Opoyaz (The Society for the Study of Poetic Language) and the Moscow Linguistics Circle which considered poetry and literature from the standpoint of their linguistic resources, was extended to apply to the whole range of avant-garde art, literature and music, and counterposed to 'realism', in particular, 'socialist realism'. Despite its crudity, this opposition seems to encapsulate many of the differences between the avant-garde art and literature of the 1920's in Russia and the art and literature characteristic of the USSR in the 1930's and 40's; moreover, it corresponds closely to the set of oppositions between the dominant trends in 19th and 20th century art recently suggested by David Morse in an article on Eisenstein in *Monogram* no 1 (p 29). It therefore appears paradoxical that the spearhead of the Russian avant-garde in the 1920's, the Left Front of the Arts (Lef) should, in 1927-8, proclaim 'factography' as the correct task of the revolutionary artist, and describe the newspaper, the documentary film and the photograph as the 'art' of the future. Art as a device, the original slogan of the formalists, seems to have been rejected in favour of a realism more complete than any demanded in the 1930's.

A simple explanation immediately comes to mind. *Novy Lef*, the magazine in which the following articles appeared, was published by the Left Front of the Arts in 1927-8, more than a year after *Lef*, the Front's first magazine, ceased publication, and Mayakovsky proclaimed that it was going to be 'more left than Lef'. The period in which *Novy Lef* appeared was the period in which the politico-literary scene was dominated by VAPP (later RAPP), the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers. Was the new programme of *Novy Lef* an attempt to come to terms with the increasing political pressure on the artist in the late 1920's in the USSR? While I do not think this view wholly incorrect, I think it should be qualified in three respects.

First, literature of fact was not so alien to futurism as it might at first sight seem. Marinetti's futurist writing, from *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1914) via *Alcova d'Acciaio* (1921) to *Il Grande Milano Tradizionale e Futurista* (1944), is all based on factual reporting, the first being the impressions of a correspondent in the First Balkan War, the second an account of Marinetti's wartime experiences as the driver of an armoured car, and the third, memories of his youth. In Russia itself, Mayakovsky's post-revolutionary poetry

60 was characterised by the adoption of the non-literary modes of the political leaflet or resolution and the advertisement (the Proletkult denounced the 'advertising artist Mayakovsky').¹ The work held up as an example in the pages of *Novy Lef* as literature of fact was not a work of the late 1920's but Shklovsky's *Sentimental Journey*, memoirs of the years 1917-20, written between 1919 and 1922 and published in 1923.² In fact, even in its first, 'heroic' period, Russian futurism did not just concentrate on expanding the verbal means of poetic expression, a tendency reaching its peak in the 'trans-sense' (*zaumy*) poetry of Khlebnikov and Kruchënykh, it also introduced a new poetic content drawn from non-literary speech and prose and from direct impressions of reality, best characterised by Elena Guro's prose poems. Many works incorporated both tendencies, for example, Kamensky's 'ferro-concrete' poems, whose syntax is replaced by the distribution of the words on the printed page (as in *Zang Tumb Tuuum*), but the content is fleeting impressions of a place and time.³

Second, it is important to examine the politico-aesthetic situation in the USSR in the late 1920's more concretely, and not just to assume a growing pressure from the Party to conform to a pre-defined Marxist critical orthodoxy, socialist realism. It should be remembered that before 1917, there had been no Marxist aesthetics as such. Marx, Engels and Lenin wrote very little on aesthetic questions, and even Plekhanov only took over ideas from Hegel's aesthetics and opinions from liberal thinkers of his day. In general, European Social-Democracy tended to support 19th century realism (Balzac, Zola) as against the decadents and symbolists, the socially conscious artist against *l'art pour l'art*. In Russia this meant the civic tradition typified by Chernyshevsky and the criticism of Belinsky, Tolstoy, and among 20th century authors, Gorky. Hence there was an initial prejudice against the Russian avant-garde among the Bolsheviks, but this was offset by the avant-garde's more enthusiastic support for the October Revolution and their work during the Civil War. Hence in the 1920's there was no Marxist aesthetic theory to counterpose to Left Front art. This still had to be constructed.

After the October Revolution, although the Bolsheviks were well aware of the propagandistic importance of art (witness Lenin's famous decree on the replacement of monuments to reactionaries by monuments to progressives and revolutionaries), their general policy was one of welcoming all artists, whatever their aesthetic tendency, so long as they agreed to support Soviet power. Two groups of artists, however, demanded a Party-backed monopoly for their tendency: the futurists, on the grounds that their futurist revolution in the arts was the aesthetic complement of the Bolshevik revolution in politics; and the Proletkult, who proclaimed the need for a proletarian culture created by proletarians and condensing their experience to accompany the dictatorship

of the proletariat. These three trends reproduced themselves throughout the 1920's, despite apparent turns in the officially constituted bodies: (1) a broad-minded, but basically traditionalist line deriving from the socially conscious realism of the 19th century, (2) a line asserting the need for a specifically proletarian art and culture, and (3) a line deriving from and extending futurism. The excellence and seminal nature of the work of the third group often obscures from us today the fact that it was by far the smallest of the three. Besides these three left-wing art tendencies, there was, of course, the external and internal emigration, artists and writers whose work was consciously anti-Bolshevik, and groups such as the Serapion Brothers, who held that the artist should pursue artistic excellence independently of any political positions.

During the period of the first *Lef*, and while it was the most important proponent of the futurist trend, the traditionalist position was championed by the 'fat' magazine *Krasnaya Nov* (Red Virgin Soil), edited by the Communist A. K. Voronsky from 1921-7. Voronsky supported the so-called 'fellow-travelling' authors, writers who, while not Communist or proletarian, were sympathetic to the Soviet regime, and whose writing, while not particularly political or agitational, reflected the experiences of the Revolution and Civil War. Most important of these were Pilyak and Esenin. At the same time, Voronsky turned to Plekhanov for the rudiments of a Marxist aesthetics, developing the idea that art has a cognitive function, encapsulating knowledge of historical development (otherwise only accessible in scientific abstraction) in concrete, typical, cases. In these positions he was opposed by the *On Guard* group, members of VAPP, the All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers, founded 1920 and dominated by proletarian poets and authors, ex-members of the Proletkult. The On-guardists demanded strict adherence to the Party's political line and an art whose function was emotional and agitational rather than cognitive, encouraging proletarians to political action by anecdotal, often factual accounts of their immediate political and economic tasks (echoes of this debate about cognition and emotion can be traced in the *Lef* and *Novy Lef* arguments).

In 1925, the Politbureau of the CPSU(B) made a direct decision in literary matters for the first time. While backing VAPP to a considerable extent (Voronsky was increasingly discredited by his association with the Trotskyite opposition), they demanded a much less sectarian outlook. The Association's magazine became *On Literary Guard*, and leadership shifted to a more moderate group centred around L. L. Averbakh, Y. N. Libedinsky and D. A. Furmanov (the author of *Chapaev*). While calling for a much more strict adherence to the Party line than Voronsky, and in particular, a proletarian position, they in fact adopted many of his theoretical theses. Their ideal author was Lev Tolstoy. On cognition and emotion they took a compromise: 'Cognition of life on the one hand

and emotional infection on the other are inextricably and immutably joined in a work of art' (Averbakh, 1927). Art reveals the causal connections behind concrete experience, it 'tears off the veils', but it does not do so by conscious abstraction, like science, but by the unconscious effects of a deeply felt world-view: 'Art does not operate by the same method as science; it does not deal in abstractions, as does philosophy, but through immediate impressions, it shows concrete phenomena in their interconnection, and this calls forth what is known as the 'aesthetic feeling' . . . In order to accomplish the generalising work of art one must possess a deeply felt philosophy (world-view). Only such a philosophy permits man to free his immediate impressions of reality from their place of concealment under the casing of philistine judgement' (Libedinsky, 1927). *On Literary Guard* attacked the Lef group's theory of 'social demand' as 'mechanistic' – art was not something provided by the technical specialist on proletarian demand, but a largely unconscious product of men in determinate social situations. And the characters represented in literary work should have these same properties, be psychologically realistic 'living men' and, in the ideal case (the positive hero), 'harmonious men'.

They were opposed by *Novy Lef*, but also by a heterogeneous group including the old *On Guard* leadership, who formed Litfront in 1928. They attacked the contemplative, objective aspect of RAPP realism (VAPP became RAPP in 1928), demanding a more agitational, emotional literature based on the revolutionary sketch, and characterised by 'revolutionary romanticism': 'The decisive thing in a work of art is not so much the author's conscious view of the world as the author's emotional reaction to the world'.

Thus *Novy Lef's* 'factography' must be seen in a triangular debate with psychological realism and revolutionary romanticism. 'Socialist realism' was not really established until well after the dissolution of RAPP and the formation of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1932, and it synthesised elements both of the psychological realism of the RAPPists and of the revolutionary romanticism of Litfront. However, at least in the first years of the USW, it laid much less stress on a proletarian component or a Party commitment than any of the left schools of the 1920's.⁴

The third qualification of the simple argument of political pressure is the international character of the demand for an art of fact. I have already referred to the example of Marinetti, but the parallels are most obvious in the German case. In Germany, the Communist Party helped organise a German equivalent of RAPP, the Bund Proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller (League of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers) with its organ *Die Linkskurve*. As was natural in a capitalist society, this organisation included a broader range of left artists than RAPP. It contained a traditionalist wing arguing for a psychologically realist aesthetic derived largely from Hegel, centred around Wittfogel and Lukács, and a proletarian

group (also influenced by German *Neue Sachlichkeit*) exemplified by Ernst Ottwalt, advocating positions with similarities both to Litfront (anecdotal literature with an agitational emphasis) and Lef (documentarism, use of extra-literary forms and material).⁵ More important perhaps in comparison with the USSR are the dadaist artists who rallied to the revolutionary cause – John Heartfield, Wieland Herzfelde, George Grosz and Erwin Piscator. Starting from dadaist hostility to ‘art’ as an ideological veil for capitalism, they came in the 1920’s to see ‘art’ as a technique by which to make propaganda and instruction for the proletarian cause effective, ie, they saw art as fulfilling a ‘social demand’. Herzfelde and Grosz wrote in 1925:

If he does not want to be an idler, an antiquated dud, the contemporary artist can only choose between technology and propaganda in the class struggle. In either case, he must relinquish ‘pure art’. Either by enrolling as an architect, an engineer or an advertising artist in the – unfortunately still highly feudally organised – army which develops the industrial forces and exploits the world, or by joining the ranks of the oppressed who are struggling for their fair share in the world’s value, for a meaningful social organisation of life, as a recorder and critic reflecting the face of our time, as a propagandist and defender of the revolutionary idea and its supporters’ (*Die Kunst ist in Gefahr*).⁶

Piscator’s theatre similarly eschewed psychology and illusion in favour of propaganda and instruction (he expressed a similar hostility to Meyerhold’s production of *The Government Inspector* as Tretyakov did in *Novy Lef*).⁷ Though the propaganda effect is stressed by these writers more than the fact as such, there are clear similarities here with the *Novy lef* position. These similarities are partly related to the close links between the Russian and German avant-gardes on the one hand (Tretyakov was the link man in the literary debates in the late 1920’s),⁸ and between the CPSU(B) and the KPD on the other. But they are also rooted in the problems of avant-garde art itself and the political commitments of the artists, which themselves had sources close to their demand for an artistic revolution.

Thus the ‘literature of fact’ advocated by *Novy Lef* is not a desperate attempt to accommodate to increasing political pressure. Rather it is an attempt to get to grips with something which had been true of futurism from the beginning: that the art which had concentrated its revolution on the means of artistic production, expanding poetic language into trans-sense language, transforming poetic devices such as metaphor, had led both to a change in the content from traditional literary material to such extra-literary uses of language as letters, memoirs, diaries, newspapers and feuilletons,⁹ and a change in the function of art with respect to politics and the dominant ideology. Exactly the same can be

64 seen in the German case. The manifesto *Die Kunst ist in Gefahr*, from which I have quoted, may seem a simple demand for propaganda art, the technique simply increasing the effects of the political line conveyed. However, the text itself is organised in a parodic form with semi-comic sub-heads, the title itself being ironic, and in it Grosz describes the extent to which his own art is derived from lavatory graffiti, a scatological reference which is echoed in Russian futurism by the use of obscure obscenities in the work of Kruchënykh and Zdanevich. Similarly, Piscator's elaborate mechanical staging and his epic style of acting were more than mere propaganda devices, and as developed by Brecht, created an entirely new theatrical art.

