1.
The radical restriction of themes and modes imposed on artistic disciplines during the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the specific ways in which the artists working during the decade between 1967 and 1977 faced such restrictions are inexplicably absent from the universal narrative of art history. It is, however, a paradigmatic case of normativisation in favour of realism that can be extremely revealing of the problematics of assigning art a political role in relation to the working class and, particularly in this case, the peasantry. The fact that the most widely extended artistic practice of that time was the woodcut print seems consistent with the will to disseminate the pictures cheaply and to set them apart from the bourgeois taste for painting and its sacralised objects. Because of this, in several Western contexts woodblock printing was recuperated as a means of political

expression. In the case of China, however, the use of woodcut continued a very long tradition, reinforced by the centrality that this technique had had in Chinese artists' approach to the avant-garde in the thirties. The expressionist, dramatic realism with which this genuine vanguard had denounced feudal exploitation or Japanese imperialism had already caused a critical reaction in the forties, which criticized it as the result of foreign influence because of its aggressive use of black and white, against the popular liking for colourful landscapes. The impositions of the Cultural Revolution on graphic languages, then, drastic as they were, could not have felt like a radical novelty in the sixties and seventies.

The main purpose of the depictions of landscapes in these woodcuts is, still, to represent the contrast between the sublime of nature on the one hand, and human transformation of the environment on the other. The composition continues to use, as it had for centuries, the monumentality of mountains and gorges, the exuberant sinuosity of the trees and forests, the fog… all these opposed to the orderly but still vast fields and pastures used for agriculture.

What the Cultural Revolution adds to this symbolic opposition is the emergence of industrial production in the landscape as a metaphor not only of progress but also of the political relevance of the reconciliation of rural and urban lives in revolutionary China. Images where a filigree of stylized vegetation in the foreground would in the past have opened up to a vast landscape now incorporate a small electrical train, crossing the picture frame in the distance. A sublime representation of rocky peaks poking through the mist now appears traversed by high voltage cables suspended from steel towers that shrink as they continue deep into the landscape.

A picture I found in Beijing some time ago shows a scene within a forest solved with the precise gestuality of woodcarving. Behind a tree that organizes the composition of the whole scene in the foreground, a small camp is visible. It is a peaceful scene, one in which men quietly occupy the landscape, almost disappearing within it. But the green and black are punctuated by two instances of red, in the flag that crowns the camp and the neckerchiefs that the men are wearing. It is not just a camp, then, it is a revolutionary guard's camp. If one were to separate the three ink layers that make up the print, the tiny red spots that show the flag and the neckerchiefs would appear, by comparison, a very modest imperative with which to comply with the ideological mandate of the times. But the symbolic gesture is not so much the inclusion of unambiguous political signs, emblems – it is the way in which the technical gesture of carving, the specific stroke to which the wood grain forces the blade, encodes the landscape.

2.

Mister Bulatovic, who was president of Montenegro during the Yugoslav Wars, when speaking of the memory of that time, does so with the tragicomic distance of one who knows that he doesn't really match up to History. The suit he is wearing is also a bit too large for him, and that gives rise to the same ridiculous sadness as is produced by his unbelieving narration. Although he doesn't talk about himself as a key figure in that history – or perhaps for that very reason – his account provides us with a significant image, when he tells a humorous anecdote that isn't funny at all.

In his narration of the Dayton peace negotiations, when over the course of hours Yugoslavia was divided up metre by metre, he relates that in order to put an end to the tensions caused when drawing and redrawing a frontier line, the Bosnian-Serb leaders agreed to negotiate the demarcation of a corridor that would join Sarajevo with Gorazde. Facing the apparent inadequacy of the abstraction of the maps, the United States Army provided satellite images that showed the Balkan lands in detail, in an animated simulation that reproduced the terrain with satellite photographs as if in a videogame, navigable from the air. A rudimentary Google Earth when that kind of technology was only available to the military. When they accepted the deal, Richard Holbrooke, the US mediator, looking at the screen, clutched his head in his hands in desperate anger, because the terrain over which they had been negotiating so arduously was no more than deserted rocky hills. In response to his perplexity, the enemies, proudly smiling in unison, replied: 'That's Bosnia!'

It would not be enough to think that this anecdote informs us of the irrationality of romantic nationalist

essentialism. Nor is it only a mystical link with the landscape that is at stake here. What is revealed in the acceptance of that cruel irrationality present in the enemies' shared smile, is the perverse excess of identity – an excess that materializes for the gaze of the other. Identity is constructed by the desire of the other; it is represented for the other.

Those of us born in villages sitting within valleys always seem to have a symbolic relation with a mountain nearby. Perhaps it is not because we can see the mountain from the village, but because we think that the mountain, from up above, is always casting an ideal gaze over our village.

