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SERGEI TRET'IAKOV – THE WRITER AS PHOTOGRAPHER

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Abstract

Sergei Mikhailovich Tret'iakov was one of the first creative figures among the Russian avant-garde to become actively involved in photography, which he combined with his journalistic writing. This article seeks to identify some of the aspects of the complex cultural and ideological framework within which he was working during the early Soviet period that might have stimulated him and prompted him to make this move into photo-journalism. These include the emergence of an illustrated press in the wake of improved printing technology; Tret'iakov's association with the journal *Lef* and his colleagues like Osip Brik; the theoretical position of Aleksei Gan's magazine *Kino-Fot*; Lenin's Directive on Cinema; the prominence given to photography following the need to produce commemorative publications after the great leader's death in 1924; Tret'iakov's connection with film through Sergei Eisenstein, film stills and his work for Proletcult; as well as the stimulus of his travel to China in 1924-1925. Several photographs and layouts are examined in detail.

Keywords: *Sergei Tret'iakov: photography: Lenin: photojournalism: Lef*

In June 1924, Sergei Mikhailovich Tret'iakov published an article entitled simply 'Пекин' (Peking), which was accompanied by eight photographs (Fig. 1, Tret'iakov 1924). The publication provides the earliest evidence of Tret'iakov's engagement with photography – whether as a commentator, theorist, consumer or creator. The photographs form an integral component of the article, expanding and illuminating the content. Yet their significance goes beyond this. These eight photographs seem to have been actually taken by Tret'iakov himself. Certainly, no other photographer was mentioned in the photographic credits, and several years later, Tret'iakov alluded to having used his camera while he was teaching at the University of Peking, in China between February 1924 and October 1925.¹ He later explained that he and his camera had wandered around Peking, and had then visited Shanghai where they had witnessed the demonstrations that had followed the shootings in 1925 (Tret'iakov 1934b).² Tret'iakov's account is corroborated by a photograph that he took during his stay in China, which was published in *Novyi lef* in May 1927, with the caption "Photograph by S. M. Tret'jakov, Demonstration Protesting Against the Shootings in Shanghai 1925" (*Foto S. M. Tret'iakova Demonstratsiia protesta protiv rasstrela v Shankhae 1925g*) (Fig. 2).³

It seems fairly probable, therefore, that, as early as 1924, Tret'iakov was acting as a photo-journalist, taking photographs and publishing them as an integral component of his journalistic writing. Significantly, this practical involvement with photography predates his published statements and theoretical writings about the medium. It also distinguishes him as one of the first members of the Russian avant-garde to actually take and publish photographs. Even the artist and Constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko, who later became renowned as an innovative photographer, did not start taking photographs until 1924 and only began publishing them in 1926 (Lavrentiev 1996: 13; Wolf 2004). Clearly, in becoming a photographer alongside his other activities, Tret'iakov was not following established avant-garde practice. On the contrary, he seems to have been at the forefront of inaugurating a completely new trend. In this context it would, therefore, seem appropriate to ask what factors initially stimulated a writer and critic, who was producing poems, plays and cultural theories, to become involved with photography as a medium to the extent of wielding a camera himself. In this article, I shall try to identify the various strands in the cultural framework of the period that may have inspired and prompted this development.

The early date of 1924 is significant. There is very little evidence that Russian innovators – literary or artistic – had been actively engaged with photography much before this date. The tri-lingual journal *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet* published by El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg in Berlin in early 1922, made no mention of photography, although it covered Russian and Western developments in architecture, painting, sculpture, music, poetry, literature and abstract film (Ehrenburg and Lissitzky 1922). In the Soviet Union itself, the main mouthpiece of the post-revolutionary avant-garde and its approaches was the magazine *Lef* (*Levyi front iskusstv– The Left Front of the Arts*, 1923-4), with which Tret'iakov was closely connected. But it was also reticent about photography. More concerned with literature than with art, the journal barely mentioned photography, except for one brief article entitled 'Photomontage' (*Foto-Montazh*) (Anon 1924).⁴ Despite its title, the text didn't focus solely on the manipulation of photographs, but dealt at some length with the importance of photography, attaching it firmly to the emerging theory of the literature of fact or factography as enunciated by *Lef* and its sequel, *Novyi lef* (*New Lef*, 1927-8) (Fore 2006). The text was published in late 1924, when Tret'iakov was already in China, but the contents suggest how photography was regarded by his colleagues in *Lef*:

[...] **фото-снимок не есть зарисовка зрительного факта, а точная его фиксация.** Эта точность и документальность придают фото-снимку такую силу воздействия на зрителя, какую графическое изображение никогда достичь не может.