This is not to say that the theorists of *Novy Lef* solved the problems thus produced. Nevertheless, the reality of these problems is revealed in a number of confusions or paradoxes characteristic of the theoretical writing of the period. The most important of these is found in the use of the term 'objective'. Sometimes it implies that the work itself is the object, that it has no relationship to anything outside it, represents only itself and is therefore as abstract as possible (the 'word as such' of the futurists, the abstract art of the constructivists), sometimes that the work has a completely objective aim, a social and political function (the utilitarian objects produced by the productivists, the agitational art of Piscator and Eisenstein). These two definitions ought to be distinct, it ought to be possible to divide artists into constructivists and productivists – but the two obstinately overlap. A work is most objective when it is most formalised, but this objectivity is conceived in the double sense of most object-like in itself, and most adapted to an objective goal.

Perhaps the most serious attempt to theorise this paradox was Shklovsky's famous notion of *ostranenie* or 'making-it-strange'. Ordinary language and everyday perception rapidly become routinised with the result that real understanding and vision cease. It is the function of art, by linking together dissimilar things in tropes, and disappointing routine expectations in all its devices, to make us see and understand afresh, correctly. Thus the more formalised, the more 'true', the 'closer to 'reality''.¹⁰ This idea is found in Vertov's *Lef* articles, too, for what characterises the cinema-eye is the *differences* between it and the human eye – hence the emphasis on close-up, unnatural perspective and slow and fast motion. But attractive as the idea is, it does not solve the problem, for the 'truth' or 'reality' the estrangement conveys remains completely ineffable, a momentary spark flashing between remote poles brought together by the artist, and the means used to achieve it can degenerate into a new Marinism, or even, as Tretyakov saw, into a decorative device. Nor did the Germans solve the related problem of their equation of technical revolution in art and revolution of the political tendency of art. The most advanced theorist of this

German avant-garde, Walter Benjamin, got no further than some cryptic metaphors.¹¹

So far my discussion has concentrated on literary theory, with a few references to the visual arts. What about the cinema?¹² The stress on fact obviously indicated documentary, but this involved a change in the definition of *material*. Discussing literature, Tretyakov used this term in a way deriving both from Marx's definition of 'raw material' as material already the result of a certain initial labour of extraction, and from the formalist critics' conception of the relation between literary and extra-literary (but linguistic) 'series' (*ryad*): hence letters, memoirs, newspapers, etc. Where photography and the cinema were concerned, it clearly implied a marked hostility to fiction and illusion. All the futurists seem to have shared Brik's hostility to the 'fake Lenin' in Eisenstein's *October*: at a Sovkino meeting in 1927, Mayakovsky declared 'I promise you that at the most solemn moment, whenever it may be, I shall give this fake Lenin the bird and cover him with rotten eggs'.¹³ This hostility to 'fakes' applied *a fortiori* to psychologically realistic acting. Meyerhold's production of *The Government Inspector* (1926) was seen as a betrayal of his earlier 'bio-mechanical' style of acting and as a retreat to the ground of RAPP or even Voronsky. But on the other hand, it is possible to categorise a wide range of phenomena as factual material, from candid camera to certain kinds of artificial re-enactment. Hence the dispute about the 'play' versus the 'unplayed' film. Secondly, a stress on documentary raises the problem of the script. Once the fictional story has been rejected, what is to replace it? Arvatov and Brik favoured a script based on the properties of the object, the process to be represented in the film. Hence the latter attacked Vertov for what he saw as decorative constructivism, and Eisenstein for historical distortion and the use of metaphor, preferring Shub's historical documentaries to either.¹⁴ As well as being hostile to the potential RAPPism of the 'fake Lenin', Brik suspected the 'Litfront' emphasis on agitprop in Eisenstein. Shklovsky, on the other hand, true to his principles, approved the metaphorical montage of *October*, stressing only the dangers of *conventional* uses of such metaphor and *conventional* distortions of historical fact.

These divergent critical opinions and divergent artistic methods (for Vertov and Eisenstein were members of the Left Front of the Arts, and therefore the colleagues of their critics) are thus not so disparate as they might seem, nor are they the last gasps of a heroic movement under intolerable political pressure. On the contrary, they are the record of the theoretical problems produced by the achievements of Russian futurism in literature, the visual arts and the cinema, and the responses of the futurist artists to the October Revolution. That they did not solve these problems is not surprising. If they are to be solved (and it is crucial that they should be now that the classical narrative cinema has come into

66 question again), these texts should be carefully and critically studied, not accepted as solutions, nor rejected as simply incoherent or as distorted by bureaucratic political intervention.

References

1. A. A. Bogdanov: 'Critique of Proletarian Art', *Proletarskaya Kultura*, 1918 no 3, pp 12-21, German translation in Richard Lorenz ed, *Proletarische Kulturrevolution in Sowjetrußland*, Munich 1969, p 43.
2. Translated by Richard Sheldon, Ithaca and London 1970.
3. For the 'heroic phase' of Russian futurism see Vladimir Markov: *Russian Futurism, a History*, London 1969.
4. See Edward J. Brown: *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature 1928-32*, New York 1953.
5. See Helga Gallas: *Marxistische Literaturtheorie, Kontroversen im Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller*, Neuwied and Berlin 1971.
6. *Manifeste, Schriften deutscher Künstler des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*, Bd.I, ed Diether Schmidt, Dresden 1965, p 358.
7. *Erwin Piscator, Political Theatre 1920-1966*, exhibition catalogue, London 1971, p 10.
8. Tretyakov visited Berlin in 1931, met Brecht and many leading members of the BPRS, and was attacked in *Die Linkskurve* by Lukács (see Gallas, op cit, pp 123-5). In the USSR, he was close to Piscator after the latter settled there in 1931.
9. A feuilleton is a regular column in a newspaper which makes a moral or political point about the day's news, usually by linking two unrelated news items together in some unexpected way – the conceit is as important as the overt point. Feuilletons are found in French papers and in papers modelled on French ones; in Russia they had a particularly spectacular development. Robert Escarpit's *Au jour le jour* column in *Le Monde* is a good example of a feuilleton. For an analysis of the technique of the feuilleton, see Viktor Shklovsky: *Gamburgsky Schët*, Leningrad 1928.
10. See Victor Erlich: *Russian Formalism, History-Doctrine*, Paris and the Hague, 3rd edition 1969, pp 176-7.
11. Eg: 'It is a commonplace that political tendencies inhabit every work of art in every epoch, in that such tendencies are historical forms of consciousness. But just as deeper rock strata only come to light where they outcrop, so the deeper formation 'tendency' is only visible to the eye in the outcrop points of the history of art. . . . Technical revolutions are the outcrop points of the development of art where tendency always comes to the surface, is in some sense exposed. In every new technical revolution, the tendency changes as if of itself from a very hidden element to a manifest one,' *Die Literarische Welt* Jg3 (1927), No 11, p 7; cit. Helmut Lethen: *Neue Sachlichkeit 1924-32, Studien zur Literatur des 'Weissen Sozialismus'*, Stuttgart 1970, p 130. For a general account of Benjamin's aesthetic positions, *ibid*, pp 127-139.
12. For the Russian cinema and Left Front influence on it, see Jay Leyda: *Kino*, London 1960, and *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No 218-232, esp. No 220-221, May-June 1970 and 226-7 (Jan-Feb 1971).
13. See Angelo Maria Ripellino: *Majakovskij e il teatro russo d'avanguardia*, Turin 1959, p 260n.
14. Vertov's reply to this criticism is discussed by A. Fevral'ski in an article in *Iskustvo Kino*, December 1965, published in French translation in *Cahiers du Cinéma* No 229, May-June 1971, pp 27-33.

From the outset Lef has worked on the problem of the social function of things produced by workers in art. The task is – to isolate from among the confusion of (often conscious) intentions, the real social purpose of an object, that is, the effect it produces; then to establish the methods and conditions which produce this effect most fully, and most economically in terms of forces and means.

In the five years of its existence, Lef's most notable results have been in two fields – literature and the fine arts (IZO).

To the easel painting, which supposedly functions as 'a mirror of reality' Lef opposes the photograph – a more accurate, rapid and objective means of fixing fact.

To the easel painting – claimed to be a permanent source of agit – Lef opposes the placard, which is topical, designed and adapted for the street, the newspaper and the demonstration, and which hits the emotions with the sureness of artillery fire.

In literature, to *belles-lettres* and the related claim to 'reflection' Lef opposes reportage – 'factography' – which breaks with literary art traditions and moves entirely into the field of publicism to serve the newspaper and the journal. This is what is meant by Lef prose which we are disseminating through various newspaper articles and publishing in exemplary extracts in the journal *New Lef*.

On the other hand, Lef continues to promote poetry which it places within a definite agit function, assigns clear tasks in publicism and coordinates with other newspaper material.

These are the two fields from which the Lef formula of art is developing. If fact is needed – old art is no use. Old art deforms fact – to grasp fact use new methods.

If stimulus and agit are needed – assemble all the appropriate material available, but bear in mind that agit divorced from a concrete aim to which it is directed, agit transformed into agit in general, a play on nerves, stimulation for its own sake, is agit aesthetics and operates in society like drugs or dangerous drink.

While major poetic forms such as, for instance, the narrative poem, may still be the subject of controversy within Lef from the standpoint of their functional expediency, there is no controversy over such forms as the feuilleton, the slogan and the pragmatically orientated agit-poem.

The fixing of fact and agit represent two basic functions. In considering these we must also consider the devices through which these functions can be realised.

The art product operates (chiefly) as either intellectualisation or emotionalisation. In fact these may well represent two functional axes in relation to which the old concepts 'epic' and 'lyric' are now crystallising. We consider that with increased precision of work in art, the former will gain ground at the expense of the latter. We are moving towards a time when the intellectual content of facts will give them agit effect far surpassing that of any emotionalised pressuring.

It can be assumed that the schema appropriate to the fine arts will apply equally to the cinema.

Film production is a field in which Lef has recently concentrated particular energy, establishing production practices, studying film making and constructing a theory of cinema.

In this field theoretical research is in full swing. On questions of cinema the unarmed (or indeed those armed by Lef-Eaters) may see only anarchy of opinions in Lef theory and an apparent absence of any structuring constants. This is not the case.

When Lef theorists analyse formal and material distinctions between the 'play' film and the 'unplayed' film, Tretyakov proceeds from the film material, Shklovsky from the narrative structure of the scenario, Zhemchuzhny from the shooting arrangements, and so on, hence the apparent variations.

But when the question is the social function of these two categories, then Lef's orientation emerges immediately and clearly: on the one hand towards the cinema of fact – the news-reel in the widest sense of the term – and on the other hand to the pragmatically orientated, topical, publicistic agit-film.

At the same time it must be stressed that Lef in no sense equates the cinema of fact with cheap cinema, as does Comrade Blyakhin (*Izvestiya* 25.12.27) in an article which expresses views of the 'unplayed' film generally in accord with those of Lef.

The cinema of fact, if it is not to be discredited by amateurishness, hackwork and dullness, demands at least an equal place with the play film in estimates in terms of facilities and finance.

As far as the remaining mass of so-called 'entertainment' film production is concerned, the agit function of which is dubious since it lacks either actuality, or publicism, or pragmatic orientation, it is the business of Lef to sort out cinematic publicism from among the cinematic *belles-lettres*.

The Lef analysis of the social function of film genres and the related struggle for and against them is the main content of Lef work now and in the future.

We Raise the Alarm,
S. Tretyakov (*New Lef* No 2, 1927)

The Civil War was also a period of fierce struggle on the art front. The revolutionary Futurists and Com-Futs were not just a detach-

ment of anti-traditionalists rushing in to conquer the tastes of the period. They flung art into the thick of revolutionary activity. They set the tone and held the hegemony in the field of aesthetic forms. Their innovations and projects, while not always fully realised, were always significant and grandiose. Tatlin's Tower, Mayakovsky's *Mystery Bouffe*¹, the Rosta Posters and the RSFSR productions and in common ideas of the epoch as important and inspiring as those that give rise to the worker's army and communist Saturday labour. The greatest achievement of left art in that period was the establishment of the principle of production art, whereby the former entertainer/joker/clown/conjurer/hanger-on of society's entertainment world switched categorically to the ranks of the workers, exchanging an aesthetic fantasy for the creation of things that were useful and needed by the proletariat.

Lef was the form which the activities of revolutionary Futurism took in the conditions of the New Economic Policy – an association of workers in left art. Lef means Left front, and Left front implies opposition to any other front. The novelty of the Lef position as against the position of Com-Fut lay in the fact that the principles established in the preceding period now had to be realised in conditions of competitive production with other group suppliers of aesthetic products. 'Who's side are you on?' proved to be an urgent question in the field of art too. The whole of academy art ranged itself against Lef. Academy art was economically powerful for it had once again found its old, well-trying consumer. It demanded a licence to trade and this was obligingly granted in the shape of the formula about 'assuming the cultural heritage'.

