

**Photopoetry and the Bioscopic Book:
Russian and Czech Avant-Garde Experiments of the 1920s**

by

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For my father and in memory of my mother

Katarina Bošković
1946-2010

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on three select examples of avant-garde poetry books—Mayakovsky’s and Rodchenko’s *About This* (1923), Mayakovsky’s and Rozhkov’s *To the Workers of Kursk* (1924-7) and Nezval and Teige’s *Alphabet* (1926), all illustrated by photomontages or diverse techniques involving photographic material. By way of three distinct case studies, this dissertation examines these avant-garde photo-poetry works from the angle of the bioscopic book, a concept envisaged in a programmatic manner by El Lissitzky in 1923. In the 1920s, inclusion of mass-produced and machine-made images—photography, photomontage—together with the application of a filmic vision as a fundamental part of literary fiction, was a much more radical statement about modernity than it may appear to us today. In this context, the 1920s photopoetry emerged as a new genre that aspired to appropriate the products of technological culture in creating poetry more alert to the mass sensibility of a rapidly changing mechanical age. As a new hybrid form that combines poetic text and photographic images, photopoetry was ripe for poetic experimentation and production of optical provocations.

The 1920s bioscopic book, however, should not be mistaken for a genre, but rather, should be understood as a theoretical, if not visionary, concept of a visual technology approximated in the series of experiments within the avant-garde photo-poetry genre. This dissertation conceptualizes the bioscopic book as an alternative cinematic apparatus through examining its materiality and dynamic conceptual design. The bioscopic book transforms from a mere object into a concrete “technology” due to its operational body: its continuous page-sequence and the dialectical interaction of the poetic text and photomontages featured on its

pages. The specificity of the bioscopic book's operational body is defined by the montage, which is understood as overt juxtapositions and accumulation, repetition, seriality, or sequence.

The medium of the bioscopic book maintains the non-reified form of an apparatus only as a *design* embodied in technology that enables the reader/viewer to be an active, engaged producer instead of a passive consumer. By examining different avant-garde 'programs,' embodied in the medium's conceptual design, this dissertation demonstrates how these three selected examples, despite being differently designed apparatuses, all invite the reader/viewer to operate as a producer by joining the collective authorship of the poet and graphic designer in conducting perpetual transfer from one medium to another. In managing such interpretative *transduction* from one semiotic system to another, this dissertation argues, the reader/viewer both takes part in the topography of the bioscopic book and becomes a part of its conceptual-material circuit. The reader/viewer participates in the re-creation of the cinematic 'projection' by setting the *alternating current* of the bioscopic book in motion. I argue that the bioscopic book is a technology 'programmed' to function as a "suggestion apparatus" for a two-way communication between the different media and the reader/viewer, who herself becomes a channel, a medium, an active "influencing machine," a prosumer. This dissertation offers a theory of the bioscopic book concept as a technology for 1) the formulation and re-production of montage thinking as a new cognitive model by which we interact with the outside world, 2) the augmentation of intermedial and interpersonal dialogue, and 3) the transformation of readers/viewers into prosumers.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction:

The Avant-Garde Photo-Poetry Book

The inclusion of photography in books became a standard practice in the second half of the nineteenth century, but it was essentially the avant-garde that started using photography in conjunction with fiction and poetry. The extraordinary junction between poetry and photography and photomontage—defined as photopoetry—flourished in avant-garde books and journals throughout Europe in the 1920s and 1930s.¹ At this time artists became more attuned to the expressive potential of layout and graphic design, bringing about a complete transformation of the page in order to convey text’s visual impact and its tactile existence. The written text became increasingly responsive to the surrounding context of mass culture and industrial production. Many artists imagined the printed page cinematically, while many poets started to envisage the poetic realm of the imaginary by means of photography and photomontage.

Photopoetry offered an apt response to the challenge that the advance of mass-circulated and new media of communication—the telegraph, newspapers and advertisements, illustrated press, posters, and cinema—posed to traditional art forms, the understanding of art, culture, and society as a whole. The Russian Futurist poet Mayakovsky and Constructivist artist Rodchenko, the French and American Surrealists Eluard and Man Ray, the Czech poet Nezval and graphic designer and theorist Teige, to give a few examples, invented a new forms that aspired to appropriate the products of technological culture in creating poetry more alert to the “mass

¹ See Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, pp. 284-311.

sensibility” of a rapidly changing mechanical age. As a new, hybrid form that embodied what Renato Poggioli called “the fusing of genres,” photopoetry was ripe for poetic experimentation and for the production of optical provocations.²

Although the avant-garde photo-poetry book can be seen as the offshoot of a long tradition of illustrated books, it rather represents an innovative and unconventional instrument. The goal of this dissertation is to illuminate the most salient features of its development by examining several diverse examples from Central and Eastern Europe during the 1920s, the period of its heyday. Focusing on this mixed-media genre, across Soviet Russia and Czechoslovakia, this dissertation articulates the concept of the bioscopic book while answering the following questions: What does it mean if a poem, ballad, poetry collection, or novel in verse is illustrated using photomontage? Where is the meaning-generating mechanism of the bioscopic book created? What are the different strategies for constructing such a mechanism across various avant-garde movements? How does photopoetry differ from the ways in which both poetry and visual arts have traditionally been understood to “define” or produce culture in the past?

This dissertation argues that the avant-garde bioscopic book is a specific technology created in an attempt to overcome the crisis of verbal and visual representation by combining “conceptual thinking” and “magical thought” into a multimedia apparatus that aimed to create new practices of reading, seeing, and comprehending, combining them into the more flexible and active processing of our relation to the world, which I call montage thinking.

² Poggioli’s syntagm “fusing of genres” stands for both a romantic doctrine and a prominent feature of the avant-garde literary works to escape traditional definitions of literary genres. (Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 58).

1.1 Poetry of Modern Life

Only half a century after Charles Baudelaire, a new generation of artists emerged with a completely opposite outlook on the relationship between poetry and photography. The French poet denounced photography, the proper role of which he saw to be “the servant to the sciences and arts,” advocating that photography should not interfere with “the sphere of the impalpable and the imaginary.”³ The generation of avant-garde artists completely inverted Baudelaire’s thought about incompatibility and mutual enmity between “poetry” and “material progress,” and persisted to integrate the former into the later.

Baudelaire’s text “The Modern Public and Photography” marks the departure point of our discussion of the dialectical relationship between and avant-garde convergence of poetry and photography. As a section of his lengthy review of the Paris Salon of 1859, this text stands at the beginning of the first stage of the relationship between photography and modernism.

Baudelaire’s derision of the daguerreotype in his oft-quoted 1859 diatribe stands in a sharp contrast with the apology for the “new technology” and its practical dominance in the art of the 1920s and 1930s. In his essay, the “founder of modern poetry” described photography as a “new industry” which threatens to “ruin whatever divine remained of the French spirit,” and denounced it along with the cult of an “abject society” obsessed with its own “trivial image.” Baudelaire indicted photography, strictly limiting its proper role to the menial and feminine status of the “maid of the sciences and arts,” and proclaiming it the absolute antagonist of poetry and imagination. He famously stated that photography should not encroach upon “the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary,” the prime medium of which is poetic language.

³ Baudelaire, “The Modern Public and Photography,” p. 88.

Poetry and progress are two ambitious men that hate each other, with an instinctive hatred, and when they meet along a pathway one or other must give way. If photography is allowed to deputize for art in some of art's activities, it will not be long before it has supplanted or corrupted art altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the masses, its natural ally. Photography must, therefore, return to its true duty, which is that of handmaid, like painting and shorthand, which have neither created nor supplemented literature. Let photography quickly enrich the traveler's album, and restore to his eyes the precision his memory may lack; let it adorn the library of the naturalist, magnify microscopic insects, even strengthen, with a few facts, the hypotheses of the astronomer; let it, in short, be secretary and record-keeper of whomever needs absolute material accuracy for professional reasons. So far so good. Let it save crumbling ruins from oblivion, books, engravings, and manuscripts, the prey of time, all those precious things, vowed to dissolution, which crave a place in the archives of our memories; in all these things, photography will deserve our thanks and applause. But if once it be allowed to impinge on the sphere of the intangible and the imaginary, on anything that has value solely because man adds something to it from his soul, than woe betide us!⁴

Baudelaire's sally was motivated by the inclusion, for the first time, of photography in the Salon, as well as by his attack on Realism or, more precisely, Naturalism and the popular ideal of "exactitude" in modern art.⁵ As it is known, the French poet was tried and convicted in 1857 for the "gross realism" exercised in his "notorious" volume of poems *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) and censored for its "public indecency." His invective against photography's utilitarianism and verisimilitude in the text from two years later can be, therefore, read as a sort of self-confession. His revolt against the veracity and industrial precision that he recognized as threatening to the free flight of imagination, was thus accompanied by a general critique of vulgarity and modern taste, as well as of manifold displays of "industry,"

⁴ Baudelaire, "The Modern Public and Photography," p. 88.

⁵ Since mid-nineteenth century, the daguerreotype and photography were associated with the rise of the new literary school alternatively called "realism" or "naturalism." In this context, Baudelaire's attack merely exemplify a debate that gained more acuity in 1857 with the critic Champfluey's manifesto on Realism, "which included a parable pitting ten daguerreotypists and ten painters in an open field to conclude that the ten mechanical images turned out identical, whereas among the ten paintings 'not one was like another.'" (Brunet, *Photography and Literature*, p. 70).

“commerce,” and “Americanization.” All these phenomena that Baudelaire so resolutely discarded returned, as this dissertation will show, to the public stage in the 1920s and 1930s and gained under a lustrous spotlight a considerable currency in the imagination of the avant-garde poets, designers, and artist-engineers.

From a more historical standpoint, Baudelaire’s essay was a reaction to the popularization of photography in the late 1850s that was augmented through the collodion process, the *carte-de-visite* format, the stereoscope and the stereograph. In the following passage of his essay, Baudelaire linked the taste for allegorical compositions promoted by the *tableaux vivants* and the “avidity” of “thousands of hungry eyes” peeping into “the holes of stereoscope,” offering them as two examples of a “love of obscenity” that he attributed to the influence of “some democratic writer:”

By bringing together and posing a pack of rascals, male and female, dressed up like carnival-time butchers and washerwomen, and in persuading these *heroes* to *hold* improvised grimaces for as long as the photographic process required, people really believed they could represent the tragic and the charming scenes of ancient history. Some democratic writer must have seen in that cheap means of spreading the dislike of history and painting amongst the masses, thus committing a double sacrilege, and insulting, at one and the same time, the divine art of painting and the sublime art of the actor. It was not long before thousands of pairs of greedy eyes were glued to the peepholes of the stereoscope, as though they were the skylights of infinity. The love of obscenity, which is as vigorous a growth in the heart of natural man as self-love, could not let slip such a glorious opportunity for its own satisfaction.⁶

The passage chronicles the photographic merging of art and entertainment, high culture and everyday life, linking it with the fascination for obscenity and its increasing social significance.⁷

⁶ Baudelaire, “The Modern Public and Photography,” p. 87.

⁷ Baudelaire’s essay was strongly resonant with the two Anglo-American contemporary texts: the long essay by Lady Eastlake published in 1857 in the *Quarterly Review*, and the first of Oliver W. Holme’s three essays on stereoscope and stereography published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1859. Eastlake’s essay is concerned with the social issues of photography, and simultaneously represents one of the first attempts of approaching photography as both a sign and a language. In comparison to Baudelaire’s critique, her essay is much more predictive of future critical developments, as are the three papers by Oliver W. Holmes, who tells a story based

Baudelaire's two references are additionally significant as they record the emerging techniques of image manipulation and the reorganization of the observer: the photomontage and stereoscope. First, the *tableau vivant* scene that Baudelaire describes is particularly reminiscent of the allegorical compositions developed by the artists of the "pictorialist" movement in the Victorian era, Oscar Gustave Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson, who dressed up models in costumes and posed them in scenes out of history or literature in order to create the first illusionistic photomontages known as the "combination prints."⁸ Moreover, Robinson's combination prints were the first examples of the early forms of photomontage printed and published along with the verses of various poets such as Shakespeare, Percy B. Shelley, William Wordsworth, Edmund Spenser, Mathew Arnold, and Alfred Lord Tennyson.⁹ Second, the

on his browsing through a collection of stereo-views. Holmes reads "infinite volumes of poems [...] in this small library of glass and pasteboard," and describes his immersion in this virtual library as an experience of disembodiment. See <http://www.photokaboom.com/photography/pdfs/Lady_Eastlake.pdf> and <<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>>.

⁸ Oscar Gustave Rejlander, a Swede living in England, made one of the most assertively self-conscious attempts at producing art through photography with *Two Ways of Life* (1857). This photograph juxtaposed figures representing Religion, Charity, and other virtues with figures representing Gambling, Wine, and other vices. To create this ambitious image depicting the life-choices of a young man, Industry and Dissipation, Rejlander took six weeks to create a seamless combination print from 32 separate negatives of costumed actors whom he had posed and photographed individually. *Two Ways of Life* was first shown at the Manchester Art Treasures exhibition of 1857, when many objected to the nudity. Many photographers criticized Rejlander for resorting to manipulation with combined negatives, but his ambitiously artistic aims influenced a generation of photographers bent on extending acceptance of their medium. Under Rejlander's influence, English painter and photographer Henry Peach Robinson used multiple negatives to produce soap-opera-style tableaux such as *Fading Away* (1858), which showed a young girl's death due to TB and her grief-stricken family, a common occurrence that probably contributed to the Victorian cult of childhood. He also employed actors to recreate bucolic scenes of peasant life. In his 1960 lecture, "On Printing Photographic Pictures from Several Negatives," Robinson explained the manipulation of photography as an artistic process and proposed, way before the historic avant-gardes, "Art can be extracted out of almost anything." <<http://albumen.conservation-us.org/library/c19/robinson.html>> He became an eloquent advocate for art photography, but Gernsheim shows he preferred the "scissors and paste-pot" rather than combination printing for most prints. (See Gernsheim, *Creative Photography: Aesthetic Trends, 1839-1960*). Both Rejlander and Robinson appealed to a Victorian taste for allegory, symbol, and sentimentality, and both shared the same impulse toward the creation of seamless, illusionistic photomontage that appears as taken in the one shot.

⁹ See Gernsheim, *Incunabula of British Photographic Literature: a Bibliography of British Photographic Literature, 1839-75*, and Rabb, *Literature and Photography Interactions 1840-1990: a Critical Anthology*, pp. 59-64.

stereoscope—a nineteenth-century optical device soon to be proclaimed obsolete and “phantasmagoric”—not only signaled “an eradication of ‘the point of view’ around which, for several centuries, meaning has been assigned reciprocally to an observer and the object of his or her vision,” but also introduced the transformation of the apparently passive observer of the stereoscope into an active “producer of forms of verisimilitude.”¹⁰ Furthermore, the “reality effect” is achieved differently by these two techniques. While combination prints blend a multiplicity of arrested moments into an unitary representation, rendered plausible through the created illusion of the linear perspective and its central point of view, the stereoscope’s “realism” builds upon the inherent binocular disparity of the human body and, due to the physical proximity of the objects to the observer, presupposes the latter’s perceptual experience “to be essentially an apprehension of differences.”¹¹ In other words, there are some specific *technical* secrets behind the magical effect, both *produced by* the techniques of image and *productive of* the transformation of the observer, that escaped the poet’s critical reflection.

It is exactly this *technical* quality of mechanically reproduced images that the avant-garde artists later recognized as valuable. What is more, this *technical* realm is as significant for the artists in the 1920s as the “eternal, invariable, and immutable element” is for Baudelaire’s idea of double nature of art, beauty, and modernity, which he articulated in his 1863 essay “The Painter of Modern Life.”¹² According to Baudelaire, the artist needs *creative imagination* to give

¹⁰ Crary, “Techniques of the Observer,” p. 87.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 84.

¹² “Beauty is made up of eternal, invariable element, whose quantity it is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions. Without this second element, which might be described as the amusing, enticing, appetizing icing on the divine cake, the first element would be beyond our powers of digestion or appreciation, neither adapted nor suitable to human nature. [...] By the ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is eternal and the immutable.” (Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, p. 3, 13). It seems that in his idea of double nature of modernity, Baudelaire

expression to modernity, and this imagination is a forgetful immersion into the present as a real source of originality. The eternal half of beauty can be reached only through the experience of “the transitive, fugitive, and contingent” modern beauty that is the pulchritude of the present in its present-ness. Many avant-garde graphic artists, as this dissertation shows, cherished flexible and cultivated *algorithmic imagination* founded on the laws of natural science and technical innovations and which, similarly to the rules of a game (as, for example, the laws of chess), placed no limitation on imagination, invention and originality, allowing for an infinite number of the most diverse possibilities and solutions. These artists, therefore, recognized in the means of technological reproducibility useful modern tools for producing reality, changing the surrounding environment of present-ness, forging consciousness through representation and re-appropriation and manufacturing truth.

Baudelaire perceives modernity as a spiritual adventure for which one has to arm him or herself with the “heroism of modern life,” in order to venture into and explore the realm of evil—whose flowers are dangerously beautiful. The avant-garde artist perceives modernity not only as a spiritual but also a material adventure, for which one has to arm her or himself with “revolutionary heroism” in order to venture into the exploit full of risks and difficulties and plant new, more beautiful yet even more dangerous flowers in the same garden of evil, fertilizing its soil with utopian projections into the future. By creating artworks with immediate effects on the individual and collective experience of “the transitive, fugitive, and contingent,” the avant-garde artist intervenes into the present, thus changing our conception of reality, if not reality itself.

For Baudelaire, the artist should be a *flâneur*—a “passionate spectator” of modern life, who dives into “the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow” of people moving within the

draws upon the basic Kantian dichotomy of the noumenal world of unchanging existence versus the phenomenal world of our ordinary sensory experiences.

city attending to their daily tasks; the one who plunges into the city's hubbub, "in the midst of fugitive and the infinite."¹³ And yet, he must always retain an aesthetic distance toward this contagious activity of daily life; he must ceaselessly resist the compulsion to join in the city's running and gasping haste; he must remain alert, vigilant and constantly on guard while bombarded with a plethora of stimuli that cannot be completely assimilated. This aesthetic distance, in turn, enables him to reveal that immutable, "eternal" element of beauty in the bustle of the fleeting moments of everyday life. The artist is able to establish such distance due to his possession of a vast historical memory, his wide knowledge in the realms of history, geography, arts and customs (in Baudelaire's words: "every age had its own gait, glance and gesture"). With Baudelaire, the Romantics' escape from trivial reality into distant lands and epochs is altered by the poet's return to the daily life of a modern European city. The poet of modern life himself becomes a bearer of the aesthetic distance—the dandy, whose high-class loftiness, haughty exclusiveness and arrogance serve as an external expression of that distance. Baudelaire describes the dandy as a sort of "new aristocracy," which appears "in periods of transition, when democracy is not yet all-powerful, and aristocracy is only just beginning to totter and fall."¹⁴

Only half a century after Baudelaire, a new generation of artists emerged, deliberate in their decision to trade in the dandy's costume for the worker's jumpsuit and engineer's jacket, and to alter the easel painting with the means of technical reproducibility and the machine. As

¹³ "For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. [...] Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and flickering grace of all the elements of life. He is an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I,' at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive." (Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, p. 9).

¹⁴ Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, p. 28.

this dissertation demonstrates, the generation of avant-garde artists completely inverted Baudelaire's thought about incompatibility and mutual enmity between "poetry" and "material progress," and persisted to integrate the former into the later. The protagonist of "The Painter of Modern Life" is Constantin Guys—the artist whose name today, as a rule, is more associated with Baudelaire's essay than with his own drawings. Comparing Baudelaire's text with Guy's illustrations and watercolors, one eventually arrives at the impression that if Guys had a camera instead of a brush, he would have embodied the ideal of "the poet of modern life"—of the reporter vigilantly perceptive of details and able of documenting the fleeting and flickering images of the beauty—with much greater consistency.

It is photography that becomes the "poetry of modern life" at the beginning of twentieth century, taking that function over from easel painting, which in consequence has been largely transformed into the poetry of painting itself—abstract painting. "Up-to-date, mechanical, perceived as impersonal and objective, saturated with reality of the world outside the studio, capable of reaching a mass audience," writes Peter Galassi in his text on Aleksandar Rodchenko, "photography was also taken to be blessedly free of the cultivated pieties of the past. It offered a welcome alternative to existing artistic practices, a path of escape from bourgeois convention and pretension, which many progressive artists blamed for the devastating war."¹⁵ During this period of artistic experimentation, photography came back with a vengeance to colonize the aesthetic sphere, from which it was long barred by artistic prejudice. Mechanically reproduced photography played a crucial role in departing from the imitative modes of representation, which was the effort shared by all avant-garde movements both before and after the First World War.

¹⁵ Galassi, "Rodchenko and Photography's Revolution," p. 104.

1.2 Photography and Crisis of Representation

Inner contradictions, innumerable aporias and a long association with the praxis and idea of cultural crisis characterize both modernism and the avant-garde. The artistic avant-garde, as Matei Calinescu argues in his *Five Faces of Modernity*, developed from its very outset as “a culture of crisis.” Recognizing modernity *en générale* as a culture of crisis, the same author asserts that the avant-gardist tries to “discover or invent new forms, aspects or possibilities of crisis.”¹⁶ In *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, Pericle Lewis takes Calinescu’s observation as a departure point for his own insightful definition of modernism as “the literature that acknowledged and attempted to respond to a crisis of representation beginning in the mid-nineteenth century.” According to Lewis, modernism differs from earlier movements, such as Romanticism, “in its emphasis on the need continually to reinvent the means of representation” across different arts.¹⁷

The lively interaction between photography and painting in the formative years of the early avant-garde illustrates both the aforementioned crisis of representation and the different paths that the visual arts explored in order to overcome this crisis. In trying to find a place and legitimate task for painting in the age of rapid technological advancement, artists fully engaged in projecting, creating, and testing radical departures from photographic imagery and alternatives to imitative functions of their art. It was actually the *mimetic function* of all the arts that came under attack at this point.¹⁸ If the Impressionist painting—which took the aforementioned critical

¹⁶ Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, p. 124.

¹⁷ Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, pp. xviii, 8. It should be mentioned that Lewis under the term “modernism” understands both the “high” modernism and avant-garde artworks and authors, that is, both “the relatively mainstream works of the 1920s” and “the more radical experiments of the prewar avant-garde or of such later avant-gardes such as dada and surrealism.” (Ibid, p. 96).

¹⁸ This common notion one can find also in Benjamin’s famous essay “The Work of Art,” in which he raises the question “whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art.” In his

essay by Baudelaire for its philosophical program—was already showing the first steps of departure from Realist and Naturalist modes of representation, all three conceptions of art and artistic production were consigned to the past with the emergence of Cubist, Futurist, Expressionist, Dadaist, and Surrealist painters. Moreover, the latter “isms” started to compete for the *renommée* as the most contemporary, advanced, and innovative art movement at a much more rapid pace. What all these painters shared, nonetheless, was a great concern with the advances of the rival medium of photography, and a perceived need to respond to photographic triumphs.¹⁹

The modern painters started exploring new domains in the art of painting, while reserving the traditional mimetic function of the arts for photography. The search for new tasks, techniques, and languages of painting was chiefly driven by the goal to discover modes of representation and perception that would differ from those of photography. The fruits of such a quest were a series of innovations conceived by Cubist painters, such as the particular treatment of space, the abandonment of the spatial illusionism of one-point perspective and its replacement with a combination of multiple view-points in a single image, the reduction of the human figure to geometrical shapes, the fragmentation and faceting of depicted objects, the use of letters and figures in painting, as well as “the invention of collage.”

While the Cubist painters explored the properties of artistic materials and techniques, both Futurist and Expressionist painters started with research concerning the subject matter, developing their specific pictorial styles and techniques accordingly. The Futurists celebrated the

Theory of Avant-Garde, Bürger iterates the same notion in a slightly changed form, “Because the advent of photography makes possible the precise mechanical reproduction of reality, the mimetic function of the fine arts withers.” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” p. 227; and Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 32).

¹⁹ For a compilation of statements by Cubist and Futurist, Expressionist, Dadaist and Surrealist painters expressing the concerns, see Scharf, *Art and Photography*.

“frenetic life of our great cities,” the “whirling life of steel, of pride, of fever and of speed,” declaring as their primary goal the inscription of “universal dynamism” through “movement and light.”²⁰ They adopted the Cubist practice of fragmentation and the multi-perspective organization in painting for their own particular aims, such as superimposing successive phases of motion and inscribing rays of energy into their paintings (as is especially prominent in the case of the Cubo-Futurist paintings of Russian Rayism).

Simultaneously, Expressionist painters emphasized the inner urges of the artist and the “inner side of nature” that which determined their approach to the pictorial organization of their paintings. The main pictorial strategies that the Expressionist painters developed were the reduction of natural forms and the non-representational use of color. The use of color as an emotional and mental indicator signaled the beginning of a new era of Expressionist painting, reaching its ultimate forms in abstract compositions with remote ciphers of objects and freely floating colors. Each of these various artistic movements developed its own strategies, specific styles and techniques; yet they all shared a common feature: their aesthetic innovations emerged as a response to the advances of photography.²¹

Although most readily illustrated by the visual arts, the crisis of representation was also reflected in verbal art and exacerbated by questioning the very medium out of which literature is

²⁰ Boccioni, “Manifesto of the Futurist Painters 1910,” and “Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto 1910,” p. 25, 30.

²¹ It was, however, non uncommon that the painters’ response to photographic technique was affirmative. Among others, such were the cases with Picasso, who experimented widely with “photographic compositions” and a variety of transformations of these compositions into graphic drawings, with Marcel Duchamp and the futurist painters, whose canvases depicted motion based upon the discoveries made by the Eadwerd Muybridge’s and Etienne-Lules Marey’s chronophotographic studies of motion, as well as with the Dadaist painters, who integrated photographic material and technical processes into their paintings and eventually into newly furnished arsenal of artistic possibilities. I discuss these and similar issues in the next section of this introduction.

created—language.²² The early twentieth century introduced the work of several linguists and philosophers, Ferdinand de Saussure and Ludwig Wittgenstein being the most prominent, who analyzed the way language functions as a system of representation. De Saussure emphasized the double nature of the linguistic sign comprised of what he called “the signifier” and “the signified,” and assigned a particular role to each of the two elements in the signification process. He recognized the arbitrary nature of the relationship between the two elements of the sign, proposed the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, and acknowledged the possible effect of materiality in the signifying process. In this way, De Saussure reinserted *writing* into the domain of language. He admitted the existence of writing, granted it a presence, an actuality, by making it clear that the language and writing are “two distinct systems” and that “the written word” is *the image of (spoken) language*. This emphasis on the actual materiality of the visual sign—the materiality of the signifier—consequently had a large significance on the awareness of both poets and theoreticians that the poetry has its own “verbal mass” and material substance.

Wittgenstein studied language as a rule-guided practice and a set of games whose conventions are rooted in the speakers’ shared way of life, suggesting that the rules of the game—rather than the reality it is meant to describe—govern how language is used. The Austrian philosopher proposed a model of language that rejects the distinction between literary and ordinary language, and approached aesthetics as yet another realm for investigating the everyday practices by means of which we communicate and produce meaning. This exposed the situatedness and conventional nature of language, the fact that language practices could be

²² In his influential *Discourse Networks* book, Friedrich Kittler writes on Herman Ebbinghaus’s memory experiments of the 1880s and the emergence of the new discipline—psychophysics—that marks “a discursive event,” a mutation of linguistic materiality, which introduces both the perception of language as a medium and the crisis of language as representation. Psychophysics takes language to a point where it stops making sense, or rather, it shows that all sense making has its frontiers (and therefore its definition) in domains of nonsense and in automatized operations that no longer belong to a subjective authority. See Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800-1900*, especially chapter “The Great Lalulā.”

organized differently and remain just as meaningful. In this context, communication emerges not as a process in which we choose one option over another from some deep structure of language that functions as a blueprint for possible games. The novelty and profundity of Wittgenstein's inquiry, as Stanley Cavell has noted, reside in the realization "that everyday language does not, in fact or in essence, depend upon such a structure and conception of rules, and yet that the absence of such structure in no way impairs its functioning."²³

Poetic language itself underwent profound crises before the First World War and many avant-garde poets found a solution in embracing the idea of literary work as a specific language game. In their sophisticated language games, the relations among the words became more important than the relations of words to nonlinguistic reality. The response to the crisis of verbal representation resulted in the creation of the autonomous, self-sufficient word, such as the concepts of "liberated words" (*parole in libertà*) and "the word as such" (слово как таковое, *slovo kak takovoe* and самовитое слово, *samovitoe slovo*), fabricated by Italian and Russian Futurist poets respectively, as well as in the turn toward abstraction, such as the latter's concept of "trans-rational language" (заум, *zaum*). Many Dadaist experimental poetic forms emerged as yet another project that aimed toward the renovation of poetic language. Their works forcefully demonstrated how language, that foremost guardian of reason and the socio-symbolic order, might itself be "savaged" and transformed into a crude substance of pure enjoyment: Tristan Tzara's simultaneous poem (read in different languages, with different rhythms, tonalities, and by different persons at the same time), Hugo Ball's phonetic poem (*lautgedichte*), Richard Huelsenbeck's bruitist poem, or Raoul Hausmann's opto-phonetic and poster poems, are the

²³ Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," p. 48.

most salient examples of such experiments.²⁴ The Dadaists' sound poetry swiftly evolved into visual poetry, enriching the Futurists' use of typographical strategies by creating poems that used mechanically reproduced images in innovative ways.

Many avant-garde artists throughout Europe quickly recognized photography as a useful tool for overcoming the extant crisis of the word and representation. By 1919 photography hardly resembled the medium that France had announced as its gift to the world eighty years before. There were three main paths of development, all significant in themselves but especially powerful in concert. First, the invention of versatile hand-held cameras revolutionized the way that photographs were made and set the photographer free. The second concerned the ways in which photographs reached their audiences: the innovation introduced a cheaper and more efficient way of multiplying the photographic image, as well as other advances in printing technology which enabled the press run of a daily newspaper to reach millions of people. Finally, the third was the creation of motion pictures, with which came the unique vocabulary of montage. These three developments in applied photography—its extreme ease, mobility, and availability; its prominent and polymorphous presence in the mass media; and its extension into film—were just achieving maturity at the close of World War I. Consequently, although photography was much older than the skyscraper and the airplane, it was rightly regarded along with them as a symbol of modernity.²⁵

²⁴ It may be said that Dadaist sound poetry puts into practice the type of ahistorical and meaningless language that Jacques Lacan termed *lalangue*, the goal of which is not merely communication but a nonsensical, narcissistic enjoyment, the “satisfaction of blah-blah.” (Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p. 45). For the same sound poetry, Annette Michelson is instead prone to use the term “cacophony” after the word “caca,” which is used by children to refer to excrement. (Michelson, “De Stijl, Its Other Face: Abstraction and Cacophony, or What Was the Matter with Hegel?”). More on opto-phonetic poetry, originating with Christian Morgenstern and subsequently actively pursued by the Dadaists, see Lista, “Raoul Hausmann’s Optophone: ‘Universal language’ and the Intermedia.”

²⁵ This brief summary of the technological revolution in photography is deeply indebted to John Szarkowski. See his *Photography Until Now*, especially chapters 5 and 6, pp. 125-245.

At the time, poets started to perceive the poetic realm of “the impalpable and imaginary” to be almost impossible without photography and photomontage that turned mirages into reality, and reality—into illusions. While prewar artists opened up new domains for the art of painting and illustrated art books, reserving the traditional mimetic function of the arts to photography, the postwar avant-garde artists adopted mechanically reproduced photography and photomontage as more efficient means for communicating a progressive message.²⁶

1.3 Photomontage and Montage Thinking

The use of photomontage was the turning point for postwar avant-garde art. The use of this “new” artistic medium, re-discovered and popularized by the Berlin Dadaists, shows that the

In his recent book on Dada photomontage, Matthew Biro offered a more detailed summary of the photographic advancements, using a number of sources: “Before the development of the halftone process between the late 1870s and the 1890s, newspaper and magazine illustrations were created through several different methods including lithography, woodcut engraving, and copper plate engraving. New techniques, such as photogravure, photolithography, collographic printing, and the Woodburytype, became popular in the 1870s and 1880s for printing photographs in magazines and books; however, these techniques, like the ones mentioned above, could not be used with type and thus required that image and text remain on separate pages or for the page to be printed twice in order to combine them. With the advent of halftone engraving, however, photographs and texts could finally be printed together; as a result, printing time was reduced, as were printing costs. Daily newspapers started regularly publishing photographs around 1900, and rotogravure, the printing of text and image in massive rotating presses, which was introduced in the early 1900s, allowed halftone illustrations to be printed at an extremely rapid rate. As a result of these developments, illustrated newspapers proliferated during the first decades of the twentieth century.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also witnessed rapid changes in photographic technologies. The dry plate process of Dr. Richard Leach Maddox, celluloid negatives, orthochromatic film, exposure calculators, anastigmatic lenses, handheld cameras, new forms of shutters, new types of printing papers, flash powder, and the science of sensitometry, which were all developed by the early 1900s, allowed for photographs to be taken more easily and rapidly as well as in places where it was previously too difficult to obtain an image. These innovations, along with the burgeoning of amateur photography since the 1880s, led to the increased production of—and demand for—instantaneous photographs of life: candid images of fleeting events (everyday and historical) that prepared the ground for photojournalism. In addition, phototelegraphy, the telegraphic transmitting of photographic images, was first put into use in 1907, thus making photographs even more readily (and quickly) available for publication. For these various reasons, after World War I, press illustration became largely photographic.” (Biro, *The Dada Cyborg*, p. 90).

²⁶ Thus, photopoetry books superseded the handcrafted avant-garde poetry collections that were usually printed in small sizes and small numbers of copies, habitually combining handwritten text with illustrations and drawings (for example, poetry collections of the Russian futurists before the First World War). See Rowell and Wye (eds.), *The Russian Avant-Garde Book, 1910-1934*.

response to the advance of photography was a dialectical process in which the avant-garde developed a range of radically new, non-mimetic techniques and styles, integrating photographic material and technical processes of montage into its newly fashioned artistic practices.²⁷ The Dadaist photomontage recognized the basis for this new art form in mass-produced photographic material, which questioned the validity of many traditional artistic concepts such as “originality” and “uniqueness,” “handicraft” and “personal style,” “unity” and “organicity” of the artwork, as well as the demarcation of art and technological reproduction (including in industrial and everyday life). The Dadaist photomontage stands as a turning point after which technological reproduction was recognized as an integral part of artistic production.

The Dadaists recognized photomontage as a new artistic technique and art form inhabiting the conspicuous realm between painting and cinema.²⁸ Although this recognition came much later in theoretical writings dating from the early 1930s, one may argue that it was already present in the Dadaist photomontage practice from the very moment of its inception, as art historian Matthew Biro does in his book *The Dada Cyborg*.²⁹ In his introductory essay to the catalogue of the notorious First International Dada Fair (1920), Wieland Herzfelde, John

²⁷ The art of photomontage is, however, much older. See Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, pp. 32-54; and <<http://www.d-log.info/timeline/>>

²⁸ Peter Bürger also asserts that the photomontage “occupies an intermediate position between montage in films and montage in painting,” whereas for the very same reason he discards it as a useful departure point for his discussion of the concept of montage. (Bürger, *Theory of Avant-Garde*, 1984, p. 76).

²⁹ Here, I follow the argumentation by Mathew Biro, who takes the example of Hausmann’s text “Synthetisches Cino der Malerei,” “as well as the print he created with the same title using the first two-thirds of the text and a collage of cigar bands in 1918 (reproduced in Züchner, Krausse, and Hatesaul, *Raoul Hausmann*, p. 176). Hausmann first presented “Synthetic Cinema of Painting” under the title “The New Material in Painting” at the Berlin Sezession on April 12, 1918 [...]; in addition, he also created a second print with the same title. Although Hausmann does not discuss film directly in his text, he was, as the title suggests, interested in how cinema could be merged with traditional forms of art such as painting. Presumably under the influence of film, cubism and futurism, he notes, took steps toward representing the “fourth dimension” and the contradictory nature of human experience, which interweaves contrasts. Dada, he argued, would develop this cinematic tendency even further, thereby leading to “the true experience of all relationships.” See Biro, *The Dada Cyborg*, p. 88, 276 (fn 65), and also p. 126.

Heartfield's brother and a prominent member of Berlin Dada group, provided an insightful account of the power of photomontage to resist traditional representation, recognizing it as a weapon for undermining the familiar illusionism of academic painting, and the frivolous abstraction of experimental practices through a radical attack on both representation and the institution of academic art:

Dadaism is the reaction against all those attempts to disavow the actual that were the driving force of the Impressionists, Expressionists, Cubists, and Futurists [...], but the Dadaist does not undertake, once again, to compete with the photographic apparatus [...] The Dadaist says: When in the past colossal quantities of time, love, and effort were directed toward the painting of a body, a flower, a hat, a heavy shadow, and so forth, now we need merely to take scissors and cut out all that we require from paintings and photographic representations of these things. [...] Any product that is manufactured uninfluenced and unencumbered by public authorities and concepts of value is in and of itself Dadaistic, as long as the means of presentation are anti-illusionistic and proceed from the requirement to further the disfiguration of the contemporary world, which already finds itself in a state of disintegration, of metamorphosis.³⁰

Similarly, in his 1931 text "Photomontage" Raoul Hausmann, "Dadasopher" and one of the most active members of the Berlin Dadaists, acknowledged its revolutionary form: "[A]s revolutionary as the content of photomontage was its form—photography and printed texts combined and transformed into *a kind of static film*. The Dadaists, who had 'invented' the static, the simultaneous, and the purely phonetic poem, applied these same principles to pictorial expression." Further, he provided a precise and convincing account of the artistic techniques employed, and the aesthetic effects produced by photomontage:

[P]hotomontage in its primitive form was an explosion of viewpoints and a whirling confusion of picture planes more radical in its complexity than futurist paintings [...] Photomontage in particular, with its opposing structures and dimensions (such as rough versus smooth, aerial views versus close-up, perspective versus flat plane), allows the greatest technical diversity or the clearest working out of the dialectical problems of form. [...] in short, the

³⁰ Herzfelde, "Introduction to the First International Dada Fair," pp. 100-102.

dialectical form-dynamics that are inherent in photomontage—will assure it a long survival and ample opportunities for development.³¹

This “new” artistic medium, as Hausmann’s reflection clearly pointed out, builds on advanced techniques that had already been developed by the prewar Cubists and Futurists: decomposition, fragmentation, combination of multiple view-points, simultaneity, dynamism, and cinematic effects, such as double exposure and montage. These devices not only prevented recourse to any realist mode of artistic production, but actually pushed photomontage to the forefront of the avant-garde revolution in the arts. Hardly elsewhere can we find the spatial illusionism of the central, one-point perspective more radically destabilized and substituted by a multitude of visual facets than in the early forms of Dadaist photomontage. Nowhere else do we encounter a more visually explosive combination of interlocking planes, different levels and angles of perception. In no other form can we find a greater affinity to cinematic effects than in the early forms of photomontage. Quite correctly, Hausmann acknowledged and emphasized the cinematic relationship of the new art form by identifying it as “a kind of static film,” a motionless moving picture.³²

The second important feature to which the “Dadasopher” referred in his essay is *the formal dialectic quality* of photomontage. The “dialectical-form dynamics” are not only

³¹ Hausmann, “Photomontage,” pp. 178-180. My emphasis.

³² One of the first photomontages produced by George Grosz and John Heartfield and reproduced in the catalogue of the First International Dada Fair accompanying Wieland Herzfelde’s introduction—*Life and Activity in Universal City at 12:05 in the Afternoon* (1919)—undeniably foregrounds the aforementioned photomontage’s cinematic affinity. This artwork alludes to a Hollywood studio complex in its title, featuring many references to film and “photoplay” within a picture. (Pachnicke and Honnef (eds.), *John Heartfield*, p. 68). The examples of textual references to cinema and cinematic iconography can be found in the works of several Berlin Dadaists, such as, among others, the word “cinémademapensée” or “cinema of my mind” written across the forehead of Hausmann’s 1919 collage *Gurk* (Levi, *Cinema By Other Means*, p. 34), the film projector sitting on the head of the figure in Hausmann’s 1920 *Self Portrait of the Dadasoph* or the faces and bodies of film stars in Hannah Höch’s 1919-20 *Cut With the Kitchen Knife*. (Biro, *The Dada Cyborg*, p. 118 and p. 72, respectively).

“inherent in photomontage,” but also frequently palpable through the juxtaposition of fragmented, faceted materials of different origins, perspectives and proportions, provoking an active contribution from the viewer in establishing a relationship between the disparate materials displayed. It is, actually, the viewer who puts the static images of photomontage into the motion, who makes the motionless picture move. And the viewer is able to become the producer of diverse meanings and interpretations based upon the complex set of relations she establishes between the heterogeneous elements into which the surface of the photomontage is split, only because she has been invited to do so by the photomontage’s structure. The inherent dialectics is embedded in the structure of photomontage, constituted *as* and constitutive *of* the tension between the factographic element and abstract configuration (construction).

Photomontage is, just as any montage, endowed with an unequivocal and unresolvable *duality*. This distinct doubleness—the tension between construction and element embedded in the foundations of montage—is both its aporetic and defining feature. The construction is simultaneously the labor or the process of production (in the sense of “constructing”) and its result: an artifact that successively lays bare the procedure of its formation. In this respect, the term “construction” correlates with the Marxist comprehension of the world as a product and an effect of “the forces and relations of production” (where the latter evolves on the basis of the former). The world of things, created in the labor process, appears at the same time to be a disguise concealing the forces and relations of their production. Dadaist photomontage aimed to disclose the very processes (the forces and relations) of production that are lying veiled behind the culture’s visual discourses.

In terms of visual culture, this translates into the following: those who were maintaining the cultural conventions sustained by photography frequently disguised its social instrumentality.

For those critiquing the same cultural conventions, however, this social disciplinary practice of photography was just as frequently exposed. “That is why the successful critique of whole-world views,” as Stephen C. Foster remarks, “occurred most productively where the power of their representation was greatest: the photograph. That is, re-thinking cultural space (views on the world) became primarily a question of rethinking photographic space or rethinking space photographically. The photograph became the touchstone of rethinking culture, whether it was a question of entrenchment, revisionism, or critique.”³³ The creation of heterogeneous and discontinuous space of photomontage, therefore, becomes a gesture of both rethinking space photographically and rethinking cultural space. This dissertation shows that not only photomontage, but also the avant-garde photopoetry book functions as a site for reflections, negotiations and transformations of the abstractions we call world-views, and a forum for the formulation of new cognitive models by which we come to know and transact the cultural world.

If the construction in montage connotes production, constantly reminding us of its hidden forces and relations, the element of construction represents an application of this labor. The element constitutes the smallest unit of the construction, possessing a distinctive homogeneity in relation to the other similar, corresponding units. This sameness of the element is tied with the undifferentiated, unshaped world that is external to the artistic or technical construction. The element is in unresolvable dialectical tension with the construction, without the possibility of resolution. The element is the material captured by the construction in which it occupies its unique place but against which it withstands or points to the prospects of de- and re-construction. In its relation to the construction as a space of reflection, transparency, and consciousness, the

³³ Foster, “Dada and the Constitution of Culture: (Re-)Conceptualizing the Avant-Garde,” p. 53.

element forms a field of non-transparency, inscrutability, and materiality—being an indexical signifier of substantive reality.

The basic characteristic of the element is *faktura*—understood in the same way the Russian productionists assigned it its specific meaning within the vernacular of their formal method.³⁴ For them, *faktura* implies “asperity, harshness, sharpness” (*sherohovatost*), which holds our attention, interrupts the automatism of perception, reminds us of the existence of an exterior world and makes the entire process of our interaction with this world palpable. This feature of *faktura* correlates with another important Formalist idea, the concept of “making [forms] difficult,” of increasing “the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.” In other words, art, according to Formalist theory, allows for “the resistance of material” as the indispensable factor of how construction functions.³⁵

Both the construction and the element are double-coded, but in different ways: the construction is both the process and result of production, and the element functions as a part of the new context while it points back to the context(s) from which it was extracted. This “productive double-coding” or “double signification,” as Patricia McBride remarks, is “engendered by montage techniques, which operate via a transfer of materials from one context to another. In this transfer, materials become functional parts of the new context while maintaining allusions to the previous one(s).” This is why the collage or montage, according to

³⁴ More on the concept of *faktura* in Russian art see Margit Rowell, “Vladimir Tatlin: Form/Faktura, p. 91, 94; Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” pp. 82-119; and Maria Gough, “*Faktura*: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde,” pp. 32-59.

³⁵ Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” p. 12. The semantic layer contained in Formalist terminology implies the priority of tactile experience over the purely *perceptive*, and also *action* over *reflection*, which is visible in the distrust the Formalists express toward the traditional aesthetic category of image. Instead, they put accent on the technique, “device,” and immediate, physic contact and constructive work with the material, which enables us to experience its intransigent factography.

McBride, is characterized by its “fruitful double talk” and an “insuppressible semantic ambivalence.”³⁶ In Formalist terms, this productive doubleness of the photomontage, manifested as a tension between transparency of the construction, which forms the sector of total control and rationality, on the one hand, and opacity, density and faktura of the element, on the other, may be described as a struggle, but a struggle with varied ends. The inner meaning of such a struggle consists of the fact that each of the two involved require its opposite for its own realization. In other words, the hypertrophy of “constructivity,” which suppresses the “material” aspect, unavoidably results in the loss of the effect of operating construction, inasmuch as that operation is palpable only in its application of a certain irreducible substrate, which articulates “the external in the internal.” On the other hand, the tangibility of this substrate presupposes its enclosure by construction: the construction reveals and exposes the element, makes it visible or, as we would say today, turns it into the sign of itself. This dissertation holds that the avant-garde photopoetry is a technology for furthering this dialectics.

The avant-garde recognition of photomontage, with its inherent dialectical qualities, as a powerful tool for overcoming the existing crisis of representation was a symptom of the much larger cultural shift happening on an international scale—a turn toward montage culture. As defined by the Finish scholar of Russian imagism and avant-garde, semiotican Tomi Huttunen, montage culture stands for the predominance of “montage philosophy” and the “montage principle discernable in various art forms and artistic texts” across the European cultures of the first part of the twentieth century. In the context of post-Revolutionary Russia alone, it is

³⁶ McBride, “The Game of Meaning: Collage, Montage, and Parody in Kurt Schwitters’s *Merz*,” p. 253. Johanna Drucker defines the double nature of the element of montage/collage in a similar way: “The collaged element remained an object in-itself, present and replete, as well as serving in its capacity as a stand-in for an absent signified and an absent referent. Its undeniable material presence introduced considerable complexity into its signifying function.” (Drucker, *The Visible Word*, p. 84).

possible to speak of a montage philosophy throughout different arts.³⁷ The most salient feature of such a culture—in which montage functions as “a comprehensive example of the predominant polyglotism in a culture, a mutual interaction on the sign systems, and the attitude to the culture itself as a whole”—is the concept of “montage thinking” (МОНТАЖНОЕ МЫШЛЕНИЕ, *montazhnoe myshlenie*). According to Huttunen, montage thinking, which encompasses both montage philosophy and montage principle, defines “conditions for making certain kinds of art in both the author’s and the reader’s minds.”³⁸

Montage thinking is closely related to both the creative process and allegorical procedure of reading/seeing prompted by the specificities of the medium. The creative process in question (*poiesis*) is not based on mimesis understood as *imitation*, which hinges on capturing the semblance of things and whose character as a copy has a subordinate status vis-à-vis reality, but rather on mimesis understood as *reproducibility* or a duplication of forms that erases the hierarchical relation between the original and the copy. This type of *poiesis* is based on what Patricia McBride calls “mimesis as mimicry,” a complex and medium specific artistic process “in which interaction with the forms of the experiential world produces other forms in an imitative process in which each new form is not an inferior copy of the one that triggered repetition, but is rather situated on the same phenomenological plane.”³⁹ Montage thinking

³⁷ Although the montage theory develops specifically among the film theoreticians (experiments with reediting, “Kuleshov effect,” Eisenstein’s conflictual montage, Kuleshov’s syntactic montage, Pudovkin’s narrative and metonymical montage, and Vertov’s rhetorical-transformative montage), it simultaneously becomes a domineering principle in other arts, including painting (Malevich, Lissitzky, Puni), sculpture (Tatlin, Rodchenko, Iorgenson), theater (Eisenstein’s montage of attraction, Lyubov Popova’s stage designs), literature (imaginist montage, writers around *Lef*), graphic arts (posters and photomontages by Rodchenko and Stepanova, Klutis and Kulagina, Steinberg brothers and Yuri Rozhkov among others, made both for the commercial and propaganda purposes) including here also diverse photo-books (devoted to Lenin, children books, ceremonial books, photopoetry books), etc.

³⁸ Huttunen, “Montage culture: the semiotics of post-revolutionary Russian culture,” pp. 187-205. See also Huttunen, *Imazhinist Mariengof: Dendi. Montazh. Tsiniki*, pp. 57-99.

³⁹ McBride, “Introduction: Weimar-era Montage: Storytelling, Technology, Perception.”

enables the receiver, in turn, to recognize these reproduced forms as copies, while simultaneously treating them as if they were invested with the power of the original. This process is, essentially, both enabled and determined by the very materiality of the media of communication, which plays an important role in the procedure of reading/seeing. While the acts of watching a film, observing a photomontage and reading a photo-poetry book all activate montage thinking, the specific materiality of each of these media simultaneously requires and disciplines (allows for and limits, obstructs and directs, confuses and abuses) particular procedures and different practices of reading/seeing.

In this regard, the avant-garde photo-poetry book is a specific technology-based object; a medium defined by the centuries-old yet still peculiar materiality that combines printed text and photographic image(s), thus exposing the technique of montage (thinking) as an integral part of the new conceptual order of modernity. Montage breaks down distinctions between unity and fragmentation, continuity and interruption, necessitating the dialectic of disjuncture and conjunction. By calling attention to the fact that the work of art is made of bits and pieces of reality, montage “breaks through the appearance of totality.”⁴⁰ “Montage appears,” as Klaus Honneth remarks, “not only as a symbolic form of our time but also as a model of a view of the world and its experience, as self-evident [to us] as perspective was to our ancestors.”⁴¹ This dissertation argues that the photo-poetry book, just as cinema itself, could be redeemed as a medium of such experience. By emulating film’s power to stimulate interest and participation in its fantasies, photo-poetry provided a space for the reprisal of myths and rituals that trace and condition individual and collective experience, and advanced new models of understanding and

⁴⁰ Peter Bürger, *Theory of Avant-Garde*, p. 72.

⁴¹ Honneth, “Symbolic Form as a Vivid Cognitive Principle. An Essay on Montage,” p. 13.

behavior. The formal structure and material specificities of the avant-garde photo-poetry book, nonetheless, significantly differ from those of cinema.

1.4 The Bioscopic Book

If the montage undeniably appears to model of a view of the world and its experience, the world itself leads us again toward the book as a medium. This is a concept nurtured by Stéphane Mallarmé, the French symbolist poet whose “radical reader-oriented poetics have made him a canonical figure in the discourse of modernism.”⁴² A quarter century after Mallarmé, the Russian Constructivist, architect and graphic artist, El Lissitzky, proposed—in his 1923 manifesto-like essay “Topography of Typography”—the strangely reminiscent idea of the “bioscopic book,” which he defined simply as “the continuous page-sequence.”⁴³

Mallarmé and Lissitzky both shared a strong faith in the book as a strategic site for engaging the modern public. While continuing Baudelaire’s vision of the moral significance of the book’s “secret architecture,” Mallarmé modified and largely abandoned the former’s uncompromising antagonism toward industrialized publications.⁴⁴ Mallarmé rethought the book profoundly, recognizing it as a tool or “instrument” no longer focusing on a fixed object but on

⁴² Arnar, *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, The Artist’s Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture*, p. 2.

⁴³ Lissitzky, “Topography of Typography,” p. 359. Originally published in Kurt Schwitters’ journal *Merz*, No. 4, Hanover, July 1923, p. 47.

⁴⁴ Baudelaire defended *Les Fleurs du mal* in court as a *book* and not an *album*. The claim of a moral vision was essential to Baudelaire’s own assessment of *Les Fleurs du mal*. A book was to be understood as a measure of moral and artistic character. It was *Les Fleurs du mal*’s “secret architecture” that built its unity and which Barbey d’Aurevilly’s passionate essay argued for in Baudelaire’s defense. At the age of nineteen, Mallarmé purchased the second edition (considered to best represent Baudelaire’s intentions), and he scrupulously added the six condemned poems by hand, thereby reconstituting the “architecture” of the book as intended by Baudelaire. (Mondor, *Vie de Mallarmé*, p. 29). However, the evolving role and understanding of the reading public (and its role in redefining the experience of reading the book) is what ultimately distinguishes Mallarmé from Baudelaire in their respective conceptualizations of the book. See Arnar, *The Book as Instrument*, p. 30, 32.

the very process of reading.⁴⁵ For Mallarmé, the book was an alternative forum in which to present one's work and initiate new poetics that would radically alter everyday life by empowering readers as independent creative agents. For Lissitzky, who made a similar claim in a much more explicit and assertive way, the book was an alternative apparatus, which transformed readers from passive consumers into active producers. In his famous Suprematist children's story, *Pro 2■: Suprematicheskii skaz* (Супрематический сказ про 2 квадрата, Of two squares: Suprematist story, 1922), he devoted an entire page to the following instructions to the reader: "Do not read" but instead "take papers, columns [rods], blocks" and "fold [arrange], color, build."⁴⁶ In his design for Mayakovsky's collection of poems, *Dlia golosa* (Для голоса, For the Voice, 1923), he similarly proposed the reader's interactive relation to the medium of the book. Featuring a thumb index instead of a regular table of contents, Lissitzky's design was meant to assist not only Mayakovsky himself in declaiming his own verses at live performances, but also other readers in utilizing the book in the same way and for the same purpose; in other words, the book was designed to be a pedagogical instrument that converts readers into orators.

Moreover, Mallarmé and Lissitzky both shared a similar awareness of the surrounding mass media culture. As a keen observer of fin-de-siècle developments in the mass media, Mallarmé understood that the book was also undergoing a transformation due to the pressures brought on by the rapid changes in the publishing industry, including the daily newspaper and the poster. In his 1895 essay titled "Le Livre, instrument spirituel" ("The Book, A Spiritual Instrument,"), the newspaper serves as a kind of rhetorical foil against which he could articulate

⁴⁵ In her book on avant-garde typographic experiments, Johanna Drucker writes: "Mallarmé's typographic plan of the famous *A Throw of the Dice*, which was first published according to the poet's original sketches in 1914, activates spatial and temporal relations outside the normal linear sequence of poetic lines, thus making the complex format that, as Penny Florence neatly states, 'moves thought toward the simultaneity of perception.'" (Drucker, *The Visible Word*, p. 58).

⁴⁶ Lissitzky and Railing (ed.), *About Two Squares: In 6 Constructions: a Suprematist Tale*, p. 6.

the ideals of the book. According to Mallarmé, the newspaper had become the most effective medium in disseminating and propagating new ways of more distractive reading. The task of the modern poet will be to reflect on the “lessons” from the newspaper and to forge a new art.⁴⁷

Lissitzky went a step beyond Mallarmé’s critique of mechanization of reading induced by the daily press, and was more resolute to explore how new media and technologies, especially cinema and photography, could enhance reading and viewing. In his 1926 article “Our Book,”

Lissitzky writes:

The cinema and illustrated weekly magazine have triumphed. We rejoice at the new media which technology has placed at our disposal. We know that being in close contact with worldwide events and keeping pace with progress of social development, that with the perpetual sharpening of our optic nerve, with the mastery of plastic material, with construction of the plane and its space, with the force which keeps inventiveness at boiling point, with all these new assets, we know that finally we shall give a new effectiveness to the book as a work of art.⁴⁸

Lissitzky emphasized that in “skeptical and bewildered” post-war Europe, an individual must “hold one’s own and keep up with everything.” Reminding readers that one must be regularly updated about new technological advancements in a time where the catchwords are “attraction”

⁴⁷ By 1900 the newspaper had become a mass medium commanding large audiences—larger than any other printed medium or any other form of communication hitherto. Mallarmé articulated the experience of reading newspapers as a form of freedom and mobility, an activity he compares to meandering through a public, and decidedly popular space. He characterized the improvised nature of this “spectacle” as a “fairytale” (a drama of enchantment). He was attracted by the “charm” that the structure of the newspaper page offers and creates. These multiple distractions require new habits of reading that necessitate flexibility, visual activity, and physical endurance. He perceived how the physical energy and noise of the newspaper page forcefully disrupted traditional practices of reading, making it no longer a routinized or sequential activity. Mallarmé recognized the newspaper as “a unique kind of public space that seems to be inclusive and participatory.” (Arnar, *The Book as Instrument*, p. 51).

Between Mallarmé and Lissitzky, as Johanna Drucker has neatly demonstrated, several experiments played an important role in the development of the printed page. Marinetti, Apollinaire, and Ilya Zdanevich, according to Drucker, carried on Mallarmé’s legacy: Zdanevich continued the conviction that through an intensified attention to the material properties of poetic language a transcendence from logic and the quotidian may be achieved; Marinetti continued Mallarmé’s radical repression of the lyrical subject which had been so essential to nineteenth century poetics; Apollinaire developed Mallarmé’s rejection of representational mode in favor of the figural and visual mode of verbal manifestation. See Drucker, *The Visible Word*, pp. 58-59.

⁴⁸ Lissitzky, “Our Book,” p. 363. Originally published in *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch*, 1926.

and “trick,” Lissitzky made obvious reference to the rise of cinema and its influence on “cultivating a shrieking, bellowing language” in the European public sphere. Further, he acknowledged the importance of “1) the fragmented type panel, 2) photomontage and typomontage” for “the appearance of the book.”⁴⁹ While Lissitzky shared Mallarmé’s missionary zeal for condemning the conventional book, he was still more eager to embrace the technological promises of his rapidly changing, mechanical age.⁵⁰

Lissitzky’s fascination with the visuality and kineticism of the cinema partly explains the origins of his concept of the “bioscopic book” and why it remained essentially underdeveloped. Although Lissitzky never worked in the medium of film, throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, cinema provided him with a tangible metaphor for his production in other media—whether graphic design, exhibition design, photography, or architecture.⁵¹ In order to avoid confusion around the term “bioscopic”—which has been misinterpreted as an idea that “makes little sense because *scope* is used only for optical measuring apparatus” while “the addition of *bio* points to general (human) life, indicating the conditions of human perception”—it should be underlined that Lissitzky borrowed this term from the name of a particular type of film projector.⁵² As the standard cinematic apparatus popular at the time, the *Bioscope projector*

⁴⁹ Lissitzky, “Our Book,” p. 363.

⁵⁰ Mallarmé’s condemnation of the conventional book is no less severe than his critique of the mechanization of reading by the daily press: “[t]o the question of books which we read in the ordinary way I raise my knife in protest, like the cook chopping off chickens’ heads.” (Mallarmé, “The Book: A Spiritual Instrument,” p. 84). In a similar vein, Lissitzky describes the role that the propagandistic poster played in Revolutionary Russia: “The traditional book was torn into separate pages, enlarged a hundred-fold, coloured for greater intensity, and brought into the street as a poster.” (Lissitzky, “Our Book,” p. 362).

⁵¹ See Nisbet, “El Lissitzky in the Proun Years: A Study of His Work and Thought,” esp. 304-305, n. 14.

⁵² The mentioned misunderstanding of the term belongs to Kai-Uwe Hemke. See “For the Voice and For the Eye: Notes on the Aesthetics in *For the Voice*,” p. 226. The Bioscope projector was the name used for at least three different patents. First, the brothers Max and Emil Skladanowsky in Berlin-Pankow developed the Bioscope projector in 1895. Second, in November of the same year, the French inventor Georges Demeny renamed his patent Phonoscope into Bioscope and offered it for sale. Third, the Bioscop projector was also

provided Lissitzky with a suitable technological model for his vision of the bioscopic book. He never ventured into explaining the new concept, and the term was left to linger only as an “attractive” metaphor for a mysterious and undefined kind of book.

This dissertation proposes a theoretical explication of the concept in question by developing further Lissitzky’s initial vision of the bioscopic book as “an alternative cinematic apparatus” and offering analyses of several examples from twentieth century interwar Central and East Europe. Film scholar and theoretician Pavle Levi made an initial step in this direction by recognizing Lissitzky’s concept of the “bioscopic book” as an example of the re-materialization of the standard cinematographic apparatus, and a model of conceptualizing the “cinema by other means.”⁵³ According to Levi, what is specific to all art forms that tend to create alternative cinematographic apparatus, including Lissitzky’s “bioscopic book,” is the so-called retrograde remediation. The category of *remediation*, introduced by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, involves the processes of re-shaping and re-activating older forms of media by the use of new ones.⁵⁴ The *retrograde* remediation, however, is marked by the pronounced technological

made by Walter L. Isaacs for Charles Urban in 1897 in America, but mostly produced for a variety of companies in England and Germany and popularized throughout Europe. For discussion on the invention and models of the Bioscope projector, see <http://bioscope.biz/resources/book_first_bioscope.pdf>

⁵³ I would like to thank Tatjana Aleksić who has drawn my attention to these works. See Levi, “Cinema by Other Means,” pp. 51-68; and his recent book *Cinema by Other Means*, especially pp. 25-45. In his article and book of the same title, he argues that the art forms fitting this category are not made “under the influence of, or referring to, the cinema.” Rather, they conceptualize the cinema “as itself a type of practice that, since the invention of the film apparatus, has also (simultaneously) had a history of execution through other, ‘older’ artistic media.” (p. 53; 27). These forms are, among others, the Dadaist’ photomontages, Raoul Hausmann’s “optophone,” the diagramatic drawings of Francis Picabia and Man Ray, avant-garde theatrical performances (such as Eisenstein’s “Montage of Attractions”), projects such as Kuleshov’s “cinema without film,” Lissitzky’s “bioscopic books,” László Moholy-Nagy’s “Typophotos,” Karel Teige’s “static films,” or surrealist sculptural assemblages (such as *The Frenzied Marble* by Belgrade Surrealists Aleksandar Vučo and Dušan Matić). All these art forms, by circumventing existing technological apparatus (photo camera and cinematograph), tend to create an alternative cinematographic apparatus. They “oppose normativization and technological reification of the apparatus by inviting the process of its infinite re-materialization.” (p. 56).

⁵⁴ “Remediation involves newer forms of media appropriating—surpassing and on some level preserving—the older ones. Television, for example, presented an advanced form of radio, while virtual reality offered itself as

inadequacy of an older medium to fully assimilate certain aspects of the new one. For example, Haussmann, Man Ray, Picabia, and their contemporaries repeatedly articulated the demand for cinema by employing techniques and forms of other, “older” means of expression: drawing, writing, photography, photomontage, assemblage, etc. To the question, “Why did these lovers of the machine continually resist the existing technological film apparatus?” Levi answers that these artists shared “an underlying desire to posit cinema as design” and “to locate this cinematic design in the space—[...] in the *difference*—between the concept of the medium and its unconventional technological realization.”⁵⁵

This dissertation recognizes Levi’s notions of the “cinema as *design*” and “cinematic *design*” as useful for further theorizing and articulating the concept of the bioscopic book. Through the *design* of the book, Lissitzky envisioned it to be a technology—an alternative cinematic projector. The materiality of the medium of the bioscopic book plays a key role in this vision. The bioscopic book transforms from a mere object into a concrete “technology” due to its operational body, that is, due to its continuous page-sequence and the previously mentioned dialectics inherent to the montage of the poetic text and photo/montage images featured on these pages. The specificity of the bioscopic book’s operational body is defined by this type of montage, which is understood both as overt juxtapositions and as “accumulation, repetition, seriality, or sequence.”⁵⁶ As a technology with such a specific operational body, the bioscopic book differs from what Mallarmé and Lissitzky name the conventional and traditional book, and

improved form of cinema.” (Levi, “Cinema by Other Means,” p. 65). See also Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*.

⁵⁵ Levi, “Cinema by Other Means,” p. 60.

⁵⁶ “Accumulation, repetition, seriality, and sequences are certainly less assertive than overt juxtapositions. The difference is that in these models the photographs can appear even as single shots and as elements of the larger whole. This expanded definition helps make sense of what at first seems like an absence of montage.” (Company, *Photography and Cinema*, pp. 73-74).

from what Levi calls the “normative,” controlling technology of the standard cinematic apparatus.

