UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL

REVOLUTION BY DESIGN: PHOTOGRAPHY & GRAPHIC APPLICATIONS MOBILIZED BY CONSTRUCTIVIST ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO IN THE 1920S SOVIET JOURNAL *"NOVY LEF"*

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PAR
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RESUME

This Master's thesis investigates the mobilization of new technologies in print media during the 1920s Soviet Union. Specifically, it centers on the designs of Constructivist artist Aleksandr Rodchenko and his graphic contribution to the leftist art magazine *Novy Lef* (1927-28). It aims to argue that Rodchenko relentlessly championed the Constructivist principles of Production Art and mobilized new technologies as visual instruments in his fight to be and *remain* over the years an active art producer and citizen of the newly established Communist State, especially in the 1920s. In the context of print media, these Productivist principles had the objective of advancing the potential power of visual communication in the service of developing Communism. This initiative is testament to Rodchenko's commitment to the discipline of graphic design, as he became one of the first to react artistically to the impact of industrialization by introducing print media and technologies of mass reproduction into his work. Thus, he became arguably one of the most self-aware artist-propagandists of the Twentieth Century.

The objectives of this investigation are twofold. First, it aims to analyze the evolution of Rodchneko's graphic design work during the 1920s, which led to his artistic contribution in the emerging field of Soviet print media. Second, it aspires to analyze Rodchenko's use of new media technologies in concrete graphic works destined to persuade the audience (in this case Soviet proletarian masses) to adopt and integrate socialist ideals.

Key words: Rodchenko – Constructivism – Graphic Design – Photography - USSR

RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire enquête sur la mobilisation des nouvelles technologies dans la presse écrite au cours des années 1920 en l'Union soviétique. Plus précisément, il se concentre sur les oeuvres de l'artiste constructiviste Aleksandr Rodchenko et sa contribution graphique au magazine d'art gauchiste *Novy Lef* (1927-28). Il vise à soutenir que Rodchenko a défendu sans relâche les principes constructivistes de l'art de la production tout en mobilisant les nouvelles technologies comme instruments visuels dans sa lutte pour être et demeurer au fil des années un producteur artistique actif et citoyen de l'État communiste nouvellement créé, en particulier dans les années vingt. Dans le contexte de la presse écrite, ces principes productivistes avaient pour objectif de faire progresser la puissance potentielle de la communication visuelle au service du développement du communisme. Cette initiative témoigne de l'engagement de Rodchenko à la discipline du design graphique, étant l'un des premiers à réagir artistiquement à l'impact de l'industrialisation par l'introduction de la presse écrite et des technologies de la reproduction de masse dans son travail. Ainsi, il est devenu sans conteste l'un des grands artistes- propagandistes du XXe siècle, conscient de son propre apport à la discipline.

Les objectifs de cette étude sont de deux ordres. Tout d'abord, elle vise à analyser l'évolution du travail de Rodchneko dans la conception graphique des années vingt, qui ont conduit à sa contribution artistique dans le domaine émergeant de la presse écrite soviétique. Deuxièmement, elle cherche à analyser l'utilisation par Rodchenko des nouvelles technologies des médias dans des oeuvres graphiques concrètes destinées à persuader le public (dans ce cas les masses soviétiques prolétariennes) à adopter et intégrer les idéaux socialistes.

Descripteurs: Rodchenko – Constructivisme – Design Graphique – Photographie – l'URSS

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The system of transliteration used here is the Library of Congress system. However there are some exceptions. Well-known names and places are given in their more familiar English forms, for example, Lunacharskii as Lunacharsky.