'Who's side are you on?' – a frenetic rag fair had broken out in the marketplace of aesthetic products where talent, charlatany and all kinds of fine imitations elbowed each other furiously. Their guidelines were the box office takings and production costs, their aims, to satisfy the tastes of the consumer. They lost no time in disassociating themselves from 'Lefism' even while appropriating Lef formal devices for their own constructivist nicknacks. But Lef proved to have staying power and vitality. Wherever artistic initiative was needed. Lef emerged and acted, to each piece of expediency on the part of academism, Lef raised its own utilitarian-based objection. But since Lef considered that an aggressive stance was vital, it had at all costs to maintain a distance between itself and its enemies: failing this it would have found itself thrust into the general melee where it would have had its arms pinned and been paralysed. As it was, the roach that crept up from the right wing of art did in fact paralyse Lef to a significant extent by taking over all its inventions, terminology, techniques, constructivist devices, parading itself in Lef colours to the point where the inexperienced eye would have been hard put to dis-

tinguish where a wooden construction was a construction and where a postcard with an inscription, where verse was a controlled organisation of language, and where simply musty lyricism.

'Who's side are you on?' was transformed into 'anything goes, with anyone, and anywhere', and embraces all-round. Instead of a struggle there came the sermon which preached inter-departmental agreement in the bosom of a single 'Soviet' art. Ideological differences in art were annulled – everything was reduced to a question of formal and technical differences. A band of all-embracing associations arose, flying the 'red' 'Revolutionary', 'Soviet', banner.

New Lef had not come into existence by chance, and the bearers of the innovatory initiative could not accept this 'peace and goodwill to all departments' as appropriate soil for the blossoming of a Soviet art which would 'strike awe in the hearts of our enemies in the remaining five sixths of the world', as certain admirable and responsible comrades like to put it.

Drawing the teeth of natural enemies in the art field can lead to only one thing – they all end up toothless. The greatest sin for a worker in the art field now is not lack of talent or inventiveness, but on the contrary, principles. Note that when a Lef artist is asked to work in cinema he is told firmly, 'We're asking you as a specialist, not as a Lefist'. Translated this means 'give us first class subtitles for any old film we care to pass you but have the goodness to keep your nose out of the opinions and intentions of the cinema authorities who are floating on clouds of "satisfaction" for the philistine and diverting film production from its cultural role to the manufacture of aesthetic hashish'. A general levelling always has a soothing effect on the bureaucratic heart. Try to prove that when he wrote *War and the Universe* – a profoundly revolutionary, international and anti-war work – the lumpen-intellectual Mayakovsky actually wrote something quite decadent. That's a difficult thing to prove isn't it? – As difficult as perjury. What a difference it makes when poets are firmly divided into groups neatly corresponding to the class categories of a basic course in political studies: proletariat=VAPP, peasantry=Union of Peasant Writers, bourgeoisie=Union of Writers. But for this classification it would be clear to everyone that the nadsonian lyrics of say someone like Vyatich with his absolute indifference to mastering even the rudiments of verse writing – was essentially an anti-cultural and aesthetically conservative phenomenon whose effect must be the lowering of quality. But given the existence of the Union, the system of indicators is stood on its head: Vyatich equals peasant poet, therefore what he writes is characteristic of and necessary to the countryside, therefore Gosizdat publishes.

The first fact against which Lef must take a stand is this replacement of intergroup wars of principles by a levelling of all

the conflicting tendencies within the protection of a corporative-type union.

The battle for form has been reduced to a battle for the stylistic sign. New inventions in the field of form are no longer weapons for cultural advance, but merely a new ornament, a new embellishing device, a new addition to the assortment of aesthetic embroideries and rattles offered to the public. Those who assemble these rattles of course bring them out wrapped in the padding of statement about 'social command', 'social need', 'reflections of revolutionary construction'. Who's going to strain his head and his patience over questions of form when it is not by the sign of quality that a product breaks into wide publication. In the field of form, the stereotype reigns supreme, but even the stereotype is mis-used. Remember Tugendkhold's ecstasies over the 'godpainters' who put an archangel's headdress adorned with a five-point star on the Red Army man and painted his face so that the religio-mystical effect to which icon painting forms are directed completely swallowed up our own in no sense religious or mystical conception of the Red Army man. The subjection of material to inappropriate formal means can only lead to the distortion of the splendid material offered by Soviet reality.

Soviet reality fixed by the lens of a Soviet camera (even in the form of a painted photograph if the preservation of a colour impression is called for) which finds a place in the pages of an illustrated journal is as important and essential as daily bread. But the same material hanging on the walls of an AkhRR (see biographical notes and acronyms p 91) exhibition in the form of an easel painting – which for all its sympathies in this direction the AkhRR hasn't an idea where to put or how to use – is material fixed by the outworn devices of a transplant art and therefore material ruined.

'Red' icon painting devices lend themselves to this kind of distortion of material (proud, fiery-eyed leaders, selfless marching pioneers, peasant Ivans with their heraldic sickles): All of this is a feature of the agit-poster, against which if I am not mistaken, the AkhRR is waging a battle, but whose devices they seem to be attempting to adapt to their own needs. I won't even discuss the notorious instances of distortion which occur when a painter armed with a camera goes for a stroll, shoots his material, and then proceeds to smear the honest and accurate photograph with all sorts of 'personally significant' but absolutely inaccurate daubs of colour.

Our cinema is also a field where material is ruined, and precisely in areas where room was given to the creators of cinematic stereotypes and their activities. Thus unskilled hands have completely ruined the splendid material presented by the Civil War and the history of the Revolution. *Battleship Potemkin*³ rehabilitated this material at a moment when the term 'civil war film' had been

finally discredited in the film studios. Our Near East was ruined in the same sort of way: the model structure for all kinds of exoticism which is a feature of the imperialist's colonial novel was adapted where a new, original, Soviet, operative approach to the life of underdeveloped peoples should have been found.

It is a fact that once the concern with form lessened, what remained was the line of least resistance, the reactivation of already worn-out formal models and the rejection of innovations in form. The persistent cry of the 'saviours of art' against so-called stunts and conjuring tricks has led to a situation where they are now credited with the defence of either the crudely talented, or of the good old stereotype.

The first mistake of these 'saviours' was their endorsement of the formula form/content, 'what'/'how' (rather than Lef's proposed 'material-purpose-form/thing') and in the activation of each part separately. The second mistake, the forced pedalling of the 'primacy of content' (i.e. of a completely indeterminate and undifferentiated phenomenon) was in fact realised in a deterioration in form. The 'how' flew up the chimney. Surely 'how' has its own noun – 'quality' [the Russian *kak-kachestvo* (how-'howness')] permits this pun on the part of the writer] and the struggle for how/quality is the struggle for form. The struggle for quality in art has now been replaced by a struggle for the reinstatement of the pre-war stereotype, what has happened is a flight backwards into the wilderness.

The fall of interest in the constructivist schema, in innovation by mastercraftsmen, cannot be disputed. Where five years ago people went to the productions of the 'October of the theatre'⁴ to see a director's work whatever the play, they now go to see a play irrespective of how and by what theatre it is produced. What is appropriate for our day is an orientation towards the material, a focus on material in its most raw form – the memoir, the diary, sketch, article, outline. But the artist/cooks of the day turn up their noses at such low, topical, journalistic forms and go on nailing up living material in the stereotype coffins of tales and romances.

The fall of interest in form is equally the tragedy of today's poets since verse is precisely that verbal construct in which the formal elements are underlined.

Material in raw forms – this is the vanguard of contemporary art. But raw forms can only serve an informational purpose and this is the tragedy of the situation – as soon as the question of the use of material on levels other than that of pure information arises, say in agit – pre-war formal devices immediately appear on the scene and thanks to them the material is either deformed as we have seen, or is immediately subjected to the aims of aesthetic diversion from reality and its task of construction.

But the pre-war norm has its defenders:

Why should art be concerned with raising quality and seeking new forms when the basic mass of consumers of aesthetic products swallow them in the pre-war models and even praise them. Down with innovation; down with experiment; long live the aesthetic inertia of the masses.

There is only one context in which the public can honestly be fed the pre-war aesthetic norm: when what is intended is the pre-war norm's corresponding social purpose – to draw the consciousness and emotions of the consumer away from the essential tasks of reality. And this is the point we have reached. The pre-war norm in form has drawn after it the pre-war norm in ideology: art as relaxation, art as pleasant stimulus, art as diversion . . . is this not a variation on the old 'art as dream, day-dream, fantasy'? The day dream has in fact been given full reign, such sugary day dream that it's even nauseated comrade Bukharin, and he's such a busy man!

The cry 'down with agit-art' is already old hat, 'long live reflection' already has a hollow ring. The latest cry of the 'back to the past' brigade is 'down with topicality! Volkenstein praises Meyerhold's *The Government Inspector*⁵ for its retreat from topicality and transforms his praise into a motto.

A full stop has been reached. The pre-war norm has been achieved. The altar of art has resurged out of the tedious abysses of our 'depressing, grey, everyday reality' to provide citizens with a legalised daily escape route into the kingdom of dream/stereotypes. Topical raw material still survives, but never mind. Volkenstein will deal with that too. The specialists will invent a means of getting imaginative exoticism from Party history material, or treat it in say, ancient Roman or Babylonian tones, or even in the Sergievo-suburbs-iconpainting style⁶ and everyone will feel that art is serving revolutionary construction (well of course, look at the themes, incidents, characters) while in reality art will be serving a philistine escapism from the revolution.

These are the four dangers:

- levelling
- lowering of form
- pre-war stereotypes
- art as a drug

Lef is aware and will fight responsibly
for an aggressive, class-active art
for innovation appropriate to the tasks of socialist construction
for art/lifebuilding, art/activator, art/agit

Present: O. Brik, V. Zhemchuzhny, A. Lavinsky, M. Machavaryani, P. Neznamov, V. Pertsov, S. Tretyakov, E. Shub, V. Shklovsky, L. Esakia, and others.

Tretyakov

Nowhere is Lef working more intensively than in the cinema. Yet lately we have been criticised for not practising what we preach: it's been said that Lef theory can sometimes be diametrically opposed to the work it is doing in the production sphere. This is the first question we need to confront.

We need to define our work in terms of what we reject, what we consider arbitrary and what we believe needs to be argued in words and action. Lef does have a general line, but the weight of work at the level of production has meant that it has been only partially articulated – it needs to be made explicit.

The second question concerns the basic problem of contemporary cinema – the 'play' film/'unplayed' film controversy. This requires a theoretical analysis to clarify distinctions and oppositions. Perhaps the actual 'play' film/'unplayed' film opposition is itself an unfortunate formulation of the problem.

There have been attempts to establish the degree of 'play' involved at the various stages of film production. The element of 'play' is the random personal factor which may be introduced by the director, the scenario writer, or the actor, and it is this element which determines the degree of 'play' in a given film sequence. . . .

It has never been my view that Lef should be concerned with the documentary exclusively – this would be rather one-sided. I have always felt that there is every justification for the fact that the Lef cover bears two names: Eisenstein and Vertov. These two men are working with precisely the same apparatus, but with two different methods. With Eisenstein the agitational aspect predominates and the film material is subordinated to this function. With Vertov it is the informational aspect which predominates with the stress on the material itself.

But can Vertov's work be called pure documentary? Pure documentary is the editing of facts simply in terms of their actuality and social significance. When a fact becomes a brick in a construction of a different kind – the pure documentary concept disappears; everything depends on the montage.

Whether or not a film is a 'play' film or an 'unplayed' film to my mind is a question of the degree of deformation of the material out of which the film is composed: the random personal factor in any given film. 'Interpretation' is from the start a one-

sided exploitation of the material. I would for instance call the film *The Great Road*⁷ a 'play' film, but a film 'played' by a single character, Esfir Ilishna Shub. The personal factor in her case is artistic, her selection of material purely aesthetic, directed towards achieving a certain emotional charge in the auditorium through the arrangement of montage attractions. But Shub is here dealing with material of a certain cultural level which has been minimally deformed.

The reaction of a viewer who said with feeling after watching Shub's *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*⁸: 'It's a pity there are those gaps, they should have been scripted in', was not such a stupid one. This man valued not the authenticity of the material, but the effect the film had on him on the strength of which he asked for the blanks to be filled in by inauthentic material. . . . I think that in order to distinguish between the 'play' film and the 'unplayed' film (the terminology is arbitrary) one must have in mind the scale of deformation in the elements from which the film is composed. By deformation I mean the arbitrary distortion and displacement of 'raw' elements.

Such deformation operates first of all on the level of the material (from the moment the question 'What is to be filmed?' is asked and a selection made of the material required from the total mass of material available). Secondly, the deformation of material occurs with the selection of camera position, the arrangement of lighting, and thirdly, at the stage of montage, through the director.

Measured against such a deformation scale, the material falls into three categories: *in flagrante*, scripted, and 'played'. The first category covers material caught red-handed, Vertov's 'life slap-up'. Here deformation is minimal, but it nevertheless has its own scale since it is possible, for instance, to film a subject without his being aware of being filmed. . . . I have for example discussed with Shub the possibility of walling cameras up in the street to film passersby. . . . This would produce shots of the typical in which the personal element in choice of camera position had been eliminated.