According to Levi, a specific medium maintains the non-reified form of an apparatus only as a *design* embodied in technology that enables the reader/viewer to be an active, engaged producer, rather than a passive consumer.⁵⁷ The bioscopic book, as an example of non-reified apparatus, is usually the collaborative creation of a poet and a graphic designer, and therefore always already involves intermedial dialogue. This dissertation thus proposes a concept of bioscopic book as a “suggestion apparatus” with an *alternating current*.⁵⁸ Since the fundamental message conveyed by every medium is always, quite literally, the dynamization of its own pure materiality, a “pre-sublimatory” vibrancy of its body, the content of the bioscopic book is already (at least) double-voiced or double-coded.⁵⁹ That is to say, the materiality, the very body of the bioscopic book, is always already “a dynamic conceptual design,” a “suggestion apparatus” set in motion by the reader/viewer who, as an important part of this conceptual-material circuit, operates as a producer by conducting perpetual *transfer* from one medium to another, i.e. by

⁵⁷ In his essay, Pavle Levi develops a notion of “design,” defined on the basis of different premises from that which I call the “program.” The idea or the dream of cinema, according to Levi, “preceded and motivated the invention of the film medium.” (p. 56). This idea of cinema exists as a *design*—the structural pattern of technology, or “an adaptation of means to some preconceived end.” (p. 60). Design is, thus, also a model, since it involves a structure or pattern, a particular combination of details or component parts. Just as the program, design is communicated in writing: in the development of a detail plan, in drafting the blueprints and diagrams. Just as any highly calculated program, design fulfills the need for strict formalization. Both the program and design function as a musical score, as a combination game with clear and distinct elements. Furthermore, the creators of a design are also within the communication process, since every pure form of structure, or every diagram, as Deleuze puts it, is “intersocial and constantly evolving.” (Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 35). Designers are, in other words, “philosophers of technology,” i.e. engineers, and programmers. Finally, Levi puts the notions of design and medium into a productive relation: “Every medium is, from the moment of its inscription, a dynamic conceptual design: an imagined cluster of (desired, projected, assumed) functions.” (p. 67).

⁵⁸ The terms “suggestion apparatus” and “influencing machine” were introduced by Viktor Tausk in his 1919 study on persecutory delusion in schizophrenia. See Tausk, “On the Origin of the Influencing Machine in Schizophrenia.”

⁵⁹ This is a variation on Marshall McLuhan’s well-known thesis developed in the 1960s, that “the medium is the message.” See McLuhan, “The Medium is the Message,” pp. 7-21.

managing interpretative *transduction* from one semiotic system to another and vice versa. The bioscopic book is, therefore, a hybrid materialization of McLuhan's thesis, "The content of one medium is always another medium," since it stands for the medium that always already involves two media—text and image—whose *alternating current* is both *controlling* and *controlled by* "the psycho-perceptual activity of the human subject."⁶⁰ The bioscopic book is "programmed" to function as a "suggestion apparatus" for a two-way communication between the different media and the reader/viewer, who herself becomes a channel, a medium, an active "influencing machine," a prosumer.⁶¹

This dissertation recognizes the concept of the *prosumer* as useful for the articulation of multivalent roles of the reader/viewer, who simultaneously acts as a consumer, producer, "middleman," channel, or medium. Thus, the notion of prosumer extends the existing definition of the reader/viewer to whom all three, Mallarmé, Lissitzky and Levi, assign importance equaling the author(s). The reader/viewer of a bioscopic book consequently becomes a version of Baudelairian highly perceptive *flâneur* who, by observing, loafing around, and strolling through the pages that juxtapose text and images, sets in motion a "suggestion apparatus" through his thought-relations. The most valuable functions of the bioscopic book are, on the one hand, the activation of the reader/viewer's abilities to reflect upon, analyze, compare, and on the other hand, the "innervation" of reader/viewer that enables him to "live through" a special sort of

⁶⁰ Winthrop-Young and Wutz, "Introduction," p. 12.

⁶¹ "This word is becoming fairly common but can be confusing, as it has two meanings. It was coined in 1980 by the futurist Alvin Toffler—in his book *The Third Wave*—as a blend of *producer* and *consumer*. He used it to describe a possible future type of consumer who would become involved in the design and manufacture of products, so they could be made to individual specification. He argued that we would then no longer be a passive market upon which industry dumped consumer goods but a part of the creative process."

<<http://www.worldwidewords.org/turnsofphrase/tp-pro4.htm>>

tactile, corporeal experience.⁶² By creating the conditions that harness these abilities into what the Futurist leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti calls “anonymous gears,” the bioscopic book makes the reader/viewer “no longer a consumer but a producer of the text,” anticipating Roland Barthes’ famous formulation.⁶³ In the avant-garde context, this means that the ultimate aim of the bioscopic book is not to explain “the world out there” but to change our conception of, and relation to it. In order for this to happen, the bioscopic book makes the reader/viewer’s body function as a medium, the very site upon which the technology’s *montage thinking* inscribes itself. The concept of the subject is, thus, replaced by the concept of the body as a connecting link to which our medial means of processing, storage, and transmission run. This transformation disperses (bodies are multiple), complicates (bodies are layered systems) and historicizes (bodies are finite and contingent products) subjectivity rather than exchanging it for a simple absence. Human bodies thus become both sites and instruments of change.⁶⁴

1.5 A Brief Chapter Outline

The 1920s avant-garde bioscopic book is rooted in social and technological utopianism as well as in the artistic ideologies of collectivism and progress. It is chiefly characterized by avant-garde utopian impulses and great expectations. The bioscopic book is not about illustration; rather, it is

⁶² Walter Benjamin introduces the term “innervation” in his essay “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, pp. 217-218.

⁶³ Barthes. *S/Z: An Essay*, p. 4.

⁶⁴ For an account of Dada montage that exemplifies this dispersion of the subjectivity and explores different conceptualizations of the nature of human identity, see Biro’s *The Dada Cyborg*. For more on the body as the instrument for communication see in Tsivian, *Na podstupakh k karpalistiche. Dvizhenie i zhest v literature, isskustve i kino. Carpalistics* is Nabokov’s neologism, defined in *Pnin* as the sum of the “Russian shrugs and shakes [...] the movements underlying such Russian verbs—used in reference to hands—as *mahnut*’, *vsplesnut*’, *razvesti*.” It is more specific than *kinesics*, the generalized study of gesture, and does not overlap with *pasimology*, the science of the gestures that do not accompany and enrich speech but clumsily substitute for it. However, Tsivian took over this neologism from *Pnin* and developed it conceptually into a new discipline of the study of gesture and ‘any bodily movement’ across the arts.

about experimentation with the book as an alternative cinematic apparatus. This dissertation aims to conceptualize it as a breakthrough point towards cineptic, cinematographic books, which El Lissitzky acknowledged and envisioned, but said little about and left underdeveloped.

Rather than offering a chronology of avant-garde photo-poetry books, this dissertation proceeds through critical case studies. Its methods are close reading, critical exegesis, and careful attention to detail which aim to identify tactical affinities and aesthetic genealogies that more broadly focused, chronologically bound studies tend to overlook. Each of the three focuses on one bioscopic book experiment and the wider cultural context with its set of artistic practices that provided an environment for such experimentation. Each chapter reveals how avant-garde artists collaborated to construct an alternative technological apparatus signifying their ideological affinities, and how that indermedial apparatus is meant to function accordingly.

Chapter 2, “A Merger of Dada and Constructivism” focuses on the first Constructivist bioscopic book, Vladimir Mayakovsky’s and Aleksandr Rodchenko’s collaborative 1923 project *About This*. This chapter describes the historical context from which post-revolutionary Russian montage culture emerged, surveying social and cultural programs for the reconstruction of everyday life (*byt*) proposed by the artists gathered around the magazine *Lef*, and closely examines the relationship of these programs to those of Mayakovsky and Rodchenko. This chapter explores the dialectical relationship between Mayakovsky’s verses and Rodchenko’s photomontages in *About This*, demonstrating how the conceptual design of this Constructivist apparatus functions.

Chapter 3, “An Agit-Book that Remained a Project” investigates the little known, yet visually rich and intriguing photomontage work by Yuri Nikolaevich Rozhkov for Mayakovsky’s 1924 poem “To the Worker’s of Kursk.” This chapter makes use of archival

materials to introduce the largely unknown biography of the artist. It elaborates on the most salient aesthetic features of Rozhkov's unpublished agit-book as an apparatus with alternating rhythm and cinematic qualities of the proto-sequential art. This chapter critically assesses Rozhkov photo-collages and their distinctive qualities through a series of close readings of each of the seventeen photomontage sheets, focusing primarily on their propagandistic, documentary, utopian, and satirical qualities and commenting on its differences and similarities with other photo-poetry and photomontage works at the time.⁶⁵

Chapter 4, "Poetry and Typophoto that Remained Forgotten" explores *Alphabet*, the unique 1926 bioscopic book of Czech Poetism, formed through the collaboration of three artists—poet Vítězslav Nezval, dancer Milada (Milča) Mayerová, and graphic designer and theoretician Karel Teige. By focusing on the various experiments in Czech poetry and graphic arts that eventually led to the creation of its distinctive bioscopic book—picture poems and photomontage poetry, typography and typophoto—this chapter investigates the 1926 book *Alphabet* in detail and offers an explanation of the *paradoxical duality* under which it operates. This chapter analyzes the artists' original contributions to this unique experiment in specific technology with the "continuous-page sequence," enabling the reader/viewer to "perform the book" and thus enjoy its cinematic quality on several levels.

⁶⁵ There is no established distinction between the terms montage and collage and they are often used interchangeably. According to Marjorie Perloff, collage mainly connotes static visual practices, while montage refers to the practices developed in time, most notably film (Perloff, "Collage and Poetry," p. 385). From historical perspective, the term montage gained currency in conjunction with film theory. This dissertation uses the term montage as denoting a broad aesthetic principle of combination and juxtaposition, which encompasses a variety of practices ranging from verbal and visual collage, photomontage, assemblage and last but not least, combination of the text, photography/photomontage and typography on the printed page. For a discussion of collage in the context of the historical avant-garde see: Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*, pp. 42-79; Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage*; and Banash, "From Advertising to the Avant-Garde: Rethinking the Invention of Collage;" for an historical overview of the development of collage and montage practices in Western art see Taylor, *Collage: The Making of Modern Art*.

The conclusion, “**Books for the Children of the Revolution,**” briefly recapitulates the argument to show how this dissertation offers a theory of the bioscopic book as a technology for 1) the formulation and reproduction of montage thinking as a new cognitive model by which we interact with the outside world, 2) the augmentation of intermedial and interpersonal dialogue, and 3) the transformation of readers/viewers into prosumers. In addition, the conclusion reflects on the processes of standardization and variety control through which the radical experiments of the early 1920s avant-garde came to an end.

CHAPTER 2
A Merger of Dada and Constructivism:
Mayakovsky's Poetry & Rodchenko's Photomontages in *About This* (1923)

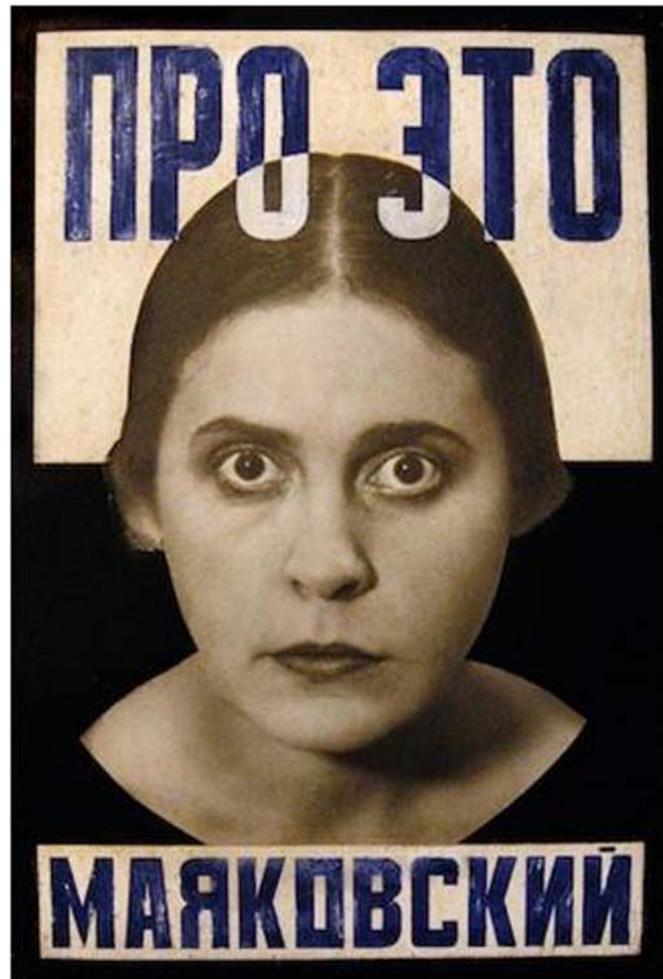


Figure 2.1 Aleksandr Rodchenko:
front cover for Mayakovsky, *About This* (1923).

Featuring a frontal photo-portrait of a woman staring intently at the reader, and framed above by the title and below by the renowned surname of the poet, the front cover of Mayakovsky's 1923 book *Pro eto* (About This) resembles a silent film poster (**fig. 2.1**). Two letters of the book's

suggestive title, “About This,” interpenetrate the woman’s head, creating a point of reference by contiguity. The reader-already-turned-viewer swiftly establishes a semantic connection between the image of the woman and the words from the title. Yet, does the reader know who this *particular* woman is? This woman, with a fearless, emotionless, almost robotic gaze? Is she a contemporary silent film star? Or is she meant to represent the generic woman? Is she somehow related to the poet whose reverberant surname appears beneath in a layout evocative of an advertisement slogan? Or is she symbolic of something? And if so, what does she stand for? Does her stony, impartial expression support or run up against the symbolic representation of the sovereign liberation of the spirit that is associated with the blue color of the letters framing her image?⁶⁶

The entire book, including its front cover and the set of eight black and white photomontages, was designed by Aleksandr Rodchenko, a Russian Constructivist polymath and graphic designer. The tension generated by the subtle disturbance of the rhythmical equilibrium of the overall visual composition is the main feature of the front cover of the 1923 book published by the State Publishing House (Gosizdat).⁶⁷ Like folk art and Byzantine iconography, Rodchenko’s immaculate design maintains equilibrium by holding forces together. Rodchenko’s composition achieves balance between fullness and emptiness, light and dark surfaces, straight lines and curves, and it can be broken down into measurable units or grids—patterns that are both graceful and stable. A balance is achieved by the recurrence of the same type of shapes in contrasting colors: black and white *squares* divide the background into two halves, and the

⁶⁶ See Gass, *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry*.

⁶⁷ The book was published a few months after Mayakovsky’s poem first appeared as the controversial centerpiece in the inaugural issue of *Lef* journal (March 1923) of which he was the chief editor. See Mayakovsky, “Pro eto,” pp. 65-103. In this chapter, I am using the following translation: Marshall, *Mayakovsky*, pp. 161-229. Original verses in Russian are quoted from Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 13 t.*, vol. 4, pp. 81-134.

woman's eyes, chest, and head are conveyed by bright or white-colored *oval* shapes. The rhythmical equilibrium lies in the background horizontal line that divides the composition in two equal parts. The dark circular eyes that stare directly forward, seemingly oblivious even to the presence of the photographer, disturb this harmonizing line. Her direct gaze both pierces and passes over the viewer and ostensible camera. Thus, the gaze's focal point is rendered obscure and vanishing. Her direct gaze, with its intangible point of focus, establishes equilibrium of a different value, which is no longer static. That is to say, the symmetry is no longer fixed; equivalence is no longer managed without difference, and stability is no longer possible without change. Everything is in flux.

This chapter explores in greater detail the proposition that Rodchenko's design suggests is the central theme of Mayakovsky's entire poem: the tension resulting from a series of unresolved conflicts between the poet and the Russian *byt* (быт, everyday life), individual and collective expressions, and personal and public identity. This tension manifests in Mayakovsky's narrative of the life of a public hero and his obsessive love for a woman. This narrative touches upon the themes of the futurist's ego, revolutionary and mass society, suicide as "healing death" and the utopian future. Furthermore, this tension is reflected by the conflict of high and low genres, and is generated by an intermedial juxtaposition of meanings to which each medium separately gives its own double-coded expression. By analyzing the multiple conflicts that are played out through and by the evident double-coded signification of both poetic text and photomontage, this chapter demonstrates that Mayakovsky and Rodchenko's collaborative project can be seen as one of Russian Constructivist pioneering bioscopic books. Bioscopic books were thought to be a "suggestion apparatus," to use the term by Levi, which could draw

the reader/viewer within its *alternating current* of verbal and visual signification, thus both magnetizing and electrifying his/her thinking processes.

The first part of this chapter briefly describes the historical context out of which post-revolutionary Russian montage culture emerged. It focuses primarily on the first Constructivist magazine *Kino-fot* (Кино-фот, Cinema-Photo, 1922) and the mutually reinforcing art practices it introduced. The second part of this chapter surveys the social and cultural programs proposed by the Left Opposition for the reconstruction of everyday life (перестройка быта, *perestroika byta*), and closely examines the relationship of these programs to those of Mayakovsky and Rodchenko—insofar as Mayakovsky and Rodchenko demonstrated their programs in their first collaborative bioscopic book. The third part of this chapter examines the dialectical relationship between Mayakovsky's verses and Rodchenko's photomontages. It demonstrates the conceptual design of this Constructivist apparatus and also explores its alternating functions. This chapter argues that Mayakovsky's and Rodchenko's bioscopic book heralded a new program of seeing, reading, and ultimately of understanding, which required that the reader/viewer become more flexible, thus able to adapt to the new post-revolutionary circumstances (of NEP) without losing their revolutionary fervor and commitment to the legacy of October.

2.1 Russian Constructivism and Montage Culture

The book edition of *About This* was the first of Mayakovsky's works to feature Rodchenko's accompanying illustrations, and the first example of the new modernist photomontage, which is used through the entire poem. Indeed, this was the first book in which the authors explicitly

labeled this technique as photomontage.⁶⁸ As a constructivist mixed-media artwork, the book *About This* embodied and extended the already existing artistic attempts to produce a synthesis of the arts, or more precisely, a synthetic art medium that would be able to satisfy both the aesthetic and ideological requirements of the modern age.⁶⁹ Along with a rich production in the field of advertising, the collaboration between Mayakovsky and Rodchenko resulted in several photopoetry works.⁷⁰ In the short period between 1923 and 1926, they published the following books: *About This* (1923), *Paris* (1925), *To Sergei Esenin* (1926), *Conversation with a Tax Inspector about Poetry* (1926), and *Syphilis* (1926), all of which feature Mayakovsky's narrative poems accompanied by Rodchenko's photomontages and cover designs. Mayakovsky's and Rodchenko's collaborative photopoetry editions were intended to be a sort of effective "technology" that would be productive only as long as it continued to be motivated by human projection of its desired effects, while the medium of this technology (being the product of a

⁶⁸ In his book on Czech avant-garde graphic design, Toman remarks that the "Dadaists did not use the term photomontage" in the early 1920s, but that the term "does appear in early Soviet sources." He explains that *About This* "appeared in June 1923, and its colophon includes one small forgotten detail: 'Photo-montage of the cover and illustrations by the constructivist Rodchenko.' It is there that the new technique finally receives its name – *photo-montage*." See Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, pp. 41-45. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁹ Starting from 1919-20, the book, together with other manifestations of artistic activity, would be redefined and restructured into a vehicle of collective ideology, embodied in aesthetic program of Russian Constructivism. Unlike Russian Futurism—which was deliberately eccentric, sonorously trans-rational (*zaum*), and remarkably anarchistic—Soviet Constructivism was mostly determined by the Communist political and social ideology, and its normative production program. While Russian Futurism recognized in painting a potential for development of the visual effects in literature and an additional vehicle for diffusing their message, Soviet Constructivism proclaimed end of the easel painting and turned toward the more standardized and rational visual language which largely utilized photography and photomontage. Such language based on the use of the new techniques of reproduction was regarded as more effective, and thus more appropriate to the socio-political agenda and industrial production that had to forge, form, and represent the emerging Communist world. More on the art of avant-garde book in Russia before and after the revolution see in Rowel and Wye (eds.), *The Russian Avant-Garde Book 1910-1934*.

⁷⁰ More on Mayakovsky's and Rodchenko's commercial work see Tarkhanov, "The Name of the Object," pp. 75-77; Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, especially pp. 143-196.

combination of poetic text with photo-collage) should have continued to maintain the non-reified form of the apparatus which was designed to be set in motion by thought-relations.⁷¹

In order to show how constructivist bioscopic books came into being, I will briefly outline the historical context out of which post-revolutionary Russian montage culture emerged. I will also introduce the mutually reinforcing art practices that, almost simultaneously, triumphed over other artistic modes of expression. The art practices and tendencies that hatched from avant-garde experimentation with the newly re-discovered potential of mechanically produced images were: consideration of photomontage in relation to the illustrated press, the technique of re-editing, and finally, the tendency towards non-fiction. All three of these changes in artistic practice were closely related to the emergent art of cinema. A closer look at the first Constructivist magazine *Kino-fot* (Cinema-Photo, 1922) will serve as an illuminating example of how all three of these orientations were intertwined and related to the concept of cinema.

2.1.1 *Kino-fot* and Constructivist Montage

The development of new artistic criteria and standards in the graphic arts, where the Constructivist principles found broad application, was guided by the Constructivists' insistence on the use of new technology and the importance of functionalism.⁷² Their creative work in the

⁷¹ Yet, the reification of these editions is unavoidable due to the recuperative forces of history. Namely, all these editions are now considered as the "rare" avant-garde books that circulate on the art market as commodities with skyrocketing prices. Thus, they became again confined to the narrow circle of "bibliophiles" and collectors, eventually ending in museums collections. This process of commodification and museification (mummification) is, undoubtedly, in stark contrast with the initial aspirations and utopian goals of their authors, and demonstrates the inevitable force of the laws and pitfalls of cultural industry, harshly criticized by Adorno and Horkheimer.

⁷² With Constructivism, during the 1920s, the notions of both artist and artwork were once again fundamentally revised. Artist was conceived first as a "worker," i.e. a fellow soldier of proletarian worker, and eventually as a "constructor," "artist-constructor," and an "engineer." Rodchenko writes, "The artist, as we picture him, is different from the mere engineer who makes a given object. The engineer will perhaps [...] carry out a whole series of experiments, but as far as observation and the capacity to see are concerned we are different from him. The difference lies in just this fact that *we know how to see.*" (From INKhUK Archives, cit. acc. Khan-Magomedov and Quilici, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, p. 115. My emphasis). Artwork was imagined to be

field of graphic design was not only confined to the rational use of typographical techniques, but also included an interest in photography and photomontage in their printed form. The most important example of avant-garde graphic design is the first Constructivist magazine, *Kino-fot* (1922).⁷³ This magazine, whose editor in chief was the fervent Constructivist—theoretician, organizer, and publisher—Alexei Gan, introduced photography and photomontage as an equally important means of expression as typography, recognizing in *montage* their common denominator. Such tendencies can be partly explained by the specifically cinematographic theoretical concerns of the magazine. Theorizing about compositional aspects of film and photography was one of the editors' primary concerns. Varvara Stepanova and Aleksandr Rodchenko, whose view of photomontage gradually evolved within the framework of their constructivist agenda, designed the covers of Gan's magazine.⁷⁴ In the third issue of *Kino-fot* Lev Kuleshov, film director and theoretician, published his text on principles of film montage alongside two of Rodchenko's photomontages, thus establishing a connection between the two.

the product of politically effective, socially useful, and mass-produced art; which is to say, a practical, economical, convincing and convenient, "comrade-object" of everyday use. Constructivist art, including the book and poster design, was governed by the principles of material integrity, functional expediency, and societal purpose. These principles were formulated according to rigorous political directives, behind whose agenda was a conviction in the urgency of addressing a vast and largely illiterate audience. Yet, this task could only be realized through the use of a rationalized, standardized, and explicit visual vocabulary. The standardization of visual grammar and the rationalization of image vocabulary, which were chiefly based on a political ideology and elementary formal, structural, and technical codes that could directly communicate utopian promise of social transformation and collective culture, actually revolutionized Russian graphic design to one of the earliest and most radical in the Western world.

⁷³ Russian art historian and Rodchenko's grandson, Aleksandr Lavrientev, gives a tribute to *Kino-fot* not only as the "monument to avant-garde theories of Constructivism, history of cinema, or source of documentary materials from the beginning of 1920s," but also praises the magazine as the "unique monument of avant-garde graphic design." (Lavrientev, *Aleksei Gan*, pp. 106-7).

⁷⁴ There is yet another important example of early Soviet photomontage, even prior to those aforementioned—the works such as "Dynamic City" (1919) and "Electrification of the Entire Country" (1920) by another Constructivist, Gustav Klutsis. For more on Klutsis and his work, see Tupitsyn, *Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina*; and Ash, "Gustav Klutsis: The Revolutionary Arsenal of Arms and Art," pp. 47-68.

Albeit short-lived—there were only five issues published—*Kino-fot* was an important platform of the Russian post-revolutionary avant-garde for dissemination of avant-garde manifestos in several areas: cinema, design, photography, theater, and stage design. It featured Dziga Vertov’s famous manifesto “We,” which celebrated film as the “art of inventing movements of things in space in response to demands of science.” The magazine also premiered a series of Rodchenko’s collage-parodies on the state of the contemporary theater and the literary scene in Moscow in 1922, titled “printed material for the critic, edited by Constructivist Rodchenko” (печатный материал для критики смонтированный конструктивистом Родченко).⁷⁵ Among other things, *Kino-fot* praised Charlie Chaplin as “the undeniable hero of Constructivism,” introduced the new abstract cinema of Viking Eggeling (also called “dynamic painting”), and published Lev Kuleshov’s theoretical essay on “cinema without film,” which pays special tribute to actors’ gestures, movements, and the organization of space on the stage. The journal focused on the contemporary events in the realm of cinema and photography (however, all the published photographs were merely printed film stills; there were no original photographs), and featured programmatic texts on cinema such as “Agit-cinema” by the theoretician of productivist art, Boris Arvatov, as well as Ippolit Sokolov’s “Stone Tablet of Our Time,” among others. At the same time, *Kino-fot* introduced the Soviet public to the then widespread “Americanism”—associated with jazz, sports, cars, technology, skyscrapers, movies, photography, and photomontage—as an alternative to old bourgeois aestheticism and its separation from ‘life.’

As the mouthpiece of Soviet avant-garde filmmakers, *Kino-fot* perpetuated the post-revolutionary Russian avant-garde and its daydream of creating a revolutionary culture for the

⁷⁵ *Kino-fot*, No. 1 (August 25-31, 1922), p. 13.

masses. In the October 1922 issue of *Kino-fot*, Mayakovsky published a short text in which he championed cinema's revolutionary potential:

Для вас кино — зрелище.
Для меня — почти мирозерцание.
Кино — проводник движения.
Кино — новатор литератур.
Кино — разрушитель эстетики.
Кино — бесстрашность.
Кино — спортсмен.
Кино — рассеиватель идей.

For you cinema is spectacle.
For me almost a Weltanschauung.
Cinema—purveyor of movement.
Cinema—renewer of literature.
Cinema—destroyer of aesthetic.
Cinema—fearlessness.
Cinema—a sportsman.
Cinema—a sower of ideas.⁷⁶

The above text may shed light on why the futurist poet consented to collaborate with constructivist Rodchenko in both publishing avant-garde photopoetry artworks and creating commercial advertisements. In this *Kino-fot* piece, Mayakovsky goes on on to argue that moviegoers had grown tired of American imports, homegrown melodramas, and the capitalist control of the cinematic medium. Innovation, in other words, was essential for Mayakovsky. The rise of the new Soviet state necessitated a brand of cinema that would correspond to its revolutionary goals: the spread of socialism, the triumph of the new proletarian culture (новый быт, *novyi byt*) over the old bourgeois tradition (мещанский быт, *meshchanski byt*), and the expansion of an industrial complex (including one that produces art) capable of competing with, and eventually outpacing the West. These goals forged and shaped the ideology that motivated

⁷⁶ Mayakovsky, “Kino i Kino” (Cinema and Cinema), *Kino-fot*, No. 4 (October 5-12, 1922), p. 5. Translation quoted from Taylor and Christie (eds.), *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents*, p. 75.

the marriage between poetry and photomontage, or more generally, between two potent genres of the avant-garde and mass culture, respectively.

2.1.2 Photomontage and Illustrated Press

Kino-fot was also a very important podium for Rodchenko, whose experience in designing covers for the journal largely developed both his orientation toward the new artistic medium of photomontage and his role as the journal's designer and photo-editor. For Rodchenko, photomontage was a distinct art medium capable of reflecting contemporary life; it provided an open-ended array of available tools for appropriation of the signs circulating in contemporary mass-culture. Rodchenko's work as a photo-editor became another functional incarnation of an emergent media culture, made possible by improved technologies of reproduction that allowed for the broad dissemination of photographic material and, increasingly, for the printing of texts and photo-images on the same page. By redefining the artist as a media worker through theoretical proclamations and practice, Rodchenko emerged as a pioneer of the information age.

Rodchenko did not engage in photography as a photographer, but rather as a creator of photomontages, a "photo-monteur."⁷⁷ The technique of collage was part of the Cubist vocabulary he had received from Malevich, Tatlin, and others. As he increasingly turned away from

⁷⁷ Berlin Dadaists prized the term "monteur" for its affinity to the world of the factory and machine production, since that term in German means 'mechanic' or 'engineer.' Undoubtedly, one can assume that Rodchenko was abetted by artistic impulses that were coming from the West, particularly those that he may find in the works of the Berlin Dadaists (George Grosz, John Heartfield, Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch). The Berlin branch of Dada, which after the First World War continued and radicalized the first anti-art movement in history, found in photomontage the visual equivalent of their cultural nihilism and revolt against the pervasive influence of Expressionism. Embracing the photomontage's mechanical qualities, the German Dadaists used this technique to demolish easel painting, which occupied traditionally privileged place in the Expressionism. Berlin Dadaist recognized the guiding principles against easel painting in the "machinist art" of Vladimir Tatlin. Nineteen-year-old Konstantin Umanskii published text about new Russian art in January 1920 in the magazine *Der Ararat I*, along with a book *New Art in Russia, 1914-1919 (Neue Kunst in Russland, 1914-1919)*. It is there that the Berlin Dadaists read of "the death of painting," "the death of art," and of "the machine art of Tatlin," the slogan which they will embrace for revolutionary use, without fully understanding the nature of Tatlin's work.

painting, his collages began to incorporate a wide variety of vernacular graphic material, including photographic imagery.⁷⁸ Photography first appealed to the postwar avant-gardes not as a tool for capturing appearances but as a fluid process linked to the vast depository of images in the illustrated press. The illustrated press provided a rich store of raw materials to the practitioners of avant-garde photomontage, including Rodchenko himself. Art historian Peter

⁷⁸ Rodchenko's experiments with collage and photomontage were obviously rooted in graphic Constructivism, but the initial stimuli undeniably came from Vladimir Tatlin. It is important here to recall that Rodchenko was not a member of any artistic group until *The Store* exhibition, organized by Tatlin in March 1916 in Moscow. At the time, Rodchenko produced his first compass and ruler drawings, contributing six of them to Tatlin's exhibition. Alongside with Malevich's work, this is an early example of the linearism that will become the hallmark of constructivist graphic design during the 1920s. After this exhibition, during which he refused Malevich's offer to join his camp, Rodchenko remained loyal to Tatlin, who initially invited him to participate in the exhibition. (For more about creative rivalry and notorious animosity between Malevich and Tatlin, see in Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*, pp. 78-97). His close relationship with Tatlin will inspire Rodchenko not only to experiment with spatial constructions, but also to continue Tatlin's work on abolition of the painting's surface and introducing the new material. Both ideas hatched out of Tatlin's "corner counter-reliefs," which, on the other hand, have their conceptual beginnings in Paris, in early 1913, with Tatlin's visit to the studio of Picasso. (Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, p. 83). As it is known, Picasso was to be the first artist to introduce so-called "reliefs collages" and thus both separate color from the form and, more importantly, introduce new material (paper, carton, wood, tin, wire, etc.) in art. Moreover, Tatlin will represent an inspiring force in Rodchenko's developing and fashioning of his declaration against easel painting and focusing on "production art." Rodchenko's collages from the period 1919-22 clearly elucidate shift from the aesthetic and formal experiments in painting toward studies in graphic art. The very differences between his early (1919) and later collages (1922) illustrate gradual move from the composition that was primarily producing 'representational' effect, to the more settled arrangement of separate pieces which laid bare the very construction of a composition on the sheet. In the period between these two phases of his work on collages, Rodchenko wrote a short essay, the treatise called "The Line," in which he initially tend to explain the principle of his latest paintings built entirely on lines. ("The Line" text went through several different versions, from a preliminary and very short draft entitled "Slogans" (22 February 1921), to its first version (3 May 1921), and to its final version for the "5x5=25" exhibition (before 22 December 1921), which should have been published by INKhUK (Moscow Institute for Artistic Culture) in 1922, in an edition of 100 copies. However, the pamphlet was never published. Here, I am quoting his first version of the essay, dated from 3 May 1921. See *Aleksandr Rodchenko. Experiments for the Future*, pp. 111-115). Yet, this terse pamphlet reads as an attempt of the artist to reflect on a transitional phase in his creative career, and as an early manifestation of what in December of the same year will be recognized as 'end of the painting.' (The extreme limit of abstraction in painting was displayed at the "5x5=25" exhibition, in which each of five artists (Rodchenko, Vesnin, Exter, Stepanova and Popova) exhibited five of their experimental works. At the exhibition, which was opened at the end of 1921, Rodchenko "put on show three paintings of the same format, painted in the primary colors of yellow, red, and blue." Referring to those paintings at the general assembly of INKhUK, on 20 October 1921, Tarabukin read his report entitled "The last picture has been painted." Quoted in Khan-Magomedov, *Alexandr Vesnin And Russian Constructivism*). This tractate clearly indicates the theoretical background of Rodchenko's constructivist agenda: it dealt primarily with the issues of line and composition, elaborating on their significance for the overcoming of non-objective painting and turning toward a new praxis of building "constructive structures in life" (Rodchenko, "The Line," p. 114).

Galassi, in his essay on Rodchenko, summarizes in the following way the advantages the illustrated press offered:

The eagerness to appeal to advanced taste; the wide range of subject matter, offering vicarious experience of far-flung places; the abrupt juxtapositions and shifts of scale; the rich bouillabaisse in which disparate elements of image, text, and graphic material exchanged flavors without losing their distinct identities; the familiar tone of address to the viewer, by turns seductive, hortatory, and comic; the spirit of effortless recycling, recombination, and reproduction; the disappearance of the artist's hand behind the anonymous tools of the graphic designer and art director—all these qualities of avant-garde photomontage were already present in its raw material.⁷⁹

But it was more than raw material—it was a new vocabulary, a whole language of modernity that enabled artists to make their work urgently modern precisely because the illustrated press so deeply implicated that work in the modern world. The art of photomontage exemplified photography's new force in the realm of the arts, a force arising from the permeability of the shifting barrier between the medium's artistic and vernacular roles. The vernacular press served the photographic avant-garde in two distinct ways. Both literally and artistically the new medium of photo-collage drew upon the sheer overabundant accumulation of imagery in which the banal became piquant by virtue of juxtaposition. This sort of photo-collage, which drew inspiration from the vernacular press, was associated in Rodchenko's circle with the abrupt juxtapositions of cinematic montage.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Galassi, "Rodchenko and Photography's Revolution," p. 108.

⁸⁰ All visuals within the *Kino-fot* can be read as projects for both the montage culture and cinema. Rodchenko's collages, as assemblages of cuts from the illustrated and daily press, have the power of spontaneously fabricated scenarios of street noise, including in its language of commercial photomontage the clichéd phrases and announcements. Architectural projects were regarded as complex, multi-media installations within the city, which were, according to many projects in 1920s, the indispensable requisite screen for the cinema projections. In the same vein, *Kino-fot* considered the architectural or engineering constructions of the Constructivists Karl Ioganson and the Stenberg brothers, as well as Rodchenko's "spatial constructions," being the heroes of dynamic motion picture filming and the champions of the abstract cinema. Finally, *montage* was the pervasive principle of organizing the materials in the magazine and, at the same time, the major creative principle advocated by Rodchenko, Vertov, and Kuleshov. Rodchenko demonstrated the universality of montage as device, which is superior to any graphic material: photography, text, drawings, geometrical forms, etc. Vertov accounted the rhythmically organized montage of real life scenes, the montage

2.1.3 Re-editing and Non-fiction

Two other *Kino-fot* contributors, Lev Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov, took up film right after the Revolution. However, in the first years after the Revolution, they produced almost no feature films, concentrating instead on two other forms of filmmaking: re-editing (перемонтаж, *peremontazh*) and non-fiction. German and American films were most featured in the early years of the Soviet Union. For ideological reasons, these films were often shown in versions different from the original. In 1919, the film committee had already established a section for re-montaging of foreign films—a practice common during the entire existence of the Soviet Union. A good many filmmakers sharpened their eyes and scissors on these transformations; the most famous, besides Kuleshov and Vertov, were Sergei Eisenstein and Alexei Gan's wife, Esfir Shub.⁸¹ For example, the editors cut and discarded excessively violent or overtly sexual scenes, and, more importantly, they dramatically reedited the films to make them more ideologically palatable: whole sequences were edited differently by re-arrangement, titles were changed, and shots were removed to give the film a different political thrust.⁸² The classic example is the re-editing of *Dr. Mabuse* (1921/22, Fritz Lang) into *The Gilded Rot* (1924, Eisenstein/Shub). The Soviet montage school is unthinkable without this practice of creating new meaning by cutting, repositioning or exchanging shots.⁸³

of cinema-newsreels from fragments with varied length, and the montage of planes. Kuleshov wrote on the collective image and the director's engagement with montage shots that capture expressive fragments of actors' emotions.

⁸¹ Esfir Shub was the main 'culprit' of Gan's interest in cinematography and photography. She started to work as an editor in Goskino (the Central State Photographic and Cinematographic Enterprise, formed in December 1922) during the Gan's publishing of *Kino-fot*. (Lavrientev, *Aleksei Gan*, p. 102).

⁸² For more on re-editing see Tsivian, *Na podstupakh k karpalistike*, especially pp. 245-307.

⁸³ "With raw film in short supply, one way for the cinema to develop was through the re-editing of old films, sometimes even on the negative. With this in view, a special 'Re-editing Department' was created in the production section of the Moscow Film Committee. According to film historian Veniamin Vishnevsky, Vladimir Gardin was the first Soviet theoretician of montage. On 10 February 1919 Gardin delivered a lecture to the Re-editing Department on montage as one of the fundamentals of film art. This lecture had a great

This practice corresponded on several levels to the logic of the avant-garde. In terms of formal technique, re-montage was akin to collage insofar as the creative act consisted of cutting up and isolating elements, destroying an old context and creating a new one by re-combining the pre-existing elements in a different form. Re-montage could also be related to the Dada technique of photomontage directed at the destruction of the ordered bourgeois universe and the creation of a new anti-sense. Moreover, one finds an element of abstraction in this strategy, as the narrative recedes into the background, and fresh meaning is created out of existing material assembled in a new way. It is on these three levels—collage technique, destroying order, and abstraction from a narrative universe—that the Soviet cinema aligned itself with general avant-garde preoccupations. In fact, the practice of reverse engineering (i.e., taking something apart in order to understand its function) is typical of the constructivist ethos: isolate the element, examine how energy is generated through the sequence, contrast and alternate these pieces, then put the elements back together. This technique was widespread: practically all-foreign films were re-edited. The foreign films had the same role for the technique of re-editing as illustrated press had for the technique of photomontage.

Dziga Vertov's work serves as a good example in regard to the notion of non-fiction. From the very beginning of his film career, Vertov contrasted the mainstream fictional feature film with the "unplayed" film (неигровое кино, *neigrovoe kino*). A variety of his projects from the early 1920s exemplify his insistence on circumventing representation as an artistic operation, i.e. fictionality. He proposed a "revolutionary film [daily] newspaper," he worked on the *Kinonedelia* newsreels (Кинонеделя, 1918/19, 43 installments) and the *Kinopravda* newsreels

impact on his colleagues, notably on Lev Kuleshov. Kuleshov, whose famous 'experiments' are traditionally considered the origin of the Soviet concept of montage, was, according to Vishnevsky, developing ideas put forward by Gardin." (Nussianova, "The Soviet Union and the Russian émigrés," p. 289).

(Киноправда, 1922-25, 23 installments), created “compilation films” such as the canonized avant-garde classic *Kinoglaz* (Киноглаз, 1920), produced “cinema advertisements” that represented an early commercial in the service of Soviet state institutions, and developed plans for the “Cinema Eye” project, etc.⁸⁴ For Vertov, fictional forms were closely connected to the oppressive pre-revolutionary social and political systems. That is why he fervently rejected all fictional forms and advocated the use of the camera for a “sensory exploration of the world,” a sort of non-fiction which would present life without the interference of any kind of artistic “vision.”⁸⁵ Vertov called the material captured on celluloid “film-facts” and the manipulation of this factual film material “organization,” i.e. montage. Film scholars refer to his creative model of non-fiction that was simultaneously documenting and constructing the developing Communist society as “the Vertov paradox.”⁸⁶ This paradox is the result of the conflict between Vertov’s apparent disavowal of the authorial intervention into the material of film, on the one hand, and his conscious organization of that material (montage), on the other. The core of Vertov’s non-fiction theory and practice belies the tension between the evidentiary status of the “film-fact” and the discursive status of the final “film-thing” (кино-вещь, *kinoveshch*) that was organized through montage. One can also find the same tension between the inartificial reality and the play of art in Rodchenko’s photomontages for Mayakovsky’s poems.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ For more on Dziga Vertov see Tsivian, “Dziga Vertov and His Time.” Vertov also collaborated on animation films. The reason for such collaboration one should find in the revolutionary content of these films rather than in their artificiality.

⁸⁵ Vertov, “Kinoki: Perevorot” (Kinoks: A Revolution). It is significant to note that *Lef* magazine in various respect replaced *Kino-fot* as the mouthpiece for Soviet avant-garde filmmakers. Thus, in June 1923, soon after the demise of *Kino-fot*, *Lef* published Eisenstein’s “Montage of Attractions” and Vertov’s “Kinoks: A Revolution.”

⁸⁶ Petrić, “Vertov’s Cinematic Transposition of Reality,” p. 291.

⁸⁷ Actually, Vertov’s films of the 1920s are often referred to as closest in spirit with Rodchenko’s photomontages of the same period. Working with the same raw material and using many of the same stylistic devices, the two men created an art that meets the world with open arms, eager for the reward of surprise. Both Vertov and Rodchenko project a buoyant mood of confidence and excitement: in the high-spirited work of

2.1.4 Constructivism and Dada Convergences

Through *Kino-Fot* Rodchenko met Dziga Vertov and began working in film, creating inter-titles for Vertov's *Kinopravda* newsreels, which greatly influenced Rodchenko's work on books.⁸⁸ As art historian Susan Compton aptly remarks, Rodchenko's experience of working for cinema was paralleled in his book design: "His work with Vertov encouraged him to invent new ways with words—a propaganda approach of immediacy and clarity, enabling the semi-literate audience to grasp the key which the words provided to the moving pictures."⁸⁹ At the same time, Rodchenko

these two true believers in the Revolution there is no hint of the violence and devastation of the recent civil war. Finally, both Rodchenko's and Vertov's freewheeling montage have a manic feel, similar to the cut-and-paste abandon of Dada photo-monteurs Hannah Höch or Hausmann. The textures of Rodchenko's photomontages and Vertov's cinema shots show that they were both familiar with the language of commercial advertising, recognizing it as a powerful tool for constructing a revolutionary culture for the masses. See also Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov And the Twenties*.

⁸⁸ According to A. Lavrientev, collaboration with Vertov was crucial in shifting Rodchenko's interest towards the graphic design: "Rodchenko began his career as a designer in 1922 with the development of the inter-titles for Vertov's newsreels. He drew the inter-titles with elements of his non-objective compositions, cut them out of paper and cardboard on which he would then write the names of the various pieces of film, attach letters to the spatial structures and turned them in front of the cameras. The inter-titles were of several types: purely graphic, spatial, dynamic. In his project of newsreel's inter-titles, Rodchenko demonstrated the possibilities of animation inscriptions. Parts of the inter-titles for movie fragments were attached to the spatial structures he made in 1920-1921. These constructions were rotated on the stand during shooting. Other texts have changed due to the slope of the neatly dynamic structure made of two overlapping parallelograms. The word 'End' was processed in this way. Due to the motion of this skeletal structure, the letters synchronously rose from an inclined to a vertical position. The word 'Comintern' would move out on the shaft of rotary printing press toward the viewer. This piece was shot in the existing printing company. There have been examples of animation made with the use of light. The names of countries, 'France,' 'Italy,' 'China,' preceded by foreign newsreel snippets, were included in the tridimensional cardboard relief. When shooting, the light, which was illuminating this relief, moved, and the shadows were moving on the screen. Dynamic inter-titles literally entered into the fabric of the film, thus attracting attention as a unique attraction. Silent cinema found its visual 'voice.' On this subject, Alexei Gan even wrote a separate article in the magazine *Kino-fot*, in which he assorted inter-titles as an integral part of the 13th film of Dziga Vertov's *Kinopravda*." See Lavrientev, "Aleksandr Rodchenko: nachalo kariery dizainera" (Aleksandr Rodchenko: the beginning of his career as a designer), <<http://design-review.net/index.php?show=article&id=253&year=2011&number=2>> My translation. See also Tsivian, "Dziga Vertov and His Time," p. 3.

⁸⁹ She adds further, "It was Rodchenko, with his keen interest in cinema, who developed a radical way of 'editing' photographs much as Vertov cut and spliced the frames of his films. Vertov's newsreels broke new ground because of his editing techniques; characteristic of Russian avant-garde film in the early 1920s was the attention film directors gave to cutting. Instead of the four to five hundred cuts typical of Western film makers, they often used between one and four thousand." (Compton, *Russian Avant-Garde Books 1917-1934*, pp. 80-81). For more on the number of cuts in both the Russian early and avant-garde cinema see the following texts by Yuri Tsivian: "Some Preparatory Remarks on Russian Cinema," "Pre-revolutionary Russia," and "New Notes on Russian Film Culture Between 1908 and 1919."

publishes in *Kino-fot* his photomontages — *Psikhologiii* (Психология, Psychology) and *Detektiv* (Детектив, Detective)—both composed of photographs and text (**fig. 2.2**).⁹⁰



Figure 2.2 Aleksandr Rodchenko: *Detective* (collage) 1922.

Their visual language and themes are telling: although functioning as illustrations for Lev Kuleshov’s article on the montage in cinema, these photomontages are essentially collage-parodies that utilize a series of cinematographic clichés to produce satirical commentary on the conditions of the contemporary theater and literary scene in Moscow, using the language of commercial photomontage and appropriating the signs from contemporary mass culture.⁹¹ In this

⁹⁰ *Kino-fot*, No. 3 (September 19-25, 1922), pp. 11-12.

⁹¹ In photomontage *Detektiv*, for example, the photographic imagery is accompanied with the corresponding captions (such as “bloody Sunday,” “invisible presence,” “lunatic,” and alike) that are expressing a

regard, they are very similar to the Berlin Dada photomontages, which is something that can be explained both by the common sources and satirical commentary of their cultural critique.⁹²

In addition, it may or may not be a coincidence that both Rodchenko and the Berlin Dadaists Heartfield and Grosz were involved in the process of filmmaking prior to and simultaneous with their photomontage work. Rodchenko constructed intertitles for Vertov's films while simultaneously working on other projects during the first half of the 1920s, whereas Heartfield and Grosz collaborated on diverse film propaganda projects for the German military during World War I.⁹³ Whatever the case, there is no doubt that cinema played one of the key roles in the development of their photomontage techniques.

quintessence of the mundane world of truisms. Rodchenko's photomontage series for Mayakovsky's *About This* has also for its leitmotif the theme of the world soaked in 'objects,' sodden with banality and kitsch, the world that the poet himself confronts.

⁹² As Matthew Biro has argued in his 2009 book on the Berlin Dada, "the Dadaists appropriated objects and printed photographs for their connotative and symbolic meanings. Their intention was to accuse, to satirize, and to encourage political interpretations of the subjects that they represented. [...] As suggested by the specific montage strategies and self-reflexive tendencies of the *BIZ*, the Dadaists responded to the new modes of simultaneous seeing and reading promoted by the illustrated magazines and newspapers, and to some extent they incorporated forms and strategies derived from these new types of print journalism into their art. Contrary to the establishment press, however, the Dadaists used photomontage to encourage their spectators to employ their distracted modes of perception to dismantle the status quo and to reveal the hidden political agendas, social ideologies, and "ideal" psychological types that the mass media promulgated. Thus, although the Berlin Dadaists were in many ways inspired by the German culture industries, they also remained fundamentally opposed to them, seeking as they did to turn the strategies of mass communication and advertising against the mass media itself." (Biro, *The Dada Cyborg*, p. 96).

⁹³ In the introduction to his extraordinary compendium of "texts by Vertov, on Vertov, or related to Vertov," from the 1920s, Yuri Tsivian writes that Vertov's and Rodchenko's collaborative process which started in early 1920s, "would remain for four years a bridge between Vertov's filmmaking and modern art. This collaboration was not merely practical (*Kino-Pravda* needs intertitles, so why don't I offer this paid job to a friend?), but also creative, as we can judge from the steady flow of Rodchenko-induced innovations. Varying font sizes was one, of course, but also so-called 'lit titles' (cut out from pasteboard cards, covered by tissue paper, and lit from behind) and 'moving titles' (lit titles gradually covered and uncovered). By 1924 titling was first on Rodchenko's list of truly Constructivist occupations." (Tsivian, "Dziga Vertov and His Time," p. 3).

On the other hand, Matthew Biro reveals in his book that, "Heartfield, moreover, is reported to have worked as a set designer for 'trick' or special effects films at Grünbaum-Film in Berlin-Weissensee between 1917 and 1920, and Heartfield and Grosz also appear to have collaborated on propaganda, advertising, cartoon, and trick films for Universum Film, A.G. (UFA, which was then known as BUFA) from 1917, during the first year of the company's existence as a propaganda machine controlled by the Army High Command, until the beginning of 1919—projects that, despite the fact that they are no longer extant, all speak to the importance of cinema or

It is exactly in this orientation toward agitational and commercial design, namely, in Rodchenko's profound affection for propaganda and advertisement, that one should situate his gesture of embracing the photomontage. The encounter with advertising, consumer commodity, material culture in general, and the force of visual propaganda, which was most obvious in film and photography, impelled Rodchenko both to explore new mediums and to actively participate in forming constructivist bioscopic books. Rodchenko barely works in the genre of political poster; the main areas of his engagement are the graphic design for books and journals, as well as advertisements.⁹⁴ Few and far between Rodchenko's propagandistic works are formally close to Klutsic's works. Yet, within the context of productionists' poetics, Rodchenko's earlier, Dadaist-like photomontages carry the fully determined political indictment. They refer to the NEP period (1921-1927) and represent Rodchenko's unique response to the realities of the New Economic Policy, which was perceived by the artists and theoreticians on the Left as an enforced compromise and a step backward in regard to revolutionary achievements.

2.2 Programs of the Left: Managing Everyday Life (*byt*) under the NEP

The adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921 — after the catastrophic losses during the civil war in which the nascent Soviet state was obliged to defend itself against a counterrevolution and foreign intervention — was the adoption of a specific state 'program' of

the Berlin Dadaists." (Biro, *The Dada Cyborg*, pp. 86-87). See also Goergen, "Marke Herzfeld-Filme: Dokumente zu John Heartfields Filmarbeit, 1917-1920."

⁹⁴ "Rodchenko, unlike Klutsis, was not so much interested in representing political 'realia of Soviet life' as in creating a complex, multilayered world of poetic imagination and private references. In these early series of photomontages, Rodchenko's iconographic arsenal functions within the framework of unexpected juxtapositions and absurd contexts." (Tupitsyn, "From the Politics of Montage to the Montage of Politics: Soviet Practice 1919 Through 1937," p. 88).

reintroducing capitalism in order to restart the devastated economy, a necessary measure whose goal was the accumulation of capital in the Soviet Union. The adoption of the new ‘program’ (NEP) of the early Soviet state was necessary for the survival and maintenance of *the* program: Revolution. Paradoxically, the NEP was adopted at the expense of both the industry and of the industrial proletariat that made up the traditional vanguard of the revolutionary movement. This policy revived a limited free market at unregulated prices, thus producing an industrial crisis as a consequence of the so-called “scissors” effect (the rise of industrial prices and simultaneous fall of agricultural ones) and the new social stratifications (new conflicting and contradictory class relations within the peasantry, as well as the rise of middlemen involved in speculation and profiteering: the *kulak* and the *Nepman*). In this atmosphere, the roles of kulaks and Nepmen took on sinister counterrevolutionary aspects constantly pointed out by the political and artistic Left Opposition, to use Leo Trotsky’s term, in their sharp attacks on the disorder within both the heavy and cultural industry, and social life in general.⁹⁵

The Lef(t) Opposition—comprised of various political activists and artists such as Leon Trotsky and those gathered around the journals *Kino-fot* and *Lef*—started eagerly advocating and fighting for the implementation of their programs.⁹⁶ The proliferation of artistic programs and

⁹⁵ Paul Wood explains the birth of the Left Opposition in the following way: “In the summer and autumn of 1923, because of the mixture of economic pressure and the lack of adequate avenues of political expression, a wave of industrial militancy struck Moscow and Petrograd, extending even to the possibility of a general strike: overall the most powerful political challenge to the leadership since Kronshtadt. One result of this changed situation was the formalization and extension of the position broached by Trotskii at the Twelfth Congress in the Platform of the Forty-Six, a statement by a group of leading figures in the Party which criticized the authorities for their handling of the economy and erosion of democracy. October 1923 is thus usually treated as marking the birth of the Left Opposition.” (Wood, “The Politics of the Avant-Garde,” p. 13).

⁹⁶ Trotsky, for example, suggested that “the first successes of the NEP should be consolidated by a comprehensive *plan* for the industrialization of the country, based on state subsidies to hasten industrial recovery and development,” while many left-oriented artists comprehended their manifestos as a Party program. (Trotsky, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923-1924)*, p. 24). As early as 1922, Alexei Gan, the author of the first book on the theory of Constructivism, understood this new art movement as a form of the proletarian state’s cultural politics. (See Lavrientev, *Aleksei Gan*, pp. 61-87). In the same year, Dziga Vertov proposed the idea of a network of kinoks, an “army of kino-observers and kino-correspondents,” thus insisting

programming in the cultural sphere of the early Soviet Union was the symptom of the shift in the criteria that, according to media theoretician Vilém Flusser, has since taken a full force in our post-industrial society: the program, as a soft symbol rather than hard object, is what became valuable.⁹⁷ Not only did power in post-revolutionary Communist Russia transfer from owners of objects to the programmers and operators, but also the struggle between those who own and those who control the program(s)—acquired greater dimensions.⁹⁸ In other words, it was as if the Russian civil war—the period known as War Communism (1917-1921), which brought victory to communists over the bourgeoisie—did not end at all: it continued, but on different ground and in different circumstances. This new battlefield was everyday life (*byt*).⁹⁹

on the establishment of an institutional apparatus for documentary filmmaking entirely separate from the production system for fiction films. (This idea was first published in *Kino-fot*, No. 2, September 8-15, 1922). I refer here only to the few examples among many artistic programs that emerged within the conditions of NEP; yet, they all shared the same demand for rationalization, planned organization, and efficiency.

⁹⁷ “As for the softest of all apparatus, the political apparatus, for example, we easily observe the characteristic of all post-industrial society: it is not he who owns the hard objects, but he who controls the software, who in the end holds the value. It is the soft symbol, not the hard object, which contains value: the ‘transvaluation of all values.’ Power has shifted from the owners of the objects to the programmers and operators. Playing with symbols has become the power-game, and it is a hierarchical game. The photographer holds power over those who look at his photographs: he programs their behavior. The apparatus holds power over the photographer: it programs his gestures. This shift of power from the object to the symbol is the true mark of the ‘information society’ and of an ‘information imperialism.’” See Flusser, *Towards A Philosophy of Photography*, pp. 21-32.

⁹⁸ This is a short period marked by the strong existence of the opposition. After the position figured out the importance of the owning of programs that programmers developed, the time of suppression of the opposition starts (the end of 1920s) and continues into the decades of oppression (1930-40s). The failure of the avant-garde emerged with the rise of totalitarian tendencies of the entire apparatus culture (Nazism and Soviet Socialism). Since it rapidly gained control over various—including almost all of avant-garde artistic—programs, the totalitarian apparatus culture utilized those programs for its own reproduction. Totalitarian apparatus culture thus got an uncritical reception and was able to program the receiver to act as if they are under a magic spell.

⁹⁹ The Russian word *byt* has often been translated as either “everyday life,” “daily grind,” “quotidian existence,” “way of life,” or “established order of things” and “norms of life.” Yet, each of these translations—or even all of them together—perpetually fail to grasp the unique meaning that *byt* has in the Russian language, culture and its mythology. Jakobson sees the untranslatability of *byt* not only as the lack of proper linguistic equivalent in Western European languages, but also as a qualitative difference in concentration of the force that constitutes a particular system of values, structures a specific set of relationships, and organizes the culture of everyday life. What Jakobson suggests when referring to *byt* is the palpable force of established norms and conventions that exercises control upon every individual in Russia: “Perhaps the reason is that in the European collective consciousness there is no concept of such force as might oppose and break down established norms of life. The revolt of the individual against the fixed forms of social convention presupposes the existence of

The wide and contested field of *byt* turned everything into the “theater of war,” thus allowing an entire social and cultural life to be staged with as wide of a circle of actors as possible. All members of the Lef(t) Opposition—including Trotsky, Brik, Tretiakov, Mayakovsky, Gan, Tatlin, Arvatov, and Rodchenko—tried to define *byt*, recognizing in this force either an enemy or an ally, and as a result proposing different social and cultural programs. A closer examination of these distinct takes on *byt* makes it possible to illuminate the dialectical relationship between Mayakovsky’s verses and Rodchenko’s photomontages in *About This*. The dialectic between the two media programs—textual and visual—should bring us closer to understanding how this avant-garde “suggestion apparatus” functions.

2.2.1 Mayakovsky’s program

The struggle against the old *byt* was the key feature of the *Lef* (the Left Front of Arts). *Lef* was a label for the regrouped revolutionary avant-garde forces that intended to intervene against the reemergence of capitalism and symbols of the old, bourgeois order that threatened to nullify the goals of the revolution and Civil War. Daily life under NEP was, as Mayakovsky described it, a “way of life which hasn’t changed at all and which is now our vilest enemy, and turns us into philistines [мещане, *meshchane*].”¹⁰⁰ According to Osip Brik, one of the main theoreticians of the *Lef*, Mayakovsky had started to think about a new “organizational grouping” as early as the end of 1921, but the proposal was not fully worked out until the following year.¹⁰¹ When the first issue of *Lef* journal came out in early 1923, the members of *Lef* referred to themselves as the

such a force. The real antithesis of *byt* is a slippage of social norms that is immediately sensed by those involved in social life. In Russia, this sense of an unstable foundation has been present for a very long time, and not just as a historical generalization, but as a direct experience.” (Jakobson, “On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets,” p. 277).

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Brown, *Mayakovsky: a Poet in the Revolution*, p. 232.

¹⁰¹ Wood, “The Politics of the Avant-Garde,” p. 16, fn. 74.

“Bolsheviks of art” and described their context—life under NEP—as “respite from war and hunger.”¹⁰² Sergei Tretiakov, another important theoretician of the group, writes a few years after the first publication of the magazine that *Lef* had been formed “in the conditions of the New Economic Policy [...] *Lef* means Left Front, and Left Front implies opposition to any other front.”¹⁰³ The target of *Lef*’s attack was the resurrected social strata of petit bourgeois, with their traditional *meshchanski byt* representing the entire old system of values, set of relationships, and organization of enjoyments and leisure time. Along with this newly emergent class represented by Nepmen, *Lef* also opposed the communist bureaucrats of NEP who betrayed the revolutionary commitment by promoting the traditional everyday life of urban Russia, thus “threatening to nullify the political changes that had been so hard won through revolution and civil war.”¹⁰⁴ In 1923 Mayakovsky’s close friend, poet Nikolai Aseev, commented that “the waves of NEP were already rolling overboard into the revolutionary ship,” so that one had to “hold on to the balustrades in order not to be swept into the sea of obscurantism and philistinism.”¹⁰⁵ The avant-garde sharply reacted against what they saw as the “symptoms of bourgeoisification” under NEP, opposing the effects of social stratification and the reintroduction of conservative cultural practices by this new social class. As the chief editor of *Lef*, Mayakovsky was at the forefront of the group, whose main oppositional claim “was defense of the legacy of October against increasing deviations and retreats.”¹⁰⁶ In his poem *About This*, Mayakovsky converts this defense into a feverish poetic narrative that captures and enacts the conflict between revolutionary ideals and the stasis of *byt*.

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 16.

¹⁰³ Tretiakov, “We Raise the Alarm,” pp. 60ff.

¹⁰⁴ Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, p. 147.

¹⁰⁵ Wood, “The Politics of the Avant-Garde,” p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, pp. 8-9.

The battle with the specific Russian *byt*, we are told by Roman Jakobson in his seminal paper on Mayakovsky's poetry, is a poetic constant in the poet's entire oeuvre and constitutes the crux of its mythology. The poet's relentless enemy—*byt*—tirelessly reappears in the guise of numerous personifications—from the first lines he wrote in the Russian futurist manifesto (“A Slap in the Face of Public Taste”), to his farewell note written two nights before his suicide. Yet, only in the poem *About This* is “the poet's desperate struggle with *byt* fully laid bare.” Taking Jakobson's famous description of *byt* as “the stabilizing force of an immutable present overlaid [...] by stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold,” Christina Kiaer correctly notes that *About This* is nothing less than an “indictment of *byt*.”¹⁰⁷ In the poem *About This* Mayakovsky fully succeeds in translating his struggle with *byt* into a rapidly changing sequence of suggestive poetic images. He constructed a poetic narrative reminiscent of a manic cartoon adventure in which the narrator, identified as Mayakovsky, is crucified after his repeated attempts to transform *byt*. His efforts to deconstruct, shake, and destabilize the tired and complacent domestic routines of daily life end in failure.

The text of the poem intertwines two main narratives: Mayakovsky's present-day attempts to contact his lover and his dialogue with the narrator of his earlier poem “Man” (Человек, 1915). The narrator in “Man,” a Christ-like figure, who threatens to commit suicide by jumping from the bridge into the Neva River in Petrograd, represents a purer version of Mayakovsky, a younger Bolshevik Futurist preparing for the revolution, not a financially successful poet in danger of settling down into the complacent post-revolutionary *meshchanskii byt* under NEP. In his imagination, the woman he obsessively loves is tied to the old forms of everyday life, to the static domesticity that threatens to divert him from the purer path of his

¹⁰⁷ See Jakobson, “On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets,” pp. 277-278; Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, p. 147.

former self. Consequently, the less restrained his love for her the tighter the noose around his revolutionary neck. The poem narrates about how Mayakovsky scurries back and forth between his family's Moscow apartment and apartments where he might find his lover, pleading with the people he meets there to fly with him to Petrograd to save the man on the bridge; pleading, essentially, that they give up the warm, cozy surroundings of their NEP-era Christmas parties to travel back in time, through the cold and snow, to a moment of revolutionary purity (the October legacy). However, no one heeds his pleas. This betrayal of both his former self as a young revolutionary and the revolution itself, leads to a dramatic staging of Mayakovsky's crucifixion by the forces of *byt*, in which the poet's struggle reaches its culmination. In the final section of the poem, Mayakovsky projects himself into a hypothetical future, the thirtieth century, where he pleads with a chemist to resurrect him as a street sweeper in a zoo, if zoos still exist.

Mayakovsky's poem, as an "indictment of *byt*," shares much in common with Trotsky and Tretiakov's accounts (programs) of the battle with the old *byt*. For all three of them, *byt* represented their worry that the return to the previous conditions, enabled by NEP, would result in a bourgeois influence on morality, sexuality, and domestic life. They all regarded *byt* as a primitive and atavistic force, which preserves a connection to the past and undermines the forward movement of the revolution. They all recognized a passive force in *byt*, opposing the conscious creation of the new forms of social life and endangering the development of the "new individual" after the revolution.