Плакат о голоде с фото-снимками голодающих производит гораздо более сильное впечатление, чем плакат с зарисовками этих же голодающих

Реклама с фото-снимком рекламируемого предмета действительней рисунка на эту же тему.

Фотографии городов, пейзажей, лиц дают зрителю в тысячу раз больше, чем соответствующие картинки.

До сих пор квалифицированная фотография, - т. н. художественная - старалась подражать живописи и рисунку, от чего ее продукция была слаба и не выявляла тех возможностей, которые в фотографии имеются. Фотографы полагали, что, чем более фото-снимок будет похож на картинку, **тем получается художественней, лучше.** В действительности же результат получался обратный: чем художественней, тем хуже. В фотографии есть свои возможности монтажа, ничего общего с композицией картинок не имеющие. Их то и надлежит выявить. (Anon 1924:41)

(... **a photograph is not the description of a visual fact, but its precise fixation.** This precision and documentary quality give photographs a power to act on the viewer in a way that a graphic image has never been able to achieve.

A poster on the subject of famine composed of snapshots of starving people makes a much more profound impression than one containing sketches of the same starving people.

An advertisement with a photograph of the object being advertised is far more effective than a drawing

Photographs of cities, landscapes and faces give the viewer a thousand times more than paintings of these subjects.

Until now, professional, that is artistic, photography tried to imitate painting and drawing; because of this, the results have been weak and have not demonstrated photography's full potential. Photographers presumed that the more a photograph resembles a painting and the more artistic it is, the better. In actual fact, it is the reverse that is true: **the more artistic it [a photograph] is, the worse it is.** The photograph possesses its own possibilities for montage, which have nothing in common with the composition of a painting. These [possibilities] must be developed). (Bowlt 1989: 211-212)

The declaration that “**a photograph is not the description of a visual fact, but its precise fixation,**” indicates why Tret'iakov might have become interested in using photographs to reinforce the message of his article. Photography suggested a direct relationship to reality. It

emphasized, elaborated and gave visual substance and power to his verbal analysis and description. The same understanding of the photograph is evident in Osip Brik's suggestion that Tret'iakov should 'kodak' his trip (Tret'iakov 1925: 33)

ТАК СКАЗАЛ ОСЯ.

"Ты едешь в Пекин. Ты должен написать путевые заметки. Но чтоб они не были заметками для себя. Нет, они должны иметь общественное значение. Сделай установку по НОТ и зорким хозяйским глазом фиксируй, что увидишь. Прояви наблюдательность. Пусть ни одна мелочь не ускользнет. Ты в вагоне - кодачь каждый штрих и разговор. Ты на станции - все отметь вплоть до афиш смытых дождем". Я понял. Я буду кодачить [...] Я пошел в магазин и купил крепкий блок-нот. (Tret'iakov 1925: 33)

OSYA SAID

"You are going to Peking. You must write travel notes. But not so that they will be notes just for you. No, they must have social significance. Adopt an objective in accordance with the Scientific Organisation of Work [NOT] and record what you see with a sharp native eye. Develop your powers of observation. Let not one trifle be overlooked. You are in the compartment – kodak every feature and conversation. You are at the station – notice everything even the posters washed by the rain."

I understood. I will kodak [...] I went to the shop and bought a strong note-book. (Tret'iakov 1925: 33).

The verb 'to kodak' links the emerging literature of fact with photography, expressing a belief in the camera's ability to provide an incontrovertible visual document and precisely record or fix a fact. Yet in response to Brik's advice, Tret'iakov seems to have simply purchased a note book, which implies that he did not possess a camera at this point. There is certainly no mention of a camera in the detailed notes of his trip from Moscow to Peking, which was published in *Lef* in 1925 as a 'travel film' (*put'filma*) (Tret'iakov 1925: 33). While the term may have been his first attempt to "conceptualize journalistic writing under the aesthetic forms being developed in cinema", uniting the verbal and the visual (Salazkina 2012: 130), he did not actually include any photographic illustrations in this particular piece. This may have been an editorial decision, outside of his control, but it seems more likely that he simply did not have a camera before he arrived in Peking and did not wish to use photographs that he had taken later to illustrate the account of his trip. By the time he was living in China, he did have a camera and he used it to make a visual chronicle of his experiences, but exactly how, when and where he acquired it is open to speculation.