When a cameraman films, he inevitably introduces something individual into his work. This is not problematic if he proceeds from certain premises: natural lighting, calculated sharpness in focus, a preliminary working out of relationships between groups, etc. But we should take a stand against randomness in the cameraman's selection of camera position. Why should a cameraman dance around his subject? The usual explanation is that in this way the subject is shown from all sides. But there is surely a distinction between the position necessary for the fullest representation of the object, and an arbitrary aesthetic 'contemplation' of the object from all sides.

The material '*in flagrante*' of the first category is therefore the most objective. The next degree along the deformation scale

represents the slightly more impure '*in flagrante*' material which results when the presence of a camera affects the behaviour of the subject being filmed. He sees the handle turning and his movements become artificial, he begins to give a distorted version of himself, to present himself as an icon rather than as you want to see him.

The third degree along the scale in this category is the filming of life '*in flagrante*', but using artificial lighting; for instance the filming of a peasant family in natural conditions, in a dark hut, when the natural lighting is changed by the positioning of lights in various corners of the room.

The second category, which I have labelled 'scripted' material, I will illustrate with the following example. I film a woodcutter at work; I bring him to a tree selected by me, and ask him to chop it down while I film. His work is being done to order, but I have set in motion his professional habits and therefore the deformation involved is minimal. This is in fact a description of the way work with the actor-model operates; he is selected as material which corresponds in its concrete qualities, habits and reflex actions to the image required on the screen. This is how Eisenstein works – he chooses people with the appropriate faces, habits and movements. There is of course an undoubted orientation towards play in this structure but to a far lesser degree than with the professional actor. The 'free' personal element introduced by the actor is here replaced by the authentic action of a correctly selected reflex. . . .

The task of the director of the 'unplayed' film is to get as close as possible to the 'raw', to material 'slap-up'. For us in Lef it is important to delimit the practical possibilities in relation to the dictates of social command and thus to establish the limit towards which our concrete daily work must be directed. This is why, in setting up our maximum-programme we demand: give us 'Kino-eye' and 'life slap-up', etc.

But insofar as there is a need for emotional stimulus, we work with the montage of attractions method, insofar as our hands must be free to affect the viewer, we will also need to concern ourselves with material of another kind: we may perhaps also need to defend scripted material, that is, to work with the methods of Eisenstein.

And now for a word or two about depersonalised material.

The documentary needs clear indication that the image on the screen represents a particular man at a particular moment in a particular place, doing something specific. The loss of this 'specificity' of the image generalises the object and the viewer observes it as a depersonalised and 'type' representation.

Example: barge haulers towing a barge, the usual colour combinations are: barge haulers, ropes and barge, grey. The cameraman, waits for a ray of light, then shoots an effective shot but does not however convey that this represents barge haulers taken

at a moment of visually effective lighting. The viewer therefore receives an impression of bargehaulers which is exceptional, not typical.

Finally, the film direction. There is on the one hand the director-cameraman who looks for the typical shot and natural lighting, without forcing the material. And then there is the 'play' director who sees himself as the sole master and interpreter of the material. He usually justifies his random free personal interpretation of material on the basis of intuitions: the director who is at once a specialist and a publicist is rare. Most often the director will tell you: 'That's how it seemed to me, that's what I felt'. He has a visual taste approach to the evaluation of a film which is personal to him.

And so it seems to me that the apparently sharp demarcation line between the 'play' film and the 'unplayed' film is in fact extremely relative.

The question of 'play' film as against 'unplayed' film is the question of respect for fact as against fiction, for contemporaneity as against the past.

Shklovsky

The point is that there are some extremely useless clever people about and some extremely useful mistakes. Talking to the documentary film-makers, I find it is relatively easy to break them down, but the mistakes they are making are extremely useful in terms of both art and cinema: they are the mistakes that lead to innovation.

The distinction between 'play' and 'unplayed' film is an elementary one of course, but there is nothing to be gained from hammering something we haven't understood: the material itself is always intelligent, if we haven't been able to analyse certain distinctions within it, the fault is with our analysis and not with the material.

It's been suggested here that Kuleshov and Eisenstein are the 'play' film, while Shub and Vertov are the 'unplayed'. But they all sat in the same company, Shub learnt her montage on the 'play' film, while the play film director studied montage on the documentary.

It's a very old problem: Goethe once said – 'You sit right opposite a tree, draw it as carefully as you can, and what becomes of that tree on paper?'

It's the same with a camera. Certain problems are not easy to solve by the laws of physics: whether to have a fixed camera position, or whether the cameraman should move round a 'play' actor or the actor around the 'unplayed' cameraman. The problem is raised from the very beginning, by the way a shot is set up, which already involves an element of 'play'. . . .

The best moments in Shub's film are the sequences which show Dybenko – he has no idea how to face a camera and wavers between smiles and putting on a heroic face. And this piece of 'play' with the cameraman constitutes a moment of genius in this excellent film.

I've watched VIP's being filmed and they could be signed up in the artist's union right away. The camera no sooner starts to roll than they're there in the frame, they've taken up their positions and launched into conversation with each other.

Obviously the 'play'/'unplayed' division itself is at fault because it generates a general law.

What Shub is doing and Vertov is getting ready to do has many analogies in literature. For instance, Tolstoy: he is almost entirely an 'unplayed' writer since he takes three or four pages of historical material and it's enough for him to change a word to transform it into literature. . . . And Brik recently showed me a parody on Dostoevsky where he writes: 'you still haven't had my last final chapter of *Crime and Punishment* so take some court case and substitute Raskolnikov for the name of the accused – I haven't had time to write it'.

The play side of art shouldn't be exaggerated. The phenomenon of 'play' is inherent in art, but art itself periodically reorientates itself towards the material.

And in this respect the erring documentary film makers were correct and are correct now in that they rightly bring forward the material. The consequence is that the material takes priority. For today.

For this reason I consider that for all the complexity and controversial nature of the 'play'/'unplayed' question, the problem is not one of who is doing the seeing or revealing, or how he sees or reveals, but how to assess the degree of usefulness and depth achieved.

Lef is faced with a task that is more extensive than the problem of the 'play' film as against the 'unplayed' film, and that is the question of the priority of the material.

Curiously enough Rabis has just recently distributed us with a draft of its writer's agreement which contains, among other things, one very odd item. This item lays down how many hours are required for the writing of a scenario. The agreement reckons on 75 hours and an hourly rate of pay.

Karl Marx wrote that everything could be translated into hours except writing: Marx's work was written a long time ago and was of course based on the material. But this is far from the mind of Rabis.

Let's take the formula for the composition of a work: some people have the very strange idea that the starting point is a narrative structure which is then filled out by material. The Lef idea is that a man begins by studying the material, only then does

the question of how that material is to be formulated arise.

There are moreover both narrative and non-narrative representations of reality; non-narrative cinema is nevertheless thematic. . . .

What practical suggestions do I have? Firstly – instead of the division into film documentary and ‘play’ film, a division between narrative and non-narrative cinema.

A certain Bragin suggested that a film was needed on the subject of corn, and then himself proceeded to squeeze in a love theme. There’s been a lot of talk about rye lately and how it’s being exported to London now. Well corn and love make a fine pair and should be packed off to London too – there’s no sense in them.

Saltykov-Schedrin once made the point that you could only introduce family events into the framework of a family novel. Our main tragedy today is that we have a soviet empire style afflicted with restorationist themes. When a form has been misapplied but persists for a number of decades it is universalised. And so the inevitable love theme is being pushed into everything. . . .

Our misfortune and error is not just that we don’t know how to distinguish between the ‘play’ film and the ‘unplayed’ film but that within the organisation of cinema we don’t always know how to defend the material and begin our work on material which has no merit from an artistic point of view. . . .

Shub

The whole problem can be reduced to the question of what it is we should be filming today. When this has been resolved, the terminology – ‘play’ or ‘unplayed’ – will be unimportant. The essential fact is that we are Lef.

Lef believes that only the filming of the documentary is relevant for our times, in order to preserve our epoch for future generations, just that. This means that we want to film today’s times, today’s people, today’s events. Whether Rykov or Lenin ‘play’ badly or well in front of the camera, and whether or not this represents a moment of play are questions which do not disturb us. The important thing is that the camera is filming both Lenin and Dybenko, even if they don’t know how to present themselves to the camera, since this feature is most characteristic of them.

Why does Dybenko come across to us in such a non-abstract way on the screen? Precisely because this is Dybenko himself, and not someone portraying Dybenko. The fact that an element of ‘play’ is involved doesn’t trouble us. . . . Everything is a question of technique and when we have good lighting equipment, and the technical apparatus for mounting a shot properly, the element of play will begin to disappear.

What we need to fight for now is not the documentary – this is being stressed all around us in the newspapers and by people every-

80 where. We don't have to argue for the documentary anymore, our work is a better argument than any article. What is important now is the fight for the conditions which make work of quality possible. We have gathered the material, and the skills we will master with time.

Where does the idea come from that we are not interested in making emotionally effective films? The point is that our concern is with the material and with questions of the kind of material we want to work with.

Have we denied the importance of the element of skill? Not at all. We believe that a high degree of skill can produce a film composed of 'unplayed' material which will surpass any art film. But everything depends on the technical possibilities available and on the method, and this is what we should be discussing.

Film Platform (*New Lef* No 3, 1928)

Since he was unable to attend the Lef debate, Comrade Arvatov has sent us his contribution which we publish below.

Arvatov

New Lef No 11/12 of 1927 contained a report of an interesting debate on what constitutes Lef cinema, i.e. left cinema, i.e. obviously, production cinema, understanding under this term the socio-technical utilisation of art.

The conclusions reached were not unanimous, but there was enough of a consensus for the following to emerge: Lef theory considers cinema of the right to be characterised by 'play', narrative-structure (*fabula*) and deformation of the object, while a film of the left is 'unplayed', non-narrative and does not deform the object.

Firstly, a few words on the misunderstanding of the concept of narrative structure.

The term is used to describe the succession of events which makes up the theme (*syuzhet*) of an art product. Bourgeois art tradition has taught us to consider that narrative structure belongs to the realm of imagination (the tale, the story, etc) but any fact out of reality developed in time obviously has a narrative structure – it would be doctrinaire for instance to deny the existence of a narrative structure in the film *Petroleum*, and this is not something to be regretted. On the contrary, the narrative structure is possibly one of the main factors in aesthetic expression – to reject it would be to deprive revolutionary art of one of the powerful advantages of art in general.

This problem is tightly bound up with the problem of 'deformation' and the problem of so-called agit-art. The view was expressed at the Lef debate – and no particular objections were raised – that Lef theory defends two types of artistic activity: agit-art (agit-verse, the living paper, the placard, etc) and art-organiser of reality (industrial art, the feuilleton, the demonstration, etc), and consequently, the agit-film and the documentary; it was suggested that while the agit-film was to a large extent obliged to resort to 'play' and to the deformation of the subject, the less there was of these two elements, the closer the film approached the category of Lef and production art. However, the absence of 'play', of 'acting', and so on, in a film cannot guarantee its correspondence to the tasks of the proletarian art movement as they are formulated in production art theory. If this were not so, then the best proletarian film makers would be the authors of the so-called abstract German expressionist films and the French *Pathé-journal*. The term 'unplayed' describes a negative characteristic and is therefore inadequate.

On relations to the film object

It was fairly energetically argued at the debate that the only genuine Lef cinema was that in which the object was, so to speak, caught red-handed, when life 'slap up', to use Vertov's expression, is screened, when there has been no preliminary preparation of the 'real' represented. Such a view is pure sectarianism.

Let us suppose that you needed to show the complex process of wood manufacture. What would be the result of a 'life slap up' treatment? Aesthetic impressionism, the nonsense of a Picasso collage. From the standpoint of the 'life slap up' group, the demonstration of water synthesis at a chemistry lecture is pure theatricality since the good demonstration is not only prepared, but often rehearsed. . . .

The point that needs to be made is that the problem of the film object is wider and more complex than emerged from its treatment at the above-mentioned debate. The misfortune of our cinema revolutionaries is their ill-concealed aesthetic fetishism. When our film-maker comrades bellow against the 'copiers' and cheer for the 'real', for material as it is, they are implanting on society a new and superfluous aestheticism, they are inculcating the savouring of a 'real' peasant like a 'real' Cezanne, of a 'piece' of reality like a 'piece' of fine art, of stunning foreshortened perspective in film like someone or other's 'daring perspective' in representational easel painting or sculpture.

Today's obsession with composition and the image is profoundly formalist, almost on a par with the films of Protazanov and others. More than that – there is at the moment a widespread 'adulation'

82 of the usefulness of an object to the point where usefulness becomes not an aesthetic but an aesthetised category. There are productionists who are convinced that the aesthetic sense of the usefulness of a railway bridge can be absorbed through contemplation analogous to the contemplation of an easel painting representing a bridge. The idea that an aesthetic sense of the useful can only be reached through the use of an object, through utilisation, is foreign to them.

