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THE SABLE FRONTIER THE SIBERIAN FUR TRADE AS MONTAGE

RANE WILLERSLEV¹ AND OLGA ULTURGASHEVA²

Introduction

Soviet scholars made great efforts to contrast positively Russia's conquest of Siberia with Western imperialism under which indigenous populations were cruelly exploited. Siberia, they argued, was nothing but an empty land, having only sparsely scattered indigenous inhabitants, who welcomed the Russians on account of their peaceful relations and the useful commodities that they offered. Levin and Potapov, in their massive ethnography *The Peoples of Siberia*, originally published in Russian in 1956, confidently declared:

The first pioneers rapidly established economic and cultural ties with the population of the part of Europe and Asia they had discovered ... exerting a beneficial influence on the culture and everyday life of the age-old inhabitants ... The Siberian tribes desperately needed Russian products, particularly iron objects, and willingly traded furs for them ... (1964: 108)

We now know that this particular image of Russia's empire-building in Siberia – bringing benefit rather than harm to the indigenous peoples – was propagated by the Communist regime and that the story is in fact no different to that of Portuguese, Spanish or English colonisations in other parts of the world (see Forsyth 1992: 109–16, Bobrick 1992: 67–78; Slezkine 1994: 303–8). As Bobrick bluntly states: '[Russia's conquest of Siberia] was the eastern counterpart of the westward colonial march' (1992: 67). Instead of gold, silver and other prized commodities, which the Europeans squeezed out of their overseas colonies, it was 'soft gold', in the form of the world's finest fur, which spurred Russia's expansion eastwards. For centuries, Siberian fur

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– especially sable³ – was Russia's most valuable export and its principal source was a fur tribute paid by the indigenous subjects as tokens of their subjugation.

Although fur had long been important to Siberia's indigenous peoples, it had been part of a purely subsistence lifestyle, consisting of various combinations of hunting, fishing and reindeer herding.⁴ With the arrival of the Russians at the end of the sixteenth century, fur hunting took a commercial turn. The global fur trade entered the scene, with all that this entailed in terms of subjection to new hierarchical relationships and divisions of labour. And the fur trade, as we shall see, had come to stay. Today, the export of Siberian fur still yields tremendous profits to a small group of private traders. For Siberia's indigenous hunters however, the fur trade remains a story of rapacious exploitation, full of agony and conflict.

We became involved in the fur trade not as anthropologists or traders but as 'accidental' self-made activists for indigenous rights. Back in the mid-1990s, the local leadership of the Yukaghirs, a small group of indigenous hunters, living along the Kolyma River in the northeastern part of the Russian Republic of Sakha Yakutia, approached Rane Willerslev, asking him to assist them in selling their sable fur directly on the world market. The reason for their request was the collapse of the Soviet state farm system, which had left them with no legitimate buyer of their fur, except for a regionally based fur company, *Sakhabult*, which exploited them ruthlessly and which could not secure them a steady flow of consumer goods. Rane, who had already worked as an anthropologist in the Yukaghir village of Nelemnoye (Willerslev 2000a, in press), took up the challenge and together with a Danish fur specialist, Uffe Christensen, they organised what was called the 'Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project'. The aim of the project was to promote the sale of sable fur produced by the Yukaghirs directly on the world market, the full profit thus returning to their own community. The project, as we shall see, went through various difficult phases, before it finally collapsed with the imprisonment of the Yukaghir leader, the escape of Rane into the forest and the alleged killing of a local business associate. It was at this point that Olga Ulturgasheva got involved. Working as a journalist for a regional indigenous newspaper, Olga and Rane wrote a

³ The sable (*Martes zibellina*) is a solitary, arboreal weasel about 50 centimetres (20 inches) long (excluding the tail), which ranges in colour from brown to black, and has a soft, dense silky undercoat with sparkling guard hair.

⁴ Some indigenous peoples living in western and southern Siberia had already been paying fur tribute to various Mongolian overlords. For them, the arrival of the Russians simply meant a change of master (Slezkine 1994: 18).

number of articles together, exposing the corrupt and exploitative character of the Siberian fur trade (Willerslev 2000b; Willerslev and Ulturgasheva 2000). In the end, the President of Yakutia took up the affair and the Yukaghirs were compensated for their economic loss and payments on their sable fur were increased. However, the Danish-Yukagir Fur Project was never revived.

The montage way of seeing

In this article, we discuss the history and organisation of the Siberian fur trade, from its early beginnings under tsarism, through the Soviet era to our recent attempt at establishing a direct trading link between the Yukaghirs and the international fur market. As an analytical framework, we make use of the cinematic metaphor of 'montage', which in its original usage refers to the juxtaposition of images in the technical production of filmmaking and the associated task of editing. Montage as a cinematic technique was developed in its most radical form by early Soviet filmmakers, most notably by Eisenstein, who became the best known of all the Russian montage-theorists of the 1920s, before their creative spirit was brutally suppressed by Stalin. Eisenstein was much influenced by the theory of 'dialectical materialism', which proposes that artistic creation, like political progress, comes about from the interaction of contradictory opposites: the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Montage, he argued, should be employed, not as a process in which the viewer reacts first to one shot and then to another, as in the 'American montage school' (Deleuze 2003: 59), but as the creation of a completely new concept, coming together through the violent confrontation of dissimilar images. In other words, Eisenstein's principal thesis was that the single image was without intrinsic meaning prior to its placement within a montage structure. That is, the image gained meaning only relationally, as part of a larger pattern of contradictory opposites (Eisenstein 1994 [1926]: 147).