The text of his ‘travel film’ is an interesting mixture of vivid vignettes, serious analyses and light-hearted wit. For instance, when a German tourist was alarmed about bedbugs, Tret’iakov told him in all seriousness that Russian bedbugs do not bite Germans! (Tret’iakov 1925: 37). Even though no photographs illustrated his text, Tret’iakov did write about photography. He mentioned his German companion’s attachment to the photograph of his family back home in Germany (Tret’iakov 1925: 36). More importantly, perhaps, Tret’iakov described how he witnessed the power of photographic images at first hand. As he entered China, he reported, “I noticed how attentively the Chinese soldiers and customs officials looked at the pictures in *Krasnaia Niva*, *Ogonëk*, and *Prozhektor* and particularly the photographs taken of V. I. Lenin’s funeral.” (Tret’iakov, 1925: 46).

While literary considerations, encouragement from his colleagues, and his actual travel experiences may have inspired Tret’iakov to use and then make photographs, his own ideological affiliations and commitments may have also played a role. As a member of Lef, Tret’iakov was committed to “fight for the aesthetic construction of life” (бороться за искусство-строение жизни) (Aseev et al 1923:7; Lawton and Eagle 1988: 194). Yet Tret’iakov considered that the achievement of this aim was threatened by the re-emergence of capitalist elements and bourgeois cultural values under the New Economic Policy (NEP), instituted in 1921 to resuscitate the economy after the devastation of the Civil War (1918-1920) (Tret’iakov 1923; Tretiakov 2006). Hence, he declared that, “in the period of NEP, one must conduct the struggle for class consciousness more sharply than ever” (*v period nepa, reshce, chem kogda-libo, dolzhen byt’ projavlen boi za dushu klassa*) (Tret’iakov 1923a: 201; Lawton and Eagle 1988: 214) He argued that “the art worker must become an engineer of the psyche [psycho-engineer] a constructor of the psyche [a psycho-constructor]” (*rabotnik iskusstva dolzhen stat’ psikhoinzhenerom, psikhokonstruktorom*). (Tret’iakov 1923a: 202; Lawton and Eagle 1988: 214). He elaborated, “And if the maximum program of the Futurists is the integration of art and life, the conscious reorganization of language in accordance with the new forms of life, and the struggle to emotionally train the psyche of the producer-consumer, then the minimum program of the Futurist speech producers is to place their linguistic skills at the service of the practical tasks of the day.” (*I esli promgrammoi maksimum futuristov javlaetsya rastvorenie iskusstva v zhizni, soznatel’naja reorganizatsija jazyka primenitel’no novym formam bytija, draka za emotsional’nyi trenazh psikhiki proizvoditelja-potrebitelja, to programmoi-minimum futuristov-rechevikov javljaetsja postanovka svoego jazykova masterstva na sluzhbu prakticheskim zadacham dnja*) (Tret’iakov 1923a: 202; Lawton and Eagle 1988: 215).

Tret’iakov was a creative writer committed to forging a truly communist culture and assisting in the emergence of the new Soviet person, as well as a playwright working with Proletcult – an organization committed to nurturing the cultural and artistic development of the working class. The non-elitist nature and didactic quality of the photograph offered one practical way

of achieving these aims. As a technological device for recording reality, the camera demanded no particular artistic skill or training on the part of the user; anybody could point a camera at an object and take a photograph. The camera's potential for liberating the creative powers of the workers, as well as the fact that photographs were not unique but could be infinitely reproduced seemed to offer the possibility of achieving those goals that Tret'iakov was pursuing – a true democratisation of art, “the involvement of the masses in the processes of creation” and art's active participation in constructing a new way of life and a new man. (Tret'iakov, 1923b: 118; Tretiakov 2006: 18)

