The New Technological Renaissance in the Twenties

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ABSTRACT

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The debate on photography and cinema in the Twenties is considered in the light of Russian revolution as a moment in which the effort of avant-garde artists and thinkers to legitimate the new media collided with Stalinist political propaganda. With the fulfillment of the second Five-Years Plan in 1937 photographers gradually aligned to strict socialist realist canons causing the end of all the avant-gardist experimentations and a return to the painting.

In this work, theoretical issues of space and time are explored in relation to painting, cinema and photograph in order to demonstrate as the change in our perception of space and in the structure of time, mainly due to the notion of dynamic/movement, has determined an epochal cultural change.

Which has in turn affected both the form of arts and its structures and in this showing as the notion of New Technological Renaissance is a compelling one.

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To Angelo Brelich, my ideal mentor.

To my country, Italy and to all those realities violated by the oppression of man over man.

To all victims of the ongoing political reprisals, who “believe in the value of an open society, striving for democracy, knowledge, intellectual honesty.”¹

¹ Smirnov, A. *Sound In Z: Experiments In Sound and Electronic Music In Early 20th Century Russia*, London: Koenig Books, 2013, p.1

Introduction

In the 20th century, the ancient Russian popular traditions were upset by sudden and sweeping political changes that mixed them with the futuristic design of avant-garde art. This not only produced, through the relic of the past traditions, the passage from one visual technology to another but also gave rise to probably one of the most intense debates on the visual arts of the last century. The topic of this work aims to illustrate and to expand my previous studies on the Russian Revolution, in particular the developments took place between the First World War to the end of the second Five-Year Plan in 1937. To this purpose, I will examine in the last chapter the relationship between two of the most important Russian artists of this time, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Dziga Vertov, and the mutual influence this friendship produced. The study of these specific artefacts exemplifies the complex evolution and the key topics concerning the visual image at the beginning of the 20th century in the young Soviet Russia, both in terms of the specific production of meanings and of theories to them related inside of Russian culture and as a more general production of avant-garde art in the 1920s and 1930s.

An investigation of the relationship between art and the Russian Revolution remains important for contemporary culture because it focused on what Margarita Tupitsyn calls “the conflict (or contest) between realism and abstraction,”² a conflict which continues to resist resolution. In fact, many social, political, cultural and economic issues were left unresolved and in a certain way betrayed by those events. If the so-called Postmodern societies emerged because of the collapse of Modernist proposals, it had Germany and Russia among its main

² Tupitsyn, M. *Malevich and film*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002, p. XII

supporters, Russia spawned the most significant artistic, social and political experiences that could not carry on, however, due to the advent of the Stalinist era. Indeed, according the Italian scholar Paolo Bertetto:

In the age of the Stalinist dictatorship occurred not only a harsh repression, but also a rewriting of the history of the Soviet Revolution, hiding and removing the political function of the individuals that Stalin has killed or imprisoned. [...] this destruction of historical events goes so far as to cancel the characters of the opponents from the cinematographic images of documents and fiction historical movies.³

The correct interpretation of those events, also considering the rewriting of the history through the manipulation of media image's documents, is thus necessary in order to comprehend the development of visual and social processes. In this case, this involves the intervention of a centralist political will that in the end was incompatible with the more progressive requests of the Revolution. Dziga Vertov is certainly one of the most famous examples of ostracism by Stalinism, although the Russian history of that time points out several others — for instance, the events related to Mikhail Bulgakov or the exploitation of the death of Vladimir Mayakovsky by Stalin, who proclaimed him in 1935 'hero of the Revolution,'⁴ despite the fact that Mayakovsky's suicide was probably due to his disappointment⁵ concerning the developments of the State doctrine of Socialist realism towards which he was strongly critical.

The 'great utopia' appeared for many as the beginning of a new Humanism for European cultures.⁶ However it raised a multiplicity of questions which are still outstanding in modern post-industrial societies. What I would like to emphasize with my study is that, the analysis of visual culture in a contemporary "society of the spectacle," in which the image has a foundational value as means of communication, knowledge and investigation of reality,⁷ can

³ Bertetto, P. *Lo specchio e il simulacro. Il cinema nel mondo diventato favola*, Milano: Bompiani, 2007, p. 236

⁴ Dabrowski, M. *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998, p. 111

⁵ Jakobson, R. *Una generazione che ha dissipato i suoi poeti. Il problema Majakovskij*, Torino: Einaudi, 1975

⁶ Finizio, L. P. *L'astrattismo costruttivo. Suprematismo e costruttivismo*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1990, p. VII

⁷ Ibidem, p. II

help us to better understand the phenomena and historical changes. This is necessary in order to produce a correct criticism and to give concrete solutions to the present's questions through the mistakes and correct strategies of the past, as the former Director of the Getty Research Institute Salvatore Settis says, "the past is freedom."⁸ That is, the past reveals to us alternatives and is the possibility of seeing the world on the basis of a secular and generous vision of society, Pier Paolo Pasolini himself spoke of "the revolutionary force of the past,"⁹ as a reservoir of possibilities and ideas. Therefore, the study of the Russian visual culture forms during the Revolution can still disclose to us many unsolved questions.

As an historian of art my primary question is what happened in visual culture after Malevich and what visual changes the Russian Revolution produced. Moreover, I am interested to explore how visual forms and socio-political issues are related and to which extent visual image expresses political phenomena and vice versa according to the theoretical models. In the first chapter I will briefly discuss on methodology in order to sum up and explain how and why I have engaged with different materials; in the second chapter I will provide a more general explanation of the phenomenon of the Russian avant-garde; in the third chapter I will focus on the specific moment in which took place the paradigm shift from 'easel painting' to photography. Here I will try to explain the historical, technological and theoretical reasons of this crucial turning point according to Panofsky's conception of space. In the end, in the fourth chapter, I intend to analyse some conceptual and thematic relationships between Aleksandr Rodchenko and Dziga Vertov — for a complete and detailed analysis of all the works they produced together, see my previous work.¹⁰ In doing this, I will use some of Margarita

⁸ Giurato, B. "Salvatore Settis, la buona scuola non è buona. E le 'competenze' non servono a niente." *Linkiesta*, 07 February 2016. <https://www.linkiesta.it/it/article/2016/02/07/salvatore-settis-la-buona-scuola-non-e-buona-e-le-competenze-non-servo/29179/>

⁹ *Ibidem*

¹⁰ Di Trinca, G. *La fotografia e il cinema sovietici negli anni Venti: Aleksander Rodchenko e Dziga Vertov*, BA dissertation, Rome: La Sapienza, 2017

Tupitsyn's reflections on Soviet photograph in order to illustrate the Russian debate about image between 1920-1930 and the time conception implies in such upheaval.

In the end, the topic of this work brought me to assume that some of Nicholas Mirzoeff, Boris Groys and Fredric Jameson's assumptions are to be reviewed. Firstly, if the easel painting ends in 1921 in favour of photography, visual culture studies in the contemporary era should begin on that same date. Therefore, 1921 is a substantial and formal turning point in the light of which the whole parable of contemporary art should be re-read, in this way refuting Mirzoeff's thesis about "the death of painting" in 1839.¹¹

Secondly, according to Margarita Tupitsyn studies,¹² it is unsatisfactory Boris Groys' thesis that Socialist Realism was an organized method of work rather than Suprematist an unorganized work.¹³ If anything, it is true the contrary, that is, Constructivist and Suprematist avant-gardes were a planned project of socio-political change while Socialist Realism was a return to the past traditions. From this point of view, many Italian studies on architecture can prove this claim, such as those of Bruno Zevi,¹⁴ Leonardo Benevolo,¹⁵ Vieri Quilici¹⁶ and so on. The advent of Stalinism did not mean that the Russian avant-garde got "an entirely new society in which art had achieved a wholly political function."¹⁷ The avant-gardists were marginalised, lost their status as artists and were involved only in minor official projects,¹⁸ so they were not "instrumental in the emergence of socialist realism," as argued Groys. Conversely, Tupitsyn's studies prove that the avant-gardists were always going against the

¹¹ Mirzoeff, N. *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 65-66

¹² Tupitsyn, M. *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996; Boynik, S. "Radical as Reality Itself: on Documentary Abstraction. Interview with Margarita Tupitsyn," *Rab-Rab: Journal for Political and Formal Inquiries in Art*, no. 3 (2016), pp. 337-350

¹³ Groys, B. *In the Flow*. London: Verso, 2016, p.92

¹⁴ Zevi, B. *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (1950), Torino: Einaudi, 2004, voll. I-II

¹⁵ Benevolo, L. *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (1960), Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005

¹⁶ Quilici, V. *L'architettura del Costruttivismo* (1968), Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1978

¹⁷ Dabrowski, M. *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998, p.131

¹⁸ Boynik, S. "Radical as Reality Itself: on Documentary Abstraction. Interview with Margarita Tupitsyn," p. 346

grain, in an environment where socialist realism “occupied everything with their greedy hands.”¹⁹

Thirdly, Fredric Jameson’s concept of “flatness”²⁰ which he uses in order to define the difference between painting and photograph needs to be revised in the light of the concept of “time,” because, according to Aleksandr Rodchenko, it is the unit of time which can express better these differences. Indeed, as correctly argued Leah Dickerman, when Rodchenko affirmed in his essay *Against the Synthetic Portrait, for the Snapshot* “the first collision between art and photography, a battle between eternity and the moment,”²¹ here he is arguing for a time distinction. That is, with regards to Lenin’s image, he saw painting as a distillation over the time of the individual essence, whereas the photography captured a unique documentary moment. The difference, argued Dickerman, is in the temporal structure.²² Although this discourse concerns primarily the Lenin’s portrait which is a very compelling example, it is possible to move it in a broader discourse concerning the difference between photography and painting more generally. Indeed, the concept of “flatness” is inadequate to describe the intrinsic difference between these two means of expression. A painting can have different degrees of depth, material and visual, while a photograph can have only a perspective depth. However, it not represents a structural difference because for example a watercolour can achieve the same material and visual “flatness” than a photograph without ever obtain the same visual freshness. A photograph as space-time representation of reality in motion achieve a result more in tune with the modern times, its pace and the mass needs. Moreover, it reproduces reality in an incomparably smaller unit of time than any well-trained painter. As the avant-garde photography show, a snapshot can appear flat or depth it depends on the photographer,

¹⁹ Ibidem

²⁰ Jameson, F. *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/%7EDRBR/JAMESON/jameson.html>

²¹ Phillips, C. *Photography in the Modern Era. European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, New York: Aperture, 1989, p.240

²² Dabrowski, M. p.78

but always a photo represents a moment whereas a painting is the product of a long mental and material process in time.

For all these reasons, I believe it would be necessary to rethink the last century in the light of these facts as a passage and a dialectical relationship between concepts of order and non-order, cosmos and chaos, which the most varied cultures evoke in infinite cultural forms,²³ which find their synthesis in the present time as premises of the globalization processes.