Through montage sequences, Eisenstein believed that film could bring about 'shock-effects', which would free the viewer from false ideas and images so as to arrive at a deeper understanding of reality. For example, in his famous movie *October* (1928), celebrating the 1917 Revolution, we see Kerensky, head of the provisional government opposed by the Bolsheviks,

standing before the door of the czar's chambers, the film cuts back and forth between him and a gold peacock seen in isolation from the surrounding space... [The montage] leads us to see Kerensky as a peacock whose vanity is mechanically activated by the gears of the old

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regime, a puppet whose illusions of grandeur are part of the machinery of exploitation. (Perez 1998: 154)

An initial contradiction – ‘contrasting images of Kerensky and a peacock’ – is followed by a sudden, shocking revelation: ‘Kerensky is in effect a peacock’. In a similar way, grotesque bourgeois women are contrasted with a young revolutionary, and Kerensky’s own private army is compared with wine glasses and tin soldiers. Thus, the-viewer is drawn through one cognitive struggle after another into a kind of new ‘dialectic’ understanding of the world – an understanding which effectuates a radical break with the conventional bourgeois ways of seeing and knowing. As such, Eisenstein celebrated montage as a vehicle of revolutionary consciousness.

In presenting an argument which is motivated by our desire not only to challenge the conventional representation of the fur trade by Soviet scholars but also to draw attention to its unjust and conflictive character, it seems appropriate to exploit the creation of shock-effects through a series of juxtapositions as in the technique of montage. However, our use of the montage metaphor is not only motivated by a ‘revolutionary’ desire to overthrow the conventional way by which the history of fur trade has been constructed. It is equally, and perhaps even more so, motivated by the nature of our own experience. Our encounter with the fur trade involved the intercutting of different episodes and agencies so that we were never able to grasp the full picture of what was going on, nor of its consequences. In fact, our view on the fur trade is, to this day, essentially incomplete and fragmented. The principle of montage captures this experience of seeing the world in fragments because,

using montage as a technique means that the world cannot be represented as complete or stable; rather it is evoked as a mosaic of shifting patterns made up of unstable pieces. The world is never offered as whole but can only be approached as partial (what you see always depends on where you are) (Grimshaw 2001: 27, original insertion)

A further aspect of this fragmented vision is that the Siberian fur trade cannot be comprehended as only a set of localised phenomena, but needs to be understood in terms of ‘multiple perspectives’ in varying locales (see Marcus 1994). In fact, throughout Siberia’s colonial history, from the tsarist period to the present day, the fur trade has been based on a rigid division of labour between indigenous hunters, providing raw fur for sale, and non-indigenous dealers, bringing this fur to the international market, which invariably increases its value enormously.

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This division of labour also signals two diverse yet parallel and simultaneous perspectives, operating more or less consciously with respect to each other. In everyday life, there has been little exchange between these two perspectives. Indeed, the colonial structure of the Siberian fur trade has, as we shall see, been based on the rigid separation of the hunter's perspective from that of the trader. What happened with the establishment of the Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project, we argue, is that these diverse and simultaneous perspectives were brought together in a new dramatic way – as in an Eisensteinian montage sequence – creating shock-effects at the heart of the fur trade organisation. The result was a genuine threat of overthrowing the colonial relations of power that the fur-trading regime generates and the creation of an entirely new situation in which the indigenous hunters, for the first time in their history, would establish direct trading relations with the international fur market. However, *Sakhabult*, the 'middle-man' organisation within the regional fur trade, found its profitable position under threat and it ruthlessly destroyed the Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project by means of political terror and violence. However, before going into this aspect of our story, we need first to provide a historical outline of the Siberian fur trade and the type of relationships and perspectives that have unfolded in its wake.

A historical outline of the Siberian fur trade

With the conquest of Siberia, Russia gained access to the world's richest source of high quality fur, and during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the export of Siberian fur to the European market formed the backbone of the Russian economy, constituting up to 10 per cent of the state's total revenue (Fisher 1943: 119).

The first to enter Siberia were the Cossacks, the professional soldiers in state service, who constructed a thin line of wooden fortresses and fortified towns that connected the newly annexed territories with Moscow and the European fur market. In their wake came the private hunters and traders, *Promyshlenniki*. Among them were noblemen, township residents and peasants, all of whom were driven by the prospect of making quick profits 'in a "Fur Rush" as frantic as the Gold Rush in Alaska' (Bobrick 1992: 68). It was not unusual for a hunter to catch between 120 and 280 sables in a season, which stretched from early October to late April (Bychkov 1994: 81). Given that Moscow prices for sable increased five-fold (Fisher 1943: 69) and that a few good pelts alone could buy a man '50 acres of land, a decent cabin, five horses, ten head of cattle, and twenty sheep' (Bobrick 1992: 68), it is evident that a hunter could strike it rich in one season alone. And many did. As Fisher writes,

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'[The Siberian fur trade was] the most important single factor in the creation of a comparatively strong and numerically increasing Russian commercial class' (1943: 207).