Tret'iakov's cultural, artistic and political aspirations dovetailed with Constructivism's concerns. By 1922, Aleksei Gan, the author of the main treatise on Constructivism (Gan 1922a; Gan 2013), had turned his attention to cinema and photography as means of participating in the construction of the new society and its culture. In the first issue of his journal *Kino-fot (Cinema-Photo)*, published in August 1922, Gan stressed that photography was a vital propaganda tool and an adjunct to cinema, which he described as ‘living photography’ (*zhivaia fotografii*) (Gan 1922b; Taylor and Christie 1988: 67-68). He argued that cinema (and by implication photography) were powerful means of uniting people. Like the working class, these media were products of an industrial culture and should now take over the role previously performed by easel painting in organizing people's emotions (Gan 1922b). In the second issue of the journal, Professor Nikolai Tikhonov, who was the director of the Cinema-Technical section of the State College of Cinematography (Gosudarstvennyi Tekhnikum Kinematografii - GTK) emphasized photography's accessibility and its potential to be an effective instrument for educating the masses. He wrote: “it is a technical medium, accessible to everyone, one only needs a camera, chemicals and film [...] with the help of photography [...] humanity can achieve a higher state of consciousness” (*ono - tekhnicheskii priem – dostupnyi vsiakomu, nuzhno tol'ko imet' kameru, khimicheskie veshchestvo i plastinki [...] pri pomoshchi foto [...] chelovechestvo pronikaet v dal'neishee poznanie*) (Tikhonov 1922). Although *Kino-fot* focused primarily on cinema, numerous reproductions of stills from films complemented these early statements about the importance of photography as a mass medium, providing a wealth of images and approaches to constructing the image, before photojournalism came to the fore in the illustrated magazines, set up in 1923 (Wolf 2004: 106-107).

Tret'iakov was almost certainly aware of *Kino-fot* and Gan's ideas concerning the role of film and photography. Gan was not only a prominent avant-garde figure, with good communist credentials, having been in charge of the Cultural Education Department of the Commissariat of Military Affairs for the Moscow district (Lodder 2013: xxii), but he was also the husband of Esfir Shub, who was a film editor and worked with Sergei Eisenstein (Lodder 2013: xl). Tret'iakov was also involved in film, being a close friend and collaborator of Eisenstein. They had worked together 1923-4, on agitational plays like *Gasmasks (Protivgazy)* for Proletcult's theatrical workshops, and as Eisenstein became increasingly involved with film making, Tret'iakov began

contributing to screen plays for him, such as *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets 'Potëmkin'*) (Tret'iakov 1926).

It is possible that Tret'iakov's connection with Soviet films, and his encounter with film stills, encouraged him to experiment with photography and use it to add power to his writing, especially given the Bolshevik promotion of the medium. Lenin was known to favour the cinema and, in 1922, he had produced his Directive on Cinematic Affairs.⁵ Its main concern was to foster and control the state sector of the nascent Soviet film industry and harness its potential to act as propaganda for Communist Party objectives. The directive had also embraced photography, stipulating that photographs of propaganda interest should be shown with appropriate captions (Taylor and Christie 1988: 56). Although Lenin's text was not published in full until 1925, its main features were soon known to people working in the cinema, which included Eisenstein and Tret'iakov.

Lenin's directive had brought photography into the cultural and political foreground, and, perhaps appropriately, his death on 21 January 1924 endowed the photographic image with even greater practical importance. The need for memorabilia to honour the dead leader and record his lying-in-state and funeral left easel painters at a disadvantage. They simply were not able to produce the quantity of images that were required quickly enough. Photographs and photomontages filled the gap. Photographers documented the various events following the leader's death and his eventual installation in the temporary mausoleum on Red Square. The few photographs that had been taken of Lenin while he was still alive provided the raw material for numerous photomontage compositions dedicated to commemorating various aspects of his life and activities (Akinsha 2007). Tret'iakov left Moscow on 14 February 1924 (Tret'iakov 1926), so he would still have been in Moscow to witness this development. We also know that in his luggage he had magazines illustrating Lenin's funeral because he subsequently described his experience of witnessing the propaganda power of photographs when he observed the Chinese guards' fascination with them (Tret'iakov 1925: 46).

Whatever factors, events and/or motives inspired Tret'iakov to begin taking photographs, it is clear from the Peking article that in manipulating the camera, in choosing his viewpoints and in composing his images, he had absorbed some of the techniques of composition developed by avant-garde artists and film-makers. The six images on the first two pages of his Peking article bear witness to the care with which he had composed his images and orchestrated the visual structure of the page spread. Of course, it is not clear to what extent he was able to control the layout, but the images he selected clearly would have suggested the sequence.

The article opens with an image of a modern railway station in Peking – Beijing as it is today. The track, highlighted by the white platforms either side, cuts across the composition at a slight angle as it disappears into the distance. The sky takes up a third of the composition, conveying a sense of space and evoking the vast expanse of China. It also communicates the notion of a journey across that expanse, which, of course, Tret'iakov himself had

completed just a few months before. In fact, the image of the station and railway track appears above the author's name and the title of the article, seeming to act as a visual sign that the author had travelled along the track, and that the text below is a result of that journey – physical and cultural - travelled by the author as a visitor.