Trotsky linked the primitiveness and passivity of *byt*—that operated "behind the backs" of the proletariat—with the fear of larger social passivity and political backwardness of peasant and bourgeois women. Everyday life was perceived to be a women's sphere of influence due to their traditional confinement to the private sphere of life, and women were expected to institute

changes at the level of everyday experience (men experience everyday life, but their primary roles lay in the public and working life). Trotsky emphasized realistic strategies for the emancipation of women, recognizing true difficulty not in attempts to legislate political equality of women and men, nor in efforts to establish equality in the workplace, but rather in task of establishing actual equality between the man and woman within the family. Without this real equality at home, both the battle for political equality and the promotion of equality in the workplace would not have any dramatic effects. Trotsky writes: “Politics are flexible, but *byt* is immobile and obstinate.”¹⁰⁸ For Trotsky, *byt* can never be a site for political action; it must be completely eradicated. Finally, he proposes that the real equality between men and women can be achieved only through the development of the Soviet economy to the point where it will be possible to liberate the family from the material worries that oppress it. Trotsky’s ‘program’ is the virtual abolition of all material possessions, the complete rationalization of the material order of domestic life from above, i.e. by the State: “Only then,” he writes, “will the relation of husband and wife be freed of everything external, foreign, binding, incidental. The one will cease oppressing the other. Genuine equality will be established. The relation will be determined only by mutual attraction.”¹⁰⁹

Mayakovsky’s verses perfectly echo Trotsky’s evocation of a love relationship unhampered by possessions, liberated from the ties of the warm materiality of private beds and stoves, freed from the physical and psychological effects of property relations. Women would no longer be possessions and dependents of men. It is as if Trotsky repeats the same belief in the centrality of a new kind of non-possessive love that we find in Mayakovsky’s utopian vision of a higher, more spiritual and collective form of love at the end of his poem. In the culminating

¹⁰⁸ Trotskii, *Voprosy byta*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 45. See also Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture and Science*.

towards a woman is sublimated into a vision of a higher, more spiritual and collective form of love, liberated from the ties of the domestic materiality of private beds and stoves.

Indeed, there is no qualitative difference among Trotsky's vision of the relation between men and women "freed of everything external, foreign, binding, incidental" and Mayakovsky's projection of love that "won't be servant of marriages, lust, and bread." Both privilege spiritual *bytie* (бытие, existence) over material *byt*. "If *byt* will be *novyi* [new], it will no longer be *byt* at all, but something much closer to *bytie*," writes Christina Kiaer assessing Trotsky's campaign for the *novyi byt*. Also, both Mayakovsky's and Trotsky's belief in the establishment of this spiritual form of love is set in the future. Only the "utopian projection into the future" is able to provide a(n im)possible temporal structure in which *byt* might become *novyi* either by destroying it or transforming completely into a higher spiritual existence. They both propose the radical elimination of matter—which, in their 'programs,' is persistently tied to the domestic sphere occupied by women, and therefore understood as feminine. As Kiaer puts it, "Trotsky and the Bolshevik *byt* reformers, with their undoubted good intentions to emancipate women, can be faulted precisely for taking the association of femininity with matter as the *ground* of their program."¹¹²

¹¹² Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, p. 63. Here, Kiaer repeats Sergei Tretiakov's remarks on *byt*. Tretiakov explicitly ties the concept of *byt* with the ideology of the ruling classes (aristocracy and bourgeoisie): "a system of feelings and actions (строй чувствований и действий) which has become automatized through constant repetition in their relation to the specific socio-economical base, and have become habits possessing exceptional vitality, so that even the most powerful blows of the revolution cannot effectively shatter this internalized *byt*." For Tretiakov, *byt* is the "established order of things (порядок вещей), with which the person surrounds himself and to which, regardless of their usefulness, he transfers the fetishism of his sympathies and memories and in the end literally becomes the slave of these things. In this sense *byt* is a deeply reactionary force, that which in pivotal moments of social change prevents the organization of the will of a class for plotting decisive assaults. Comfort for comfort's sake; coziness as an end in itself; all the chains of tradition and respect for objects that have lost their practical meaning, beginning with the neck tie and ending with religious fetishes—this is the quagmire of *byt*." According to Tretiakov, *byt* implies a *static axiology* ('the conception of absolute values'), and becomes also an aesthetic category since it creates an 'established taste' '[encompassing such objects as] the neck-tie and ending with religious fetishes.' As opposed to the stagnancy of *byt*, Tretiakov thus advocates the dynamism of being (*bytie*), praxis, and continual

image of a new, emancipated woman, or something else? The icon clearly communicates a gendered and multilayered idea: the iconic image of Lili Brik refers not only to her as Mayakovsky's object of desire and a fetishized love commodity, but also to the commodity world of everyday mass culture (*byt*)—which, in Trotsky's and Mayakovsky's program, is explicitly gendered as feminine.¹¹⁴ However, Rodchenko's decision to put Lili Brik's photograph on the front cover is not only an effort to emphasize Mayakovsky's association of *byt* with femininity, but also an effort to question the functional consequences of a program that is grounded on such an association. A comparative reading of Mayakovsky's verses and Rodchenko's cover design can reveal how the latter's 'program' is founded on a different account of *byt*, more closely related to those proposed by the productionist-constructivist "camp" of *byt* reformers—Tatlin, Arvatov, Gan and, of course, Vertov.

First, the metonymic relationship established between the title of the poem and the iconic photography of Lili on the front cover of the book refers to the poem's unnamed trickster—love and love's desire. Rodchenko's design for the cover is in dialogue with the verses from the first section of Mayakovsky's poem:

Эта тема день истемнила, в темень

sustaining their friendship despite the publicly known relationship between the poet and his lover. The poem *About This* was written during a two-month separation between the poet and Lili Brik, and chronicles Mayakovsky's response to the separation imposed by the woman he loved. The first serious crisis of their relationship since the public acknowledgment of their love affair in 1918 started in the autumn of 1922 during their stay in Berlin and culminated at the end of December the same year after Mayakovsky returned to Moscow from Paris. They made a decision to spend two months apart, Mayakovsky in his room in Lubyanskiy Passage, she in her flat in Vodopyanyy Lane. According to Lili, the reason for the two months separation was their mutual disappointment that everything—"love, art, revolution"—had become a habit. She summarized the motivation for this decision in the following manner: "[...] we were living well; we had grown used to each other, to the fact that we were shod, dressed and living in the warm, eating regular tasty meals, drinking a lot of tea with jam. 'Little old routine' (*byt*) had been established. Suddenly we took fright at this and decided on the forcible destruction of 'shameful prudence.'" (Brik, "Iz vospominanii," p. 116). For more on their relationship and correspondence see in Jangfeldt (ed.), *Love Is The Heart of Everything: Correspondence Between Vladimir Mayakovsky and Lili Brik 1915-1930*.

¹¹⁴ For more on the chain effect of signification by which the gendering of an inferior mass culture as feminine is derived see Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, pp. 44-62.

КОЛОТИСЬ — ВЕЛЕЛА — СТРОЧКАМИ ЛБОВ.

Имя

этой

теме:

. !

This theme darkened day into darkness.

“Beat,” it commanded, “With your brow-lines above.”

The name

of this theme

is thus:

.....!

Mayakovsky’s image of learned heads that have beaten their brows against this unnamed theme ends on the word “foreheads” (лбов), followed by the enigmatic sentence: “The name of this theme is:.....!” If we are to follow the rhyming scheme, the missing word replaced by Mayakovsky’s ellipsis is “love” (любовь). Even here, one can see Mayakovsky’s reasoning for the eradication of the “material body” of the Russian word for love: **любовь** is a sort of acronym for **Лили Юрьевна Брик**. Such textual ellipsis is, again, the poet’s protective gesture. Conversely, Rodchenko’s design of the letters in the title that penetrate the head of Mayakovsky’s beloved discloses the referential point of the demonstrative determiner “this.” Rodchenko translates into a visual sign (Lili’s portrait) the word that Mayakovsky never spells out (“love”).¹¹⁵

Second, in Rodchenko’s simplified graphic design, Mayakovsky’s image of “daylight turned to darkness” (день истемнила) is transformed into the black and white squares dividing the background in two equal parts. One can find the blueprint for this design in Rodchenko’s

¹¹⁵ As the linguist Emile Benveniste has argued, mobile signifiers—demonstratives and adverbial forms such as “this,” “that,” “here,” “now,” “today,” “yesterday,” and “tomorrow”—mark an author’s position on a spatial and temporal plane, defining the *present* instance. The use of such demonstratives along with the first person perfect, which is “the autobiographical form par excellence” that conveys the immediacy of experience and a keen sense of the present, is championed as the discursive mode in the new literature of factography in *Novyi Lef* in late 1920s. See Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, particularly “The Correlations of Tense in the French Verb,” pp. 205–15; 209, 210.

graphic layout on the front cover of the fifth issue of *Kino-fot* (December 10, 1922), which features the straightforward montage of the American inventor whom Constructivists regarded as one of their allies—Thomas Edison (**fig. 2.3**).

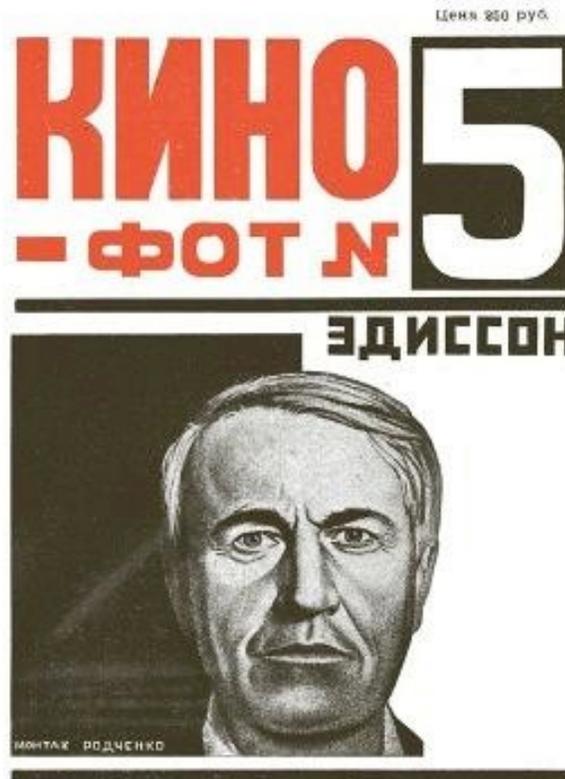


Figure 2.3 Aleksandr Rodchenko:
cover for *Kino-fot* No. 5 (December 1922).

The iconic full-face portrait of Edison is cut out and pasted over the intersection of black and white squares. The black square to the left, according to Lavrentiev, represents the cinema hall, while the white square to the right—the cinema screen.¹¹⁶ Rodchenko’s choice to utilize this composition, with clear references to the “inventor of the cinematograph,” the invention that enabled the emergence of cinema as a new art form for the revolutionary masses, brings these

¹¹⁶ Lavrentiev, *Aleksei Gan*, p. 106.

references in close connection with the image of the feminine.¹¹⁷ In Rodchenko's 'program,' or design, *femininity* (which Lili stands for) is not reduced to the association with mere matter, and the passive, atavistic, immobile force of *byt*. Rather, it is tied to the 'inventor' and his 'invention'—the cinematograph as a new revolutionary means that enables the shared collective experience in the cinema hall, and also projects the moving images of documented and (through the montage) organized *byt*. Rodchenko's conception of *byt* thus results from his fervent investment in industrial production and new technologies of mechanical reproduction—the practices of seizing, recording, documenting, as well as shaping, producing, and organizing *byt*—alluded to the obvious analogy between Lili's eyes and camera lenses.

Undoubtedly, the kinship of Rodchenko's design with Vertov's *Kino-glaz* (Cinema-Eye) is the most obvious and a pivotal one: "I am kino-eye, I am mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it."¹¹⁸ However, it must be acknowledged that Lissitzky was the first to design Mayakovsky's dedication to Lili Brik in *For the Voice* (1923) in the form of an eye, thus emphasizing the visual reception of the poems (**fig. 2.4**). By placing the triangle next to a black circle so that it becomes the horizon of vision, Lissitzky made a graphic sign by which the book was to be understood: "the optic instead of the phonetics" as stated in his 1923 manifesto, 'Topography of Typography,' which appeared in Kurt Schwitters' publication *Merz* in July 1923. One can compare Lissitzky's use of the eye as a metaphor for direct economical

¹¹⁷ Rodchenko's design for *About This* may have been inspired both by Kozintsev and Trauberg who "in their unfilmed scenario *Zhenshchina Edisona* (Edison's woman, 1923) envisaged the creation of a new Eve, the daughter of Edison and the primogenitrix of the new world." (Nussinova, "The Soviet Union and the Russian émigrés," p. 292). On the feminine character of the cinema, see also Michelson, "On the Eve of the Future: The Reasonable Facsimile and the Philosophical Toy."

¹¹⁸ Vertov, "Kinoks: A Revolution," p. 141; also in Michelson (ed.), *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, p. 11. As Pavle Levi writes in regard to Vertov's conception of both the cinema and reality: "In the era of technologically (re-)producible moving image, one's subjective field of vision, one's look, is almost *a priori* aligned with the kino-eye. In a way, one's naked eye *is* already the eye of the camera." (Levi, *Cinema By Other Means*, p. 82).

communication with the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov’s reference to the film camera as ‘Cinema-Eye,’ because it extends human vision through the revelation of new views. Lissitzky also included Lili Brik’s initials, Л and Б, plus Ю in the graphic design of the eye.



Figure 2.4 El Lissitzky: frontispiece and dedication page for Mayakovsky *For the Voice* (1923).

Rodchenko’s design, as a ‘program’ conceived through the practices of photo-collage and photomontage, shares much in common not only with Vertov, but also with Tatlin’s, Arvatov’s, and Gan’s programs. Since they were all interested in the notions of the material or matter as an actively shaping principle, *byt* was a potentially active force for all of them. Tatlin, for example, defined their task in the report of his INKhUK Section in 1924 as “research into material as the shaping principle of culture,” and the “research into *byt* as a certain form of material culture.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Tatlin, “Report of the Section for Material Culture’s Research Work for 1924,” cited in Zhadova (ed.), *Tatlin: Criticism and Interpretation*, p. 256. The INKhUK was the state sponsored Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow, founded in March 1920 by the painter Wassily Kandinsky, and set up for the sole purpose of conducting research on artistic modernism. It consisted of painters, sculptors, architects, poets, composers, critics, and art historians who had participated in, or were heir to prerevolutionary avant-garde movements, such as Futurism, Malevich’s Suprematism, Tatlin’s sculptural “culture of materials,” and Kandinsky’s painterly abstraction. For more on INKhUK debates in the period 1920-1922 see Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, pp. 7-17.

Tatlin's strong supporter, Boris Arvatov, in his essay "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing," similarly claimed that the creation of the proletarian culture "can proceed only from the forms of material *byt*."¹²⁰ He believed that this culture would not spring up by transcending the material sphere, but by "organically" and "flexibly" working within it in order to transform it in the process of "everyday-life-creation" [бытотворчество, *bytotvorchestvo*].¹²¹ In his short brochure-manual—*Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!* (Да здравствует демонстрация быта!, Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!, 1923)—Alexei Gan showed to young film directors and cameramen of documentary cinema how "to seize, record, and document *byt*," how to understand it, as well as how to organize and "shape" that knowledge through cinematic

¹²⁰ Arvatov, "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing," p. 121.

¹²¹ Arvatov theorized about this social version of productionist art in his Marxist history of art from 1922, "Art and Production." He claimed that the dualism of material *byt* and spiritual *bytie* is a historical artifact of capitalism. In the pre-capitalist period, Arvatov states, both the functional and the visual properties of a thing contributed to its active, almost animate powers of "organizing material *byt*." With capitalist industrialization, however, the artist feared that machine production would make him obsolete, and he withdrew into his specialized craft. Easel art, for example, thus became self-referential, exploring the autonomy of its own medium and ending in the abstract painting. According to Arvatov, this was a mistake. Instead, he proposed that the artist should embrace industrial production and create again things that will have active and transformative powers of "organizing material *byt*." Instead of an artists' retreat into the creation of handcrafted luxury objects, which rendered the visual aspects into a passive quality and placed visual objects in glass coffins, Arvatov promoted the idea of an artist who will immerse himself in creating the material culture of socialism through the use of industrial technology. Arvatov recognized that the industrial technology has the potential to amplify and accentuate all human senses, rather than isolating and alienating them. Trotsky criticized Arvatov for his apparent rejection of sight as an isolated sense, declaring that this "distrust of the eye" denies to the proletarian culture the potential political power of the visual arts. Arvatov responded in *Lef* that critics misread the Constructivist struggle against easel art—which for him represents the most bourgeois form of visual art since it promotes passive contemplation—as a struggle against all visual art. *Lef* does promote visual art, argues Arvatov, but only the kind which makes sense in the epoch of proletarian dictatorship: "Decisively rejecting living-room and museum oriented easel art, *Lef* is fighting for the poster, the illustration, the advertisement, the photo- and cinematic-montage, i.e. for those types of mass utilitarian forms of visual art that are made by means of machine technology and closely connected with the material *byt* of urban industrial workers." (Arvatov, "Utopia ili nauka?" (Utopia or science?), p. 18). In Arvatov's productionist account, the new technologies of mechanical reproduction that enable "mass utilitarian forms of visual art"—photography, photo- and cinema montage—are highly resonant with the revolutionary goals of the time. As a medium that is mass-produced and could be disseminated on a mass scale, photography has a potential to reach a broader audience. It also provides a promise of objectivity. It claims kinship to science due to its ability to truly reflect reality through indexical and iconic signs. Simultaneously, photo- and cinematic montages offer the flip side of this: the image as interpretation rather than representation. These images are highly functional for avant-garde utopian goals, both as instrument of change and as means of charting that change.

montage.¹²² For all of them, the “shaping” principle of material in *byt* is industrial, production-oriented, technological and, above all, a social code. Both Arvatov and Gan, for example, refuse to feminize *byt*, viewing it as a potential site of active creation that holds the promise of social transformation. Rodchenko’s design of the front cover is in tune with Arvatov and Gan’s accounts, and thus opposed to Mayakovsky and Trotsky’s traditional rejection of passive and feminine *byt*.

Rodchenko also contests Mayakovsky’s rejection of the feminine *byt* by rendering the powerful image of femininity as a sort of new age Medusa: Lili is a different hybrid than the mythological Medusa—more robotized due to the analogy between her gaze and cinematic or camera apparatus, but still not-yet-fully-cyborg due to the softness of harmonizing shapes and

¹²² The analogy between Lili’s eyes on the front cover of *About This* and the camera lenses, which Rodchenko successfully renders in his design, is reminiscent of Alexei Gan’s understanding of the relationship between *byt* and cinematography. In his brochure, Gan emphasizes the importance of learning “how to record *byt*” and “how to master the practice which on the one hand seems very simple, and on the other, very complex—to capture *byt*.” He writes: “While carefully observing the sheer variety of its [*byt*] elements, it is as if at every step you encounter ‘unfamiliar’ forms of its appearance, an endless chain of new expressions of *byt*, which the citizens of the Soviet Republic, individually or collectively, effectively release. By peering into their movements, listening to their conversations, grasping connections, and revealing relations, you start to understand that exuberant, never subsiding flow of people as an uninterruptedly advancing form of never ceasing substance. In such hurry-scurry and unrestrained appearance one cannot but not discover the striking functional content-richness [sapidity], the substance that arises where material conditions collide with the human will and desires.” (p. 11). Gan first tries to give a definition of *byt*, to communicate his feeling of life—of that eternally changing power that ceaselessly destroys the old forms and creates new ones: “One has to be blind not to notice how *byt* dialectically develops on a daily basis, growing out of the new productive and social relations. It is necessary to promptly observe and catalogue the fluctuation of its forms, and to understand that they result directly from the full complexity of rapidly changing political factors and spring again from the economic aspects of the slumping or reviving economy. Then it will be clear that *byt*, as an objective and material form of human society, in the periods of longstanding social conservatism [reaction] settles down and conserves, starts to be inactive, and, conversely, in the eventful periods of revolutionary reconfigurations—transforms, glides down from sedentary place and enters on the path of perpetual transformations. Such spirited and powerful forces of *byt*—during the period when its revolutionary content is released in apparent, externally operating, formal and material actions of the actively living mass—can only be properly documented by cinematography and offered on the screen to the mass audience through montage.” (p. 4). Gan proposes the employment of cinema for both the exploration of real life and the demonstration of that exploration to the people for the purpose of their self-conscious enlightenment. His definition of *byt* as a potentially active, constantly changing, “living and powerful force” completely diverges from Mayakovsky’s and Trotsky’s immobile and passive *byt*. See A. Gan, *Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta* <http://www.filmuseum.at/jart/prj3/filmuseum/main.jart?rel=de&reserve-mode=active&content-id=1222451098170&DV_objekte_id=611&c-p=-10&p-anz=20> My translation.

curves that render her femininity recognizably human.¹²³ The probing gaze of the feminine in Rodchenko's 'program' is the gaze of the camera apparatus that, in Gan's account, is the only contemporary instrument able to record and transform *byt*. This new relation towards both femininity and matter (*byt*) within the Constructivist-productionist "camp," challenges Mayakovsky's and Trotsky's misogynist tradition that is further intertwined with their Bolshevik anti-materialism. Instead of Mayakovsky's "utopian projection," Rodchenko advocates the "projection of technical images;" in place of Mayakovsky's projection "into the future," Rodchenko proposes the projection on the "screen" (one should also regard both the "covers and pages in the book" and "wall posters on the streets" as "screens").

It seems that these two 'programs' cannot appear to be more in contrast with one another. How was it possible, then, that Rodchenko and Mayakovsky collaborated on this project at all? The reason may be in the simple fact that Mayakovsky's "utopian projection into the future" and Rodchenko's "screen projection of technical images" share the same notions of ironic doubleness and frozen temporality. The next section of the chapter will discuss these issues in more detail.

2.3 The Constructivist Bioscopic Book: An Apparatus with Alternating Current

Rodchenko's reference to the cinematic and camera apparatuses through Lili's photo-portrait on the front cover, a hierarchically privileged space of the book, refers also to the photopoetry book

¹²³ The protocyborgian aspects of Simmel's concept of metropolitan consciousness, which William J. Mitchell recognized in Simmel's characterization of the urban subject as a "connecting creature" intricately entwined with the surrounding networked environment, may be useful for further discussion on the image of Lili as a proto-cyborg figure. Her 'cold,' more distanced, more objective, apparatus-like gaze signifies a belief that the visual mode of perception was becoming an increasingly dominant part of such metropolitan consciousness. For the very successful application of Simmel's "model of the subject as a locus of multiple and fragmented modes of perception" to a model of the cyborg "as both a locus of perception and a form of hybrid identity produced through assimilating objective culture," see Biro, *The Dada Cyborg*, pp. 96-100.

itself as a suggestion apparatus. It is as if the reader/viewer ought to regard the book the same way he/she regards the camera: handling it, turning it around, looking into it and through it.

Vilém Flusser writes about the user's relationship with the camera and its program:

If he looks through the camera into the world, he does so not because he is interested in the world, but because he is in search of the yet undiscovered virtualities in the camera program enabling him to produce new information. His interest is concentrated on the camera, and world 'out there' is a pretext for his realization of the virtualities contained in the program. In sum: he does not work, he does not aim at changing the world: he looks for information to be realized as photograph.¹²⁴

This is to say that apparatuses are not meant to change the world, but to change the meaning of the world. Their intention is symbolic. The same goes for the bioscopic book—it is a suggestion apparatus that aims to change our perception of and relation to “the world out there,” which we experience no longer as a technologically unmediated state of existence, but as “a cinefied reality,” “thoroughly mediated by the all-subsuming dynamics of cinematography.”¹²⁵ In other words, the bioscopic book augments montage thinking, which is predicated upon aligning one's perspective *with* both the eye of the camera and the voice of the text (which is, usually, the voice of the poetic I), as well as upon internalizing the dialectic of disjuncture and conjunction.

The dialogue between Rodchenko and Mayakovsky, as discussed below, shows that the visual language of photomontage transforms the hyperbolic image of the poet into a series of reproduced images, destroying any distinctions between private and public, inner and outer, presence and absence. More importantly, the intermedial dialogue between Rodchenko's photomontages and Mayakovsky's verses resonates with a specific self-reflexive parody that is double-coded and therefore simultaneously both *affirmative* and *critical*. Mayakovsky's text is already self-parodic, so that Rodchenko's photomontages—which are themselves endowed with

¹²⁴ Flusser, *Towards A Philosophy of Photography*, p. 19.

¹²⁵ Levi, *Cinema by Other Means*, p. 82.

the unequivocal yet unresolvable *duality* embedded in the foundations and manifested as the tension between the construction and element—only further *echo* and *transform* the existing double-signification of Mayakovsky’s verbal metaphors.¹²⁶

Disseminated throughout the book, Rodchenko’s illustrations closely follow the overall structure of the poem. The photomontage from the front cover may be seen as referring both to the entire poem and its prologue, whereas each of its two main parts—*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and *Christmas Eve*—is accompanied by three separate photomontages, and its epilogue by the last two in the entire series. Close analysis of the word-image relationship demonstrates that the process of intermedial exchange includes both the *condensation* of the spatially distant portions of text into an image, as well as the *extension* of the referential scope of an image onto spatially remote parts of the text. In other words, the length of the text participating in the process of the intermedial exchange can vary from one word to whole sentences or sections. As one can see from the outset, the dynamic relationship between word and image is as incestuous and interactive as it is ordered and hierarchical.

¹²⁶ Mayakovsky initially entered the literary life by waging a “fierce battle” with the previous century, situating himself “in between” historical times or in “the interval” (промежуток, *promezhutok*), as Russian Formalist Yuri Tynanov puts it in his 1924 essay with the same title. (Tynanov, *Arkhaisty i Novatory*, pp. 555-556). Mayakovsky’s innovative force, in Tynianov’s view, came from inaugurating the literary borderline mode that combines the comic and the tragic. The tension between these two modes constitutes the “rhetorical duality” of Mayakovsky’s poetry through the parodic combination of “high and low.” (p. 554). According to Tynanov, Mayakovsky’s innovative force consists in the constant resistance of his poetry to any rhetorical reduction, as well as in preserving this rhetorical duality from being reduced to a thematic or canonic repetition. This rhetorical duality, in turn, has a carnevalistic quality since it supplements the genre of high poetry with “the resonance of the street and the city square,” thus running counter to the nineteenth-century canon. (p. 553). What safeguards the innovative force of Mayakovsky’s poetry is its ability to promote the law of the genre (high poetry) while simultaneously undermining it by parody and carnevalization. The poet’s parodic self-reflection is that force which guarantees the fluidity of temporality, its “life,” and guards it against the a-temporal iterability of the canon and history. Situated on the borderline between literary tradition and innovation, parody is summoned once again to connect Mayakovsky’s new writing with his old poetic practice and, simultaneously, to erase that old practice in order for innovation to take place. This borderline has a dialectical structure, since Mayakovsky, “by parodying his own poetry, is simultaneously situating himself in its proximity.” (p. 554). For an insightful reading of Tynanov’s concept of the interval, see Kujundžić, *The Returns of History: Russian Nietzscheans After Modernity*, pp. 73-94.



**Figure 2.5 Aleksandar Rodchenko:
first photomontage for *About This* (1923).**

2.3.1 Fetish

The first of Rodchenko's eight photomontages (**fig. 2.5**) illustrates a short part of Mayakovsky's text from the opening of the first part of the poem, *The Ballad of Reading Goal*:

Вот
фон.
В постели она.
Она лежит.
Он.
На столе телефон.
«Он» и «она» баллада моя.
Не страшно нов я.
Страшно то,
ч то «он» — это я
и то, что «она» —

МОЯ.

 This sets the scene.
In bed is she.
 She's lying down.
He.
 On the table a telephone is seen,
This ballad-to-be is 'he' and 'she.'
Not a terribly novel line.
What's terrible is,
 that 'he' —is me.
and that 'she' —
 is mine.

Rodchenko's photomontage offers no glimpse of the poet, but multiple images of Lili, who is pictured resting on a divan and standing on a bed, defiantly staring at the viewer. The larger photograph (in semi-profile on the left) fits the representation of a sensitive and vulnerable woman. The one of Lili standing on the bed, however, is located on quite the opposite pole from vulnerability: she is dressed casually and yet appears firm and resolute, striking an insubordinate pose that visibly contradicts Mayakovsky's verses (in this fragment, Lili is standing, while in poem she is reclining). Not only is Lili's image deprived of any traditional role customarily ascribed to women (as would be the case if we saw her in the kitchen), but her untraditionally tailored Western costume with trousers, hat and blouse proudly promote the more masculine and bold look of the modern, new woman. As we learn from another Rodchenko photograph of Lili in 1924, this is the same costume that she wore while at a summer cottage (дача) in Pushkino (**fig. 2.6**). The remaining two images of Lili reclining on the divan and holding a hand mirror suggest not only her proximity to the objects replete with erotic and narcissistic meanings, but also Rodchenko's illustration of Lili as a love object of the poet's erotic and narcissistic desire, thus echoing Mayakovsky's verses that turn his beloved into a fetishized love commodity.



**Figure 2.6 Aleksandr Rodchenko:
photograph of Lili Brik at summer cottage in Pushkino (1924).**

Rodchenko's multiple images of Lili convey the intensity and scope of Mayakovsky's obsession, which transforms Lili into his fetishized possession. "By translating temporal recurrence (she is on the poet's mind all the time) into spatial repetition (the images fan out across the page), Rodchenko discloses the mediated nature of that obsession," Stephen Hutchings astutely remarks in his essay on Mayakovsky's and Rodchenko's collaborative work on *About This*.¹²⁷ Repetitions of images of different objects—such as telephones, shoes, chairs, and beds—parallel the repeated images of Lili. The repetitive pattern can also be seen in the photograph of a sequence of buildings in perspective, which is the only signal of an outside world clearly sequestered by the right-angled and tick black lines of Rodchenko's design. By its singularity this image amplifies

¹²⁷ Hutchings, "Photographic eye as poetic I: Dialogues of text and image in Maiakovskii's and Rodchenko's *Pro eto* project," p. 66.

the dominance of domestic space within the photomontage, while by its repetitive pattern it suggests possible recurrences of such an interior.

Finally, Rodchenko's photomontage indicates something that Mayakovsky remains silent about throughout his poem: the possessive nature of his love and the fact that Lili is ignoring him. The black and white telephone handset at the top of the page is noticeably larger than other objects included in the photomontage. Its speaker, with a shape resembling the hook thus symbolically alluding to the love theme, is on Lili Brik's concealed right ear. The microphone of the handset is directed toward the smaller telephone device lying on the tea table, which should here denote its own ringing as if in answer to the poet's call. This telephone device dominates a cozy place of relaxation, framed by a tea table, love seat, and two armchairs, and emanating an aura of a recognizable domestic atmosphere. In this specific context, it becomes significant that Lili's ears remain hidden in all of her photographic reappearances. This element of Rodchenko's design subtly implies her defiant deafness toward the poet's call.

2.3.2 Duel

The second photomontage by Rodchenko (**fig. 2.7**) illustrates a much larger portion of the poem than the previous one. It features several visual elements participating in the construction of the abstract configuration dominated by its strong diagonal, which is proverbially recognized in art history scholarship as the signature of Constructivist dynamism in design. In the center of the notably diagonal construction one finds: Lili's telephone number ("67-10!") that is superimposed upon a strip (тесьма) of panoramic urban landscape ("as if through binoculars seen, / through gigantic binoculars (from the wrong end) / The horizon straightens / so even, it seems / braid;" как будто в бинокле, / в огромном бинокле (с другой стороны). / Горизонт распрямился / ровно-ровно. Тесьма), and a line of a telephone cable, a "gossamer-tenuous thread" on which,

according to the poet, “everything hangs” (кабель / тонюсенький —/ ну, просто нитка! / И всё / вот на этой вот держится ниточке).



**Figure 2.7 Aleksandr Rodchenko:
second photomontage for *About This* (1923).**

This “whipcord stretched to its limit” (натянут бичевкой тугой) visually connects the image of Mayakovsky, who is hunched up in the right top corner of the page, and the photograph of Lili’s housekeeper who is about to answer the phone call in the left bottom corner. Instead of Lili, whom Mayakovsky reckons to answer his call (Натянут бичевкой тугой. / Край один —/ я в моей комнате, / ты в своей комнате — край другой), we see the cook-housekeeper in the Briks’ house, A.F. Grubanova (Annushka), whose photo largely resembles her description in the

poem, where she is assigned the metaphorical role of a second in ‘a deadly duel of passion.’¹²⁸

By this reference, Mayakovsky alludes not only to the duel, which was a form of public self-expression and even self-realization in the age of Romanticism, but also to his sense of honor and loyalty stained by an offense that should be wiped clean.¹²⁹ In the text of the poem,

Mayakovsky expects both to talk to Lili as well as for her to “burrow through the wire / a bullet / of any caliber or poison” (просверлите сквозь кабель / пулей / любого яда и веса). Yet, instead, he faces the silence and sees something “more terrible than a bullet [...] a WORD crawls. / More terrible than a word — / from primordial history” (Страшнее пуль [...] СЛОВО ползет. / Страшнее слов — / из древнейшей древности),

ПОЛЗЛО
из шнура —
скребущейся ревности
времен троглодитских тогдашнее чудище.

From the wire there crawled—
clawing jealousy
a monster from those troglodyte days.

Rodchenko pastes an illustration of a brontosaurus onto the page so that its head almost collides with the poet’s. “Photographic montages accord all images equal semiotic status: the photo-record of a printed telephone number and the photo-record of a poet are both records of a reality reproduced for public consumption,” Hutchings remarks in his analysis, adding that the role of this image of a brontosaurus “is to undermine actuality itself” since it is posited “as a slice

¹²⁸ “Lethargically, the cook’s arises, / groaning and hawking, / from her bed. / Her brow though-furrows scar, / till she’s a pickled apple. / ‘Who? / Vladimir Vladimich? / Ah! / Off she went, slippers flapping. / The Second measures the paces from here. / She goes. / The paces die away...” (Ленясь, кухарка поднялась, / идет, / кряхтя и харкая. / Моченым яблоком она. / Морщият мысли лоб ее. /— Кого? / Владим Владимыч?! / А! — / Пошла, туфлём шлепая. / Идет. / Отмеряет шаги секундантом. / Шаги отдаляются... / Слышатся еле...).

¹²⁹ For more on the importance of the Russian cultural tradition of the duel, see in Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence Russian Style: The Duel in Russian Culture and Literature*.

of actuality” along the sequence of photographs of real people and places.¹³⁰ Although this observation reveals the phantasmagoric origins of the poet’s vision (“No one crawled into the phone at all, / there is no troglodyte-like pan;” Никто в телефон не лез и не лезет, / нет никакой троглодичьей рожи), one cannot expect Rodchenko to paste the photograph of a real creature from the late Jurassic period. It is, however, more important that Rodchenko echoes Mayakovsky’s recognition of his own self in the mirrored image on the telephone handset (“Just myself in the phone, / mirrored in metal;” Сам в телефоне. / Зеркалюсь в железе) by juxtaposing the images of a brontosaurus and Mayakovsky in such way that their heads almost touch. In other words, Rodchenko reveals that the poet’s jealous agony is the pathological origin of that which becomes a series of doubling of the poet’s self and, eventually, proliferation of the poet’s doubles.

The poetic “I” is transformed into a third person “He,” and is imprisoned by the objectifying gaze of the camera lenses which reduces the poet to the banal status of “star in snapshot.” The *byt*, that immutable present by which Mayakovsky feels so oppressed includes the very apparatus by which that oppression is recorded. As Hutchings asserts, what we see is not Mayakovsky hunched up in jealous agony, but Mayakovsky the man *posing* as Mayakovsky the poet hunched up in jealous agony, mediating private emotion through a mass-media image. Further, while trying to articulate a private love in public arena, Mayakovsky resorts to cryptic references accessible only to the private self: the name of the street in which Lili lives, and her telephone number. Rodchenko, however, decodes this cryptic message and exposes private as public. In other words, to express private feelings in the age of media is automatically to make them public property.

¹³⁰ Hutchings, “Photographic eye as poetic I,” p. 67.

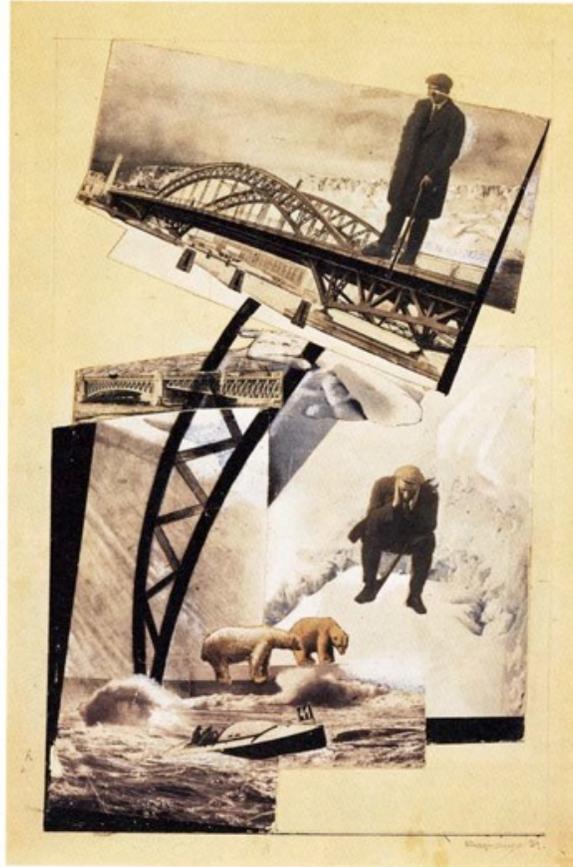


Figure 2.8 Aleksandr Rodchenko:
third photomontage for *About This* (1923).

2.3.3 The Double

Rodchenko's third photomontage in the book illustrates the physical transformation of the poet into an animal and the occurrence of the poet's first double (**fig. 2.8**). In the poem, this metamorphosis is played out as a series of re-employments of the poetic device known as the *realization of metaphor*. Since the pathological origin of the poet's double—his libidinal jealousy materialized in the image of “a monster from those troglodyte days” (времен троглодитских тогдашнее чудище)—stands for the animalistic principle in a love relationship, the poet transforms into an animal (“Yesterday a man— / with one stroke alone / of my fangs my looks I polar-beared!” Вчера человек — / единым махом / клыками свой размедведил вид

я!).¹³¹ The poet weeps a flood of tears that, by the realization of the metaphor, becomes the real St. Petersburg Neva River. Next, the pillow converts into an iceberg on which “a white polar-bear” clambers (Я в середине. / Белым медведем / взлез на льдину, / плыву на своей подушке-льдине) while floating toward the bridge on which stands Mayakovsky’s double, “the man from seven years ago” (Человек из-за 7-ми лет).

The sequence of realized metaphors is significant for Mayakovsky’s and the poetics of the avant-garde in general. On the one hand, it does not allow symbolization and persistently contradicts the pathetic expression; on the other, it creates a sort of “comical grotesque” and carnival-like “grandiose and entertaining buffoonery,” as Victor Zhirmunsky called it, simultaneously allowing the hyperbolization of psychic space.¹³² The immediacy of the emotional expression, presented by an unexpected sequence of monologue-associations that connect given motifs on a psychological level, is in evident opposition with the principle of the montage, which organizes this spontaneity of associations according to the constructive principle.¹³³ Thus, Mayakovsky abates his highly personal emotions by irony and poetic self-

¹³¹ Rodchenko, however, did not choose to illustrate the poetic image of “bearification” (размедвежение) in which Mayakovsky evoked a scene of the bear hunt, developing further the analogy between similar two-pronged shapes of the (old) telephone part that carries the speaker handle and the Russian heavy spear for close combat or bear hunting (рогатина): “Like a bear, when to deadly anger prone, / my breast / I turn / to my foe—the phone. / Into the two-pronged receiver rest, / deep into the bear-spear, my heart is pressed.” (Медведем, / когда он смертельно сердится, / на телефон / грудь / на врага тяну. / А сердце / глубже уходит в рогатину!). I would like to thank Yuri Tsivian who has drawn my attention to this observation.

¹³² Zhirmunsky, *Teoria literatury, poetika, stilistika: izbrannye trudy*, p. 217.

¹³³ In the poem, the appellative utterances are an accentuated mode of the actualization of an emotive (expressive) function. The poet addresses frequently his recipient, thus producing the effect that his drama is playing out in front of the large audience. The poet is extremely appellative toward himself. For example, the introduction of the *Man from seven years ago* (which is the title of the fragment) highlights not only the continuity of his own poetry but also motivates the auto-appellative expression by which he requests the continuity of an avant-garde poetic attitude without which it is impossible for a contemporary poet to resist the emerging structures of life relationships (“Stop! / Don’t desert me! / Vladimir!” Владимир! / Остановись! / Не покинь!).

materialized metaphor of montage. Through such dominant element of the photomontage's configuration, Rodchenko underlines the significance of the montage as the constructive principle that, similar to the sequence of realized metaphors in Mayakovsky's poem, is able to deconstruct the pathos of the poet's despair by organizing his personal emotion into the structural segments of construction. It also creates a new mythic space in which the image of the poet, "through the infinite reproducibility of the photo," as Hutchings notes, "can live on agelessly, splitting himself in two, then magically reunifying his alter egos as one."¹³⁴

2.3.4 Byt

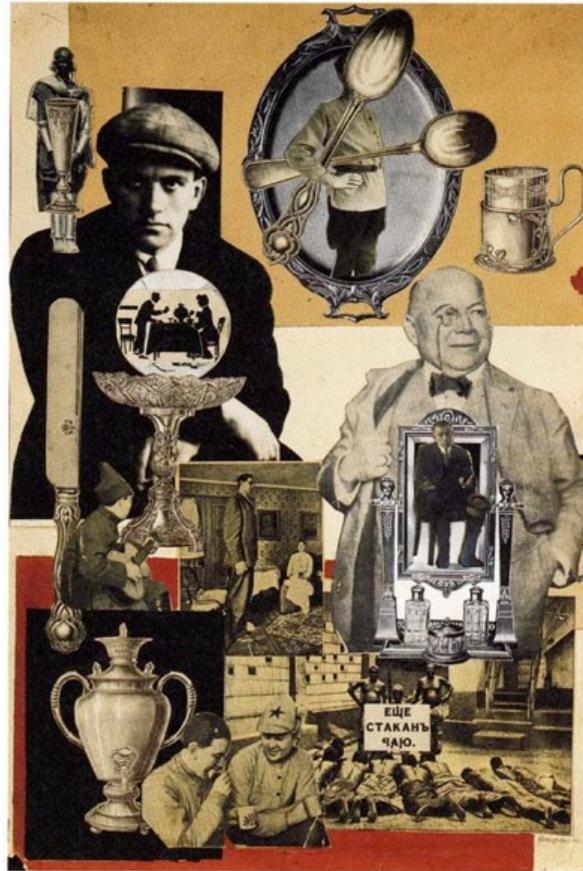
Although present in the entire photopoem, ironic *doubleness* is the most overt in the fragment of the poem entitled *The Husband of Fekla Davidovna*, accompanied by the fourth photomontage by Rodchenko (**fig. 2.9**). Searching for Lili at the apartment of Fekla Davidovna (a female acquaintance), Mayakovsky the narrator encounters banal introductions over drinks and tea, and a dance of mice, bedbugs, cockroaches, and the objects of *meshchanskii* Soviet décor: samovars, geraniums, canaries, family pictures. The objects threaten to close in on him, like Tretyakov's quagmire of *byt*: the glinting samovar "wants to envelop you in its samovar arms" (Весь самовар рассиялся в лучики — / хочет обнять в самоварные ручки). Old and new symbols intermingle in the motley mix of early Soviet *byt*; among the wall decorations, "Jesus / tips / his thorny crown / and bowls politely, / and Marx, / bitted and haltered in a pink frame, pulls his full weight in the middle-class ménage" (Исус, / приподняв / веночек тернистый, / любезно кланяется. / Маркс, / впряженный в алую рамку, / и то тащил обывательства ляжку). With professed horror, Mayakovsky the narrator recognizes—by his height, his skin, his clothes—none other than himself among the bourgeois objects and social rituals in this ménage: "One of

¹³⁴ Hutchings, "Photographic eye as poetic I," p. 68.

them / I recognized / As like a twin / Myself / My very own self” (в одном / узнал — / близнецами похожи — / себя самого — / сам / я). The stark philosophical binary of the heroic self, perpetually pitted against the dissolving power of the old *byt*, certainly figures in Mayakovsky’s character and his work, but the temporal confusion and ironic doubleness of *About This* suggest that his identities as an ascetic Bolshevik and as an owner-purchaser lover must be reconciled, since both involve love in different ways. For example, the voice of the man on the bridge from seven years before chastises the present narrator: “So, it seems, you’re worming your way into their caste? / You’re kissing? / Eating? / Growing a paunch? / You yourself / intend to clamber mincingly / into their *byt* / into their family happiness?!” (Ты, может, к ихней примазался касте? / Целуешь? / Ешь? / Отпускаешь брюшко? / Сам / в ихний быт, / в их семейное счастье / намереваешься пролезть петушком?!). The previous Mayakovsky persona accuses his present self of being weakened by the emotional comfort of his personal love relationship with Lili and the material comforts of the *meshchanskii byt* in which it unfolds.

The fourth of Rodchenko’s compositions thematizes Mayakovsky’s entrapment in a “dense, hardened mold” of stifled *meshchanskii byt*. Rodchenko’s selection of the objects that immature Mayakovsky clearly emphasize their origin: butter knife, the stem of the crystal candy dish, an oval silver serving tray, etc. —they all belong to old bourgeois *byt*, the icon of which is a stereotypical capitalist or NEP profiteer, replete with bow tie and monocle. Here, one also finds the old-fashioned cut black paper silhouette of a wife pouring tea from a samovar for her husband balanced on the top of a candy dish. Yet, this silhouette is a heavy weight pressed against the heart of the poet. The large photograph of Mayakovsky on the left, in his worker’s

cap enacts an attempt to project a masculine sense of discipline, embodied in his direct, almost accusatory gaze, against the tide of all of objects of bourgeois feminization.



**Figure 2.9 Aleksandr Rodchenko:
fourth photomontage for *About This* (1923).**

Rodchenko sets up a contrast between the two photographs of Mayakovsky: the first, on the left, has him glaring purposefully out at the viewer in his worker's cap, "punishing / judging," like October itself in the poem (Октябрь прогремел, / карающий, / судный); in the second, on the right, the symbolic cap is now on his knee, and his raised eyebrows and gesticulating hands imply a comical, self-ironizing monologue: "kissing? / Eating? / Growing a paunch?" (Целуешь? / Ешь? / Отпускаешь брюшко?) Is he trapped inside the gilt frame of the mirror on the ladies toiletries table, or is he comfortably ensconced? Further, the four corners have images referring to the theme of tea drinking, to which Mayakovsky returns repeatedly in

the poem as a sign of old *meshchanskii byt*: a samovar on the lover left; a photograph of a traditional Russian tea glass set in an ornate metal holder on the upper right; images of Africans in the remaining two corners illustrate Mayakovsky's lament in the poem that even "curly-headed negroes in Africa / now lap under the tea" (с негритоской курчавой / лакает семейкой чай негритос). Clearly, the proliferation of photographs of Mayakovsky himself across and within this and other photomontages emphasizes the rift of Mayakovsky's identities as revolutionary and as lover. The narrative structure of the photomontage is emphasized by compositional elements drawn from Constructivist repertoire, such as the repetition of geometric forms (rectangle, circle, and oval), the linear pattering of cutlery, or the organization of photographic elements against a background of monochromatic rectangles; that is, the composition is replaced by construction.

2.3.5 Partying

Rodchenko's photomontages propagate the ironic *doubleness* of the poetic text: the highly organized compositional forms create juxtapositions of images from Mayakovsky's personal narrative and the old bourgeois *byt* of which they are decidedly critical, and yet this imagery is retained and rendered dynamic and vivid. The fifth photomontage in Rodchenko's series is an illustrative example of such dynamism and the allure that commercial photomontages and advertisement posters at the time were customarily eager to achieve (**fig. 2.10**). The images of products for mass consumption, such as liqueurs and cigars, and the images of men in tuxedos and women in fancy dining dresses, dancing in pairs or sitting at tables, chatting, drinking, and toasting ("Bawlers bawling, / brawlers brawling," Горлань горланья, / оранья орло́; "glasses in toasts are clinking," в тостах стаканы исчоканы), conflate with the large and noticeable slogans in German and English, all of which refer to modern music and dances—"Die Jazz-Band," "Jass-

Two Step,” “Shimmy,” and “Fox-Trot”—thus resembling the visual language of commercial photomontage and advertisements for night clubs.¹³⁵

The photomontage illustrates the part of the poem that concentrates on Mayakovsky’s desperate attempt to contact Lili; we read how the poet, resembling Raskolnikov in delirium after “having murdered,” goes to her apartment, hides on the staircase that her “guests crowded” (Вот так, убив, Раскольников / пришел звенеть в звонок. / Гостьё идет по лестнице...), in order to find her entertaining and socializing with friends.¹³⁶ The entire scene conveys Mayakovsky’s delirious hallucination of people talking about him (“Yes— / that’s them— / talking about me.” Да — / это они — / они обо мне), the experience at the end of which he finds, “Myself from that delirium I suffocated. / It / has eaten out my life by the fug of apartments” (я сам задыхался от этого бреда. / Он / жизнь дымком квартирошным выел). Instead of representing the poet himself suffocating in such delirium, Rodchenko’s photomontage renders Mayakovsky’s feverish vision visible and, what is more, even pleasant, joyful, and desirable.

¹³⁵ Under Rodchenko’s photomontage are the following verses from the poem: “And once again / walls’ burning steppes / stamp into ears / and paint in two-steps” (И снова / стен раскаленные степи / под ухом звенят и вздыхают в тустепе). In a sense, Rodchenko’s use of visual means to introduce the new *international* jazz music orchestra and modern dances in a positive light repeats what had been already done in writing by Valentin Parnach, a writer, journalist, and translator who wrote short articles “Novye Tancy” (New Dances) and “Dzhaz-Band” (Jazz-Band), published in the first double issue of *Veshch* (March-April), 1922, p. 25. Parnach was in touch with the Dadaist among others, and along with Ilya Zdanevich and Sharshun, wanted to bring Dadaism in Moscow.

¹³⁶ This part of the poem is completely autobiographical. Mayakovsky found their separation more of a torment than Lili. During this time of two months separation he did not visit Lili once; he became a recluse, living alone in his tiny room. He went up to her apartment, hid on the staircase, wrote letters and notes that were handed to her by servants or by mutual friends. He sent her flowers, books, and other presents, such as caged birds, which were intended to remind her of him. On the other hand, Lili carried on with her normal everyday life, entertaining at home and socializing with friends, occasionally sending Mayakovsky very short notes in reply. Mayakovsky’s constant vacillations between elation and despair, hope and doubt, are registered not only in their mutual correspondence, but also in the text of the poem *About This* which repeats almost word for word the parts of letters and notes he was sending to her at the time. For more on their relationship and correspondence at the time, see Jangfeldt, *Love Is The Heart of Everything*, pp. 20-22 and pp. 108-131.



**Figure 2.10 Aleksandr Rodchenko:
fifth photomontage for *About This* (1923).**

At first, Rodchenko's photomontage appears to be *affirmative* towards the mundane world of socialization and entertainment and yet, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that its construction is simultaneously *critical* of the banality and kitsch propagated by such a world. With its two diagonals that cut across the middle of the page, the construction of Rodchenko's photomontage resembles the sign frequently used in the visual language of the avant-garde as its recognizable gesture of negation. Rodchenko used this sign, for example, in his design of the front cover of the second issue of *Lef* (April-May 1923) (**fig. 2.11**).

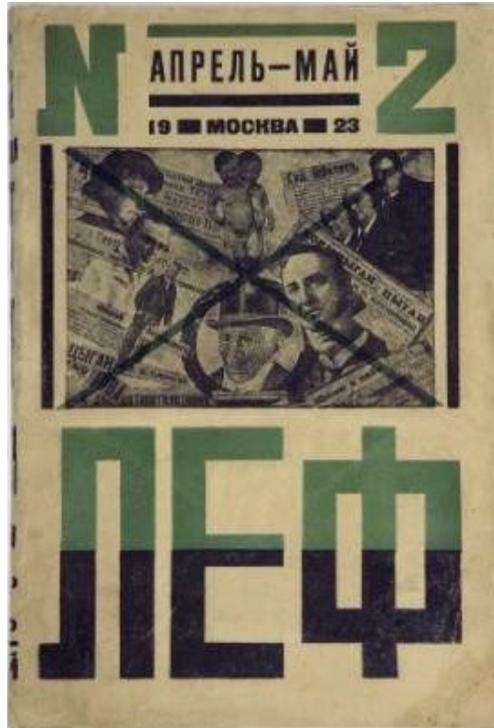


Figure 2.11 Aleksandr Rodchenko:
design of the front cover for *Lef*, No. 2 (April-May, 1923).

Both diagonals feature the faces of people who were intimately acquainted with the poet (fig. 2.10). One diagonal stretches from the image of a man in a suit (at the right bottom corner), across the oversized image of the cigar in his mouth, to the image of Lili cut out from her studio photograph taken in Riga in 1922 (fig. 2.12).



Figure 2.12 Photograph of Lili Brik in Riga (1922).

Another diagonal—extending from the image of a woman in a glittering evening dress and hat at the left bottom corner, across the dancing couple in the middle of the page, to the images of biscuits and a tray with a bowl of punch and glasses at the right upper-hand corner—includes an image of Rodchenko’s head on the tray (**fig. 2.10**). Rodchenko’s and Lili’s cutout portraits are pasted on bodies of women dancing, suggesting how they are both enjoying themselves at Lili’s apartment. The photomontage, thus, contains yet another layer of non-fictional, autobiographical references beside Mayakovsky’s: namely, Rodchenko’s. As Katarina Romanenko has argued in her essay on *About This*, Rodchenko, in an early version of this photomontage, documented the fact that he was one of the friends who delivered Mayakovsky’s notes to Lili during their two-month separation (**fig. 2.13**).¹³⁷



Figure 2.13 Aleksandr Rodchenko: a version of the fifth photomontage for *About This* (1923). Not included in the printed edition.

¹³⁷ Romanenko, “‘Pro eto.’ Rodchenko and Mayakovsky’s Groundbreaking Collaboration.”
<<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/arhistory/part/part11/articles/romanenko.html>>

2.3.6 Crucifixion

For Mayakovsky, the real function of poetry is precisely the aesthetic and ethical transvaluation of the entire system of life relationships. The culmination of such a clash is given in the representation of the conflict between the poet at the top of the Kremlin-Caucasus and the faceless and shapeless mass of his enemies (“Only on the Kremlin / the poet’s tatters / shine in the wind a red, red flag.” Лишь на Кремле / поэтовы клочья / сияли по ветру красным флажком). In *About This*, Mayakovsky uses biblical and evangelical motifs just as he did in his earlier poems and plays.¹³⁸ In the part of the poem preceding his crucifixion, for example, Mayakovsky refers to Christ the savior, “a redeemer of earthly love” who stands alone “for everyone born” and “will pay for everyone,” and with whom he identifies. The references to the “Golgotha” myth both accentuate the universal human condition of the poet’s suffering and provide him with an aura of a prophet who speaks “in behalf of all” (земной любви искупителем значась, / должен стоять, / стою за всех, / за всех расплачусь, / за всех расплачусь). The crucified poet also identifies in the poem with the death of “hussar” Lermontov, an iconic figure of Russian Romanticism who was shot in the Caucasus in a duel (Один уж такой попался — / гусар!). This identification resonates with the self-ironical plea of the poet, who at the top of the Kremlin-Caucasus cannot “catch [my] balance, / waiving frantically” (ловлю равновесие, / страшно машу) “with cardboard hands” (руками картонными), while “the Caucasus swarms with Pinkerton bands” (Кавказ кишит Пинкертонами).¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Mayakovsky’s *Mystery Buff* is created upon the deluge or flood myth, while his earlier poems employ the motif of “Golgotha.”

¹³⁹ The last line is a humorous allusion to the trivial detective novels at the time: the fictional detective Ned Pinkerton, hero of the popular series of detective novels, inspired many Hollywood movies in early 1920s; thus, Hollywood became synonymous with the “detective story.” While certain Soviet critics praised this crime-oriented genre as the most enticing of cinematic plot structures, the aforementioned editor of *Kino-*



**Figure 2.14 Aleksandr Rodchenko:
sixth photomontage for *About This* (1923).**

Rodchenko's sixth photomontage (fig. 2.14) portrays the poet's relationship to the masses as a sacrificial victim to a baying crowd, depicting the poet balanced atop the Kremlin with a crowd and a lonely Lili Brik beneath, an airplane flying past. In this modern crucifixion scene, Rodchenko incorporated out-of-proportion cutouts of a large car tire, and small children floating above a cannon. During the course of the poetic fantasy, Mayakovsky flies across Paris, seeing

photo, Aleksey Gan, considered the *detektiv* a trivial strain of Western cinema that placed too great an emphasis on narrative, and referred to it as "rubbish." Undoubtedly, Mayakovsky shared Gan's view, believing that the Soviet cinema should introduce its strong ideological message more assertively. For more on *Pinkertonovshchina* see Dralyuk, *Western Crime Fiction Goes East*, especially chapter six focussing on Marietta Shaginian's pulp-fiction detective series *Mess-Mend, or Yankees in Petrograd* (1923–24), "a ten-installment extravaganza of Pinkertonian formal tropes," with front covers illustrated with photomontages by Rodchenko (pp. 99-121).

himself as “a grey, cinematic shadow” (Подымаюсь сенскою сенью, / синематографской серой тенью), and arrives from his flight to Moscow on the Kremlin tower. There, he is terrified by the fact that he is now exposed to the public gaze (“They’ll all notice / From here I am completely visible.” Заметят. / Отсюда виден весь я). The age of mass production, global travel and universal fame endowed the poet with new freedoms, but also made him a passive object of the gaze of the masses who recognized him as their “century-old enemy” (Ты враг наш столетний) and shell “from every battery, / from each Mauser and Browning” (со всех батарей, / с каждого маузера и браунинга). The last line explains why Rodchenko included the image of a cannon in the photomontage. The image of children, however, is to underline the poet’s “pronounced dislike of children.”¹⁴⁰

Rodchenko’s composition echoes the ironic *doubleness* of Mayakovsky’s verses both by stressing the illusionary nature of the poet’s self-sacrificial vision and confirming that Mayakovsky is an anachronistic poet in the age of the masses. The traditionally cherished representation of the Russian writer as a Christ figure (the word as icon) becomes literally the word as mass-produced image. In the poem, Mayakovsky does not only identify with Christ the savior, or with the mythologized Romantic poets who died in duels, but also with the public figures from the Russian medieval tradition—such as the medieval jester, the trickster or *shut*, and a wandering minstrel-acrobat-actor, the *skomorokh* (скоморох)—since the aforementioned “cardboard hands” (руками картонными) resembling those of a clown, are linked with the traditional motifs of the poet represented as a circus performer. Moreover, Mayakovsky envisions his future-self in the epilogue of the poem as a carnivalesque performer who will

¹⁴⁰ Jakobson explains this fact in the following way: “[I]n Mayakovsky’s spiritual world an abstract faith in the coming transformation of the world is joined quite properly with hatred for the evil continuum of specific tomorrows that only prolong today [...] and with undying hostility to that ‘brood-hen’ love that serves only to reproduce the present way of life.” (Jakobson, “On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets,” pp. 287-288).

“entertain you / with some gags / of hyperbole, / allegories / and poetic hanky-panky” (Я шарадами гипербол, / аллегорий / буду развлекать, / стихами балагурия). This incitement to carnival tradition, connected also with the transmutation of the lyrical subject into an animal character (his ‘bearification’), testifies not only to the presence of the ludic function of poetry (so often emphasized as crucial for the avant-garde), but also to the question of the (in)significance of the social function of poetry.¹⁴¹

2.3.7 Rejuvenation

Rodchenko’s seventh photomontage (**fig. 2.15**) relates to the poem’s epilogue in which the poet, after being killed in an ill-matched battle with the forces of *byt*, reiterates his hatred towards “everything / into us / past slavishness driven, / everything, / that in swarming trifles teem / ossifying / and assifying living / even in our own / red-flag society” (Всё, / что в нас / ушедшим рабьим вбито, / всё, / что мелочинным роем / оседало / и осело бытом / даже в нашем / краснофлагом строе), and declares his everlasting commitment to Poetry:

Четырежды состарюсь — четырежды омоложенный,

¹⁴¹ In a similar vein, a theatrical workshop FEX (The Factory of the Eccentric Actor), formed in Leningrad in 1921 under the leadership of Grigory Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg and transformed in 1924 into a cinematographic collective, put the emphasis on ‘eccentrism’ and the orientation towards ‘low’ genres (circus, vaudeville, the variety stage) while rejecting the traditions of the ‘serious’ art of the salon. As Nussinova writes in her historical survey of the early Soviet cinema, these ‘eccentric’ techniques, “based on circus and vaudeville, were particularly prominent in short films, including Ermler’s *Skarlatina* (Скарлатина, Scarlet Fever, 1924), Pudovkin and Shpikovskiy’s *Shakhmatnaya goryachka* (Шахматная горячка, Chess Fever, 1925), and Yutkevich’s *Radiodetektiv* (Радиодетектив, The Radio Detective, 1926). The quintessence of the new genre, however, was Kozintsev and Trauberg’s *Pokhozheniya Oktyabriny* (Похождения Октябрины, Adventures of Oktyabrina, 1924), which sought, in Trauberg’s words, to combine the theme of an *agitka* with political features from the Soviet satirical press, the tricks of American comics, and a headlong montage rhythm that could outdo the French avant-garde.” (Nussinova, “The Soviet Union and the Russian émigrés,” pp. 291-292). Another important text is a short article “Cirk” (Circus), published in the first double issue of *Veshch* (March-April 1922), in which its author, Céline Arnould, defines the circus as “a real show” or spectacle (зрелище, *zrelishche*) in comparison to the theater described as “fictitious performance” or representation (представление, *predstavlenie*), and underlines the close connection of the circus with the sport: “it [circus] is the manifestation of sport in art.” (Arnould, “Cirk,” p. 25). An article by the same author, who was also a persistent writer for *L’Esprit Nouveau*, can be found in the first issue of this magazine: Arnould, “Le cirque, art nouveau.”

до гроба добраться чтоб.
Где б ни умер,
умру поя.

Four times I'll age—four times rejuvenated be,
before I reach the grave.
But no matter where I die,
dying, I'll sing.



**Figure 2.15 Aleksandr Rodchenko:
seventh photomontage for *About This* (1923).**

Rodchenko's photomontage combines an image of Mayakovsky with four photographs of children along with the cutout pictures of various technological devices and a modern tower construction. There are several strong vertical and horizontal lines in the composition, made by both graphic and photographic means. The white graphic vertical line on the left is paralleled by a photographic one that expands from the image of a hand holding a photo camera beside the

portrait of a fair-haired child, to the blended portraits of Mayakovsky and Jackie Coogan (well-known from Chaplin's film *The Kid*) in the middle, to the image of a kid at the top of the page (who, as in an act of some children's play, appears from the box with his arm reaching towards us.) The second photographic vertical line runs from the image of a child holding a basket and a rod at the right below, to the complex mish-mash of technical devices above his head, ending with the image of a tower construction. Both photographic verticals bear the signature of the nascent technological age; if the images of the camera and box on the left are intended to signify what Vilém Flusser calls the "black box" of the apparatus, then the complex technological device on the right is, according to Lavrentiev, "intended to breathe new life into the unconscious which Rodchenko put together from an electric motor, a car horn, the wheel of a dynamo, and engineer Shukov's water tower."¹⁴² In other words, in the peculiar *temporality* that the burgeoning photographic and technological cultures offer, Rodchenko sees a promise to resurrect the past for the benefit of the future.

The three black and white horizontal graphic lines that both interrupt and emphasize the vertical ones allude to the importance that Rodchenko assigns to the line in his unpublished pamphlet with the same title.¹⁴³ In this 1921 text, Rodchenko ascribes three main features to the line that perfected its significance. The first is its "bordering and edge relationship," which is to say that the line has its own volume, specific inmost quality, displayed by the possibility of its margins and edges to shape and violate, to form and deform, to define and redefine. Secondly, the line represents "a factor of the main construction of every organism that exists in life, the

¹⁴² Lavrentiev, "About This Book," p. 76. Flusser compares apparatuses with the "black boxes" in the following way: "In short: Apparatuses are black boxes that simulate thinking in the sense of combinatory game using number-like symbols [...] Apparatuses are scientific black boxes that carry out this type of thinking better than human beings because they are better at playing (more quickly and with fewer errors) with number-like symbols." (Flusser, *Towards A Philosophy of Photography*, p. 32).