However, it was not the private hunters and traders who dominated the fur trade, but the Russian state in the form of the tsar, who was himself the biggest merchant in Russia. The tsar had various means of obtaining fur for the treasury, through taxation, confiscation and trade. However, most important was the *yasak*, an obligatory fur tribute, imposed on Siberia's indigenous populations as a whole. In fact, the entire colonial administration – its building of fortresses, its military strategy in acquiring new territory and its categorisation of the indigenous peoples into administrative 'tribes' and 'clans' – was all fundamentally governed by this end. The *yasak* was an annual tax and was 'paid' in sable either directly by the individual hunter or by the 'clan elder' for the whole group. The rate of the *yasak* varied according to the district and time. At the beginning of the seventeenth century the tax was as high as 18–22 sables for every man aged between eighteen and fifty years (Fisher 1943: 56–7). The *Promyshlenniki* were also required to pay a fur tax – a *tithe* (meaning one-tenth of all the fur produced) – to the tsar. However, the amount from the indigenous Siberians easily made up the largest share, contributing 65–80 per cent of the state's total revenue in fur (Fisher 1943: 118).

In addition to *yasak*, the Russians extracted *pominki*, a supposedly voluntary gift in fur made in honour of the tsar. In practice, however, it assumed several forms, ranging from gifts made by the indigenous subjects to a fixed taxation extracted by force. Not infrequently it was also given in exchange for trade goods (Slezkine 1994: 19). In fact, the purity of meaning of both the *yasak* and the *pominki* remains in question as a tribute in one context could take the form of a commodity exchange in another (about which more below).

The intensive hunting pressure brought about a steady decline in the number of sable. As hunting grounds became exhausted, others had to be found and so the conquest proceeded from one hunting ground to the next, as fur resources gave out. And the exhaustion of sables proceeded quickly. By the end of the eighteenth century, the sable became so scarce that the trade in Siberian fur lost its position as the cornerstone of the Russian economy (Willerslev 1995).

Even so, in certain periods of the twentieth century, such as in the aftermath of the civil war when industrial production lay in ruins, Siberian fur regained its position as Russia's key export. From 1924 to 1929, for example, fur accounted for 10–15 per cent of total Soviet exports (Forsyth 1992: 247). During this period, the Soviet government

introduced a number of hunting regulations to ensure that the population of sable and other fur-bearing animals was kept at sustainable and increasing levels.

The revival of the Siberian fur trade continued under Stalin. In his quest for foreign capital to drive forward the development of Soviet heavy industry, he advocated trapping on a large scale (Willerslev 2000a: 14). The indigenous communities were organised into 'collective farms' (*kolkhoz*) and the resulting settlements were further reorganised into large 'state farms' (*sovkhoz*). Fur hunting as a mode of production became 'industrialised' – it was modelled on the shift system used elsewhere in the Soviet Union for industrial workers, with the hunters being provided with guns, traps and food by the state farms who sent them out into their territories by helicopter in shifts (see Vitebsky 1992). All of this was aimed at transforming the market-like social relationships that existed in Siberia into a rational plan-economic system in which the Soviet state would hold a full monopoly within the fur trade. No private trading in sable was allowed and hunters were instructed to deliver all of their fur to the state farm at a fixed low price set by the state. However, as Ssorin-Chaikov points out: 'The "actually-existing" Soviet economy worked differently, and in many ways contrary to this reform design. "Submitting the plan to the state" (*sdacha plana gosudarstvu*) in reindeer and fur was a highly ritualised tributary gesture ...' (2000: 356).

The implication was that the Siberian fur trade, rather than developing in a historically progressive way, manifesting a teleological plan or goal as in the Soviet narrative, where the Siberian societies are depicted as initially following the cultural logic of capitalism in their advance towards a socialist plan-economy (see, for example, Levin and Potapov 1964), instead turned out to be more like a repetition of the 'new' as 'always-the-same' (Buck-Morss 1991: 56). The 'old' division of labour between the indigenous hunters and the non-indigenous dealers, between tribute givers and tribute takers, was resurrected within the 'new' Soviet regime. This surfacing of old types of relatedness within the modern is also apparent when we turn to the present-day post-socialist period. Our focus also now turns to Yakutia, the region in which we worked.

The present-day fur trade in Yakutia

Yakutia is the largest of Russia's republics, covering an area the size of India (3.1 million square kilometres). Its population, however, is no more than 1.1 million. In the Arctic region, where the Yukaghirs and most of the other indigenous peoples live, the population density is no more than 1 person per 100 square kilometre (Jensen and Magnusson

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1995: 175). The Yakuts, or Sakha, as they prefer to call themselves, account for 33 per cent of Yakutia's total population. They are not considered to be the 'aboriginal' population but are believed to have moved into the region from southern Siberia during the thirteenth century (Jochelson 1933). The majority population, making up 50 per cent of the total, is Russian. The Yukaghirs and the other 'Small Peoples of the North' – the Evens, Evenki and Chukchi – are considered the aboriginal inhabitants, but make up only 3 per cent (Jensen and Magnusson 1995: 175).

