



Aleksandr Rodchenko. Osip Brik. 1924.

Osip Brik and the Politics of the Avant-Garde*

NATASHA KURCHANOVA

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

—Osip Brik

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Literator

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

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

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

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



Rodchenko. Vladimir Mayakovsky and Osip Brik. 1926.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An Ideologue of the Bolshevik Utopia

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Art in Production

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Lef”

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

“*Novyi Lef*”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Film

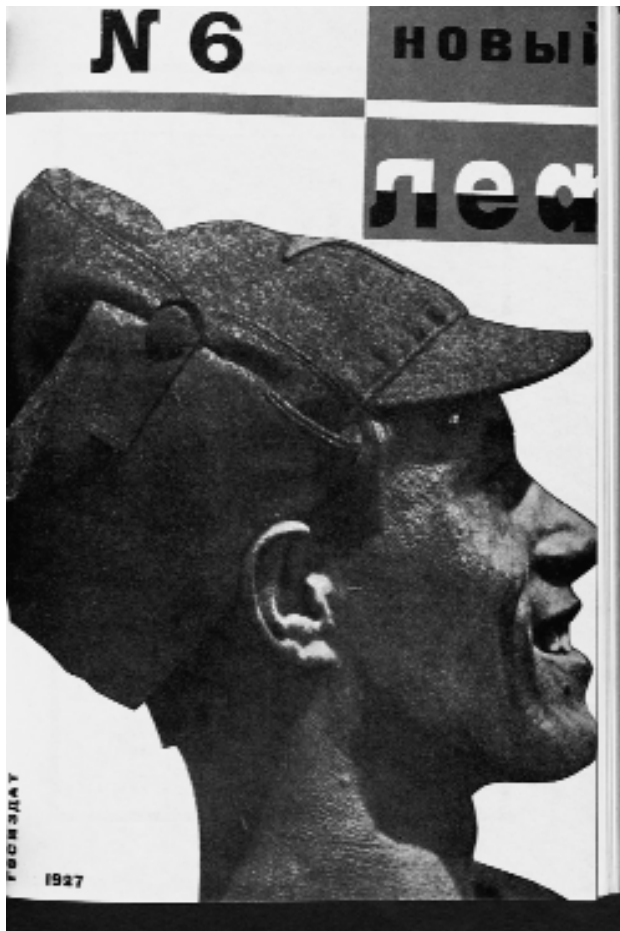
The shift from text to image, sanctioned at the highest echelons of the party, led Brik in 1926 to begin working as a scriptwriter at the film studio Mezhrabpom-Rus', a predecessor of Mezhrabpomfilm. While Brik's articles on photography are well-known, his texts on film have received less attention.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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

51. “Chelovek b’et cheloveka,” *Kino* 27 (September 22, 1925), p. 5.

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

53. “Konkurs pod lozungom ‘Sovetskaia fil’ma na sovetskom ekrane,” *Kino* 26 (June 29, 1926), p. 2.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

66. See “There is Nothing and No One Knows about It,” *Kino* 14 (1926), p. 3.

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

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