¹⁴³ Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Experiments for the Future*, pp. 111-115.

skeleton, so to speak (or the foundation, carcass, system).¹⁴⁴ That is to say, the line is the basic fabric and structure for the building of forms: “The line is the first and last, both in painting and in any construction at all.”¹⁴⁵ Finally, the most important quality of the line is its ability to master the dynamism and instability; since the natural existence of the line is a state of constant flux, it can stabilize, control, and organize this fluctuation.¹⁴⁶ In the last part of his pamphlet, Rodchenko makes a crucial statement: “In the line a new worldview became clear: to build in essence, and not depict (objectify or non-objectify); build new, expedient, constructive structures in life, and not from life and outside of life.”¹⁴⁷ He concludes the pamphlet with the following manifesto-like call and a clear statement of constructivist preference for what I call the *algorithmic imagination*, founded on the laws of natural science and technical innovations, over art itself:

Work for life, and not for places, temples, cemeteries, and museums. Work amid everyone, for everyone, and with everyone. There is nothing eternal, everything is temporary. Consciousness, experience, goals, mathematics, technology, industry, and construction—this is above all else, above art.¹⁴⁸

2.3.8 Zoo

The last photomontage in Rodchenko’s series (**fig. 2.16**) confirms his constructivist “program” according to which, the use of the line in the design of the page turns the composition into the construction. Just as in the case of previous photomontage, it also illustrates the epilogue of the poem, in which Mayakovsky pleads with a chemist to resurrect him as a street sweeper in a zoo (“I love animals too— / Zoos? / Let me be a zoo-keeper there;” Я зверье еще люблю —/ у вас /

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 113.

¹⁴⁵ In the 1920 sketch for the cover of pamphlet, he writes: “The last form—the line.” (Ibid, p.112).

¹⁴⁶ It has almost the power of divine intervention: “The line is the path of passing through, movement, collision, edge, attachment, joining, sectioning.” (Ibid, p.113).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p.114.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

зверинцы / есть? / Пустите к зверю в сторожа) since he believes that he will meet Lili there
again:

и она —
она зверей любила —
улыбаясь, то же ступит в сад,
вот такая,
как на карточке в столе.

She too—
for she loved animals—
smiling, will also the Gardens re-enter,
like that photo
in the desk of my room.

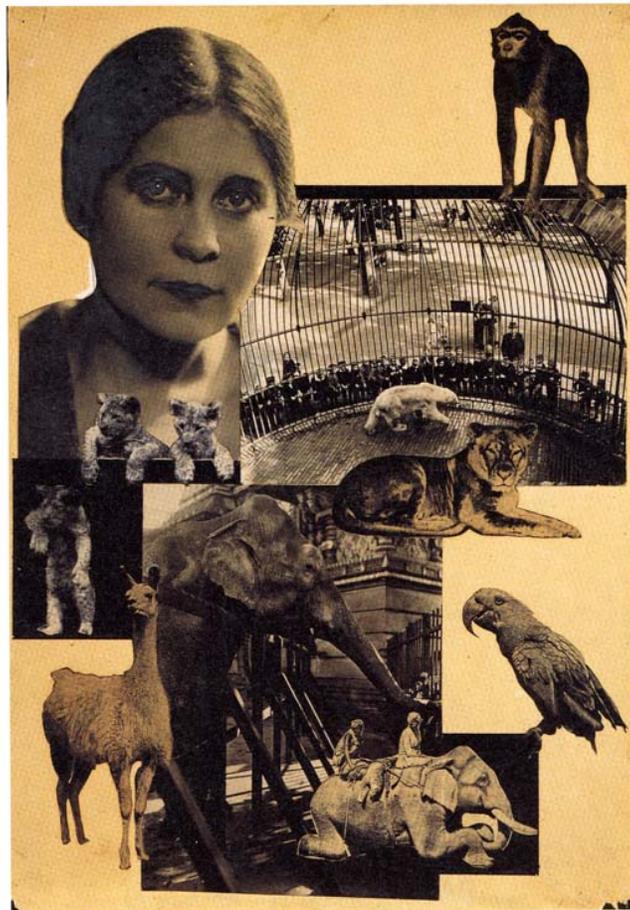


Figure 2.16 Aleksandr Rodchenko:
eight photomontage for *About This* (1923).

The zoo becomes a space of specific *temporality* where Mayakovsky's optimal projection into the future, based on his faith in the scientific progress of humankind and envisioned as the global achievement of universal human love, meets Rodchenko's screen projection of technical images, based on the research into *byt* as a certain form of material culture and envisioned through the technological, industrial, and production-oriented "shaping" principle of montage. Rodchenko's photomontage still pertains the aforementioned *duality* between element and construction, between the oblique lines (of Lili's face and the bodies of animals) and the sharp and straight lines (of montage construction and photograph edges), between the poet's too-earthly, possessive, fetishistic love toward a woman and a higher, more spiritual, universal form of love that is described, for example, with such accurate similarity in Robert Walser's short story "Tiergarten" (1911). This Swiss modernist writer, whose prose had a great impact on Walter Benjamin and Kafka among others, compares the zoological garden in Berlin with attributes such as femininity, heavenly tranquility and pleasantness:

The world in all directions is like a smile, it's enough to put you in feminine frame of mind. [...] The park is overrun with people. The people are dark moving spots in delicate, fleeting sun-shimmer. Up above is the pale-blue sky that touches, dreamlike, the green that lies below. [...] I myself find the crowd on a Sunday in all its obvious, harmless Sunday pleasure-seeking [...] Hardness becomes obliging, rigidity dulcet, and all lines, all commonplaces blur dreamily together. A universal strolling like this is ineffably tender. [...] The image of the Tiergarten as a whole is like a painted picture, then like a dream, then like a circuitous, agreeable kiss. [...] Everything is simultaneously droll and sacrosanct, and this makes you feel solemn like all the others. Everyone is displaying the same appropriate, mild solemnity. [...] Everything is emanating womanliness, everything is bright and balmy, everything is so wide, so transparent, so round.¹⁴⁹

By putting a photo of Lili Brik in the Zoological Gardens, Rodchenko retains the overall tension of the photomontage in which the "material conditions collide with human will and desires" and succeeds in capturing the lovers' private *byt* with its "striking functional content-

¹⁴⁹ Walser, *Berlin Stories*, pp. 20-21.

richness,” to use Alexei Gan’s words. The Berlin Tiergarten, located in what was then the Russian section of the city (west Berlin), was the place where Russians tended to take their strolls and, more importantly, where Mayakovsky and Lili had frequently visited.¹⁵⁰ On a less concrete level, the Berlin zoo secures a safe harbor for the lovers’ private references: the white polar bear in a cage symbolizes Mayakovsky’s tamed animal jealousy, while the images of three lion “kittens” are to underline the poet’s affectionate love toward Lili whom he called “kitten.” This photomontage finalizes Rodchenko’s sequence that, according to Hutchings, reflects the “progression from Mayakovsky as obsessive, gazing subject, through Mayakovsky as gazed-at object, back to Mayakovsky as gazing (but a gazed at) subject.”¹⁵¹

2.4 Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, Rodchenko’s and Mayakovsky’s collaborative project *About This* stands for the first constructivist bioscopic book in which verses and images mutually interact, promoting the constructive principle and the technique of montage (thinking) as an integral part of the new conceptual order of modernity. Rodchenko’s images both passively *echo* and actively *transform* Mayakovsky’s verbal metaphors, playing with the same ironic *doubleness* through the visual language of photomontage. These photomontages render the tension between the material and the construction more palpable, and preserve the power dynamics between the photographic element and the abstract scheme persistently shifting and unresolved. Finally, Rodchenko was

¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Shklovsky’s book *Zoo: or Letters Not about Love* (1923) refers to the Berlin Tiergarten, involving numerous references to the author’s affection towards Lili Brik’s sister Elsa Triolet. As an epigraph for his book, Shklovsky took a piece of Khlebnikov’s *Zverinec* (Zoo). For more about the stylistic and thematic affinities between Shklovsky’s modern epistolary novel and Mayakovsky’s modern ballad, see in Sheldon’s introduction to Viktor Shklovsky, *Zoo: or Letters Not about Love*, pp. xix-xxi. Police records document that by the end of 1924 there was at least 300,000 Russians living in Berlin (although it is likely that a considerable number of émigrés is not register with the Berlin police), 100,000 of whom had congregated in the Charlottenburg district. (Mierau, *Russen in Berlin, 1918-1933: Eine kulturelle Begegnung*, p. 259).

¹⁵¹ Hutchings, “Photographic eye as poetic I,” p. 63.

the first to incorporate photographs of the actual people that the work of fiction is describing: Vladimir Mayakovsky and his lover Lili Yurievna Brik.

The technique of montage is visible in the very form of Mayakovsky's poem—diverse fragments are separated from each another by the subtitles, resembling the stills with inter-titles from silent cinema (**fig. 2.17**). The entire poem is constructed from rhythmically, semantically, as well as spatially and temporally remote fragments that are reminiscent of film sequences.¹⁵²

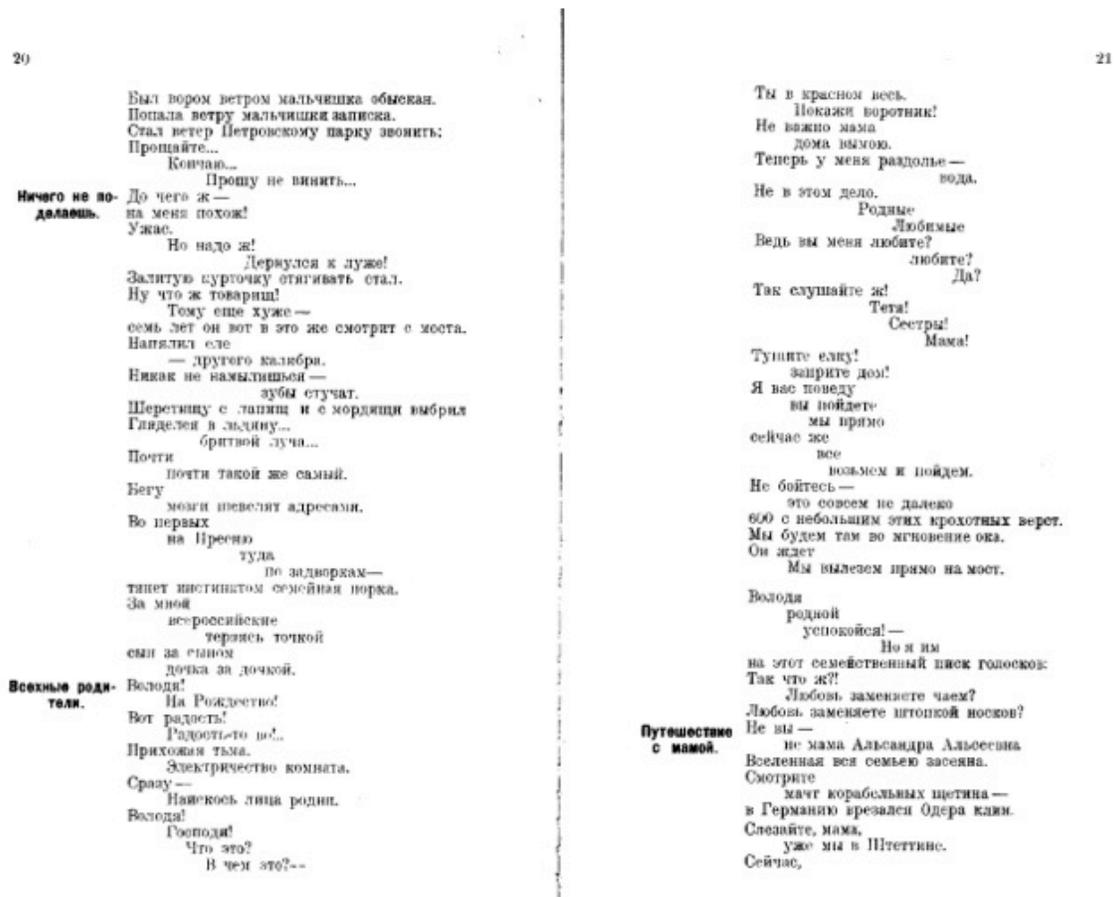


Figure 2.17 Stepladder layout (*lesenka*) of Mayakovsky's verses in *About This* (1923).

Furthermore, *About This* represents a new stage in the development of the formation, organization, and visual structure of Mayakovsky's verse—the so-called Mayakovsky's moment

¹⁵² Besides the aforementioned “gray shadows of cinematography,” the visualization of the telephone call in the verses of the poem is also highly filmic and resembles the device of ‘suspended frame’ in the cinema.

of innovation. For the first time in his poetry, Mayakovsky introduces *lesenka* (лесенка, stepladder), which he will develop and perfect soon after. The stepladder form demands the reader's eye to travel differently than while reading conventional verse forms: down and back rather than continuously. Our eyes wander in a similar way as they do while in the process of perceiving a photomontage.¹⁵³ The entire poem is a huge *construction* that, by the fact that it exposes its own construction, undeniably contradicts the apparent spontaneity of the poet's expression. While on the paradigmatic level Mayakovsky still follows the model of the romanticist poem (the ballad, the duel, the double), on the syntagmatic level his poem is constructed by overtly avant-garde devices (the realization of metaphor, poetic parodic self-reflection, ironic doubleness). Mayakovsky lessens his highly personal emotions by use of irony and poetic self-parody, deconstructs their pathos through the realization of metaphors, and reduces their dramatic effect by organizing them into the structural blocks of formal construction.

The imaginative world laid out by Rodchenko's photomontages is yet another polymorphic and poetic visual *construction*, linked with Mayakovsky's text by an umbilical cord

¹⁵³ I will not delve further into the complex issues of *lesenka*, but will offer a brief summary of what Gerald Janecek has already wrote on the subject. According to Janecek, Michael Gasparov (1974) was the first to point out to an external stimulus on Mayakovsky in the development of the *lesenka*. He found out that Mayakovsky most probably found the model for this verse organization in Andrey Bely's small booklet *After Painting*, in whose preface "Let us seek melody" he advanced the following program: "to seek intonation in an idiosyncratic layout which conveys intonation to the viewer" and proposed a stepladder layout as an example. What also may be the case is that Mayakovsky learnt about this form from the posthumous 1914 edition of Mallarmé's famous *A Throw of the Dice* which pages he probably browsed while visiting Paris just before his return to Moscow in December 1922 and prior to the beginning of his work on *About This*.

The inherently melodic nature of verse that the *intonation* proposes becomes inseparable from the *visual* organization of the verses: the stepladder layout of the verse clearly directs readers' comprehension of the function that intonation has in the overall structure of meaning. Thus, the text's layout serves as a soundplay score. The explicit stepladder form clearly indicates what are the verses, what are the syntagmatic segments, and what the rhymes are; it introduces a breaking device (less distance is covered by the eye); "its role in rhythm and intonation seems much like that of soundplay: a free, unregulated, flexible means of expressively highlight unique moments. What soundplay is to rhyme, the *lesenka* is to meter. Its value is precisely in its freedom and unpredictability." (Janecek, *The Look of Russian Literature*, p. 234).

of references. The richness of referential and aesthetic functions in Rodchenko's photomontages cannot be completely conveyed nor grasped without knowing the text of the poem. Again, their defining technique is montage of juxtapositions. Juxtaposition, as Rosalind Krauss remarks, "spaces" the elements of the image as a whole, stressing the discontinuous and interruptive, and thus destroying, in its multiperspectival forms, the "naturalistic" illusion of a self-identical and unified present. In doing so, the photomontage deprives the photograph of its "declaration of the seamless integrity of the real."¹⁵⁴ Photomontage's imagistic production of a moment-in-difference, a simultaneity of dissociation, is generally conceived as an anti-positivist and politically transformative gesture. The aesthetic function of the photomontage is always already dominated by an ideology. If the dominant function of language in poetry is the poetic function, then the dominant function of visual language in photomontage is its interventionist, *cognitive* model. This cognitive function focuses on juxtaposition within photomontage and its aesthetic effects of simultaneity, superimposition, and fragmentation. The photomontage addresses the recipient's sensory system in order to transform it cognitively through jarring interruption and subversion of hierarchies that guide the recipient's behavior. If the visual organization of *lesenka* directs the reader to perceive an importance that the intonation of the verses has in a larger formation of meaning, the visual layout of the photomontage provokes the reader to draw connections with the written text and both its disclosed and hidden meanings.

The visual effects of *lesenka* and photo-montage comprise a junction within the bioscopic book that punctuates the receivers' perception in order to awake their perceptive habits, to poke their "critical thought" by introducing the disturbance and unpredictability into a semantic play, as well as to provoke new mental habits by demanding from the reader/viewer to enter this

¹⁵⁴ Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, p. 109.

dialectical play of poetic and photographic images and make a dialectical synthesis of numerous and diverse fragments, converting these into a meaningful and coherent whole.¹⁵⁵

*

Within the constructivist bioscopic book, the high and the low (genre) are forced into ‘scandalous’ identity. This marriage between *poetry* (recognized as the high art that privileges originality) and *photomontage* (recognized as a reproductive form of mass culture rather than art) was ideologically motivated. As theoretician of Russian Constructivism, Boris Arvatov, writes in his aforementioned programmatic article “Agit-kino” (Propaganda-Cinema): “There is no ‘high’ or ‘low’ art for the working class; the proletariat knows only progressive, revolutionary art and the backward, extinct, reactionary art.”¹⁵⁶ Mayakovsky’s and Rodchenko’s *About This* is based on the same principles of ‘representational agitation,’ ‘dynamism and hyperbolism of actions,’ and ‘documentary realism’ of Arvatov’s program for the *Agit-kino* and the promise of revolutionary possibilities it grants:

Agitation is first and foremost the tool for transformation of reality. Representational agitation has to present this transformation completely immediate, by itself.

Dynamism and hyperbolism of actions is the principal condition for agit-cinema. From this, one should not jump to the conclusion about the necessity of cinematographic fantastic, symbolic, and the like.

Quite the opposite. Only real, contemporary material is suited for agit-cinema. Agitation is not daydreaming; agitation is a pragmatic activity. *And that is why agit-cinema is not cinema of ghosts, but of real people and things.*

¹⁵⁵ Finally, montage becomes a locus not only of photomontage but also of *intermediality*. The question of the relation between text and image—hence also between narrative in textual and in visual representation— as W.J.T Mitchell pointed out, is one not simply of media but of *interests*. What W.J.T. Mitchell understands under the term “interests” becomes clear when he defines “ideology”: “the structure of values and interests that informs any representation of reality.” (Mitchell, *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*, p. 4). The juxtaposition of different media, as two distinct semiotic systems, enables this “ideological” feature of *intermedial* artwork to be overtly exposed. Theodor Adorno reads the juxtaposition as manipulative, what montage indeed is. But narrative is also primarily manipulation: it presents time and “facts” together, so that they become pictorially potent stories. What is exposed as an “ideology” within *About This* is a conflict and tension enacted through ironic doubleness.

¹⁵⁶ Arvatov, “Agit-Kino” (Propaganda-Cinema), p. 2. My translation.

The realism of materials and flamboyancy of action—that’s what is needed. Flying train, running skyscraper, airplane strike or rebellion of things—these are suitable themes not only because they are amusing, but also because of the *possibilities that they grant: to take the existent and do with it whatever one wants.*

America was for a mere amusement.

The Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) must impart a purposeful, social meaning to amusement.”¹⁵⁷

Soon after their collaborative bioscopic book was published, Mayakovsky and Rodchenko entered a two-man commercial business called *Reklam-Konstruktor* (Реклам-Конструктор, Advertising-Constructor), and began producing advertising and packaging for Soviet state-owned enterprises.¹⁵⁸ But their collaborative Constructivist bioscopic book had a huge impact on the *prosumers* (readers/viewers turned producers) of this new kind of Leftist agitation and propaganda, which is the focus of the following chapter.

¹⁵⁷ Arvatov, “Agit-Kino,” p. 2. My emphasis.

¹⁵⁸ This new kind of agitation and propaganda was deeply Leftist, ideologically anti-NEP and pro Communist, but it, at the same time, enabled both artists to live with ‘the promise of revolutionary possibilities’ that such work grants; as Christine Kiaer demonstrated, for a medium size poster they charged as much as a factory worker would make for a month. (Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, p. 170). Exactly in this business venture one can recognize what Mayakovsky meant when he wrote in his letter to Lili that she would find him a “completely new man.” Mayakovsky took the pose of a poet-businessman, a poet of the new kind of agitation and propaganda, a creator of commercial poetry—a producer of illustrated advertising jingles. Mayakovsky’s advertising jingles, on the one hand, perfectly echo his original pose as a brilliant non-poet, a poet of anti-poetry, since they continue to use non-poetic vocabulary. Yet, at the same time they are distinct from his earlier work, since they lack metaphors at the heart of his futurist verses, as well as the literary allusions and self-parody. Even more importantly, Mayakovsky’s jingles, advertising commodities such as “cigarette,” “caramel,” “galosh,” “pacifiers,” “tea cookies” etc., still express the poet’s resistance against self-reification: one finds a temporary absence of the poet’s lacerated ego who withdraws beyond his verses in order to reappear as an ironic presence in the background. This latent ironic pose makes these commercial verses ambiguous: the advertisements charge consumers with the desire for the objects of *meshchanskii byt*, while simultaneously refuting commodity desire. As Christina Kiaer successfully demonstrates, Mayakovsky’s advertising *agitki* are steeped in the same “doubleness of revolutionary desire that formed the heart of *About This*.” (Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, p. 167). In other words, Mayakovsky’s and Rodchenko’s *Reklam-Konstruktor* advertisements reproduce the same ambivalent expression of protest against and desire for the objects of the old Russian everyday life that one finds in *About This*, in both Mayakovsky’s utopian projection to the thirtieth century and his self-recognition as the contented lover within the *meshchanskii byt*.

CHAPTER 3
An Agit-Book that Remained a Project: Yuri Rozhkov's Photomontages for Mayakovsky's Poem "To the Workers of Kursk" (1924)



Figure 3.1 Yuri Nikolaevich Rozhkov: Portfolio folder with his photomontages for Mayakovsky's poem "To the Workers of Kursk" (1924). (Moscow, GLM)

A portfolio, its cover featuring a curious exercise in typography, has been held in the State Literary Museum (GLM) in Moscow (**fig. 3.1**). The cutout letters of different sizes and colors are pasted onto the trapezoid black background. In spite of several missing letters, one can read the following text in Russian: "To the Workers of Kursk" and "КМА" in the upper part, "A Temporary Monument of Work of Vladimir Mayakovsky" in the middle white perpendicular,

and “Photo-montage of Yuri Rozhkov” beneath. We can learn a little more about this portfolio thanks to the author’s daughter, Inga Yurievna Matissen-Rozhkov:

From the recollections of my mother and father’s sisters, it is known that my father knew Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky, whose work he adored and he was so close to it that he illustrated with a great pleasure poems such as: “To the Kursk’s Workers,” “Jew,” “And You, Could You?” etc. My mother said that Vladimir Vladimirovich attempted to publish these works abroad in color, but it is not known whether that happened.

My father’s sister Vera Nikolaevna said that the exhibition of these works was organized in Moscow in 1930 and that the entire family attended it.¹⁵⁹

During the 1920s Yuri Nikolaevich Rozhkov made photomontages for the following poems by Mayakovsky: “Backbone Flute,” “And You, Could You” (photomontages are still undiscovered), “To the Workers of Kursk, Who Extracted the First Ore, a Temporary Monument of the Work of Vladimir Mayakovsky” (17 sheets of original photomontages, dimensions 24x36 cm, are kept at the State Literary Museum, Moscow), and the poem “Jew” (5 sheets of author’s photocopies of the montages are saved and kept both at the State Literary Museum and State V.V. Mayakovsky Museum in Moscow). It is also known that in January 1930, Rozhkov’s photomontages for the poem “To the Workers of Kursk” were shown at the exhibition “20 Years of Work of Vladimir Mayakovsky,” which the poet himself curated, and then gave the exhibits as a collection to the State Literary Museum. Publication of Yuri Rozhkov’s work in the exhibition catalogue was signed by Mayakovsky as “A temporary monument. Rozhkov’s montages. To be printed.” Unfortunately, the poet committed suicide two months after the exhibition and Rozhkov’s photomontages remained unpublished. The short-lived success of Rozhkov’s participation at the 1930 exhibition faded with Mayakovsky’s premature and

¹⁵⁹ Matissen-Rozhkov, “Memoirs of Yuri Nikolaevich Rozhkov’s daughter, Inga Yurievna Matissen-Rozhkov.” All translations of archival materials are mine.

unfortunate end, which propelled Rozhkov's own artistic work into the extended period of oblivion.

Nonetheless, Rozhkov emerges as one of the central actors in the main area of this dissertation's intent—the interface of text with images. Albeit a nonprofessional graphic artists, Rozhkov was highly enthusiastic and experimental in his photomontage work. He was not affiliated with any usual artistic or educational venues in Moscow at the time, such as INKhUK (Moscow Institute for Artistic Culture, 1920-1922) or VKhUTEMAS (Higher Art and Technical Studios, 1920-1927), and yet he was well informed about modern tendencies in graphic art and innovations within the various fields of the burgeoning Soviet visual culture. As this dissertation will show, Rozhkov's photomontage works represent a unique creation within such rich and diverse visual culture and photomontage practices of the 1920s both in the Soviet Union and abroad. In this regard, Rozhkov deserves to be credited and treated as one on par with the professional and internationally recognized graphic artists such as Rodchenko, Klutis, or Teige, among others. An additional reason to include Rozhkov's work in this dissertation is that his photomontages for Mayakovsky's poem "To the Workers of Kursk" have been eventually published as a separate printed book edition: first in Dusseldorf in 1980 (half a century after the aforementioned exhibition) along with its German translation, and subsequently in Prague in 1982 with the Czech translation of the poem and a short introductory essay by Vladimír Remeš.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ See Majakowski und Roschkow, *Den Arbeitern von Kursk, ein vorläufiges Denkmal von Wladimir Majakowski 1923*. See also Majakovský, *Kurským dělníkům, kteří vytěžili první rudu, tento prozatimní pomník vytvořený Vladimírem Majakovským*. Translation of Mayakovsky's poem is mine. Original verses are quoted from Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 13 t.*, vol. 5, pp. 149-165.

There is the unusual scarcity of scholarly work on this little known but no less interesting photomontage work from the Soviet Union of mid 1920s.¹⁶¹ In this chapter I seek to amend this gap in the scholarship of Russian Constructivism by examining Rozhkov's visually rich and intriguing work in further detail, its relation to both Mayakovsky's poem and *Lef's* program, and the significance of its documentary poetics and aesthetics. First, I introduce the largely unknown biography of Yuri Nikolaevich. Second, I continue with the general remarks on the industrial, monumental, and political propaganda to which Mayakovsky's poem and Rozhkov's photomontages contribute each in its own way. Third, I elaborate on the most salient aesthetic features of Rozhkov's unpublished agit-book as an apparatus with alternating rhythm and cinematic qualities of the proto-sequential art. I then proceed with close readings of each of the seventeen photomontage-sheets, more or less in consecutive order, focusing primarily on their propagandistic, documentary, utopian, and satirical qualities. I close the chapter by summarizing the main features of Rozhkov's poster photo-poem, briefly commenting on its differences and similarities with other photo-poetry and photomontage works at the time, highlighting its exceptional qualities.

3.1 Rozhkov: Life of a Revolutionary

Yuri Nikolaevich Rozhkov was born on January 20, 1898, in Orekhovo-Zuevo, and grew up in Moscow, in a house on Big Vlasevski alley in the Arbat district, in a large intellectual and social family. His parents had six children—two sons and four daughters—all of whom received a

¹⁶¹ Except for the three short scholarly articles by Szymon Bojko, A. P. Efimova and Larisa Alekseeva, and more brief subsidiary references made by Martin Grushka and Jose Alaniz, there is hardly anything written about the artist himself or his intriguing work. See: Bojko's text in the Polish journal *Fotografia*, No. 4, 1977; Efimova, "Budushchego priotkritii glaz," pp. 24-25; Grushka, "Fotograficheskii fotomontazh—ego istochniki i perspektivi;" Alekseeva, "Neizvesnii master XX veka," pp. 178-185; Alaniz, *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia*, p. 52. Furthermore, Alaniz completely miscalculated that Rozhkov made "fifty-page photomontage." (p. 52).

well-rounded education, including music and foreign languages. His father, Nikolai Borisovich Rozhkov (1866-1927), was an engineer-technologist and the principal of textile and weaving factories.¹⁶² His mother, Natalya Alekseevna Rozhkova (1866-1942), was the daughter of the honorary St. Petersburg citizen, merchant A. Nikitin. During Soviet times she was employed as a teacher in a worker school together with Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, a Russian revolutionary and wife of Vladimir Ilych Lenin.

Educated amidst the progressive and liberal middle class of an engineer, Yuri Nikolaevich had taken part in Bolshevik circles of working student youth since 1916, joining the Russian Communist Party in 1917. During the same year, young Rozhkov finished ward attendant and infantryman courses within red-guard squadrons and took part in the street fights in Moscow during the first days following the October Revolution. He graduated at the Moscow classical high school¹⁶³ in 1918, and as an active member of the Red Student Battalion safeguarded the Fourth Special All-Russian Congress of Soviets.¹⁶⁴ In March of the same year, Yuri Rozhkov volunteered in the Red Army. He fought on the south front, and near Novocherkassk, fell captive to the White Guardsmen, who tortured and sentenced him to death by execution. He survived by a miracle. His daughter, Inga Yurievna Matissen-Rozhkov, describes these events in the addition to her father's autobiography in the following way:

Yurii Nikolaevich carried the urgent military report when he fell captive to the White Guard, and in order to hide it from them he ate it. He was severely beaten with metal sticks (the scars along his spine were permanent) and then they issued the verdict—execution. Among the White Guard there happened to be a man (whose last name, unfortunately, I don't remember) who had been in high school with my father. He didn't say that they knew each other and volunteered to carry

¹⁶² The Prohorovski Trekhgorni manufactory in Moscow, and Krasil'shchikov manufactory in city Rodniki.

¹⁶³ The name of the school was "A.E. Flerov Gymnasium."

¹⁶⁴ *Chrezvychainyi IV Vserossiiskii S'ezd Sovetov*. This is the congress on which, after recurrent Lenin's speeches, the peace treaty Bolsheviks signed with Germany—the famous Treaty of Brest-Litovsk—was ratified and the capital transferred to Moscow.

out the verdict, but set him free. Thanks to that man, father survived. And after several years, father accidentally ran across him on Arbat [pedestrian street in the historical centre of Moscow], pretending that he didn't see him. Clearly, he was frightened and he didn't want to be recognized. Father came home and told my mother about the encounter. He was very worried since he didn't inform against him; this is because the man was the enemy... Mother persuaded him that he acted properly, returning the favor to the man who saved his life, but his conscience tormented him for a long time.¹⁶⁵

It's difficult to say what happened to Rozhkov immediately after his miraculous survival and one can only speculate whether he attended the spectacular and festive three-day long celebration of the first anniversary of the October Revolution in Moscow that November. Yet, what we know with certainty is that Rozhkov was "activated" in the late fall of 1918 as an instructor-inspector of NKVD¹⁶⁶ in the literary-instructional agit-train of VTsIK¹⁶⁷ named after V.I. Lenin. The agit-trains (агитпоезды, *agitpoezdy*) were highly efficient means used by the new government to mobilize the masses into active involvement with the Bolshevik cause and to train them into appropriately new modes of revolutionary thought. After the Revolution, the Bolsheviks transported their troops in trains that contained special compartments reserved for the distribution of propaganda—leaflets, newspapers, and the like. The *Lenin* agit-train¹⁶⁸ was the first Bolshevik's *agitpoezd* made as an experimental extension of the propaganda compartment to the size of a full-length train. The *Lenin agitpoezd* was hurriedly prepared and painted with pictorial slogans in the Kursk railway works, and left Moscow for a trial run to Kazan' on August 13, 1918. The train and its crew spent two weeks distributing pamphlets and newspapers to units of the Red Army stationed along the track and returned to the capital in early September

¹⁶⁵ Matissen-Rozhkov, "Addition to Autobiography of Yuri Nikolaevich Rozhkov" (to the item No. 7).

¹⁶⁶ The People Commissariat of Internal Affairs (*Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennix del*).

¹⁶⁷ All-Russian Central Executive Committee (*Vserossiiskiy central'nyi ispolnitel'nyi komitet*).

¹⁶⁸ The so-called *Voенно-podvizhnyi frontovyi poezd po imeni V.I. Lenina*.

1918.¹⁶⁹ Rozhkov embarked on the *Lenin* agit-train at the end of 1918, several weeks before the train was sent through the parts of the northwestern territory recently liberated from the Germans on a six-week journey ending in mid-March 1919. It was here on the *Lenin* train that Rozhkov met Lev Semenovich Sosnovsky, who later in 1921 became appointed the chief of Agitprop of CK RKP.¹⁷⁰ The train, headed by Lev Semenovich Sosnovsky, who was at the time a member of the VTsIK Commission established the previous January, visited Pskov, Riga, Vitebsk, Vil'na, Minsk, Khar'kov and Kursk, thus covering the whole of the former front against the Germans. After a three-month wait in Moscow, the *Lenin* train returned in the summer of 1919 to the Ukrainian front, where the Red Army was now fighting Denekin's troops.¹⁷¹



Figure 3.2 The *Lenin* agit train named after comrade Lenin (Pervyi agit-poezd imeni tovarishcha Lenina, 1920).

¹⁶⁹ The experiment was confined to propaganda among the military, and was so successful that Trotsky ordered five 'literary-instructional' trains from the Moscow regional railway. Production difficulties, however, delayed the delivery of the last of these until 1920. On January 31, 1919, the Presidium of VTsIK established a Special Commission to run its planned fleet of trains and steamers, and to study the problems of communication between the centre and the provinces that the project raised. See Burov, "Voznikovenie, apparat i rabota agitpoezdov VTsIK," p. 6.

¹⁷⁰ The Central Committee of Russian Communist Party (*Central'nyi komitet Rossiiskoi kommunisticheskoi partii*).

¹⁷¹ Yuri Nikolaevich draws the same trajectory in his autobiography, listing the Latvia, Lithuania, Belorussia, and Ukraine as areas the *Lenin* train visited in the period from end of 1918 through the 1919. See Rozhkov, "Autobiography" (point eight).

The *Lenin agitpoezd* was composed of seven to nine coaches containing living quarters, a storage-library, a bookshop, a “Soviet cinematograph” wagon, a radio station, and a printing office where the leaflets, pamphlets and informational publications of Russian Telegraphy Agency (ROSTA Windows) were printed. Inside, the train was divided into different working departments, such as the Political Department, which controlled instruction and agitational lectures, the Information Department, which helped the Political department to prepare necessary propaganda material, a Complaint Office, which received petitions from the populations, and the ROSTA Department, which organized publications, newspapers, leaflets and appeals in addition to running the train’s radio station.¹⁷² The train carried with it a significantly larger number of technical assistants, and a smaller but skilled team of *agitprop* (агитпроп) officials and political workers, some of whom specialized in particular fields appropriate to the areas they were visiting. Rozhkov was obviously a member of a team of skilled political workers: one finds him onboard of the *Lenin* train not only in the capacity of a literary-instructor but also of a police (милиция, *militia*) inspector and a representative of NKVD of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR).¹⁷³ As one can see from the photographs (**fig. 3.2** and **fig. 3.3**), the *Lenin* train was distinctively and brightly decorated with painted pictures and slogans. It is most likely that here Rozhkov became familiar with the futurist motifs of visual imagery and its conjunction with pictorial lettering of slogans since the sideboards of the agit-train wagons were painted as futurist posters for the purpose of propaganda and promotion of the ideas of proletarian revolutionary movement. One can also assume that, according to the position he occupied and due to his constant exposure to the various materials of revolutionary propaganda, it was here that Rozhkov became familiar with the satirical work on ROSTA Windows which,

¹⁷² See Taylor, “A Medium for the Masses: Agitation in the Soviet Civil War,” pp. 562-574.

¹⁷³ See Rozhkov “Autobiography” (point eight).

drawing upon the traditional form of popular Russian *lubok* (лубок), also conflate image and text.



Figure 3.3 An Agit-poezd. Second from the left is Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Soviet People’s Commissar of Enlightenment

From October until the end of the 1919, the *Lenin* train travelled through Siberia visiting Samara, Omsk and Yekaterinburg; the aim was to improve the flow of grain to the cities and alleviate the worsening food crisis there, caused by Denekin’s advance to Tula. If we are to judge according to his autobiography, Rozhkov disembarked the *Lenin* train during its trip to the east somewhere around the city of Chelyabinsk, which is located halfway between Samara and Omsk and about 200km south of Yekaterinburg towards the Russian border with northern Kazakhstan. As a mid-ranked official and an executive member of the NKVD in Chelyabinsk province, Rozhkov was involved in the risky and dangerous job of the Bolshevik police (*militia*), taking part in the elimination of remaining White Guardsmen in remote regions of the province. At the same time, he contributed reports and articles to the NKVD journal *Vlast’ Sovetov*, providing the organization with information about the activities of the *militia* forces in the province.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ “In 1919-1920,” writes Rozhkov in his concise report style, “I worked at the front-line zone of 5th NKVD army of Chelyabinsk Oblast. I took direct participation in liquidation of the remains of White troops in remote

After his return to Moscow in 1920, Rozhkov found himself again in the center of cultural and political life of the capital. For the young revolutionary, the years spent in Moscow from 1920 to 1928 represent another active and no less intense period of his revolutionary engagement. For almost an entire decade he worked at the Department of Information of the CK VKP (b), the highest party organ functioning between Party congresses, as an informant, a head of the informational cell (завинформчасти), and as an assistant manager of the head of the department. At the same time, he was studying at the Moscow State University (MGU, 1922-1924), working as a member of organization committees of IX to XV Party congresses, as a body-guard appointed by the Party (партприкреплённый) for the Department of State Currency Production (Гознак) and the factories for the state banknote printer, “Red October” and *Elektrozavod* (Электрозавод). Simultaneously, he was writing articles, practicing photography, actively participating in forums, and regularly attending Lenin’s public speeches (**fig. 3.4**).



Figure 3.4 A Photograph of Yuri Nikolaevich Rozhkov (1920s).

regions of the province. I collaborated in the NKVD journal *Vlast' Sovetov*, contributing reports and articles related to my working area.” (Rozhkov, “Autobiography,” point nine).

At the time, Rozhkov met Mayakovsky, who worked ceaselessly for the satirical ROSTA Windows from September 1919 until 1921. Rozhkov's daughter, Inga Yurievna, provides in her memoirs a few interesting episodes about her parents and Mayakovsky, from which we learn that about her father's artistic work and a "deal" that the forgotten artist had made with the famous poet of the Revolution:

In February 1927 father went in the sanatorium in Yalta and left mother Mayakovsky's phone number so she could call him if she needs money, i.e. Mayakovsky owed father money for the photomontages.

Mother decided to call him—she really wanted to chat with the poet she was fond of. Vladimir Vladimirovich picked up a receiver and said that Mayakovsky is not at home and hung it up. Mother rang him for a second time and he picked up the receiver again, saying that Mayakovsky was not at home, and my mother says: "Oh yeah, as a matter of fact, it is You speaking!" And he answers: "I am telling you again, I am not at home!" My mother always laughed when she would retell this episode, she loved his answer a lot. At the end, she didn't have time to tell him who she was; he surely had enough of his admirers' endless calls.¹⁷⁵

In a similar vein, Rozhkov's life during the 1930s was marked by the events simultaneously exciting and disappointing, triumphant and tragic. Between 1929 and 1931, Rozhkov studied at the Moscow Institute for Geological Exploration, which he successfully finished ahead of time. Following in the professional steps of his older brother Boris Nikolaevich, who worked as a geologist in Norilsk—the industrial city at far north of the Siberian province Krasnoyarsk Krai—Yuri Rozhkov received specialization as an exploration geologist and was allotted immediately afterwards to work in Kazakhstan. From May 1931 to 1936 Rozhkov worked as an exploration geologist and the chief of the Department of Geological Exploration of the "Kazakhstan Gold" complex, and from 1936 as the chief of geological-economical group of the "Gold Exploration" complex, where he also did scientific research. During this period, Yuri Nikolaevich Rozhkov discovered thirty-three (*sic!*) industrially critical

¹⁷⁵ Matissen-Rozhkov, "Memoirs of Yuri Nikolaevich Rozhkov's daughter, Inga Yurievna Matissen-Rozhkov."

minefields of golden ore within the completely new territories of northeastern Kazakhstan.¹⁷⁶ In 1937, however, as Josef Stalin's purges intensified, the Rozhkov family was subjected to repressions—Yuri's older brother Boris was arrested and executed, his sister was deported to a *gulag* labor camp (Lidiya Nikolaevna was rehabilitated in 1960), and he himself was expelled from the Party (afterwards rehabilitated). His daughter writes:

When my father was expelled from the Party on 7th September 1937 because he was allegedly hiding information that his brother was arrested as a “counterrevolutionary” (Boris Nikolaevich Rozhkov was rehabilitated posthumously in 1957), my mother obtained his rehabilitation, showing a huge persistence and proved that his cousins intentionally hid that his brother was arrested, i.e. claiming that his brother was very ill. Although he was later rehabilitated, the very fact of the exclusion from the Party knocked him down once and for all and from 27th September 1937 he became an invalid of the 1st group.¹⁷⁷

Rozhkov was suffering from the constantly progressing illness—tuberculosis of the lungs—that he developed gradually from the injuries he suffered as a captive of the White Guards. After he returned to Moscow, Rozhkov worked at home in spite of his unfortunate health condition and occupied himself with scientific research for the “Black Gold” institute. Thanks to Matissen Zinaida Petrovna, his wife, Rozhkov was able to survive three more years. He was forty-two years old when he died in 1940.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Rozhkov, “Autobiography” (point twelve).

¹⁷⁷ Matissen-Rozhkov, “Addition to Autobiography of Yuri Nikolaevich Rozhkov” (to the item No. 13).

¹⁷⁸ Inga Yurievna recalls her father's final years with specific emotional warmth:

“Because the White Guard knocked Yuri Nikolaevich's spine, he developed tuberculosis and he was constantly kept under the tuberculosis dispensary surveillance. While working in Kazakhstan, he would visit the dispenser for an examination once in a year. And when he came to a regular examination in 1937, doctors promptly called my mother, asking to show them the drugs he was taking during that year. It turned out that he was taking drugs that were detrimental for his lungs, which, in just a year, completely disintegrated. And the doctors came up with the terrible judgment—that he wouldn't live more than three months. The doctor who was treating father turned out to be the people's enemy and was executed, i.e. he ruined many good people (he was German, his last name was Koch).

Thanks to my mother, father held on for nearly three years: she sold all that she could, took him to the Crimea for a couple of months during the year, exchanged the apartment at Arbat for the one at Pokrovskoe-

That is all that we currently know about this little known, obscure, and almost forgotten artist and photo-monteur, who was also an orthodox Bolshevik, a policeman and intelligence service agent, a geologist, an explorer and discoverer, a beloved husband and a generous father. His extraordinary life story and his unique photomontages share much in common; they are both distinctive products of their time: revolutionary, passionate, agitational moments that rendered the present transitory while celebrating the presence of the future yet to come. The quality of Rozhkov's photomontages is unlike the work of other graphic artists and agitators by the way in which he independently employed poetry and art montages, juxtaposing calligraphic verses and cubo-futurist typographic compositions with modern photographic and pictorial idioms whose sole target is not merely propaganda, but also aesthetic and richly conceived metaphor. The following sections of this chapter address general characteristics of Rozhkov's photomontages, showing how they are a joyful celebration of revolutionary changes and an undeniable agreement with the campaign for a "reconstruction of everyday life" (перестройка быта) of which sharply topical political propaganda launched the cultural and social-psychological dimension of the revolutionary program dominated by economic and industrial themes.

Streshnevo (i.e. father needed good air and wooden heat), abandon the theater (mother was the actress of the first category), finished the acting courses and, in order to spend more time at home, worked as amateur art director/actress, and most importantly she loved him so much. She told me so many times how she would enjoy her whole life with him even only to be able, upon returning home, to see his beloved and loving eyes, and that reminiscing about those fifteen years they spent together had power to sustain her for the rest of her life." (Ibid).

3.2 Programs of Industrial, Monumental, and Political Propaganda

Mayakovsky first published “To the Workers of Kursk” in the fourth issue of *Lef* journal, which was printed and distributed in early January 1924. But he finished the poem a few months earlier, in November 1923, and read it immediately at the public meeting with students in the club of the First Moscow University.¹⁷⁹ The poem addresses the historical moment subsequent to the period of spectacular revolutionary heroism, promoting workers’ inconspicuous labor as being as heroic and important as the self sacrifice of the early days when they had “gone through fire and the cannon’s mouth.” Solemnly celebrating the worker’s labor, Mayakovsky praises the miners of Kursk (the Russian mining city near the border with Ukraine), the first in Soviet Russia to obtain iron ore: “What do you care about statues, lectures, monographs done in your honor?” Mayakovsky addresses the workers, while adding: “Yours will be a greater monument: a million chimneys weaving the pattern of your names” in the industrialized land of the future.

The revolutionary ode to labor was conceived by the poet not only as a “temporary monument to the workers of Kursk” and a literary counterpart of Tatlin’s famous “Monument to the Third International,” but also as a high-pitched and polemical answer to all those who relentlessly criticized and attacked the *Lef* authors and their work. “To the Workers of Kursk” contains numerous references to the foes of *Lef* and participants in the fierce polemics against the Left Front of Arts. For example, one of the most clamorous attackers on the *Lef* was the political activist, journalist and publicist Lev Semenovich Sosnovsky—the supervisor of the same *Lenin* train on which Rozhkov was serving as a NKVD inspector. Sosnovsky’s opinions and stances towards the cultural politics of the time, which are expressed in the articles and feuilletons published from 1920 to 1923 in *Pravda*, contested the positions solicited by the left oriented

¹⁷⁹ Katanyan, *Mayakovsky: khronika zhizni i deyatel'nosti*, p. 261.

avant-garde forces, simultaneously proclaiming their art as alien to the masses. In their response, the *Lef* members and authors have been no less harsh toward Sosnovsky either.¹⁸⁰

Mayakovsky's revolutionary ode was an attuned response both to the contemporary task of industrial propaganda in the reconstruction period and the emerging practices of commemorations that enabled deviations and retreats from the legacies of October Revolution to increase. Mayakovsky was aware of the political importance of agitation. In his 1923 short article titled "Agitation and Advertising," published in a small Ekaterinburg magazine, he wrote: "We know well the power of agitation. In every military victory, in every economic success, 9/10 belongs to the ability and the strength of our agitation."¹⁸¹ If his ROSTA Windows aided the military success of the Red Army in the Civil War, his ideologically engaged poetry of didactic propaganda was meant to support the economical revival of the emerging Soviet State. Completely in tune with Arvatov's account on agitation as a "pragmatic activity" and "the tool for transformation of reality," Mayakovsky's poem "To the Workers of Kursk" was an expression of two large agitation projects: of monumental and industrial propaganda.¹⁸²

3.2.1 Kursk Magnetic Anomaly

Mayakovsky's agitation work was in agreement with Lenin's plan for the reorganization of industry and the country's economical revival, which put a special accent on achieving the technical-economical independence of the country. Lenin recognized that in order for the Revolution to be successful and to bear fruit, it was of the utmost necessity for the new Bolshevik state to be self-sufficiently supplied with all the necessary raw materials and industrial

¹⁸⁰ See: *Lef*, No. 3 (June-July, 1923), pp. 3-40a.

¹⁸¹ Mayakovsky, "Agitation and advertising," p. 57. Originally published in the journal "Tovarishch Terentiy," Ekaterinburg, No. 14, June 10, 1923.

¹⁸² Arvatov, "Agit-Kino," p. 2.

products. That's why at the end of the summer 1918, after Lenin's initiative (proposed in his "Draft of the plan for science-technical works"), the Union of People's Commissars suggested to the Academy of Sciences and academic Petr Petrovich Lazarev to explain the reasons of magnetic anomaly and to investigate the extension of possible reservoirs of iron ore in the Kursk area.

The Kursk Magnetic Anomaly (KMA) was first discovered in 1733,¹⁸³ but it was not investigated again until the end of the nineteenth century, when I. N. Smirnov conducted the first geomagnetic survey of European Russia (1874) and when N. D. Pilchikov, an assistant professor at Kharkiv University, conducted a series of observations of the Kursk Magnetic Anomaly (1883). These revealed a much larger extent than the one previously measured and for the first time attributed the anomaly to the presence of iron ore. In 1886, Russian geographic society commissioned Ernest Yegorovich Leist (1852-1918), a professor and the vice-president of the Moscow University, to investigate the causes of Kursk Magnetic Anomaly and to identify the areas of its extension. Twenty-two years later, and on the basis of Leist's completed works, it was possible to prove that there were huge reserves of iron ore in the Kursk area.

However, the young Soviet Republic was not able to use the valuable results of Leist's lengthy work. In the summer 1918, Leist died in Germany where he had been shortly hospitalized. In spite of his last will and testament, which claimed all materials of his research to be returned to the government of Soviet Russia, these were kept in Germany. Being aware of estimated reserves of iron ore in the KMA basin, the German government attained the Kursk area within the occupied territory when they signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918. Nevertheless, after the tumultuous period of the Bolsheviks' war against the Whites and their

¹⁸³ It was discovered by the Russian astronomer and academic Pyotr Inokhodtsev while preparing the maps of the General Land Survey (*general'noe mezhevanie*) at the behest of the Russian government.

allies, the Red Army won back almost the entire region of Ukraine in January-February 1919, including the Kursk area.

Already in June 1919, when the Ukrainian front ended, the new Bolshevik government organized the scientific research of KMA, which lasted approximately until the end of the Civil War and was followed by frequent abnegations and controversies.¹⁸⁴ In its initial phase, for example, the government of the Soviet Union and V.I. Lenin were even considering the option of giving the mine in concession to Germans. Finally, they refused the German offer in 1920, as well as they refused the offer to purchase the documents of Leist's research for 8 million of rubles in gold. At the same time, the first debates about the deadlines and places of excavations occurred during the first half of 1920. Thus, in September 1920, the men in charge asked Lenin to change the structure of the committee. On January 21, 1921, the new committee was made, including the previous members and I. M. Gubkin as the president responsible to give the reports to Lenin personally. That is to say, Lenin was personally very interested in the research and its results. Finally, on December 19, 1921, the committee gave Lenin the positive results that the magnetic anomaly is definitely the consequence of the large reservoirs of the iron ore in the area. As V. A. Smolyanov acknowledges in the recollection of his conversation with Vladimir Ilych on this subject, this made Lenin very happy:

“Did you pry, — asks Ilych,— what sort of the magnet power is there?
—Lazarev said that the tool pulled fourteen kilograms of the ore.

¹⁸⁴ On June 15, 1919, Ukrainian front ended. On June 17, 1919, expedition of eleven geodesists and hydrographers started their research. After the Lenin's suggestion, the committee for research and exploration of KMA was formed, in charge of which were I. M. Gubkin, P.P. Lazarev and A.D. Arhangel'ski. On August 11, 1919, work on deep excavation of KMA was recognized as urgent. On August 24, 1919, Lenin signed the document that prepared excavation of the iron ore in Kursk: “1. All works on KMA have very important state significance [...], 4. All workers and employees will get doubled food portions and working clothes. 5. [...] All traffic, following the address of excavation, will have the advantage on rails and waters, and should not be delayed [...] etc.” (*Leninskii sbornik* XXXIV, pp. 350-351; also quoted in Shevl'akov, “Rol' V.I. Lenina v rukovodstve issledovaniiami Kurskoi magnetnoi anomalii,” (Role of V.I. Lenin in the governance of explorations of Kursk Magnetic Anomaly), p. 55). My translation.

—Oho!—exclaimed Ilych.—Almost a pud [Russian measure for the weight of sixteen kilograms]. It seems that the prognoses of our academics start fulfilling.”¹⁸⁵

On April 5, 1922, Lenin wrote to the president of the board of work and defense, “[t]he results of research, according to the engineers, show that we have there unheard-of reservoir of the pure iron. [...] It is necessary to achieve *the fastest pace* of running the work [...] in order to purchase necessary plant and equipment, instruments and machinery (diamond, mining and alike) *with maximal speed*. [W]e have here almost certainly unprecedented in the world wealth, which is able to flip over the entire metallurgic business.”¹⁸⁶ Lenin also thought it was important *not* to print and publish the results of these discoveries, but to share them with just a few chosen Party members. Finally, the Party’s Program, adopted on the Party’s XXII congress (17-25 April 1923), made provisions, along with the development of metallurgic complexes on Ural and in Ukraine, for completion of construction of the third metallurgic complex in Siberia and development of two new—in the Central-European part of USSR in reliance on reclaiming the iron ore of Kursk Magnetic Anomaly and in Kazakhstan.

Only several months later, in November 1923, Mayakovsky declaimed his “To the Workers of Kursk” at the public meeting with students in the club of the First Moscow University. It is not a coincidence that the attribute of *high velocity*, which was of the utmost importance for Lenin, found an important place in Mayakovsky’s ode. There, however, as the subsequent sections of this chapter will show, it resonated with the critical timbre of the poet’s anti-monumental propaganda.

¹⁸⁵ *Kurskaia Magnitnaia Anomaliia*, tom 1, pp. 308-309. My translation.

¹⁸⁶ See “XXII congress of Soviet Union Communist Party,” quoted in Shevl’akov, “Rol’ V.I. Lenina v rukovodstve issledovaniyami Kurskoi magnetnoi anomalii,” (Roll of V.I. Lenin in the governance of explorations of Kursk Magnetic Anomaly), pp. 53-58. My translation.

3.2.2 How to Commemorate the Working Class?

Similarly in form to *About This*, the printed version of Mayakovsky's poem is divided into several sections. Except for the prologue, it is comprised of three consequent parts, signaled in the printed version of the text by the thick margin titles: It Was (БЫЛО), It Is (ЕСТЬ), and It Will Be (Будет).

In the prologue of the poem, Mayakovsky describes the workers as those “who have never heard / of the Greeks / in their battles / who / have not read / about Mucius Scaevolas,” and “who do not know / why the Gracchi brothers are renowned” (кто не слышал / про греков / в драках / кто / не читал / про Муциев Сцевол, / кто не знает, / чем / замечательны Гракхи). Mayakovsky does not portray the subjects of his poem as illiterate or uneducated masses, but rather as men ignorant of classical Greek and Roman history. Nevertheless, he compares the miners with the ancient legendary heroes, recognizing in their labor a heroic deed similar to those feats that secured Mucius Scaevola and Gracchi brothers a place within the Roman cultural history. Mayakovsky even uses Scaevola's name in plural, thus alluding to the mundane notion that each worker in the collective is already a hero regarding the physical sufferings he undergoes in his toil.¹⁸⁷

But Mayakovsky's choice to mention the Gracchi brothers most likely had a double motivation. First, the two Roman plebeians and tribunes have been considered the founding fathers of both socialism and populism for their efforts to pass reform legislation that would redistribute the major patrician landholdings among the plebeians. Second, the Gracchi brothers were included in the list of historical figures—twenty European radical thinkers and activists,

¹⁸⁷ According to the ancient Roman legend, Scaevola was a youngster who, while being held hostage, thrust his hand into the fire in order to prove his valor and contempt for physical sufferings, thereby earning for himself the cognomen *Scaevola*, meaning “left-handed.”

artistic and cultural figures—to be honored by Lenin’s “plan of monumental propaganda.” Drawing upon Campanella’s 1602 utopia, *City of the Sun*, Lenin developed his famous “plan of monumental propaganda” which, implying the sculpting of altogether forty temporary statues and sculptures (of twenty Russian and twenty European figures) to be situated on public spaces and streets of Moscow, was conceived in 1919 as the first public lesson in the pre-history of the Russian Revolution given by the Bolsheviks.¹⁸⁸

Mayakovsky undoubtedly shared Lenin’s views on the importance of Bolshevik propaganda, believing that the publicly spoken word is a more effective tool for the political education of the masses than the static materiality of a monument. Namely, Lenin’s “monumental plan of propaganda” reflected, in the first place, his desire for expression: to get out the word out about the Revolution. The aim of the plan was not to erect permanent sculptures and monuments, but to create the podiums for orators who would spread fresh words of the Revolution. It is known that the statues and sculptures of the revolutionary historical figures were temporary and poorly executed in perishable material such as plaster or cement.¹⁸⁹

Accordingly, they were meant to mark the particular spaces on the streets, boulevards, alleys, and squares, which would function not only as the urban landmarks and commemorative sites

¹⁸⁸ On April 12, 1918, the Soviet of People’s Commissars passed the decree “On the Monuments of the Republic” which was published two days later. This decree established specific tasks for monumental propaganda and revolutionary celebrations, and had a double social function, both educational and propagandistic. Both these functions, moreover, were to help “building socialism.” The interest of simple people, not elite minority, must be awakened. These statues, combined with “an imaginative speech”, would, according to Lenin, “touch the soul of an illiterate person.” (Lenin’s words to architect N.D. Vinogradov, who was in charge with realizing the plan of monumental propaganda in Moscow, are quoted from Tolstoy, “Art born of the October Revolution”). The intention was to convey the importance of great social changes to the working masses, to those very people who had in fact created these historical changes.

¹⁸⁹ Lenin’s idea consisted of the fact that “short but expressive inscriptions should be placed in various significant places, on suitable walls or on special constructions. These inscriptions should contain the most basic Marxist principles and slogans as well as, perhaps, tightly worked out formulations evaluating one or another great historical event... Even more important than these slogans are in my opinion statues—be they busts or bas-reliefs of figures and groups.” They would not be “of marble, granite and gold incised lettering” but “modest, and let everything be temporary.” (Lunacharsky, “Lenin o monumentalnoi propagande” (Lenin on Monumental Propaganda), pp. 318-20).

but also as the modern “agoras,” i.e. platforms for spreading words and rousing thoughts of the Revolution. Both Lenin and Lunacharsky—the first Soviet People’s Commissar of Enlightenment responsible for culture and education—believed that these temporary monuments should champion the living word of the Revolution among the generations instead epitomizing the merely ossified and fossilized quality of permanent but static monumentality.¹⁹⁰ Not unlike them, Mayakovsky disregarded public monuments as fully suitable for commemorating the working class. The poet’s anti-monumental attitude, as I argue later in the chapter, becomes one of the main ideological statements providing important polemical amplitude of the poem.

The entirety of Mayakovsky’s poem deals with the issue of how to pay tribute to the tens of thousands of workers, to the anonymous mass of men and women “who simply work” (кто просто работает) and whom Mayakovsky baptizes “the oxen of the future” (грядущего вол). By naming the workers thus, Mayakovsky alludes to the mode in which he himself is prone to memorialize and honor the working class for its revolutionary role. The working class, according to Mayakovsky, does not have the only decisive role in the Revolution. Their revolutionary role is rather ceaseless: as “the oxen of the future,” the workers have to perform their role incessantly in the process of production. The reproductive process, (in)to which the working class is both devoted and immersed, is geared toward overcoming the present by making the better future’s presence felt. Thus, while working towards enabling the presence of the future yet to come, the working class renders the very present and its conditions transitory. In such a transitory, rapidly changing contemporaneousness, the working class was conceived as transitory itself.

Subsequently, Mayakovsky understood that any mode of successful celebration and

¹⁹⁰ Lunacharsky believed that children should be taken there and educated about the Revolution, and that every Sunday should be devoted to an unveiling and celebrating the life of subject whom the monument represents.

memorializing of such a working class has to be temporary, while simultaneously functioning as an efficient channel for propagating ideas of the Revolution.

Mayakovsky considered the poem a suitable mode for commemoration of the working class and expressive of its revolutionary role, especially because the verses could easily be adapted into publically spoken words or innovative photo-books. The poet was aware of the nascent but surrounding *technological* and *media age* to which the future belongs, considering himself to be a poet of such revolutionary modernity. He knew that his *modern epic* devoted to the workers could be read at public meetings or even recorded and broadcasted to the tens of millions. In other words, he was aware of how the means of new technological media were able to bestow the impermanence with permanent qualities. Mayakovsky believed in what he was preaching and kept insisting that men must not lose sight of the grand social design, through which each man alone could hope for what all men desired. He insisted not only that the communal effort and faith in one's country must not be relaxed, but also that such endeavors and convictions must be reproduced regularly as a part of the everyday life culture *by and through* the means of technical reproducibility.¹⁹¹ He believed that the scientific advancement and forward development of the technical modernity would eventually bring about the abolishment of the division of labor and private property, along with a classless society and prosperity of the communal everyday life freed of fetishism of possessions.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ The program of reconstruction of everyday life (перестройка быта) that he and his comrades-in-arms gathered around *Lef* advocated, involved appropriation of the new means of technical production, reproduction and representation. See more in Arvatov, "Utopiia ili nauka" (Utopia or Science), *Lef*, No. 4 (August-December 1923, published in January 1924), pp. 16-21.

¹⁹² His suicide, however, justified that his unfortunate disillusionment proved him wrong.

3.2.3 Comrade Rozhkov—An Agitprop Prosumer

In the period 1922-1924, Rozhkov was attending courses on Marxism at the Communist Academy at the Moscow State University.¹⁹³ As an orthodox Bolshevik and a member of organization committees of the Party congresses, Rozhkov was passionate about any sort of sharply topical political propaganda. Mayakovsky's ode to labor, devoted to the workers of the Kursk mining site—as an industrial achievement that promised a better future and life in the new socialist society—must have animated a young man who was soon to illustrate it creating his experimental and innovative photomontage work.

Rozhkov was not only a fervent reader of Mayakovsky but also his true admirer. Moreover, he was a dedicated reader of *Lef* magazine and an ardent believer in the Constructivist ideas about art and culture that the *Lef* members and collaborators promoted and fought for. There are several different incentives leading to such a conclusion: Rozhkov's use of the photomontage (as a novel medium and the label), his prudent use of the verse line of Mayakovsky's poem, and his tweaking of the existing model of a photo-poem book which consequently brought its page in close proximity to the poster and cinema.

First, the very medium that Rozhkov chose for his work— photomontage— was celebrated by the various artists gathered around *Lef* as a new artistic means of expression that is the most suitable for communicating the progressive revolutionary message. *Lef* printed photomontages and published theoretical articles on this medium.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, Rozhkov was

¹⁹³ See Rozhkov, "Autobiography," (point ten).

¹⁹⁴ At the very end of the first issue of *Lef* the editors—most probably Osip Brik—wrote in the section "Fakty" (Facts) the short rapport on the contemporary activity of Constructivists. The rapport notes on Rodchenko's work on intertitles for Vertov's *Kino-Pravdy* (Кино-Правды, Сінема-Truths), activities within VKhUTEMAS, and innovative work in the graphic production (полиграфическое производство): "Activity in the area of book illustration: A new kind of illustration was introduced by way of mounting print and photography material on a given topic, which in view of the richness of material and its realistic clarity renders

familiar with *Lef*'s most representative collaborator among graphic designers, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and his work on illustrations for Mayakovsky's long narrative poem *About This* (1923). In the colophon of this book Rozhkov must have read the newly coined word "photomontage," picked it up, and used it on the front cover page sheets of his own work in several occasions (see the previous chapter).

Second, it is the verse line from the so-called stepladder layout of the text of Mayakovsky's poem that Rozhkov preserves and applies throughout the visuals. In the poem "About This," for the first time in his poetry, Mayakovsky introduces *lesenka* (stepladder), which he will develop and perfect soon after. The stepladder form demands the reader's eye to travel differently than it is accustomed to while reading conventional verse forms: down and back rather than continuously. Our eye wanders in a similar way as in front of a photomontage (see the previous chapter). The poem "To the Workers of Kursk" was printed in the *Lef* journal with the same visual structure and it was the only printed edition available to Rozhkov at the time.