Of course, in this instance, the railway not only suggests the nature and role of the author but also indicates the subject of the article – the contemporary state of China and to what extent it had been modernized. Trains epitomized progress and were synonymous with modernity. They had been celebrated as such by the Italian Futurists and Russian avant-garde artists.⁶ Yet trains also possessed enormous ideological and strategic importance. During the Civil War in Russia (1918-1921) they had acted as the physical and ideological arm of the Bolshevik party – moving soldiers and armaments rapidly to where they were needed, while propaganda or agit trains had disseminated the revolutionary message. In the 1920s, extending the railway network was central to the Soviet regime's determination to develop heavy industry and modernize the country's economic infrastructure. Trains operated as practical links between Moscow and the provinces, carrying materials, goods, and people to and from far-flung cities. In this situation, trains became symbolic of the revolutionary struggle and the dynamic qualities of Soviet construction. They epitomized the regime's aspiration to unite the country and abolish the divide between the cities and the countryside.

The contemporary connotations that the train held for the Soviet public and for Soviet officialdom seem embedded in Tret'iakov's photograph, where the traditional buildings seem to be at the mercy of this new railway track as modernization figuratively sweeps the country. The photograph is placed above the article, like a vision of the future, a small indication perhaps both of what had already been achieved in China and what could be achieved in the future. It indicates the path of aspiration and is separated from the rest of the illustrations (which document everyday Peking reality), by the article's title.

The final image on the initial two-page spread is a very abstract photograph of the roofs of Peking. The play of intersecting diagonals reiterates the diagonal of the opening photograph of the train track going through the station but emphasizes the lack of a single direction. Instead, the multi-directional mass of the roofs conveys a sensation of congestion and of conflicting directions – suggesting perhaps not only the various currents present within Chinese everyday life, but also suggesting tradition and the impediments to progress. Both panoramic images - on the one hand, the train station and track pointing to a modern future and, on the other, the traditional roof tops of the present - are taken from a high viewpoint, implying the lofty perspective of the impartial observer and commentator, a role with which Tret'iakov clearly identified.

In between these two images, there are photographs of people with various goods and antiquated modes of transporting them. These focus on specific people and objects. They have been shot at eye level and at no great distance, implying a sense of direct observation. Commentary, however, is still

present. In one shot, for instance a hand-drawn delivery cart is placed against an old and elaborate entrance, vividly expressing the archaic and traditional fabric of the Chinese way of life. In another, the vehicle and its driver are shot within a narrow lane, suggesting sensations of confinement and constriction. The apparently straightforward documentary character of these photographs contrasts with the more general views supplied by the opening and closing shots. The changes in format and size also reinforce the visual message, with the landscape format having been used for the opening and closing images, while the portrait format was employed for the intervening photographs. Overall, the piece has been cleverly designed and orchestrated not only to reinforce the verbal message but also to act as independent photographic essay, with a visually effective and accessible message.

Tret'iakov's Peking article appeared in the state-financed, illustrated journal *Prozhektor (Projector)*, which had been set up in 1923 as a literary and artistic publication, issued as a supplement to the Communist Party's official newspaper *Pravda* and edited by Nikolai Bukharin (Belja and Skorokhodov 1966). Over the next few years, Tret'iakov frequently published illustrated articles in this journal, which possessed a very strong propaganda bias (Tret'iakov, 1932; Wolf 2011: 392-3). It was one of several popular illustrated magazines that featured photo-journalism, made possible by new technical developments in printing technology. Demand was high, and Tret'iakov's output was prodigious - while he was in China alone, he published no fewer than fifty articles about the country in the Soviet press (Mierau 1985: 460).

During the 1920s, Tret'iakov became well-known as a photographer and photo-journalist. As Erika Wolf has pointed out, Tret'iakov's photographic achievements were recognized by his contemporaries and, for most of the 1920s, even eclipsed those of Rodchenko (Wolf 2011: 388-389). Wolf also highlights Tret'iakov's international reputation during the 1930s and cites the American left-wing journalist Walt Carmon who considered Tret'iakov "a camera fiend with thousands of films from all over", and Albert Parry who observed that "he prefers to illustrate his writings with photographs, for drawings and paintings might not be authentic" (Wolf 2011: 389). Such was Tret'iakov's status that his omission from the exhibition *Ten Years of Soviet Photography (Sovetskaia fotografiia za 10 let)* of 1928 astonished journalists, such as the young member of *Novyi lef*, Leonid Volkov-Lannit (Volkov-Lannit 1928: 44).