Sociology has the floor

Firstly a few words about the agit film. Recently the papers told us of how a bourgeois film from the 'period of the Soviet Revolution' through shots of the 'expropriation of the exploiters' provoked a revolutionary demonstration in some Italian town. The film was anti-Soviet. Let's take another example. The first revolutionary production of the Soviet cinema, *Battleship Potemkin*, is at the moment making a triumphant tour of bourgeois Europe applauded by audiences which are far from exclusively proletarian. How are we to explain this? By the fact that Eisenstein is, apart from anything else, a revolutionary film-maker and a highly qualified master-craftsman in his field. And further, *Battleship Potemkin* has in essence remained, and still remains, within the bounds of ordinary aesthetic cinema.

These two facts are to be explained as follows: the social and class distinctions which characterise an art product are not to be sought intrinsically within the art product itself – they are extrinsic to it and located in the methods of production and consumption.

The fundamental form produced by bourgeois art was the easel painting. The easel painting is characterised by its autonomy, it is produced independently of the extra-aesthetic branches of human activity and is demanded independently of them. The essence of bourgeois cinema is in the existence of the network of film theatres which gather together film audiences.

Seen from this point of view, the distinction in terms of 'play' and 'unplayed' film – *The Thief of Bagdad*⁹ as against *A Sixth of the World*¹⁰ cannot be considered definitive. Both films are watched for the film itself, as an art product, not as a production of the cinema. Therefore the documentary, insofar as it fails to emerge from the cinema halls, remains a moving picture (*kinokartina*), not a newsreel (*kinogazeta*): and even the travel film and the contemporary scientific or technical film, etc bear the stamp of bourgeois art cinema as well as utilitarianism, as is evident from the fact that a cinema can screen *Petroleum* one week, *In the Jungles of Africa* the second, and *Red Army Manoeuvres* the third – a dubious brand of utilitarianism this. Without denying the inevitability of many transitional forms, I would suggest that if they

are to distinguish themselves from the 'also-lefs', consistent production artists are obliged to have their maximum-programme constantly in mind, making this their point of departure each time the need to place an artistic phenomenon arises.

For cinema the programme is:

1. The film must become a formal technical weapon in daily social construction, not on the level of its ideological interpretation, but in its socio-practical application (film in secondary schools, in universities, research institutes, etc).

2. We must cut down the network of cinemas, take an aggressive stand against the autonomous culture film and agitate for production cinematography in the appropriate 'unititarian' organisations and for the creation of cinema departments within them.

3. The slogan for 'film fixation of fact' must be replaced by slogans for film study, film teaching, film propaganda, film information, etc, and for the training that will transform today's film aesthetes into cadres of future film-makers (not in order to destroy art as some comrades claim, but in order to socialise its function).

The Lef Arena

Comrades: Fight out your ideas!

Theme: *The Eleventh*, Dziga Vertov¹¹

October,¹² Sergei Eisenstein and Grigory Alexandrov.

In the arena: O. Brik, V. Shklovsky

The Eleventh

Dziga Vertov's film *The Eleventh* is an important frontline event in the struggle for the 'unplayed' film: its pluses and minuses are of equal significance and interest.

The film consists of a montage of 'unplayed' film material shot in the Ukraine. Purely in terms of camerawork, Kaufman's filming is brilliant, but on the level of montage the film lacks unity. Why?

Primarily because Vertov has ignored the need for an exact clearly-constructed thematic scenario. Vertov's thoughtless rejection of the necessity for a scenario in the 'unplayed' film is a serious mistake. A scenario is even more important for the 'unplayed' film than for the 'play' film where the term is understood not simply as a narrative-structured exposition of events, but rather as the motivation of the film material. The need for such motivation is even greater in the 'unplayed' film than in the 'play' film. To imagine that documentary shots joined without any inner thematic link can produce a film is worse than thoughtless.

Vertov tries to make the film titles do the work of a scenario but this attempt to use written language as a means of providing the cinematic image with a semantic structure can lead nowhere. A semantic structure cannot be imposed on the film from outside, it exists within the frame and no written additions can compensate for its absence. The reverse is also true, when a determined semantic structure is contained within the frame, it should not be exchanged for written titles.

Vertov has chosen particular film shots from a complete film sequence and joined them to other frames from a different sequence, linking the material under a general title which he intends will merge the different systems of meaning to produce a new system. What happens in fact is that these two sections are drawn back into their basic film parts and the title hovers over them without uniting them in any sense.

The Eleventh contains a long sequence on work in coal mines which has its own semantic structure, and another sequence showing work in a metallurgical plant which also has its own, distinct, semantic structure.

Vertov has joined a few metres from each sequence, intercutting the title 'Forward to Socialism'. The audience, watching the coal mining shots registers the system of meaning of this complete sequence, sees the metallurgical shots and registers this sequence, and no association with the new theme 'Forward to Socialism' is provoked. For this to be achieved new film material is essential. . . .

This fact needs to be firmly established – the further development of the 'unplayed' film is being impeded at the moment by its workers' indifference to the scenario and the need for a preliminary thematic structuring of the overall plan. This is why the 'unplayed' film at present has a tendency to dissolve into separate film parts inadequately held together by heroic inscriptions.

It is curious that Shub's *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, put together out of old film strips, makes a far more total impression, thanks to careful structuring on the levels of themes and montage.

The absence of a thematic plan must inevitably affect the cameraman. For all the brilliance of Kaufman's filming, his shots never go beyond the visual illustration, they are filmed purely for their visual interest and could almost be included in any film. The reportage/publicism element is completely lacking and what emerges is essentially beautiful 'natural' shots, 'unplayed' images for a 'play' film.

This is because Kaufman did not know what theme he was filming for, from what semantic position those shots were to be taken. He filmed things as they seemed most interesting to him as a cameraman; his taste and skill are undeniable, but his material is filmed from an aesthetic, not a documentary, position.

Sergei Eisenstein has slipped into a difficult and absurd situation. He has suddenly found himself proclaimed a world-class director, a genius, he has been heaped with political and artistic decorations, all of which has effectively bound his creative initiative hand and foot.

In normal circumstances he could have carried on his artistic experiments and researches into new methods of film-making calmly and without any strain: his films would then have been of great methodological and aesthetic interest. But piece-meal experiments are too trivial a concern for a world-class director: by virtue of his status he is obliged to resolve world-scale problems and produce world-class films. It comes as no surprise therefore that Eisenstein has announced his intention to film Marx's *Capital* – no lesser theme would do.

As a result there have been painful and hopeless efforts to jump higher than his own height of which a graphic example is his latest film, *October*.

It would, of course, be difficult for any young director not to take advantage of all those material and organisational opportunities that flow from the title of genius, and Eisenstein has not withstood the temptations.

He has decided that he is his own genius-head, he has made a decisive break with his comrades in production, moved out of production discipline and begun to work in a way that leans heavily and directly on his world renown.

Eisenstein was asked to make a jubilee film for the tenth anniversary of October, a task which from the Lef point of view could only be fulfilled through a documentary montage of existing film material. This is in fact what Shub has done in her films, *The Great Road*, and *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*. Our position was that the October Revolution was such a major historical fact that any 'play' with this fact was unacceptable. We argued that the slightest deviation from historical truth in the representation of the events of October could not fail to disturb anyone with the slightest cultural sensitivity.

We felt therefore that the task that Eisenstein had been set – to give not the film-truth (*kinopravda*), of the October events, but a film-epic, a film-fantasy – was doomed in advance. But Eisenstein, who in some areas has moved towards the Lef position, did not share the Lef viewpoint in this instance – he believed that it was possible to find a method of representing October, not as documentary montage, but through an artistic 'play' film. Eisenstein of course rejected the idea of straightforward historical reconstruction from the start. The failure of *Moscow in October*¹³ – a film based purely on the reconstruction of events – showed him to be right in this regard. What he needed was an artistic method for the

From the Lef standpoint such a method does not exist and indeed cannot exist. If Eisenstein had not been loaded down by the weighty title of genius, he could have experimented freely and his experiments might have brilliantly demonstrated the impossibility of the task set him. Now however, alongside pure experiment, he was obliged to create a complete jubilee film, and therefore to combine experiments with form and trite conventions in a way that sits curiously in one and the same work. The result is an unremarkable film.

While rejecting straightforward reconstruction, Eisenstein was obliged one way or another to deal with Lenin, the central figure of the October Revolution, in his jubilee film. To do so he resorted to the most absurd and cheapest of devices: he found a man who resembled Lenin to play the role of Lenin. The result was an absurd falsification which could only carry conviction for someone devoid of any respect or feeling for historical truth.

Eisenstein's film work on the heroic parts of his film analogous to the operations of our cliché painters, like Brodsky or Pchelin, and these sequences have neither cultural nor artistic interest.

Only in episodes fairly distantly related to the development of the October Revolution is his work as a director apparent and it is to these episodes that any discussion of the film has to be limited.

The Women's Battalion. This theme is given much greater prominence in the film *October* than the women's battalion had in the actual historical events. The explanation for this is that women in military uniform represent rich material for theatrical exploitation.

However, in structuring this theme Eisenstein has committed a crude political mistake. Carried away by his satirical portrayal of the woman soldier, he creates, instead of a satire on the women who defended the Provisional Government, a general satire on women who take up arms for any cause at all.

The theme of women involving themselves in affairs that don't concern them draws further strength in Eisenstein's work from juxtapositions in a metaphorical relation of the woman soldier and images like Rodin's *The Kiss* and a mother and child.

The error is committed because Eisenstein exaggerates the satirical treatment of the women without constructing a parallel satire on the power which they were defending and therefore no sense of the political absurdity of this defence is conveyed.

People and things. Eisenstein's search for cinematic metaphors gives rise to a whole series of episodes which intercut the lines of objects and people (Kerensky and the peacock, Kerensky and the statue of Napoleon, the Mensheviks and the high society dinner plate) and in all these constructions, Eisenstein commits the same error.

The objects are not given any preliminary non-metaphorical significance. It is never made apparent that these objects were all to be found in the Winter Palace, that the plate, for instance, was left in the Smolny by the Institute originally housed there. There is therefore no context for their sudden and inexplicable emergence in a metaphorical relation.

While the verbal metaphor allows us to say 'as cowardly as a hare' because the hare in question is not a real hare, but a sum of signs, in film we cannot follow a picture of a cowardly man by a picture of a hare and consider that we have thereby constructed a metaphor, because in a film, the given hare is a real hare and not just a sum of signs. In film therefore a metaphor cannot be constructed on the basis of objects which do not have their own real destiny in terms of the film in which they appear. Such a metaphor would not be cinematic, but literary. This is clear in the sequence which shows a chandelier shuddering under the impact of October gunfire. Since we have not seen this chandelier before and have no sense of its pre-revolutionary history, we cannot be moved by its trembling and the whole image simply calls up incongruous questions. . . .

The unthought out linkage of objects and people leads Eisenstein to build relations between them which have no metaphorical significance at all but are based purely on the principle of visual paradox; thus we have tiny people alongside huge marble feet, and the overlap from earlier metaphorical structures leads the viewer to look for metaphorical significance where none proves to exist.

The opening of the bridge. As a film director Eisenstein could obviously not resist filming the raising of the bridges in Petrograd, but this in itself was not enough. He extended the episode with piquant details, women's hair slipping over the opening, a horse dangling over the Neva. It goes without saying these *guignol* details have no relation to any of the film's themes – the given sequences are offered in isolation, like some spicy side dish, and are quite out of place.

Falsification of history. Every departure from historical fact is permissible only where it has been developed to the level of grotesque and the extent of its correspondence to any reality is no longer relevant. . . .

When departure from historical fact does not approach the grotesque, but remains somewhere halfway, then the result is the most commonplace historical lie. There are many such instances in *October*.

1. The murder of a bolshevik by women in the July Days: There was a similar incident which involved the murder of a bolshevik selling *Pravda* by junkers. In an attempt to heighten the incident, Eisenstein brings in women and parasols – the result is unconvincing and in the spirit of trite stories about the Paris Commune. The parasols prove to have no symbolic value, they

88 function as a shabby prop and distort the reality of the event.

2. The sailors' smashing of the wine cellars: Everyone knows that one of the darker episodes of *October* was the battle over the wine cellars immediately after the overthrow and that the sailors not only did not smash the wine cellars, but looted themselves and refused to shoot at those who came after the wine. If Eisenstein had found some symbolic expression for this affair, say, demonstrating some kind of eventual resolution between proletarian consciousness and the incident, the sequence might have had some justification. But when a real sailor energetically smashes real bottles, what results is not a symbol, not a poster, but a lie. Eisenstein's view as it has been expressed in his most recent articles and lectures is that the artist-director should not be the slave of his material, that artistic vision or, to use Eisenstein's terminology, the 'slogan' must be the basis of cinematography. The 'slogan' determines not only the selection of material, but its form. The Lef position is that the basis of cinematic art is the material. To Eisenstein this seems too narrow, too prone to nail the flight of artistic imagination to the realm of the real.