Yakutia is extremely rich in natural resources. It has the second largest diamond industry in the world (see Argounova-Low, this volume) and also produces large quantities of gold, silver, iron, gas and coal. Although fur is now a negligible part the republic's economy compared with minerals, it still represents an important source of income. Altogether, Yakutia's fur industry is said to be worth about \$62 million a year and the European fur auctions continue to depend heavily on Yakutian fur, especially the sable.

During the Soviet period, virtually all of the republic's industries were subjected to control by the Central Soviet State Planning Commission. However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Sakha Parliament, *Il Tumen*, placed all of the republic's industries, including the fur industry, under Yakutian jurisdiction (Jensen and Magnusson 1995: 177). At the same time, the President of Yakutia, Nikolaiev (himself a Sakha), declared Yakutia's laws superior to those of Russia within the republic's territory.

This led to the establishment of *Sakhabult*, the Sakha Republic's official fur company, whose leader, Petrov (a relative of Nikolaiev), monopolised all fur trading within Yakutia. The principal idea behind the company was no different from that of its predecessor, the Soviet state: the hunters would continue to deliver sable and other types of fur for a fixed low price in exchange for cheap helicopter flights, ammunition and food products, subsidised by *Sakhabult*. However, in reality the only thing the hunters could be assured of was the low price offered for their fur; *Sakhabult's* agents failed almost without exception to supply the Yukaghirs and other indigenous hunters with deliveries of goods – and when they did, the goods were of shoddy Chinese fabrication that had failed to find markets elsewhere: Traps that did not work, binoculars through which nothing could be seen, as well as goods that were totally superfluous to the hunters' needs, such as chilli sauce and out-of-date cans of Coca-cola. For all these items the hunters had to pay the full market price. With an inflation rate on all manufactured goods running at several hundred per cent, it is not hard to see why this

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system caused the indigenous hunting economies to collapse. Today the average Yukaghir hunter has to catch a minimum of 20 sables – effectively his entire production of fur in one year – just to cover his direct expenses for one hunting season. By contrast, in the Soviet era, just two sables would have covered all his costs.

Relations of debt-peonage

Owing to the incompetence of *Sakhabult* and the lack of regular supplies, a black market in fur has flourished in Yakutia's Kolyma region. This takes the form of 'debt-peonage' in which private traders use goods advanced on credit to Yukaghir hunters to secure their entire production of fur. Such relations of debt-peonage used to be widespread in Siberia under tsarism (Jochelson 1926: 433; Slezkine 1994: 63–4; Ssorin-Chaikov 2000), but were banned, officially at least, during the communist era. However, today these black-market dealings account for the majority of transactions. The traders are mostly Russians and Sakha from the regional centre of Zyrianka, who provide Yukaghir hunters with all the necessary equipment and provisions for the upcoming hunt. At the end of the season, the hunter delivers his fur to the trader. The trader usually makes a profit of several hundred per cent, while the hunter for his part is caught up in an endless spiral of debt. To give a simple example, a hunter will typically pay the trader 15 sable pelts for a new pair of snowmobile tracks. These cost about \$100 in Moscow where the trader buys them and where he returns to sell the 15 pelts for about \$800. If the hunter cannot deliver the 15 pelts, he will have to owe the trader the remaining sable fur in addition to an interest rate of 50 per cent or more. For this reason, almost every Yukaghir hunter is heavily in debt and is totally dependent on the trader's good will and trust not to increase the debt further. The trader, however, is not always reliable, changing his records at will. Often hunters do not know 'if the goods they receive are in payment for last year's work, an advance on the next, or both at once' (Hugh-Jones 1992: 49).

We will return to discuss the issue of debt-peonage later. It is important to realise here that although the gross exploitation of Yukaghir hunters by *Sakhabult* and the private traders was the direct reason for our involvement in the Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project, this does not mean that the local hunters themselves, at least initially, shared our view of their situation. Many of them did not conceive the private traders as being unfair in their dealings with them. In fact, a trader with whom a hunter deals on a regular basis is usually addressed as a 'special friend' (*dorogoi*), a 'brother' (*brat*) or an 'honoured member of the family' (*uvazhaemi chlen semiji*). Moreover, we were often stunned by the fact

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that some Yukaghir hunters continue to be involved in trading relations that to us are evidently exploitative, even when they are not forced to.

This type of insight tends to be ignored by activist writers who are working to further the political and economic interests of indigenous peoples, because it complicates the otherwise clear-cut picture of the indigenous hunter as someone who is always cheated and abused by the colonial regime. However, the situation is in fact much more complicated and it forces us to ask the perhaps trivial, yet overtly tricky question of whether it is right to talk about the Yukaghir hunters as 'victims' cruelly exploited in the fur trade.

A multiplicity of perspectives

We began this article by arguing for a montage model in the study of the Siberian fur trade. This implies that the fur trade and the various transactions involved cannot be grasped as mere instantiations of one single perspective; neither can one perspective alone function as its one and only measure. Rather, the montage principle entails the destruction of the unity of perspective so as to allow the object of study to be grasped from a range of different angles.