In 1928-9, the Party decided to abolish NEP and its uneasy truce with capitalism, and, instead, implemented the Collectivization of Agriculture and the program of rapid industrialization enshrined in the First Five-Year Plan. Responding to this new situation, Tret'iakov became involved in trying to organize an Association of Workers of Revolutionary Photography. Although this association was never realized, its aims became integrated into the program of the October group, which stressed that photographers should create works of social significance by being engaged with production (either agricultural or industrial) (Wolf 2011: 389). Tret'iakov practised what he

preached. He visited and even worked on a collective farm and subsequently published several illustrated books devoted to his experiences (Gough 2006).⁷

Not surprisingly, by the time *Novyi lef* started publication in 1927, photography had become an important item of the journal's program and was explicitly linked to factography:

Станковой картине, считающей, что она выполняет функцию "отображения действительности", Лэф противопоставляет фото - более точное, быстрое, объективное средство фиксации факта. [...]

В литературе Лэф противопоставляет беллетристике, претендующей на "отображательство" - репортаж, литературу факта, порывающую с традициями литературного художества и целиком уходящую в публицистику, на службу газеты и журнала [...]

Фиксация факта и агит - вот две основные функции. Наметив их, надо наметить и приемы осуществления этих функций. (Anon, 1927: 2)

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

In literature, to *belles lettres* and the related claim to 'reflection', Lef opposes reportage – factography – which breaks with the traditions of creative literature and moves completely into the public arena to serve the newspaper and the magazine [...]

The fixing of fact and agitation represent the two basic functional requirements. In considering these, we must also consider the devices through which these functions can be realized.) (Anon, 1927: 2; Brewster 1971-2: 67)

Photography featured prominently in *Novyi lef*, but it was chiefly produced by Rodchenko, whose work adorned the journal's pages and covers. Yet these shots were self-consciously innovative, rather than about "fixing the fact" or "agitation". Rodchenko was exploring the potential of the camera to capture people and objects from unexpected angles – from above and below – exploiting light and shadow, while composing his images to create dramatic effects. In many respects, this approach was more attuned to the formally experimental aesthetics of *Lef* than to the more ideologically committed approach of *Novyi lef*. In 1928, Rodchenko was viciously criticized by the proletarian journal *The Soviet Photograph* (*Sovetskoe foto*) and accused of individualism, plagiarising Western photographers, and, by implication, promoting counter-revolutionary cultural values (Anon 1928; Bowlt 1989:

243-244). *Novyi lef* published his response in which he justified his approach, but the journal's editors and his colleagues expressed little sympathy (Rodchenko 1928; Bowlt 1989: 245-246).

The episode, however, seems to have prompted Tret'iakov, who took over the editorship of the journal for the last five issues of 1928, to write more explicitly about his own approach to photography and the process of taking photographs. He explained that his method was based on his belief that "Ideology does not reside in the material that art uses. Ideology resides in the means by which that material is developed; ideology resides in the form. Only appropriately organized material can become an object of direct social significance" ([...] идеология не в материале, которым пользуется искусство. Идеология в приемах обработки этого материала, идеология в форме. Только целесообразно оформленный материал может стать вещью прямого социального назначения) (Tret'iakov 1928a:1)

In his 'Photographic Notes' (*Fotozametki*), he omitted all reference to Rodchenko, but implicitly criticized his colleague's approach by placing great stress on his own rejection of aesthetics (Tret'iakov 1928b). He emphasized that the way a photograph was taken should be determined by the function that the photograph was intended to perform. For him, the "what" and the "how" were not nearly as important as the "why" – i.e. the ultimate purpose of the image. In other words, the result to be achieved should determine the means to be employed. He explained that often portrait photographs present idealized images of their subjects, using lighting and other methods to disguise imperfections or enhance a person's appearance, while photographs taken for identity purposes and documents must show every detail clearly, including blemishes. He coined the term "photographist" (*fotografist*) to distinguish his approach from that of the professional photographer (*fotograf*), whom he regarded with profound suspicion (Tret'iakov 1928b: 40; Bowlt 1989: 252). He asserted: "The Lef approach to photography is above all about setting it up – [establishing] the aim (purpose) of the photograph, and then finding the most rational means for actually taking the photograph and the viewpoints" (*Lefovskim podkhodom k fotografii iavlaetsia prezhde vsego ustanovlenie – dlia kakoi tseli nado fotografirovat' (naznachenie), a zatem uzhe naxozhdenie ratsional'nykh sposobov fotografirovaniia i tochek zreniia*). (Tret'iakov 1928b: 40; Bowlt 1989: 252). He also introduced some practical advice, clearly derived from his own experience of taking photographs, about using figures to provide scale in relation to natural phenomena and buildings – a device that he seems to have adopted in his own photographs (Fig 3).⁸