As Angelo Brelich argued in *Storia delle religioni perché?*, the culture in the unity of human history is an element that distinguishes man from other species and put him in contrast with the “nature,” in which, however, he continues to be part. This condition put him in a state of crisis which represents a constitutive element of consciousness and a permanent element of human condition. Inseparable from this crisis is the effort that tends to overcome it and that makes man as a “historical” species, which is both bearer of a culture and continually creator of ever-renewed cultural forms.²⁴

²³ Brelich, A. *Storia delle religioni perché?*, Napoli: Liguori, 1979, p. 54

²⁴ Ibidem, p.174

1. Methodology

[...] because always a mutation leaves the
interlocking to the building of another.²⁵

Niccoló Machiavelli

A methodological discourse is a necessary premise of this research in order to briefly clarify the historical reasons which push me to revise the development of the last century and also to distinguish the particular method I will use here to comparatively analyse photographs and film frames of Aleksandr Rodchenko and Dziga Vertov.

The century just passed has leaved us two important traditions of thinking which can be figure out more generally as the formalist and the structuralist approaches, which, in Hegelian terms, can be seen also as thesis and anti-thesis. For almost half of the last century academic research in analysing abstract art has focused on formalist studies of rationalist approach, emphasizing the concept of image self-sufficiency.²⁶

Even though this concept did not exclude the complexity of stratified meanings in the language, in the 1960s, especially in the Anglo-Saxon area, the need for a methodological revision gave birth many studies that investigated the contents of abstract art, especially in light of a re-emergence of the relationships between artists and hermetic tradition.²⁷ At the same time the structuralist studies returned to underline the formal elements of a picture trying, with a more systematic and scientifically updated methodology on linguistic and semiotic studies, to clarify

²⁵ Machiavelli, N. *Il Principe* (1513), Torino: Einaudi, 1995, p.10

²⁶ Nigro Covre, J. *Astrattismo. Temi e forme dell'astrazione nelle avanguardie europee*, Milano: Motta editore, 2005, p.7

²⁷ Ibidem

the concept of self-sufficiency image and to analyse how the language is engendered and works.²⁸

Although a reaction to the formalism criticism was necessary and produced a multiplicity of positive ferments, it was perhaps excessively partial since linked the avant-garde to the revival of occultism.²⁹ In the late 80s, the emergence of perestroika and a post-Cold War spirit of collaboration inspired a great sense of optimism and the launch of exhibitions as a joint East-West venture, producing a series of new coordinated and collective researches on Russian avant-garde, between different countries and institutions.³⁰ At the same time, the “emergence of a new paradigm for studying all forms of visual culture as parts of a cross-media system” in the 90s carried to rethink the role of visual arts in a mass-mediated visual world³¹ and stimulated new methods of analysis. Which took into account previous approaches and mixed them in a coherent interpretative theory for a wide range of documentary and visual sources.

A remarkable example of this methodology is the work of Margarita Tupitsyn. Exemplary in this sense, and for the specific purpose of this research, is her book *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* which shows an overcome of the previous interpretative methods promoting the integration of formalist and structuralist approaches. Such a kind of work has proved fruitful also for other research fields. As for example Angelo Turco’s book *Configurazioni della territorialità*, which tries in different ways to sum up the so-called Western cultural tradition, based on principles of order such as disposition and jurisdiction that guide the understanding and explanation of geographical knowledge, and the new discipline’s paradigmatic articulations born in the second half of the Twentieth century.³² In this case, such

²⁸ Ibidem

²⁹ Nigro Covre, J. *Astrattismo. Temi e forme dell’astrazione nelle avanguardie europee*, p. 8

³⁰ Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, State Tret’iakov Gallery, State Russian Museum, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*, New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992, p. XI

³¹ Irvine, M. “Intro to Visual Culture.” <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/visualarts/Intro-VisualCulture.html>

³² Turco, A. *Configurazioni della territorialità*, Milano: Franco Angeli, 2010, p. 294

a dichotomy is exemplified by the paratactic and liminal space of representation, which reflect two different world's conceptual organizations.

The first is related to locations, coordinations and reifications of natural or anthropic characteristics of earth's surface, within which were made diverse efforts to construct syntactic models, the most famous of them is the so-called "quantitative revolution."³³ The latter is related to the formality of space, the ways in which it constantly composes and recomposes the indeterminacy of natural phenomena and the unpredictability of human history.³⁴ It underlines the importance of comprehension, linking logic and feeling and assuming as allegoric reference for its paradigm the change and the liquid or gaseous state.³⁵ It is more interested to localization processes and evaluates complex dispositional arrangements for their nature of events.³⁶

Turco claims that such ways to represent the world's order, between axiomatic truths and negotiating truths, have always been coexistent in geographical narrative, developing appropriate categorical apparatus and verb-iconic textures. The coexistence of paratactic and liminal conformational frames has sometimes unfolded in a fairly balanced way, as in classical antiquity, other times it has marked a pre-eminence to one over another.³⁷ From this point of view, Margarita Tupitsyn's work moves towards a methodology which takes in consideration both of these ways of representing the world in a discursive strategy which confirm its theoretical worth as investigation tool. Since it coherently explains the crucial moment of Russian culture in which socio-political issues pushed artists to search for an effective connection with the masses through new media such as photography and cinema.

³³ "The 'Quantitative Revolution': hard science or "inconsequential claptrap"?,” University of Aberdeen, December 16, 2005.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20051216113257/http://www.abdn.ac.uk/~geo337/gg3012/qrev.html>

³⁴ Turco, A. *Configurazioni della territorialità*, p. 268

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 269

³⁶ Ibidem

³⁷ Ibidem

In this regard, the variously called new photography, avant-garde photography, modern photography, or “new vision” was part of a wider utopian project, which aspired “to teach men and woman to contend with the unprecedented demands of an increasingly urban, mechanical age,” with the aim to “bring about a total transformation of visual and mental habits.”³⁸ In the Soviet Union, this desire of break with “the perceptual habits and the pictorial custom of the past” took on a tone “more urgent, and distinctly political,” in order to archive “a synthesis between social content and inventive form.”³⁹

Lastly, I will show the case study of Rodchenko and Vertov’s materials in the ‘20s and ‘30s through a historical-comparative methodology and I will apply to it some Simmel’s considerations about the metropolis and the mental life, and how the intensification of nervous stimulation in the city sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life.⁴⁰ I am going to use the historical-comparative methodology because it captures both differences and assonances between realities compared, and highlights the specificities related to two different authors.⁴¹ This methodology comes from the Roman school of religions history and applies an historical method which adopts the comparison in order to find differences and identify how they are originated from the historical processes viewpoint, so as to think the facts in their historical context.⁴²

³⁸ Phillips, C. *Photography in the Modern Era. European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, p. xiii

³⁹ Tupitsyn, M. *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937*, p. 38

⁴⁰ Simmel, G. “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903) in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, eds. *The Blackwell City Reader*. Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002. http://www.esperdy.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Simmel_21.pdf

⁴¹ Mapelli, N. *Storia delle religioni. Una prima introduzione alla disciplina*, Roma: Bulzoni, 2009, p.245

⁴² Ibidem, p.247

2. The Russian avant-garde

We were for the new world, the world of industry, technology and science. We were for the new man; we felt him but did not imagine him clearly...We created a new understanding of beauty, and enlarged the concept of art. And at that time such battle —I believe was not a mistake.⁴³

Aleksandr Rodchenko

The Russian avant-garde developed within the fervent artistic and cultural panorama of the early twentieth century. All the movements born in this time in Europe are characterized by a profound desire to break with the past and to renew themselves experimenting new languages far from academicism. Within these, perhaps, the most known phenomenon is Malevich's Suprematism, which is one of the first geometric abstract manifestations in Europe and is dated no earlier than 1915.⁴⁴

At the beginning of the 20th century Russian culture intertwines peculiar relationships both with the symbolist tradition and with the developments of the European avant-gardes, in particular French, from which it initially depends. Moreover, one must never forget the deep bonds that it has with popular traditions, and with the centuries-old Byzantine tradition, whose icons represent a legacy of the past and a key element in the transition from Suprematism to Constructivism, exemplified by three monochromatic canvases by Rodchenko of 1921 (FIG.

⁴³ Dabrowski, M. *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998, p. 23

⁴⁴ Nigro Covre, J. *Arte contemporanea: le avanguardie storiche* (2008), Roma: Carocci, 2014, p. 97

1). Paintings-object that establish a complex relationship with *Black Square* (FIG. 2) by Malevich, iconic non-objective symbol, and at the same time declare the end of painting. At the same way, we can notice a controversial influence of Italian Futurism: on the one hand, many artists openly declare themselves Futurists, on the other hand, Marinetti's arrival in 1914 is welcomed with particular opposition.⁴⁵ Substantially the intent is to emphasize the Russian culture as an "Other" culture,⁴⁶ strongly different from European culture, an attitude that we can find also in Vertov's lapidary anti-artistic vision and in that of Constructivists, who aim to rethink the function of art in the light of new technologies.⁴⁷

FIG. 1 Aleksandr Rodchenko (1921), Pure Red Colour, Pure Yellow colour, Pure Blue Colour. Oil on canvas. A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova Archive, Moscow. Available from <https://russianlife.com/stories/online/we-invented-and-changed-the-world-a-rodchenko-art-gallery/>

Constructivist avant-garde, of which Rodchenko is the main proponent, was constituted in the aftermath of the October Revolution as a highly heterogeneous and militant movement, that strongly supported the need to an industrial future for the new Soviet State, it gave itself the task to contribute at the Revolution exalting the value of industry, labour and technique.

⁴⁵ Finizio, L. P. *L'astrattismo costruttivo. Suprematismo e costruttivismo*, p. 5; Lawton, A. and Herbert, E. *Russian Futurism through its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 192

⁴⁶ Tupitsyn, M. *Aleksandr Rodchenko: The New Moscow*, Schirmer Art Books, Munich, 1998, p. 8

⁴⁷ Montani, P. *Dziga Vertov. L'occhio della rivoluzione*, Mimesis, Milano, 2011, p. 14

Initially the avant-garde took advantage of institutional protection by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the cosmopolitan head of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros), the institution that administered all branches of education and culture and endowed artists of all tendencies.⁴⁸ Among these the so-called leftists, the close circle of extreme left-wing intellectuals, were particularly appreciated by Lunacharsky. The leftists soon occupied important positions in IZO, the Section of Visual Arts of Narkompros,⁴⁹ established in 1918 in Petrograd.⁵⁰ IZO reorganized through its offices both art schools such as Vkhutemas, and research centres such as INChUK and GINChUK, divided into colleges of Moscow and Petrograd and directed respectively by Tatlin and Shterenberg. The department of IZO in Moscow, INChUK, gathered young artists inspired by Tatlin and Malevich however plunged into new language and new artistic forms; whereas that in Petrograd, GINChUK, gathered pre-revolutionary avant-gardist artists. INChUK was a kind of institution unique in the history of state-sponsored institution, inasmuch its sole mission was to establish universal and objective principles of art.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Dabrowski, M. p. 12

⁴⁹ Ibidem

⁵⁰ "IZO Narkompros," Monoskop, August 15, 2015. https://monoskop.org/IZO_Narkompros

⁵¹ Dabrowski, M. p. 13

FIG. 2 Kazimir Malevich (1915), Black Square. Oil on linen, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Available from <http://radicalart.info/nothing/monochrome/MalevichRodchenko/index.html>