We are, however, not the first to employ this approach of 'multiperspectivism'. Slezkine (1994), in his detailed book on Siberia's colonization, points to how the meaning of a single transaction, such as the payment of *yasak*, was not necessarily understood in the same way by the Russian conquerors and the conquered Siberian subjects. The Evenki, for example,

ask for gifts – tin and breads, and food for themselves, and flour, and butter, and fat, and when they are given those gifts ... they give in exchange for that and when asked, one sable from every one or two families. But without gifts they do not want to give anything ... (Stepanov quoted in Slezkine 1994: 19)

So, what the Russians deemed *yasak*, the Evenki saw as trade. And it was only when the Evenki accepted the deal as fair that they would allow themselves to become, in the eyes of the Russians, a tribute-paying '*yasak* people' (*yasak nye lyudy*). A similar play of transaction meanings is also apparent in the relationship between the indigenous hunter and the private trader. Jochelson (1926), who studied the Yukaghirs at the end of the nineteenth century, wrote with much harm about how their so-called trader 'friends' deliberately trapped them in an endless spiral of debt so as to secure all of their fur and force them into enslavement for generations to come. From the Yukaghirs' own point of view, however, this was not necessarily seen as a problem, for as Jochelson writes,

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The more debts a man has, the richer he is regarded. A Yukaghir proverb says that every newborn boy appears in the world as a rich man, i.e., loaded with debts. When he attains manhood he must pay the debts of his father or even his grandfather. It is a matter of honor to pay the father's debts and to be trusted by the merchants. (1926: 433)

Jochelson, who was an evolutionist of the Tylorian type (as was customary at his time), took this as a sign of the Yukaghirs' 'general absence of logical reasoning' (1926: 156). However, as Hugh-Jones has described in the Amazonian context, which is equally applicable to Siberia, in frontier regions, where 'supplies are unpredictable and notoriously unreliable' (1992: 64), personal trust becomes inseparable from trading so that 'the morality of the market' and 'that of kinship' penetrate and enable each other (1992: 51). In other words, the indigenous hunters, who depend on the trader's goods, attempt to tie him into their network of kinship relations with all this entails in terms of reciprocal obligations and a steadier flow of trade goods. The result is that 'the dividing line between gift and barter would often be hard to draw' (Hugh-Jones 1992: 63).

Hugh-Jones thus follows a line of argument similar to our montage model of inquiry, arguing that a single transaction or a chain of transactions are differently perceived, depending on who sees and where one is situated. What to us appears as a deeply immoral and unfair transaction regime might, from the indigenous viewpoint, be quite differently understood. He even depicts the different viewpoints of the trader and the Indian in mathematical terms (1992: 65–6). From the trader's perspective the transaction looks like this:

$$M - C_g - (m) - C_c - C_c' - M'$$

where M = money, C_g = goods, (m) = money as a unit of account, C_c = coca leaves, C_c' = value-added cocaine, and M' = profit.

Thus, the trader makes a whole series of sober calculations so as to maximize his profit in the transaction: For example, he considers from whom and at what price he can buy the goods that he sells to the Indian. Likewise, he takes into consideration the costs of processing the coca leaves and the risks of selling the cocaine on the drug market, and so on. Indeed, the trader anticipates a whole range of perspectives other than his own as part of his dealings with the Indian.

The Indian for his part sees the transaction in much more simple terms. He is not looking for money or profit. Nor does he have any clear notion of the monetary aspects of the deal. All he sees is a simple swapping of goods:

$C_c - C_g$
 where C_c = coca leaves and C_g = goods.

We will return to discuss the two viewpoints outlined by Hugh-Jones. For now, we turn to Ssorin-Chaikov (2000: 345–61), who makes a similar kind of argument within the Siberian context. He describes in detail a series of transactions through which one particular exchange object passes – in this case the skin of a bear. The character of the exchange changes a great deal according to the context of the transaction and the viewpoints of the people involved, articulating ‘multiple exchange logics – such as those of monetary and barter trade, but also of sharing, gift and tribute’ (2000: 345). Thus, in Ssorin-Chaikov’s analysis, the myriad of perspectives involved remain unreconciled and he makes no attempt at fusing them into one privileged or harmonizing perspective, which is then presented, with all the rough edges and contradictions edited out, as either ‘gift’, ‘trade’ or ‘tribute’.

For both Ssorin-Chaikov and Hugh-Jones, the important and interesting point is that no transaction is ever complete or stable, but is constantly evoked through a mosaic of perspectives that refract it in a range of different directions. Clearly, this is in accord with our montage model. However, underlying their analyses is also an implicit acceptance of the principles of ‘cultural relativism’, which, if we put it bluntly, imply that all people have their own culturally informed perspectives and that these perspectives are ‘right’ for those people in terms of their own contexts. It would, therefore, be a mistake to pass critical judgements (i.e. that one perspective is ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than the other), since each is equally valuable in its own place (see, e.g., Burr 1995: 4).