In his image of Novaia Mestiia in Svanetia, Georgia (Fig. 3), for instance, Tret'iakov showed the chief of police in conversation with the head of the executive committee against a background of a large pile of hay or crops being moved by oxen, the modern buildings of the cooperative, the cafeteria and the doctors' surgery. This organization conveys a sense of the extent of the village and the relative size of the buildings. Yet the mixture of elements also serves to evoke the sense of a town in transition. The traditional way of life is represented by the oxen and the figure leading them, but these

are engaged in motion and are relatively small components of the overall image, in which the new buildings and the new people predominate. In contrast, Staraia Mestiia is shown as devoid of people (Fig. 4).⁹ There are no figures to give a sense of scale to the 46 stone towers. While this absence seems to contradict his own advice (about scale), the omission was clearly deliberate. Evidently, Tret'iakov's intention was to contrast the old and the new, the pre-Soviet and the Soviet. An empty Staraia Mestiia alongside a busy Novaia Mestiia suggests that everyone has abandoned the old for the new. Just as Eisenstein used montage in films like *October* and *Battleship Potemkin*, Tret'iakov exploited the contrasting images to convey his ideological message. Activity versus emptiness; and the stone towers (inevitably generating associations with the stone age) versus the new buildings which are light and airy, with verandas. Tret'iakov's orchestration of the images themselves and his presentation of the two photographs in tandem was clearly determined by the purpose of the image to show the positive impact of Soviet power and Collectivization.

Strangely, very few of his own photographs were reproduced in *Novyi lef*, even after he became the editor-in-chief. Some of those that were included date from his time in China. Alongside the photograph of the demonstration in Shanghai (Fig. 2), the journal showed images of a street seller and Masks in a Peking Market (Fig. 5 & 6).¹⁰ These capture the distinctive atmosphere of an exotic and alien culture. The masks are shot in close up, while the photograph of the seller with his wares is taken from a slight distance in order to show his merchandise and customers. Less successful is the image of the demonstration. The viewpoint is only slightly elevated, so that the image conveys a sea of heads, parasols and fans, with a couple of banners. Without the caption one might think that it was simply a crowd of people out to enjoy themselves in the city's sunshine. The political dimension is not visually explicit. Clearly, by the time, Tret'iakov took his images of Svanetiia a few years later, he was a much more experienced and accomplished photographer, and knew how to manipulate the image more effectively to fulfil his ideological agenda.

Although Tret'iakov was immensely productive as a photo-journalist, writing continued to be his main occupation. When he was arrested on 26 July 1937, he described himself as a writer (*pisatel'*), a special correspondent for *Pravda* and vice president of the International Committee of the Union of Soviet Writers (Inostrannaya komissiiia Soiuza sovetskikh pisatelei).¹¹ Except for those photographs that have survived as reproductions, illustrating his published articles and books, most of his photographs seem to have been lost or destroyed when the contents of his home were confiscated by the NKVD. Among his possessions, however, was a Leica with the registration number 50167 (Anon 1937). According to production data, this registration number refers to a Leica I, produced in 1930.¹² Almost certainly, Tret'iakov would have acquired it during his visit to Germany between December 1930 and October 1931 (Mierau 1985: 462). From that point on, this Leica would obviously have been his camera of choice, although it is difficult to know precisely what type of camera he used prior to this. Unfortunately, no other

camera is mentioned on the NKVD list. Understandably, art historians have usually assumed that he possessed a Leica before 1931 – but whether he did or not is open to speculation. His tribute to the Leica - his confession that his Leica was as important as his pen and notebook and that his Leica film was his visual diary – was written in 1934 (Tretiakov 1934a; Wolf 201: 387). Poignantly, Tret'iakov's enduring belief in the power of the photographic image was reflected in his fabricated confession (produced following his interrogation by the NKVD) that he had been a Japanese spy; as proof of his treason, he mentioned frequently that photographs had been an important element in his spying activities (Anon 1937).