Third, Rozhkov created seventeen unprecedented and completely unique photomontage sheets in which images and verses congeal within the whole. By bringing text and image into tight correlation, Rozhkov pushed the photo-book model proposed by Rodchenko in *About This* even further towards an inventive symbiosis of text and image. It is almost as if Rozhkov was the perfect reader of Mayakovsky and Rodchenko's collaborative work; as if the dynamic conceptual design of *About This*, materialized into the medium of a new photo-book, was set in motion by Rozhkov the reader/viewer in order to fabricate a completely new form of a more dynamic, poster-like and cinematic conceptual design of Rozhkov the producer. In other words, Rozhkov the reader/viewer of the *Lef* editions—magazine and a photo-book—became Rozhkov the

the entire 'art-graphic' illustration non-sensical." ("Konstruktivisty," *Lef*, No. 1 (March 1923), p. 252). Translated by Jindřich Toman. (Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 45).

producer, a programmer and designer, an active “influencing machine,” a *prosumer*.¹⁹⁵

Furthermore, Rozhkov was an agitprop prosumer—a consumer, a medium or channel, and a producer of the political agitation propaganda. The following close reading shows more clearly his specific agenda.



Figure 3.5 Yuri Rozhkov: front cover photomontage for *To the Workers of Kursk* (1924) (Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_1)

Rozhkov conceived the first photomontage sheet of his work as the front cover of the unpublished agit-book (**fig 3.5**). It is a poster-like illustration of the lengthy title of Mayakovsky’s poem: “To the Workers of Kursk, Who Extracted the First Ore, A Temporary Monument of Work by Vladimir Mayakovsky” (Рабочим Курска, добывшим первую руду, временный памятник работы Владимира Маяковского). As a successful conflation of visual

¹⁹⁵ As long as Rozhkov’s design is embodied in technology that enables the reader/viewer not to be a consumer but a producer, the medium maintains the non-reified form of an apparatus (see my introduction).

images and typography both of which are reinforced by different shapes and colors, Rozhkov's graphic design of the front page clearly conveys the exact title of Mayakovsky's poem, all the while playfully suggesting the meanings beyond it. The color choice for the topographical layout of the words "To the workers of Kursk" (**Рабочим КурсКА**) guides the viewer's perception towards the practice of close reading. One can thus recognize the parts written in white letters (**раб** and **кур**) and the letters КМА colored in red as separate words.

Semantically, the word раб in Russian denotes a "slave" or a "servant," whereas lexically it belongs to a number of different registers, such as the civil/social and religious, among others (класс рабов means "servile class" and раб Божий means "a God's servant"). Yet, the word кур, according to *Dahl's Explanatory Dictionary*, denotes "a rooster" (петух), while retaining the strong connotation of "the underworld" that originates from Sumerian-Acadian mythology since in Sumerian *kur* literary means "mountain," "highlands," or "foreign hostile country." The red letters КМА are the acronym of the largest magnetic anomaly on Earth, the Kursk Magnetic Anomaly (Курская Магнитная Аномалия)—a territory rich in iron ores located within the Kursk area (on the Russian border with the Ukraine) and a place where the needle of a compass deviates.

These three words—the two morphemes and the acronym—are accompanied by the photographic images of engineers and workers, machines and tools. Both hard working laborers and skilled engineers (known also as *техническая интеллигенция*) are "serving" the same cause: by working in the mining industry they are aiding the country's industrial and economical revival and, eventually, facilitating the rise of living standard in the nascent Soviet Union. As a historical geographer Grey Brechin reminds us, mining engineers and historians repeatedly claimed that miners were the true vanguard of progress. To the merchant's oft-repeated cliché

“Commerce follows the flag,” the champions of mining added the condition “but the flag follows the pick.”¹⁹⁶ The close association of mining with warfare, according to Brechin, is more ancient even than the idealized relationship between agriculture and morality. Unlike farmers, miners toil in a lightless and timeless realm of extreme danger and hardship. If agriculture is feminine and fecund as symbolized by Demeter and Ceres, then testosterone characterizes mining, whose gods are of the underworld.¹⁹⁷ Rozhkov’s first photomontage exposes these observations, displacing us into the opposite realm to the one suggested by Rodchenko’s front cover for *About This*. If the image of Lili Brik was—at least partially—denoting the feminine realm of *meshchanskii byt*, Rozhkov’s front cover is the composite of images dominantly masculinized and mechanized.

One could, thus, read Rozhkov’s typographical composition of the first part of Mayakovsky’s title as a cryptographic representation of the workers as “servants of the God of underworld.” If the Kursk mining site is the underworld, the powerful technical machinery is its God. If one’s gaze zooms at the diagonally displayed image of the counterbore occupying the very center of the cover page, she will be able to recognize the following inscription on the mechanical tool: “№ 2 The National Tool Co. Cleveland Pat. Jan. 30. 1912.” (fig 3.6).



Figure 3.6 Yuri Rozhkov: front cover photomontage for *To the Workers of Kursk* (1924), detail (Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_1)

¹⁹⁶ Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin*, p. 15.

¹⁹⁷ See Brechin: *Imperial San Francisco*, pp. 15-17.

It is to say that the God of underworld has a pedigree. However, the new Soviet State, as Boris Arvatov put it in his 1922 text “Agit-Kino,” had to “impart a purposeful, social meaning” to everything what would come from America, including the technology itself. Technology—tools, machines, technological knowledge, and the like—appears to be liberated from any ideology. But, according to Arvatov, this is an illusion perpetuating what Marx called the “false consciousness;” what is obscured is that this is the technology of private-property production:

This technology, limited by the framework of individual capital or middle-sized shareholding capital (the mode of production in most countries even to this day), manufactures things for individual consumption, i.e., things not connected to each other, separated, Thing-commodities. Production works for the market and therefore cannot take into account the concrete particularities of consumption and proceed from them; it is forced, in the construction of things, to proceed from existing patterns of a purely formal order, to imitate them. The result is the complete and utter conservatism and stasis of forms.¹⁹⁸

As this chapter will show, Rozhkov’s photomontage work for Mayakovsky’s poem proposed a similar idea to Arvatov’s program of the reconstruction of everyday life: political agitation and propaganda as a means to increase ideological consciousness. Agitprop—agitation propaganda—was Rozhkov’s program. As such, it focused on the dissemination of Marxist-Leninist thought and action applied by the Soviet State.

Already with the front cover Rozhkov introduces the reader/viewer to his experiment in both the reading/viewing protocol, thus demanding from her an interactive critical engagement. The eye of the reader/viewer has to scan the entire page, from left to right and from up to down, along with zooming in and out (as we saw in the example with the image of the inscription on the drill). Rozhkov, for example, aligned the letters of the phrase “who extracted the first ore” (добывшим первую руду) with the image of the counterbore, thus slanting the horizontal line of text into the diagonal one, while keeping the occidental convention of reading/writing (from left

¹⁹⁸ Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of Thing,” p. 124.

to right and from up to down). This visual diagonal serves simultaneously to link the first part of the title and the accompanied images of an engineer and workers, with the second part of the title and the image of a hand holding a tall vertical construction that resembles a crane or an oil derrick.

The images of hand and construction tower are completely different in size and scale. Their conversed scale relationship creates an additional semantic layer to the second part of the poem's title: "a temporary monument of work of Vladimir Mayakovsky" (временный памятник работы Владимира Маяковского). The image of the construction tower can be easily linked with the concept of a modern *monument*, such as Eiffel's or Tatlin's towers were at the time.¹⁹⁹ Juxtaposed with the image of a hand, the size of the tower is significantly reduced, which suggests that such a monument is bestowed with a *temporary* quality despite its iron construction. The image of the oversized hand, which holds a steel construction crowned with aspirations of verticality, implies the concept of activity, *work*, and manufacture, or a *hand-made* quality.²⁰⁰ Moreover, this visual semantic appendix for the second part of the poem's title is also tied with the typographical layout. In the lettering of this part of the title, Rozhkov was much more imaginative and playful. He created an interesting grid-less *crossword* (or *scrabble*) in the typographic layout of the second part of the poem's title, adding to it the name of place and year, "Moscow, 1924," as well as information of the medium and the author: "photo-montages by Yuri Rozhkov" (фото-монтаж Юрия Рожкова). With this lettering that is done both meticulously

¹⁹⁹ "The necessary components for the skyscraper emerged from the mines. Mining and mechanical journals publicized those innovations. There they would have been available to the engineers and architects who created the first true skyscrapers in Chicago in the final two decades of the nineteenth century." (Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*, p. 67).

²⁰⁰ Since Rimbaud's nineteenth century revolutionary poem "Les Mains de Jeanne-Marie," the poetic image of hands retained connotations of a close link between the proletariat and the liberal elements amongst the urban bourgeoisie.

and thoughtfully, Rozhkov put his own creation of hand-made photomontages on par with Mayakovsky's hand-made temporary monument for the workers of Kursk.

3.3 The Memorial: A Poster Photo-Poem

It is likely that Rozhkov's innovative and experimental design attracted Mayakovsky's attention. Mayakovsky persistently urged the artists to search for new means of expression. "Novelty. Novelty of the material and device!"—he advocated.²⁰¹ The importance of Rozhkov's photomontages lies in their use of photography as a document, fact, and validation of the real. Rozhkov's montages appear to be condensation and accumulation of the visual imagery of the time obsessed by the modern technology—construction sites, building yards, cranes, drilling derricks, wharfs, locomotives and steamships, automobiles and airships, boats, tractors, dynamos, flywheels, construction towers and engines. Rozhkov widely used photographs of workers and laborers along with the images of various scientists and academics known as the "technical intelligentsia" (техническая интеллигенция). The heterogeneous imagery on the seventeen pages of the photomontages reveal Rozhkov's eclectic use of the pre- and post-revolutionary sources: the photographs of well known and canonical Russian writers of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century alternate with the images of contemporary artists, opera singers, journalists and politicians. This emphasis on documentary aesthetics was in tune with Mayakovsky's style and brought innovation in the visual representation.

On the one hand, Rozhkov's photomontages are marked by the proliferation of signifiers. The pictorial saturation, graphic intenseness, and visual—both iconic and indexical—satiating

²⁰¹ Quoted in Efimova, "Budushchego priotkryti glaz..." (A Half-Open Eye of the Future...), p. 24.

are the most apparent characteristic of the entire Rozhkov's photomontage series. It is as if the reader/viewer of Rozhkov-Mayakovsky's photo-poem is thrown amidst the Kracauerian "blizzard of photographs,"²⁰² trying to orient him/herself vis-à-vis this tsunami of images and attempting to discern what it means to be a social subject through visual reasoning. Every photographic fragment is in a specific correlation with another. Rozhkov's montages of images thus resemble the structure of Mayakovsky's imagery and his poetic method, which the poet himself defined as the "creation of very fantastic events – facts, emphasized with hyperbole."²⁰³

On the other hand, the extraordinariness of Rozhkov's photomontage work lies in his specific use of typography. In this regard, Rozhkov did something quite different from Rodchenko. While his predecessor printed his photomontages in *About This* separately from the text of the poem, Rozhkov merged Mayakovsky's verses with the images and pasted them both on the same sheet. By this, Rozhkov turned the very verses—words and letters—into the images. The letters thus became the active optical elements, occupying the same visual level as the images themselves. However, this resulted in a hierarchical backflip of the image-text relationship. In Rozhkov's photomontages the image became superior to the text: it is not that images illustrate the verses, but other way around—the verses explain images.

One of the reasons for this somersault in the text-image correlation is that Rozhkov diverged from preserving Mayakovsky's *lesenka* layout. However, he did not destroy the linearity of Mayakovsky's poem and retained the specific verse lines from this layout. A line of Mayakovsky's *lesenka*, as the segment that is on the same horizontal typographical line, is synonymous with a "step" on the staircase (see my conclusion of the previous chapter). Although

²⁰² Kracauer wrote about the "blizzard of photographs" referring to the proliferation of images in illustrated magazines: "The blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference towards what the things mean." (Kracauer, "Photography," p. 58).

²⁰³ Mayakovsky, quoted in Efimova, "Budushchego priotkrityi glaz..." p. 24.

Rozhkov sometimes pasted the cutout letters of the poem's text as the lines that are not completely horizontal but usually slanted (similarly to the posters), he nevertheless consistently kept the same division of verse lines as in the printed version of the poem. Mayakovsky must have had appreciated this feature of Rozhkov's photomontages, since the inherently melodic nature of the verse proposed by *intonation* was both maintained and altered by the *visual* organization of the verses. If the intonation was maintained within the specific verse lines, it was altered by the disappearance of *lesenka*. Consequently, Rozhkov's photomontages created a different *tempo* of reading the verses than the one of Mayakovsky's *lesenka*. Rozhkov additionally anchored this parallel *rhythm* to the visually discernable segments, which were to organize and structure the apparent blizzard of images.

3.3.1 An Agit-Apparatus: Alternating Rhythm and Sequencing

The compositional complexity and high concentration of assorted images on Rozhkov's pages create the effect of an intensification of rhythm. It is quite possible that Rozhkov was one of the first listeners of the author's reading of the poem. It seems that the experience of listening was crucial in determining Rozhkov's method, with which he translated the poem into visual language. That is perhaps where the sensation of "accumulation" of the details originates from, transforming into his subsequent destruction of the *lesenka*, which sometimes hampers the reading of the poem. One's reading of verses affects the listener in a similar way—we do not digest everything so clearly (we fail to hear something completely or something escapes our attention and then later, all of the sudden, it becomes clear), and while one group of images is not yet settled in the mind there is already another set of images leaning on the previous ones, and another, and so on. But this is, perhaps, the first and most unique attempt to visually represent the structure of the poem and it is, at the first glance, what renders these photomontages

especially valuable. It is as if Rozhkov brings us into the time when the poem was written, reverberating with the same sound as when Mayakovsky would perform it during one of his readings.

For Mayakovsky, the rhythmic organization of words to achieve a musical impact in poetry was of exceptional importance. In his essay “How to Make Verses” (1926), he emphasized the precedence not only of line length but also of the “transitional words” that connect one line with the next. Mayakovsky urged his fellow poets to take advantage of the all formal possibilities available to them, or, as he put it, to give “all the rights of citizenship to the new language, to the cry instead of melody, to the beat of drums instead of a lullaby.”²⁰⁴ If the poem was intended to reflect the dynamism of the new technological age, then, Mayakovsky insisted, its style and, even more, its formal structure and layout should be equally “energetic”; otherwise, the poem would merely echo the mawkish and oldfangled (старомодный) conventions of a symbolist-romantic imagination, only to function on the thematic level.

Undoubtedly, Mayakovsky saw in the *lesenka* layout such formal structure of his verses, which enables the new sensibility, and dynamism of modern age to be expressed. As I’ve already argued (see my previous chapter), the formal features of Mayakovsky’s verses fully correspond to the technique of montage. The entire poem *About This* is constructed from diverse fragments as distinct and circled sense-units. These rhythmically, semantically, as well as spatially and temporally remote fragments, are also visually distinguishable from one another by the *margin titles* printed in a thicker font, which function similarly to those still images with the text from the silent cinema (*intertitles*). Mayakovsky used the same margin title device in the poem “To

²⁰⁴ Mayakovsky, quoted in Petrić, *Constructivism In Film: the Man With the Movie Camera, a Cinematic Analysis*, p. 26.

the Workers of Kursk,” dividing it into the three different parts—*it was, it is, and it will be*—which along with the unmarked prologue address the past, present, and future, respectively.

Rozhkov was completely aware of Mayakovsky’s device, which Sergei Eisenstein acknowledged and praised much later in his essay “Montage 1938,” when he wrote that Mayakovsky “does not work in lines [...] he works in shots, verses [...] cutting his lines just as an experienced film editor would construct a typical film sequence.”²⁰⁵ In order to enable the acoustic re-enactment through the visual re-presentation, Rozhkov followed Mayakovsky while dividing the poem into specific segments or episodes, which may be called sense-units. This division of the stepladder verses into the sense-units I call *segmentivity* and *sequencing*. As defined by Brian McHale, *segmentivity* is the important criterion that defines Mayakovsky’s poetry as much as the poetry in general.²⁰⁶

Rozhkov was an intuitive reader who read poetry as *segmented writing*, the kind of writing that is articulated in *sequenced*, gapped lines and whose meanings are created by occurring in bounded sense-units, operating in relation to pause or silence. It is the sequencing that enabled Rozhkov to re-present Mayakovsky’s poem visually: to roll the sense-units from lines of printed verses back into the scenes.²⁰⁷ Rozhkov did not do this mechanically, but rather

²⁰⁵ Eisenstein, “Word and Image,” p. 63. As Vlada Petrić remarked, “The original essay, “Montazh 1938,” was changed in the English translation to ‘Word and Image.’ Actually, this was the second part of Eisenstein’s extensive study on montage that at the time had not been published. The other part, written in 1937, was published for the first time in Eisenstein’s *Izabrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), pp. 329-484. (Petrić, *Constructivism In Film*, p. 241).

²⁰⁶ According to the poet and critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “poetry is defined by the criterion of *segmentivity*; segmentivity is poetry’s dominant, as narrativity is narrative’s. Segmentivity, ‘the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments,’ is ‘the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre.’” (McHale, “Narrativity and Segmentivity, or, Poetry in the Gutter,” p. 28). See also DuPlessis, “Codicil on the Definition of Poetry,” p. 51; and Rosenthal & Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry*.

²⁰⁷ In his essay “The Codified World,” which is an essayistic take on the early history of media, Vilém Flusser writes:

meticulously: he carefully divided the poem into segments that naturally follow its progression. Further, Rozhkov represented the scenes in a relatively free manner, either framing them in panels with both different shapes (triangular wedge-like, or trapezoids, or speaker-like cones, or rectangular) and inner dynamics, or leaving them unframed and thus allowing more animate and symbiotic interaction between these panels.

The *segmentivity* and *sequencing* clearly indicate the separate scenes, simultaneously revealing what are the syntagmatic segments of verses to which a specific visual scene corresponds. The *segmentivity* and *sequencing* illuminate relations between assorted representations within the scenes, directing the viewer to recognize various visual rhymes, visual overlapping, or repetitions (analogous to alliterations or assonances). The *segmentivity* and *sequencing* point toward how space relations, i.e. the proper dimensionality of the visual (measures of height, width, and depth) and its content (color and shape), correspond to the time

For people programmed by images, time flows through the world the way the eye wanders across the image: it diachronizes, it orders things into positions. It is the time of the return from day to night to day, of sowing to reaping to sowing, of birth to death to rebirth, and magic is the technique that is called for in this experience of time. It orders all things in the manner in which they relate to each other within the cycle of time. The world, the world of images, the “imaginary world” thus codified, possesses the same form of being as that of our ancestors who were programmed and cultivated for untold centuries: for them, the “world” consisted of a bunch of “scenes” that demanded magical attunement. And then we came to an eruption, a revolution with such violent consequences that we are still breathless when we consider the event that took place six thousand years ago.

The invention of writing consisted not so very much in the invention of new symbols, but rather in the unrolling of the image into rows (“lines”). We say that with this event prehistory ends and history in the true sense begins. But we are not conscious of the fact that with this event we mean the step that was taken outside of the image and into the yawning void, making it possible to roll the image out into a line.

The line that stands on the right side of the image in the illustration rips the things from the scene, to arrange them anew, that is, to count them, to calculate them. It rolls the scene out and transforms it into a story. It “explains” the scene in that it enumerates each individual symbol clearly and distinctly (*clara et distincta perceptio*). For this reason, the line (the “text”) does not directly mean the situation, but rather the scene of the image, which for its part means the “concrete situation.” Texts are a development from images, and their symbols do not directly signify something concrete, but rather images. They are “concepts” that signify “ideas.” For example, in the illustration does not directly signify the concrete experience of the “sun,” but rather in the image, which for its part signifies “sun.” Texts are one step further away from concrete experience than images, and “conceptualizing” is an additional symptom of being one step further away than “imagining.” (Flusser, *Writings*, p. 38).

relations, i.e. the dimensional form of the acoustical (measures of beats in meter, rhythm, and tempo) and its content (tone, timbre, and pitch).

Finally, the *segmentivity/sequencing* introduces breaking device: it determinates where *gaps* open up in a poetic text as a provocation to meaning-making. It is where spacing interrupts meaning-making, where the text breaks off and a gap (even if only an infinitesimal one) opens up. The reader must create the closure: the reader's meaning-making apparatus must *gear up* to overcome the resistance, bridge the gap and close the breach. The role of *segmentivity/sequencing* in comprehension is like that of an aid device or of a direction signs: visual re-presentation is made through a relatively free, loosely regulated, flexible means of expressively highlight unique moments. What the *lesenka* is to meter, the *sequencing* is to reading/viewing protocol.

3.3.2 Prologue

If we look, for example, at the first sheet of Rozhkov's photomontages with Mayakovsky's verses, we will notice that he visually segmented the opening lines of the poem (which is, actually, the poem's prologue) into the following different sense-units: 1) an army unit advances from the left; 2) a face between the muzzles of cannons; 3) soldiers are marching from left to right; 4) people are walking from right to left; 5) a group of shirtless blast furnace workers (**fig 3.7**).

I segment: *Army advances from the left*

БЫЛО:

социализм —

восторженное слово!

С флагом,

с песней

становились слева,

Was:

Socialism —

an exalted word!
 With song
 and banner
 we fell in on the left,

II segment: *A face between the muzzles of cannons*
 и сама

на ГОЛОВЫ
 спускалась слава.

and glory of itself
 came down
 on our heads.



Figure 3.7 Yuri Rozhkov: prologue photomontage for *To the Workers of Kursk* (1924) (Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_2)

III segment: *Soldiers march from left to right*
 Сквозь огонь прошли,
 сквозь пушечные дула.

We went through the muzzles of cannon
through bullet's hail.

IV segment: Common people walk from right to left

Вместо гор восторга —
горе дола.

Стало:
коммунизм —
обычайшее дело.

Instead of mountains of elation
the sorrow of the vale.

Then came:
Communism—
The most ordinary thing.

V segment: A group of shirtless blast furnace workers

Нынче
словом
не пофанфароните —
шею крючь
да спину гни.

На вершочном
незаметном фронте
завоевываются дни.

Я о тех,
кто не слышал
про греков
в драках,
кто
не читал
про Муциев Сцевол,

кто не знает,
чем замечательны Гракхи, —
кто просто работает —
грядущего вол.

Now
with words so fine
you cannot make fanfaronade —
you bend your back
and twist your neck all ways.

It's on an unseen
tiny front line
that are won the victories of our days.
I am talking about those,

who have never heard
 of the Greeks
 in their battles
 who
 have not read
 about Mucius Scaevolas
 who do not know
 why the Gracchi brothers are renowned, —
 who simply work —
 the oxen of the future.

In the very first sense-unit, Rozhkov emphasized the subject, “we,” by offering its visual representation: the soldiers of Red Army, who “fell in on the left” (становились слева) as the forces fighting for the progressive leftist ideas of the socialist Revolution. Rozhkov also wittily chose to put the “exalted word” (восторженное слово)— *socialism*—on the red “banner,” thus not only combining the different denotative layers of Mayakovsky’s verses, but also underlying the significance of the idea of “socialism.”

In the second sense-unit, however, Rozhkov’s interpretation of Mayakovsky’s verses is even more interesting since he had a rather complicated task: to visually represent the abstract concept of “glory.” But Rozhkov’s choice is telling: it reveals him as an artist who thought thoroughly about every segment of his work. Namely, Rozhkov switched the numbers of nouns in Mayakovsky’s verses: the singular abstract noun “glory” (слава) is translated into the visual sign of “the muzzles of cannons” (пушечные дула) in plural, while the subject in plural, “[our] heads” (головы), who is at the same time bestowed with the “glory itself” (сама [...] слава), is represented by the singular red-colored face. By this, Rozhkov suggested that the force of the revolutionary idea is in its cohesiveness, in the ability to render its subjects into a unity, thus forging a uniting collective identity. Moreover, the muzzles of the cannon stand for the *means* by which revolutionaries gained glory, while simultaneously having the *shape* of a halo, of the saint’s nimbus.



Figure 3.8 Yuri Rozhkov: prologue photomontage (detail)

The third and fourth sense-units are put into even closer interrelationship through Rozhkov's visual representation (**fig. 3.8**). Both trapezoid-shaped panels frame the representation of movement: from left to right (an ordered march of male soldiers in uniforms with red colored belts) and from right to left (a more loose procession of men and women in everyday clothing, some of which are carrying goods and their belongings). Here, Rozhkov contrasted not only the directions of these two movements, but also the different appearances and gender of participants, as well as the levels of their walk discipline and, consequently, the speed of the pace in their respective processions. Rozhkov knew very well, for example, that what comics' writers nowadays usually have to remind us of: that the speed of movement appears faster from left to right than from right to left. The dynamics of the action submits to the imagined movement of the gaze and, as we know, in the West the gaze moves according to the convention from left to right as an irremovable beam. In other words, the pace of movement in Russian everyday life during the NEP (*New Economic Policy*; see my previous chapter) era considerably slowed down in

comparison to the rapid pace of systematic and radical changes characteristic for the stormy epoch of the Civil War. The contrast between these two panels reveals noticeable change of order and discipline, reflected in the distinctive appearances of the participants in the two respective processions.

The second panel, in that regard, reflects unexpected and surprising deviations from the initial ideas of Revolution (such as the idea of a classless society) that the NEP era brought with the revitalization of the old bourgeoisie, along with their habits and values. This visual contrast manifests the spread of sorrowful disappointment with the NEP measures, so characteristic for the members of left forces gathered around *Lef* and concomitant of the ebbing of spectacular revolutionary heroism: “Instead of mountains of elation / the sorrow of the vale” (Вместо гор восторга – / горе дола).

Rozhkov represented the fifth sense-unit only through a single scene, although it is the part of the poem that is significantly longer than the rest. The scene features a group of shirtless blast furnace workers in front of the smelting furnace. Two shirtless laborers are toiling in the background, bending their backs and twisting their necks. Beside two of them we see two dressed workers. In the very foreground we distinguish another bare-chested man in a pose of the victorious warrior who wields a long and thin stick resembling a spear.²⁰⁸ Rozhkov represents the shirtless workers as simultaneously laboring and victorious. Also, the very site—a dark environment with fire, heat, and smoke from the blast furnace and, subsequently, with men’s sweat—alludes to “an unseen tiny front line” (на вершочном незаметном фронте) where the efforts of workers stand for human struggle for the better, communist future. The blast furnace

²⁰⁸ His posture visually resembles the iconic representations of St. George, the saint who is deeply embodied in Russian visual culture and the traditional saint protector of Moscow.

site, thus, symbolizes the everyday battlefield on which, as the poet suggests, “the victories of our days” are won (завоевываются дни).

Both Mayakovsky’s poetic images and Rozhkov’s subsequent visual illustrations celebrated the cult of the machine, embodied in the desire for speed, efficiency, and “industrialness.” Their work was closely related to the task of production propaganda in the reconstruction period—after introduction of the NEP and the campaign for a “reconstruction of everyday life” (перестройка быта) in March 1921—when the basic themes of agitation became the building of the economy and the increase in labor productivity. In such a context, the Kursk iron-mining site provided a perfect example for propaganda ends. Mayakovsky and Rozhkov favored and served such sharply topical political propaganda dominated by economic and industrial themes. Their belief in the classless society of the communist land of the future was both anchored in the fear of backwardness and the thirst for technical and industrial modernity. The following sections of this chapter closely examine these respective issues.

3.3.3 Agitation Propaganda and the Struggle against the Backwardness

The first three photomontages which feature part of Mayakovsky’s poem marked with the margin title “IT WAS” provide the imagery of the economical, industrial and technical backwardness in which the post-revolutionary Russia found itself after the end of the Civil War. After close examination of the first photomontage in the series (**fig. 3.9**) addressing the past one can discern the following sense-units into which Rozhkov separated Mayakovsky’s verses:

I segment: *Agitprop man and the demonstrating masses*

БЫЛО.МЫ МИТИНГОВАЛИ.

Словопадов струи,
пузыри идеи —
мир сразить во сколько.

IT WAS. We held meetings.

III segment: Two soles with holes and a nail

А на деле —
у подметок дырки, —
без гвоздя
слюной
клеить — впустую!
Дырку
не поса́дите в Бутырки,
а однако
дырки
протестуют.

But in reality –
our soles have a hole, –
you cannot do without nails
and stick them
with saliva—no way!
You will not dig
the hole in the Butyrka [jail in Moscow],
and yet
holes
protest.

IV segment: A peasant with a wooden farming plough

«Кто был ничем, тот станет всем!»
Станет.
А на деле —
как феллахи —
неизвестно чем
распахиваем земь.

“He who has nothing will become everything!”
So he will.
But in reality –
like fellahs –
no one knows with what
kind of thing we till the soil.

Rozhkov’s choice of placing the title (IT WAS) on the margin already violates the convention of the Western reading protocol. Although Rozhkov highlighted the margin title by coloring its letters into the red, he placed it at the right instead of the left upper corner of the sheet. He didn’t only invert the sides and thus infringed the reader/viewer’s expectation, but he

also introduced the theme of backwardness by constraining our gaze to reverse at the very beginning of reading. The content of the written sign is tightly linked with the inversion of the formal convention of the Western reading protocol. In other words, the past is equaled with the backwardness.

Rozhkov's visuals of the first segment of Mayakovsky's verses relate to the October Revolution that was, according to Lenin, "a festival of the oppressed and the exploited,"²⁰⁹ as well as to one of the most powerful means of agitation on behalf of Soviet power—the public festivals that celebrated revolution. Revolution and festival are both moments of re-birth, freedom, the surge to a new life, boundlessness, euphoria, reversal, and the breakthrough into forbidden passages leading to utopia. Mayakovsky's verses and the subsequent Rozhkov's representation of street demonstrations are both reminiscent of the revolution as awakening of the masses after a long slumber into consciousness and action in an arena where people learn. The central place of this photomontage belongs to the propagandist—an agitprop youngster dressed in the wardrobe reminiscent of a Paris Commune revolutionary (worker's cap, jacket, and a linen scarf tied in the bulky knot)—whose open mouth and stern facial expression, along with the stack of newspapers under his right arm with the vertically typed title *agitprop* on them, clearly suggest his role in the surrounding "political carnival." Rozhkov's graphic design further highlights the role that the public festivals had as the means of agitational propaganda. For example, the beaming white lines around the agitprop man's head and the duplicated typographic layout of the text "We held meetings" (МЫ МИТИНГОВАЛИ) in the black and white letters, visually suggest the high pitch and deep timbre of his stentorian voice spreading the words of the revolution. The red color that fulfills the surrounding space between the propagandist and the

²⁰⁹ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams. Utopian Vision and experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, p. 98.

masses notably contributes to the theme of enthusiasm for the struggle with the old and for victory over it. At the same time, Rozhkov’s choice of color points toward Moscow as the “wonderland red city,” which is how the new capital appeared to look during the celebration of the first revolution anniversary: colorful and festive in the extreme and a delight to the eye of witnesses.²¹⁰



Figure 3.10 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WAS (1) photomontage for *To the Workers of Kursk* (1924), detail (Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_3

While the visual display makes the first segment of Mayakovsky’s text clear and comprehensible the same cannot be said for the rest. At the lower part of the photomontage, Rozhkov condensed more text than the space on the sheet allows for, so that it became very difficult to recognize where the lines of Mayakovsky’s verses start or end (**fig. 3.10**). The message of Mayakovsky’s text, however, is both clear and bitter in its description of the disastrous situation in which Russian citizens found themselves after the Revolution, Civil War, and famine. Rozhkov chose to visually represent a few of Mayakovsky’s telling examples in a completely literal manner—a broken handle of a pan, splinters of glass for shaving, a pair of shoe soles with wide holes and a nail, and a peasant with a wooden farming plough (*fellah* is a

²¹⁰ Tolstoy, Bibikova, and Cooke (eds.), *Street Art of the Revolution: Festivals and Celebrations in Russia 1918-33*.

peasant or agricultural laborer in an Arab country)—thus illustrating not only the social backwardness in the sphere of Russian everyday life, but also the state’s complete lack of necessary means and knowledge for the industrial production. Although Mayakovsky bitterly acknowledged the enormous difference between the exalted revolutionary promises (“He who has nothing will become everything!” «Кто был ничем, тот станет всем!») and the gloomy reality (“So he will. / But in reality –;” Станет. / А на деле —), he kept insisting on the importance of communal effort and faith in the nascent Soviet country. Rozhkov shared this revolutionary optimism and the belief in the grand social design propagated by the quoted verse from the first stanza of the Russian version of “The International.” Moreover, Rozhkov graphically introduced the first symbol of the new Bolshevik state—its anthem—by framing the verse from “The International” in the color red and turning it into a political slogan.

The second photomontage continues to render both the backwardness and recent past visually palpable along with the emerging symbols of the new Soviet state (**fig 3.11**). Rozhkov’s photomontage sequenced Mayakovsky’s text into the following sense-units:

I segment: *Dozens of triangles*

Шторы
 пиджаками
 на плечи надели.

We’ve put
 blinds
 on our backs for jackets.

II segment: *A sinewy youngster cornered by bayonets*

Жабой
 сжало грудь
 блокады иго.

Like angina
 the blockade’s yoke
 has strangled our chest.



Figure 3.11 Yuri Rozkov: IT WAS (2) photomontage for *To the Workers of Kursk* (1924)
(Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_4)

III segment: Ruined machinery

Изнутри
 разрух стоградусовый жар.
 Машины
 сдыхало,
 рычажком подрыгав.

Inside
 a hundredth-degree heat of ruins.
 The (beast-like) machinery
 has gone dead
 with a twitch of levers.

IV segment: Threatening fang-like shards and factory buildings

В склепах-фабриках
 железо
 жрала ржа.

In the vaults of factories
rust
gobbled up the iron.

V segment: Panoramic landscape scene

Непроезженные
были степи,
и Урал
орал
непроходимолесый

Impassable steppe-lands
whined,
and the impenetrable
Ural forests
howled.

Beside the imagery that clearly suggests the complete ruination of the Russian industry and the empty, rusting factories (segments III and IV), Rozhkov employs the new symbols of the nascent revolutionary state: the hammer and sickle seal and the red flag (segment II). The entire photomontage is Rozhkov's visual illustration of the poet's commentary on the political situation in Russia during the Civil War and until its end in 1922. For example, the second segment of Mayakovsky's verses refers to the period after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, during which Bolshevik Russia was faced with the international blockade, while simultaneously fighting the White Guards and Allied forces. Rozhkov's representation features a sinewy youngster as Bolshevik Russia, who holds the recognizable symbols of the new revolutionary state (flag and blazon)²¹¹ and who is surrounded with bayonet-like arrows poking his chest. Since these

²¹¹ "The Bolsheviks leaders possessed a strong consciousness of the power of symbols. Their first symbol, approved April 19, 1918, was the breast badge of the Red Army: a crossed hammer and plough inside a red star (designer unknown) [...] A new seal was looked for on a contest of artists and designs, opened by Lenin and Lunacharsky. A dazzling variety of entries: castles and cornucopias from armorial traditions, crossed axes, zig-zags, triangles, and even exclamation points, etc. [...] The most acceptable entry, designed by an unknown Petrograd artist in early March, contained a crossed hammer and sickle, a wreath of grain, a rising sun, and a sword rising from below. Yet, the first use of crossed hammer and sickle in the Revolution was reported in Saratov some time in 1917, while the Moscow artist Kamzolkin used independently of these, hammer and sickle crossed in a May Day poster. Also, one can find crossed sickles and crossed hammers in Russian

emblems are absent from Mayakovsky's poem, they represent a clear *political supplement* to its content. Rozhkov's visual interpretation of Mayakovsky's verses renders them more accessible and visible as *ideologically unambiguous*. The image of a huge toad behind the youngster's muscular figure may seem puzzling for any non-Russian speaker. But the answer to the riddle is simple: a Russian equivalent for the "angina pectoris" (*lat.* strangling, *gr.* chest) is the phrase грудная жаба, which literally translates as the "toad on the chests." In other words, the visual image of the toad is yet another instance where Rozhkov uses literal representation of Mayakovsky's poetic image of the "blockade's yoke" (блокады иго) which "strangled" Russia "like breast pang" (жабой сжало грудь).

It is more interesting, however, to see how Rozhkov created a close link between the apparently distant meanings of the two different poetic images. If we look, for example, in the visual representations of segments II and IV, we will notice that they are both framed by the circular panels. Also, inside of both circles we can detect the pictorial elements of similar shape and color: the black bayonet-like arrows (**fig 3.12**) and the black threatening fang-like shards (**fig. 3.13**). The fang-like shards are the graphic representation of the "rust" that "gobbled up the iron" in the factories. Both of Mayakovsky's images of the "blockade" and "rust" are the

traditional armorial art. The hammer was also widely used in the imagery of nineteenth century European labor and socialist movements. The hammer and sickle was a natural combination to celebrate the Bolsheviks belief in the October Revolution as the product of unified energies and aspirations of workers and peasants. The sword in the winning entry signified no more than the Russian soldier, who was a third element of the popular trinity of Revolution. But Lenin, in an astonishingly persistent and adamant manner, objected to its aggressive appearance at a moment when he wished to project the infant Soviet Republic as a peacemaking and peace-loving state right after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. "This is not our emblem, and this is not our policy," he said. The sword was removed and the sculptor N. A. Andreev [to whom Mayakovsky alludes in the poem] embellished the original sketch in Lenin's presence, thickening the sheaf wheat and adding some Grecian designs. The resulting seal was a multivocal ensemble of symbols: the newly arranged but central motif of hammer and sickle suggesting a social alliance of toilers; an international component—the slogan 'Proletarians of All Countries, Unite;' and a reassuring frame of rising sun (the promise of a new day), a wheat sheaf for prosperity, and a classical scroll." (Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, pp. 85-86).

expressions brimming with alliterations: *жабой сжало грудь* and *железо жрала ржа*. While Mayakovsky created semantic links between the remote poetic images of the “rust” and the “blockade” by employing acoustic repetitions (alliterations of the rolling *р* and repetitive *ж* sounds), Rozhkov created such associations by repeating the same visual shapes (circle and sharp arrows) and their color (black). The backwardness and the accompanied luck of the industrial means for production are in a large part—as the acoustically and visually established semantic relation suggests— the consequence of the destructions caused by the Civil War, international military intervention and blockade.

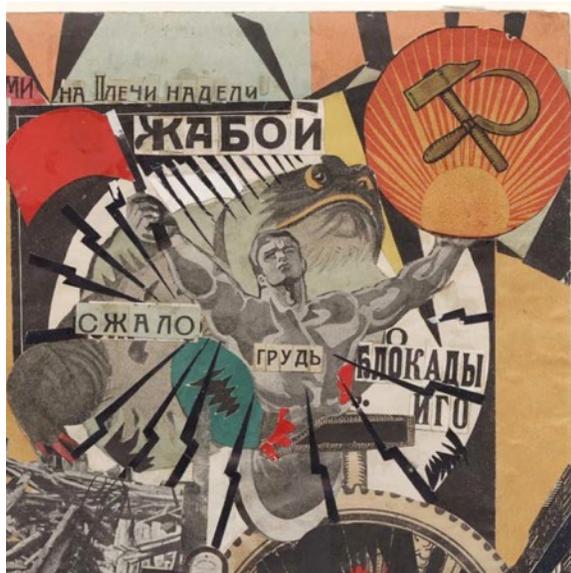


Figure 3.12 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WAS (2) photomontage (detail)



Figure 3.13 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WAS (2) photomontage (detail)

The third photomontage sheet in the series (**fig. 3.14**) is more specific in emphasizing the importance of the raw material base—iron—for the efforts of the new communist State to rebuild the country ruined by war and famine and to overcome the ubiquitous technological, industrial, and economical backwardness. The first two segments of the photomontage read:

I segment: Church bells, rails, and dynamos

Без железа

КОММУНИЗМ

не стерпим.
 Где железо?
 Рельсы где?
 Давайте рельсы!

Without iron
 Communism
 is impossible.
 Where's the iron?
 Where are the rails?
 Give us rails!

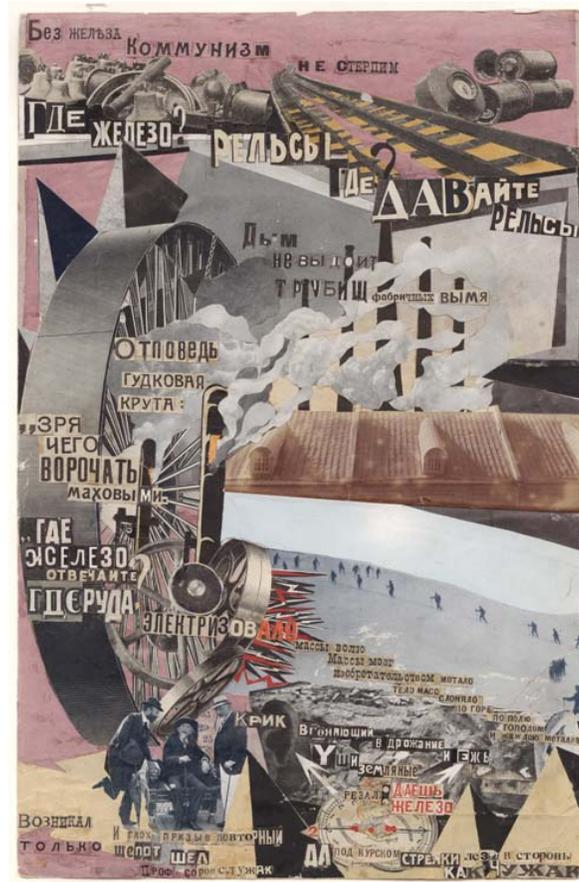


Figure 3.14 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WAS (3) photomontage for *To the Workers of Kursk* (1924) (Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_5)

II segment: *Smoke and factory chimneys, flywheels and sirens*

Дым
 не выдоит
 трубищ фабричных вымя.
 Отповедь
 гудковая
 крута:

«Зря
 чего
 ворочать маховыми?
 Где железо,
 отвечайте!
 Где руда?»

The udder
 of factory chimneys
 milks out no smoke.
 The sharp reply
 of the factory hooter
 is raw:
 “What’s the good
 of setting the flywheels spinning?
 Where’s the iron?
 Answer!
 Where’s the ore?”



Figure 3.15 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WAS (3) photomontage (detail)

In the representation of the first segment, Rozhkov used the images of church bells, rails and dynamos, in order to provide yet another *political supplement* to the content of Mayakovsky’s expressive verses. Above the image of the church bells, Rozhkov pasted the words “without iron,” while the typeset he chose for the word “iron” is one of the old orthography (желѣза, **fig. 3.15**). The new orthography and the alphabet reform were accelerated rather than invented by the Bolsheviks; the former had been accomplished by the previous regime of the (first democratic) Provisional Government, whose reforms included simplifying of

the Cyrillic alphabet. The older version of the Cyrillic alphabet is, thus, metonymically related to the old world of tsarist Russia and its monarchical order, the traditional pillar of the Church. Rozhkov's graphic design suggests both the historical fact and the symbolic act of melting the church bells to cast the iron and of the anti-religious "melting" of the Orthodox Church to forge Communism.²¹² Both Mayakovsky and Rozhkov envisaged the accomplishment of Communism as a prospective and revolutionary social form completely inseparable from the rapid processes of modernization and technical development. The urge for technical and industrial development was tightly connected with the haste for its achievement, while the later was propagated through the images of increased mobility exemplified in the network of railroads.



Figure 3.16 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WAS (3) photomontage detail

Mayakovsky's metaphor from the second segment (**fig. 3.16**), which compares the industrial site with mammals' organs and the industrial production with the organic, bodily production of milk ("The udder / of factory chimneys / milks out no smoke;" ДЫМ / не выдоит /

²¹² During the stormy epoch of the Civil War significantly scarce in goods and resources, melting church bells satisfied the need for iron as the raw material for the production of bullets and weapons. Removal and destruction of bells became almost a passion for the Communists. Bells were thrown down from the bell towers and carted off for melting. The symbolic "melting" was, however, much more severe: after the Russian revolution and the establishment of the communist regime, the Orthodox Church was subjected to most brutal persecution. Most of the clergy were executed; churches closed, robbed of their artifacts, and often destroyed. The Communist plan called for complete annihilation of all religious activities and organization.

трубищ фабричных вымя), may have lost its strong biological nature in Rozhkov's photomontage, but not its naturalistic appearance: the smoke on the photomontage appears so natural that it may look like it comes from the factory chimneys. Nevertheless, Rozhkov leaves no illusion that the smoke springs from the factory hooters. Thus, the image of hooters smoking fiercely is a visual representation of their "raw sharp reply" (отповедь гудковая крута) that without *iron* and *iron ore* there is no point of setting the factory flywheels spinning (Зря / чего / ворочать маховыми?). In other words, Rozhkov, following Mayakovsky, emphasized that the creation of the material-technical base of communism needed further increase of the production of metal (ore) which is the foundation for the heavy industry and expansion of its raw material base—iron-mining industry.

Both Mayakovsky's verses and Rozhkov's sequencing photomontages illustrate the Bolsheviks' "lust for metal," and the excitement broiled on the heat of the rumors about the scientific research of KMA and its positive outcomes (**fig. 3.14**):

III segment: Flywheels, electric sparks, and cross-skiers

Электризовало
 массы волю.
 Массы мозг
 изобретательством мотало.
 Тело масс
 слоняло
 по горе,
 по полю
 голодом
 и жаждою металла.

Electrified
 has been the masses' will.
 The masses' mind
 has been driven
 over field,
 over hill
 by hunger
 and the lust for metal.

IV segment: A human ear, two white arrows, and excavating site

Крик,
вгоняющий
в дрожание
и в ёжь,
уши
земляные
резал:
«Даешь
железо!»

A cry
causing all
to shake
and shiver
rent
the ears
of the Earth:
“You give
iron!”

V segment: Three older men (professors)

Возникал
и глух призыв повторный —
только шепот
шел
профессоров-служак:

The repeated cry
rose and died away—
only the whisper
went around
of the professor hack:

VI segment: Compass, two arrows, and the Kursk area map

де под Курском
стрелки
лезут в стороны,
как Чужак.

Under Kursk, they say,
compass needles
deviate
like comrade Chuzhak.



Figure 3.17 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WAS (3) photomontage (detail)



Figure 3.18 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WAS (3) photomontage (detail)

Through his use of typography and color, Rozhkov succeeds to additionally underline visual representation of electric sparks, thus accentuating the effect that Bolsheviki propaganda have had on the general population—both professional and working. By choosing to put the last part of the word “electrified” (электризовало, **fig 3.17**), which reads as the telephone response/call “hello,” and the imperative “You give iron” («Даешь железо!» **fig. 3.18**) in red, Rozhkov almost rendered the image of “electric sparks” audible. The images of a human ear and two white diagonal arrows, one of which points to the “ear of the Earth” (уши земляные) and the other to the verbal noun “shiver” (ёжь) additionally highlight this rampant “cry” (крик) and its environmental effects.



Figure 3.19 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WAS (3) photomontage (detail)

At the very bottom of the sheet, we see images of three pyramids and two compasses the arrow-like needles of which show opposite directions (**fig. 3.19**). This part of the photomontage illustrates a polemical sting aimed at Nikolai Chuzhak, a member of *Lef*'s editorial board with whom Mayakovsky had frequent disagreements (see verses in segment VI). The main reason of contention between Chuzhak and the rest of the *Lef* group, as Halina Stephan explains in her study on the Left Front of the Arts, "had always been the question of the ultimate goal of the *Lef* organization." While the majority of the *Lef* editors "wanted to concentrate on adapting modern arts to the Soviet system and on developing of the corresponding artistic theories," Chuzhak was interested mainly in cultural politics, which he saw in terms similar to those promoted by Octobrists. Chuzhak even joined *Lef* with the hope of transforming it into a Party journal with a single, unifying program. Throughout *Lef*'s existence he attempted to acquire official Party approval for the *Lef* art program in order to gain a monopoly before any competitive groups would win the Communist Party's recognition. However, the *Lef* members rejected these objectives, refusing to subscribe to a "uniform organizational stand." Since Chuzhak failed to obtain an editorship of a Party journal, he "continued to disagree with the other *Lef* members, protesting the publication in *Lef* of Mayakovsky's 'About That' and Brik's 'She Is Not A Fellow

Traveler,' both of which he considered inconsistent with the concept of agitational arts."²¹³ This was yet another reason for Mayakovsky's polemical response to Chuzhak: the poet wittily compares the latter's behavior with the "deviant" needles of a compass in one of his most propagandistic poem that is, needless to say, published in the same forth number of *Lef* in which Chuzhak announced his departure from the editorial board.²¹⁴

This example is, on the other hand, very useful in explaining the meaning of one of Rozhkov's frequently used visual motifs—the pyramid-like spike(s). The angularity of pyramids, namely, occurs here—along with the poet's "foe," Nikolai Chuzhak—as a sign of *obstacle(s)* overcoming of which necessitates the great collective *effort*. And, as we will see, Rozhkov's constant usage of this visual sign throughout his photomontages accumulates its altering meanings—which range from representation of obstacles, to mobilization of collective effort necessary for their overcoming, to radiating beams of transformative energy, to the vision of shared fruits of the communal efforts—thus interconnecting these varying meanings and rendering them into the congregated set of dialectically related semantic connotations.

3.3.4 Documentary Photo-Material: Political Commentary and the Mobilization of Labor

Mayakovsky's revolutionary ode to labor, as I've briefly mentioned earlier, was conceived not only as a "temporary monument to the workers of Kursk," but also as a verbal gunfight with those who relentlessly criticized and attacked the work of the avant-garde Left Front of Arts. The *Lef* members and activists both promoted and fought for "the daily, continuous reorganization of the human psyche toward the achievement of the commune" as well as for art that will not be a

²¹³ Stephan, "*Lef* and the Left Front of the Arts," p. 49.

²¹⁴ "[B]ecause of differences in opinion on matters of theory and organization with the majority of the editorial board of *Lef*." (Chuzhak, "Pis'mo v redakciju," *Lef*, No. 4 (August-December 1923, published in January 1924), p. 213). Chuzhak also publicized his disagreements with the *Lef* group in *Pravda*, see: Chuzhak, "Na levom fronte (Pis'mo v redakciyu)," *Pravda*, November 11, 1923.

consumer product, but “a production skill.” As Sergei Tretiakov writes in his programmatic text “From Where to Where?” published in the first March 1923 issue of the *Lef*:

“What is necessary is the mode of art which will make people feel that they are not mass of consumers but *the organizers and managers of the very material of production*. New, productivist literature should have for its application not narratives about people, but living words in living interaction among people. *Art not as a consumer product, but as a production skill*. The goal will be accomplished through the victory of the organizational forces of the revolution, transforming mankind into a harmonious productivist collective where *labor* will not be forced activity as in capitalist society, but *will be one’s favorite activity*, and where *art* will not call the people into its magic lantern chamber of entertainment, but *will become a joyful energy which permeates production processes*.”²¹⁵

Rozhkov’s photomontage work confirms not only his compliance with, but also his fervent belief in the productive effect of these two joint—progressive and critical—tendencies propagated by the *Lef*. He recognized and, moreover, accomplished himself as a graphic artist—a sort of organizer and manager of the very material of production—by creating a unique artwork that functioned not as “a consumer product” but rather as “a production skill.” Furthermore, he practiced art completely *voluntary*, as his “favorite activity,” with such enjoyment and passion—the specific *gusto* that his photomontages so successfully convey and communicate. Simultaneously, Rozhkov did not abstain from making direct critical remarks on the surrounding political and cultural environment at the time. The documentary character of Rozhkov’s photomontages, as the following sections of this chapter will show, is fully in tune with Mayakovsky’s polemics with the contemporary enemies and foes of *Lef*.

In his use of documentary photo-material, Rozhkov follows the practice previously developed by the Berlin Dadaists and Aleksandr Rodchenko. Hausmann, Höch, Huelsenbeck, Grosz, Heartfield and other Berlin Dada monteurs started to use in their photomontages the

²¹⁵ Tretiakov, “From Where to Where?” *Lef*, No.1 (March 1923), pp. 192-203. Translation from Lawton, & Eagle, *Words in Revolution: Russian Futurist Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, p. 211. My emphasis.

images of important politicians and other contemporary figures popularized by illustrated press and mass media. Rodchenko was the first to incorporate photographs of the actual people that the work of fiction is describing: poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and his lover Lili Yurievna Brik.



Figure 3.20 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WAS (4) photomontage for *To the Workers of Kursk* (1924) (Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_6)

Rozhkov, in turn, treats Rodchenko’s photomontage (fig. 2.9) as a raw material for his own work and uses the image of Mayakovsky from *About This* to represent the following poet’s verses from “To the Workers of Kursk”: “A word factory / has been given me / to run” (Мне/ фабрика слов / в управление дана; fig. 3.20). If Mayakovsky represents himself, following

Tretiakov’s proposal, as a word factory organizer and manager, i.e. an engineer, Rozhkov’s representation suggests the poet-cyborg who is in symbiosis with the machine, the cone-shaped part of which resembles a part of the early phonograph. Thus, Rozhkov’s photomontage renders *visible* the very *audible* material of production: the cone-shaped cylinder of a phonograph radiates the words and phrases that are, actually, the titles of all major Mayakovsky’s works up to “The Workers of Kursk.”²¹⁶ Rozhkov may have found the model for this visual rendering in Klutsis’ work (fig. 3.21).



**Figure 3.21 Gustav Klutsis:
illustration for Young Guard: For Lenin [*Molodaia gvardiia. Leninu*, 1924].
Downtrodden Masses of the World: Under the Banner of the Comintern, Overthrow Imperialism**

Further following the same practice of Berlin Dadaists, Rozhkov incorporated the images of important European and Russian politicians at the time (fig 3.22).

²¹⁶ The titles are given in the chronological order from left to right as follows: “I,” “Vladimir Mayakovsky,” “Cloud in Trousers,” “Backbone Flute,” “War and Peace,” “Man,” “Our March,” “Mystery Buff,” “Left March,” [missing, but most probably “150,000,000”], “Love,” and, at the end, “About This.” Both verbal and visual images of Mayakovsky as the organizer and manager of a word factory are also echoed in his poem “Conversation with a Tax Collector about Poetry” (1926). There, Mayakovsky calls the act of writing the poetry “creative mining,” and writes: “Poetry’s / also radium extraction. / Grams of extraction / in years of labor. / For one single word, / I consume in action / thousands of tons / of verbal ore.”



Figure 3.22 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WAS (5) photomontage for *To the Workers of Kursk* (1924) (Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_7)

In the illustration of the part of the poem that traces the trajectory of the largest amounts of running and flowing iron ore through the centuries, from the diluvian times to the time of Russian revolutions, and ends with the verses explaining how—

Бежало от немцев,
 боялось французов,
 глаза
 косивших

на лакомый кус,
пока доплелось,
задыхаясь от груза,
запряталось
в сердце России
под Курск.

It [the iron] fled from the Germans
it feared the French
with their eyes
fixed on this tasty prize,
until it staggered,
breathless from its load
and hid
in the heart of Russia
under Kursk.

—Rozhkov uses images of Joseph Joffre, a French general during World War I, and Raymond Poincare, a French statesman who served five times as Prime Minister and once as President (1913-1920). While the images of these Frenchmen symbolize France, along with its most stereotypical symbols such as Paris, the French flag, Eiffel Tower, and a bottle of (supposedly French) wine, they are also here to remind the reader/viewer of the French military engagement against the Bolsheviks in the Polish-Soviet war during 1919-1921 (**fig 3.22**).

The photomontage on the subsequent sheet shares a similar function that—along Mayakovsky’s verses: “You, / who yelled: / You’ve eaten the sunflower seed bare, / sunflower / has littered Russia” (Вы, / оравшие: / «В лоск залускали, / рассорил / Россию / подсолнух!»)—features images of two Romanovs and several members of the Russian Provisional Government. From the left to right, these people are: the youngest son of Emperor Alexander III of Russia, Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich (guess?); the founder, leader, and the most prominent member of the Constitutional Democratic Party (known as Kadets) and a minister of foreign affairs in the Provisional Government, Pavel Nikolaevich Milyukov; the second Prime Minister of the Russian Provisional Government until overthrown in the October

Revolution, Alexander Fyodorovich Karensky; and one of Russia's biggest textile manufacturers and minister of trade and industry in the Provisional Government, Alexander Ivanovich Konovalov (fig 3.23).



Figure 3.23 Yuri Rozhkov: IT IS (1) photomontage (detail)

Below, one can see the image of Tsar Nicholas II's head, under which the words "to Paris" in French suggest that majority of the members of the former Provisional democratic government ended in exile in France (both of Romanovs were, though, executed by the Bolsheviks). Mayakovsky refrains from directly referring to these political figures; he actually calls out some "Alfred from *Izvestia*" (Альфред из «Известий»), which is the pseudonym of publicist Kapel'ush who published an article against the journal *Lef* (on June 10, 1923) in the daily newspaper *Izvestia*. Rozhkov, yet, chooses not to visually represent "Alfred from *Izvestia*;" instead, he uses the opportunity to accuse the members of the Russian imperial family and their political successors as being the main culprits of Russia's pre- and post-revolutionary hardships.



Figure 3.24 Yuri Rozhkov: *IT IS (1)* photomontage for *To the Workers of Kursk* (1924) (Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_8)

This is the first of Rozhkov’s two photomontages that illustrate the shortest section of Mayakovsky’s poem addressing the present (**fig 3.24**). It is also among the most colorful ones. Beside the dominant red overtones at its upper part, the photomontage features beige, yellow, black, and purple colored triangles merging into the different spikes that jut out its lower part. These spikes resembling thorn-like peaks, shape a visual ridge spreading diagonally across the middle part of the composition. Beneath these spikes Rozhkov pasted images of children (“proletarian daughters”) and women, miners and workers, as well as an image of hands drafting a diagram with a pencil and ruler. The pasted verses of Mayakovsky’s poem read:

Слушайте,
 пролетарские дочери:
 пришедший
 в землю врыться,
 в чертежах
 размечавший точки,
 он —
 сегодняшний рыцарь!
 Он так же мечтает,
 он так же любит.
 Руда
 залегла, томясь.
 Красавцем
 в кудрявом
 дымном клубе —
 за ней
 сквозь камень масс!

Listen,
 the proletarian daughters:
 the one who came
 to dig the earth,
 at places mapped out
 in the drawings,
 he—
 today's knight!
 He also dreams
 he also loves.
 The ore is
 hiding, languishing.
 A handsome one
 in the curly
 smoky club—
 needs to chase the ore
 through the masses of stone!

The sharp angularity of the spikes no longer symbolizes the obstacles, but rather, the mobilization of the collective effort, which was necessary for overcoming these difficulties. It is also in tune with the second photomontage related to the poem's representation of the present. This photomontage (**fig 3.25**) is the only monochrome sheet in the series since it represents miners who toil underground, in a lightless and timeless realm of extreme danger and hardship.

With the dominant diagonal image of the drill, this photomontage echoes Rozhkov's front cover sheet but with an important distinction. Namely, while the counterbore from the front cover had inscribed letters confirming its American origin, the drill from this photomontage bears the more noticeable acronym KMA. In other words, Rozhkov here made an unequivocal ideological statement of the State building program of industrialization, while following the aforementioned Arvatov's dictum to "impart a purposeful, social meaning" to everything what would come from America, including the mechanical tools.



Figure 3.25 Yuri Rozhkov: IT IS (2) photomontage for *To the Workers of Kursk* (1924) (Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_9)

Finally, this photomontage turns the previous multi-colored spikes into the white fleshing sparks. These gleaming rays of light are to announce the bright future yet to come. These flickering flashes, signifying the radiating beams of transformative energy, open into the vision of shared fruits of the communal effort or what Mayakovsky calls “the half-open eye of the future” (будущего приоткрытый глаз). These beams of light foreshadowing the bright future will transform, as the next section shows, into yet another model and metaphor for industrial production.

3.3.5 The Industrial Land of the Future

As I have already mentioned, both Mayakovsky’s ode to the working class and Rozhkov’s subsequent visual illustrations advocated the cult of the machine, the struggle for time, and allied currents of efficiency. In that regard, they functioned not only as a purposeful political propaganda, but also as an artistic statement on the importance of technology, organization, and discipline. Similarly to Alexei Gastev and Platon Kerzhnitshev²¹⁷ who were true promoters of the new technological age in the nascent Soviet Russia, Mayakovsky and Rozhkov articulated a vision of the communist future commensurate with the desire for technical and industrial modernity.

Their optimal projection into the future was, actually, made upon the Americanism and its mass production assembly line as the giant emblems of modernity. As the precise indicator of the country of origin of the aforementioned “God of the underworld,” i.e. the technological

²¹⁷ Alexei Gastev was known for his poetry that offered the animation of machinery and the mechanization of a man (“the iron demon of the age with the soul of a man, nerves of steel, and rails for muscles,” “my iron friends”, a man who is growing “out of iron” and becoming a machine, etc.). In addition, Gastev recognized the Ford plant as a model for a cultural transformation, and evoked “iron discipline” and organization in the work place—the same values propagated by Rozhkov’s photomontages. Platon Kerzhnitshev took Gastevism out of factory and into the realm of everyday life: the world of social management in the early 1920s. He founded the *League of Time* in 1923. See also Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, pp. 150-159.

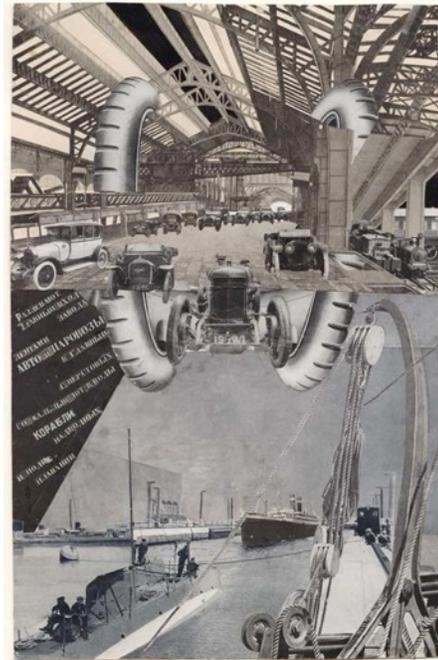
machinery, Americanization (американизация) was also a metaphor of the time for speedy industrial tempo, high growth, productivity, and efficiency (see my previous chapter). Such a vision of the future, in the first place, involved the visual imagery of a time obsessed by modern technology. Rozhkov's first four photomontage sheets addressing the section of Mayakovsky's poem entitled IT WILL BE are brimming with such imagery: one can see large cranes and construction sites, spacious wharfs and building yards, heated blast furnaces, iron-constructed bridges and factory halls, high boat masts and factory chimneys (figs. 3.26; 3.28; 3.29; 3.30; 3.31).



Figure 3.26 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (1) photomontage (Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_10)



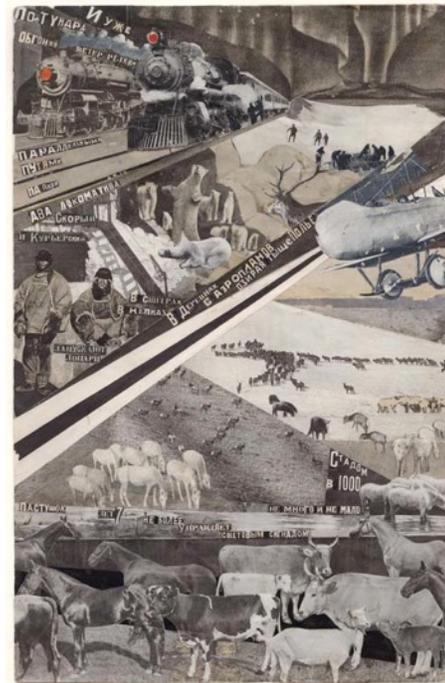
**Figure 3.27 Yuri Rozhkov:
IT WILL BE (2) photomontage (Moscow,
GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_11)**



**Figure 3.29 Yuri Rozhkov:
version of IT WILL BE (3) photomontage
(Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_13)**



**Figure 3.28 Yuri Rozhkov:
IT WILL BE (3) photomontage (Moscow,
GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_12)**



**Figure 3.30 Yuri Rozhkov:
IT WILL BE (4) photomontage
(Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_14)**



Figure 3.31 Gustav Klucis: design for Radio Orators, No. 3 (1922)

But more importantly, such a vision of the future entailed the new means of transportation and communication, which epitomized the dynamism of modern everyday life and the rapid pace of industrial development.²¹⁸ The factory sirens and cone-shaped loud speakers were, as part of aural-centered vision, pervasive icons of modern means of communication. We see, for example, the same loud speakers in many of Gustav Klucis's graphic designs of the propaganda stands and so-called Radio Orators (**fig. 3.27**). Both speakers and sirens were used primarily in organizing and mobilizing the workers in factories, which interestingly was reflected through two main artistic forms during the post-revolutionary years: the symphony of factory sirens and the noise orchestra.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ This vision is reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling's formula, which was made at the moment when the British Empire reached its peak: civilization equals transport plus communication.