Although we find no place where Hugh-Jones and Ssorin-Chaikov make any explicit commitment to the principles of cultural relativism, the overall sense of their arguments points in this direction. Also the fact that they refrain from taking any stance on which perspective is superior – that of the indigenous person or that of the trader – is itself a testimony to their relativist position. But, just here, in their implicit or unrecognised claim to cultural relativism lies the rub: if no one perspective is absolute and therefore cannot be used as the one and only measure of the transactions, then how can we argue that the indigenous person is being exploited when he sells his goods to the trader for ‘peanuts’? Well, we cannot, since this would lead us into the fatal error of collapsing the indigenous perspective into our familiar one. This is exactly the kind of dilemma that both Hugh-Jones and Ssorin-Chaikov face in their analyses, but which they fail to deal with adequately. Surely they both point to the fact that even if the transaction between the indigenous person and the trader might in principle imply that the two

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are equivalent economic agents who balance their desires in the deals, the two are very unequal in the wider political-economic context (Hugh-Jones 1992: 70; Ssorin-Chaikov 2000: 357). However, we cannot help finding this response insufficient as it stands, because it still implies that the indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives have equal value in the concrete context of the actual deal.

While disregarding the question of superiority of perspective might take the heat off (undoubtedly many contemporary anthropologists would argue that we no longer have to make judgements as to whose perspective is superior), for activist writers like ourselves, who claim to fight for the political and economic interests of Siberia's indigenous hunters, the issue cannot be ignored. We must find a way of banishing the inherent relativism from our montage model of inquiry, so as to demonstrate that the trader's perspective is in fact more optimal – or in some sense superior – to that of the indigenous hunter. Only on such grounds can we claim that the hunter is being exploited in the deal, even if he himself sees it differently. Despite running up against a widely held contemporary view that one cannot make any non-ethnocentric judgements as to the superiority of one perspective over another, we are going to pursue this line of argument. However, to make it more clearly, we need to embark on a considerable detour into the theory of perception.

Some perspectives are more valuable than others

Our commonsense understanding of vision tells us that we are located where our eyes are. In a literal sense, our commonsense view is egocentric: the world is centred upon the perceiver. However, we need to give up this subject-centred view of vision. In reality, vision is not subjective, but an effect of our relations with one another. Vision is, so to speak, 'outside' rather than 'within us', or rather it exists 'between us', as our relationships do. Merleau-Ponty, the celebrated scholar of perception, points to exactly this when he writes:

When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can 'see'... (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Kelly 2005: 76)⁵

⁵ Merleau-Ponty's body of work is by no means easy to interpret in any definite manner. Our account of his ideas draws therefore heavily on Kelly's (2005) recent article 'Seeing things in Merleau-Ponty', which provides insights into the philosopher's theory of visual perception.

Let us explain the meaning of this passage. Given that our perception of an object always takes place from one perspectival point of view or another, we can never see the object in its totality but only partly. There will always be a 'hidden side', which remains absent from our direct view. Even so, we tend to experience the object not as a two-dimensional façade but as a fully-fledged three-dimensional reality. Merleau-Ponty argues that this is because our own perspective is entangled in a vast sprawling web of viewpoints, which surrounds the focal thing and provides the supporting context for that side of the object which is presently in view. Without this whole matrix of other viewpoints, weaving the object through to its core, the directly given aspect of the thing would simply lose its sense of depth and volume – that is, it would lose its three-dimensionality. Accordingly, it is, so to speak, because vision is 'everywhere' that we as perspectival beings are able to see things from 'somewhere' – that is, from one particular viewpoint or another.

Merleau-Ponty calls the 'view from everywhere' the 'normative ideal' (Kelly 2005: 91), and it might be imagined as a kind of cubist presentation in which every side of the object is presented simultaneously to us in a single perspective. However, in actual fact this is a perceptual impossibility. Though the view from everywhere can be understood intellectually it is not achievable from any one perspectival position: we never see things in their totality. Even so, we tend to experience the view from everywhere in the form of a motivational invitation to change our position, so as to get a better, fuller, or more optimal view of the perceived object. Not all perspectives have, therefore, equal value compared to one another. While they all deviate from the same normative ideal (that is, from the view from everywhere) some are closer to this ideal than others. Holenstein is particularly clear in his discussion of the 'optimal' viewpoint, and it is worth quoting him at length:

We soon realise that, in the case of viewing a building, we have to go to a specific side in order to bring out more clearly the function of the building, and yet to a third in order to realize in an optimal way how the architecture takes up and continues the main lines of the landscape ... These series [of perspectives] characterize themselves as ascending, culminating in an optimal perspective ... The optimal perspective ... tends to establish itself as absolute, making the rest of the perspectives appear to be orientated towards it. (1999: 82)

We may seem to have wandered a bit far in discussing the perception of lamps and architecture, but all of this relates in some important way to the key issue that interests us, namely whether we can make a valid

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judgement as to the superiority of the trader's perspective over that of the indigenous hunter.

Let us begin by following Merleau-Ponty and take the view from everywhere to be the ideal view. This would mean that the whole bundle of different perspectives on the fur trade is the normative ideal. These include every possible perspective, from that of the local hunter and the trader to those of the various dealers, international brokers and buyers in fur markets around the world. If we could see the fur trade organisation from all of these different perspectives at once, it would give us a better understanding of its character than any single viewpoint could. Yet, no one can see the fur trade organisation in its totality. Indeed, this is why the view from everywhere is a normative ideal and not an actual achievable perspective.