INTRODUCTION

> In the past three years … [he] has given graphic art a completely new orientation.[1]
> Vladimir Mayakovsky

In September 1921 at the All-Russian Federation of Writers' Club on Tverskaya Street, Moscow, 25 paintings were hung in a small exhibition entitled *5 x 5 = 25*. Five avant-garde artists participated in this historic exhibition. They were listed alphabetically in the accompanying catalogue: Varvara Stepanova, Aleksandr Vesnin, Lyubov Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Aleksandra Exter.[2] Despite the fact that the exhibition was seen at the time as a fairly marginal venture, it became recognized for what it signified: a farewell to painting.[3] In his essay *The Exhibition 5 x 5 = 25: Its Background and Significance*, John Milner describes it as an "extraordinary event in extraordinary times."[4] Taking place during the critical years following the Russian Revolution, the exhibition recognized that the role of art had reached a turning point. The participating artists, who all supported the new Communist regime, declared during the exhibition that they aspired not only to analyze the role of art and its processes, but more importantly, to adapt artistic practices to the existing socio-political context. In this sense, the exhibition demonstrated a "historical awareness and an ideological purpose."[5]

One of the central figures of the exhibition was Rodchenko. He contributed five artworks to the exhibition, as each of the five participating artists did; it is the inclusion of his triptych

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[1] Text from *Novoe o Mayakovskom Literaturenoe Nasledstov*, vol. 65, Moscow, 1958; trans. Szymon Bojko, *New Graphic Design in Revolutionary Russia* (London, Lund Humphries, 1972), p. 18.

[2] It is important to note that this alphabetical order reflects Russian alphabetization.

[3] John Milner, *The Exhibition 5 x 5 = 25: Its Background and Significance* (UK: Artists' Bookworks, 1992), p. 5.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*

entitled *The Last Painting* that demands attention here. It consisted of three primary color monochromes, labeled "Pure Red, Pure Yellow, Pure Blue." They were accompanied by a label onto which the following statement by Rodchenko had been printed: "I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvasses: red, blue, yellow. I affirmed: it's all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no more representation."[6] The canvases demonstrated no style, no composition and no element of expression, nothing personal. Although there was neither representation nor any traditional communicational means in the work's execution, it was nonetheless significant in what it communicated.[7] For Rodchenko, painting was no longer a viable artistic activity.[8] He considered that as a responsible citizen of the new Soviet society, he, along with artists within his circle, needed to strive to produce modern and politically aware art.[9] Art was no longer to be a personal reflection; artists needed to be banished from the confines of the studio and launched into society as social agents of the State, producing art for its social value.[10] Essentially, the exhibition, which announced the abandonment of easel painting by its participating members, heralded the starting point of Constructivism and Production Art in Russia.[11]

Although the *5 x 5 = 25* exhibition signaled a desire for a shift in art practices, what Rodchenko and his colleagues needed to address now was: "How to be an artist in the new Soviet Union? How could artists create modern artworks, which represented the newly politicized mandate?"[12] Associating himself with the group Left Front of the Arts (*LEF),* which was comprised of avant-garde artists and intellectuals from the politically driven left, Rodchenko addressed these issues together with its members. For *LEF*, in order to ensure a complete break from bourgeois culture and art practices of the past, it was necessary to produce art that would "transform consciousness."[13] Two key theoretical principles would

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[6] Leah Dickerman, "The Propagandizing of Things," in *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: Abrams Inc., 1998), p. 63.

[7] Milner, p. 35.

[8] Dickerman, p. 63.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Dickerman, p. 63.

[11] Milner, p. 5.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Dickerman, p. 64.

emerge as a result of the group's artistic debates: "that form and technique were themselves to be understood as ideological, so that a transformative art had to be grounded in new systems of representation; and, that a subject's self-definition took place within praxis, so that such an art would require labor in both its making and its interpretation."[14]

Launching the journals *Lef* (1923-25) and *Novy Lef* (New *Lef* 1927-28), a small group of these *LEF* members, including Rodchenko contributed both critically and visually to the evolving socio-political and aesthetic debate. A prominent artistic contributor to the journals and artistic director, a task he retained throughout their publication and until the last number of *Novy Lef* appeared in 1928, Rodchenko swiftly ascertained the visual advantage of harnessing new technologies for this purpose. Thus, Rodchenko mobilized photography and graphic elements in his enthusiasm to create fresh modes of visual communication, aiming at the reshaping of beliefs and the production of a modern political subject.