3.
One revealing consequence of the acceptance of the then new technique of photomontage in the art of propaganda, in the early 20th century, was related to the surplus generated by the photographic sign in its condition as a mechanical replica of reality. If the design of posters and murals – amongst other artefacts of agitprop – acted through reduction and condensation into unmistakable symbols, the inclusion of photographic typologies to replace or strengthen those symbols could not but entail a surplus in all that the represented reality involuntarily added to the image, idealised for the value it should hold. Thus, the close-up portraits of peasants laughing ostentatiously, the framing of groups of workers involved in labour, or the scenes of anonymous masses crowded together in demonstrations and processions, which should have only condensed the symbolic meaning assigned to them, incorporated something more, not consciously desired – a bonus of reality. The photograph reveals, along with what we want it to show, all that we did not even see it showed. From among the aforementioned typologies, it is the photography of multitudes, of massive concentrations, which offers us a symptom most plenty of implications.

Always taken from an elevated point, therefore structurally related to bird's eye views, images of masses occupying the streets became a fundamental presence in the modern imaginary after the advent of photography. The emergence of the earliest of such snapshots and their early reproduction and circulation through the press coincide, significantly, with the emergence of the mass as a new political subject. The fundamental ideological narratives that shaped the 20th century were especially conscious of the modes of representation used to address this phenomenon.

Before the advent of photography, the representation of multitudes in the illustrated press had been made through almost abstract filigrees consistent with the technique of engraving used at the time, which compressed the little heads that spread through the paper plane, covering the landscape to an almost textile grid of acquired traces. The individuals were unrecognizable. The form thus represented was that of the totality, not of the parts in their sum. There was a revealing agreement between these images and the characterization, half distrusting and half hostile, that sociology at the time made of the mass as a blind magma, uncontrollable and terrifying, subject to the laws of fluid mechanics rather than to will. Photography, on the contrary, allowed for the capture, in an instant, of all the complexity of a myriad features in a split second and, by doing so, it generated a paradoxical effect of which there could not yet be a conscious awareness: as well as the form of the totality of the mass, one could, simultaneously, see that of each of the individuals that composed it. An image was thus generated that seemed to solve the contradiction always present in the articulation of the political: the impossible conciliation between the individual and the collective, strangely resonant with the figure and background relation in painterly representation. It is not surprising, then, that in the political propaganda of the ideologies of the beginning of the 20th century photographs of multitudes were used as a fundamental sign.

It cost the artists more to fully realise the implications involved in this fact than the politicians who commissioned the representations. Or, perhaps, it was precisely the artists who assumed with pleasure the implications of this complex manner of generating fictions with realities that rose up in the form of an uncontrollable symptom. Gustav Klucis, one of the constructivist artists most involved in Soviet agitprop and a paradigmatic victim of the imposition of dogmatic realism, seemed at one time to want to resolve this problem in an intimate manner. Facing the Party's demand that the images of masses should be restricted to interchangeable ornamental backgrounds where they were no longer portraits but a multitude of anonymous points framing the effigy of Stalin, Klucis cut out and carefully glued portraits of his mother-in-law, for example,

onto the impersonal little heads.

4.

A friend has drawn my attention to certain limitations to which the idea I have been proposing here about the form of the multitude should be subjected. To be precise, whether it is true, or relevant, that the graphic representations, (at the same time, to be sure, as the cinematographic representations) through their then new technical possibilities, but above all through the new forms tried out in those media, conditioned the way in which the mass acquired an image of itself, illustrating or refuting the descriptions that sociology presented of it. The principal limitation, in honour of a necessary rigour, has to do with the dating of that proposed moment. The circulation of the earliest photographs in the printed press, due to the use of photogravure for their reproduction, was through illustrated magazines that were acquired on subscription by the better-off classes. Only from 1897 onwards, and in a gradual way, did the possibility of reproducing photographs directly on the rotary press lead to their mass circulation, from which they could be expected to contribute to self-consciousness in those who saw themselves represented. But more interestingly, and due to the same technical limitation, the rudimentary texture of those early techniques did not allow for a detailed reproduction of multitudinous gatherings, because the dots of which the photograph was made up merged with the small heads that formed the image, deforming them to the point of the image becoming an unrecognisable mass.

The error generated by the mechanical process can, however, constitute the most accurate metaphor for that representation. In a photograph by Karel Hájek, from 1934, that shows a demonstration in the university of Prague from above, the long exposure due to the low light results in the multitude coming out blurred, deformed around a confrontation at the centre of the compact mass, sketching flows of complex movement that evoke an accurate way of understanding the mass as a dynamic entity.

5.

When in 1843 the painter David Octavius Hill attended the assembly at which part of the Church of Scotland broke away to become, from then onwards, the Free Church of Scotland, he decided that this performative act, by which separation itself instituted the group, should be represented in a large painting. He also understood that its realisation posed a problem. There were four hundred and fifty members in that assembly. Representation of the event constituting the new group required a record of the fact that it was the sum of all and each of the subjectivities who decided there, by that gesture, to separate from the official body of their creed, thus risking condemnation to ostracism by their community. He would probably not have found an adequate way of recording this without the intervention of the young scientist Robert Adamson, who had just opened the first photographic laboratory in Edinburgh and was experimenting with the incipient technique of the calotype. Hill and Adamson photographed each of the participants in the assembly, and also some individuals who, although they had not attended it, deserved to be included in the record that would be created in the foundational painting. Basing his work on the photographic portraits, it took Hill twenty-three years to complete the painting.