Eisenstein does not see cinema as a means of representing reality, he lays claim to philosophical cinema-tracts. We would suggest that this is a mistake, that this direction can lead no further than ideographic symbolism. And *October* is the best proof of this.

From our point of view, Eisenstein's main contribution lies in his smashing the canons of the 'play' film, and carrying to the absurd the principle of creative transformation of material. This work was done in literature by the symbolists in their time, by the abstract artists in painting, and is historically necessary.

Our only regret is that Eisenstein, in the capacity of a world-class director, feels obliged to construct 80 per cent of his work on the basis of worn out conventions which consequently considerably lower the value of the experimental work he is trying to carry on in his films.

Eisenstein's *October*.

Reasons for failure, V. Shklovsky.

Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein's talk of the need for a special department in cinema is unnecessary – his film is understandable in a general, not in a special way, and it doesn't call for panic.

Sergei Mikhailovich has raised the question of the reasons for failure, but first we must define what constitutes failure. We all know, many things were received as failures when they first appeared and only later re-assessed as innovations in form.

Sergei Mikhailovich has doubts about his own film in this respect and I too feel there are elements of straightforward failure in the film.

In terms of artistic devices, the film divides into two parts, Lef and academy sections; and while the former is interestingly made, the latter is not.

The academy section of Eisenstein's film is distinguished mainly by its scale and the vast numbers of light units employed. Just by the way, isn't it time an end was put to the filming of wet things? The October Revolution did not take place in a constant downpour and was it worth drenching the Dvortsovaya Square and the Alexandrovsky Column? Thanks to the shower and the thousands of lights, the images look as if they've been smeared with machine oil, but there are some remarkable achievements in these sequences.

One of the branches of cinema is at the moment treading a line somewhere between vulgarity and innovation.

The essential task at the moment is to create the unambiguous cinematic image and reveal the language of film, in other words, to achieve precision in the action of cinematic expression on viewer, to create the language of the film shot and the syntax of montage.

Eisenstein has achieved this in his film. He sets up lines of objects and, for instance, moves from god to god coming in the end to the phallic negroid god and from this through the notion of 'statue' to Napoleon and Kerensky, with a consequent reduction. In this instance the objects resemble each other through only one of their aspects, their divinity, and are distinct from one another through their reverberations on the level of meaning. These reverberations create the sense of differentia essential to an art product. Through the creation of this transitional series, Eisenstein is able to lead the viewer where he wants him. The sequence is linked to the well-known ascent of the (Winter Palace) staircase by Kerensky. The ascent itself is represented realistically, while at the same time the film titles list Kerensky's ranks and titles.

The overstatement of the staircase and the basic simplicity of the ascent, carried out at the same regular pace, and the very disparity between the notions 'ascent' and 'staircase' together constitute a clearly comprehensible formal device. It represents an important innovation, but one which may contain within it certain flaws, that is, it may be imperfectly understood by the author himself.

A degenerated version of this innovation would take the form of an elementary cinematic metaphor with too close a correspondence between its parts; for instance a flowing stream and a moving stream of people, or the heart of some person as a forgetmenot. It is important in this context to bear in mind that the so-called image functions through its non-coincident components -- its aureoles.

In any case, Eisenstein has forged a long way ahead in this direction. But a new formal means when it is created is always received as comic, by virtue of its novelty. That was how the cubists were received, and the impressionists, that's how Tolstoy reacted to the decadentes, Aristophanes to Euripides.

A new form is therefore most suited to material where the comic sense is appropriate. This is how Eisenstein has used his innovation. His new formal device, which will no doubt become general cinematic usage, is only employed by him in the structuring of negative features, to show Kerensky, the Winter Palace, the advance of Kornilov, etc.

To extend the device to the pathetic parts of the film would be a mistake, the new device is not yet appropriate to the treatment of heroism.

The film's failures can be explained by the fact that there is a dislocation between the level of innovation and the material – and therefore the official part of the film is forced rather than creative, instead of being well-constructed it is merely grandiose. The thematic points of the film, its knots of meaning, do not coincide with the most powerful moments of the film.

. . . but art needs advances rather than victories. Just as the 1905 revolution cannot be evaluated simply as a failure, so we can only talk of Eisenstein's failures from a specific standpoint.

Translations by Diana Matias

Notes

1. *Mystery Bouffe* was a verse play written by Mayakovsky in the summer of 1918. It received its first performance, directed by Meyerhold and with Mayakovsky himself playing three parts, on November 7 1918 at the Petrograd Conservatoire, and an expanded and topicalised version was staged, again by Meyerhold, on May Day 1921 at the RSFSR Theatre No. 1 in Moscow. Its subject was a celebration of the workers' victory over various enemies and waverers.
2. *War and the Universe* is a long poem by Mayakovsky written in 1916, but only published in full after the Revolution. The earlier of its five sections celebrate war as the sole hygiene of the world in Marinettian fashion, but the later ones express a millenarian revolutionary pacifism.
3. *Battleship Potëmkin* (Bronenosets 'Potëmkin') directed by Eisenstein, photography by Tisse, sub-titles by Aseev, 1926.
4. Meyerhold became a Communist after being captured by Whites while convalescing from a bout of TB in Yalta, and then rescued by the Red Army. Summoned to Moscow by Lunacharsky, he was made head of TEO, but to Lunacharsky's surprise proclaimed 'October in the Theatre', demanding the nationalisation of the elite Academic Moscow theatres, and setting up his own revolutionary theatre, the RSFSR Theatre No 1. When NEP was introduced in 1921, these projects had to be abandoned, and Meyerhold resigned as head of TEO.
5. Meyerhold's production of his own adaptation of Gogol's *Government Inspector* at the Meyerhold Theatre in December 1926 was

- regarded by the left as a retreat from the bio-mechanics of his dramaturgy from 1921-5 to a traditional naturalism.
6. Sergiev (now Zagorsk) is a town 44 miles North of Moscow built around the Monastery of Trinity-Sergius, home of Andrei Rublëv (c 1360-c 1430), the famous icon painter. Its suburbs became a centre for folk crafts, including painting on wood and it is to this that Tretyakov is presumably referring.
 7. *The Great Road* (Veliky Put), directed and edited by Esfir Šub, 1927. A compilation film telling the story of the ten years that had passed since the October Revolution.
 8. *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (Padeniye dinasti Romanovikh), directed and edited by Esfir Šub, 1927. A compilation film telling the story of the last years of the Russian empire.
 9. *The Thief of Baghdad*, directed by Raoul Walsh, 1924, starring Douglas Fairbanks Sr.
 10. *One Sixth of the World* (Shestaya chast mira), directed by Dziga Vertov, photography by Mikhail Kaufman, 1926. A film made for Gostorg, the State trade agency, to illustrate the resources of the USSR.
 11. *The Eleventh* (Odinnadtsati), directed by Dziga Vertov, photography by Mikhail Kaufman, edited by Elizaveta Svilova, 1928. Film celebrating the eleventh year of Soviet Power and the achievements of the first year of the first Five Year Plan in the Ukraine.
 12. *October* (Oktyabr), directed by Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Alexandrov, photography by Edvard Tisse, 1928.
 13. *Moscow in October* (Moskva v Oktyabre), directed by Boris Barnet, 1927. The film tells the story of the Bolshevik seizure of power in Moscow in 1917.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES AND ACRONYMS

These notes give brief biographical details of all the people mentioned by name in the texts from Lef and Novy Lef and the introductory material, where that information could be found, with the exception of a few political personalities so well-known as to make their inclusion superfluous.

AKHMATOVA, ANNA (Anna Andreyevna Gorenko, 1889-1966)

One of the three outstanding Acmeist poets, the wife of Gumilëv (qv) and later of Punin (qv).

AKhRR (Assotsiatsiya Khudozhnikov Revoliutsionnoi Rossii)

Association of Revolutionary Russian Artists, 1922-32, the equivalent of VAPP (qv) and RAPP for fine artists.

ALTMAN, NATAN ISAEVICH (b 1889)

Artist, founder member of IZO (qv), head of Narkompros (qv) Academic Centre Art Department 1921.

ART OF THE COMMUNE (*Iskustvo Kommuny*)

IZO (qv) journal, founded by Osip Brik (qv) and Nikolai Punin (qv) in December 1918, 19 issues were published before IZO closed it in April 1919.

ARVATOV, BORIS IGNATEVICH (1896-1940)

Art and literary critic, member of Proletkult (qv) then of *Lef* (qv) and *Novy Lef* (qv). Advocate of 'formalist-sociological' method of literary criticism. Worked for IZO (qv).

- ASEEV, NIKOLAI NIKOLAEVICH (1889-1963)**
Poet, member of Moscow Centrifuge futurist group with Pasternak (qv) and Bobrov 1913-16, of Vladivostok futurist group Tvorchestvo (Creation) with Chuzhak (qv) and Tretyakov (qv) 1918-20, of *Lef* (qv) 1923-5 and of *Novy Lef* (qv) 1927-8. Left *Novy Lef* in 1928 with Mayakovsky (qv) to found REF.
- ASS'S TAIL (or Donkey's Tail, *Oslinyi Khvost*)**
A group, or rather exhibition of futurist painters in 1912, including Larionov, Goncharova, Malevich (qv), Tatlin (qv), Von Wiesen, Ledentu and Chagall.
- AVERBAKH, LEOPOLD LEONIDOVICH (1903-37?)**
Literary critic, leading member of VAPP (qv) and RAPP 1925-32. Arrested as Trotskyist in mid 1930's, death shortly thereafter.
- BABEL, ISAAK (1894-1941)**
Short-story writer, author of *Red Cavalry* and *Tales of Odessa*, contributor to *Lef* (qv), arrested in 1930's, death 1941.
- BALMONT, KONSTANTIN DMITRIEVICH (1876-1942)**
Symbolist poet, died in exile in Paris.
- BELINSKY, VISSARION GREGOREVICH (1811-48)**
Russian literary critic, first Russian supporter and theoretician of realism.
- BELY, ANDREI (Boris Nikolaevich Bugaev, 1880-1934)**
Poet and writer, theorist of symbolism, anthroposophist, worked in TEO Narkompros (qv) during Civil War. Emigrated 1921, returned to USSR 1923.
- BENJAMIN, WALTER (1892-1940)**
German critic and philosopher, friend of Brecht's (qv), born and worked in Berlin, emigrated to Paris 1933, committed suicide when captured trying to escape to Spain after the fall of France.
- BLYAKHIN, PAVEL A.**
Writer on the cinema, leading official in Sovkino, wrote scripts, eg. for Perestiani's *Red Imps*, 1923.
- BPRS (Bund Proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller)**
League of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers, German equivalent of RAPP (see VAPP), 1928-32.
- BRIK, OSIP MAKSIMOVICH (1884-1945)**
Literary critic, member of Opoyaz (qv), husband of Lily Brik, friend of Mayakovsky (qv), editor of *Art of the Commune* (qv) for IZO (qv), editor of *Lef* (qv), *Novy Lef* (qv), split from *Novy Lef* with Mayakovsky in 1928 to form REF. Worked in cinema as scriptwriter, eg. for Pudovkin's *Storm over Asia* (1928).
- BRODSKY, ISAAK ISRAELOVICH (b 1884)**
Russian artist.
- BURLYUK, DAVID DAVIDOVICH (1882-1967), VLADIMIR (1888-1917) and NIKOLAI (1890-1920)**
Family of futurist poets and painters, members of Hylaea group. Vladimir was killed in the War, Nikolai in the Civil War, David in Vladivostok 1918, member of Tvorchestvo futurist group, in Japan 1920-22, USA from 1922 to his death.
- CHERNYSHEVSKY, NIKOLAI GAVRILOVICH (1828-89)**
Russian revolutionary democrat, writer and literary critic, exiled to Siberia for political activity 1862-83, proponent of socially conscious realism in literature, author of *What is to be Done?*
- CHULKOV, GEORGY IVANOVICH (1879-1934)**
Symbolist poet, prose writer and critic.
- CHUZHAK, NIKOLAI NAZIMOVICH (1876-1939?)**
Member of Vladivostok futurist group Tvorchestvo (Creation) 1918-20, editor of *Lef* (qv) and *Novy Lef* (qv), editor of volume *Literature of Fact* 1928, arrested 1938-9.

Organisation of Communist Futurists in the Vyborg district of Petrograd led by Mayakovsky (qv), 1919.

DMITRIEV, VSEVOLOD

Writer for *Art of the Commune* (qv), designer for Meyerhold's (qv) production of Verhaeren's *The Dawn* (1920).

DYBENKO, PAVEL EFIMOVICH (1889-1938)

Soviet military leader and statesman, representative of revolutionary Baltic sailors 1917, member of Council of People's Commissars, 1917, married Aleksandra Kollontai in 1918.

EIKHENBAUM, BORIS (1886-1959)

Formalist critic, member of Opoyaz (qv), author of studies on classical and modern Russian literature.