This master's degree thesis project will examine the strategic exploitation of photography and graphic elements in print media in the 1920s Soviet Union. More specifically, it will center on the graphic designs produced by Constructivist artist Rodchenko, as well as his contribution to the leftist art journal *Novy Lef.* Although it is impossible to know unerringly what Rodchenko's true objectives were, this analysis will demonstrate that Rodchenko seemed more concerned with contributing to and promoting the social experience of Communism than creating new aesthetic vocabularies—for their own sake. Therefore, this project aims to argue that Rodchenko relentlessly defended the Constructivist principles of Production Art and mobilized new technologies as visual instruments in his campaign to inform and enlighten the post-revolutionary subject. In other words, Rodchenko through the "experience of vision" aspired to communicate and inculcate the citizens of the new Soviet State not only to accept, but also to adopt the new Communist way of life.

As a central figure within the group of artists and intellectuals that formed around the *Novy Lef* journal, the critic Osip Brik wrote this about Rodchenko:

> Rodchenko sees that the problem of the artist is not the abstract apprehension of color and form, but the practical ability to resolve any task of shaping a concrete object. Rodchenko knows that there aren't immutable laws of construction, but that every task must be resolved anew, starting form the conditions defined by the specific case. [...]

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[14] *Ibid.*

> Rodchenko is patient. He will wait: meanwhile he is doing what he can---he is revolutionizing taste, clearing the way for the future, non-aesthetic, material expedient culture.[15]

Seen as a model that fulfilled the mandate promoted by the journal, Rodchenko's graphic work and, above all, his photographic explorations were distinguished by the editorial group for their ability to transmute blindness into sight.[16] Rodchenko's innovative practice was identified as a significant contribution, having the power to revolutionize political consciousness.[17]

To establish effectively my hypothesis that Rodchenko's thrust into new technologies never altered his determination to "construct" or "produce" art for its social value, it will be necessary to investigate Rodchenko's motivations and artistic evolution, which led to his eventual involvement in the creation and production of the *Novy Lef* journal. In order to do this, the investigation will be divided into chapters, where each chapter will examine an aspect of Rodchenko's motivation and artistic production. Drawing mainly on existing scholarly books, theses, journals and scientific articles, this analysis will aim to demonstrate that Rodchenko's graphic design work in Soviet print media of the late 1920s evolved from innovative applications of graphic applications towards the creation of graphic designs as "communication."

Before embarking into the core of the investigation, it is necessary to recognize some of the primary sources and the work of scholars who have contributed greatly to the field. The review of both the journals *Lef* and *Novy Lef* provided the most comprehensive overview of Rodchenko's evolving graphic contribution, which initially consisted mainly of color and typographic applications, progressing towards photomontage and finally photography. The journals *Lef* and *Novy Lef* were accessed at the Canadian Center for Architecture, and along with the journals, Rodchenko's personal essays, diaries and letters originally published in 1996 in Moscow by his family,

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[15] Leah-Anne Dickerman, *Aleksandr's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1997), p. 3.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[17] *Ibid.*

and in English by the Museum of Modern Art in 2005,[18] provided a unique personal look into Rodchenko's artistic motivations and the ideological principles that structure his work. However, the great majority of the research for this project was drawn mainly from scholarly books and theses, mostly works originating from Western scholars. Therefore, this project prevails in its venture to join the ongoing dialog of the existing literature in the field of Soviet art and design in the Anglo-Saxon world. In an effort to establish coherently a historical timeline of the period being investigated, the key contributing sources will be introduced chronologically. This organization of the material is necessary in order to demonstrate not only how Rodchenko's artistic practices developed within a socio-political context, but also how scholars' analysis of Rodchenko's artistic work altered after the introduction of Gorbachev's reforms in 1986 and the gradual opening up of a variety of new organizations, which provided them an opportunity for research in the Soviet Union.