Lenin's decline into illness in 1922, followed by his death in January 1924, provoked a power void and a struggle for succession between Leon Trotsky, Nicolai Bukharin, and Stalin, that persisted until 1927 when Stalin took the total control of the Communist party. Thus, the early and the mid-1920s in Russia were a time of politically, socially and culturally relative openness, opportunity and continuous changes although filled with uncertainty and tension.⁵² The advent of NEP, New Political Economy, established by Lenin in 1921 reduced the relative institutional autonomy of the leftist avant-garde, which now was obliged to compete for attention and funds.⁵³ In this contentious climate, several talented leftist artists formed Lef (the Left Front of the Arts), which gathered in the magazine *Lef*, published between 1923 and 1925, and later in the magazine *Novyi Lef* (New left), published in 1927-28, both financed by Narkompros.⁵⁴ Its nominal leader was Mayakovsky, to whom joined writers as Nikolai Aseev, Osip Brik, Boris Kushner e Sergei Tretyakov; filmmakers as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, stage directors as Vsevolod Meyerhold; and Viktor Shlovsky, who with

⁵² Dabrowski, M. p. 14

⁵³ Ibidem

⁵⁴ Ibidem

Roman Jakobson, founded the Russian Formalist of literary theory and criticism on the eve of the Revolution.⁵⁵ Aleksandr Rodchenko designed all the covers of *Lef*⁵⁶ and *Novyi Lef* and contributed also to their contents. LEF's ambition was to realise Marx's social ideals, aspiring to produce "a new human being through art."⁵⁷ LEF was a collective project which produced "an original and probing body of writing"⁵⁸ with the purpose to synthesize Marxist materialism with Russian Formalist theory and advanced artistic experiments.⁵⁹

The beginning of Stalinist era in the late 1920s engendered the end of this relative tolerance and diversity of the NEP era. The Communist party revived directly and indirectly a divisive rhetoric of class war, instigating a climate of accusation in which the accuser affirmed himself as an ally of the "proletarian" class and denounced as "bourgeois" the tendencies of the accused.⁶⁰ This cultural changing, which was most intense between 1928 and 1931, brought into discredit many adherents of the Revolution as Mayakovsky, Rodchenko, and lastly all the LEF circle and remnants of the free-thinking intelligentsia. In 1932 when the First Five-Years Plan was achieved with one year in advance Stalin judged the 'cultural revolution' ended replacing the unreliable figures with loyal Party elements. Artistic organizations were dissolved and replaced with a single union of artists under Party control.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Dabrowski, M. p. 15

⁵⁶ "LEF," Monoskop, August, 8, 2019. <https://monoskop.org/Lef>

⁵⁷ Dabrowski, M. p. 15

⁵⁸ Ibidem

⁵⁹ Ibidem

⁶⁰ Ibidem

⁶¹ Ibidem

3. The death of painting: the conception of space

[...] we recognise space as the product of interrelation; [...] we understand space as the sphere of possibility; [...] we recognise space as always under construction.⁶²

Doreen Massey

To comprehend what it means by ‘the death of painting,’ we need to return to the exemplary explanation of Giulio Carlo Argan in *L’Arte Moderna 1770-1970*. According Argan the birth of industrial technology, which undermined craftsmanship, provoked the transformation of structures and purposes of art. This transition from the technology of craftsmanship, which used materials and repeated the processes of nature, to industrial technology based on science and acting on nature transforming the environment, and often degrading it, is one of the main causes of the crisis of art. It emerged above all in the visual arts with the birth of photography in the first half of the 19th century, that undermined both the role of painter, excluded from the technical-economic system of production,⁶³ and painting more broadly as means of investigating reality.

If for this investigation, we can use a means as “precise, fast, cheap”⁶⁴ as photography in the 1920s and 1930s, the role of artist must be totally rethought and adapted to the new society’s needs in order to recover him from this exclusion. Similarly, art itself ceases to play

⁶² Turco, A. *Configurazioni della territorialità*, p. 267

⁶³ Argan, G. C. *L’Arte Moderna 1770-1790* (1970), Milano: Sansoni, 2002, p. 7

⁶⁴ Phillips, C. p. 215

its leading role inside the artistic production tending so to disappear, two solutions are proposed: either the problem is evaded by suggesting that art is a spiritual activity which cannot be replaced by a mechanical means (this is Baudelaire's thesis and then that of Symbolist and similar currents), or it is recognised that the problem exists and that it is a problem of vision, which can be solved only defining the distinction between types and functions of pictorial image and photographic image (this is Realism's thesis and that of Impressionism as well). In the first case, painting tends to act as a poetry or figurative literature, in the latter painting, freed to traditional task of 'depicting the true', tends to act as a pure painting, that is, to clarify how with rigorous pictorial procedures it can obtain values not otherwise achievable.⁶⁵

A further step in this sense, is made by the non-objective avant-gardists, which rejects art as a representation of the external real world in order to create an art 'immanent' to the world of reality, an art that *creates* objects and not pictorial copies of the real world's objects.⁶⁶ The so-called non-objective art, or abstract art, thus, is not the Hegelian expression of abstract, but the discovery of an art devoid of objective references to reality, related at the desire to overcome the tradition of the Renaissance perspective,⁶⁷ what Edwin Panofsky called the 'symbolic form' of the modern space of representation.

But what does the modern space of representation mean? And why is it a symbolic form according to Panofsky? In 1927 Panofsky published the book *Perspective as Symbolic Form* in which he tried to demonstrate as the perspective view was the result of all the cultural passages from antiquity onwards, collected and then synthetized by Italian Renaissance culture. Panofsky's thesis, however, from another point of view underlined the cultural pre-eminence of mathematically rationalizing image of Italian Renaissance over other cultures and thus its culturally relative and non-absolute value. About the differences with antiquity he claimed that

⁶⁵ Argan, G. C. *L'Arte Moderna 1770-1790*, p. 43

⁶⁶ Tarabukin, N. *Per una Teoria della Pittura*, Roma: Officina edizioni, 1979, p. 95

⁶⁷ Nigro Covre, J. p.9

“antique perspective is [...] the expression of a specific and fundamentally diverse view of space with respect to the modern one [...]. Antique perspective is furthermore the expression of an equally specific and equally diverse conception of the world.”⁶⁸ And then “it becomes quite clear that ‘aesthetic space’ and ‘theoretical space’ recast perceptual space reshaped into a single and same sensation: in one case that sensation is virtually symbolized, in the other it appears in logical form.”⁶⁹ In other words, he is asserting that the perception of space is directly linked to the perception of the world which is both aesthetical and theoretical, so that through aestheticization it is symbolized while through theorizing it is logicalized. The modern space of representation, according to Panofsky, happened when:

the Renaissance succeeded in mathematically fully rationalizing an image of space which had already earlier been aesthetically unified. This [...] involved extensive abstraction from the psychological structure of the space, and repudiation of the antique authorities. [...] it was now possible to construct an unambiguous and consistent spatial structure of infinite extension, where bodies and the intervals of empty space between them were merged in a regular fashion into a *corpus generaliter sumptum*. There was now a generally valid and mathematically justifiable rule to determine “how far two things ought to stand from another, or how closely they ought to cohere, in order that the intelligibility of the subject matter is neither confused by crowding nor impaired by sparseness.” Thus, the great evolution from aggregate space to systematic space found its provisional conclusion. Once again, this perspectival achievement is nothing other than a concrete expression of a contemporary advance in epistemology or natural philosophy.⁷⁰

That is to say, it could happen only abandoning the idea of a cosmos with the earth as its absolute centre and with the outermost celestial sphere as its limit:

the result was the concept of an infinity, an infinity [...] embodied in empirical reality. [...] The vision of the universe is [...] detheologized, and space, [...] now become a “continuous quantity, consisting of three physical dimensions, existing by nature before all bodies and beyond all bodies, indifferently receiving everything” [...] The result was a translation of psychophysiological

⁶⁸ Panofsky, E. *La Prospettiva come “Forma Simbolica* (1927), Milano: Abscondita, 2013, p. 26-27. Accessible in English translation here: <http://tems.umn.edu/pdf/Erwin%20Panofsky%20-%20Perspective%20as%20Symbolic%20Form.pdf>

⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 28

⁷⁰ Panofsky, E. p. 45

space into mathematical space; in other words, an objectification of the subjective.⁷¹

The artistic conquest of the perspectival view of systematic space, homogeneous, infinite and “isotropic,” became with Desargues a general projective geometry and thus “opened up all spatial direction equally.”⁷² Nevertheless, the perspectival view is based on the will to construct the representational space starting from the elements and according the scheme of visual empirical space, so it mathematizes the visual space and constructs an order, a visual image order.⁷³ Panofsky concluded his treatise asserted that:

Through this peculiar carrying over of artistic objectivity into the domain of the phenomenal, perspective bars off religious art from the realm of the magical, where the work of art itself works the miracle, and from the realm of the dogmatic and symbolic, where the work bears witness to, or foretells, the miraculous. But then it opens it to something entirely new: the realm of the visionary, where the miraculous becomes a direct experience of the beholder, in that the supernatural events in a sense erupt into his own, apparently natural, visual space and so permit him really to “internalize” their supernaturaleess. Perspective, finally, opens art to the realm of the psychological, in the highest sense, where the miraculous finds its last refuge in the soul of the human being represented in the work of art [...] Perspective, in transforming the *ousia* (reality) into the *phainomenon* (appearance), seems to reduce the divine to a mere subject matter for human consciousness; but for that very reason, conversely, it expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine. It is thus no accident if this perspectival view of space has already succeeded twice in the course of the evolution of art: the first time as the sign of an ending, when antique theocracy crumbled; the second time as the sign of a beginning, when modern “anthropocracy” first reared itself.⁷⁴

Panofsky himself admitted at page 53 that “a new upheaval had recently occurred,” cited in note no. 73 El Lissitzky’s work *A. and Pangeometry* published in 1925 Europa Almanach, and suggested that for modern artistic theories the perspective conception of space was an instrument of limited and limiting rationalism.⁷⁵ This illustrates how he was aware of the

⁷¹ Ibidem, p. 46-47

⁷² Ibidem, p. 52

⁷³ Panofsky, E. p. 53

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p.53-54

⁷⁵ Ibidem

radical change that has taken place in European culture, although at this date he was not yet clear on the terms of this change. The importance of Panofsky's study on the conception of perspective vision can be summarized in a statement he makes to note no. 71 in which he writes:

Only the collaboration between North and South could make the homogeneous and infinite space artistically sensitive, since the South was able to deal with the problem “sub specie quanti,” the North instead “sub specie qualis.”

In 1934, he wrote the essay *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures*, in this important work we can find an enormous range of ideas and observations on film aesthetics, “the complex nature of the movie medium and its context in the history of art.” In fact, according to Panofsky:

Film art [...] was a technique invention that gave rise to the discovery and gradual perfection of a new art. [...] Today [...] narrative films are not only “art” [...] but also, besides architecture, cartooning and “commercial design,” the only visual art entirely alive. The “movies” have re-established that dynamic contact between art production and art consumption which [...] is sorely attenuated, if not entirely interrupted, in many other fields of artistic endeavour.⁷⁶

Panofsky thus set film art in the field of art history as a legitimate visual art and in these legitimate “paths of evolution” traces its specific possibilities:

The legitimate paths of evolution were opened, not by running away from the folk art character of the primitive film but by developing it within the limits of its own possibilities. [...] These unique and specific possibilities can be defined as *dynamization of space* and, accordingly, *spatialization of time*. This statement is self-evident to the point of triviality but it belongs to that kind of truths which, just because of their triviality, are easily forgotten or neglected.⁷⁷

Dynamization of space and *spatialization of time* are its unique and specific possibilities which in turn are “the expression of an equally specific and equally diverse conception of the world,”

⁷⁶ Panofsky, E. *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures* (1934), p.15-16. Accessible here: https://monoskop.org/images/1/14/Panofsky_Erwin_1934_1966_Style_and_Medium_in_the_Motion_Pictures.pdf

⁷⁷ Panofsky, E. p. 18

as it were in Panofsky's words. This implies a contemporary advance in epistemology or natural philosophy that, for example, El Lissitzky in the aforementioned essay related to the theory of relativity, which "has provided evidence that quantities of time and space are dependent on the motion of each respective system."