²¹⁹ The origins of both the symphony of factory sirens and the noise orchestra can be traced back to Italian futurism. Music-as-machinery-noise and urban-sound-as-music received their first notable currency among the Italian futurists in the immediate prewar years. Balillia Pratella and his ideologist Luigi Russolo yearned for music that not only celebrated the city in some programmatic way but that reproduced it. Russolo's "Art of Noises" glorified urban sound—shouting throngs, motors, machines, valves, pumps, pistons, streetcars rattling on rails. In Russia, this idea was quickly taken in by Proletkult circles: "a new tempo and sonorities in the revolutionary life of proletariat" "to express the sounds of contemporary life" to capture its "might and titanic oscillations", its "rhythm of iron and granite", and the thunderous sounds that herald "the establishment of communism on earth." (Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, p. 159).

This vision—or aural premonition—took two main forms in Russia during and after the October Revolution. The first was a series of "concerts" of factory whistles, first attempted in Petrograd in 1918, repeated in other

Simultaneously, the various means of passenger and industrial cargo transportation—locomotive, train, car, tractor, boat, airplane—were the most suitable images for the visualization of the bright Soviet future and, as we will see, of a “running memorial” to the working class (see **figs. 3.28; 3.29; 3.30; 3.31; 3.35**). An American automobile and the Taylorized worker were the totem of progress in the 1920s.²²⁰

Thus, it is not a coincidence that the most visually appealing photomontage by Rozhkov is the one representing “the cars and engines” while they “pass in streams through the main gates of factories” (Раззевают / главный вход / заводы. Лентами / авто и паровозы), and the “ships for surface and under-water voyages” while they “slip into the water from wharfs a mile long” (С верфей / с верстовых / соскальзывают в воды / корабли / надводных / и подводных плаваний; **fig. 3.29** and **3.30**). Rozhkov’s vision portrays the prospective future inseparable from the factory and its production assembly lane. This photomontage sheet notably stands out with its distinct completeness, compositional sternness, and harmony of design, which altogether faithfully reproduce the features of the assembly line: its precision, continuity, coordination, speed, automatization, and standardization. Rozhkov artistically soldered segregated elements within the image, thus achieving an organic visual whole. Colored filling holes of the background create

towns during the Civil War, and culminating in the “symphony of factory whistles” in Baku in 1922. The arena of performance was the entire city. Industrial sirens and whistles around Baku were tuned and conducted from rooftops by flag-waving “conductors” who attempted to produce the cadences of the “International” while percussive and sonoric effects were added by foghorns of the Caspian fleet, two batteries of cannon, a machine gun section, and hydroplanes. The result was a deafening cacophony. A sect of machine worshippers, called Engineerinsts, launched the second form—the noise orchestra. At their concerts, technicians “played” engines, turbines, dynamos, sirens, hooters, and belts of all kinds on the premises of the factory itself, producing what Fülöp-Miller called a “whole world of noise which deafened the ear.” They were sometimes accompanied by the ballet of mechanical gymnastics choreographed to the machine noise and performed on the workshop floor. These were sonoric flights into technicist utopia. (Fülöp-Miller, *The Mind And Face of Bolshevism; an Examination of Cultural Life In Soviet Russia*, p. 261). For more on the “Symphony of Sirens” (*Simfoniia Gudkov*) and Arseny Avraamov, its composer and conductor, see Alarcón, *Baku: Symphony of Sirens*, pp. 19-21.

²²⁰ In 1924, four different translations of Henry Ford’s autobiography *My Life* were published in the Soviet Union, while for the first six years of the 1920s the Soviet regime imported large number of Ford motorcars and even 24,000 Fordson tractors.

the feeling of spatial depth and movement. The minimum of text is introduced in the montage. Mayakovsky's verses are sharply defined and clear to read.



Figure 3.32 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (3) photomontage (detail).

Rozhkov skillfully employs the photography of the iron construction in order to visually represent Mayakovsky's poetic personification of the factories which "gape open wide / their main gates." The architecture of the steel construction represented on the photography at the upper part of the photomontage is reminiscent of the *arcades* because of its height, lofty construction and verticality, which settle in the soothing curve of the arc. Here, Rozhkov succeeds to tame the spiky angularity, which is a pervasive characteristic of his constructivist graphic design, and to transform it together with its sharpness into the assuaging curves of the steel construction arch and the orderly dotted *Dunlop* car tires. Nevertheless, Rozhkov preserves the sharpness and dynamism of such angularity in the graphic representation of the linear perspective, the vanishing point of which is the tiny *black square* far back in the entrance of one of the "main gates" (главный вход) of the factory (fig. 3.32). Many multi-colored (yellow, blue,

and red) stripes radiate from the direction of this tiny black square that may seem as Rozhkov's hidden homage to Kazimir Malevich, the founder of Suprematism, thus creating the effect of spatial depth and movement. Even Rozhkov's technically skillful typographical layout of the verses on the upper part of the photomontage creates the phenomenon of the visual perception of linear perspective and motion.

Rozhkov uses multi-colored beaming stripes to graphically underline the important concept of *lenta* from Mayakovsky's image of the "cars and locomotives (engines)" that "pass in streams" (лентами / авто и паровозы) or, more precisely, that "pass by stretching on strips," or "on long belts," since the Russian word лента translates into all these meanings (stream, strip, beam, band, belt). The entire photomontage distinguishes itself by the new beauty—the beauty of the industrial and technological world of construction and creativity. The vision of such a technological land of the future is modeled upon Ford's conveyor belt (лента конвейера), which at the time functioned not only as the model of factory but also as the model for modern society.

Another alluring example of the conveyor belt image is the cut-and-paste photograph of men operating a series of machines each of which has the wheel connected to the single rotating mechanism (**fig 3.33**). This image—surrounded by the larger image of a round pocket watch, the image of a cyclic barometer, and the image of a rotating flywheel with the belt—occupies the left quarter of the encircling ring with the thick white outline in the center of which is yet another round gear. Rozhkov uses this image to visually represent the following Mayakovsky's verses, "Precise like gunshot / at the machine / are Elvists" (Четкие, как выстрел, / у машин / эльвисты.). Yet, he pastes letters of the word "Elvists" over the image that represents skilled workers conducting the machines. By his typographic choice of the more visible, majuscule Cyrillic letters л and в in the word э**Л**в**И**сты, Rozhkov emphasizes the acronym from which the

meaning of the word originates, thus making Mayakovsky hard-to-read reference visually readable: ЭЛЬВИСТЫ, or “time and motion men,” is how the members of the *League “Time”* were called, and “ЛВ” was the abbreviation for the *League “Time”* (Лига Время) created for the purposes of the propaganda of scientific organization of work in Soviet Union.



Figure 3.33 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (2) photomontage (detail)

The *League “Time”* was founded in July 1923 at the initiative of the already mentioned Platon Kerzhnincev. Although it was technically independent of government and the Party, the intimate relationship between the *League “Time”* organization and NOT (Научная Организация Труда, Scientific Organization of Labor) movement led by the aforementioned Alexei Gastev, was clearly reflected in its board members: Kerzhnincev, Gastev, and other Taylorists, including the theater director Meyerhold, with Lenin and Trotsky as honorary officers. Not only that Vladimir Mayakovsky knew Kerzhnincev’s *League “Time,”* but also he was familiar with the former’s concern to introduce scientific principles into all organized activity of work (the army, the school, and all of social life). Kerzhnincev’s vision of the revolution in time, or revolution from bellow, was built in the foundations of his major works, *The Struggle for Time* and *The*

Scientific Organization of Labor. Mayakovsky was most likely familiar with Kerzhnincev's theoretical works on the subject, published within the same few weeks during which he founded *League "Time"* and wrote his impassioned article in the Party's daily *Pravda* entitled "Time Builds Airplanes." Thus, it is not surprising that we read in Mayakovsky's poem and see on Rozhkov's photomontage (**fig 3.28**) how:

Раззевают
 слуховые окна
 крыши-норы.
 Сразу
 в сто
 товарно-пассажирских линий
 отправляются
 с иглолочки
 планёры,
 рация
 по солнцу
 алюминий.

The roof windows
 of the burrow roof
 gape open.
 At once
 on a hundred freight and
 passenger lines,
 planes
 set out
 brand new
 flashing
 their aluminum
 in the Sun.

3.3.6 Anti-monumental and Anti-canonical Satire

The last three photomontage sheets most successfully bring to our attention the poet's beliefs and attitudes, articulated both through his resistance to the ossified and fossilized qualities of the permanent but static monumentality and his belief in the victory of technological and productive forces. These forces are, according to Tretiakov, epitomized in the struggle for a new

individuality, for “the person-worker, energetic, ingenious, solidarity disciplined, who feels the call of duty as a class-creator, and who, without hesitation, puts all his production at the disposal of the collective.” The true *immortality* of such an individual, who “must be, least of all, the owner of his production,” according to Tretiakov, lies not in the possible preservation of his own creation, but “in the larger and more complete assimilation of his production by the people.” And he adds:

It does not matter if his name is forgotten. What matters is that his achievements enter the life process and there generate new improvements and new training. Not the politics of locked skulls of patent protection against all thoughts, all discoveries and designs, but the politics of skulls open to all those who want, jointly, side by side, to search for *form* overcoming both stagnation and chaos in the name of the maximal organization of life.²²¹

Mayakovsky shared Tretiakov’s views, while disregarding the existing commemorative practices—such as naming the streets after famous people, building various monuments and the alike—in favor of both the innovative and productive technological and cultural forms.

Rozhkov’s work on the photo-poetry book, as Mayakovsky himself acknowledged, qualifies as one of such technologically progressive cultural forms. Here is how Rozhkov segmented the following verses of Mayakovsky’s poem:

(fig. 3.34)

I segment: *A pen, spread ink, swans, a man who writes surrounded by several typing machines*

Что перо? —
 гусиные обноски! —
только зря
 бумагу рвут, —
сто статей
 напишет
 обо мне
 Сосновский,
каждый день
 меняя

²²¹ Tretiakov, “From Where to Where?” *Lef*, No.1 (March 1923), pp. 192-203. Translation from Lawton & Eagle, *Words in Revolution*, p. 213. My emphasis.

«Ундервуд».

What is a pen? –
Worn-out goose's clothing! –
They're tearing up
paper
for nothing—
Sosnovsky
will write
a hundred articles
about me,
everyday
changing
his "Underwood."

II segment: A man walking the boulevard, two monuments, and a six columns
marble edifice

Я считаю,
обходя
бульварные аллеи,
скольких
наследили
юбилеи?
Пушкин,
Достоевский,
Гоголь,
Алексей Толстой
в бороде у Льва.

I count
going around
boulevards,
how many
we inherited
jubilees?
Pushkin,
Dostoevsky,
Gogol',
Alexei Tolstoy
in Lev's beard.

The margin between the images of boulevard and the masses (filled with the
verses):

Не завидую —
у нас
бульваров много,

каждому
найдется
бульвар.

I am not envious—
we have many
boulevards,
Everyone
will be found
a boulevard.

III segment: The domineering image of a man with glasses holding a rock in his hand

Может,
будет
Лазарев
у липы в лепете.

Обозначат
в бронзе
чином чин.

Maybe
there will be
Professor Lazarev
in a prattle of linden trees.

They'll mark him
in bronze
in manner fitting.

IV segment: The mass of people, a pyramid, and a horse toy

Ну, а остальные?
Как их слéпите?

Тысяч тридцать
курских
женщин и мужчин.

Вам
не скрестишь ручки,
не напялишь тогу,

Well, what about the rest?
How will you sculpture them?

Thirty thousand or so
Kursk
women and men.

They won't
fold your arms across,

they won't make you
ridiculous in a toga.

V segment: *A child sitting on a potty, and nannies with babies*

не поставишь
нянькам на затор...

They won't stand you there
To cause a blockage of
Nannies...

VI segment: *A child with a black square in his hands with the following letters:*

Ну и слава богу!
Но зато —

And thank to God for it!
But—

(fig. 3.35)

VII segment: *Many bearded and half-cut men's faces, many hands*

на бороды дымов,
на тело гулов
не покусятся
никакой Меркулов.
Трем Андреевым,
всему академическому скопу,
копошащемуся
у писателей в усах,

the beards of smoke
a body of machinery's hum
no Merkulov
will try to sculpture.
Three Andreev's the whole academy crowd,
messing about
with writers' moustashes,

VIII segment: *Factory buildings and chimneys*

никогда
не вылепить
ваш красный корпус,
заводские корпуса.

could never
sculpture
your beautiful body

your factory bodies.

IX segment: *Triangles, spikes, and hands conducting a wheel*

Вас

не будут звать:

«Железо бросьте,

выверните

на спину

глаза,

возвращайтесь

вспять

к слоновой кости,

к мамонту,

к Островскому

назад».

В ваш

столетний юбилей

не прольют

Сакулины

речей елей.

No one

will call you and say:

“Give up iron,

twist your eyes

to the back of your head

go back

again

to ivory

to the mammoth,

to Ostrovsky.”

At your

hundredth anniversary

the likes of Sakulin

won't pour out

unctuous speeches.

X segment: *Two men, one works and the other sleeps, an aerial view of the city, skyscrapers*

Ты работал,

ты уснул

и спи —

только город ты,

а не Шекспир.

You worked,



**Figure 3.34 Yuri Rozhkov:
IT WILL BE (5) photomontage
(Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_15)**



**Figure 3.35 Yuri Rozhkov:
IT WILL BE (6) photomontage
(Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_16)**

These two photomontages illustrate Mayakovsky’s anti-monumental attitude, which is, at the same time, the poet’s key ideological statement paired with important polemical amplitude. Along with the canonical Russian writers, whom the Futurists decisively “thrown off from the Steamship of Modernity” a decade ago, Mayakovsky straightforwardly calls out many of his contemporaries. He polemicizes with those who openly wrote against the *Lef* and their avant-garde art as alien to the masses, and with those who participated in the contemporary processes of commemoration supporting the less progressive values. Rozhkov, as we will see, includes in his photomontages not only the images of these, but also of other well-known cultural figures.



Figure 3.36 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (5) photomontage (detail)

Rozhkov illustrates the first segment of the quoted poem with the image of his supervisor from the Lenin agit-train—Lev Semonovich Sosnovsky (**fig. 3.36**). We see Sosnovsky writing in cursive letters “Down with Mayakovsky” (Долой Маяковщину) a clear illustration of the former’s confrontational cultural politics expressed in the articles and feuillets published from 1920 to 1923 in *Pravda*. It is very likely that Rozhkov was familiar with the response to Sosnovsky in the third issue of *Lef* journal’s editorial, entitled “LEF to Battle.” There, one can find the following statement: “Some to LEF, some for firewood.” This statement is a pun on the proverb “Some to woods, some for firewood” (Кто в лес, кто по дрова), where the word “*les*” (лес, woods) is replaced by the similarly sounding word “*Lef*” (леф). Driving upon the meaning of the proverb—which describes a situation of disharmony, chaos, and disagreement—the statement points to the emerging split between those who support *Lef* and those who do not. Further, the word дрова (firewood) is footnoted with the following sentence: “Oak, pine, aspen, and other Species.” In Russian, these words (oak=дыбовые, pine=сосновые, aspen=осиновые, and other Species=и других Родов) create sound associations with the names Dubovski, Sosnovski, S. Rodov and others (such as, for example, Alfred from *Izvestia* and V. Lebedev-Polianski from *Poz znamenem Marksizma*) who constantly attacked the LEF and Mayakovsky in

particular. This witty editorial of the third (June-July 1923) issue of *Lef* magazine is followed by the “Program” section that is entirely devoted to the debunking of Sosnovsky’s accusations as unfounded, counter-factual, and demagogic.²²²



Figure 3.37 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (5) photomontage (detail)

For the photo-collage of the second segment of the quoted text (**fig. 3.37**), Rozhkov again uses the image of the poet from the Rodchenko’s photomontage for *About This* (**fig. 2.8**). The image of Mayakovsky in a posture of an old man, is juxtaposed with the portraits of Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, and the images of monuments to Pushkin and Gogol’. This segment foreshadows Rozhkov’s illustration of the seventh segment, and visually underlines the poet’s resistance to the processes of ossification, monumentalization, and canonization about which Yuri Tynanov wrote with such accuracy in his 1924 “Interval” article (see my previous chapter).

The photomontage for the seventh segment of the quoted text is, actually, additionally intriguing since it represents Rozhkov’s supplement to Mayakovsky’s verses. While the poet, mentions Merkulov (whom he misnames) and three Andreevs, Rozhkov pastes an image of Sergei Dmitrievich Merkurov (a sculptor-monumentalist who was commissioned for realizing Lenin’s plan of monumental propaganda and who perfected the art of the death-mask), and the

²²² See “LEF to Battle!” *Lef*, No. 3 (June-July, 1923), p. 3; and Brik, “To Sosnovski,” *Lef*, No. 3 (June-July, 1923), p. 4.

two images of Leonid Nikolaevich Andreev (a Russian Silver-age playwright, novelist, and short-story writer who also very successfully practiced photography in early teens. I assume that another Andreev whom Mayakovsky probably referred to in his verses is Nikolay Andreyevich Andreev, a sculptor whose most famous work is the monument with the seated bronze figure of Gogol' —the image of which Rozhkov used for the previous photomontage sheet). Rozhkov, however, decided to provide his own creative response on another topic—Mayakovsky's poetic image of “the whole academy crowd, / messing about / with writers' moustaches” (всему академическому скопу, / копошащемся / у писателей в усах).



Figure 3.38 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (6) photomontage (detail)

Rozhkov made a hilarious representation of the nineteenth century Russian writers' pantheon, assembling the following Frankenstein-like hybrid identities by cutting and pasting the halves of the faces (**fig. 3.38**, from left to right): I.S. Turg/oncharov, from Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev and Ivan Goncharov; A. Herz/zhkovskii, from Alexander Ivanovich Herzen and Merezhkovskii; Tols/trovsky, from Tolstoy Aleksey Konstantinovich and Alexander Nikolaevich Ostrovsky; N.V. Gog/resaev, from N.V. Gogol' and Vikenty Vikentievich Veresaev; Tolst/chenko, from L. Tolstoy and Taras Grigorevich Shevchenko; Maksim Gork/kushkin, from

Maksim Gorki and Pushkin; and Tolst/vratsky, from L. Tolstoy and Nikolai Nikolaevich Zlatovratsky. Rozhkov may have found the model for his visual joke in Hannah Höch's 1923 photomontage *Hochfinanz* (High Finance, **fig 3.39**). That Rozhkov preferred this stylistic device proves his photomontage work on Mayakovsky's 1927 poem "Jew" (**fig. 3.40**).

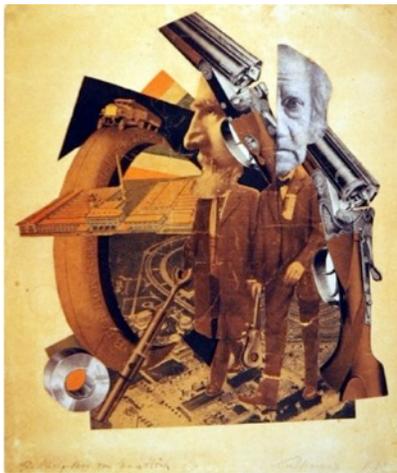


Figure 3.39 Hannah Höch, *High Finance* (1923)

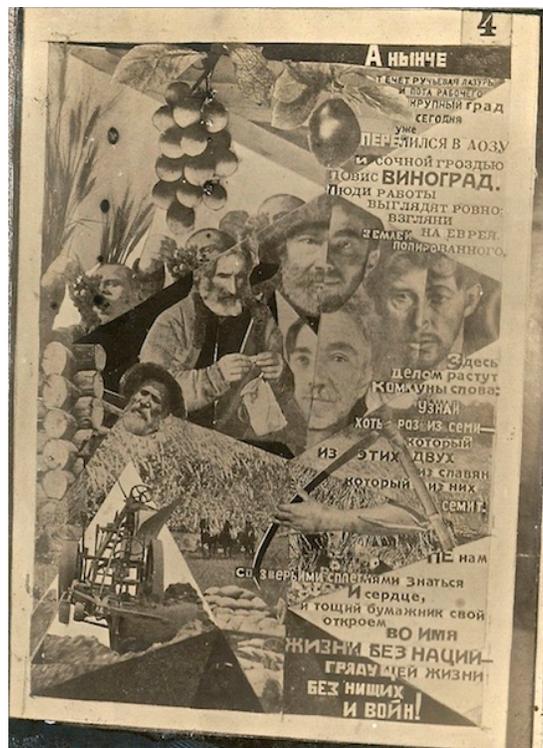


Figure 3.40 Yuri Rozhkov's last photomontage (No. 4) for Mayakovsky's poem "Jew" (1927)

Rozhkov's entertaining and mocking supplement to the Mayakovsky's poem reflected the existent anti-canonical sentiment that the *Lef* members preached, practiced, and disseminated, first and foremost, in their manifestoes. For example, in the programmatic text "Whom Does LEF Wrangle With?" from the first issue of *Lef*, one can read the following attack on the classics:

The classics were nationalized. The classics were honored as our only pulp literature. The classics were considered permanent, absolute art. The classics with *the bronze of their monuments* and *the tradition of their schools* suffocated everything new. Now, for 150,000,000 people the classic is an ordinary textbook. [...] We will fight against the transferring of the working methods of the dead into today's art."²²³

In the aforementioned text "From Where to Where?" Sergei Tretyakov writes in a similar vein: "Never encumber the flight of creativity with *a fossilized stratum* (no matter how highly expected)—this is our second slogan."²²⁴ Rozhkov's photomontage draws upon this very connection between the classics, on the one hand, and the fossilizing forces of tradition and monuments, on the other. .

At the same time, the writers' pantheon photomontage casts an additional light on the ninth segment of the quoted text of the poem, in which Mayakovsky assures that no one will call out the factories to "go back / again / to ivory / to the mammoth / to Ostrovsky" (возвращайтесь / вспять / к слоновой кости, / к мамонту, / к Островскому / назад). For the illustration of this part of the poem, Rozhkov employs angular shapes—triangles and pyramid-like spikes—along with an image of hands turning a wheel (probably backwards, **fig 3.41**). Behind these hands is the portrait of the nineteenth century Russian playwright, A.N. Ostrovsky. Triangles and spikes

²²³ *Lef*, No. 1 (March 1923), pp. 8-9. Translation from Lawton, & Eagle, *Words in Revolution: Russian Futurist Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, p. 196. My emphasis. The number—*one hundredth and fifty million*—had to remind the reader of Mayakovsky's poem with the same title.

²²⁴ Tretyakov, "Otkuda i kuda?" *Lef*, No.1 (March, 1923), p. 196. Translation from Lawton, & Eagle, *Words in Revolution: Russian Futurist Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, p. 209. My emphasis.

emerge again as the visual sign of *obstacle(s)*. In this case, the obstacle is scripted in the quote, “Back to Ostrovsky!” This was a new slogan proclaimed by the Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, who in anticipation of the one-hundredth anniversary of the playwright’s birth published a two-part article in *Izvestia* (April 11th and 12th, 1923), entitled “About Alexander Nikolaevich Ostrovsky and Concerning Him.” In the article, Lunacharsky called on revolutionary theatre artists to revise their negative attitude toward the classic. Moreover, he issued a call for the reevaluation of Russian literary classics within the new sociopolitical context along with the controversial proclamation that the futuristic art—which rejects the old art together with academism—cultivated an erroneous method of reassessment.²²⁵ Lunacharsky’s article triggered a sound debate between “monumentalists” and “iconoclasts” and an avalanche of responses among which Mayakovsky’s and Rozhkov’s qualify as the most playful and inventive.²²⁶



Figure 3.41 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (6) photomontage (detail)

Mayakovsky’s verses, “At your / hundredth anniversary / the likes of Sakulin / won’t pour out / unctuous speeches” (В ваш / столетний юбилей / не прольют / Сакулины / речей елей), are undoubtedly a response to the occasion for the emergence of the mentioned article by Lunacharsky. But they are also an expression of resistance to the public recognitions of the pre-

²²⁵ Lunacharskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos’mi tomakh*, Vol 1, p. 200.

²²⁶ Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, p. 27.

revolutionary artists and cultural workers, such as Leonid Vitalevich Sobinov (an acclaimed Imperial Russian operatic tenor) and actor Alexander Ivanovich Yuzhin, (the Georgian Prince Sumbatov, who dominated the Mali Theatre of Moscow at the turn of nineteenth and twentieth centuries). Both Yuzhin and Sobinov were made People’s Artist of the RSFSR in 1922 and 1923, respectively. Mayakovsky was most likely provoked by such an act, which he understood similarly to Lunacharsky’s new slogan “Back to Ostrovsky”—as a relapse towards the more traditional and bourgeois art forms. Moreover, on the covers of the second issue of the *Lef* (April-May 1923), one can find Rodchenko’s photomontage that expresses an avant-garde gesture of rejecting and canceling the old, bourgeois art, of which one of the symbols is Prince Sumbatov himself (**fig. 2.11**).²²⁷ Following Mayakovsky, Rozhkov incorporated in the photomontage the images of “monographs” and marble fences (see verses from XI segment), above which are the two Sobinov’s frontal portraits as well as the profile image of what seems to be Yuzhin’s death mask (**fig. 3.42**).²²⁸



Figure 3.42 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (6) photomontage (detail)

²²⁷ It is also not surprising that Pavel Nikitich Sakulin, Russian and Soviet literary scholar, historian, and academic, whom Mayakovsky describes as the orator of “unctuous speeches” (речей елей), published in 1927 in English the first edition of his book *Theater of A.I. Sumbatov*.

²²⁸ If this assumption were correct, then it would be easier to claim that Rozhkov created his photomontages after 1927, since Yuzhin passed away in Nice in September of 1927.

3.3.7 Running Memorial to the Proletariat

On both of the photomontages analyzed here, one can notice that the images dominating are those of the workers (or masses), factory buildings and chimneys, and various city constructions. More precisely, the first of these two photomontages is dominated by the image of geologist Lazarev who holds a rock in his hand and who is in close proximity to the image of the workers—“thirty thousand or so / Kursk / women and men” (Тысяч тридцать / курских / женщин и мужчин). The second photomontage, however, puts the images of both laboring and sleeping workers in close relationship to an aerial image of the city and images of skyscrapers and city neighborhoods—“you are only a city / and not a Shakespeare” (только город ты, / а не Шекспир, **fig. 3.43**). These two pairings of workers—with a member of technical intelligentsia and the city itself—visualize one of the key utopian ideas that the members of *Lef*, and especially Boris Arvatov, were fighting for: namely, how the success of the “reconstruction of everyday life” (перестройка быта) program depends primarily upon the fundamental shift in the relation of the individual and the collective to the material culture.



Figure 3.43 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (6) photomontage (detail)

Arvatov saw in this relation of the individual and the collective to “the universal system of Things,” which is how he called material culture, as the most defining of all social relations.

In his 1925 essay, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing,” he argued that the abolishment of the private ownership and the liquidation of the everyday life of consumption and the everyday as a specific sphere of social life (which are final goals of the “reconstruction of everyday life”) is feasible through the creation of the so-called socialist comrade-objects. Such objects—objects as co-workers—develop a fundamentally different relation between individual and collective to material culture of the Thing. Interestingly, Arvatov recognized that experiences the technical intelligentsia undergoes at the work and in the urban everyday, i.e. in the sphere of production and in the modern city, are salient examples of this necessary change in the human relation to the objects. According to Arvatov, the technical intelligentsia is in a unique position of organizing the advanced technological things of industry through its work, without forming an ownership attachment to those things; it lives “in a world of things that it organizes but does not possess things that condition its labor.” The technical intelligentsia has temporary and contingent relation to objects at work (in the sphere of production). This relation is echoed in their relation to the objects of the urban everyday on the street, communication and transport, as well as to the technologically reconfigured domestic *byt* affected by systematic plumbing, heating, lighting, architectural building, etc., where the private *byt* is narrowed to a minimum.²²⁹

Arvatov recognizes the technical intelligentsia as “the very social motor” that organized ideas, people, and things, and which transferred “the skills it acquired from the sphere of production to the sphere of consumption, from collective *byt* to private *byt*.” This knowledge of the Thing, consequently, extended to the entire material culture, so that without the ability to command the thing it is no longer possible to have the modern urban life “in the city of

²²⁹ This technical intelligentsia demands new values of activity and flexibility for objects: “convenience, portability, comfort, flexibility, expedience, hygiene, and so on—in a word, everything that they call the adaptability of the thing, its suitability in terms of positioning and assembling (*ustanovochno-montazhnaia prisposoblennost'*) for the needs of social practice.” Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question),” pp. 125-126.

skyscrapers, of underground and overground metropolitan transit, of mechanized material connections between things, where a thousand transmission apparatuses replace labor.” What is more, Arvatov argues, this new world of Things “gave rise to a new image of a person as a psycho-physiological individual” whose “gesticulation, movement, and activity” are formed through “a particular regimen of physical culture” and whose psyche “also evolved, becoming more and more thinglike in its associative structure.”²³⁰ The members of the *artistic intelligentsia* in Arvatov’s and Mayakovsky’s *Lef* circle, needless to say, attempted to identify themselves with the *technical intelligentsia* (техническая интеллигенция)—by stressing their role as engineers, organizers and technicians of ideas, people, texts, and objects. And this explains why Mayakovsky conceives himself as an organizer and manager of a word factory, as well as it confirms that Rozhkov shared the poet’s conviction: he followed Lazarev’s example (and an example of his own brother) and in the 1930s became a very successful geologist (**fig. 3.44**).



Figure 3.44 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (5) photomontage (detail)

²³⁰ Ibid.

Towards the very end of the poem—in the twelfth segment of the quoted part—we find an expression of the poet’s belief in the promise of technological advancements. Here, Mayakovsky envisages “a temporary monument” to the working class as the “running / high-speed / hand-made / memorial” (бегущий памятник / курьерский / рукотворный). Conceptually, the image of “running memorial” still strikes one as a contradictory and puzzling if not an innovative idea. Such concepts of the moving monument one can easily find in the Russian literary tradition, starting with the representation of living statue in Pushkin’s poetic mythology.²³¹ Yet, Mayakovsky’s contribution to the image—nestled in the cultural tradition of Russian imagery so cozily that it almost became customary—was his ascription of the high-speed (express) quality to it. Mayakovsky proposed a hand-made and high-speed running monument to “the oxen of the future”—a memorial that should have been the creation of both human and machine, both a manufactured and technologically advanced art product.²³²

Rozhkov’s visual representation of the memorial to the working class is consistent with Mayakovsky’s poetic image and reflects the Constructivist insistence on the use of technology and the importance of functionalism in art. For the visual representation of such a monument, Yuri Rozhkov chooses the image of a locomotive (**fig. 3.45**). Although the invention of the early nineteenth century, the locomotive still summons the set of meanings tightly connected with the progress and rapid forward movement, so significant for the Russian revolutionary imagination in the early 1920s. This connection is, of course, completely literal: the locomotive (*lat.* “causing

²³¹ In his landmark study, “The Statue in Pushkin’s Poetic Mythology,” Roman Jakobson found the destructive capacity of statues in Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman*, *The Stone Guest* and *The Golden Cockerel* to be an expression of the antinomy, inherent in every statue, between its living subject matter and the dead material out of which it is made. (Jakobson “The Statue in Pushkin’s Poetic Mythology,” pp. 318-367). For more on Mayakovsky’s conception of the ‘mobile’ monument, see Rann, “Maiakovskii and the Mobile Monument: Alternatives to iconoclasm in Russian Culture,” pp. 766-791.

²³² For more on the importance of the concept of speed in Russian avant-garde see Harte. *Fast Forward: The Aesthetic and Ideology of Speed in Russian Avant-Garde Culture, 1910-1930*.

motion”) provides the *motive power* of a train and pulls the train compartments *from the front*. However, its link to the classic and avant-garde conceptions of art is implicit: the locomotive has no payload capacity of its own, and its sole purpose is to move the train along the tracks. As an autonomous aesthetic object, the locomotive perfectly fits Kant’s notion of the “purposeless purpose” of an art object. Just as any other machine, the locomotive possesses an expressive visual beauty and “stupendous power.”²³³



Figure 3.45 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (6) photomontage (detail)

On the other hand, as a highly functional vehicle for the particular means of transport, the locomotive completely embodies the Constructivist concept of the artwork as a product of politically effective, socially useful, and mass-produced art. Following Mayakovsky’s conception of “running memorial,” Rozhkov’s visual representation is on par with the Constructivist art governed by the principles of material integrity, functional expediency, and societal purpose.²³⁴

²³³ Andre Breton’s surrealist ideal of the “convulsive beauty” found its visual expression in the image of an abandoned locomotive in the forest. For more on this see Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, p. 112.

²³⁴ Not coincidentally, one can find the image of the locomotive on page after the front cover in the third issue of the trilingual international magazine *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet/* (1922), edited by Ilya Ehrenburg and El Lissitzky. This international avant-garde journal was published in Berlin with the aim to spread the idea of “Construction art.”

The acoustical crescendo from the finale of Mayakovsky’s poem resonates in the visual cadence of Rozhkov’s photomontage (fig. 3.46). Mayakovsky refuses the “sharp-tongued lecturer” who would “heap praises” on the working class during the “anniversary in the interval of the operas or operettas” (Вас / у опер / и у оперетт в антракте, / в юбилее / не расхвалит / языкастый лектор). Instead, Mayakovsky asserts, the “tractor will sound forth” as “the most convincing electro-lecturer” (Речь / об вас / разгромыхает трактор — / самый убедительный электролектор), and “a million of chimneys / will write / the outline of [their] last names” (фамилий ваших вязь / вписывают / миллионы труб).



Figure 3.46 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (7) photomontage (Moscow, GLM, Inv. No. КП 42068_17)

Similarly to the visuals from the previous photomontages, Rozhkov uses the images of factory buildings and chimneys, tractors (“engines on wheels”), motors, and dynamos, thus emphasizing the importance of the increase of technologically advanced and organized production. Further, each of the sense-unit panels of the last Rozhkov’s photomontage has similar rectangular shape. This feature of compositional equivalence functions similarly to the cadence in versification: it represents visual configuration that creates a sense of repose, finality, and resolution. The very last image (fig. 3.47) of the large mining tube/pipe and the workers in and around it is reminiscent of the image of the Red Army soldiers going through “the muzzles of cannons” from the prologue sheet (fig. 3.48). Stylistically, this visual rhyme of the imagery from the beginning and the end of the photo-poem has formulaic function: it provides the photo-poem, similar to the initial and final formulas from the fairy tales, with the so-called “ring structure.” Semantically, however, it proves the assertion made by historian Sheila Fitzpatrick: that the first Five Year Plan, introduced in 1928 after the end of the NEP era, mobilized both the visual and discursive rhetoric of the War Communism.



Figure 3.47 Yuri Rozhkov: IT WILL BE (7) photomontage (detail)



Figure 3.48 Yuri Rozhkov: prologue photomontage (detail)

3.4 Conclusion

Poster photo-poems by Yuri Nikolaevich Rozhkov represent a unique case among the photo-poetry experiments of the 1920s. His photomontages for Mayakovsky's revolutionary ode "To the Workers of Kursk" fully reflect the energy and enthusiasm from the street scenes, meetings and gatherings, demonstrations and occasional celebrations—the surrounding "political carnival"—of the early post-revolutionary Russia. Various forms of the public display, such as satirical ROSTA Windows, newspaper walls (стенгазеты, *stengazety*), propaganda boards and posters, colorful decorations and political slogans, which permeated public festivals such as the May parade and anniversaries of the October Revolution—left their permanent mark in Rozhkov's graphic art. Overall, Rozhkov's poster photo-poem conflates documentary, propagandistic and satirical aspirations, and is an expression of the social and technological utopianism.

Rozhkov was an orthodox Bolshevik and a long-term employee of the State Department of Information, who must have been in favor of different forms of agitation and propaganda, especially the photomontage. Photomontage was not born during the Russian Revolution, but it promptly moved to its service as a new and progressive means of expression that was most suitable for the language of the revolutionary street. Rozhkov's photomontages for Mayakovsky's "To the Workers of Kursk" are example of sharply topical political propaganda in the reconstruction period of the NEP era, dominated by economic and industrial themes. They are the joyous and genuine expression of the revolutionary faith in a better future, articulated both as the struggle against backwardness and the thirst for technical and industrial modernity.

Rozhkov's photomontages are not only mere propaganda—they are an aesthetically innovative and rich visual metaphor and a synthetic photo-poetry made upon the conflation of typographical verses and photographic and pictorial idioms. Their stark characteristics are the pictorial saturation and conflation of the text and images. What makes them differ from both Rodchenko's and Klutsis' photomontages, is the lack of blank space and the subsequent graphic intensity. In Rozhkov's photomontages, all photographic, pictorial, and typographic elements compactly bond with a simple background, creating a monochrome or multi-colored collage that allows no empty space. The color tones of images highlight the expressive language of his photomontages, creating an effect of the authenticated tactility, convincing and concrete existence of the reproductive photo fragments.

Rozhkov's poster photo-poem is compositionally more complex than *About This*. The basic building resources for both Rozhkov and Rodchenko were materials from illustrated magazines, catalogs, advertisements, as well as original photographs. For the text of Mayakovsky's poem, Rozhkov took various fragments from printed materials (newspapers, magazines, leaflets, brochures, posters, etc.) and mainly with their patchy typographical invoice. These fragments consist of a variety of letters, as if the typesetter mixed up the spilled type pieces of various sizes and fonts, and put them back into a composing stick. Consequently, in Rozhkov's photo-poem, words and letters themselves become images: they are dynamically arranged on the page/sheet in graphic patterns of lines, thus becoming an important component of the overall image quality. The heterogeneous typographic text in Rozhkov's photo-poetry functions as an active and organic visual insert. Similar merger of the text and photo-image one finds in Klutsis' propaganda posters, Rodchenko's commercial advertisings, and film posters during the 1920s and early 1930s in Soviet Union, but not in the photo-poetry books at the time.

(Nevertheless, there are few exceptions outside the Soviet Russia. A good example is Vilém Szpyk, a Czech poet who published his “photosyntheses” as separate photo-poems in Czech magazines).²³⁵

In addition, Rozhkov created anecdotal, bioscopic photomontages, dividing each of them—along with the verses—into segments or sequences representing circled sense-units of Mayakovsky’s poem. In most cases, Rozhkov framed these segments into irregularly shaped two-dimensional panels, thus transforming them into filmic scenes. In a few instances, however, he left them unframed and opened for more intimate interaction with other pictorial elements on the page. These segments, together with the text used to explain varied images within these sense-units, create different rhythm and tempo of reading the verses than the one of Mayakovsky’s stepladder (*lesenka*). The text of the poem is consistently atomized throughout Rozhkov’s photomontages, so it acts differently than as in Mayakovsky’s poem alone. It establishes a new reading protocol—a new convention, different from the rhetorical pathos of the stepladder rhythm. In Rozhkov’s photomontages, we read Mayakovsky’s verses differently, at different intervals, with different emphases and pauses, as if we are following the text that “reads” the visuals.

It is this *segmentivity* and *sequencing* that creates cinematic effect of Rozhkov’s photo-poem. The bioscopic quality of Rozhkov’s photomontage series is clearly suggested by the continuous unfolding of the separate scenes, “read” by the syntagmatic segments of verses that correspond to each of these specific cinematic sections.

In general, Rozhkov’s photomontages are literal illustrations of Mayakovsky’s verses. A number of times, however, Rozhkov uses visual means to provide clear political supplement to

²³⁵ See Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, pp. 297-301.

the content of the poem. In both cases, though, such literal, sequential and pictorial expression evokes revolutionary enthusiasm that excludes any speculation.

Rozhkov's use of the photographic documentary material for the cultural critique and satirical commentary locates him in close proximity to the tradition of the Dadaist and early Rodchenko's photomontages. But the force of the ideological doctrine and agitation propaganda which one recognizes on Rozhkov's photomontages is, certainly, what brings his work closer to Klutis's, Senekin's and Kulagina's contributions to the graphic art.

Finally, there is no need to discard Rozhkov's photomontages as random amateurish exercise in propaganda or as a work without continuation and further development, as Szymon Bojko does.²³⁶ Originally infused with the revolutionary street theme and authenticity of evidence, Rozhkov's poster photo-poems gradually surpassed the prevailing stream of educational propaganda represented by the growing professional art of agitation.

²³⁶ Quoted in Remeš's introduction to Majakovský. *Kurským dělníkům, kteří vytěžili první rudu, tento prozatímní pomník vytvořený Vladimírem Majakovským*, p. 12.

CHAPTER 4

Poetry and Typophoto that Remained Forgotten: Mayerová's & Teige's Readings of Nezval's Poems in *Alphabet* (1926)

In the fall of 1925, Karel Teige, the young leader of the Czech avant-garde, returned to Prague from the voyage he took with other left-wing intellectuals to Moscow and Leningrad. To Teige, the visit to the land of the Bolsheviks must have been of extraordinary importance. His enthusiastic comments on the pragmatic and rational organization of the Socialist system, published in his 1926-7 article “Constructivism and new architecture in the Soviet Union” in the journal *Stavba*, reveal that he perceived true Constructivism to be, “not painting, decoration, sculpture, mannered poetry, but an immense and touching poetry: economic and productive renewal, the famous 100% of the production [...] this is the soul of Constructivism.”²³⁷ Teige was mesmerized by the Soviet socialist design that used every means and method scientifically in order to build a new society. In the ideological and sociological profile of this design—which in his understanding turned the USSR into a “Socialist America”—he recognized the origins of Constructivism.

Teige's graphic design of the 1926 book *Abeceda* (Alphabet), however, does not reflect this shift from purely aesthetic motives to reasons of an ideological and sociological nature.²³⁸

²³⁷ Teige, “Konstruktivismus a nova architektura v SSSR,” p. 24.

²³⁸ Vítězslav Nezval, *Abeceda: Taneční kompozice: Milča Mayerová* (Alphabet: Dance compositions: Milča Mayerová), graphic design by Karel Teige, photographs by Karel Paspá (Prague: J. Otto, 1926). Issued in two thousand copies. All translations and original verses quoted in this chapter are from Vítězslav Nezval, *Alphabet*, transl. Jindřich Toman and Matthew S. Witkovsky (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 2001).

Quite the contrary, it makes a strong and clear statement that Constructivism is a productive method for modern work in general, as the 1924 manifesto of Poetism defines it.²³⁹ The book *Alphabet* is perhaps most accurately described as a prime expression of Czech Poetism by the following words from Teige's manifesto: "Poetism is not only the opposite of Constructivism, but also its indispensable complement. It is based on its layout."²⁴⁰ Frequently (and validly) referred to as "one of the best-designed books of the European avant-garde," "the highest achievement of avant-garde typography of the twenties," and "a key symbol of Devětsil," the 1926 book *Alphabet* fully manifests a revolutionary synthesis of verbal and visual signs and "interest in photography and photomontage in printed form" heralded by Poetism, and a synthesis of Poetism and Constructivism, as understood by Teige.²⁴¹

This remarkable product of the Czech avant-garde, the visual part of which Teige showed at the groundbreaking Stuttgart exhibition *Film und Foto* in 1929, is conceived as the collaborative project of the Czech artists' collective Devětsil members — a poet, a dancer, and a graphic designer. It is also recognized as the "artistic manifesto" of the Devětsil group.²⁴²

²³⁹ "Constructivism is the method of all productive work." Teige, "Poetism," p. 69. Originally published in *Host* 3, no. 9-10 (July 1924), pp. 197-204. Poetism is recognized as the notion "central to the Czech avant-garde group Devětsil," and also as this group's "main contribution to modern art theory." (Levinger, "Czech Avant-Garde Art: Poetry for the Five Senses," p. 513).

²⁴⁰ Teige, "Poetism," p. 67.

²⁴¹ Primus, "Book Architecture," p. 44; Šrp, "Karel Teige and the New Typography," p. 56; Witkovsky, "Staging Language: Milča Mayerová and the Czech Book *Alphabet*," p. 114; Toman, *Foto/Montáž Tiskem // Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 78, and also pp. 293-296; and Reisingerova de Puineuf, "Devětsil à la page: Le livre ALPHABET et sa place dans l'avant-garde tchèque," p. 85.

²⁴² The Czech avant-garde group Devětsil was founded in October 1920 in a Prague café, and lasted until about 1930. Initially, Devětsil adhered to the proletarian ideology, praising local traditions and condemning social injustice. However, with the emergence of Poetism as an artistic movement, Devětsil refused to employ art as a weapon of class struggle and rejected the idea of the proletarian art. The group included various artists: poets (Seifert, Vančura, Nezval, Halas, Voskovec), painters (Šima, Štyrsky, Toyen, Mrkvička, Jelenek), architects (Honyik, Obrtel, Fragner, Linhart), musicians (Ponc, Pešánek), and theater artists (Honzl, Frejka, and others who were involved with Devětsil's *Liberated Theater*, *Osvobozené Divadlo*). The very name of the group has two different meanings. First, its literal translation is "nine forces," referring to the initial number of its members. However, as the poet Jaroslav Seifert asserted, this was never a true reason for the choice of the

Alphabet is a complex whole, consisting of a series of stanzas (predominantly rhymed quatrains) by Devětsil poet Vítěslav Nezval and a series of “typophotos” by Nezval’s close friend, the leading theorist and spokesman of Devětsil, Karel Teige. Nezval’s quatrains are printed on the left pages of the book, facing Teige’s graphic designs on the right, which combine typophotos based on photographs of dancer and choreographer Milada (Milča) Mayerová, a recent affiliate of the Devětsil group. Each double page of the book exemplifies the juxtaposition of the several *writings*—poetry, typography, photography, and choreography—all of which are dedicated, more or less directly, to each letter of the Latin alphabet. In this form, *Alphabet* became a representative work of “poetry for all senses,” one of the most inventive multimedia creations of the 1920s Czech avant-garde, a simultaneous junction of several artistic genres and media (text, image/photography, photomontage, modern typography, dance), synthesis of creative postulates of the new art of the Devětsil group, completely in the spirit of avant-garde requirements.

This chapter explores *Alphabet* as the unique bioscopic book of Czech Poetism and an experiment in specific technology with the “continuous-page sequence,” which enables the reader/viewer to enjoy the cinematic quality of the book on several levels. The two main sections and a subsequent conclusion comprise this chapter. The first section focuses on the various experiments in Czech poetry and graphic arts that eventually led to the creation of its distinctive bioscopic book. Each of the subsections in the first section of this chapter elaborates on different concepts, such as bioscopic art, cinema, picture poems and photomontage poetry, typography and typophoto. The second section of this chapter examines the 1926 book *Alphabet* in more detail and offers an explanation of its *paradoxical duality* under which it operates. This section

name. The word also refers to the eponymous plant, a cornflower, which possesses mysterious and curative powers (*Butterburr*). Jindřich Toman suggested a different reading of the word Devětsil, as “nine powers” that, combining “nine” as in “nine muses” and “powers” as in “horsepower,” stands for “a modern, ‘engine driven’ start beyond traditional pantheon of nine muses.” (Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 82, fn. 37).

expands on each of the three participants in authorship of the bioscopic book and analyzes their original contributions. The conclusion turns to the Czech avant-garde project of its bioscopic book as a unique experiment in poetic creation.

4.1 Czech Poetism and Genesis of its Bioscopic Book

A glimpse into the early days of the Devětsil group reveals that Karel Teige envisioned the conceptual framework of the bioscopic book around the same time as Vítězslav Nezval conceived his poetic cycle *Alphabet*. On Christmas of 1922, Nezval, a young and still unknown poet, wrote twenty-five poems on the letters of the alphabet. Born in Moravia in 1900, Nezval arrived in Prague when he was twenty, in order to follow the lectures of the great literary critic Frantisek Xaver Šalda. Two years later he became friends with Teige and joined the avant-garde group Devětsil. The two men jointly defined Poetism that would animate Devětsil until the 1930s, before its members would adhere to surrealism. Through his poetic cycle *Alphabet*, Nezval reacted against the ideological approach to poetry, which was flourishing in the so-called Proletkult era. The poems were initially published in the spring of 1923, in the first issue of the journal *Disk*; Nezval reworked them a year later in his *Pantomime* (Pantomime), a program display of Poetism's poetics.²⁴³ In both cases, Karel Teige designed the typesetting.

In the same 1923 issue of the journal *Disk*, Teige published his article "Painting and poetry" (Malířství a poezie), proposing "the fusion of modern images with modern poetry" in

²⁴³ *Disk* was one of the most important journals of the Czech avant-garde. Only two numbers have been published: the first in 1923, the second in 1925.

what he called *picture poems*.²⁴⁴ After acknowledging that the “aesthetic has become photogenic and lively,” Teige went to explain how the modern eye has been re-educated by the “new mechanical age of the electric century” that proposes “new forms to enchant the eye.”²⁴⁵ These new forms—primarily mechanically reproduced photography, photomontage, and cinema—are changing not only the art of painting, but literature and poetry as well. The picture, according to Teige, “is either a poster—that is, public art, like the cinema, sports, and tourism, with its place in the street—or a poem, pure visual poetry, without literature, with its place in the book, a book of reproduction.”²⁴⁶ Also, the poem is meant to be read rather than recited, since its expression is no longer primarily phonetic but “first and foremost optical, plastic, and typographic.”²⁴⁷

The poem and picture mutually interfere and influence each other. The exchange of the distinct qualities guaranteeing poetry and painting the status of autonomous arts results in the transgression of their custom boundaries. This fusion, asserts Teige, should lead both to “the liquidation of traditional modes of making pictures and writing poetry” and the production of picture poems in picture books: “Books of picture poems will need to be published. Methods of mechanical reproduction will assure the wide popularization of art. It is not museums or exhibitions, but print that mediates between artistic production and the spectator.”²⁴⁸

In the finale of his essay, Teige blueprinted the three fundamentals, as this chapter will demonstrate, for the 1926 unique bioscopic book of Czech avant-garde:

²⁴⁴ After asserting, “Art is one, and it is poetry,” Teige announced, “In *Disk 2*, you will see *picture poems* [...]: the association of painting and poetry.” Teige, “Painting and Poetry,” p. 368. Originally published as “Malířství a poezie,” *Disk 1* (May 1923).

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

Constructivism

Contemporary architecture is dominated by the aesthetic of Purism, it is Constructivist, it is neither decorative nor applied art. Modern constructions and materials (concrete, glass, and iron) subjected to the laws of economy and function have given us harmonious groupings and proportions, a lofty and poetical beauty worthy of its time.

Poetism

Thanks to Cubism, painting and poetry, once dominated by ideology, have become pure poetry. The picture poem is born.

Bioscopic Art

Biomechanics is the only dramatic spectacle of the present: sport, cinema.²⁴⁹

Constructive principle, exemplified by the Purist aesthetic of architecture, is for Teige the scientific basis and method of Poetism, which in turn, as an artistic supplement of Constructivism, has spawned the picture poems as a product of a fusion of painting and poetry. In Teige's early aesthetic theory, the third stage of development of the new art, the planning of a future, as he calls it, belongs to the 'bioscopic art,' which is designed as an artistic ideal and as an aesthetic utopia. Contrary to the scholars who are prone to claim that the aesthetic utopia of bioscopic art has never been realized and that it can therefore be considered merely programmatic, i.e. "a typical expression of the avant-garde program,"²⁵⁰ this chapter demonstrates that *Alphabet* fulfills the previously mentioned aesthetic ideal in the form of the bioscopic book and embodies the aforementioned avant-garde 'program' in its thoughtful design.

This chapter will show that the architecture of the *Alphabet* book fully embodies the basic and constructive principles of Purism through its simple, sober and effective design; that its double page montage of verses, typography, and photography exemplifies the visual creation that goes beyond the Poetist picture poem and is executed with the clarity of modern typography based on the premises of the rational page design; and, finally, that its innovative use of

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Fabian, "Kinographie und Poesie: Zur Medianästhetik der tschechischen Avantgarde," p. 293.

“typophotos” along with the series of snapshots of the liberated dancer’s body throughout “the continuous-page sequence” introduce the filmic quality of the Bioscopic Art.

4.1.1 Bioscopic Art

Teige coined the term ‘bioscopic art’ by borrowing the name of one of the earliest cinematic projection machines—the Bioscope projector, which the brothers Max and Emil Skladanowsky developed in Berlin-Pankow in the same year in which the Lumière brothers assembled their more successful cinematograph in France. In his 1922 programmatic piece “Foto Kino Film” (Photo Cinema Film)—the gradation of which is echoed in Moholy-Nagy’s 1925 book *Painting Photography Film*—Teige surveys various discoveries that led to the emergence of cinema.²⁵¹

Among these he mentions “Edison’s *Biographe* and *Bioscope*,” thus confusing Edison with Georges Demenÿ, who registered both of these inventions.²⁵² Although Teige was not quite precise where the term bioscopic originated from, he was nevertheless aware of the significance that the materialization of cinematographic apparatus had for the whole new world of aesthetic possibilities: “The invention of the *cinematograph* opened up a rich new territory for art; it was

²⁵¹ Teige’s study first appeared in the second volume of the anthology *Život: Sborník nové krásy* (Life: an anthology of the new beauty) in 1922. The anthology was published annually beginning in 1921 by the traditional art association Umělecka beseda (Art union), and its second volume, *Život II*, was devoted to Devětsil. See Teige, “Photo Cinema Film,” p. 126.

²⁵² Georges Demenÿ was the French inventor and long-term collaborator of Étienne-Jules Marey. “On 22 August 1895 Demenÿ and sleeping partner Léon Gaumont signed their first contract, and in November the Phonoscope (renamed Bioscope) was offered for sale. Early in 1896, the Biographe camera using 60 mm unperforated film was also on offer. Projection by means of Phonoscope/Bioscope discs offered a very brief entertainment. The Biographe camera was already archaic in 1896, in contrast to those of Lumière or de Bedts, and Demenÿ’s machines were a financial failure.” (See Laurent Mannoni, “Georges Demenÿ,” *Who’s Who of Victorian Cinema: A Worldwide Survey*. <<http://www.victorian-cinema.net/demeny>>). In addition, the American Mutoscope and biograph Company, co-founded by Edison’s former employee William Kennedy Laurie Dickinson, developed the projector also called the Biograph, which surpassed Edison’s older Vitascope projection.

almost literally the discovery of a new world.”²⁵³ Of course, Teige was not alone in his use of the term ‘bioscopic’ at the time; as we have seen in the introduction of the dissertation, Russian constructivist El Lissitzky used the same phrase in his 1923 article “Topography of Typography” to imply the cinematic projector was the proper ‘model’ for his vision of the new bioscopic book as an alternative ‘suggestion apparatus.’

The ‘bioscopic art’ is for Teige a new (poetist) film art that expresses the speed and the sensations of modern life, ‘the pleasures of the electric century’ with a new visual poetry, and builds on the human body that is the most suitable medium for the creation, mediation, and consumption of this new art. For Teige, the bioscopic art of the present is the spectacle of ‘biomechanics,’ made visible by sport and cinema.²⁵⁴ Teige is, however, much more specific about the common characteristics of sport and cinema in his 1924 manifesto-like text “The Aesthetic of Film and *Cinégraphie*,” published in the journal *Pásmo*. The features that these two share are “the loss of live, spoken, and melodic words” and the “bodies in motion.”²⁵⁵

The first characteristic, according to Teige, “has ushered in a *new expressivity*,” so that sport and cinema became among the most important examples of modern poetry without words, “which day by day becomes more visual and optical in order to compensate for the diminishing

²⁵³ Teige, “Photo Cinema Film,” p. 125.

²⁵⁴ It is very possible that Teige was familiar with the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold, a famous Russian director, actor, and reformer of stage art, who founded *biomechanics* as a system for actor preparation that was originally a synthesis of gymnastics and acrobatic tricks, which allows the actor to consciously and expediently control the mechanism of his movements and energy. Biomechanics acts through bodily form in order to stimulate emotions.

²⁵⁵ Teige, “The Aesthetic of Film and *Cinégraphie*,” p. 150. The journal *Pásmo* was another important magazine of Czech avant-garde started by the Devětsil group in 1924, in which Teige, Artuš Černík, Jindřich Honzl, Bedřich Václavěk, and others published articles on film. The title of journal both referred to Guillaume Apollinaire’s poem “Zone” (translated in Czech as “Pásmo” by Karel Čapek in 1919) and to the filmstrip or celluloid chain of images. *Pásmo I* was first published in Brno in 1924, and then in the next year in a smaller format— in Prague as *Pásmo II*. It had a much less literary orientation than *Disk*. The content of the *Pásmo* magazine was very heterogeneous: next to manifestos and theoretical texts, there were articles on literature, science, and art. This diverse style matched the desire of Devětsil to embrace life in its various manifestations.

value and efficiency of words.”²⁵⁶ The second common feature of cinema and sport was foreshadowed by the word ‘biomechanics:’ “Film actors have no need to recite literature, they are acrobats, jugglers, and clowns; the prosody of film is not the prosody of elevated speech, but the *prosody of bodies in motion*.”²⁵⁷ This conception of the human as a body—the transformation of subjectivity by the concept of body—along with the loss of live and spoken word, is exactly what enables Teige to bring the sport and cinema, the body and machine into the equation with the concept of bioscopic art.

4.1.2 Film as a Poetist Machine

Teige’s 1922-1924 theoretical texts disseminated through the key Devětsil publications—periodicals and anthologies—reveal that the eventual formation of the Czech Poetism and its program brought with it a specific conception of film. Namely, for Teige, the whole outside world had become a proto-cinematic poem, since it had been mediated by the modern technologies of image production and reproduction that themselves make the world appear beautiful, enhanced, sensational, simultaneously lyric, epic, and dramatic, in a word—poetic. The ‘world out there,’ Teige writes, is “simply a time-space continuum and its art is the *chronospatial poem*.”²⁵⁸

The general cinefication of reality is enabled by the saturation of modern culture by mechanically reproduced images—the proliferation of photography in illustrated weeklies, and the spread of the cinema as an entirely new art form. The illustrated weeklies and visual magazines, especially those of England and America, represent for Teige the modern *curiosity*

²⁵⁶ Teige, “The Aesthetic of Film and *Cinégraphie*,” p. 150.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 146.

cabinet. These are abundant in modern photographs, which beauty is “as an elaborate documentary” that “amazes not only modern spirits, but also antique collectors.”²⁵⁹ According to Teige, both photography and film play a crucial role in contemporary comprehension of the modern world: “Photography is the most qualified of all the arts to interpret the rhythm, poetry, and incessant drama of events around the globe in the most pregnant and authentic manner. The film band (*pásmo*) is able to capture more of world’s beauty than a hymnal poem.”²⁶⁰

Photographs and film played a crucial role in different avant-garde movements, since they were able to give to the experience of everyday life an objective, rapid, visual and technically perfect expression. They placed the men in the center of the theater of the everyday and provided the ultimate, sensational entertainment the domains of which are adventure and fantasy.

Writing about the contemporary films of Chaplin and Fairbanks, in his 1922 “Photo Cinema Film” essay, Teige asserts how “the epic quality of modern life and the enormity of the world are palpable in these works; it [the film] is not merely the world in pictures, but a poem of the modern world itself.”²⁶¹ In his 1924 essay, Teige repeats that film is “100% modern poetry” that is “all-encompassing, precise, succinct, and synthetic.”²⁶² As “a *cinéplastic poem* [*kinoplastická báseň*] thrust into time” and thus endowed with the “persistence and action,” as a

²⁵⁹ Teige, “Photo Cinema Film,” p. 129.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 130.

²⁶¹ Ibid, p. 144.

²⁶² “It is the poetry of the travel journal, the Eiffel Tower, Baedeker, the poster, and the postcard, of maps, anecdotes, and slapstick comedies, the poetry of nostalgic souvenirs, for memories of cities are like memories of love; it is the poetry of cafés filled with lamps and smoke, the song of modern sirens of the Red Star Line[r], the tourist poetry of long corridors of hotels and argosies, with their mysterious, numbered doors to rooms and cabins.” Teige, “The Aesthetic of Film and *Cinégraphie*,” p. 147.

“*time-space poem*” that does not require words, music, or rhyme, film is the new art that “ceases to be art” and “positions itself in the center of life by overstepping the boundaries of art.”²⁶³

In turn, cinema brought an entirely new outlook on the surrounding modern world that Teige defines as Poetism—not literature or painting, not –ism or art, but “above all a *modus vivendi*.”²⁶⁴ Looking at the entire ‘world out there’ through the new ‘optical’ lenses of Poetism, Teige recognizes that the only survivor after “the burial of artistic tradition” is “*one singular art with many forms*, and this is living *poetry*.”²⁶⁵ For Teige, the only existing aesthetics is that of poetry. The standards and laws of this *ars una* are formulated through the processes of transposition (instead of description) and the use of technology, mechanical precision, and ideographic schematization. In other words, it is “the spirit of constructivism” as “the spirit of wisdom” that regulates the aesthetic standards and laws of this *singular* art: “Constructivism is a method of work; poetism is the atmosphere of life. Constructivism has rigorous rules. Poetism, being both free and without borders [...] is the art of life.”²⁶⁶ In the same vein, the representatives of Poetism and Constructivism are brothers-in-arts: “clowns and *fantaisistes* [meaning both a dreamer and a music-hall artist] are brothers to laborers and engineers.”²⁶⁷

Time and again, Teige links together the image of body and machine when he is explaining either the synthesis of Poetism and Constructivism or his vision of the Bisocopic Art. The skillful performance of modern physical culture meets the technical perfection of machine in many instances of Teige’s writing. Teige explains the performance of the Poetist comedy upon

²⁶³ Teige, “The Aesthetic of Film and *Cinégraphie*,” pp. 149-150.

²⁶⁴ Primus, “Book Architecture,” p. 43.

²⁶⁵ Teige, “The Aesthetic of Film and *Cinégraphie*,” p. 151.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

the firm foundation of Constructivist life-wisdom: “In order for [a] Japanese acrobat to not kill himself on the trapeze, it is necessary for the trapeze to be solidly mounted and well constructed.”²⁶⁸ In the machine, Teige identifies not only the foundation that satisfies all human “primary and daily needs,” but also the model of technical perfection that modern art must reach and achieve.²⁶⁹ The limber human bodies of acrobats, comedians, clowns, boxers, singers, and dancers, of all these “modern wandering minstrels, of globetrotter troubadours, who are citizens of the world,” restlessly haunt Teige’s imagination. For him, these are contemporary romantic nomads who feel at home in places such as the circus, variété, and music hall, the ballet, pantomime, and cabaret, the folk festivals, suburban dance halls, and finally, in sports. The character, meaning, and vital mission of these bodies and the environments in which they are performing their physical skills are, according to Teige, “most closely related to cinema. They are exotic, like cinema. They are international, their expressive language being some sort of artistic Ido or Esperanto, just as with cinema.”²⁷⁰

This is to say that the ultimate goal of Bioscopic Art, as the conflation of sport and cinema, Poetist *joie de vivre* and Constructivist method, is the development of a universal language. This is yet another important utopian projection of the 1920s European avant-gardes, which Teige advocates throughout many of his manifesto-like essays. In Teige’s manifestos such as “Optical Film” and “Poetism,” both published in 1924, for example, one can find the same ideas of creating an international language “of optical standards, like those of semaphore and

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ “Modern art must come to terms with the machine. It does so much more appropriately with photography and film [...] Modern images and modern poetry conjoin and interfuse in film. The visual and poetic emotionality of cinema is unconditionally dependent on cinema’s technical perfection. New inventions in photography and projection can lead us directly [...] toward new poetic expressions.” Teige, “The Aesthetic of Film and *Cinégraphie*,” p. 151.

²⁷⁰ Teige, “Photo Cinema Film,” p. 137.

traffic signs” and of the new poetic language as “heraldry: the language of signs” that “works with standards.”²⁷¹ In this regard, the alphabet with its elementary linguistic structure appears to be the most suitable model and objective for the utopian project of a universal language.²⁷²

The 1926 bioscopic book *Alphabet* stands for an experimental and poetic achievement of such a project, fulfilling the prophesied words from the 1923 manifesto “Picture” by Devěšil artist and photographer Jindřich Štyrský: “Our project will not be fever dreams, utopias; they will be objectively poetic.”²⁷³ As an alternative suggestive apparatus of the Czech avant-garde, with its large print format, childlike verses, and sequence of instructional typophotos matching a single letter on every double page, *Alphabet* presents itself not only as the class reader for “internationally sponsored course in universal reeducation,” but also as a specific technology-based primer for modern visual literacy and montage thinking.²⁷⁴

4.1.3 Picture Poems: Photography and Photomontage Poetry

At first glance it may seem paradoxical that Teige approached photography through cinema, but on closer inspection, this appears to be a logical way. Film, which is based on the photographic image, is at this time *de facto* the only environment in which the photographic image is not distorted, where photography speaks its specific qualities and becomes a real means of communication and artistic expression of the modern era. Teige compares the beauty of photography with that of technology:

²⁷¹ Teige, “Film I.—Optický film,” pp. 10-11; and Teige, “Poetism,” p. 69.