Alfred H. Barr, Jr., first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is recognized for introducing the work of Rodchenko to North American audiences in the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art.*[19] In the latter part of 1927, Barr traveled to the Soviet Union to survey current avant-garde production by artists working in a new revolutionary society. Meeting with Rodchenko and his wife, Varvara Stepanova, in Moscow, Barr made the following entry in his diary the day he met with the couple:

> We (Barr and Jere Abbott) went to see Rodchenko and his talented wife. Neither spoke anything but Russian but both are brilliant versatile artists. R. showed us an appalling variety of things—suprematist paintings, woodcuts, linoleum cuts, posters, book designs, photographs, Kino set, etc., etc. He has done no painting since 1922, devoting himself to the photographic arts of which he is a master.[20]

Barr acknowledged in his writings of the late 1920s his appreciation for the avant-garde's (European, including Russia) political consciousness, which was being explored via a variety of artistic channels. However, the manner in which he envisioned the new Museum's blueprint would not reflect this. Barr would choose to include Constructivism in a

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[18] Aleksandr N. Lavrentiev, ed. *Aleksandr Rodchenko, Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005).

[19] See catalog listing in Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936, 1986, pp. 204-233.

[20] Varvara Rodchenko, Curator's Introduction in the catalog *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), p. 139.

depoliticized context, labeling it as an offspring of Cubism and the precursor to all future geometric abstraction.[21] Stepanova shrewdly noticed Barr's lack of understanding during his visit. In her own diary, she described Barr and Abbott:

> Those Americans came to call: one of them dull, dry, and bespectacled—Professor Alfred Barr, the other cheerful and young—Jere Abbott. [...] Barr is interested only in art—painting, drawing. He turned our whole apartment upside down. They made us show them all kinds of old junk. Toward the end Barr got all hot and bothered. Abbott is the one more interested in new art.[22]

It is important to note, however, that Barr, upon his return from Moscow, published an essay demonstrating his awareness that a new shift in artistic representation was indeed emerging in the new Soviet State. He wrote, "The Lef is more than a symptom, more than an expression of a fresh culture or of post-revolutionary man; it is a courageous attempt to give art an important social function in a world where from one point of view it has been prostituted for five centuries."[23]

Following Barr's work by quite a few years is the groundbreaking work of Russian modernist art scholar Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922* (1962). Like Barr, Gray traveled to Russia (during the Cold War when there was little information around) to speak to the still-living artists and proceeded to give a depoliticized art historical overview of the evolution of Russian art (mainly painting) at the turn of the century. Although Gray did not delve into the ideological socio-political discourse identified in later studies, her account remained one of the most comprehensive English resources aimed at charting the development of the Russian avant-garde.

In the late '70s and early '80s, a shift in writing about Rodchenko and his work occurs. Exhibitions such as *Paris-Moscou* (Pompidou, 1979) and *The Avant-Garde in Russia 1910-1930* (Los Angeles Country Museum of Art, 1980) were notable, since they were the first to acknowledge in their catalogs the socio-political catalyst present in Soviet avant-garde artistic production. This was an important admission. Indeed, it opened up a new area of debate aimed at analyzing and investigating the theoretical and ideological motivations found at the

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[21]Dickerman, p. 12.

[22] Varvara Stepanova in the catalog *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), p. 140.

[23] Dickerman, p. 13.

core of the revolutionary Russian avant-garde. Publications that follow these take into account the socio-political context in which art practices were developed. As such, scholars refocused their analysis of leftist avant-garde artists in an effort to understand more comprehensively the intent and motivation behind the aesthetic approaches harnessed.

In an unprecedented approach, Benjamin Buchloch's 1984 essay *From Faktura to Factography* charts out the evolution of a specific facet of Constructivism as it altered its theories and practices in the mid-1920s. Buchloch examines this paradigm shift, proposing that the turn to factography was not a break with Constructivist principles but a reassessment of its artistic practices and socio-political position in response to the needs of the ever-evolving social world. Among the artists discussed by Buchloch, Rodchenko, who remained determined to participate in the creation of a new Soviet consciousness, explored aggressively new modes of representation. Professing to renew Constructivism's Productivist platform he explored the photograph's ability to render "aspects of reality visible without interference and mediation."[24] Buchloch convincingly argues his position introducing key examples and establishing photography's power to achieve "a new need to construct iconic representations for a new mass audience."[25]

Selim O. Khan-Magomedov's 1986 monograph on Rodchenko published in English in 1986 presented a very well-documented chronological account of Rodchenko's life and career, with particular focus given to Rodchenko's artistic evolution from painter to Constructivist, Productivist, graphic designer and eventual leader in photographic exploration. It is Christina Lodder's critical book *Russian Constructivism* (1993), however, that provided the most detailed and thorough chronology regarding the emergence of Russian Constructivism as a movement. Lodder systematically establishes the foundation of the movement, introducing the first significant historical overview of the artistic State institutions such as *INKhUK* (The Institute of Artistic Culture) and *VKhUTEMAS* (The Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops), which employed avant-garde artists like Rodchenko as educators, thus becoming collaborators of the State.