Space, time and movement are thus the key concepts of this radical change and in fact they are used also in 1935 Walter Benjamin's remarkable work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.⁷⁸ It is well known that Italian futurists were among the earliest interested to catch the quick vibrations of bodies' movement, especially in painting, however, as Lissitzky claimed, the accomplishment of representing dynamism by static surfaces was an approach quite unsatisfactory.

It is also interesting to notice that both Panofsky and Benjamin used, albeit with some differences, the comparison between theatre and film in order to exemplify this transition.

Panofsky explains so this shift:

In a theatre, space is static, that is, the space represented on the stage, as well as, the spatial relation of the beholder to the spectacle, is unalterably fixed. [...] With the movies the situation is reversed. Here, too, the spectator occupies a fixed seat, but only physically, not as the subject of an aesthetic experience. Aesthetically, he is in permanent motion as his eye identifies itself with the lens of the camera, which permanently shifts in distance and direction. And as movable as the spectator is, as movable is, for the same reason, the space presented to him. Not only bodies move in space, but space itself does, approaching, receding, turning, dissolving and recrystallizing as it appears through the cutting and editing of the various shots—not to mention such special effects as visions, transformations, disappearances, slow-motion and fast-motion shots, reversals and trick films. This opens up a world of possibilities of which the stage can never dream.⁷⁹

As Dziga Vertov wrote in 1922 in his *We: Variant of a Manifesto* "cinema is, as well, the art of inventing movements of things in space in response to the demands of science; it embodies the inventor's dream – be he scholar, artist, engineer, or carpenter; it is the realisation by

⁷⁸ Benjamin, W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935). Accessible here: <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf>

⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 19

kinochestvo of that which cannot be realised in life.”⁸⁰ It is so the place of imaginary space according to Lissitzky’s definition:

[...] the cinema depends on dematerialised surface projection using merely a single facet of our visual faculties [...] a new space impression that will exist only during the duration of the motion, and is therefore imaginary. The infinitely variegated effects that may be achieved by the F.⁸¹ of imaginary space can already be sensed to a limited extent even today. The whole range of all of our visual capacities may thus be brought into play. [...] everyday life will borrow widely from these A. achievements. [...] the most important aspect of this development is the fact that this A.-F. will be accompanied by the destruction of the old A. notion of monumentality.⁸²

A sort of virtual space *ante litteram* that described by Lissitzky which will involve also the destruction of the art notion of monumentality that represents for him, and somehow also for many other avant-gardists, one of main divergence points with the ‘antique authorities.’

Both Lissitzky and Panofsky underlined “the variability of our space conceptions and the subsequent F.’s of A.”⁸³ Curiously, T. S. Eliot in his 1919 work *Tradition and the Individual Talent* admitted that:

the mind of Europe [...] is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route* [...] That this development, refinement perhaps, complication certainly, is not, from the point of view of the artist, any improvement. Perhaps not even an improvement from the point of view of the psychologist or not to the extent which we imagine; perhaps only in the end based upon a complication in economics and machinery.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Michelson, A. *Kino- Eye, Writing of Dziga Vertov*, London: University of California Press, 1984, p. 9

⁸¹ Lissitzky employs two abbreviations in the essay: A. = Art; F.= Form

⁸² Harrison, C. and Wood, P. *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford-Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993, pp. 303-307; see also Dukhan, I. and Lodder, C. “Visual Geometry: El Lissitzky and the Establishment of Conceptions of Space-Time in Avant-garde Art,” *Art in Translation* Vol. 8, no. 2 (2016) pp. 194-220.

https://www.academia.edu/35442345/Visual_Geometry_El_Lissitzky_and_the_Establishment_of_Conceptions_of_Space_Time_in_Avant-garde_Art

⁸³ Harrison, C. and Wood, P. *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, p. 307

⁸⁴ Eliot, T. S. *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), p. 5

The crucial point is that if we admit a complication in ‘economics and machinery’ it is unavoidable to establish a whole series of changes which affect all the socio-political as well as cultural structures, which Panofsky precisely emphasized through the conception of space.

Panofsky’s examination on movies and theatre brings him to some conclusions:

[...] the movies have the power, entirely denied to the theatre, to convey psychological experience by directly projecting their content to the screen, substituting, as it were, the eye of the beholder for the consciousness of the character. [...] the invention of the sound track in 1928 has been unable to change the basic fact that a moving picture, even when it has learned to talk, remains a picture that moves [...] Its substance remains a series of visual sequences held together by an uninterrupted flow of movement in space [...] ⁸⁵ From the law of time-charged space and space-bound time, there follows the fact that the screenplay, in contrast to the theatre play, *has no aesthetic existence independent of its performance, and that its characters have no aesthetic existence outside the actors.* ⁸⁶

Panofsky’s considerations indicate he is writing as an art historian who regards his subject in the light of history and erudition, characteristic of his theoretical approach is the reliance on dialectics, on antitheses which do not necessarily have to be harmonized but can coexist with equal legitimacy. This instructive coexistence of opposite leads, however, him to consider films as a moving picture, that is, “visual sequences held together by an uninterrupted flow of movement in space” and ultimately as a necessary form of art in modern life. Which, according to Panofsky, is the unique that “do justice to that materialistic interpretation of the universe:”

[...] in modern life the movies are what most other forms of art have ceased to be, not an adornment but a necessity. [...] It is the movies, and only the movies, that do justice to that materialistic interpretation of the universe which, whether we like it or not, pervades contemporary civilization. [...] the movies organize material things and persons, not a neutral medium, into a composition that receives its style, and may even become fantastic or pretervoluntarily symbolic, not so much by an interpretation in the artist’s mind as by the actual manipulation of physical objects and recording machinery. The medium of the movies is physical reality as such [...] ⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Panofsky, E. p. 20

⁸⁶ Ibidem, p. 28

⁸⁷ Ibidem, p. 31

The medium of movies is thus embedded by Panofsky's reflections in the history of visual arts as a legitimate form of art which is both fantastic and symbolic nevertheless it represents a physical reality. Within these "paths of evolution" the movie picture was the inescapable landing of image in the age of mechanical reproduction that he analysed without preconceptions and merely on the basis of typical aesthetic values of an art scholar.

As indicated to Panofsky, the conception of space, its dynamization, due to technical invention of movie medium has changed our visual perception of it which is still three-dimensional but it has enlarged its possibilities to organize material things and persons in a way never dream before making fantastic, symbolic and reality coexist.

The evolutionary process of artistic forms shows so that the essential passage to new media is a necessity of the Capitalist system not an autonomous or individual choice. As correctly Panofsky argued, only film art has "re-established that dynamic contact between art production and art consumption," which is attenuated, or interrupted, in many other artistic fields. In this way, art, production and consumption find again, through technology, their close connection assigning to new art forms the role of organizing reality. It is significant what Nikolai Tarabukin wrote in 1922 *From the Easel to the Machine* about the relation between production, capitalist economy and socialism:

Under conditions of concentration of production in the hands of the state and its regulation by government bodies, the idea of productivist art can receive its implementation "from the top;" but in the capitalist economy, where regulatory factors are the market and the competition prevailing in it, this idea will be realized "from the bottom," under the pressure of the tendency to "Americanism," characteristic of our century both for the capitalistic way of life and for the socialist one.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Tarabukin, N. *Per una Teoria della Pittura*, Roma: Officina edizioni, 1979, p. 146

Moving at the tryptic *Pure Red Colour, Pure Yellow colour, Pure Blue Colour* (FIG. 1) through which Rodchenko declared the so-called ‘end of painting’ in the 1921 during the 5x5=25 art exhibition in Moscow, it is necessary to analyse briefly Rodchenko’s artistic path. The purpose is to explain some key issues related to the passage from *faktura* to *factography* according to the materialistic view of the Formalist school.

Rodchenko’s non-objective art parabola started with a serial study of pictorial syntax (light, colour, line) in response to “the dialectic of non-objectivity”⁸⁹ by Malevich (FIG. 2) and Kandinsky and following Tatlin’s experiments on materiality. Studying the pictorial syntax was object of interest for artists since the early 19th century from the artwork of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (FIG. 3) to Manet (FIG. 4), from Cezanne (FIG. 5) to Cubists (FIG. 6). In particular, according to Argan, it was Ingres the first who understood form as the product of the way of seeing or experiencing reality, therefore, the first who reduced the problem of art to a problem of view.⁹⁰ The birth of photography in the 19th century increased this problem even more intensely since the crisis that it caused on the other forms of art involved also its structures, putting at the core of the successive researches the perception of reality, how artists experience it, and the pictorial syntax, how artists translate this experience in painting.

Rodchenko’s artwork explores also the ‘surface-plane’ of painting, this concept is “a quintessential preoccupation of the Russian avant-garde”⁹¹ which attempt to create a new pictorial language that affirms the picture as a two-dimensional object devoid of any illusion of pictorial depth and reality.

⁸⁹ Dabrowski, M. p. 28

⁹⁰ Argan, G. C. *L’Arte Moderna 1770-1790*, p. 29

⁹¹ Dabrowski, M. p. 26

FIG. 3 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1808), The Valpinçon Bather. Oil on canvas, Louvre, Paris. Available from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Valpinçon_Bather#/media/File:Jean-Auguste-Dominique_Ingres_-_La_Baigneuse_Valpinçon.jpg

Connected to the concept of surface-plane is that of *faktura*, or treatment of pictorial surface. Nikolai Tarabukin, Russian art historian and critic, in his *Fundamentals of a Theory of Painting*, written in 1916 and published in 1923, indicated the concept of *faktura* as an essential element of painting which is immanent to the painting itself because of its being inherent to every pictorial work of any historical era.⁹² Besides, he asserted as contemporary artists had isolated such particular problem in order to develop all its specific aesthetical potentialities revealing as *faktura* produced a series of indubitable and essential aesthetical

⁹² Tarabukin, N. p. 56

emotions.⁹³ The concept of *faktura* became thus an evaluation criterion leading to a radical revaluation of all past artwork based on such parameter. The diverse surfaces could now be appreciated to the material used to make them, that is the material treatment processes, and to the different artists' individualities expressed through the way of the brush stroke.⁹⁴ Physicality of painting and the physicality of the execution were the new evaluation criteria, whereas the material and the method of application defined the perception of the object of art.⁹⁵

A new approach to the painting as an object was the result of a more general context of interest in *faktura* since not only in painting but also in the linguistic studies of Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky's Formalist school believed in the importance of *faktura* as fundamental characteristic of all the arts.⁹⁶ This explains Tarabukin's appraisal of Rodchenko's monochrome *Pure Red Colour*, *Pure Yellow colour*, *Pure Blue Colour*. In fact, he affirmed that:

Every artistic form is not a creative abstraction, but product of economic, political and peculiar class factors in the various social regimes. For this reason, every metaphysical abstraction which considers the work in isolation, outside of time and environment that have generated it, is pure absurdity.⁹⁷

Then, in his work *From the Easel to the Machine*, published in 1922, he discussed the state of contemporary art analysing Tatlin's work, Cubist and Futurist movements in the context of the cultural tradition and commented the radicalism of Rodchenko's act with these words:

This was a smallish almost square canvas painted entirely in a single red colour. It represents an extremely important and terminal step for the evolution of artistic forms which art has undergone in the last ten years. It is not merely a stage which can be followed by new ones but it represents the last and final step of a long journey, the last word, after which painter's speech must become silent, the last painting made by an artist. This canvas eloquently demonstrates that painting, as a figurative art—which it has always been—has run its course. If Malevich's Black square on a White Background, despite the poverty of its artistic meaning, did contained in itself some painterly idea which the author

⁹³ Ibidem, p. 57

⁹⁴ Ibidem, p.58

⁹⁵ Dabrowski, M. p. 30

⁹⁶ Ibidem

⁹⁷ Tarabukin, N. p. 34

called “economy,” “the fifth dimension,” then Rodchenko's canvas, which is devoid of any content, is a wall blind, inexpressive, voiceless. However, as a link in the chain of historical development, viewed not as a self-contained value (which it is not) but as a stage in evolution, it is historically significant and “marks an epoch.”⁹⁸

He therefore understood that in the “paths of [painting] evolution” Rodchenko’s monochrome represented the historical consequence and the logical conclusion of a visual research on traditional pictorial components, “now [the surface was] uniformly covered by a single colour plate, devoid of texture.”⁹⁹ “The observer focused on the physical parameters of the surface, admiring this artistic object devoid of style for the irrefutable beauty of its shape and colour.”¹⁰⁰

FIG. 4 Édouard Manet (1865), Olympia. Oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Available from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympia_\(Manet\)?oldformat=true#/media/File:Édouard_Manet_-_Olympia_-_Musée_d'Orsay,_Paris.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympia_(Manet)?oldformat=true#/media/File:Édouard_Manet_-_Olympia_-_Musée_d'Orsay,_Paris.jpg)

⁹⁸ Tarabukin, N. p. 111 Accessible here:

https://monoskop.org/images/9/98/Tarabukin_Nikolai_1923_From_the_Easel_to_the_Machine.pdf

⁹⁹ Dabrowski, M. p. 43

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem

At the same time, it represented a technological turning point. If as Rodchenko claimed years later “every plane is a plane and there is to be no representation,”¹⁰¹ the surface-plane reduced to its essentiality devoid of content established that the easel painting was outdated and was impossible to go forward in such direction. The only possibility for artists to “re-established that dynamic contact between art production and art consumption”, and so re-establish their social function, was to enter in the mass production: design, press, advertisements, photograph and cinema. As asserted Magdalena Dabrowski in 1998 Rodchenko’s catalogue, his “crucial innovation in the history of the avant-garde [...] also represented [the avant-gardists’] utopian conception of the aesthetic needs of the new mass viewer.”

¹⁰¹ “The death of painting,” Museum of Modern Art, 1998.
https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1998/rodchenko/texts/death_of_painting.html

4. The visible world: the time dimension

What are the roots that clutch, what branches
grow/ Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images [...]¹⁰²

T. S. Eliot

Aleksandr Rodchenko and Dziga Vertov

The close relationship, personal and artistic, between Aleksandr Rodchenko and Dziga Vertov began in the summer of 1922, thanks to the common friend Aleksei Gan, who after the publication of his short but important work *Constructivism*, launched the weekly *Kino-fot* “Journal of cinematography and photography.”¹⁰³ The journal shortly became an important discussion platform on cinema and photograph, presenting a variety of points of view which included the two main innovators of Soviet cinema at that time, Dziga Vertov and Lev Kuleshov, and Rodchenko’s artwork.

Their artistic collaboration, unfolded during the mid-and late 1920s, is characterised by same stylistic devices, conceptual and thematic motifs that the two men created usually working on raw material, according to the idea of *factography*.

Factography, promoted in the *Novyi Lef* journal, refused the artistic manipulation in favour of a restitution of facts in their immediacy and objectivity in order to describe the *novyi byt* (new way of life) in all its realistic and factual truth. As defined by its theorists it was a

¹⁰² Eliot, T.S. *La terra desolata* (1922), Milano: BUR, 2007, p. 98

¹⁰³ Lodder, C. A. “Promoting Constructivism: Kino-fot and Rodchenko’s move into photography,” in *History of Photography*, voll. Winter, Taylor & Francis LTD, 2000, pp. 292-299

contemporary counter-model to the emergent model of socialism realism, “they saw the facts neither in term of ideological stability nor immanence, but as a specific concept of document grounded in the reality of contemporary Soviet life.”¹⁰⁴ As argued to Leah Dickerman, the factographic model had its antecedent in the Formalist usage of “the fact,” which is described in 1924 *Lef* article to Iurii Tynianov as a new theory of literary evolution. Tynianov rejected traditional evolutionary models based on the continual replacement of solidified canonical literary forms proposing a nonlinear model based on mass cultural forms more adapt to audience demands. The Formalist conception of literary fact examined it from the synchronic point of view as part of a structural system, in this the Factography embraced such paradigmatic shift privileging synchronic description over developmental analysis. Which explains both the shift from the easel painting, as supposed “mirror of reality,” to photography, as a medium more “precise, fast, cheap” to fix the facts, and Dziga Vertov’s theory of interval. As it is known, it appeared for the first time in the text *We: Variant of a Manifesto*, written in 1919 but published in 1922. Here Vertov claimed:

WE invite you:

–to flee–

out into the open, into four dimensions (three + time), in search of our own material, our meter and rhythm.

[...] Everyone who cares for his art seeks the essence of his own technique.

[...] Radical necessity, precision, and speed are the three components of movement worth filming and screening. The geometrical extract of movement through an exciting succession of image is what’s required of montage.

Kinochestvo is the art of organizing the necessary movements of objects in space as a rhythmical artistic whole, in harmony with the properties of the material and the internal rhythm of each object.

Intervals (the transition from one movement to another) are the material, the elements of the art of movement, and by no means the movement themselves. It is they (the intervals) which draw the movement to a kine[sthe]tic resolution [of the film event].

The organization of movement is the organization of its elements, or its intervals, into phrases.

In each phrase there is a rise, a high point, and a falling off (expressed in varying degree) of movement.

¹⁰⁴ Dickerman, L. “The Fact and the Photograph” in *October*, vol. 118 (Fall), MIT Press, 2006, pp.132-152; see also Buchloh, B. “From Faktura to Factography,” in *October*, vol. 30 (Autumn), MIT Press, 1984, pp. 82-119

A composition is made of phrases, just as a phrase is made of intervals of movement.¹⁰⁵

To achieve the ontological authenticity of the film image *Kinoks* should organise the movements of objects in space in harmony with the proprieties of the material (the intervals), the internal object's rhythm and through a rhythmical artistic whole. If the intervals are the elements of art movement and we can organise them into phrases, the intervals can be seen as the empty spaces between one word and another. These empty spaces draw the movement to a kinesthetic resolution so they re-organise the composition but, given the discontinuous recording of reality, they also open up to interactive and political possibilities.¹⁰⁶

FIG. 5 Paul Cézanne (1904-1906), Mont Sainte-Victoire. Oil on canvas, Kunsthau, Zürich. Available from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_paintings_by_Paul_Cézanne#/media/File:Montagne_Sainte-Victoire,_par_Paul_Cézanne_110.jpg

¹⁰⁵ Michelson, A. *Kino- Eye, Writing of Dziga Vertov*, pp.8-9

¹⁰⁶ Montani, P. L'occhio della rivoluzione, pp. 11-23; see also Cook, S. "Our Eyes, Spinning Like Propellers: Wheel of Life, Curve of Velocities, and Dziga Vertov's Theory of the Interval" in *October*, vol. 121 (Summer), MIT press, 2007, pp. 79-91

Firstly, Vertov's theory expressed through his crucial method of *Film-Eye* [Kinoglaz], a series of newsreels produced in 1924. It implied deciphering "Life-As-It-Is" by the direct recording of facts found in real life and he also insisted that the *Film-Eye* had to act on its own terms, refusing the medium of theatre or literature as "surrogates of life."¹⁰⁷ However, from Vertov's viewpoint "the film is not merely a sum of visually recorded 'life facts' or a random collection of events, but a result of a 'higher mathematics' of cinematically perceived facts."¹⁰⁸ Selecting, recording and organizing "life facts" make out true "film-things," organizing authentic film material ("life facts") into cinematic structures in order to produce new unity with a particular ideological meaning.¹⁰⁹ The creative/constructive feature of montage had thus an interactive potential since it could have opened in the future the possibility for competent spectators to intervene on the filmic text and reorganize the flux adding new elements of discontinuity, such as new themes, comments or in-depth analysis, and re-organize the intervals distribution.¹¹⁰ As an endless hypertext, Vertov's intuition on interactive potential of intervals anticipated the birth of Internet of at least seventy years.

¹⁰⁷ Petric, V. Dziga Vertov as Theorist, 1978. Accessible here: https://monoskop.org/images/0/01/Petric_Vlada_1978_Dziga_Vertov_as_Theorist.pdf

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem, p. 35

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem, p. 30

¹¹⁰ Montani, P. p. 15

FIG. 6 Pablo Picasso (1907), Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O). Oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Available from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Femmes_d'Alger_\(O.J._Version_O\)/media/File:Les_Femmes_d'Alger_\(O.J._Version_O\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Femmes_d'Alger_(O.J._Version_O)/media/File:Les_Femmes_d'Alger_(O.J._Version_O).jpg)

Secondly, the specific “kinesthetic resolution on the screen” obtained, according to Vertov, through the “theory of intervals” provided an exciting sensory-motor experience for the film viewer¹¹¹ which hoped to achieve an active seeing.¹¹² The multi-levelled reorganization of facts, related to the sequence’s content, inscribed montage as a “way of seeing,”¹¹³ which could produce on the audience a critic world-view.

Our [kinoks’] task is to record life by recognizing, at the same time, the historical process. [...] We are interested not in the relationship ‘art and reality,’ but rather in ‘reality and organization of reality.’¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Petric, V. p. 36

¹¹² Ibidem, p. 29, see also Montani, P. pp. 129-131

¹¹³ Ibidem, p. 35

¹¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 30

This reorganization had to be achieved during the process of montage, as the final step of the “*Film-Eye*” method. The film image, its exhibitive and non-contemplative value, moved also it towards what Leah Dickerman points as a movement from the world as “known” to a world as “perceived.”

Organic time dissolves into multiple and simultaneous synchronicities, and with this, we witness the birth of a particular temporal experience catalysed by technological development – of information networks that function continually to produce documents of the present. The time of factography. This, of course, is the time of factography.