EISENSTEIN, SERGEI MIKHAILOVICH (1898-1948)

Russian film director, member of Proletkult (qv) 1917-20, scene-painter and director for Proletkult theatre and Factory of the Eccentric Actor, directed Trctyakov's *Gasmasks* 1923 (qv), first film *Strike* in 1924, then *Battleship Potëmkin* (1926), *October* (1928), *The General Line* (1929), trip to USA and Mexico 1929-32, later films *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and the two parts of *Ivan the Terrible* (1944 and '46).

ESENIN, SERGEI ALEKSANDROVICH (1895-1925)

Russian 'peasant' poet, Imagist after 1917, committed suicide 1925.

EVREINOV, NIKOLAI NIKOLAEVICH (1879-1953)

Dramatist and theatrical producer, leader of the Saint Petersburg Ancient Theatre 1907-12, emigrated 1925.

FURMANOV, DMITRY ANDREEVICH (1891-1926)

Novelist, Bolshevik activist in Civil War, political commissar to Chapaev's guerrilla army, author of fictionalised account of this experience, *Chapaev* (1923), leading figure in VAPP (qv) 1925-6.

GAVRILOVICH, EVGENY

Member of Literary Centre of Constructivists 1924, moved to Litfront (qv) positions in late 1920's, wrote five-year-plan sketches, stories about collective farms and war stories during the Second World War, Scripted Room's *Girl No 217*, 1944.

GIPPIUS (or Hippus), ZINAIDA NIKOLAEVNA (1869-1945)

Religious symbolist poet.

GITIS (Gosudarstvenny Institut Teatralnogo Iskusstva)

State Institute for Theatrical Art.

GIZ

See Gosizdat.

GORKY, MAKSIM (Aleksei Maksimovich Peshkov, 1868-1936)

Self-taught Russian writer, specialist in low-life themes, Bolshevik, member of *Vpered* group 1908-9, editor of *Letopis* and *Novaya Zhizn* in Petrograd 1913-17. Hostile to October Revolution, made peace with Soviets 1918, left Russia 1921, lived abroad until 1932 apart from brief visits in 1928 and 1930, returned permanently in 1932, helped organise Union of Soviet Writers (qv).

GORODETSKY, SERGEI MITROFANOVICH (b 1884)

Successful Slavophile Acmeist poet before the Revolution, later Soviet poet.

GOSIZDAT

State publishing house, organ of Narkompros (qv) 1918, autonomous body within Narkompros from May 1919, first head Vorovsky.

GROSZ GEORGE (1893-1959)

German graphic artist, collaborated with John Heartfield (qv) and Wieland Herzfelde (qv) in *Neue Jugend* and Malik Verlag, member of Berlin dada, worked with Piscator (qv) in the 1920's as stage designer, emigrated New York 1932, returned to Berlin three weeks before he died.

GUMILEV, NIKOLAI STEPANOVICH (1886-1921)

Acmeist poet, husband of Akhmatova (qv), executed 1921.

GURO, ELENA (Elena Gennikhovna von Notenber, 1877-1913)

Russian futurist poet and prose writer, member of Hylaea group.

HEARTFIELD, JOHN (Helmut Herzfeld, 1891-1968)

German artist, typographer and photomonteur, changed his name in 1914 as protest against German chauvinism, friend of Grosz (qv), co-founded Malik Verlag and *Neue Jugend* in 1916, joined KPD (qv) in 1918, Berlin dada 1919, 1929-33 photomontages for *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, emigrated to Prague 1933, to London 1938, returned to DDR 1950, settled in Leipzig. Brother of Wieland Herzfelde.

HERZFELDE, WIELAND (b 1896)

German writer and publisher, brother of John Heartfield (qv), co-founded Malik Verlag 1916, joined KPD (qv) 1918, Berlin dada 1919, emigrated to Prague 1933, to New York 1938, returned to DDR 1949, lives in Berlin.

INBER, VERA MIKHAILOVNA (b 1890)

Poet, member Literary Centre of Constructivists 1924, left constructivist movement for more conventional pro-Soviet position in the late 1920's.

INKHUK

Institute of Artistic Culture, founded Moscow 1920 under the auspices of IZO (qv), branches set up in Petrograd (led by Tatlin, qv) and Vitebsk (led by Malevich, qv), Kandinsky (qv) drafted its initial programme for constructivist art, dominated by constructivists and productivists.

IZO

Arts department of Narkompros (qv), founded 1918, initially headed by Shterenberg in Petrograd and Tatlin (qv) in Moscow, dominated by Futurists, suprematists and constructivists, its journal was *Art of the Commune* (qv).

JOHANSON (or Joganson), BORIS VLADIMIROVICH

Constructivist painter and designer, member of Inkhuk (qv) and of Obomkhu, the Society for Young Artists, argued for a completely utilitarian art.

KAMENSKY, VASILY VASILIEVICH (1884-1961)

Futurist poet, member of Hylaea group, author of *Stenka Razin* (1915), supporter of October Revolution, member of *Lef* (qv) and in the circus section of TEO (qv).

KANDINSKY, VASSILY (1866-1944)

Russian artist, member of Munich Blaue Reiter group, contributor to the Knave of Diamonds exhibitions 1910 and 1912 (qv), member of IZO (qv) Kollegia 1918, founder member of Inkhuk (qv) 1920, teacher in Vkhutemas (qv), emigrated to Germany and joined Bauhaus 1922.

KAUFMAN, MIKHAIL

Brother of Dziga Vertov (qv) and his close collaborator and cameraman, director of *Spring* (1929).

KHLEBNIKOV, VELIMIR (Viktor Vladimirovich, 1885-1922)

Futurist poet, member of Hylaea group, pioneer of 'trans-sense' poetry.

KLUTSIS, G.

Constructivist poster designer, member of Obmokhu, the Society of Young Artists, and later worked in the Vitebsk artists' workshop Unovis.

KNAVE OF DIAMONDS (or Jack of Diamonds, *Bubnovy Valet*)

Group of Russian avant-garde painters founded about 1910 by Lentulov, Konchalovsky, Falk and Mashkov. Larionov, Goncharova and Malevich (qv) contributed to their earlier exhibitions.

KPD (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*)

German Communist Party, founded December 1918.

KRUCHENYKH, ALEKSEI ELISEEVICH (b 1886)

Futurist poet, member of Hylaea group before World War One, member of 41° group in Tiflis 1917-19, pioneer of 'trans-sense' poetry, member of *Lef* (qv), editor of Khlebnikov's works.

KULESHOV, LEV (1899-1970)

Russian film director, teacher at Moscow Film Institute 1920, pioneer of montage techniques later used by Eisenstein (qv) and Pudovkin. Films include *Mr West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1923), *Death-ray* (1925) and *By the Law* (1926).

KUSHNER, BORIS ANISIMOVICH (1888-1937)

Linguist and critic, founder member of Opoyaz (qv), cubo-futurist poet, member of Centrifuge group 1913-16, leader of Com-Futs (qv), editor of *Art of the Commune* (qv) 1918, of *Lef* (qv) 1923-5, of *Novy Lef* (qv) 1927-8, member of Litfront (qv) 1928-30.

LAVINSKY, ANTON

Architect, sculptor and stage designer, editor of *Lef* (qv) 1923-5, *Novy Lef* (1927-8), worked for ROSTA (qv) 1919-20, member of Inkhuk (qv), productivist.

LEF

Left Front of the Arts and its magazine, published 1923-5, members included Mayakovsky (qv), Aseev (qv), Tretyakov (qv), Brik (qv), Kushner (qv), Arvatov (qv), Lavinsky (qv) and others.

LIBEDINSKY, YURY NIKOLAEVICH (1898-1959)

Proletarian novelist, Bolshevik from 1921, member of October Group, editor of *On Literary Guard*, leading member of VAPP (qv) and RAPP 1925-32. Author of *The Week* (1922), *Tomorrow* (1923) and *The Commissars* (1926).

LITFRONT

Left-wing opposition to RAPP (see VAPP) 1925-30 including former *On Guard* leadership, Leftists like Kushner and others, advocated 'revolutionary romanticism' and sketch literature as opposed to RAPP's realism.

LUKACS, GYORGY (1885-1971)

Hungarian philosopher and critic, joined Hungarian Communist Party in 1918, participated in Soviet Government of Hungary 1919, editor of *Kommunismus* 1920-21, expelled from CC of HCP in 1928, active in Berlin 1931-3 as member of BPRS (qv). Emigrated to USSR 1933, returned to Hungary 1945.

LUNACHARSKY, ANATOLY VASILIEVICH (1875-1933)

Social-Democrat from 1899, joined Bolsheviks in 1904, member of *Vpered* group with Gorky (qv) and Bogdanov 1908, rejoined Bolsheviks in August 1917. Commissar for Education in the Soviet government 1917-29. Head of Narkompros (qv).

MALEVICH, KASIMIR (1878-1935)

Painter, contributed to first *Knave of Diamonds* (qv) and *Ass's Tail* (qv) exhibitions. Founder of suprematism 1916. Taught at Vkhutemas (qv) and at Vitebsk (Unovis) 1919. Director of Moscow Museum of Artistic Culture 1922-28. Buried in a constructivist coffin of his own design.

MANILOV

A character from Gogol's *Dead Souls* who spends his days constructing elaborate plans which are never realised.

MARINETTI, FILIPPO TOMMASO (1876-1944)

Italian futurist, published first futurist manifesto 1909, visited Russia 1914 but was hostilely received by most Russian futurists, joined Fascist movement 1919, left 1920, rejoining 1923 or 1924, to become secretary of the Italian Union of Writers 1929. Went to fight on the

- Russian front 1942, returned to Italy the following year where he died of a heart attack. Author of *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1914), etc.
- MAYAKOVSKY, VLADIMIR VLADIMIROVICH (1893-1930)**
Futurist poet, member of Hylaea group, rallied to the October Revolution in 1918, worked for IZO (qv), then for ROSTA (qv) 1919-22, contributed to *Art of the Commune* (qv), edited *Lef* (qv) and *Novy Lef* (qv). Split from *Lef* in 1928 with Brik and Aseev, founding REF (Revolutionary Front of the Arts). Joined RAPP (see VAPP) 1930, committed suicide April 14, 1930. Wrote several plays and filmscripts as well as poetry, and acted in a number of films, notably Slavinsky's *The Lady and the Hooligan* (1918) and Turkin's *Shackled by Film* (1918), to his own scenario.
- MEYERHOLD, VSEVOLOD EMILEVICH (1874-1942)**
Theatrical producer, worked in Moscow Arts, Komissarshevskaya and Petersburg Imperial Theatres before the War, recognised Soviet government after October, headed Petrograd TEO (qv) 1918-May 1919, did propaganda work in South Russia during the Civil War, becoming a Communist in 1920. Returned to Moscow the same year, became head of TEO, proclaimed 'October in the Theatre'. Resigned in 1921 when his radical policies failed. Worked in Moscow theatres according to the method of 'bio-mechanics'. Returned to a more classical style with *The Government Inspector* (1926). His theatre closed in 1938, arrested 1939, died in prison 1942.
- MEZZANINE OF POETRY**
Moscow group of futurist poets 1913, including Shershenevich (qv), Khrisanf (Zack), Ivnev, Bolshakov and Tretyakov (qv).
- MOSCOW LINGUISTICS CIRCLE**
Group of linguists, folklorists and formalist critics founded 1915, its members included Pëtr Bogatyřev, Roman Jakobson and Grigorii Vinokur (qv).
- MUZO**
Musical department of Narkompros (qv) corresponding to IZO (qv) in the visual arts, headed by A. S. Lourie in 1918.
- NADSON, SEMEN YAKOVLEVICH (1862-87)**
Minor poet, author of sentimental verse, became epitome of bad poetic taste.
- NARKOMPROS**
People's Commissariat of Education, the Soviet State Department dealing with education and the arts, headed by Lunarcharsky (qv) 1917-29.
- NOVY LEF**
Journal founded by Mayakovsky (qv) to replace *Lef* (qv) in 1927-28 issues), edited after July 1928 by Tretyakov (qv).
- OPOYAZ**
Society for the Study of Poetic Language, founded in St. Petersburg 1916, its members included Lev Yakubinsky (qv), E. V. Polivanov, Viktor Shklovsky (qv), Boris Eikhenbaum (qv), S. I. Bernstein and Osip Brik (qv), joined by Jury Tynyanov (qv) in the early 1920's. One of the two centres of formalist criticism, the other being the Moscow Linguistics Circle (qv).
- OSINSKY, N. (1887-1938)**
Communist journalist and literary critic.
- OTTWALT, ERNST (1901-?)**
German writer and critic, Communist, member of BPRS (qv), friend of Brecht's (qv). 1933 emigrated to the USSR, arrested for espionage 1935, executed sometime thereafter.
- PASTERNAK, BORIS NIKOLAEVICH (b 1869)**
Poet, member of Moscow futurist group Centrifuge 1913-16, editor of *Lef* (qv) and *Novy Lef*.