²⁷² As art historian Matthew S. Witkovsky writes, “From Dada poetry to Constructivist architecture and design, from calls to overhaul theater to revolutions in literary theory, a panoply of experiments took the alphabet as their model or target and disclosed the potency of this elementary linguistic structure as a trope for creative renewal and social revolution.” Witkovsky, “Staging Language: Milča Mayerová and the Czech Book *Alphabet*,” p. 114.

²⁷³ Štyrský, “Picture,” p. 367. Originally published as “Obraz,” *Disk* no. 1 (May 1923).

²⁷⁴ Witkovsky, “Staging Language: Milča Mayerová and the Czech Book *Alphabet*,” p. 114.

The Beauty of photography is of the same ilk as the beauty of an airplane or a transatlantic ship or an electric light bulb. It is the product of the machine as well as work of the human hands, the human brain, and, if you will, the human heart.²⁷⁵

Just as Berlin Dadaist Raul Hausmann situates photomontage between film and painting in his 1933 “Photomontage” text, so does Karel Teige with photography in his 1922 “Photo Cinema Film.” He writes: “The relationship of film to the fine arts is mediated by photography,” and “Photography mediates cinema’s relationship and connection to the visual arts, to painting.”²⁷⁶ Teige discovers the true photographic poetry, however, in Man Ray’s photograms (rayograms), presented in the album ‘Champs délicieux,’ with an introduction by Tristan Tzara:

Here, for the first time, photography stands side by side with painting and graphic art. [...] In creating these ‘direct’ photographs, Man Ray completely abstained from using photographic plates or lenses. They are subjects unto themselves; they are picture poems. [...] At times it is almost phantasmagorical.²⁷⁷

It appears that the innovative images depicting reality are not necessarily realistic documentary pictures, but those that can *form* a new reality, as in the work of an inventive author who executes her idea by circumventing the camera apparatus. Only the final picture, living its own life, is the result of the creative process that depends, in part, on an imprint of reality itself: “Here, photography gains its own independent and competent language. Nowhere, not even here,

²⁷⁵ “The refinement of photography multiplies its beauty and enhances its clarity, its realism, and its documentary aspects. These qualities, which constitute the intrinsic sense of photography, are betrayed by the typical ‘artistic’ photography of Europe [...] photography is the most qualified of all the arts to interpret the rhythm, poetry, and incessant drama of events around the globe [...] Yes, *in reality and verisimilitude lies the morality of photography.*” (Teige, “Photo Cinema Film,” pp. 129-130). Here, the parallel between Teige and Karel Čapek’s text “Praise Photo” (Chvále fotografie) from his 1918 book *The Humblest Art* (Nejskromnější umění) is obvious: emphasis on “purity” of the photographic process, the use of photography as a “witness of the era” in documentary photography and photojournalism, and perhaps his most important observation—the concept of the photographer as creator. Unlike Čapek, Teige separated the creative work of photographer from the mechanical work of camera, which allowed him to set photography on the same level as the other arts.

²⁷⁶ Teige, “Photo Cinema Film,” p. 134; 128.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 133.

can photography abandon reality; it can become *super-real* [*nadrealistickou*].”²⁷⁸ The circumvention of the standardized cinematic apparatus—camera and lenses—and the eventual creation of an alternative ‘suggestion apparatus’ is the common feature for both concepts of Teige’s picture poems and the bioscopic book.

It should be emphasized that the notion of picture poems (*obrazové básně*) was conceived in close proximity with cinema. The Poetist enchantment with film, according to Jaroslav Anděl and Petr Szczepanik, had a palpable effect on Devětsil’s work in a number of artistic disciplines and inspired experimentation in the creation of new artistic genres, such as the ‘picture poem’ and ‘film poem.’ “The picture poem was a visual creation similar to the Dadaist or constructivist collage or photomontage, whereas the film poem was a literary work resembling a film libretto or screenplay in form. Both were intended to demonstrate Poetism’s ambition to merge modern painting and modern poetry.”²⁷⁹ According to Zdenek Primus, picture poems had to serve as a model for film, they were meant for films and with the intention to be transposed into movement. Similarly, Karel Srp writes that Teige saw the picture poems as the first stage of the movies, “which he never had the opportunity to shoot, even though he wrote some scripts together with Jaroslav Seifert, representing a sort of concise demonstration of the aesthetic of Poetism, where the most disparate artistic genres mingle.”²⁸⁰ These arguments are mainly based upon Teige’s writings. Namely, Teige provided a concise explanation of how these poems and scores, which he himself called “lyric films,” had to be transposed into movement. Such passages, outlining the transfer process of his 1924 picture poem “Odjezd na Kytheru” (The departure for Cythera) to film can be found in his 1925 book *Film* (**fig. 4.1**):

²⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 132.

²⁷⁹ Anděl and Szczepanik, “Czech Film Thought: An Introduction,” p. 37.

²⁸⁰ Srp, “Karel Teige and the New Typography,” p. 55; Primus, “Book Architecture,” p. 44.

Moment of lyrical film:

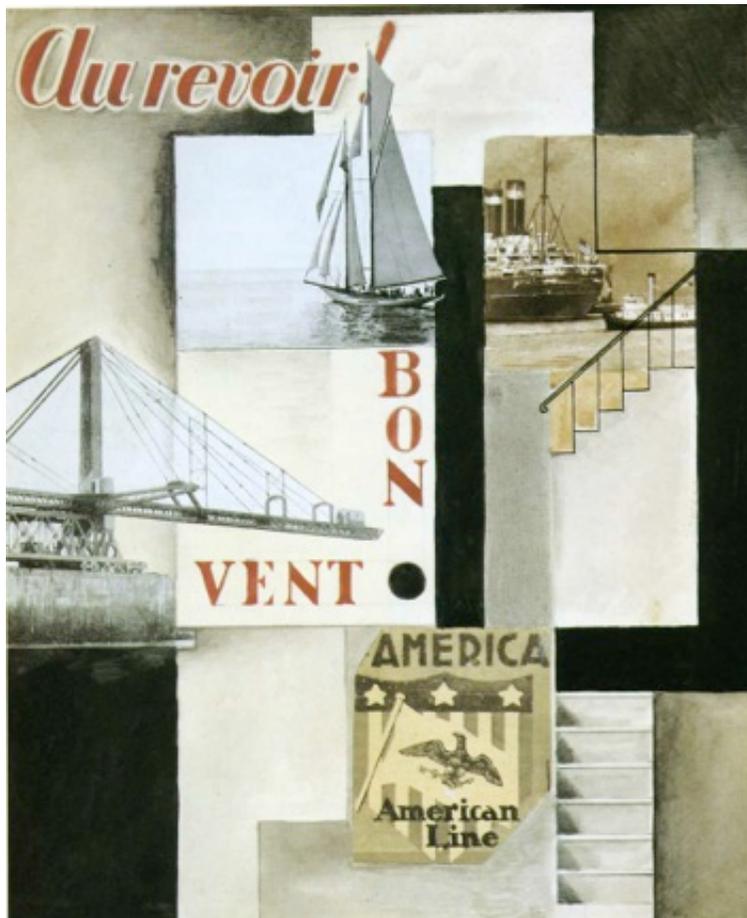
I: Geometric abstract, moving composition.

II: The composition becomes increasingly detailed: the harbor, the steamers, the crane, the manifesto appear.

III: At the same time: the crane turns to one of the positions requested by the composition (horizontal) and to the top right a speedboat crosses the harbor, leaving a white wake behind it (important for the composition)

IV: The sailboat slowly begins to move, it turns, leaning toward one side, and disappears in the distance, becoming smaller and smaller. On the stairs to the right a hand, waving a white handkerchief, appears

V: The sailboat disappears definitively in the distance: aluminous sign suddenly appears: “Aurevoir! Bon vent!”²⁸¹



**Figure 4.1 Karel Teige: picture poem “Odjezd na Kythery”
(The Departure for Cythera, 1924).**

²⁸¹ Teige, *Film*, p. 125.

Finally, Jindřich Toman underlines that Teige himself recognized the importance of the print format for picture poems in his aforementioned 1923 essay “Painting and poetry:” “Besides the idea that picture poems will ‘solve’ (a Jakobsonian-constructivist notion!) problems resulting from the tension between word and image, there appears the idea of the liquidation of art through mechanical reproduction. Indeed, Teige introduces picture poems as art for print and considers print media, not the exhibition hall, to be their natural environment.”²⁸² Since shooting the film was expensive, Toman concludes that the benefit of (both creation and consumption of) picture poems in print was “meant to be maximal—an art accessible to all at minimal cost.”²⁸³

One can find the natural inclination of picture poems toward print media from the very inception of this uniquely Czech avant-garde genre. Namely, Teige initially launched the concept of picture poems in programmatic collection *Život: Sborník nové krásy* (Life: an anthology of the new beauty), which front cover featured a photomontage fundamentally different from the work of the Berlin Dada (**fig 4.2**).²⁸⁴ This photomontage, as a collective work of four artists (Karel Teige, painter Josef Šíma, and architects Bedřich Feuerstein and Jaromír Krejcar), was an appropriation of the juxtaposition of images that illustrated Le Corbusier’s article in the Purist review *L’Esprit Nouveau* linking “the age of Renault with the age of Phidias.”²⁸⁵ This simple,

²⁸² Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 88.

²⁸³ Ibid. For more on picture poems in Czech avant-garde, see Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, pp. 83-93; and Srp, “Optical Words: Picture Poem and Poetism,” pp. 56-62.

²⁸⁴ For different interpretations of this photomontage see Dufek, *Moderní fotografie a moderní typografie* (Modern Photography and Modern Typography), pp. 64-97; Primus, “Book Architecture,” pp. 39-40; Srp, “Karel Teige and New Typography,” p. 53; Witkovsky, *Avant-Garde and Center: Devětsil in Czech Culture, 1918-1938*; Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 80.

²⁸⁵ Jindřich Toman was the first to illustrate the link between the cover of Czech magazine (published in December 1922) and the double spread from Le Corbusier’s article “Des Yeux qui ne voient pas... III: Les Autos,” printed in *L’Esprit nouveau* (Paris), no. 10, 1921, pp. 1140-1141. “But while Le Corbusier uses a traditional layout, the Czech authors merge images into a single visual field, exploiting the force of metonymy—only a part of the temple, the column, and only a part of automobile, the wheel, are visible in the resulting image.” (Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 80). In addition, one can find the apparent allusion to

sober, yet effective photomontage on the front cover of *Život II* stimulated the creation of picture poems.

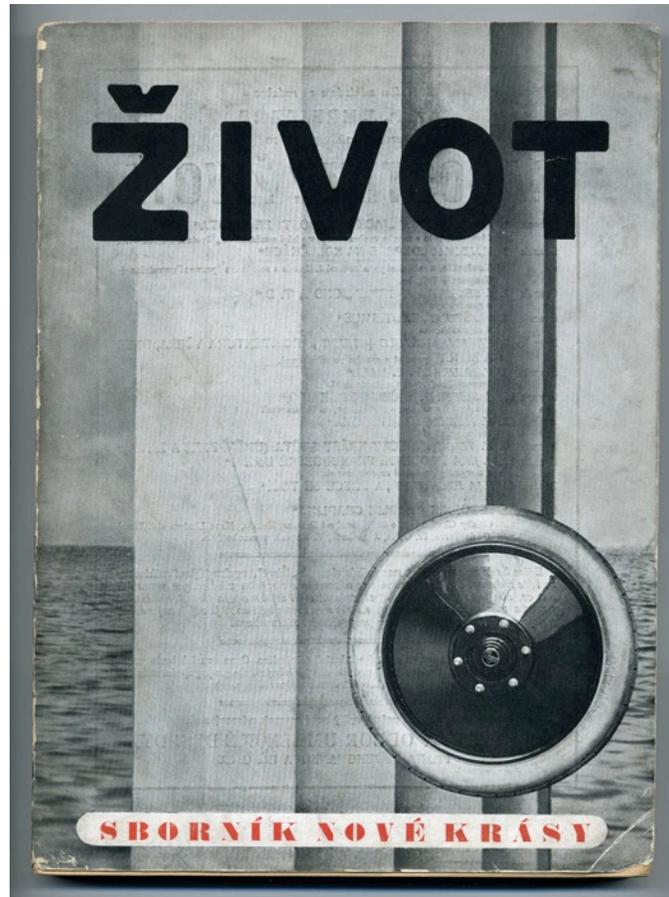


Figure 4.2 Bedřich Feuerstein, Jaromír Krejcar, Josef Šíma, Karel Teige: cover for *Život: Sborník nové krásy* (Life: an anthology of the new beauty, 1922).

A few months later, in the first issue of *Disk* (May 1923), Jindřich Štyrský published his manifesto “Picture” celebrating the active, mechanically reproduced image and its ability to enrich new art forms as projects for a new world—a poster and a picture poem: “The writing in a picture has its practical sense (Poster!) It speaks. [...] The most beautiful poem: a telegram and

the same juxtaposition of the antique temple and modern automobiles in Franz Hellen’s article published just eight months before the Czech collection *Život II*, in El Lissitzky’s and Ilya Ehrenburg’s journal *Veshch*: “You need only put the Parthenon alongside the motor car in order to link the age of the ‘Renault’ with the age of Phidias.” Hellen, “Literature and Cinematography,” *Veshch*, no. 1-2 (March-April) 1922, pp. 11-12.

photograph—economy, truth, brevity.”²⁸⁶ As the only appropriate art of the present, Štyrský recognized “a) a photo [and] b) Graphic art and poetry,” while suggesting that the modernity’s strength and wellness of the avant-garde depend on the techniques of reediting and remodeling, so typical for the photomontage: “The health of the world and its youth depends on the fact that everything is being used up and replaced by new things. That is why the world does not grow old and is younger and more beautiful with every hour.”²⁸⁷ The picture poems have been finally published in print magazines in somewhat larger number in the period between 1924 and 1927, when “at least 15 Devětsil artists of different tendencies contributed to such works.”²⁸⁸

Nevertheless, as Zdenek Primus perceptively remarks, “neither of these picture poems were conceived as a function of a book.”²⁸⁹ Perhaps the most important examples of picture poems in that regard are those on the front covers of the poetry collections by Devětsil poets: the key photomontages of emerging Poetism, Otakar Mrkvička’s cover for Jaroslav Seifert’s 1923 poetry collection *Samá láska* (Only Love) and Štyrský’s cover for Nezval’s 1924 collection of poems *Pantomima* (Pantomime). Occupying book covers as a well-defined public space, these picture poems have noticeably larger dimensions than those reproduced in magazine pages [fig. 4.3 and 4.4]. The two photomontages appear as ‘book posters’ whose elements function as signposts for the book and its contents, as well as promoting the authors and publications of

²⁸⁶ Štyrský, “Picture,” pp. 365-366.

²⁸⁷ Štyrský, “Picture,” p. 366.

²⁸⁸ Šrp, “Karel Teige and New Typography,” p. 55. For example, Teige published two of his picture poems in the March-May 1924 issue of art magazine *Veraikon*, while “other picture poems appear in the spring 1924 issue of the Brno-based Devětsil magazine *Pásmo* (The Reel) and, as promised, in *Disk* no. 2, which appeared in 1925.” Starting from the early 1925 and until 1927, as Toman remarks, picture poems “began to spread beyond the pages of avant-garde magazines” and, due primarily to the proletarian oriented magazine *Reflektor* (Spotlight), became “mass art for the print medium.” (Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 88).

²⁸⁹ See Primus, “Book Architecture,” p. 44.

Devětsil and the group itself.²⁹⁰ In addition, these picture poems feature all the forms of Devětsil iconography as they appeared in poetry and in art.²⁹¹

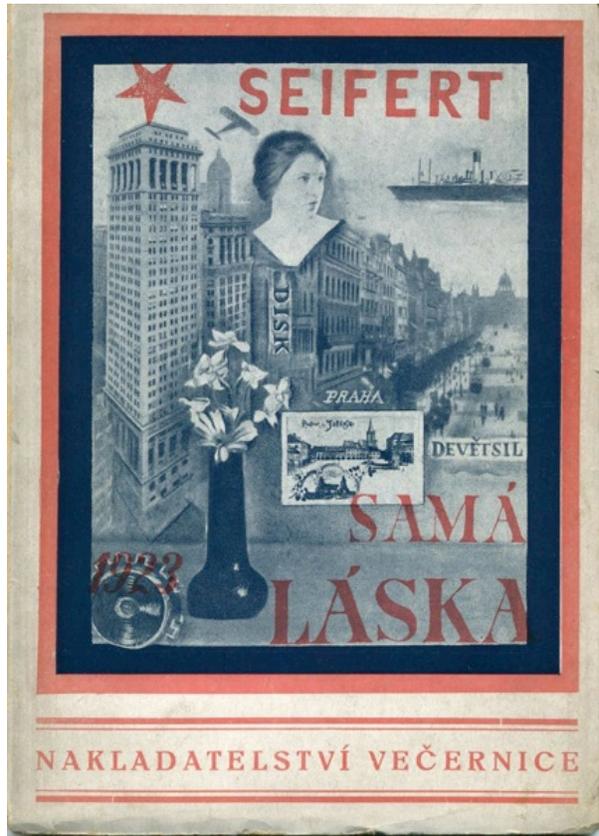


Figure 4.3 Otakar Mrkvička: cover for Jaroslav Seifert's *Samá láska* (Only Love, 1923)

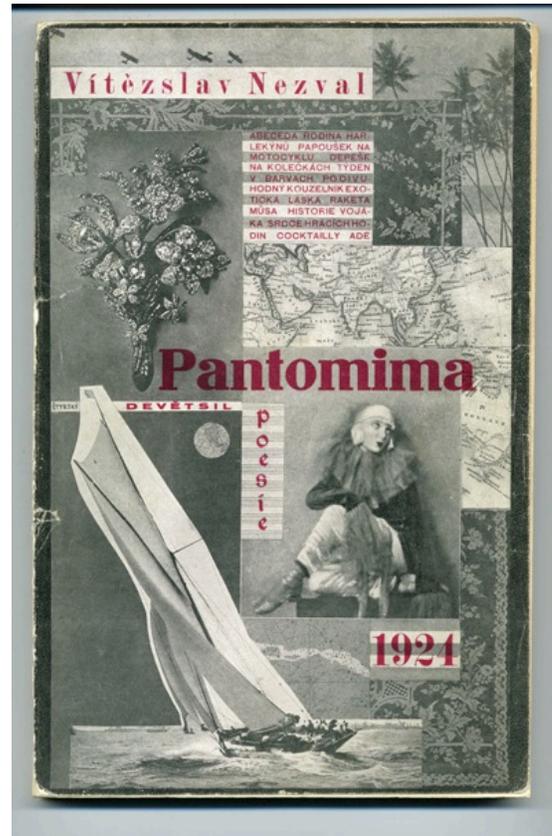


Figure 4.4 Jindřich Štyrský: cover for Nezval's *Pantomima* (Pantomime, 1924)

²⁹⁰ See Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, pp. 77 and 87.

²⁹¹ Štyrský's cover for Nezval's book juxtaposes "maps of continents and the star-studded sky, means of transportation, globes, the gloomy gaze of a dancer, and Karlovy Vary's rose." The covers of *Pantomima* feature "two recurrent motifs known to the typography and literary texts of Devětsil: the pantomime actress and Karlovy Vary's rose. In different forms these motifs can also be found on Otakar Mrkvička's cover of Jaroslav Seifert's second almanac *Sama Laska*, where they are replaced by a female bust and flower in a vase." Mrkvička's cover of Seifert's *Sama laska* also emphasized "the two main sources of inspiration and the orientation of the Devětsil: American industry and Soviet ideology." Srp, "Karel Teige and New Typography," p. 55.

Finally, as Czech poet, essayist and translator František Halas acknowledged in his 1925 essay, these picture poems—which he called “photomontage poetry”—largely build on the genre of a picture postcard.²⁹² In the case of Mrkvička’s cover, it is “the tradition of prankish postcards in the city-of-the-future style” which he, like Dadaists, is able to give “a new reading.”²⁹³ On the other hand, the images of map, globe, and sailing boat on Štyrský’s cover suggest not only an interest in travel and exoticism promoted by Devětsil artists, but also its close connection with the postcard genre.

Another important impulse for the development of the bioscopic book in Czech avant-garde came from the typography and its eventual conflation with photography. Karel Teige, for example, realized the type setting of Nezval’s *Pantomima*, and also participated in the visual realization of the book content.²⁹⁴ Teige made use of different typographical characters for every chapter of *Pantomima*, playing with visual information in a different manner than Futurist Marinetti, in order to create a balanced composition. For Jaroslav Seifert’s *Na vlnách TSF* (On

²⁹² František Halas, “Pohlednice,” pp. 11-12. In his book on Czech avant-garde print culture, Toman reveals the importance of this connection between picture poems and postcards, which is underlined in Halas’s text. (Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 89).

²⁹³ “The composition shows an imaginary version of Prague’s central boulevard, Wenceslas Square, characterized by a rich juxtaposition of images, some hand-drawn, others heavily retouched. Hand-executed lettering is also added, but on the whole there is no doubt as to the work’s photographic substance. The whole is a rich and dynamic photomontage, preserving the idea of the sky of the future as an El Dorado of modern means of transportation. One might speculate as to a connection to Raoul Hausmann’s photomontage *Dada seigt* from 1920, in which the artist incorporates a picture postcard of Wenceslas Square and adds the inscriptions ‘Dada’ and ‘361’ to two buildings. For this part, Mrkvička labels a building with the slogan ‘Devětsil,’ but although Hausmann’s work is well known today, it is not quite clear where Mrkvička might have seen it. We thus argue that Mrkvička was familiar with the tradition of prankish postcards in the city-of-the-future style and that, like the Dadaists, he was able to give this tradition a new reading. At the top of American-style skyscraper, an image familiar from the prankish postcard, there appears a thus far know political symbol—the red star.” (Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 76).

²⁹⁴ “In *Pantomima*, Teige inserted different reproductions of artistic creations by the Devětsil members (for example Štyrský), French painters (Marie Laurencin), Persian miniatures, African sculptures, nocturnal photos of the great metropolises, and photos of famous comedians and actors. The pictorial poetry, that resulted from a simple typographical interpretation of Nezval’s text of from its transposition into a sort of *paining-collage*, had an important role.” (Srp, “Karel Teige and New Typography,” p. 55).

the Waves of *TSF*, 1925), Teige introduced his own typesetting, considering letters “as optical symbols having the same value as any other geometric form.”²⁹⁵ Seifert’s book, utilizing a typesetting influenced by various forms of writing, actualized “the idea of artwork that was described in the first manifesto of Poetism, ‘a gift or game without bonds nor consequences.’”²⁹⁶ Finally, Teige combined typography with photography in his graphic design of the 1926 *Alphabet* book. In his 1927 programmatic essay “Modern typography,” he commented briefly on this first Czech bioscopic book systematically illustrated with photo materials, describing its images as examples of “*typophoto* of a purely abstract and poetic nature.”²⁹⁷

4.1.4 Typography and Typophoto

Typography played a key role in the avant-garde graphic design starting with Mallarmé and the posthumous 1914 publication of his famous poem *A Throw of the Dice*. His legacy continued with a number of heterogeneous typographic experiments by Italian Futurist Marinetti (for example, his *Zang Tumb Tumb*, 1914), Russian Futirists (for example, Vasily Kamensky and brothers Burluk’s *Tango With Cows: Ferro-Concrete Poems*, 1914), French Cubist Apollinaire (his 1918 *Calligrammes: Poems of war and peace 1913-1916*), and many Dadaists, such as Russian émigré poet in Paris Ilya Zdanevich, Raoul Hausmann and Kurt Schwitters, among

²⁹⁵ Srp, “Karel Teige and New Typography,” p. 56. The abbreviation *TSF* (*transmission sans fil*), referring to wireless broadcasting, was a favorite of the Dadaists and Futurists. His friend, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, whose collection *Les mots en liberte futurists* was published in Czech translation in 1922, inspired Teige. Saifert’s book was an example of playfulness and joy, two key tenets of Poetism. Its typography underscored the visual character of words and thus gave the literary work a further, visual component. The book was comprised of multitude of typographical poems, poetic anecdotes, aphorisms, and rebuses. Teige worked with italics and bold type. He alternated horizontal and vertical positions of typesetting. Sometimes he made use of emphatic underlining. As Saifert himself recalled several decades later, the typography and graphic design for his book were “Teige’s exertions as a typographical rodeo.” (Seifert, *Vsecky krsy světa* (*All the Beauties of the World*), pp. 259 -60). See also Srp, “The New Alphabet,” pp. 28-29.

²⁹⁶ Srp, “Karel Teige and New Typography,” p. 56.

²⁹⁷ Teige, “Modern Typography,” pp. 93-105. Originally published as “Moderní typo” in *Typografia* 34 (1927), pp. 189-198.

others.²⁹⁸ However, the largest impact on Teige's conception of typography came primarily from the exchange of ideas with the so-called international Constructivism, gathered around the avant-garde magazines such as Purist *L'esprit nouveau* (1920-1926) in France, *De Stijl* (1917-1931) in Netherlands, *Ma* (1916-1925) in Hungary, *Veshch* (1922) and *G* (1923-1926) in Germany, *Disk* (1923, 1925) in Czechoslovakia, *Blok* (1924-1926) in Poland, and *Zenith* (1921-1926) in Yugoslavia. More specifically, in the first half of the 1920s, besides Marinetti's "liberated words," the works and writings of El Lissitsky and Moholy-Nagy influenced Teige the most.

As a member of the international New Typography cohort that included Jan Tschichold, El Lissitsky, Piet Zwart, Paul Rennes, Herbert Bayer and others, Teige perceived graphic design as a productive field of Constructivist purposeful and innovative creation. His first lengthy essay on typography, published a few months after the *Alphabet* and titled "Modern typography," distinctly promoted Constructivist design principles. As a reaction against the dangers of archaism, decorative mania, and collectors' snobbism, Teige proposed the "true, pure constructivism" aiming for an essential perfection of design through its propensity for perfect shapes, "changeless for centuries" and mirrored in "a simple, clearly legible geometric form."²⁹⁹

As for the letters alone, for example, Teige asserts that "modern typography requires beautiful, austere, simple, lapidary, and well-balanced types of geometric construction, free of any superfluous appendages, hooks, and curlicues."³⁰⁰ This is a re-iteration of request by El

²⁹⁸ More on avant-garde typography see Jubert, *Typography and Graphic Design: From Antiquity to the Present*, pp. 153-241; Kinross, *Modern Typography: An Essay in Critical History*, pp. 64-119; Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art 1909-1923*; Spencer, *Pioneers of Modern Typography and Liberated Page*.

²⁹⁹ Teige, "Modern Typography," p. 97-98. As Matthew Witkovsky remarks, Teige stressed in his essay "the practical yet revolutionary aims of eye-catching simplicity, standardization of formats and the consequent cost savings in materials and labor, and clarity in the service of perfected communication." (Witkovsky, "Karel Teige: Construction, Poetry, Jazz," p. 111).

³⁰⁰ Teige, "Modern Typography," p. 98.

Lissitzky who in his short 1925 programmatic text “Typographical facts” wrote, “The clear forms can be composed only of simple elements,” and required the exclusive use of “the horizontal, the perpendicular, the diagonal, and the curve.”³⁰¹ This curve was materialized for Lissitzky by a semicircle—the same that Teige used to draw the letter C in *Alphabet* (fig. 4.5) In his design of the 1926 bisopic book *Alphabet*, Teige employs the same reduction of individual letterforms to formal compositional elements that Lissitzky suggested and practiced in his graphic work.

In his 1923 article “Topography of typography,” Lissitzky formulated eight principles of modern typography:

- 1) The words on the printed sheet are learnt by sight, not by hearing.
- 2) Ideas are communicated through conventional words, the idea should be given form through the letters.
- 3) Economy of expression—optics instead of phonetics.
- 4) The designing of the book-space through the material of the type, according to the laws of typographical mechanics, must correspond to the strains and stresses of the content.
- 5) The design of the book-space through the material of the illustrative process blocks which give reality to the new optics. The super naturalistic reality of the perfected eye.

³⁰¹ “These are the basic line-direction on the plain surface. Combinations occur in the horizontal and perpendicular directions. These two lines produce the right (unambiguous) angle.” See Lissitzky, “Typographical facts,” pp. 359-360. Originally published as “Typographische Tatsachen,” *Gutenberg-Festschrift*, Mainz, 1925. One can witness this reduction of individual letterforms to formal compositional elements in earlier Lissitzky’s work, such as the covers of the journals *Veshch* and *Epopeia* (published by the Helikon Verlag, focused on historic literary forms and under the editorship of the Symbolist poet, Andrei Bely, appeared four times between April 1922 and June 1923). As Viktor Margolin remarks in his excellent essay on Lissitzky’s early typographic works, and in regard to the cover of *Epopeia* particularly, “The best example is roman E (*e obarotnoe*), which becomes a curved shape (a semicircle) and a bar. By substituting a combination of form fragments or modules for the conventional letter, Lissitzky could integrate the letterforms with other compositional elements. [...] One can argue nonetheless that this attempt to integrate the letterforms into an overall syntactic order was a major contribution of Lissitzky’s to development of the new typography. It was his disregard for the traditional shape of letterforms that led Lissitzky to decompose them into modular elements that could be integrated with other formal elements into composition. [...] Lissitzky had the strongest sense of the letterform’s plasticity of all the avant-garde artists in Germany in early 1920s: van Doesburg was primarily concerned with the uniform rectilinearity of letters and the placement of letters and words in space; Hausmann balanced words in different scales and placed them in horizontal, vertical, and diagonal directions but was content to use letters from the type case. By contrast, Lissitzky manipulated the shape and scale of letterforms themselves as well as their location in space. He was better at dissolving the letters into formal elements than in redrawing them.” (Margolin, “El Lissitzky’s Berlin Graphic,” pp. 193-194).



**Figure 4.5 Karel Teige: typophoto C
in Nezval's *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926)**

- 6) The continuous page-sequence—the bioscopic book.
 - 7) The new book demands the new writer. Inkstand and goose-quill are dead.
 - 8) The printed sheet transcends space and time. The printed sheet, the infinity of the book, must be transcended.
- THE ELECTRO-LIBRARY.³⁰²

Four years later, it was Teige who was inspired to propose his vision of the problem:

- 1. *Liberation from tradition and prejudice: overcoming archaism and academism, eliminating all decorativism.* Ignoring academic and traditional rules that are not optically justified, being mere fossilized formulas (e.g. the golden section, unity of type).
- 2. *Selection of types with clearly legible, geometrically simple lines:* understanding the spirit of each type and using them according to the nature of the text, contrasting the typographic material to emphasize the contents.
- 3. The perfect grasp of the *purpose and fulfilling the brief. Differentiating between the purposes of each typographic task.* Advertising billboards, which should be visible from a distance, have different requirements than those of a scientific book, which are again different from those of poetry.
- 4. *Harmonious balancing of space and arrangement of typo according to objective optical laws: clear, legible layout and geometrical organization.*
- 5. Utilization of all possibilities offered by new technological discoveries [...] *combining image and print into “typophoto.”*
- 6. *Close collaboration between the graphic designer and printer* in the same way it is necessary for the architect to collaborate with the building engineer, the developer, and all those who participate in the realization of a building: *specialization and division of labor combined with the closest contact among the various experts.*³⁰³

In the 1926 book *Alphabet*, we can recognize how the postulates of the two theorists were applied. For Lissitzky and Teige, above all it was a question of asserting the visual character of the book. Thus, it is desired to reserve so many pages for picture as for the text, which is precisely the case with *Alphabet*. Both also demanded the clear organization of the typography, the rejection of the decorative, and the simplification of basic elements. Both Teige and Lissitzky

³⁰² Lissitzky, “Topography of typography,” p. 359.

³⁰³ Teige, “Modern Typography,” pp. 103-104. Emphasis in the original.

perceived typography as an active means of signification.³⁰⁴ Similarly, by making a sharp distinction between print and speech, they both privileged the dimension of visual over aural, emphasizing its economy of expression.³⁰⁵ Through sight, as opposed to lengthy verbal descriptions, a reader could apprehend a concept or situation instantly and directly. As a metaphor for sight, Lissitzky used “the perfect eye” which he equated with “supernatural reality.” Correspondingly, Teige advocated that typography, in order to respond to and satisfy the modern way of seeing, must be “based on optical rules.”³⁰⁶

Lissitzky and Teige subsequently spoke of the “space of the book” and formulated requirements of its structure and specific arrangement. For Teige, this need is articulated with a deliberately Constructivist intent—he compares the design of a book with the work of an architect and his collaboration with the building engineer. Teige partly draws inspiration for *Alphabet* from the games on transparency and interpenetration of motives that Lissitzky offered

³⁰⁴ See Lissitzky’s second point. Teige is even more specific: “Correspondence between the character of the type and text, so that the printed form would be the result of its function and contents. [...] for us, certain curves, balances, and structures bear an almost esoteric significance. Some typographic shapes have an evocative, associative power: we know that a single strong typographic sign can contain the whole message of a particular poster.” In the same vein he writes about the innovative typography of both old and new means of communication: “Posters and neon advertising use all possible techniques [...] creating a synoptical typography that is not satisfied merely with conveying the content but creates its own visual message.” Teige, “Modern Typography,” pp. 98-99.

³⁰⁵ See Lissitzky’s first and third points. In his 1923 text published in *Disk* Teige made the same statement in regard to the typography and its relation to poetry: “Marinetti freed poetry from the fetters of syntax, punctuation, and so on; in Apollinaire’s ideograms poetry acquired an optical and graphic form. The poem, once sung, is now read. Recitation is becoming nonsense and economy of poetic expression is first and foremost optical, plastic, and typographic, never phonetic or onomatopoeic. A poem is to be read like a modern picture. A modern picture is to be read like a poem.” In the second issue of *Disk* (1925), Teige even formulated the law of economy in its relation to the machine: “The driving force behind this progress is *the machine*. The machine shortens working hours to their maximum efficiency. *Its law is minimum effort for maximum effect.*” See Teige, “Painting and Poetry,” p. 368; and “Constructivism and the liquidation of ‘art,’” p. 587. Originally published as “Konstruktivism a likvidace umění,” *Disk*, No. 2 (1925).

³⁰⁶ “The modern way of seeing, educated by urban civilization and by the spectacle of contemporary life, is characterized by heightened perceptiveness. The angle of vision is widening. Posters achieve simultaneous communication by means of a suitable layout of their surface and the use of varied type that makes it possible to regulate coherent reading. The modern way of seeing is sophisticated, capable of rapid accommodation, penetrating, fast and on its feet.” (Teige, “Modern Typography,” p. 100).

on the cover of the first number of *Veshch* (fig. 4.6). But, while the motives of *Veshch* created an impression of dynamic uncertainty, the ‘architectures’ of *Alphabet* are the result of a more stable structure and clean character in Czech Constructivism.



**Figure 4.6 El Lissitzky:
covers for *Veshch-Object-Gegenstand* (No. 1-2 & No. 3, 1922)**

One of the reasons behind it is the specific use of blank space in Teige’s design. Teige found examples of this in contemporary advertising and abstract painting:

In the case of advertising and commercial typography working with synoptic forms and compositions, it became clear that the blank space has its own strong aesthetic value, which functions in relation to the printed areas, that it is an active factor not only a neutral background, just as modern architects and sculptors understood that empty spacings and openings—for example, windows—are not just passive gaps but active plastic agents, and that only through a careful balancing of these equivalent positive and negative values can one achieve the required equilibrium.³⁰⁷

The blank space, as an “active plastic agent,” according to Teige, plays a significant role in the abstract painting “that has abandon imitation of the subject and wants to be nothing but the balance, a harmony of colors and shapes, mostly geometrical, on the plane of the canvas,

³⁰⁷ Teige, “Modern Typography,” p. 99.

something like a music of colors.”³⁰⁸ By realizing its balance and harmony “according to optical laws and laws governing the interrelationship of colors and shapes,” the abstract painting, according to Teige, discovered the “possibilities of decimal balance” that results in “other forms of equilibrium than symmetry, multifaceted and active.”³⁰⁹ Teige’s notion of *decimal balance* is an important contribution to the contemporary typographic theory, since it signifies not only abandonment of the mimesis as *imitation*, but also the embrace of the mimesis as *reproducibility*, mimesis as a *rhythmic* duplication and variation of forms, shapes, and colors. In *Alphabet*, Teige experimented with the possibilities of decimal balance in a series of typophotos as a combination of typography and photography.³¹⁰

Finally, both Lissitzky and Teige demanded a progressive concept of the book. As it is known, Lissitzky suggested “the bioscopic book,” which would transform the reader into a spectator. Influenced by his interest in film, Teige succeeded in *Alphabet* in making us spontaneously turn the pages without losing the “thread,” thus creating the “continuous page-sequence” for which asked Lissitzky. Although Teige’s work on *Alphabet* was in line with the Lissitzky’s principles, it still presented additional ideas in the field of typography.

³⁰⁸ The modern abstract painter is a sort of “technician or a mechanic” who is “working with his own material, dealing with it according to factual, scientifically tested qualities.” (Teige, “Modern Typography,” p. 101).

³⁰⁹ Teige, “Modern Typography,” p. 101. Teige refers here to van Doesburg’s and Mondrian’s abstract paintings. For example, the fourth issue of the Constructivist magazine *G* (March 1926) published the review of the exhibition of abstract art in Paris (from December 1925) with a reproduction of Mondrian’s B148 *Composition* from 1922 with the caption “Equilibrium without symmetry.” (Mertins and Jennings, *G: An Avant-Garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design, and Film, 1923-1926*, p. 193).

³¹⁰ The same urge for “equilibrium without symmetry” one can find in Moholy-Nagy’s theoretical work. In his 1926 text “Contemporary Typography,” he writes: “In contrast to the centuries-old static-concentric equilibrium, one seeks today to produce a *dynamic-eccentric equilibrium*. In the first case the typographical object is captured at glance, with all the centrally focused elements—including the peripheral ones; in the second case, the eye is led step by step from point to point, whereby [the awareness of] the mutual relationship of the individual elements must not suffer (posters, job printing, titles of books, etc.).” (Moholy-Nagy, “Contemporary Typography,” p. 80). Originally published in *Offset*, VII (1926). My emphasis.

But it was above all in Moholy-Nagy's concept of typophoto that Teige recognized a suitable solution for his first bioscopic book. If Man Ray oriented photographic events in Devětsil in the early twenties, it was pronounced Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy, a polymath and Bauhaus teacher, who became an important source of inspiration, not only in photography, for the group in the mid 1920s. Ideas that Moholy-Nagy personally presented in March 1925 at a lecture in Brno, for example, have gradually found their way to many progressive Czech artists and significantly helped the search for new paths in Czech fine and applied arts.³¹¹

Moholy-Nagy developed his concept of typophoto in the early twenties, and launched it eventually in his 1925 book *Painting Photography Film*: "What is typophoto? Typography is communication composed of type. Photography is the visual presentation of what can be optically apprehended. Typophoto is the visually most exact rendering of communication."³¹² Already in his brief 1923 manifesto "The New Typography," he acknowledged that, "What Egyptians started in their inexact hieroglyphs [...] has become the most precise expression through the inclusion of photography into the typographic method."³¹³ Moreover, he expressed his utopian belief that this new and yet unnamed form of 'typography infused with photography'

³¹¹ In this lecture, Moholy-Nagy addressed the issue of new content and forms of painting, which at the time faced the issues that were never raised before photography enthroned changes, and which became common for both visual fields of painting and photography. If one is to briefly summarize Moholy-Nagy's influence on the Czech art scene of the mid-twenties, he should emphasize two dominant impulses: the first is a direct effect of the inventive painter, his graphic and photographic works and projects of original concept and vision, which at that stage of development of the technology were not yet implemented, although their inspirational power was immense. The second important aspect is the analytical view of artistic creation and its function in society (the process of creation, artistic artifact effect on the viewer, social and sociological aspects of art in society, the relationship of art and technology), based on the findings of modern science disciplines (including social sciences) and characterized as a dynamic process. See Sobek, *Teoretické práce české fotografické avantgardy*, pp. 20-21.

³¹² Moholy Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, p. 39. Originally published as the volume eight in the Bauhaus book series, *Malerei Fotografie Film* (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag) had its first edition in 1925, and second in 1927.

³¹³ Moholy-Nagy: "The New Typography," pp. 75-76. Originally published in *Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar, 1919-23* (Munich, 1923).

will supersede the traditional literature as a whole and merge with cinema: “It is safe to predict that this increasing documentation through photography will lead in the near future to replacement of literature by film.”³¹⁴

As articulated in *Painting Photography Film*, Moholy-Nagy’s typophoto still resonates with its utopian-oriented goals. The printer’s work, wrote Moholy-Nagy, aims for “international understanding” and is “part of [the] foundation on which the *new world* will be built.”³¹⁵ The utopian potential of the typophoto is reflected in the fact that it was not meant for the members of classless society, but rather “for all classes.”³¹⁶ Just as Teige saw in the vital mission of cinema and skillful bodies of performers their utopian—international and democratic—potential, so did Moholy-Nagy in the typophoto. “The hygiene of the optical, the health of the visible is slowly filtering through,” he stated, borrowing the vernacular from the burgeoning physical culture that widely promoted the hygiene and health as its fundamental values.

What probably attracted Teige to typophoto most, was the fact that Moholy-Nagy located the aesthetic intention of his concept in the attainment of the *filmic*. For Moholy-Nagy, typophoto is the form of “phototext” constructed out of “the optical and associative relationships: into a *visual, associative, conceptual, synthetic continuity*.”³¹⁷ Such continuity should be understood as a “continuous visual design (a coherent sequence of many individual pages),” as

³¹⁴ “The indications of this development,” he further added, “are apparent already in the increased use of the telephone which makes letter writing obsolete. It is no valid objection that the production of films demands too intricate and costly apparatus. Soon the making of a film will be as simple and available as now printing books.” (Moholy-Nagy: “The New Typography,” p. 75).

³¹⁵ Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, p. 38.

³¹⁶ After his appointment in Bauhaus, Moholy-Nagy, who was invited in early 1923 by Walter Gropius to replace Johannes Itten at the school in which he became in charge of the Metal Workshop, ceased to publish “radical manifestoes in Hungarian calling for Constructivists to lead a proletarian revolution” and “concentrated on design and photography as well as painting.” (Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946*, p. 75).

³¹⁷ Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, p. 40. My emphasis.

he explained in his 1926 text on contemporary typography.³¹⁸ The “continuous sequence-pages,” to use Lissitzky’s formulation, thus convert the optical and associative relationships “into the typophoto as an unambiguous rendering in an *optically* valid form.”³¹⁹

Finally, what becomes of ultimate importance for typophoto is its effect of *rhythm* and *movement*: “The typophoto governs the new *tempo* of the new visual literature.”³²⁰ Moholy-Nagy asserted that the effect of typophoto “is meant to be visual, purely visual” only insofar as it produces “its own optical action, optical arrangement of tempo—instead of literary, theatrical action: dynamic of the optical.”³²¹ Not coincidentally, Moholy-Nagy’s typophoto—the manuscript sketch of which was written in the years 1921-1922, first published in Hungarian in the magazine *Ma* in 1924, and later translated into German and printed in 1925 in a changed form as an appendix to the *Painting Photography Film*—is titled “Dynamic of the Metropolis” (**fig. 4.7**).³²²

And it is exactly in this effect of *rhythm* produced by the typophoto as ‘optical arrangement of tempo’ that Teige recognized a connective element between Poetism,

³¹⁸ Moholy-Nagy: “Contemporary Typography,” p. 78.

³¹⁹ Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, p. 40.

³²⁰ Ibid. My emphasis.

³²¹ Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, p. 122-123.

³²² More on important differences between the earlier and later versions of Moholy-Nagy’s piece, see Dimenberg, “Transfiguring the Urban Gray: László Moholy-Nagy’s Film Scenario ‘Dynamic of the Metropolis,’” pp. 109-126. According to Horak, “Dynamic of the Metropolis” seems more successful as typophoto than it would have been as film: “The use of numerous kinds and sizes of type, the constructivist ordering of geometric lines, and the dynamic positioning of photographs and text within those lines make for asynchronous reception of images. As in his photomontages, Moholy-Nagy actually uses photographic images from other sources in the dynamic design of his script. On the other hand, if a film script is to act as a blueprint for a film, it must rely on a syntactical ordering of images and movements within time.” (Horak, *Making Images Move: Photographers and Avant-Garde Cinema*, p.115).

Constructivism, and what he called Bioscopic Art.³²³ Towards the end of his 1927 essay “Modern typography,” Teige wrote, “The typographic realization of the text is conditioned by the *nature*, *rhythm*, and *tempo* [flow] of the text itself.”³²⁴ This statement served Teige to introduce a few of his own designs, such as the aforementioned Nezval *Pantomime* (1924), Seifert’s *One the Waves of TSF* (1925) and, of course, Nezval’s *Alphabet* (1926). The specific features of the last one are the focus of the next section of this chapter.



Figure 4.7 László Moholy-Nagy: page from his typophoto “Dynamics of the Metropolis” (1925)

³²³ As a plausible reason for the typography’s ‘digression’ from construction into poetry, Matthew Witkovsky sees in “regarding typography as a union of the poetic with the constructive.” He further explains in his essay on Teige’s graphic designs, that the union proceeds through ‘everyday life’ that is “imagined as a sphere of performance and spectacle. It is rhythm that gives the decisive link between Poetism and Constructivism, and it is the rhythm of jazz music, the filmstrip, and the dance hall.” (Witkovsky, “Karel Teige: Construction, Poetry, Jazz,” p. 112).

³²⁴ Teige, “Modern Typography,” p. 105. My emphasis.

4.2 *Alphabet*: Topography of Typophoto

Pragmatically speaking, the aforementioned cohesive value of *rhythm* is one of the most important components of the 1926 bioscopic book of Czech Poetism. Expanding on his principles of book design, Teige wrote, “I see the book cover [...] as the poster for a book, and, as any publisher will confirm, that is its true *commercial* purpose. It is therefore desirable for the cover to make a strong impact.”³²⁵ He further explained that this could be achieved by an “energetic and active evocation of a balance between color and form” where the strong impact “eliminated monotonous symmetry.”³²⁶ An example illustrating his point is the front cover of *Alphabet*, representing a geometric abstraction in the De Stijl style, depleted of the bright colors typically associated with the publications that movement inspired (**fig. 4.8** and **4.9**). As Matthew Witkovsky vividly described,

It is a cover that at first seems to bear little relationship to the book’s contents. A lattice of black and dark-brown bands is stretched tautly across a field of beige, with all three tones meeting in the one-word title at the center. Further information, likewise organized into rectilinear blocks, comes across clearly and prosaically: the authors’ names and their relative importance (Teige modestly absents himself), and place and date of publication. The neutral bands framing this information give no hint of the hedonistic verses within, much less of their erotic embodiment in the sphere of dance. Nothing in this sober layout evokes a ‘picture poem’ — except the rhythm; it is in this way that the cover comes alive. No two bands — whether black, brown, or beige — are of equal width, and as a result the page ripples. Quick-slow, quick-slow, the bands move, tripping from left to right, at a tempo that suffuses dour orderliness with an incontestable vibrancy.³²⁷

³²⁵ Ibid. My emphasis.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Witkovsky, “Karel Teige: Construction, Poetry, Jazz,” p. 117.

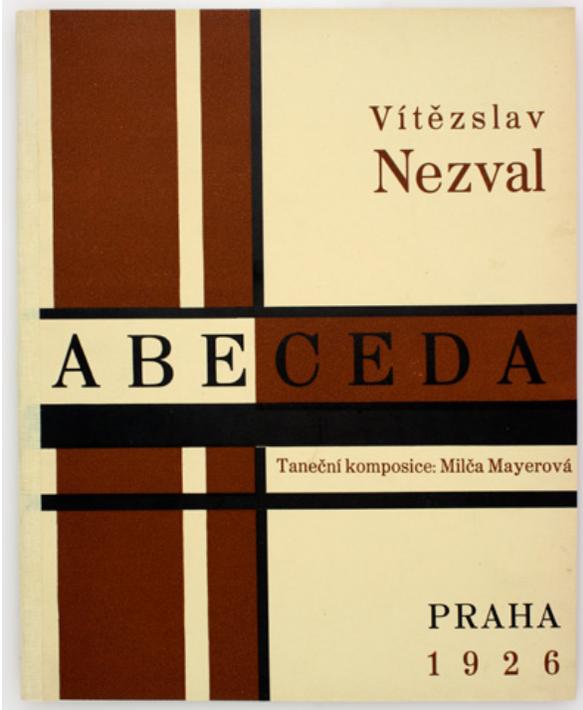


Figure 4.8 Karel Teige: cover for Nezval's *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926)

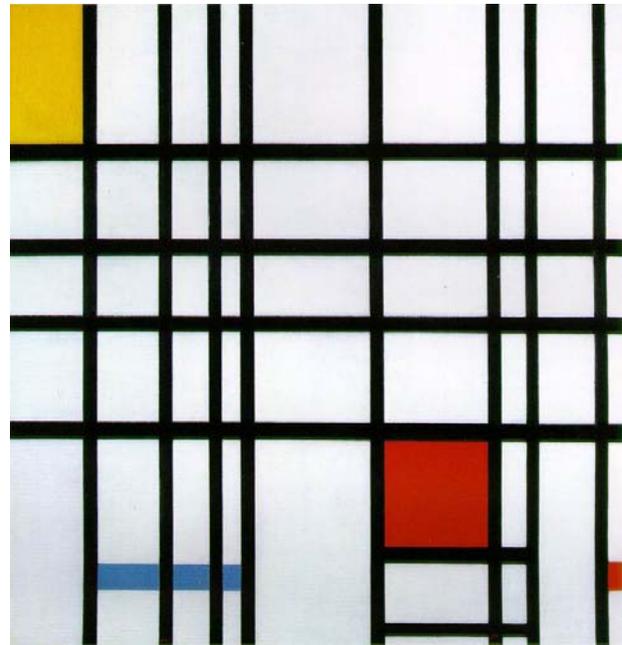


Figure 4.9 Piet Mondrian: composition with Red, Yellow and Blue, 1921. Oil on canvas, 39 x 35 cm

Teige's front cover design not only created associations with the rhythm of jazz music and dancing hall, the filmstrip and the abstract cinema, but it also resonated with the utopian promise of the universal language of signs and 'optical words' that these new art forms rendered more palpable and feasible. The medium of the book that is able to convey, express and embody such universal language was recognized at the time as being invested with a real revolutionary importance. Consequently, the focus shifted from the utopian project to the medium itself, so that the typographical revolution, anchored in a new conception of technology, took up the cause of a new socio-political consciousness and, in fact, accompanied the foundation of a cultural renewal.

It was, actually, the materiality of media that served as a departure point for the utopian impulses in these avant-garde experiments. Thus, Nezval recognized in the letter *the body* of the

alphabet and the materiality of its elementary linguistic structure that triggered verbal associations in the poem. Milča Mayerová used both the form of the letter and Nezval's verses as inspiration for her moves, so that her own *body* became the medium and means for the choreographic writing of her dance. Finally, Teige took the form of a letter and the photograph of Mayerová performing Nezval's verses, and combined them into the typophoto on the printed page, thus forming the *body* of the bioscopic book. In other words, the letter, the human body and the printed (double) page merged into the typophoto, creating a planar habitat—an environment that the artist at the time called “topography”—of the Poetist bioscopic book.

As a primer for modern visual literacy and montage thinking, and as a specifically designed conceptual circuit, *Alphabet* enables the reader/viewer to operate as a producer by joining the poet, the dancer, and the graphic designer in conducting perpetual transfer from one medium to another. In managing such interpretative *transduction* from one semiotic system to another, the reader/viewer both takes part in the planar habitat of the bioscopic book and becomes a part of its conceptual-material circuit. The reader/viewer participates in the topography of typophoto by setting in motion the *alternating current* of the bioscopic book that, as Matthew Witkovsky remarked, “performs a paradoxical double duty. It stands for a belief in system and reproducibility, yet its elements are made to resist systematization in the extreme.”³²⁸

The notion of *paradoxical doubleness* is very important, since it reveals the conceptual nature of Teige's design of the bioscopic book, based on the simultaneity of system's existence and resistance of its constitutive elements. In the aforementioned “Modern typography” essay,

³²⁸ “Teige's photomontages would make an unwieldy printer's font, for example. [...] Mayerová arguably enacts that double function most clearly. [...] Her choreography [...] operates on multiple registers.” (Witkovsky, “Staging Language,” p. 114-115).

Teige wrote about the book as a visual system, expressing his conviction in the importance of the book's structural design:

We have to realize that today's books are read by eyes differently organized and trained than those that used to read incunabula. And these eyes demand that the book be constructed not according to decorative fashion but as an *articulated, rhythmical, comprehensive visual system*, easy to orient oneself in, in the same way a letter sorter, the keyboard of a piano, typewriter, or calculator, catalogues, price lists, and transport schedules are perfect visual systems.³²⁹

All the examples of 'perfect visual systems' that Teige provided, are designs with an 'articulated, rhythmical, comprehensive' structure and great visual clarity and legibility. Such visual systems, according to Teige, realize their 'decimal balance' and harmony according to the 'laws' of sensible design, which are actually laws of natural science, such as optical laws and laws governing the interrelationship of colors and shapes. Creation of such visual systems is a deed of the modern artists who is, for Teige, a sort of "technician or a mechanic [...] working with his own material, dealing with it according to factual, scientifically tested qualities."³³⁰ Finally, instead of the Romantic imagination recognized as the metaphysical striving for the infinite and unreachable, Teige proposed something that I call *algorithmic imagination*, which is a "flexible and cultivated" imagination that decreases the number of errors to the minimum:

It is possible to realize color harmony only in accordance with these laws, which are as binding as the laws of chess. And just as the laws of chess do not exclude imagination, invention, and originality, just as there are an infinite number of possible moves in chess, these optical laws used in the construction of the picture place no limitations on the liveliest imagination, intuitive ideas, invention, and originality, allowing for the infinite number of the most diverse solutions. On the contrary, an imagination that obeys such laws becomes more flexible and cultivated, avoiding many errors. Such laws are not manacles but regulators.³³¹

³²⁹ Teige, "Modern Typography," pp. 100-101.

³³⁰ Teige, "Modern Typography," p. 101.

³³¹ Ibid, pp. 101-102.

Similar to Benjamin's "Blue Flower in the land of technology," Teige's *algorithmic imagination* is conceived as a play that transduces the probability into "the vision of immediate reality."³³² The concept of *algorithmic imagination* is, therefore, fruitful because of the multiplicity of possibilities it grants within the regulatory standards of the system and its dynamic conceptual design. As the bioscopic book, *Alphabet* functions as a "articulated, rhythmical, comprehensive visual system," placing no limitation on the imagination, invention and originality, and allowing the reader/viewer to play with a number of the most diverse interpretative solutions. As such a system, the Poetist bioscopic book augments the reader/viewer's montage thinking, which is predicated upon aligning one's perspective with *both* the comprehensive system and the unrestrained chain of associations within constrains of such a system. In this way, Teige's bioscopic book enables the reader/viewer to internalize the dialectics of disjuncture and conjunction, and thus to become a channel, a medium, an active "influencing machine," a *prosumer* who practices *algorithmic imagination*—fantasy, intuition, and invention within the 'regulatory' standards of what Teige called the 'laws' of sensible design.

4.2.1 Nezval's Poetry: From the Letter to Verses

In his preface to the 1926 book, Nezval informs the readers that his *Alphabet* was envisioned as a reaction to a polemic over modern poetry's content, in which poets divided into fractions *pro* and *contra* so-called proletarian poetry, confronting one another. Deciding to go against the

³³² Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its technical Reproducibility," p. 233. Translation modified according to Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,'" p. 204.

ideological approach that was pervasive within the Czech literary milieu at the time, Nezval rejected any particular theme whatsoever and chose *the letter* as his poetic object—the site where all graphic, aural, and functional abstractions converge:

From [each] letter shape, sound or function, I associatively created a subconstruct to serve as the base on which my fantasy embroidered. The result was twenty-four poems, which emerged from the marriage of the constructive base with reality and imagination. They were autonomous, not demonstrating content of any theme, and realistic, replacing the usual abstract ideology with the materiality of concrete images. I was not concerned with a physiological approximation of the color and sounds and their poetic reconstruction, as is the Rimbaud's well-known 'Sonnet of Vowels.' Rather than a subject, the letter was for me a motif, a stone that stirred the water's surface, a pretext for a poem.³³³

Nezval created each of his twenty-five quatrains as a sort of a collage of poetic images and juxtapositions of concise, almost telegraphically formulated verses, with topics ranging from the age of Phidias to the age of the 'Renault,' and from the age of Cain, David and Goliath to the age of machine guns, film and Josef Kolínský.³³⁴ Topicality of Nezval's poetry is as diverse as the free flight of imagination allows it to be; his verses include references to contemporary technology, mythology, religion and history, travel and exotic journeys, geometry and architecture, modern music, circus, dancers and acrobats, science, even beggars, and traditional poetic themes, such as love and death.

Although Nezval's succinct verses do not subscribe to any ideology *per se*, as his preface tries to assure us, they nevertheless stand for the Poetist manifesto in verse. Each quatrain develops a sequence of free associations, enhanced by the missing punctuation in the spirit of Marinetti's "liberated words." On the other hand, each quatrain with its assonances and

³³³ Nezval, "Preface," *Alphabet* (2001), p. 9.

³³⁴ Josef Kolínský was sentenced for the murder and robbery he committed in Prague on January 10, 1922; his execution on January 24, 1923, was the second execution in the post-war Czechoslovakia. Nezval referred to Kolínský in the quatrain "T."

children's rhyme pattern (ABAB) is characterized by regularity, evocative order and construction. With this junction, verses of *Alphabet* realize the requirement of Poetism's program: synthesis of poetry and construction, "discipline" and "art of living" as an expression of "modernized Epicureanism."³³⁵

Further, Nezval's program mirrors the same paradoxical duality one finds in the concept of the book as described by Teige. In his manifesto "Poetry," printed in the 1925 collection of essays *Cheating at Whist* (*Falešný mariáš*), Nezval wrote, "[A poem] is a game that suggests new worlds," and then added in a somewhat dramatic manner, "[it] is the game of chance whose stakes are life and death."³³⁶ A year later, in his artistic statement from October 1926, Nezval defined the rules of this elemental game: "[T]he basis for imagistic thinking is a desire to combine un-combinable things"³³⁷ The world of childhood, spontaneity and imagination, along with the principle of the game, is one of the main motivation complexes of Nezval's *Alphabet*: its quatrains can be read—and thus are to be read—as a "series of intoxicating filmstrip [*pásmo*], a miraculous kaleidoscope," poet(ist)'s 'travelogue' of the modern world and the world of modernity from A to Z, seen through the perspective of the avant-garde poet-as-child, linking the most distant and most unexpected images, ideas and meanings based on the principle of analogy in a surprising combinatory game.³³⁸

The important element of Nezval's poetics is the principle of analogy between different things about which each quatrain reports and the form of individual letters, such as "breast" in

³³⁵ Teige, "Poetism," p. 69. Witkovsky writes the following about Nezval's rhymes: "Nezval never declared was on the classic masters of Czech verse, but he certainly saw his schoolboy rhymes as a revolutionary point of departure." (Witkovsky, "Staging language," p. 117).

³³⁶ Nezval, "Báseň (Poetry), p. 168.

³³⁷ Nezval, "Vítězslav Nezval o sobě" (Vítězslav Nezval on Vítězslav Nezval), p. 15.

³³⁸ Teige, "Poetism," p. 68. In the original versions of the poem, published in 1923 and 1924, Nezval's verses to the letter "g" referred not to a cowboy's, but to Fairbank's lasso from the films of Douglas Fairbanks.

“B,” “lasso” in “g,” or “trapeze” in “H.” As Witkovsky accurately asserted, “The opening line to nearly every quatrain focuses on an image from which Nezval then developed his themes and associations.”³³⁹ Thus, for example, “A” opens with the image of “prostou chatrč” (a simple hut), and then morphs into the snail’s carapace as a constant shelter, in order to end with the image of homeless humans begging. The poem “I” begins with its image developed from the miniscule, takes off with the flaring of “pružné tělo tanečnice” (a limber dancer’s body), then transposes the reader to an outdoor jazz concert, complete with a flame-haired bandmaster and music played “nejvyšší tony” (in the highest keys).

Practicing such collage of different realities, the poet satisfies one of the main requirements of the avant-garde ‘world making’—combining of the artistic and life practices. Perspective of childhood, stylization of avant-garde children art and topic of (revolutionary) reconstruction of the world as in children’s games, is specific for the Czech avant-garde of the first half of the twenties (as well as in some of its later works, such as Nezval’s *Acrobats*, 1927).³⁴⁰ The entire concept of *Pantomime* and *Alphabet* as a programmatic avant-garde poetic anthology and a poetic cycle, respectively, is based on the idea of the coexistence of two worlds: the world of sovereign poetry and the world of reality. It is essential to perceive the world ‘out there’ through the prism of physical reality and fantasy, in a conflation that is able to reconcile opposites.

³³⁹ Witkovsky, “Staging language,” p. 117.

³⁴⁰ The constant presence of the “child perspective” is important for Poetism, because it thus becomes bestowed with the ability of the new vision of the world in perpetual transformation and movement, as opposed to the static outlook of traditional arts. The world must be constantly re-read, combining syllabification and things, always seen fresh and anew as in its very first day.

The ordering principle of *Alphabet*, according to Witkovsky, “follows that of syllabary, the textbook that introduces young learners to the building blocks of written language.”³⁴¹ In other words, the sequence of poems within Nezval’s poetic cycle is structured according to the letters of the Latin alphabet. In Nezval’s deliberate choice of Latin rather than the local alphabet, Witkovsky recognizes the poet’s “drive toward reeducation on an international scale: [...] gone are those letters with diacriticals (č, ř, š, and ž), along with the combination “ch,” all of which appear in Czech dictionaries as separate letters.”³⁴² Witkovsky also remarks that the text of the poem, however, is in Czech language, thus again pointing to the paradoxical doubleness of the very poem, reflected in its elective affinities that are simultaneously international and local.

This duality of Nezval’s poem, which both functions as a ‘mock syllabary’ and publicizes new teachings, translates into a delicate imbalance that can be seen on the level of its structure. Namely, the sequence of letters in Nezval’s poem represents a slight divergence from the established order of letters in the sequence of Latin alphabet. Instead of the expected twenty-six, Nezval’s poetic cycle has twenty-five quatrains, since the letters ‘J’ and ‘Q’ merged into the quatrain “JQ.” If we look at the regular sequence of the letters in the Latin alphabet—a b c d e f g h i **J** k l m n o p **Q** r s t u v w x y z—we will note that Nezval’s choice of the letters ‘J’ and ‘Q’ is based on the symmetry of the following pattern: 9 + J + 6 + Q + 9. The choice of this ‘decimal balance’ resulted in a form of multifaceted and active ‘equilibrium without symmetry,’ to use the idiom of abstract painting, so that the final structure of the sequence of letters in Nezval’s poem is: 9 + JQ + 15. Moreover, this somewhat structurally privileged place that the quatrain ‘JQ’

³⁴¹ “Nezval proceeded quite differently [...] than the conventional language primer. Instead of the ‘sounding-out method [*metoda hláskovací*]’ standard in Habsburg schools during his youth, Nezval concentrated on letters primarily for their visual suggestiveness.” (Witkovsky, “Staging language,” p. 117).

³⁴² Witkovsky, “Staging language,” p. 118.

occupies in the new sequence, suggests that its content may also bear a certain symbolic weight to it. And, indeed, the verses of ‘JQ’ launch the poet’s call to the west, thus clearly announcing aspiration of the Czech avant-garde at the time:

Přes Německo do Francie
dudák se svým měchem větry pluje
Chodské písně pomalu
hvízdá na svou píšťalu

Through Germany and down to France
bagpipes drifting by wind’s chance
And its owner apropos
keeps on piping westward ho!

Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the alphabet of Nezval’s avant-garde ‘travelogue’ begins and ends with a reminder of the two capitals of avant-garde art: Prague in “A” and the avant-garde’s Alpha and Omega, Paris in “Z.” In addition, the opening and closing poems of the *Alphabet*, with their images of “a simple hut” (“A”) and “Eiffel Tower” (“Z”), both present the trajectory of the development of architecture through history and emphasize what Jan Tschichold, the prominent member of New Typography, called “the deep underlying similarity between typography and architecture.”³⁴³

The program of Nezval’s *Alphabet* is based on the innovative ideas of the time, summarized accurately in Teige’s 1922 article “Art Today and Tomorrow:” “The beauty exists also outside of the art: and the new art, going toward this beauty, will exceed consequently its conventional boundaries; THE NEW ART WILL NO LONGER BE ART!!!”³⁴⁴ As far as for Teige, he succeeded in 1928 with his idea that “traditional methods of classification in the art history appear temporary and obsolete: the seven arts, the nine Muses, the triad of visual arts,

³⁴³ Tschichold, *The New Typography: A Handbook for Modern Designers*, p. 13.

³⁴⁴ Teige, “Umění dnes a zítřka” (Art Today and Tomorrow), p. 201.

etc.”³⁴⁵ Nezval, however, outlined that the academic concept of art genres is improper for new requirements of the avant-garde’s ‘fusion of arts.’ In the last poem of his *Alphabet* (“Z”) he wrote, “Desáté musy vzpomneš” (Remember the tenth Muse), thus referring to the cinema, called “the tenth Muse” in the early 1920s by Ricotto Canudo, an Italian art theorist who initiated film sessions at the Salon d’Automne where cinema was officially recognized as art. Teige, for example, used the same phrase in his 1922 text “Photo Cinema Film” (1922) where he propagated the film’s central role in the process of liquidating traditional modes of arts. The desire to revise the concept of art and to abolish its sacredness is explicitly expressed in the poem “R”: “RRR komedianti z Devětsilu / rozbili stánek na březích božského Nilu” (Vrroom—Devětsil acrobats / Set up their stand where the Nile flows divine), which promotes the Devětsil group and its revolutionary curriculum in a similar fashion to Italian Futurism and Dada.

Nezval’s verses, surprising for their foresight and resolution, should be connected with the invention of Poetism in the spring of 1923. Nezval has repeatedly suggested that the Poetism had been truly invented in the same way one invents a poem. Like the word ‘dada’ has been invented by the intervention of chance, Poetism is born “during long discussions and evening walks in Prague” in a lyrical mood. Poetism “expressed the need for an artificial arrangement of reality so that it is able to satisfy all that poetic human hunger afflicting the century. It did not want to invent new worlds, but to organize this world humanly, that is to say, to be a living poem.”³⁴⁶The poem was therefore taken as the model of all artistic creation and of the life itself.

The place of the poet became essential in the Czech avant-garde, because he was provided with enormous creative power, playing with the wide spectrum of our sensitivity.

³⁴⁵ Teige, “Manifest poetismu,” p. 31 (translation by author).

³⁴⁶ Nezval, “Kapka inkoustu” (A Drop of Ink), p. 9 (translation by author).

Indeed, Nezval wrote in the poem “K”: “Býti básníkem / je být jak slunce býti jako led” (To be a poet / is to be like a sun to be like ice). The poet was also asked to create *picture poems*, “a creation unique to poeticism,” according to Teige. As discussed in the previous section of this chapter, picture poems were created as small-sized collages in both the Dadaist and Constructivist spirit: the pictures cut from newspapers or postcards also showcased the text, preferably poetic and intelligible. They could be composed by a single person or by several authors: Nezval, for example, created one with Teige in order to illustrate his 1924 collection of poems *Pantomime*. Most often, these small sized photomontage works remained unsigned because the anonymity in creation was important in the context of the Czech avant-garde: it avoided the worship of an artist and at the same time it encouraged everyone to express him or herself.³⁴⁷

The desire to embrace life manifested itself in the work of Devětsil by an overt curiosity for other worlds. Nezval’s poem starts with a vision of the exotic made domestic: “Ó palmy přeneste svůj rovník nad Vltavu” (Transport your tropics to the Moldau, o palms) writes Nezval in the verse to the letter “A,” evoking tropical landscape on the shores of the Vltava river (Moldau in German and in the English translation). Nezval’s poem is abundant in allusions to travel and modernity: gondoliers and American-bound steamboats in “C,” arrow-wielding Indians in “D,” cowboys in “g,” the telegraphist in “E,” the clown in “H,” serpentine dancer in “S,” and the engineers and workers of “L,” while the final quatrain of letter “Z” concludes in

³⁴⁷ Czech Poetists believed that art should no longer be an activity reserved for the elite of society, but should be realized by all. Moreover, Karel Teige challenged the very term and concept of ‘art’: he preferred to call the modern creation “poetry.” From the beginning of the era of Poetism, poetry included a positive value and a sublime dimension. It had to impregnate life and, at the time when it becomes real, we would no longer need art: life would be its equivalent. In 1928, Teige summarized it in this way: “Leaving the concept of art, we understand the word ‘poetry’ in the original Greek meaning: *poiesis*, the sovereign creation. We can write verses by the color, light, sound, movement, life.” (Teige, “Manifest poetismu,” p. 31).

evoking the Eiffel Tower. Modern poetry knows no boundaries; it is wide open to the modern world, including America with its dead and autochthonous past (“D”), exotic countries (“A”), and Europe (poem “JQ”). The cosmos, the stars, and the universe of science equally fascinated young Czechs; in *Alphabet*, one finds poetic images such as those of a bright star (“M”), comet’s orbit and stargazer (“O”), or Cassiopeia (“W”). In the journal *Pásmo I*, several of Vilém Santholzer’s articles spoke of “the beauty of mathematics and the machine,”³⁴⁸ which Nezval evoked, for example, in the poem “O”: “Po Einsteinovi? [...] / Ó ano každá rovnice má svoji neznámou” (After Einstein? / Oh yes every equation has its unknown”).

Finally, the Devětsil, presumably in a kind of Dadaist descent, was attracted by entertainment. The circus, music hall and cinema were actually seen as part of a universe where the most sincere artistic expression was possible. Teige wrote in his 1924 manifesto: “We have set out to explore the possibilities not capable of being satisfied by paintings and poems in film, circus, sport, tourism, and life itself.”³⁴⁹ Two of Nezval’s quatrains reflect this interest for the entertainment: “H” and “I.” The first is loaded with an extreme tension between a buffoonery and a failed performance of a circus artist:

člověk vydechne a nedýchá pak již
 Clown skočil z hrazdy Hudba mlčí Drum!
 Jen v koutě šaška tleskat uslyšíš
 Výborně já jsem take publikum!

we breathe out and then we gasp
 The clown tumbles The music stops on cue
 In a corner we only hear the jester clap

³⁴⁸ Santholzer, “Matematika—složka moderní krásy” (Mathematics—a component of the modern beauty), p. 3. He also wrote how micro- and macro-photographs gave “evidence of the existence of primary geometric shapes in the internal composition of matter,” which reflected the interest of the members of Devětsil in x-ray, medical, air or astronomical photography. (Santholzer, “Vítězná krása fotografie,” (The Triumphant Beauty of Photography), p. 10).

³⁴⁹ Teige, “Poetism,” p. 71.

Wonderful—I am the audience too!

The ambiguity of the jester that is part of the public may have been related to the interchangeability of the author and the viewer—and the poet who reads and the dancer who performs the poems— consistent in that desire to *live* poetry. As far as Teige is concerned, he expressed it in these terms: “They [the clowns] are their own writers, actors, poets.”³⁵⁰ We understand better now why Nezval speaks in the poem “R” about acrobats of Devětsil. The poem “I” finally puts the dancer scene, one that by its elastic, “limber body” knows the best way to sublime poetry:

pružné tělo tanečnice
nad hlavou červený vějíř plápolá
Kapelníkova rudá kštica
nejvyšší tóny Indianola

a limber dancer’s body flares
A red fan flutters in the breeze
The bandmaster’s flaming hair
Indianola The highest keys³⁵¹

4.2.2 Mayerová’s dance: From Words to the Body

The foundations of inter-war Modernist dance can be found in the work of turn-of-the-century dancers: Loïe Fuller, Isidora Duncan, and Ruth Saint, all of whom were American, but most successful in Europe before World War I. They made the break from classical ballet and were concerned with abstraction, spirituality, and free movement that the new culture of dance

³⁵⁰ Teige, “O humoru, clownech a dadaistech” (On Humor, Clowns, and Dadaists), p. 4. My translation.

³⁵¹ Nezval’s poem echoes the following quote from the 1922 text by Teige, describing modern music as the most suitable for cinema: “Yet behold how precisely modern music coincides with the character of film: Stravinsky with his rag-piano and pianola, and modern dance and marching music of the world: The Salome Foxtrot, Indianola... The rhythm of modern dances is an authentically modern rhythm; it contains something of the rhythm of pounding trains and city life. How perfectly fitting a jazz band accompaniment is for film.” (Teige, “Photo Cinema Film,” p. 142).

established and developed. A cornerstone of much new practice was the work of Emile Jacques-Dalcroze, the Swiss founder of *eurhythmics* (also called rhythmic gymnastic), a systematic study of all elements of the musical rhythm mediated by body.³⁵² In addition, the celebration of dance was one of the preoccupations of European artistic circles at the beginning of the twentieth century, and a number of visual artists took part in the development of various musical performances. A plaster cast of the foot of the dancer Mira Holzbachová was exposed at the aforementioned *Bazaar moderního umění* (The Bazaar of Modern Art) organized by Devětsil (probably modeled upon the *Dada Messe*), in Prague in 1923. In the issue 5-6 of the journal *Pásmo I*, we can read: “The beauty of movement is a perfect sonnet death, his heartbeat faster than a drama of theater.”³⁵³ It is in this context that one should situate the show performed by Milča Mayerová in spring 1926.

On April 17, 1926, the Liberated Theater (*Osvobozené divadlo*), Devětsil’s theater division, organized the “Nezval Evening,” a poetry event in honor to Vítězslav Nezval, where dancer Milča Mayerová made a choreographic performance inspired by *Alphabet* under the direction of Jiří Frejka. Photographer Karel M. Pasma recorded her dancing compositions and Teige used these photographs for his typographic design of the 1926 bioscopic book *Alphabet*. Albeit the reconstruction of the entire performance is not an easy task, two things are clear: first, it is known that the Liberated Theater had large numbers of spectators, which was rather unusual for an author’s soiree. This success was probably a consequence of the increasing popularity of the young poet who “had transformed himself, thanks to a veritable outpouring of poetry and

³⁵² Dalcroze’s *eurhythmics* was a new approach to dance education, bringing to dance certain analytical elements that had never been applied before. It represented the investigations of the natural rhythms of the body.

³⁵³ Haluza, “Tanec uměním” (Dance with the Arts), p. 3.

prose, into a highly visible public figure.”³⁵⁴ The enthusiasm of the crowd also led to a second performance six days later. Second, it is known that, even if the rest of the show was harshly criticized, Milča Mayerová’s dance, accompanied by the recitation of poems by Jarmila Horáková, an actress of great talent, was very well received: “Short dance performances of Miss Mayerová for *Alphabet* impressed by their classical purity.”³⁵⁵ The artist included *Alphabet* in her repertoire so well that, six months later, a newspaper wrote about one of her evening dances: “Mayerová, the pupil and proponent of Laban’s school to us, searches for new directions in her art [...] In Nezval’s *Alphabet*, she has developed a rich range of movements, strongly influenced by Laban; she embodied, fulfilled, and made this poetic vision living.”³⁵⁶

Born into a Prague bourgeoisie family, Mayerová was introduced to modern dance at the age of ten by her uncle, the painter and graphic artist Hugo Boettinger, and received complex training according to the methods of Jacques-Dalcroze and Rudolf van Laban. During the 1910s she studied at the *Dalcroze Institute* in Hellerau, and then became one of the pupils of Rudolf van Laban in Hamburg, from fall 1923 through December 1925.³⁵⁷ Laban was certainly one of the most remarkable modern choreographers: he invented a special kind of writing to accurately trace all the steps and gestures of the dancer, which allowed identical reproduction of the dance

³⁵⁴ Witkovsky, “Staging language,” p. 121.

³⁵⁵ “Scenicky večer V. Nezvala,” *Národní osvobození*, April 20, 1926.

³⁵⁶ “Taneční večer M. Mayerové,” *Lidové noviny*, October 30, 1926. My translation.

³⁵⁷ “In contrast to Dalcroze, who promoted dance mostly for the sake of music and rhythm, Laban was a professional dancer and a rigorous theoretician of the dance as well. [...] He began his career in choreography as a director of *Fasching* (carnival) celebration in Munich in 1911-12, then an epicenter for German Expressionism. During the war, when Laban ran a dance studio in Zürich, romantic and professional liaisons connected his school to the Dada circle at the Cabaret Voltaire. Laban disciples Sophie Täuber and Käthe Wulff led the way, teaching classes for Laban and also appearing in performances at the Cabaret in 1916-17, which Laban attended; [...] in the 1920s, Laban also expressed interest in the work of Oskar Schlemmer, director of the stage productions at the Bauhaus from 1923 to 1929.” (Witkovsky, “Staging language,” p. 122). For Laban’s artistic work in Hamburg, see Maletic, *Body-Space-Expression. The Development of Rudolf Laban’s Movement and Dance Concepts*, pp. 8-24; Preston-Dunlop, *Rudolf Laban: An Extraordinary Life*, pp. 72-118; Doerr, *Rudolf Laban: The Dancer of the Crystal*, especially chapter six, pp. 97-115.

many times after.³⁵⁸ In 1925-1926, Mayerová perfected her dance in Parisian schools, and then obtained a degree in choreography in Berlin. Very quickly, she was solicited by the National Theater (*Narodni Divadlo*) in Prague, but at the same time she danced voluntary in Devětsil's Liberated Theater. Critics often recognized her sense of self-discipline and ability to develop dance as a total spectacle. For example, Emanuel Siblík, the most prominent dance critic of the thirties in Prague, pointed out that “for her [Mayerová], dance will always be an architecture built by a thoughtful aesthetic combination in which she relies as much on the human body as on the costume for the final effect of dance.”³⁵⁹

Mayerová's dance version of Nezval's verses in *Alphabet*, as Witkovsky perceptively remarks in his essay, in many respects shows the influence of her artistic training with Laban:

Her eminently frontal choreography, for example, accords with Laban's preference for static body positions occupying a single plane [...] To the extent that Mayerová made use of three-dimensional space, she confined her gestures for the most part within an invisible frame. This approach echoes Laban's preference for seeing body movement in terms of crystal-line geometry, a common metaphor in prewar central Europe. [...] [Mayerová] used a miniature version of the icosahedral model published in Laban's first book on the subject, *Choreography* (1926) [...] Laban assembled this icosahedron to map body gestures on a set of spatial coordinates—in all three dimensions, despite his apparent preference for planar choreography—noting the positions initially with marks that resembled cuneiform.”³⁶⁰

The lofty conviction of Mayerová's teacher, actually, was additionally significant to the entire collaborative project of the *Alphabet* book. Not only that Laban was widely credited by contemporaries with freeing the body, but was also truly invested into the attempts to

³⁵⁸ See Laban, *Principles of Dance and Movement Notation* and Laban's texts in Bradley, *Rudolf Laban*.

³⁵⁹ Siblík, *Tanec mimo nás i v nás*, pp. 87-88. My translation.

³⁶⁰ Witkovsky, “Staging language,” p. 122.

systematize the transcription of dance movements.³⁶¹ Similarly to the French philosopher Jean d’Udine who was inspired by Dalcroze’s rhythmic gymnastics, Laban believed that dance was an originary form of language.³⁶² Similarly to Sergei Eisenstein—Meyerhold’s close friend and collaborator in his projects of biomechanics and “theater of attraction”—Laban was operating on the assumption that gesture is a means of universal communication.³⁶³ Laban developed and advertised his movement notation as a system similar to a written language, imagining that it would return humans to the true basis of all existing alphabetic forms: “The shapes of all alphabetic letters are borrowed from movement.”³⁶⁴ Laban’s notation system, as Witkovsky put it, was a reaction to the “failing of language in general,” an attempt to reinvent the means of representation through “a sign system identical in its basis with the bodies that generated it.”³⁶⁵ In this regard, Laban’s project of modernist utopia corresponded closely to the idea of Nezval’s

³⁶¹ Eventually, he developed his system of dance notation, Kinetography, which found its application also in the contemporary robotics. In his autobiography, Laban recalled an interesting episode from his first visit to America. He commented upon his arrival to New York in May of 1926 the following: “Reporters boarded the ship together with customs officers. It did not enter my mind that these gentlemen had any notion of my humble existence. I was even more amazed when suddenly a man with a straw hat pushed to the back of his head and a pipe in his mouth, performed some wild tap dancing in front of me on the unsteady deck. He asked me abruptly, ‘Can you write this down?’ He had obviously heard of my dance notation. Then he took one hand out of his trouser pocket and offered me his sleeve on which to write down his tappings. I asked him to repeat them and he did, and I scribbled a few dance notation symbols on his cuff.” The following morning there appeared full-page stories about this fabulous dance master who could write down dances. (Laban, *A Life for Dance*, p. 114).

³⁶² For more on Jean d’Udine’s philosophy of gesture, explicated in his 1910 book *Art and Gesture* (*L’Art et le Geste*), see Tsivian, *Na podstupah k karpalistike*, pp. 40-43. For more on d’Udine’s influence on the Russian theater theory, see Yampolsky, “Kuleshov’s Experiments and the New Anthropology of the Actor,” pp. 31-50.

³⁶³ As Yuri Tsivian asserts in his book on *carpalistics* (*karpalistika*), Eisenstein developed his theoretic insight according to which the “gesture is the prototype for all means of expression, which are on disposal to the human culture alone. From this—through the multiple stages formed—theory, it emerges that in the beginning there was not a word, but a movement, after which—as a trace of the movement—emerged line drawing, and after it, as a verbal cast of the movement—the art of storytelling and literature.” (Tsivian, *Na podstupah k karpalistike*, p. 12). My translation.

³⁶⁴ Laban, *Die Welt des Tänzers* (The dancer’s world), p. 16.

³⁶⁵ Witkovsky, “Staging language,” p. 123.

poem. “It is Mayerová’s great credit that she saw these affinities and foresaw the means to distill them within the printed pages of a book as well,” concludes Witkovsky.³⁶⁶

As shown in the previous section of this chapter, the power of gesture and so-called body language to provide a means for universal communication was of the same importance for Teige as the new art of cinema. Both gesture and cinema alone enable “understanding without words.”³⁶⁷ But in tandem, they are able to create what Teige calls the spectacle of biomechanics—Bioscopic Art. Teige recognized the book as a suitable technology for creating a form of Bioscopic Art. As the uniquely designed bioscopic book, *Alphabet* functions as a technology, an alternative suggestion apparatus, which enables communication through the interaction between several bodies: of the letter, the dancer, the book, and finally, of the reader/viewer. The last has a pivotal role in putting these *bodies in motion*.

What one finds on the typophotos in the book *Alphabet*, of course, is significantly different from what one could see at the performance—as a series of gestures out of which Mayerová’s choreographies for each letter were made. As Witkovsky well documented,

According to [Jana] Rodová, [a leading member of Mayerová’s dance school from 1948 until Mayerová’s death in 1977], the recitation of each quatrain was accompanied by three to four poses, each derived from corresponding verses in Nezval’s poem. The choreography remained fairly static, confined to an area of two square meters, and it paused after each letter—hence ‘dance compositions’ in the plural for the overall performance. The photographs printed in *Alphabet* most often record the first pose, which not coincidentally usually matches the line in which Nezval provides the visual association for each letter. The impetus in the opening quatrain, for example, is given by the initial comparison of A to dwelling, for which Mayerová simply formed an A. For the second line, in which Nezval brings equatorial trees to the banks of the Moldau, she kept her head back but opened her arms wide in a swaying motion, to mimic palm branches in the wind. Mayerová then tucked her body in on the third line to suggest the snail mentioned by Nezval, snug inside its house. Finally, for the fourth line she brought her hands

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Tsivian, *Na podstupah k karpalistiche*, p. 24.

to one side in imitation of a pillow, in response to the concluding line, which reads literally, ‘while people don’t know where to lay their heads.’³⁶⁸

Mayerová’s performance is in this sense a commentary on the book’s utopian character, because “rather than projecting a holistic system, it accommodates competing, incomplete meanings.”³⁶⁹ The whole set of gestures from Mayerová’s choreography is permanently left out from the bioscopic book. *Alphabet*, as an ABC of modern visual literacy, incorporates an inescapable gap in the communicative process, which consequently produces semantic instabilities, ambiguities, and excess of meanings and interpretations. The paradoxical duality of the bioscopic book is displayed once again: *Alphabet* appears both as a system that tends to establish an international body language through the visual means and as a compendium of missing choreographic gestures that make this system imperfect.³⁷⁰

And as we know, this is completely in line with Teige’s aesthetic program and his concept of algorithmic imagination as the assertion of freedom and inventiveness within the restrictions of the system. This highly mathematical imagination is the work of mathematical intuition. As Teige elaborated in his 1925 essay “Constructivism and the liquidation of ‘art’,” this mathematical intuition is connected first, with the machine, second, with the irrationality, and finally, with the biomechanical power of human inventive faculty:

³⁶⁸ Witkovsky, “Staging language,” p. 125.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 129.

³⁷⁰ “It is the photographs [...] that give Mayerová’s poses the system and legibility of an alphabet. The surface of those images joins in reproduction with the text and typography to form an apparently unified, replicable, autonomous plane of communication. This is undoubtedly the outcome Mayerová wanted, as *Alphabet* made an ideal emblem for her readiness to teach and perform a new dance language.” (Ibid, p. 130). For his decision to include only one of Mayerová’s photography from the series, Teige may have found inspiration in Lissitzky, who also thought cinematically: “Every form is the frozen instantaneous picture of a process. Thus a work is a stopping-place on the road of becoming and not the fixed goal.” (Lissitzky, “Nasci,” p. 351. Originally published in *Merz*, nos. 8,9, Hanover, April-July 1924). For more on Lissitzky’s illustrations of liberated body, sport and spectacle, see Nisbet, “El Lissitzky in the Proun Years: A Study of His Work and Thought.”

Mathematical intuition, which intervenes here, does not mean artistic intuition, aesthetic or formal: where well-disciplined and logical mathematics is involved, there is no room for feeling, fantasy, and taste. [...]

Where we speak of mathematical intuition, where we explain the beauty of machine—and *the beauty of the machine is an irrational value of a rational product*—we realize that beyond the rational evaluation lurks the efficacy of irrationality. Mathematics, or rather geometry, was defined as the art of thinking with precision about imprecise facts. Indeed, mathematical beauty of the machine probably lies in its irrationality. And thus, the machine could be not only the model of modern mind and logical work, but also of modern sensitivity. There is nothing more nervous than a running motor.

Intervention of irrationality signifies the intervention of mathematical intuition. Instead of the advance of elementary and mechanical logic, we speak of the intervention of a biomechanical factor, of *invention*. The biomechanical power of human inventive faculty cannot be denied. In a series, there is always room for sudden changes: invention is the only unpredictable and accidental element in industry and technology. Invention precludes chance, and where chance prevailed (as was the case in so-called art) invention cannot come to its own. [...]

The inventor is a specialist—he is a modern man. The vital force rests in the biomechanical factor of inventive power. We need inventors.³⁷¹

Here, Teige again links the body with the machine, but also the biomechanics with invention. Three years later, in his 1928 book *The world that laughs*, he will be more explicit, tightly relating dance with invention and imagination: “Dance is the synthesis of corporeal culture with poetic invention and imagination.”³⁷² The notion of “biomechanical power of human inventive faculty,” however, sheds a new light on the concepts of sport and cinema, comprising Bioscopic Art. Finally, it is not surprising to find that Teige borrowed it from the inventor of the

³⁷¹ Teige, “Constructivism and the liquidation of ‘art,’” p. 588-589.

³⁷² “Modern times, an era of sports and athletics, want to get close to classical and ancient ideals of beauty and health, modern beauty and modern health. Sports and athletics have made us aware of physical beauty as an expression of health and a result of culture; they highlighted the powers of the naked human body. Sport, the culture of senses, instincts, impulsive forces and lessons of intelligence, will give us the experience of a new and dynamic beauty, a new kinoplastic language, new sensations of dizzying speed and new joys, pleasures bare skin in the wind, new impressions of its universal polyrhythmic and polydynamics. After a millennium of Christian morality, asceticism and oppressive dominance of the soul, sport signals the restoration of neglected pleasures of the body and shows that in a beautiful physical exaltation, in mastering the powerful forces of the body the human spirit has its optimistic maximum of clarity and creative force. The beauty of modern dance and ballet is a sister of the aesthetics of sport. It is also a poem of physical beauty and health.” (Teige, *Svět, který se směje*, p. 78f). Translation by Jindřich Toman.

bioscopic book concept. In his 1924 essay “Element and Invention,” Lissitzky wrote: “Invention is the universal force, the biomechanical force, which impels everything forward, overcoming all obstacles, along the path to progress.”³⁷³

Regarding Mayerová’s original costume for *Alphabet*, several assumptions can be made about its author. In sections of the afore-quoted newspapers, Šima, Teige, Heythum and Mrkvička appear as collaborators or the ones that are in charge of the scene. According to Reisingerova de Puineuf, some costumes designed by Heythum are reproduced in the eighth issue of the journal *Pásmo II*, published on April 8, 1926 (nine days before the show): “Besides these drawings, a photograph shows Milča Mayerová dancing in a costume with geometric motifs, comprised of a cap, sleeveless top, and shorts. This costume perhaps served as a model for the costume of Mayerová in *Alphabet*, even if Teige in his typophotos was able to bring his personal touch to it.”³⁷⁴ The cap of the costume emphasized the body of the dancer and corresponded to a modern aesthetics of the clothes extolled in the Czech avant-garde magazines.

“The costume is not simply a textile product, but a screenplay of specific pantomime,” Yuri Tsivian reminds us by inventively paraphrasing Baudelaire’s thought, quoted in the introduction of this dissertation.³⁷⁵ The shiny fabric led to the proliferation of sensations of movement in the slightest gesture of Mayerová. The clever combination of two contrasting colors (black background with a white stripes on the sides and top of the hat) allowed breaking the volume of composition. Thus, this costume was a true disguise and transformed the dancer into a typographical letter that was moving in space. Accordingly, her dance could acquire real

³⁷³ Lissitzky, “Element and Invention,” p. 351. Originally published in *ABC—Beiträge zum Bauen*, No. 1, (Basel), 1924.

³⁷⁴ Reisingerova de Puineuf, “Devětsil à la page,” p. 74.

³⁷⁵ Tsivian, *Na podstupah k karpalistike*, p. 84.

autonomy as Nezval indicated: “She was thus the poem’s poetic medium [...], not in the sense of themes, but in the sense of motifs rooted in the typographical symbols of alphabet.”³⁷⁶ In this regard, she approached the ideal of the “liberated dance” defined by Teige in his 1928 “Poetism Manifesto,” published in the ninth number of the magazine *ReD*:

Liberated dance, sovereign dynamic poetry of the body, independent of music, literature and sculpture, opening the gates of sensuality; the art of physical genius, the most physical and abstract art of all, whose medium is tangible flesh-and-blood physicality, whose movement gives rise to a poem of dance using dynamic and abstract forms.³⁷⁷

Mayerová has been the necessary catalyst in making the independent bioscopic book. The book has not been published in Fromek (Odeon), the usual publisher of the avant-garde editions, but in the bourgeois publishing house of Jan Otto. This choice was, actually, based on the family ties between Mayerová and the publisher, who was also her grandfather. On the other hand, perhaps Fromek could not provide the high quality of print required by a luxury edition. Finally, photography, of which Teige dreamed so much, was still at its infancy in the domain of the book, and its reproduction was still expensive. Otto’s intervention perhaps determined Mayerová’s choice to hire an older photographer, foreign to the avant-garde circle: Karel Pasma, who was best known for his portraits in the 1890s. In his atelier photographs, Pasma avoided any picturesque effect: the direct light is not diffused, and the projected shadows are well delineated. His style differed fundamentally from that of Frantisek Drtikol, who belonged to the generation

³⁷⁶ Nezval, “Preface,” *Alphabet*, (2001), p. 10.

³⁷⁷ In the same essay, Teige also wrote: “*Poetry for PHYSICAL AND SPATIAL SENSES*: [...] sport of every possible kind: motoring, aviatics, tourism, gymnastics, acrobatics [...] The poetry of sport, shining above the educational and orthopedic tendencies of physical exercise develops all the senses and provides a pure sensation of muscular activity, the delight of bare skin in the wind, beautiful physical exaltation and intoxication of the body.” (Teige, “Poetism Manifesto,” p. 601). Originally published as “Manifest poetismu,” in *ReD*, vol. 1, no. 9 (1928).

ReD (*Revue Devětsil*), was “the magazine for modern culture” published from 1927 to 1931 in Prague. It was Teige who composed the typography for the magazine and redacted most of the articles.

of Devětsil. Pasma did not capture the charm of the dancer, but recorded Mayerová's gestures in a precise, almost scientific way. He posed Mayerová before a white wall, like a letter on a page. Karel Teige recognized in these unpretentious, non-artistic, and un-stylized photographs a suitable material for creating the typophoto of a balanced bioscopic book.

4.2.3 Teige's design: From the Body to Typophoto

The previous section of this chapter has already mentioned that Teige was behind several experiments in typography prior to his work on *Alphabet*. One of the best-known publications from the beginning of his career was Nezval's collection of poems *Pantomime* (1924), in which the poetic cycle "Alphabet" occupied its first pages. In this work, Teige was trying to "complete the poetic process and transpose the poems into the visual sphere" by a heterogeneous typography and by a selection of pictures taken from different sources.³⁷⁸ In the poem "B" of "Alphabet" in *Pantomime*, for instance, Teige suggested an image of breasts by tipping the uppercase letter horizontally.

In the 1926 book *Alphabet*, however, Teige used a more rigorous typesetting.³⁷⁹ If in the poem "P" he employed the image of the hand with a pointing gesture (the dingbat ) , probably copied from Dadaist journals, it was "to achieve greater clarity and suggestion" (fig. 4.10).³⁸⁰ In his creative process, he followed the requirements of modern typography made by Vilém Nový

³⁷⁸ Teige, "Modern typography," p. 105.

³⁷⁹ With several exceptions, Teige mostly used the type called Schablonenschrift by Josef Albers, a Bauhaus professor at the Department of Design. I would like to thank Jindřich Toman who has drawn my attention to this observation.

³⁸⁰ Teige, "Modern typography," p. 105. The dingbat  was the all-time favorite typographic element of many Dadaist publications in the early 1920s, particularly *Mécano* and *Merz*. It is usually recognized as the sign referring to the Dadaist "here and now." However, one can find the same image engraved on the nineteenth century tombs, where it had to remind the visitors of the invisible hand of a transcendental deity and the power it has over the life and death.

in the journal *Pásmo I*: “To find pure forms of constructive types that are active on the surface, visually and geometrically. Not the woodcut, the zincography, the lithography, but the photography.”³⁸¹ Photography was indeed seen as a modern means, which could enhance typography: Jan Tschichold and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy — two remarkable typographers who also published in Czech journals — advocated its use.



**Figure 4.10 Karel Teige: double page for the poem “P”
in Nezval’s *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926)**

On the right pages of the book *Alphabet*, Teige tried to reach “a *typophoto* of a purely abstract and poetic nature, setting into graphic poetry what Nezval set into verbal poetry in his

³⁸¹ Nový, “O moderní typografii,” *Pásmo I*, No. 14, 1925, n.p.

verse.”³⁸² It was therefore a question of a different approach, probably more mature than the one adopted by Teige in *Pantomime*. The typography aimed to create a parallel poem, equivalent and complementary to that of the poet. The word “poem” must be understood as the result of this creation that was the self-governing *poiesis*. Its final result was of a remarkable quality and an extraordinary richness.

A close examination of the typophoto in *Alphabet* reveals that Teige sought no system in the union between typography and photography. The photographic image doesn’t act as a simple decorative veneer in the letter, because it is itself built in innovative ways. This was achieved not by playing with the line, but with black and white surfaces in order to construct a form similar to the typeface. The letter S is a perfect example (**fig. 4.11**): the graphic sign, normally constituted by a completely open sinuous line, is developed here from a composition of two half-discs and two concave shaped black surfaces to suggest a movement of aircraft propeller.³⁸³ The diagonal inclusion of photography within the black square frame adds to the feeling of instability, in which Teige located the essence of the character S.

³⁸² Teige, “Modern typography,” p. 105.

³⁸³ The propeller, i.e. form of helix was invested with a strong revolutionary meaning, especially in Lissitzky’s works and writings. See, for example, El Lissitzky, *Figurinenmappe: Die plastische Gestaltung der electromechanischen Schau “Sieg über die Sonne.”* Hannover, 1923. See also his article “Wheel—Propeller and what follows,” p. 349. This text was originally published in the magazine *G*, no. 2, Berlin, September 1923. For discussion on the semantics of the propeller in relation to the Russian avant-garde and its reception of Charlie Chaplin, see Tsivian, *Na podstupah k karpalistike*, pp. 108-129.



**Figure 4.11 Karel Teige: typophoto S
in Nezval's *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926)**

At other times, however, Teige even abandons the idea of treating the letter in its entirety: in the composition “A” (fig. 4.12) only a part of a character is suggested, so that “typography and photography here complement each other entirely.”³⁸⁴



Figure 4.12 Karel Teige: typophoto A in Nezval’s *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926)

³⁸⁴ Witkovsky, “Staging language,” p. 119.

The diversity of typophoto designs exposes the free flight of Teige's *algorithmic imagination* within the regulatory standards of Latin alphabet and the visual system of bioscopic book. Freeing himself from traditional typographical rules, Teige could create complex relationships between the body of the dancer and the abstract elements of the page. First, his typophoto develops a constructive relationship with Mayerová's body, which is actively involved in the design of the letter, as it is in the composition "E," where the tense leg of the dancer creates the horizontal median of the letter character (**fig. 4.13**), or in the composition "O" where the black curve includes the "negative" of the ellipse of the pale arm of the model, extended by the white band of costume (**fig. 4.14**).



Figure 4.13 Karel Teige: typophoto E in Nezval's *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926)

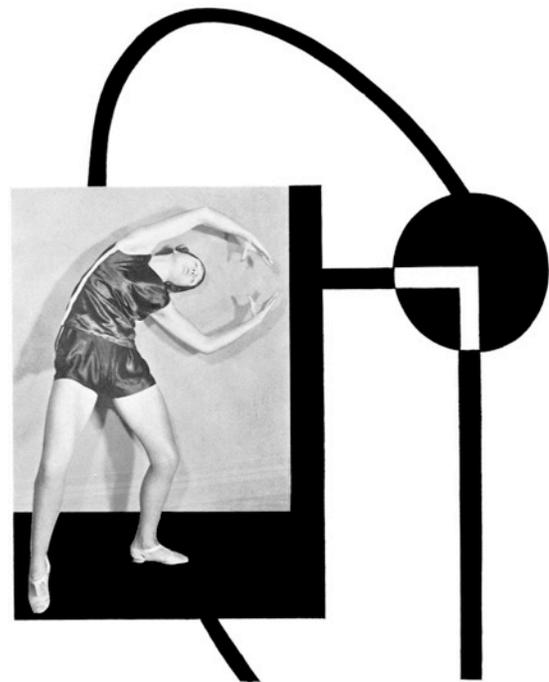


Figure 4.14 Karel Teige: typophoto O in Nezval's *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926)

Second, there is a relationship that could be described as a communication between the dancer and the page elements, characterized by a desire to produce exchanges between photography and typography: the black bands of the letter “H” are scaling a dancer, acting as a ladder to the trapeze (**fig. 4.15**), while in the composition “R,” a black-and-white disc is placed before Mayerová’s hands and thus transformed into a ball (**fig. 4.16**).



Figure 4.15 Karel Teige: typophoto H in Nezval’s *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926)

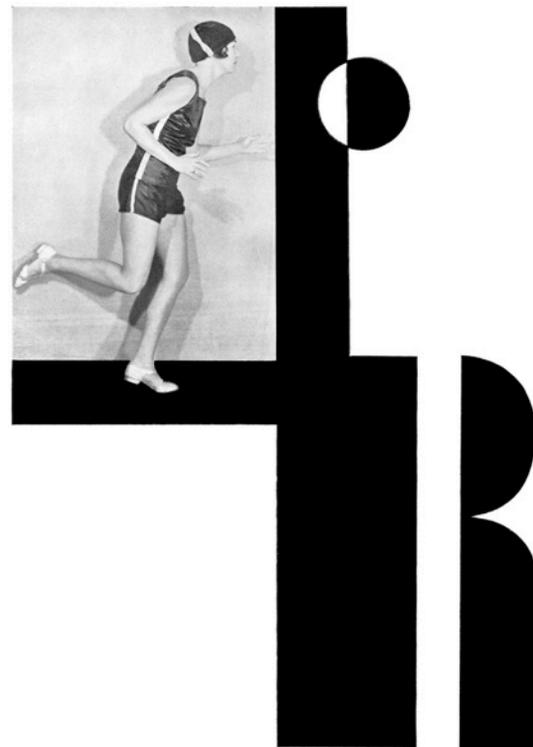


Figure 4.16 Karel Teige: typophoto R in Nezval’s *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926)

Third, when there is no direct relationship between the body of the dancer and the structural elements of letters, Teige uses black and white bands to create links between photography and typography. These bands are clearly echoed by Mayerová’s costume. White is

not only used as a background to black, but also as the equivalent of the black: that is how, for example, the letter C is drawn in white (fig. 4.5).



Figure 4.17 Karel Teige: typophotos for Nezval's *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926)

On the other hand, the white, easily confused with the surface of the page, allows the use of transparencies. The letter “Y” is entirely composed by the use of white on black (**fig. 4.17**), while in the composition “JQ,” the lettering corresponds to the principle of negatives where, on the black film, any dark element is clearly transcribed (**fig. 4.17**). This composition also plays on the ambiguity of the base, so that the black form with the letters “JQ” gives depth to the surface of the page. But alongside this, Teige attempts to smooth the space of the photograph by partially placing Mayerová’s body directly on the blank page (feet in the composition “W,” **fig. 4.17**) or on the thick black band (composition “T,” **fig. 4.17**).

On the other hand, some compositions can be seen as illustrations of Nezval’s poems. Teige employs two methods: the first uses the value of narrative photography (the image of the cowboy with the lasso in the poem “g,” **fig. 4.17**), whereas the second evokes the poem by the particular disposition of the photograph in the typeface (the crossing of the consonant “N,” **fig. 4.17**). However, it is only in the “M” that Teige creates a figurative composition by putting a motive other than abstract typographic forms and photographs of the dancer into play (**fig. 4.18**). He places the latter on an open hand, the subject of palmistry, and succeeds in providing it with a mysterious appearance. The letter “M,” drawn on the palm, illustrates the following verses of the poem:

Úspěch se s hlavní čarou kříží
Život a srdce dvě mocné linie

Success and love cross here and meet
Two mighty lines life and heart

This photo-collage is obviously closer to the aforementioned picture poems, the specific intermedial genre of the Czech avant-garde.

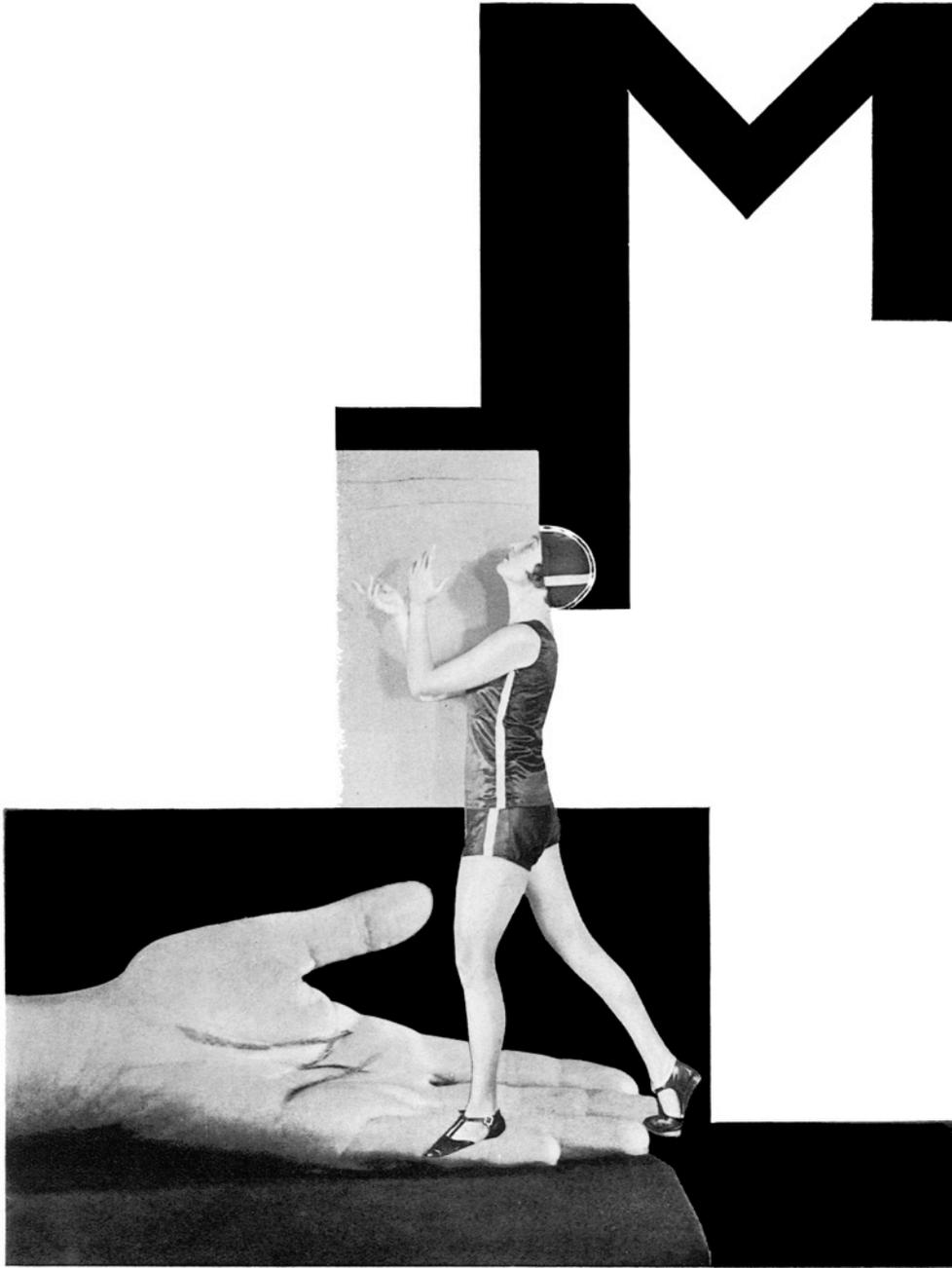


Figure 4.18 Karel Teige: typophoto M in Nezval's *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926)

Although each typesetting on the right page of the book is created as an original composition, Teige nevertheless tried to establish some continuity. The important element which regulates the work is the disc: either black or white, or black-and-white, the disc appears regularly, rising steadily over the pages as a point on the “I” (fig. 4.17), or signifying the end of

the book as a point behind the “Z” (**fig. 1.17**). Several scholars of the Czech avant-garde highlighted the importance of the disc in the aesthetics of Devětsil.³⁸⁵ Teige saw it as the perfect form, a nice equilibrium, which functioned as a modern sign on the various covers of avant-garde books and journals, so it eventually became Devětsil’s ideogram.

Teige created the impression of a continuous flow of a flipbook by utilizing typophoto throughout the planar habitat of *Alphabet*. The uninterrupted sequence of images is also underlined by the similarity of the initial and final positions of the dancer within the bioscopic book (**fig. 4.17**). By looking only at these two photographs of Mayerová, one might conclude that a slight movement occurred between the two positions. It is possible that Teige intervened in the choice of the choreographic parts to be used for the photograph (as mentioned, for each letter Mayerová had prepared a little choreography made up a series of gestures). Thus, Teige’s typesetting appears as a continuous visual poem, with a beginning and an end, so that the reader/viewer can set the typophoto in motion simply by turning the pages of the bioscopic book. In other words, the reader/viewer puts this suggestive apparatus into ‘autonomous gears’ and thus transforms the bioscopic book into an alternative film projector. The partial and expanded form of “A” that is not entirely in the page can be viewed as a capital letter with which the visual poem begins, while the disk after the letter “Z,” marking the full stop at the last page of the book, makes it clear where the poem ends.

The book *Alphabet* reflects the gradual shift towards Constructivism and materialization of Teige’s conception of Bioscopic Art in the form of a book. This book flagrantly accomplishes the symbiosis of Constructivism and Poetism with the aesthetics of Bioscopic Art. And it does so due to Teige who considered both Nezval’s poems and Mayerová’s dance as unsurpassed works

³⁸⁵ See Passuth, *Les Avantgardes de L’Europe central 1907-1927*; Primus, “Book Architecture;” and Šrp, “Karel Teige and the New Typography.”

of poetry. He pointed out the importance of their collaborative work in his second, 1928 “Poetism manifesto,” emphasizing the cultivation of sight and, of course, their collective creation of the bioscopic book as “a new branch of film art”:

By continuing with what was foreshadowed by Mallarmé and Apollinaire, we experimented with typographical montage of poems until we eventually came up with a new branch of *pictorial poetry*, a *lyricism of image and reality*, and then a new branch of *film art: purely lyrical cinematography and dynamic pictorial poetry*. We achieved a fusion of poetry freed from literature and the image freed by cubism from representation, and the identification of the poet and the painter.³⁸⁶

In the same text, Teige evokes comparisons between different areas of human creativity—poetry, music, and painting—to issue a call for “poetry for five senses.” According to him, several poets have managed to disrupt the rational order of literature and ideology: Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarme, Marinetti, Apollinaire, Cendrars and—at the end of these descendants—Nezval. As summarized by Teige: “Now that Nezval is versifying his ‘Alphabet’ we stand on the threshold of a new pictorial poetry. Whereas Rimbaud discovered the color values of vowels in their sound value, Nezval transposes the shapes of typographic signs into his poem; he makes poetry from the magic of their form.”³⁸⁷ *Alphabet* is thus seen as the starting point for visual poetry, in which the poet, from a form of letter, offered a whole chain of associations to create a picture or a film in the reader’s mind.

On Nezval’s extremely evocative poetry, Teige imposed a simple typophoto that does not disturb the stanzas. In this way, Teige further distanced Nezval from his initial infatuation with the French poets, primarily Rimbaud, whose ideas of synesthetic experiences of sound and vision initially influenced and inspired the Czech poet the most. For example, Teige defines Nezval’s

³⁸⁶ Teige, “Poetism manifesto,” p. 595.

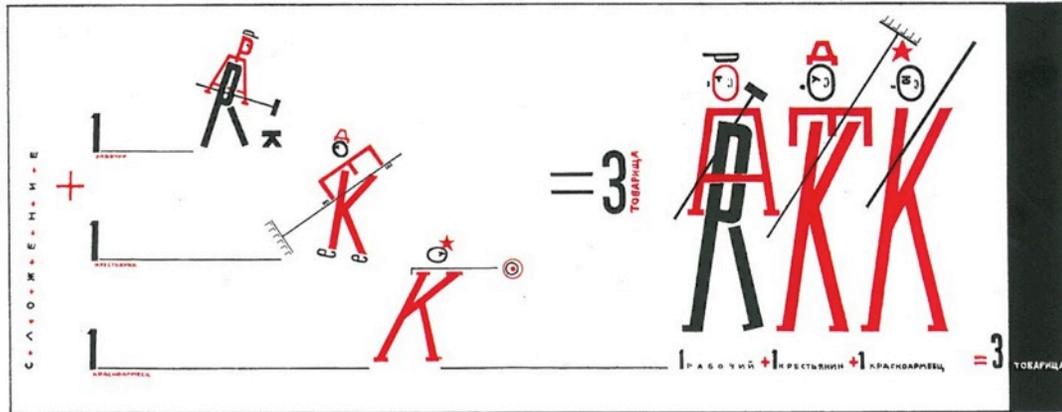
³⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 594.

Alphabet as a “cycle of poems based on the shapes of letters.”³⁸⁸ However, the poet also uses the sounds of consonants and vowels: “člověk vydechne a nedýchá” (a deep sigh) in the poem “H,” the juxtaposition of three R’s to simulate rolled ‘r’ in the poem “R,” “nejvyšší tóny” (the most high-pitched notes) in “I,” “bučení kravek” (lowing of cows) in “U.” In these last two poems, Nezval even makes clear references to Rimbaud’s “Vowels”: “I red” is recalled by the motive of “červený vějíř” (a red fan), and “U green” by the verses “a smaragdovou zeleň ovoce” (and fruits of emerald green). Besides, Rimbaud’s verses were cited as a motto in the preamble of Nezval’s cycle “Alphabet” in *Disk* (1923) and in *Pantomime* (1924). The fact that they are not included in the 1926 version of *Alphabet* has a twofold explanation. First, it can be explained by the more assertive character of the Czech avant-garde that no longer feels obliged to remind itself of its place in the European context. Second, it may be a result of a stronger affinity with the East that is manifested by an alleged excess of reflection on modern poetry in the West. This critical distancing from Western Europe loaded with heavy baggage of its academic past, justifies the removal of the initial dictum of Nezval’s cycle. Also, it exposes Teige’s dialectical response to Nezval’s call “Přes Německo do Francie” (Through Germany and down to France) from the poem “JQ,” marking the poet’s choice of “decimal balance.”

As far as the typophoto, Teige’s compositions of typographically framed photographs of Mayerová may be reminiscent of the images of ornamentally framed women from the Secessionist posters, such as those by the Czech Art Nouveau painter and decorative artist, Alfonse Mucha. Nonetheless, the elements of abundant ornamentation, woman’s floral garment and long hair from the early twentieth century hand-drawn posters are significantly altered in the 1920s typophoto by the disappearance of any ornamentations and decorations, sharp and almost

³⁸⁸ Teige, “Modern Typography,” p. 105.

boyish look of the new woman in sports gear.³⁸⁹ In addition, the graphic compositions of *Alphabet* may be situated in the proximity of anthropomorphic alphabets, which were composed for ornamental purposes and often with abundant humor. Another similar attempt from the 1920s is El Lissitzky’s typographic experiment in building figures out of letter characters (**fig. 4.19**).



**Figure 4.19 El Lissitzky: sketch for children’s book
“Addition, Subtraction, Multiplication, Division” (1928)
[‘1 worker + 1 peasant + 1 Red Army man = 3 comrades’]**

Nevertheless, the purpose of Teige’s design exceeds the anecdotal frame of these playful experiments in order to develop a deep reflection on the language of the body and its relationship with the writing that carries a poetic message. The special provision of the typographical letter at the top left of the left (verso) page embodies the initial inspiration for all three main contributors to the book—the poet, the dancer, and the designer. Indeed, each of them developed their own poem—verbal, choreographic, and graphic—from the letters of the alphabet. It is necessary therefore to understand each double page in its entirety. The book *Alphabet* must be regarded as a total work of art or—in Teige’s words—as a work of pure poetry.

³⁸⁹ I would like to thank Jindřich Toman who has drawn my attention to this observation.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the architecture and effective design of the *Alphabet* book fully embodies the basic constructive principles of Purism and International Constructivism. It has shown that the book's double page montage of verses, typography, and photography exemplifies the visual creation of the Poetist picture poem executed with the clarity of constructivist typography and graphic design. Finally, this chapter showed that the innovative use of "typophoto" along with the series of photographs of the liberated dancer's body throughout "the continuous-page sequence" of the book, to use Lissitzky's formulation, introduced the filmic quality of the Bioscopic Art.

Alphabet reflected gradual "local reading" of International Constructivism in the Czech context. The work of the Russian contemporaries has been known in Prague since the 1922 when the almanac *Život II* introduced theories of the *New Spirit*, comparing Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* to the Eiffel Tower, and featuring the translation of a chapter from Ilya Ehrenburg's *And Yet It Turns* (1922).³⁹⁰ Actually, František Šmejkal, an art historian with pioneering work on the Czech avant-garde, suggested that the young Prague artists were among the first to see similarities between Purism and Constructivism, because they considered both to be true programs of building a new life.³⁹¹ Nevertheless, in the years 1922-1923, the Czechs readily confused "constructivist" with "constructive." In the first issue of the journal *Disk*, painter Jindřich Štyrský launched ideas from the East, and in his manifesto "Picture" he wrote

³⁹⁰ Translator František Píšek translated one chapter from Ehrenburg's for *Život* and another for *Revolutionary Collection Devětsil*. See Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 85.

³⁹¹ Šmejkal, "Česky konstruktivismus," p. 214.

“picture = constructive poem of the beauties of the world.”³⁹² Nezval probably drew inspiration from this for his metaphor in the poem “V”:

odraz pyramid v žhoucím písku
V konstruktivní báseň hodná Disku

a pyramid reflected in the sand red hot
“V” the constructive poem worthy of Disk ³⁹³

It was the magazine *Disk* that became the spokesman of the Czech Constructivists and progressive artists. Correspondingly, Teige suggested the unification of Poetism with Constructivism in his 1924 manifesto: “Poeticism is the crown of life; constructivism is its bases.”³⁹⁴ According to František Šmejkal, Constructivism eventually became for Teige “a working method whose validity has been limited to architecture, industrial design, scenography, typography, poster and photograph.”³⁹⁵

Not only that this new aesthetics triumph in *Alphabet*, but also the idea of the bioscopic book, founded on the modern typography, photography, and typophoto. The first publication of Nezval’s poetic cycle “Alphabet” in the 1923 issue of magazine *Disk* was illustrated by a drawing of Robert Delaunay, who was thought to illustrate the *Trans-Siberian Prose* by Blaise Cendrars with his wife Sonia Delaunay. This drawing has been included neither in 1924 nor 1926 editions, because Teige transformed the idea into a book. According to this new conception, the book had to alter the traditional picture with the mechanically (re)produced images. In his 1924 manifesto “Poetism,” Teige asserted, “The poetic picture is the picture of

³⁹² Štyrský, “Picture,” p. 365.

³⁹³ Translation modified to follow literally the original.

³⁹⁴ Teige, “Poetism,” p. 67.

³⁹⁵ Šmejkal, “Česky konstruktivismus,” p. 218.

book illustration, photography, photomontage.”³⁹⁶ He proposed to reproduce the picture book using the machine, photographically. *Alphabet* is therefore the first picture book in this new sense of the term. Each double page has its own right as an image of a “static photo- and typomontage picture in book form identified with the poem,” as Teige claimed in the second *Poetism Manifesto* (1928).³⁹⁷ This concept of book was designed as a culmination of the poem-picture or pictorial poetry. Indeed, Teige defined the former as “static: typo- and photo-montage pictures, the new picture as a poem of color,” and the latter as “a new branch of film art.”³⁹⁸

The book *Alphabet* was the culmination of Teige’s struggle against “Art.” Art, embodied in easel painting, was for Teige a notion loaded with an ideological, moralizing and sacred past. Teige contrasted Art with the concept of poetry as original and personal “sovereign creation” represented by the book. With *Alphabet*, he wanted to reconcile different forms of poetic expression, fusing them into a unique invention. This book triumphed over traditional easel painting by the use of new images conceived with the aid of photography. It launched a challenge to architecture by its rigorous typographic construction. Finally, it employed typophoto in order to replace the standard with an alternative cinematic apparatus, thus inaugurating itself as a type of “cinema by other means.”

The thoughtful design of the book *Alphabet* embodied Teige’s program of Bioscopic Art as the spectacle of biomechanics on the page. As a bioscopic book with alternating current, *Alphabet* functions both as a well-designed visual system which elements—the letter, the verse, the image of body gesture—resist its systematization. The dynamic conceptual design of

³⁹⁶ Teige, “Poetism,” p. 69.

³⁹⁷ Teige, “Poetism Manifesto,” p. 597.

³⁹⁸ Finally, he proposed “*kinography*” as “a new art of film—pure cinematography, photogenic mechanical ballet of shapes and light, that demonstrates its innate affinity with light shows, pure dance, the art of fireworks (and the art of gymnastics and acrobatics). The art of movement, the art of time and space, *the art of the live spectacle: a new theater.*” (Teige, “Poetism Manifesto,” pp. 598-600). Emphasis in original.

Alphabet internalized this paradoxical duality. Since this design was based on the concepts of decimal balance and algorithmic imagination, it promoted the mimesis as rhythmic duplication and variation of forms, shapes, and colors. As a technology with such a program, *Alphabet* functioned as an alternative suggestive apparatus that could have been put in motion by the viewer/reader. The Czech bioscopic book was designed to invite the reader/viewer to become a *prosumer* who would practice the dialectics of disjunction and conjunction along with her fantasy, intuition, and invention within the ‘regulatory’ standards of what Teige called ‘laws’ of sensible design. The ultimate goal of the Czech bioscopic book was the development of a universal language insofar it served the biomechanical power of human inventive faculty.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion:

Books for the Children of the Revolution

This dissertation has focused on three select examples of avant-garde poetry books—Mayakovsky’s and Rodchenko’s *About This* (1923), Mayakovsky’s and Rozhkov’s *To the Workers of Kursk* (1924-7) and Nezval and Teige’s *Alphabet* (1926), all illustrated by photomontages or diverse techniques involving photographic material. By way of three distinct case studies it described and analyzed these works of avant-garde photo-poetry from the angle of the bioscopic book, a concept envisaged in a programmatic manner by El Lissitzky in 1923. We have seen that in the 1920s inclusion of mass-produced and machine-made images—photography, photomontage—together with the application of a filmic vision as a fundamental part of literary fiction was a much more radical statement about the modernity than it may appear to us today. In this context, the 1920s bioscopic book should not be mistaken for a genre, but rather, should be understood as a theoretical, if not visionary, concept of a visual technology approximated in the series of experiments within the genre of avant-garde photo-poetry.

The results of these experiments, as this dissertation has shown, fluctuated significantly. Each of the examined books embodied specific optical, indexical, and technical qualities both within and by way of its dynamic conceptual design. This design, realized as the conflation of words and images in the medium of the book, enacted, propagated, and provoked montage thinking as a model of the view of the world and its experience. At the same time, each design

and every new form of the bioscopic book was recognized as “a stopping place on the road of becoming and not the fixed goal.”³⁹⁹

The angle provided by the concept of the bioscopic book has also led this dissertation to foreground the significance of social and technological utopianism in the early avant-garde to a far greater extent than has traditionally been done. A number of scholars of the avant-garde focused on its utopian aspirations and projections into the future, its artistic ideologies of collectivism and progress, and its interest in creating new forms of nontraditional identity. Nonetheless, the idea that we should seriously consider the medium of the photo-poetry book as a distinct technology—a dynamic conceptual design that enables cultural (re)production of these utopian projections, and an alternative suggestion apparatus that both *programs* and *is programmed* by the psycho-perceptual activity of the human subject—has so far been neglected or underdeveloped. Lissitsky was not alone in proposing the “continuous page-sequence” and the “electro-library.” During the 1920s, the idea of the photo-book as a medium with revolutionary promise was widely believed. For example, in 1928, Walter Benjamin expressed these utopian desires in his *One Way Street*:

But it is quite beyond doubt that the development of writing will not indefinitely be bound by the claims to power of a chaotic academic and commercial activity; rather quantity is approaching the moment of a qualitative leap when writing, advancing ever more deeply into the graphic regions of its new eccentric figurativeness, will suddenly take possession of an adequate material content. In this *picture-writing*, poets, who will now as in earliest times be first and foremost experts in writing, will be able to participate only by mastering the fields in which (quite unobtrusively) it is being constructed: *statistical and technical diagram*. With *the founding of an international moving script*, poets will renew their authority in the life of peoples, and find a role awaiting them in comparison to which all the innovative aspirations of rhetoric will reveal themselves as antiquated daydreams.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁹ Lissitsky, “Nasci,” p. 351.

⁴⁰⁰ Benjamin, “Attested Auditor of Books,” pp. 456-457.

Technological or so-called algorithmic imagination amalgamated the photographic sensibility in the collaborative attempts of poets and graphic designers to invent what Benjamin deemed “international moving script.” Quite a few progressive artists experimented in translating a formalist vision of photographic film into photo-poetry books. This experimental approach was playful and constructive, instrumental and inventive.

If the interplay of technical and social spheres fundamentally shaped the ways in which photography and poetry interacted and in which their relationship developed, then the artistic ideologies of collectivism and progress finally authorized the liaison between the two. Above all, the teleological vision of history (the arrow of time) found its poetry in the stillness of photography. Photography is a frozen image of arrested time—thus, it is a perfect means for arming the idea of progress with the utopian projection into the future. Photography is a *cut* in time, and since time is in continuous state of flux, photography is an illusion that fails to capture reality; instead, it is a “flight from reality.”⁴⁰¹ Every photographic image is simultaneously an indexical representation and a creation, a record of the ‘real’ and a figuration.⁴⁰² According to François Soulages, a French philosopher of art,

[p]hotography is not able to show the reality in its unchangeable form; this inability and deficit are, at the same time, what makes photography valuable. Photography is a product that investigates the visible rather than an object that offers the visible. Photography faces us with the phenomena and restricts our efforts to reach reality; because it always brings us back to the phenomena, with photography we sometimes risk withdrawing and closing ourselves in. Photography doesn’t point to the transparency of reality, but to its illegibility, its riddle, its enigma and mysteriousness. Photography teaches us to exist in a life that is of phenomenological nature. It doesn’t teach us one concrete meaning or generality, but gives us a lesson of multiplicity, heterogeneity and specificity.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ Toman, “How to Hide the φ -Relation: A Discussion of Photo-illustrated Fiction,” manuscript.

⁴⁰² Photographic sign is “characterized as indexical icon or iconic signifier.” (Marie-Schaeffer, *La image preciaire*, 1987). Soulages suggest that photography is “indexical sign with iconic and symbolic potentialities.” See Sulanž, *Estetika fotografije*, pp. 73-99; and Soulages. *Esthétique de la photographie*.

⁴⁰³ Sulanž, *Estetika fotografije*, p. 99.

Avant-garde artists, however, did not reach this conclusion directly, through theorizing photography, but rather intuitively, through practicing photomontage. Dadaists and Constructivists initially embraced photomontage from their genuine concern to expose and enlist the constituting and defining technologies within the culture that had been continuously disguised as such by those who denied the very existence of these mechanisms within the culture. The purpose of photomontage was not, as the common accounts suggest, the mere fusion of various traditional genres. Rather, the initial proposition of photomontage was its defining purpose, that is, its unexhibited property of defining something—a culture, ideology, or a set of social relations, to use Tretiakov’s definition of *byt*. This defining moment of the technology of photomontage was simultaneous with the processes of its “application” in different dimensions of culture such as propaganda, advertising, journalism, and—as we have seen—book design, cutting across different geographical and temporal circumstances.

The conceptualization of photomontage as a defining technology operates on a level of constituting cultural definition (Dada photomontages, Rodchenko’s photomontages for *Kino-fot* and *About This*), while its application under different circumstances functions with policing it (Rodchenko’s *Reklam-Konstruktor* work, Rozhkov’s “To the Workers of Kursk,” Bauhaus photomontages, Mrkvička’s and Teige’s book covers, Soviet propaganda posters, etc.). In both cases, however, interests are the same: photomontage—either as a defining technology or a means of application—represents the source of empowerment. Any defining capabilities are sources of empowerment, and it was precisely in these interests that photomontage was embraced and conceived of in the first place. Application is also a power structure and it should come as no surprise that the use of photomontage freely crossed political, aesthetic, and

ideological lines: it equally served Dada and German liberal left, the utopian De Stijl artists, the Russian Constructivists, the Czech Poetists, and subsequently, the German and Italian Fascists.

Seeing the continuities between the Dada photomontage, Constructivist photomontage and practices of cinematic re-editing and non-fiction, Rodchenko's photomontages, Rozhkov's merger of text and photomontage, and Teige's typophotos allow us to develop a better understanding of how the Russian Constructivists and Czech Poetists designed their alternative suggestive apparatuses. It is no surprise that with the technological advancements in printing, photography and cinema, the demand for standardization and simplification (variety control) permeated all spheres of human activity in the second half of the 1920s. Teige's typophotos for *Alphabet* are the most salient example of how the experimental phase of the bioscopic book approached the point of its aesthetical and technological standardization. And once the bioscopic book stopped functioning as an *alternative* suggestive apparatus—or, as Pavle Levi would say, once it stopped opposing “normativization and technological reification of the apparatus”—it consequently ceased to invite the process of its “infinite re-materialization.”⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰⁴ Levi, “Cinema by Other Means,” p. 56.

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