The crucial ontological distinction between the synchronic and the diachronic lies among Formalist’s key insights. Organic, diachronic structures require the connection of meanings from one moment in lived time with those of another, linking the two in a teleological continuity. The synchronic weakens the authority of other voices – moving away from the world as “known” and toward the world as “perceived.”¹¹⁵

The technique nature of the film image, which allows it to be aggregate, accumulate and collect, and its documental character places it in close relationship with the Formalist conception of “facts,” as parts of a structural system. The facts and the images become thus parts of multiple and simultaneously synchronic information that we experience in the Internet time in a way exponentially amplified. I have elsewhere discussed the conceptual analogies between Vertov’s theory of interval and Rodchenko’s work *The History of the All-Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik) in Posters*.¹¹⁶

Concurrently, this particular temporal experience presupposes an active and media literate spectator who is able to perceive the visual and textual differences and deal with the specific historically constituted perception of the real. In other words, the stress that Vertov placed on mass media literacy, similarly László Moholy-Nagy asserted “the illiterate of the future will not be the uneducated person but the person who is not conversant in photography,”¹¹⁷ was a

¹¹⁵ Dickerman, L. p. 151

¹¹⁶ Di Trinca, G. *La fotografia e il cinema sovietici negli anni Venti: Aleksander Rodchenko e Dziga Vertov*, pp. 79-81; see also Dickerman, L. “The Fact and the Photograph”

¹¹⁷ Abbaspour, M. Daffner, L. A. and Morris Hambourg, M. *Object: Photo. Modern Photograph: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014, p. 381

political purpose because it would have potentially guaranteed to everyone the right to speech and an effective, broad, widespread dialogic discussion between active and competent speakers.¹¹⁸ The theory of interval thus as coherent system of re-organising of visual space through intervals of empty space marks a further “provisional” step in the “great evolution from aggregate space to systematic space.”

I would focus now on keys themes of Vertov’s film frames and Rodchenko’s photographs in order to sum up the Soviet debate on painting and photos which it is a paramount issue to political and cultural implications on the Russian history and avant-garde. Common themes to Dziga Vertov’s film frames and Aleksander Rodchenko’s photos range from industrial reticulated structures images to generic industrial constructions, often represented from below up, or details of machinery and cars, specifically the brand of the State car factory AMO. Then we find city images, presumably Moscow, foreshortened in a long shot that show the bustling metropolitan chaos, among these the Bolshoi Theatre is a recurring representation. Lastly, images of young people, represented in the foreground from below up, among which we find the characteristic theme of young pioneers, parade performances, young gymnasts or divers represented full-length.

These subjects represent the close and controversial relationship between man, city and machine started with the so-called second industrial revolution. George Simmel as early as 1903 in essay *The metropolis and Mental Life* carried out a series of studies that, using the concept of *blasé* man, reasoned on the changes induced in man by technology, irreversibly changing the relationship between city and countryside:

To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions – with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life – it creates in the sensory foundations of mental life, and in the degree of awareness necessitated by our organization as creatures dependent on differences, a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory mental phase of small town and rural

¹¹⁸ Montani, P. p. 12

existence. Thereby the essentially intellectualistic character of the mental life of the metropolis becomes intelligible as over against that of the small town which rests more on feelings and emotional relationships.¹¹⁹

Themes which should be inserted in the more specific context of the young Russian nation, which at the end of the civil war found engaged in major industrial plans and social, cultural, economic reconstruction. Thus, the emphasis on the machine, common to all the artistic cultures of the early 20th century, finds justification in the industrial efforts and contextually supports the needs of the Bolshevik party.

Three topics in sequence also exemplifies what Tupitsyn called “the transformation from documentary, factographic to idealizing, mythographic practice in the Soviet avant-garde photography,” that is, the crucial transition in the history of Soviet photography from avant-garde experiments to the typical images of socialist realism. A “complex and contradictory” path from the praise of machine, to the praise of human work and the glorification of a “de-individualized” proletarian class, to the Stalinist mythography. Which takes place in the background of the debate in the 1920s and 1930s on the role of photography both respect to the pictorial image and the avant-garde. As Tupitsyn noted, Soviet photography, through photomontage and straight photography, continued its experiments until the mid-1930s during the second Five-Year Plans. The photographic image therefore represents “the last great experiment in the search for an effective connection between art, radical politics, and the masses.”¹²⁰ As we will see in the exam of photographs, the realization of the first Five-Year Plan in 1932 opened a new stage in the history of Soviet avant-garde in which the emergence of conventional structures and iconographic changes on the photographic image became more evident. A phase that will continue until 1937, when, with the end of second Five-Year Plan, photographers will gradually conform to the rigid canons of socialist realism.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Simmel, G. “The metropolis and Mental Life,” pp. 11-12

¹²⁰ Tupitsyn, M. p. 4

¹²¹ Ibidem, p. 5

The photographic avant-garde and socialist realism express two different world-view which collide in the aftermath of Lenin's death in 1924, a key character of this period. Inasmuch the debate on documentary photography about the importance of it as document is based on hundreds of Lenin's photographs and films, whose relationship with Stalin image reveals the passage from one phase to another. In the 1920s, the image of Stalin is in the background of representations in which Lenin figure is exalted, during the 1930s gradually Lenin gives way to a mythologized image of Stalin as "Father of the Country" of an indistinct multitude of people.¹²²

Such different world-views represent two distinct political visions of communism expressed through two diverse representational systems. One related to Lukács's theory of realism as "expression of a social whole," which will succeed in the following years and Tupitsyn defines as "photo-picture," according to Brik's essay "The Photo-Still versus the Picture." Here the image is represented as an intelligible and predetermined reality from a conventional point of view. The other is related to Brecht's idea of "riddle," according to which "one must present the spectator with a riddle, give him or her the theoretical means with which to solve it, and leave it at that. It is up to audience to find the solution, to wake to a political consciousness,"¹²³ Rodchenko called it "photo-still."¹²⁴ Together these two systems correspond to two distinct political conceptions born in the Soviet Communist Party after Lenin's death, whose main representatives were Trotsky, who believed in the idea of world revolution, and Stalin, who believed that communism was a specific project to realize in the Soviet Union.¹²⁵

¹²² Ibidem, p. 165

¹²³ Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, State Tret'iakov Gallery, State Russian Museum, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*, p. 486

¹²⁴ Ibidem, p. 483

¹²⁵ Tupitsyn, M. p. 98

Industrialization theme is developed by Vertov and Rodchenko in different ways. Among these we can note: reticulated metal structures that tend to appear as abstract compositions, usually shot from below up, in films such as 1926 *The sixth part of the world*, 1928 *The eleventh year* and 1930 *Enthusiasm*, in Rodchenko dated between 1928 and 1929. The interest in reticulated structures of industrial buildings recalls precise experiments with line and colour made by Rodchenko in 1919, such as for example the *Construction n. 89* and *Construction n. 90*, and clearly shows how both of them adopt constructivist pictorial avant-garde devise within photographic compositions (FIG. 7-12). Among these I would also include the images of the fire escape shot from below, which are configured almost identically both in film *The man with movie camera* in 1929 and in 1925 Rodchenko's series *Fire Escape*, as part of series *Building on Miasnitskaia Street*. The two images diverge only for the scale position which in the case of Vertov is placed in a decentralized right lateral margin, so as to give it less symmetry but greater dynamism. In Rodchenko's photo it starts from the bottom to the apex of image, or laterally, but it is always configured with straight lines, giving rise to an intense geometry as well as a strong push in depth. (FIG. 13-14).

Other images of industrial buildings taken from below up are for example the chimney in films as *Enthusiasm*, *The man with movie camera* and similar compositional structures in Rodchenko's photo series dated 1929 *The Sukov tower* (FIG. 15-16). This stylistic device to shot from the bottom is used in many Rodchenko's shots, as for example the series to the construction of a canal from the Baltic Sea to the White Sea dated 1933, the photo *Construction of Sukharev Market* dated 1926, *The New "Moges"* dated 1929 or *On the roof* dated 1932. With regard to the photo *Construction of Sukharev Market*, characterized by a play of geometric lines, we can say that it is analogous to some *Enthusiasm* frames which show similar geometries.

Another characteristic device to this theme is the close-up of industrial machinery (FIG. 17-18), both alone and with details of human body. We find examples of it in films as *Stride, Soviet!* in 1926, *The sixth part of the world*, *The eleventh year* and *The man with movie camera*, in Rodchenko's series *Gears* published on Let's Produce! magazine, *Electrofactory* published on Let's Give n.12 and in the AMO series published on Let's Give n.14, all of them dated 1929. Among these, the case of the AMO logo, Soviet automotive industry, is represented in the foreground both in *Stride, Soviet!* and in Rodchenko's series dedicated to this car factory. The images, although alike for their flat two-dimensionality which tends entirely to abstraction, diverge for the composition: Rodchenko dynamizes it through a diagonal line created by the joint of two differently worked materials used for the car production. The brand is here in the upper left corner on a smooth background, while the rest of image is characterized by a reticulated structure (FIG. 19-20).¹²⁶

FIG. 7 Frame by Entusiasm, 1930*

FIG. 8 Frame by The eleventh years, 1928

*All the frames have been captured by me on Youtube platform.

¹²⁶ For Amo series, see Dabrowski, M. *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998, pp. 82-86

FIG. 9-10 Frames by The sixth part of the world, 1926

FIG. 11 Rodchenko, Untitled (1927).
Available from
<http://losgrandesfotografos.blogspot.com/2017/01/alexander-rodchenko-1891-1956.html>

FIG. 12 Rodchenko, Untitled (1927).
Gelatin silver print. Available from
<https://artblart.com/tag/aleksandr-rodchenko-untitled/>

FIG. 13 Fire Escape series (1925).
Gelatin silver print. Available from
http://www.luminous-lint.com/_phv_app.php?p/AlexanderRodchenko/

FIG. 14 Frame by The man with movie camera, 1929

FIG. 15 Shukhov tower, 1926. Available
from <http://www.mamm-mdf.ru/en/exhibitions/alexander-rodchenko-moscow/>

FIG. 16 Frame by The man with movie camera, 1929

FIG. 17 Gears series (1929). Gelatin silver print. Accessible from http://www.luminous-lint.com/_phv_app.php?f/photographer_alexander_rodchenko_amo_01/

FIG. 18 Frame by Stride, Soviet!, 1926

FIG. 19 AMO series (1929). Gelatin silver print. Accessible from http://www.luminous-lint.com/_phv_app.php?f/photographer_alexander_rodchenko_amo_01/

FIG. 20 Frame by Stride, Soviet!