Despite Tret'iakov's prominence in the 1920s, histories of Soviet photography rarely mention his name, and when they do it is usually in connection with photographic theory and the discussions that surrounded it, rather than in relation to the development of photographic practice *per se*. In part, this relative neglect of Tret'iakov's photographic output can be explained by the fact that he never presented himself as a photographer at the time. Moreover, he clearly did not approach his photographs as autonomous objects but conceived them in relation to an ideological purpose and often as an adjunct to his writing. They, therefore, possess a strong documentary, rather than artistic character. Overlooking the aesthetic aspect of his images is not helped by the fact that most of them seem to have only survived as fairly poor-quality reproductions in the publications of the period. Yet, the subsequent lack of attention paid to his photographic activity is also a result of historical circumstances. After his death in September 1937, his writings, theories and photographic work lay forgotten until after his rehabilitation in 1956 (Anon 1937; Anon 1997). As happened with other members of Russia's innovative avant-garde, it was a Western scholar who initiated the rediscovery and analysis of his contribution (Mierau 1985).

Conclusion

I have chosen to focus on Tret'iakov's early photography and the various stimuli (derived from Communist ideology, as well as creative theories concerning the involvement of the arts in the reconstruction of Soviet society) that may have prompted him to own and wield a camera. It should, however, be stressed that even after the end of the 1920s, photography and visual images continued to be important aspects of his creative activity. For instance, when he was in Germany between December 1930 and October 1931, he used visual material to illustrate his various lectures (Wolf 2011: 385). By this time, he had moved from agitation and the literature of fact to what he called 'operativism', which entailed the author becoming involved in transforming reality by manipulating objective fact in accordance with Communist Party objectives.¹³ This involved using ideological criteria to a greater degree in selecting and composing the photographic image. Yet ideological factors had always played a vital role in his visual work and, to my mind, his photographs

of Svanetiia of 1928 indicate that he was already beginning to move in that direction.

NOTES

¹ Tret'iakov left Moscow early February 1924 and returned in August 1925 (Mierau 1985: 460). For details concerning Tret'iakov's photographic theory and practice, see Gough 2006; Gough 2011; and Wolf 2011.

² In the so-called Shanghai Massacre of 30 May 1924, it is estimated that the city's police force shot and killed between 20 and 300 protesters. The Soviet Union supported the Chinese Communist Party which was fighting against foreign imperialism and against the Nationalist government. This led to the Civil War which began in 1927.

³ *Novyi lef*, no. 5 (May 1927), opposite p. 33.

⁴ The authorship of this article has not been established. No author was given in *Lef*. Bowlt attributes the text to Gustavs Klucis (Bowl 1989: 211), while Dickerman suggests it was written by Osip Brik (Dickerman, 2006: 135, n.3). It is, however, possible that it was the work of Liubov' Popova. The text is followed by her explanation of the set that she designed for Tret'iakov's play *The Earth in Turmoil* (*Zemlia dybom* of 1923, which he adapted from Marcel Martinet's *La Nuit* of 1921), and is accompanied by a reproduction of her photomontage design (Popova, 1924: 44).

⁵ The directive was dated 17 January 1922, but was only published in *Kinonedelia*, no. 4 (1925); English translation in Taylor and Christie 1988: 56.

⁶ See, for instance, Natal'ia Goncharova's painting *The Plane over the Train*; Kazimir Malevich's lithograph *The Simultaneous Death of a Man in a Plane and on the Railway*; Ivan Kliun's constructed relief, *The Rapidly Passing Landscape* (all of 1913); and Liubov' Popova's two paintings *The Travelling Woman*, both of 1915.

⁷ His illustrated books included *Chzhungo* (1927), which was devoted to his Chinese experiences and several on collective farms, including *Vyzov. Kolkhoznye ocherki* (1930).

⁸ *Novyi lef*, no. 11-12 (November-December 1927), opp. p. 32

⁹ *Novyi lef*, no. 11-12 (November-December 1927), opp. p.33.

¹⁰ *Novyi lef*, no. 5 (May 1927), opp. p.33 and p.32 respectively.

¹¹ For documents pertaining to Tret'iakov's arrest on 11 July and execution two months later, on 11 September 1937, see Anon 1997.

¹² Registration numbers 34818-6000 relate to the Leica I and were produced in 1930. See <https://www.cameraquest.com/ltnnum.htm>

¹³ Papazian divides Tret'iakov's activity into three periods: industrial art 1923-5, the literature of fact 1925-9; and operativism (1929-34). See Papazian 2009; and Gough 2006.

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