This being said, it is clear from Hugh-Jones' mathematical depiction of the viewpoints of the trader and the indigenous person (see above) that the former anticipates many more of these perspectives than does the latter. While the hunter for his part sees only a two-way swapping of goods, the trader's perspective is framed in terms of a multiplicity of perspectives intrinsic to the fur trade organisation, which reaches way beyond the concrete context of the deal itself. For that reason alone, we may claim the trader's perspective to be superior, simply because it provides a more comprehensive insight into the character of the fur trade (defined as the sum of all the perspectives on it).

But the point in fact bites deeper. These other perspectives that the trader anticipates also give him a further and more far-reaching recipe for searching out the position from which the key object of the deal, the fur, best presents itself. Let us give an example: suppose you or I have a sable pelt in our hands. The perspective from which its silvery guard hairs are clearly seen is more revealing than, for example, the perspective from which the fur's surface is revealed in its entirety. This is so because the number of silvery guard hairs is *the* key feature that determines the fur's value on the market. Every professional dealer and broker within the fur trade organisation therefore searches out this particular perspective on the fur before they look for any other qualities. The perspective that clearly reveals the fur's silvery guard hairs could, therefore, be deemed the 'optimal perspective' – that is, the perspective, which makes 'rest of the perspectives appear to be oriented towards it' (Holenstein 1999: 82).

To search spontaneously for this perspective, one has to know of its significance. The trader knows this, exactly because his perspective is framed within the wider network of perspectives that make up the fur

trade organisation. However, the hunter does not necessarily have any clue as to how to assess his fur's market value. In fact, we were surprised to find out that many Yukaghir hunters mistakenly believed that many silvery guard hairs would lower the price of the sable fur – something that their so-called trader 'friends' had told them.

The point we want to bring across is that although the perspectives of both the hunter and the trader are derived from the same normative ideal, they are not equal in value compared to one another. The trader's viewpoint is superior, and this gives him a clear advantage in dealing with the hunter. This is, of course, not a fully conclusive argument; among other things, one could rightly ask what superiority has been proven? It might be argued that perhaps it is better, all things considered, to see as the indigenous hunter does, with little insight into the workings of the fur trade, rather than fall prey to the trader's profit-hungry perspective. This might be true enough, and we therefore make no attempt to claim the general superiority of the perspective of the trader with all this entails of paying homage to the cultural logic of capitalism. All we are arguing is that within the matrix of viewpoints that together make up the fur trade organisation, the trader's perspective is indeed the superior one.

This is not to suggest that the inferiority of the hunter's perspective is due to stupidity or lack of logical reasoning, as Jochelson argued. Quite the contrary: it is based in the social hierarchies and division of labour that the fur-trading regime generates and which effectively prevent the hunter from framing his perspective within the wider web of perspectives that make up the fur trade. Thus, as we have seen, throughout the colonial history of Siberia, from its early beginnings under tsarism, through the Soviet era to the present-day, the perspectives of the indigenous hunter and the non-indigenous dealer – although operating on two parallel and simultaneous levels – have been kept firmly apart: The hunter delivered the raw fur for sale, the trader took it to the market. The Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project aimed to bring these two perspectives together so as to create an entirely new historical situation in which the Yukaghirs for the first time would become the dealers of their own fur on the international market. But, as in Eisenstein's alchemy of montage, the energy of which he once compared to 'the series of explosions of an internal combustion engine' (Eisenstein in Grimshaw 2001: 11), our collision of perspectives generated shock-effects within the fur trade system, leading to personal harassment and even, apparently, to murder. This is the part of our story to which we now turn.

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The Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project: from beginning to end

In 1995, the young leader of Nelemnoye's *Obshina* (the association of local Yukaghir hunters), Slava Shadrin, went to Denmark to see for himself how the international fur market operates. His trip was organised by Rane and Uffe and paid for by the Danish NGO 'The Committee for Nature and Peoples of the North'. Uffe, who works as a dealer at 'Danish Fur Sales' – the biggest fur auction house in the world – introduced Slava to its directorship and it was agreed that Nelemnoye's entire production of sable fur should be sent to the auction for sale the following year. The average sale price expected at the auction at the time was \$65 per sable, a considerable increase over *Sakhabult's* regular price of only \$11 per sable. Moreover, the best pelts, those with many silvery guard hairs, were expected to go for \$140 a piece.

However, at the time of delivery, the *Obshina* had gone bankrupt and therefore could not buy the fur from its hunters. The whole project was therefore put on hold until 1999, when Rane went to Nelemnoye to do a year's doctoral fieldwork. Uffe and Rane had persuaded the Danish NGO to give the Yukaghir *Obshina* a loan, so that it could pay their hunters 50 per cent of the expected sales value of their fur in advance. The hunters would get the rest of the money after the auction.

Uffe arrived in Nelemnoye in late December, where Rane had been staying since mid-June. Slava had already done the footwork, collecting a pack of official documents necessary for the deal to meet all the legal requirements of Russian legislation. Moreover, he had succeeded in convincing most of the *Obshina's* hunters to deliver their fur to the project. This had not been easy. Many of them were worried about the reaction of their 'trader-friends', whom they feared would not deal with them in the future. However, due to the fact that the price of sable offered by the Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project was several times better than the traders were willing to pay, and that Rane, who himself had been living as a hunter over the winter, put his own catch of 20 sables into the pot, the large majority of hunters decided to go along with the project.