PCHELIN, Vladimir Nikolaevich (b 1869).

Russian artist.

PILNYAK, BORIS (Boris Andreevich Vogau, 1894-1941?)

Russian novelist and short-story writer, 'fellow-traveller', author of *The Naked Year* (1922), *The Volga Flows into the Caspian Sea*.

PINKERTON, NAT

The cheaply printed adventures of Nat Pinkerton were so popular in Russia in the early 20th century that the name became generic for detective stories or serials of a similar type. After the Revolution, there were some attempts at 'Red Pinkertons'.

PISCATOR, ERWIN (1893-1966)

German stage director, member of Berlin dada 1918, popular theatre in Königsberg 1919-20, worked at various theatres in Berlin 1920-30, film and theatrical work in the USSR 1930-36, left USSR for Paris, then USA 1938-51, organising the drama workshop at the New School for Social Research, returned to the BRD 1951, dramatic work all over West Germany until his death

POPOVA, LYUBOV (1889-1924)

Painter in Knave of Diamonds group (qv), later Constructivist and Productivist. Active in Inkhuk (qv), teacher in Vkhutemas (qv), theatre designs for Meyerhold (qv).

PROLETKULT

Association of proletarian cultural organisations, founded formally October 1917 with the aim of creating a proletarian culture to replace the existing bourgeois culture. Main theorists A. A. Bogdanov, F. I. Kalinin, P. I. Lebedev (later a member of VAPP, qv), P. M. Kerzhentsev. Reached its peak in 1920 after which it was reorganised as a department of Narkompros (qv), then declined, finally losing even Narkompros support in 1922.

PROTAZANOV, YAKOV (1881-1945)

Film director whose career began before the Revolution, most successful of traditional directors after the Revolution, films include *Aelita* (1924) and *The Forty-First* (1927), etc.

PU(G)NI, IVAN ALBERTOVICH (1894-1956)

Suprematist painter, follower of Malevich (qv), financed Tramway 5 exhibition 1915, helped organise re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace 1918, emigrated 1920.

PUNIN, NIKOLAI NIKOLAEVICH (1883-1953)

Art critic, member of IZO (qv) 1918, editor of *Art of the Commune* (qv), second husband of Akhmatova (qv).

RABIS

Union of Artistic Workers.

RAPP

See VAPP.

RODCHENKO, ALEKSANDR (1891-1956)

Painter, Suprematist under Malevich's (qv) influence 1915, member of IZO (qv) 1918, member of Inkhuk (qv) 1920, taught at Vkhutemas (qv) 1921, member of Obmokhu, the Society of Young Artists, constructivist, productivist, typography for Vertov's (qv) films and *Lef* (qv) and *Novy Lef* (qv), sets and costumes for Meyerhold 1929-31. Husband of Stepanova (qv).

ROSTA

Russian Telegraph Agency, responsible for propaganda during the Civil War, employed Mayakovsky (qv) Tseremnykh, Ivanov, Kerzhentsev and others to make the hand-copied posters for display in shop windows known as 'Rosta Windows' 1919-22.

ROZANOV, VASILY VASILIEVICH (1856-1919)

Symbolist prose writer, philosopher and critic, subject of a study by Viktor Shklovsky (qv) 1921.

RYKOV, ALEKSEI IVANOVICH (1881-1938)

Russian Social-Democrat from 1899, Bolshevik 1903, urged coalition government in November 1917, member of Right deviation 1928, expelled CPSU(B) 1938.

SALTYKOV-SHCHEDRIN, MIKHAIL E. (1826-89)

Russian satirical writer.

SELVINSKY, ILYA LVOVICH (b 1899)

Constructivist poet, member of Literary Centre of Constructivists, 1924, composer of 'statistical' poems, author of *Commander of the Second Army*, produced by Meyerhold (qv) 1929.

SERAPION BROTHERHOOD

Petrograd literary group formed in 1921, named after the Hoffmann stories, members include Lev Lunts, K. Fedin, Ilya Gruzdev, V. Kaverin, N. Nikitin, M. Slonimsky, M. Zoshchenko. Stood for creative freedom independent of politics. Shklovsky (qv) was close to this group initially.

SEVERYANIN (Igor-Severyanin, Igor Vasilievich Lotarev, 1887-1941).

Poet, leader of the 'ego-futurist' group of St Petersburg 1911-14, more cosmopolitan and Bohemian than Hylaea.

SHKLOVSKY, VIKTOR BORISOVICH (b 1893)

Formalist critic, founder-member of Opoyaz (qv), in emigration 1922-3, editor of *Novy Lef* (qv), worked in the literary department of Sovkino in late 1920's, author of *A Sentimental Journey* (1923) and many other works, including filmscripts, eg, for Kuleshov's *By the Law* (1926).

SHERSHENEVICH, VADIM GARBUELEVICH (1893-1942)

Futurist poet, member of Mezzanine of Poetry (qv), supporter of Marinetti (qv) in Russia, member of imagist movement 1917-27, worked for film industry in late 1920's.

SHUB, ESFIR ILISHNA (1894-1959)

Subtitle writer 1922, assistant to Eisenstein (qv) in *Strike* (1924), director of documentary films and historical compilations. Films include *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1926), *The Great Road* (1927).

STEPANOVA, VARVARA (1894-1958)

Painter, contributor to Knave of Diamonds (qv) 1910-11, Vice-Director of art and literature department of IZO (qv) 1920, President of IZO branch of Rabis (qv), worked with Popova (qv) in Tsindel textile factory and designed costumes for Meyerhold (qv) in 1922, contributed to *Lef* (qv) 1923, head of textile department of Vkhutemas (qv) 1924, designed the magazine *Sovietskoye Kino* and cinema sets 1927. Wife of Rodchenko (qv).

TATLIN, VLADIMIR EGRAFOVICH (1885-1953)

Painter and sculptor, exhibited with Larionov and Malevich (qv) in League of Youth exhibition 1911, *Ass's Tail* (qv) and *Knave of Diamonds* (qv) 1912, *Counter-reliefs* 1913, *Tramway 5* 1915, *Head of Moscow IZO* (qv) 1918, taught at Vkhutemas (qv) and Vkhutein, works include *Project for a Moment to the Third International* (1920) and *Letatlin* (1931).

TEO

Theatre department of Narkompros (qv), headed first by Olga Kameneva, than by Lunarcharsky (qv) himself. Subordinated to Tsentreteatr 1919. Meyerhold (qv) appointed head of TEO 1920, proclaimed 'October in the Theatre', demanding full nationalisation, imposition of revolutionary ideology and use of advanced theatrical technique, resigned on failure to achieve this in 1922.

TOLSTOY, ALEKSEI NIKOLAEVICH (1882-1945)

Russian novelist, exile in Berlin after Revolution, returned to Russia 1923, as well as numerous novels worked on scenarios for films, eg, Petrov's *Peter the Great* (1937). His novel *Aelita* (1922) was filmed by

- Protazanov (qv).
- TOMASHEVSKY, BORIS V. (1890-1957)**
Formalist critic, member of Moscow Linguistics Circle (qv), first studies on statistical metrics, expert on Pushkin.
- TRETYAKOV, SERGEI MIKHAILOVICH (1892-1939?)**
Originally futurist poet, member of group Mezzanine of Poetry (qv) 1913, in Baku and Tiflis 1917, member of the Vladivostok futurist group *Tvorchestvo* ('Creation') 1918-20, in Chita 1920, in Moscow by 1922 where he participated in *Lef* (qv) and *Novy Lef* (qv) as a critic and theorist, wrote plays for Meyerhold (qv) and Eisenstein (qv) including *Gasmasks* (1924), *Listen Moscow!* (1924) and *Roar China!* (1930). Continued to edit *Novy Lef* after Mayakovsky (qv) left to form REF. Arrested in 1937, the exact date of his death shortly thereafter is unknown.
- TUGENDKHOLD (Jacques Tugendhold)**
Russian critic, author of a book on Aleksandra Ekster.
- TUMANNY, DIR (Nikolai Panov, b 1903)**
Member of Literary Centre of Constructivists, 1924
- TYN'YANOV, YURY (1894-1943)**
Formalist critic, member of Opoyaz (qv), teacher at Leningrad Institute of Art History 1921-30, author of historical novels and scenarios for Kozintsev's *The Cloak* (1926) and *SVD* (1927), and Feinzimmer's *Lt. Kizhé* (1934) from his own novel.
- UNION OF PEASANT WRITERS (All-Union of Peasant Writers)**
Peasant equivalent of VAPP (qv), and RAPP, allied with it in Federation of Organisations of Soviet Writers (FOSP), dissolved with RAPP into Union of Soviet Writers (qv) in 1932.
- UNION OF SOVIET WRITERS**
General organisation of Soviet Writers set up in 1934 to replace RAPP, UPW, etc.
- VAPP**
All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers, founded 1920 by descendants of Proletkult (qv), journal *On Guard*, dominated by Lelevich, Vardin and Rodon; more moderate leadership after 1925 including Averbakh (qv), Libedinsky (qv), Kisho and Ermilov, journal became *On Literary Guard*. Reorganised as RAPP (Russian APP) in 1928, controversy with left groups (Litfront, Lef, qv). Dissolved to form Union of Soviet Writers (qv) 1932.
- VERTOV, DZIGA (Denis Kaufman, 1896-1954)**
Film director, originally futurist noise composer, newsreel and propaganda films for Red Army during Civil War, Kino-Pravda documentaries 1922-5, participated in *Lef* (qv) and *Novy Lef* (qv) *Kino-glaz* (1925), *One Sixth of the Earth* (1926), *Stride Soviet!* (1926), *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1931), *Donbas Symphony* (1934) and *Three Songs to Lenin* (1934), etc.
- VESELY, ARTEM (Nikolai Ivanovich Kochkurov, b 1899)**
Son of a Volga stevedore, Communist, proletarian novelist dealing with Civil War themes, member of workers' co-operative *Krug* 1932, close to Pilnyak (qv) in style. Novels include *My Country*, *Russia Washed in Blood*.
- VESNIN, LEONID ALEKSANDROVICH (1880-1933), VIKTOR (1882-1950) and ALEKSANDR (1883-1950)**
Architects, Aleksandr also a stage designer, member of Inkhuk (qv). All three brothers taught at Vkhutemas (qv) 1921-5, designs include Palace of Soviets competition entry 1923, Pravda building design 1924 and Lenin Library project 1928-9. Founder members of OSA (Association of Contemporary Architects) 1925.
- VINOKUR, GRIGORY OSIPOVICH (b 1896)**
Linguist, member Moscow Linguistics Circle (qv) 1915-19.

VKhUTEMAS

Moscow School of applied arts and Higher Technical-Artistic Studios, teachers included Tatlin (qv), Malevich (qv), Kandinsky (qv), Rosanova (qv) and Pevsner.

VOLKENSHTEIN, VLADIMIR MIKHAILOVICH (b 1883)

Dramatist and dramatic critic, demanded a new dramatic repertory for the traditional theatre rather than Meyerhold's (qv) revolution of theatrical form. Argued for age-old significance of realism.

VOLODARSKY, V. (Moisey Markovich Goldshtein, 1891-1918)

Ukrainian revolutionary, member of Bund, emigrated to New York 1913, returned 1917, Mezhrayontsy, then Bolshevik, member of VTsIK, commissar in army on the Rumanian front, killed in action.

VORONSKY, ALEKSANDR KONSTANTINOVICH (1884-?)

Editor of 'fat' periodical *Krasnaya Nov* (Red Virgin Soil) 1921-7, supporter of 'fellow-travelling' writers (Esenin, qv, Pilnyak, qv, Ivanov, Tikhonov, etc.), opponent of *On Guardists* and VAPP (qv). Expelled from CPSU(B) for Trotskyism and banished to Siberia 1927, recanted and returned to Moscow 1930, arrested and executed about 1937.

WITFOGEL, KARL AUGUST (b 1896)

German Communist playwright and sociologist, author of *Rote Soldaten* (1921), *Der Mann der eine Idee hat* (1922), *Die Mutter* (1922), *Die Flüchtling* (1922), etc. Active in BPRS (qv) 1930-32. Left KPD (qv) in 1934 and emigrated to USA, became famous as orientalist, author of *Oriental Despotism* (1957).

YAKUBINSKY, LEV (?-1946)

Formalist critic, member of Opoyaz (qv) 1916, joined CPSU (B) 1917

ZDANEVICH, ILYA MIKHAILOVICH (b 1894)

Russian futurist, born Tiflis, friend of Larionov and Goncharova 1913, member of Tiflis futurist group 41° 1917-20, exile in Paris since early 1920s. Author of Pentalogy *aslaablichya*.

ZELINSKY, KORNELY LYUCHIANOVICH (b 1896)

Member of the Literary Centre of Constructivists, 1924, and of Literary Brigade no 1, 1930. Chief theoretician of the Constructivist movement in literature, attacked in Party resolution on literature, July 1925

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