The extremely close-up or shooting details of industrial machinery and human being, is called by Tupitsyn “deframing.” According to Deleuze’s notion, “they refer to dimensions of the image which transgress purely formal aspects”¹²⁷ and “the extremely abnormal point of view result in an image so spatially closed as to appear two-dimensional.”¹²⁸ Such a kind of representation so produces a spatial tension which makes to appear the image overloaded and

¹²⁷ Tupitsyn, M. p. 70

¹²⁸ Tupitsyn, M. p. 74

complex. It guides our attention to the surface object, not to accentuate their texture according to the Formalist conceptions, but to refer to what is not shown: the utopian “out-of-field” dimensions far beyond the borders of the fragments.¹²⁹ This device is at the core of the Soviet photographic and factographic debate. Through this the circle of LEF artists and intellectuals, headed by Osip Brik, tried to develop a totally new perception of everyday life and photographic practice. The “*leftist*” theories considered photographic details of a subject or an unusual perspective within a photographic series, a way to provoke a “shock” in the viewer. According to Walter Benjamin and Sergei Tretyakov, the shock was “a key to changing the mode of reception of art and to disrupting the dismal and catastrophic continuity of everyday life,”¹³⁰ which producing an innovative and conceptualized interpretation of reality. Tupitsyn noted as such visual representations, de-individualized, anti-narrative and deframed, transgressed historic specificity and pointed out the utopian aspiration of avant-gardists photographers.¹³¹

Photographic seriality and “deframing” device are also key concepts in the debate between painting and photography, that is, which techniques is more suitable to represent the contemporary reality. Brik in 1926 wrote in Soviet photo magazine:

Precise, fast, cheap. [...] It is impossible to *express* life in a painting and it is absurd to imitate it. [...] The photographer records life and events more cheaply, more quickly and more accurately than the painter. In this lies his strength, his great importance for society. No relapse into primitive painting methods frightens him.¹³²

Rodchenko affirmed in this regard in 1928 on *Novyi lef*:

The photograph presents a precise moment documentarily. [...] Now people do not live by encyclopedias but by newspapers, magazine, card catalogues, prospectus, and directories. Modern science and technology are not searching for truths but are opening up new areas of work, and with every day change

¹²⁹ Ibidem, p. 76

¹³⁰ Ibidem, p. 97

¹³¹ Tupitsyn, M. p. 98

¹³² Phillips, C. pp. 213-218

what has been attained. [...] the first major collision between art and photography, a battle between eternity and the moment.

Then he arguing on Lenin picture claimed:

[...] we possess a large file of photographs of Lenin. [...] show me where and when and of which artistically synthetic work one could say: this is the real V. I. Lenin. There is no one. And there will not be. Why not? [...] because there is a file of photographs, and this file of snapshots allow no one to idealize or falsify Lenin. Everyone has seen this file of photographs, and as a matter of course, no one would allow artistic nonsense to be taken for the eternal Lenin. [...] I maintain that there is no synthesis of Lenin, and there cannot be one and the same synthesis of Lenin for each and every one...

But there is a synthesis of him. This is a representation based on photographs, books, and notes. It should be stated firmly that with the appearance of photographs, there can be no question of a single, immutable portrait. Moreover, a man is not just one sum total; he is many, and sometimes they are quite opposed. [...] Crystallize man not by a single "synthetic" portrait, but by a whole lot of snapshots taken at different times and in different conditions. Paint the truth. Value all that is real and contemporary. And we will be real people, not actors.¹³³

Rodchenko saw painting as an attempt to distil the individual essence over time, presenting what painter considered characteristic. Photography, on the contrary, captures a precise documentary moment, this difference in the temporal structure makes photography the privileged mode of modern representation. Therefore, painting is historically ended.

As argued to Dickerman, this change in the structure of knowledge is related by Rodchenko to the death of the integral subject.¹³⁴ The synthetic representation produced by pictorial image stands as a false whole, in respect of a photography which documents a specific moment and a single viewpoint in a multiplicity of perspectives. So that photography documents and demonstrates this fundamental passage of modernity. The death of the integral subject and the emergence of a fragmentation and proliferation of image, which nonetheless is able to restore through the multiplicity a unified vision opens to the interpretation, is an important subject

¹³³ Phillips, C. pp. 238-242

¹³⁴ Dabrowski, M. *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, p. 78

matter of the 20th century. In this regard, Benjamin quoted Pirandello's poetics.¹³⁵ I would just offer a suggestion recalling the 1941 Orson Welles debut film *Citizen Kane*, as an example of a similar investigation on the possibility of restoring the wholeness of a human being through the multiple points of view those who knew him.

In addition, the significance photography character as a physical trace of specific moment in time,¹³⁶ captured/crystalized through the light in a well determined space, makes photograph a space-time fragment of reality. In this it can be seen the Panofsky's conception of *spatialization of time* so both his conceptions on the "unique and specific possibilities" of moving picture are realized and explained. Making Panofsky's essay a coherent and precise analysis on aesthetics and visual perception.

At the end of 1920s, the beginning of the Five-Year Plans boosted the role of the mass media in order to report the propaganda on the progress of industrialization and it became an imperative for all artists the commitment in such transformations. Brik will reproach Rodchenko because of his reluctance to abandon the modernist photographic method, albeit with evident interest in documentation, in favour of social themes, criticizing his attempt to solve pictorial problems through photographic language.¹³⁷ Brik and Tretyakov criticisms will have a great impact on Rodchenko, pushing him to pay more attention on the social content to represent the *novyi byt* from 1928 onwards. Rodchenko and his peers must now be at the service of proletariat, no longer guiding it, which already indicates their precarious social position.¹³⁸ Committed to produce art based on the direct experience in factories and collectivized farms to participate in the industrial restructuring process, at this moment the avant-gardists work to

¹³⁵ Benjamin, W. pp. 10-11

¹³⁶ Dickerman, L. p. 135

¹³⁷ Tupitsyn, M. p. 41

¹³⁸ Dabrowski, M. p. 83

link the new representative systems to revolutionary politics, with the aim to fill up the distance between creator and public opinion.¹³⁹

Another frequent theme is the city, in particular the Bolshoi Theatre. Here we find the famous trick of the last film reel *The Man with Movie Camera*, in which the Bolshoi Theatre image is divided into two fragments which folded in half simulate the collapse of the theatre, a similar image is also in the number 47 of Vertov's *Kine Calendar*. This theme was tackled by Rodchenko in 1932, when Izogiz, the Muscovite publishing house, commissioned him some photos to be transformed into postcards of Moscow (FIG. 21-22). For various reasons, left-wing writers and filmmakers perceived the Bolshoi Theatre as a symbol of dated and pompous art. Vertov considered the existence of the Bolshoi Theatre a problem, given that the authorities refused to demolish or convert it into something more useful, as the Left Front of the Arts (LEF) wanted, or to close it, as Lenin would have wanted since 1921.¹⁴⁰

FIG. 21 Moscow, Bolshoi Theatre (1932), Izogiz Postcards. Gelatin silver print. Available from <http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/vexhibit/ THEME Lines LowerLeft UpperRight 01/6/33/17150311922651770276/>

¹³⁹ Tupitsyn, M. p. 48

¹⁴⁰ Tsivian, Y. *Dziga Vertov: Le fabbriche del reale*, LE GIORNATE DEL CINEMA MUTO XXIII, Sacile, 9-16 October 2004, prog. 14.
http://www.cinetecadelfriuli.org/gcm/ed_precedenti/edizione2004/edizione2004_frameset.html

FIG. 22 Bolshoi Theatre, frame by The man with movie camera, 1929

FIG. 23-24 Frame by Kinoglaz, 1924

FIG. 25 Rodchenko (1930), Ochotny-Straße, series The New Moscow. Available from <https://www.pinterest.it/pin/206110120430162652/>

Rodchenko's photos of the Theatre square in Moscow, with the Bolshoi pediment surmounted by Apollo's chariot, are images that appear as total works of art, accomplished and self-sufficient. They all resemble postcards, but they could also have an independent existence such as isolated images or episodes of city life. This series on the city of 1932 probably constitutes one of the first original collection of images of this type in the history of Soviet photography.¹⁴¹ Rodchenko's photos show us the city life in the twenties and thirties: people walking on the street, getting on a bus or tram, advertisements and shops, places where you can eat, workers staring at the sidewalk, a city continually offers such a kind of scenes and the camera can capture them over time. In this regard Osip Brik wrote in 1928 on *Novyi lef*:

But since in reality all objects are in constant movement and in constant contact with other adjacent objects, any attempt to set up nature so as to record it by painting is bound to be spurious. [...] in the picture the objects are presented not in their continuity, but in isolation. The artist is unable to catch the object changing in time and space, and in order to paint his picture he is obliged to remove time and space [...] The photographer –and in this lies the radical difference– can snap the phenomenon in its continuity.¹⁴²

City squares representations in long shot with oblique perspectives are depicted in *Man with movie camera* and in the “postcards” series taken by Rodchenko in 1932 (FIG. 23-24-25). According to Tupitsyn, images which give a global view, apart to the oblique perspective which is a typical devise of modernist photography, can be referred to the Lukácsian “theory of totality,” which is clearly opposed to the “deframing” theory. This theory is at the base of socialist realism and will be decisive for the Soviet photography. Strongly sponsored by government, it defended “the expression of social whole” and tries to know “the historical process in its entirety.”¹⁴³ For Lukacs, the issue of realistic style transcended a formalistic category and concerned the problem of content, in particular he criticized “the concentration

¹⁴¹ Lavrent'ev, A. “Aleksandr Rodčenko: gli esordi della fotografia d'avanguardia in Russia,” Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 2011. <https://www.palazzo-esposizioni.it/pagine/mostre-archivio-mostre-archivio-mostre-2011-aleksandr-rodcenko-aleksandr-rodcenko-gli-esordi-della-fotografia-davanguardia-russa>

¹⁴² Phillips, C. pp. 229-230

¹⁴³ Tupitsyn, M. p. 93

on isolated facts” or “groups of facts” at the expense of what he called “unity in the process of totality.”¹⁴⁴ This conception proposed a different interpretation of Marxism on the basis of Hegel’s claim “the truth is the whole,”¹⁴⁵ in an attempt to organize the world as a homogeneous photographic picture to overcome what Luckács called “the alienated inner lives of individuals” unable “to transcend the atomistic and fragmented worlds.”¹⁴⁶ As Tupitsyn pointed such kind of representations do not leave space for reflection, since everything is already given, shown, without any possibility of doubt or criticism in a full and not problematic representation of reality.¹⁴⁷

The Brecht-Lukács debate was the framework of the October-ROPF controversy, which took place in those years between the photographers of the ROPF (Russian Society of Proletarian Photographers) and the photography section of October group, which included photographers as Rodchenko, Langman, Karmen and Ignatovich. The latter employed fragmentation in photographic series for a “sharper and conflictual perception of content”¹⁴⁸ in order to achieve a conceptualized image. Such aesthetics was based on Brechtian conception of realism as “an active, curious, experimental, subversive...attitude toward the material world”¹⁴⁹ through which one can discover “the casual complexes of society/unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power/writing the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties [...] emphasizing the elements of development/making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.”¹⁵⁰ A realistic representation combined with experimental objectives, towards work and the audience.

¹⁴⁴ Ibidem

¹⁴⁵ Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, State Tretyakov Gallery, State Russian Museum, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. *The Great Utopia*, p. 492

¹⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 493

¹⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 488

¹⁴⁸ Ibidem

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 486

¹⁵⁰ Tupitsyn, M. p. 91-93

FIG. 26-27 Young pioneers: Rodchenko, Pioneer Girl (1930). Gelatin silver print. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Available from <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/51740>; Dziga Vertov, frame by Kinoglaz, 1924

Their antagonists will be the main supporters of the “theory of totality” and finally they will prove promoters of the Soviet establishment’s “dominant ideology.”

In these long shot photos, therefore, also proved by dating, it is possible to trace an implicit influence of this theory. On the one hand because of Vertov’s interest in the “totality theory,”¹⁵¹ Tsivian pointed as an example *The sixth part of the world*, whereas Tupitsyn referred to *Three Songs of Lenin* dated 1934. On the other hand, because Rodchenko may have been influenced or induced to this kind of representations by Izogiz, the State publishing house which commissioned such work.