As news about the project spread within the Kolyma region, more hunters from the neighbouring villages turned up to hand over their fur. Every single pelt was marked with a bar code number, so that each hunter could see for himself what price his fur would fetch at auction. It was important to achieve absolute transparency in the transaction so as to avoid rumours of fraud. By mid-January more than 250 sable pelts had been collected. Uffe returned to Copenhagen and Slava went to the regional centre of Zyrianka to send the fur to Denmark.

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Uffe (left) and Rane (middle) collecting sables from a Yukaghir hunter (right) in Nelmenoye for the Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project.

However, here things took an uneasy turn. At the airport Slava was arrested by the local police, all the fur confiscated and the bar codes removed. Slava was never informed on what charges he was jailed; all he was told was that the fur was being handed over to the director of *Sakhabult*, Petrov. The next day, Slava was released and he immediately took a plane to the republic's capital Yakutsk to enquire into the matter of the confiscation. When he arrived at *Sakhabult's* headquarters, Petrov was away at meeting in St. Petersburg. Instead, Slava got to talk to the vice-director of the company, Maximov. Totally unexpectedly, Maximov agreed to return all of the fur if Slava agreed to set up a new company with him, and export Yakutian fur to the Danish auction in the future. Surprised and much relieved over the sudden change of attitude, Slava agreed and left the fur with *Sakhabult* to pick it up in the morning. However, in the meantime, Petrov returned from St. Petersburg, and he immediately cancelled the agreement between Slava and Maximov. In protest, Maximov left *Sakhabult* to set up his own fur company. However, his plans were never realised because, a few days afterwards, he drowned under mysterious circumstances, together with his two sons, while on a fishing trip.

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In the meantime, the police were sent to Nelemnoye to arrest Rane on charges of illegal trading and poaching. At the last minute, Rane escaped into the forest with the help of Yukaghir hunters, and there he stayed in hiding for the next six months before eventually returning safely to Denmark in mid-July.

Slava, who now feared for his own life, went to the republic's Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and asked for help. They provided him with a lawyer, who wrote a letter of complaint to the Russian government in Moscow. A few months slipped by, during which time Slava had to go into hiding in Yakutsk. Then, quite suddenly he was called to a meeting at the office of Nikolaiev, the president of Yakutia, together with Petrov. Here it was made known that Putin, who had just gained power in Russia, had written to Nikolaiev demanding that he settle the conflict between the Yukaghirs and *Sakhabult*. Nikolaiev, who during his own election campaign had emphasised the need to protect the rights of Yakutia's indigenous peoples, was determined to find a solution to the problem. It was agreed that *Sakhabult* should compensate the Yukaghirs for the loss of their fur and that the company's future payment for sable fur should be increased to an average price of \$55 a piece. However, *Sakhabult* was to be able to keep its monopoly over the export of fur from Yakutia. It should be noted that the Yukaghir hunters had to wait 10 months for their compensation, but they did eventually get it. However, the Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project was dead, and with it the hope of overturning the colonial relations of power that the fur-trading regime had generated right through its long history. In the end, the Yukaghirs never got to sell their fur directly on the international market.

Afterthoughts

The story of the Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project is a story of many things: It is about a daring but perhaps overtly naïve attempt to subvert more than 400 years of merciless exploitation. Like the early Soviet montage-theorists, our project sought to reconstruct perceptually the perspective of the indigenous hunters – to 'shake their eyes' – so as to show them an alternative vision for a better and more prosperous future, in which they would control the sale of their fur. However, like Eisenstein and the other early Soviet filmmakers, whose artistic vision was quickly crushed under the heavy hand of Stalin, we soon realized that our 'social experiment' was up against a much too powerful system to ever be realized. Even if it could be argued that our project was not entirely unsuccessful in that it forced the price of Yukaghir fur to rise, it was a poor result given the vision, energy and risk we had put into the project.

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However, our story of the Siberian fur trade has also been an investigation into the nature of vision. While we recognize the 'multiplicity of perspectives' that defines the fur trade, we also acknowledge the impossibility of anticipating all of these viewpoints simultaneously. The Soviet montage-theorists aimed at such 'super vision' by putting together strips of film taken from every conceivable angle and distance, as well as employing numerous montage techniques to combine elements that have no inherent space-time connection. Indeed, the tragedy of their attempt to obtain a view that can see everything is that, under Stalin's regime, this panoptical view worked all too well and many of the people we see in the films were killed off in the great purges shortly afterwards. This being said, the truth of the matter is that the 'view from everywhere' presupposes a 'perspectival viewpoint' and one cannot have one without the other. The machines and technologies that capture, extend and even replace 'natural' human vision in extraordinary ways, such as the movie camera and the techniques of montage, cannot change the fact that without the perspectival viewpoint (the part) there will be no optically perceived reality (the whole). In a similar way, those who put confidence in the idea that human vision begins and ends in the experience of the subject must accept the fact that without the vast, tangled network of viewpoints that surrounds us and weaves itself through us (the view from everywhere), there would be no subjective viewpoint *as such*. If our analyses of the Siberian fur trade as montage has provided us with any particularly illuminating insight, it must be this understanding of the intertwining of the parts and the whole of vision, which has provided us with a new way of comparing and assessing the relative value of perspectives.

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