Among images which represents young people in foreground from below we find young pioneers (FIG. 26-27-28), members of youth organizations of the Communist Party, in film *Kinoglaz* dated 1924 and in Rodchenko’s photos dated 1930, a young sailor in Vertov’s film *The Eleventh year* dated 1928, or young girls shot in the foreground or medium plan in films *The Eleventh year* (FIG. 30-31) and *Enthusiasm*. The dramatically shortened figures are

¹⁵¹ Tsivian, Y. *Dziga Vertov: Le fabbriche del reale*, prog. 11; Tupitsyn, M. p. 129

usually represented isolated on a light background and, like those of divers which we find in *Kinoglaz* and *The Man movie camera* and in Rodchenko dated to 1934-36, although formally different, they are almost all characterized by a strong utopian charge. In the case of young people depicted in foreground, the oblique perspective with a strongly lowered viewpoint tend to abstract the face in a group of foreshortened masses setting it within a complex spatial relationship which give it a sort of monumentality, as for example in Rodchenko's *Pioneer with trumpet* (FIG. 29) dated 1930.

Rodchenko's *Pioneer* series represents an investigation into a particular social category or typology and a departure from the portraiture practices of the first half of the 1920s. Here human figure was represented in full-length or according to the vernacular style of the identity picture, "which had begun to achieve currency in the late nineteenth century, and whose simple recording function discouraged artistic posturing,"¹⁵² *Mayakovski* series is an effective example. Conversely, faces repeatedly photographed in *Pioneer* series document the multiple individual manifestations and the refusal of a definitive or "synthetic" vision typical of painting. The subject then does not allow identification for the observer. The series aroused wide criticism on the pages of *Proletarskoe Foto*, all unanimously agree in judging them as a personal insult, so much so that shortly after Rodchenko was forced to leave the October group.

Divers images are represented by figures framed from behind, in profile or from above, on a homogeneous background, in most cases isolated, almost floating in the air. Visually, those characterized by a light background refer to the Malevich's non-objective representations, but they have a greater vital charge given by the irregular contours of figures (FIG. 32-35). Others find similarities with those of Leni Riefenstahl's photos in the mid-1930s.

¹⁵² Dabrowski, M. p. 110

FIG. 28-29 From below up: Rodchenko, Pioneer (1930). Gelatin silver print. Available from <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2014/09/19/from-painting-to-photography-aleksandr-rodchenkos-revolution-in-visual-art/pioneer-by-alexander-rodchenko/>; Rodchenko, Pioneer with Trumpet (1930). Gelatin silver print. Available from <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/alexander-rodchenko-pioneer-with-trumpet>

FIG. 30-31 Frames by The Eleventh year, 1928

The images that represent parades, both military (FIG. 36-37-38) and gymnasts (FIG. 39-44), in films such as *Stride, Soviet!* and *Enthusiasm*, in Rodchenko dated between 1928-29 and 1934-36, on the one hand represent the attempt to propose an exemplary model of a young Soviet man, in the case of gymnasts, as sport becomes the metaphor to the realization of communist ideals. On the other hand, as a symbol of strength, they attempt to show the ability

of the Soviet state to regiment its own citizens, in the case of parades. Which on a figurative level, despite their conventionality, propose geometric para-tactical solutions. In this type of images human figures is arranged in rows which create ascending lines, or together with their shadow they make up a sort of motif obsessively repeated throughout the image. A type of Kracauer's mass ornament expressed through parades, which recall us the relationship between visual and cultural forms as an expression of abstract nature of the mass production processes.¹⁵³ Such emphasis on the production process through obsessively repeated shapes represents the effort to redefine the human being as a producer. Tretyakov's essay *Biography of the thing*, written in 1929, can offer a justification of such representations, he indicated, in fact, that "privileging the world of things and processes"¹⁵⁴ instead of the "world of emotions," provided an antidote to the heroism of bourgeois narratives focused on individual experience. However, them express also in some sense the rational industrial social order given through the replication and standardization. In others images, human figures are represented while carry out actions in unison forming an inverted L that divides the image into three parts. Such images found parallels, in a far more sinister meaning, with Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda films in the 1930s. In this regard, Tupitsyn, pointed out how some Rodchenko's images of gymnasts, as for example *Make Way for Women* (FIG. 44), which documents the advance of young girls in sportswear between two lines of similarly dressed boys, even though it represents a sporting event in conventional way, it does not give up the utopian charge expressed by the young athletes who courageously walk towards the viewer. A utopian charge also underlined by the light clothes dressed to the figures, which clearly distinguishes them from the grim, almost funereal, ones of the Nazi representations.

¹⁵³ Kracauer, S. *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (1963), Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 75-86.

https://monoskop.org/images/0/0f/Kracauer_Siegfried_The_Mass_Ornament_Weimar_Essays.pdf

¹⁵⁴ Dabrowski, M. p. 83

FIG. 32 Rodchenko, A Jump into Water (1934). Gelatin silver print. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Available from <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/83878>

FIG. 33 Rodchenko, Diver (1934). Gelatin silver print. Available from <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/alexander-rodchenko-diver>

FIG. 34 Rodchenko, The diver, 1934. Available from <http://photonumerique.codedrops.net/Alexandre-Rodtchenko>

FIG. 35 Frame by Kinoglaz, 1924

The human representation, no longer in fragments but in full length, indicates here a first stage of the passage towards mythography. This is confirmed, especially for Rodchenko, by the date of works in the first half of the 1930s. As well as the representations based on the “theory of totality,” those of human figure in full length become a device that conveys the revival of “photo-picture,” now flanked by Soviet mythographic values. The Lukacsian principles are transformed into “a vital weapon”¹⁵⁵ against all those who diverge from the conventional method of representation, in which information must be communicated in an instructive and intelligible way. In the second Five-Year Plan, the two cultures of “photo-still” and “photo-picture” coexist, avant-garde photography underwent the influence of politicized iconography and applied its methods to socialist realism. Meanwhile, significant changes taken place which minimize the importance of documentary photography, pushing the return of fine arts, and discredit the Factography through a criticism which insists on evaluating photos in purely pictorial terms.¹⁵⁶ Painting is preferred again to photomontage, determining the end of the photographic primacy among the Soviet visual representations. “By the end of the second Five-Year Plan, the totalitarian terror had begun to affect the cultural community.”¹⁵⁷ Many artists and thinkers were arrested, in many case killed, and labelled as “the enemies of the Soviet photography.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, State Tret'iakov Gallery, State Russian Museum, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, p. 492

¹⁵⁶ Tupitsyn, M. p. 171-172

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 172

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem

FIG. 36-37 Military parades: frames by Enthusiasm, 1930

FIG. 38 Rodchenko (1935-36), Military Parade. Vintage gelatin silver print. Available from <https://www.richardsaltoun.com/artists/168-alexander-rodchenko/works/9678-alexander-rodchenko-military-parade-1935-36/>

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FIG. 44 Rodchenko (1934), Make Way for Women. Gelatin silver print Available from <https://medium.com/@alexandralunn/constructing-a-new-russia-with-visual-imagery-502376494135>

FIG. 43 Rodchenko (1936), Sports parade: Women Fencers. Available from <https://www.pinterest.it/pin/238690848974139247/>

The return to “objective” iconic representation in social function, started with the photographic and cinematographic experiments of the Soviet avant-garde in the late 1920s and exemplified by photographic series which filled the magazines during the first Five-Year Plan, set up a breach in visual representation. The debate of the 1920s and early 1930s in photography and cinema was, however, used by the Communist party as an excuse to take the total control on visual language. Formal devices were considered not as purely artistic, but as an expression of reality caused by the “non-organic phenomenon of capitalism”¹⁵⁹ and fought like a struggle for survival. In such battle Rodchenko still in 1928 stated that:

[...] the fetishism of fact is not only not needed, it's also pernicious for photography. We are fighting against easel painting not because it is aesthetic, but because it is out of step with modern times, weak in its reproductive technique, unwieldy, introverted, and cannot serve the masses. Strictly speaking we are fighting not against painting (it's dying anyway) but against photography “à la painting,” “inspired by painting,” [...] There's absolutely no point in fighting over “what” to depict [...] A revolution in photography takes place when a factual photograph acts so strongly and so unexpectedly with its photographic elements (because of its quality, because of “how” it was taken) that it not only can compete with painting, but can make clear to any viewer that this is a new and complete means of revealing the world of science, technology, and the everyday life of modern man. As the avant-garde of Communist culture, *Lef* is obliged to show what must be photographed and *how* [...] we are obliged to experiment.¹⁶⁰

Stalin's megalomaniacal aspirations will instead tend to remodel history and his role within the revolution through images, compromising its understanding because it is falsified. The avant-garde then, in the mid-1930s, succumbed.

In conclusion, I would assert that the historical-comparative method applied to theoretical and sociological framework is a useful tool for visual arts in order to come to light some key subjects in a specific historic culture. In the 1920s Soviet culture key themes are the interaction of man with machine and urban space, in the mid-1930 political changes determine a greater

¹⁵⁹ Tupitsyn, M. p. 114

¹⁶⁰ Phillips, C. pp. 264-265

interest in human figure as means to convey a heroic perception of Soviet State. Such visual changes appear both in painting than in cinema and photograph and determine simultaneously the return of painting and the end of avant-garde experiments. As it has been clearly illustrated during the dissertation, the “second wave [of photography] after that of photography’s early years”¹⁶¹ has irreversibly changed our perception of time and space due to the emergence to concepts as dynamism, synchronism, connection and context, in this sense undermined at the core the basis of historical European culture. Industrialization and technology have thus rewritten our society and caused an impressive array of structural changes, one of which, probably the most striking, was the ‘end of painting.’ The end of painting is an historical “fact,” apodictic and irrefutable, which prove as artists were in tune with such epochal changes, but the establishment in power were not, they did not comprehend this crucial historical transition, they could not support it and in the end European culture in some way collapsed in the World War II.

The concept of New Technological Renaissance is thus a compelling notion to look in perspective at the last two centuries and at the current one, such concept successfully can logically explain many artistic and cultural phenomena hitherto misrepresented, such as Deconstructive architecture. A movement which show a distinct anti-functional, anti-aesthetics purpose that makes it a passing movement destined to run out. In contrast to Modernism which tend to continuously re-emerge in scholar studies all over the world and in artists’ interests. The New Technological Renaissance tries to give again a progressive trajectory to the European culture in order to leave the old path of powerlessness and uncertainty towards the possibilities of science and technology to positively affect and thus change the society

¹⁶¹ Ingelmann, G. “Mechanics and Expression: Franz Roh and the New Vision — A Historical Sketch,” in Abbaspour, M. Daffner, L. A. and Morris Hambourg, M. *Object:Photo. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949*. An Online Project of The Museum of Modern Art. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014, p. 3
<https://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/GraeveIngelmann.pdf>

subverting the established values and prejudices. From this point of view, the New Vision or modern photography, is the other side of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. If T. S. Eliot claimed in 1921 the decline of European culture with words "those fragments I have shorted against my ruins,"¹⁶² this did not mean the end of European culture but it was the symptom of a radical change difficult for him to grasp at the time. Because always the end is a new beginning.

¹⁶² Eliot, T.S. *La terra desolata* (1922), p. 144

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