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[24] Benjamin H. D. Buchloch, "From Faktura to Factography," in *October*, vol. 30 (Fall 1984), p. 103.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

Lodder demonstrates, unlike other scholars thus far, that Constructivists found it imperative to synthesize the ideological part of their artistic work with the formal part. This was necessary in order to have a real transference of laboratory work and experimentation towards real practical activity in the service of the State. Though Lodder's contribution is crucial, her view that most Constructivist production emerging after 1922 compromised artistic integrity, specifically graphic design is oversimplified. Calling it "limited design task, becoming the consequence of the artist 'lowering his sights'," [26] Lodder chooses not to include in her study the institutions that followed *INKhUK* in her study, such as the *Lef* journals, which are at the core of this project.

In 1996, Margarita Tupitsyn's book *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937,* offered the first historical account of Soviet avant-garde photography and photomontage, analyzing the photograph's function as an image between the years of 1924 and 1937.[27] Tupitsyn's study is an essential resource; it argues that Rodchenko's approach to photography was influenced by the changing social and political Soviet climate. Furthermore, Tupitsyn disputes the widespread view that the Soviet avant-garde peaked in the 1920s as it was being forced to conform to State censorship. Contrarily, she proposes that photography in this period presented "a great experiment" aiming to link art, politics and the masses. Tupitsyn's study constitutes one of the first substantial monographs on Soviet photography published after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Her narrative style also should be noted here, as the vein of Cold War rhetoric seems to be absent. As a result, this allows for a subjective analysis, unlike the work of Lodder, whose voice is clearly still influenced by Cold War conjuncture in spite of the rigor of her analysis. This is made evident in her conclusions that the development of "factographic" communicative practices by Rodchenko and other *Lef*ist artists "led them back to the real image and thus to traditional concepts of art and its representational role," [28] which ultimately became the vehicle of Constructivism's decline.[29]

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[26] Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 181.

[27] It is important to note that the Cold War is now over and scholars have access to Soviet archives.

[28] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 204.

[29] *Ibid.*

The book that accompanies the first major American exhibition of Rodchenko's artistic contribution (MoMA, 1998) provides an updated and thorough chronology of the artist's career. Although Rodchenko's artistic work is positioned mainly as an aesthetic journey, the essays by Leah Anne Dickerman and Peter Galassi are pertinent, contributing further details behind Rodchenko's foray into photography and the motivations that inspired him. Most important, however, are the illustrative plates, which supply extensive samples of Rodchenko's graphic work in commercial design, publishing and advertising.

More recently, in 2005, Christina Kiaer's book *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* investigates the Constructivist object as being more than a commodity. Artists such as Rodchenko had abandoned in the early 1920s the nonobjective painting and sculpture of the early Russian avant-garde, embracing the Constructivist mandate to produce art for its social value. Calling themselves "artist-engineers," the group's objective was to produce functional everyday objects for everyday life as part of the new socialist collective. Kiaer argues that these artists broke with other avant-garde models in order to participate wholly in the political agenda of the newly established Soviet State. Paramount to this project is Kiaer's ability to demonstrate effectively Rodchenko's role in helping to build a new mass consciousness. Through his exploration of modern technologies and graphic elements, Rodchenko's contributions in commercial designs and advertising, which were commissioned by the State, are a testament to this. Many of these same visual strategies can be recognized in Rodchenko's later graphic designs in the *Novy Lef* journals.

Over the past 25 years, a number of groundbreaking theses, most notably the PhD dissertations submitted by Victor Margolin in 1982 and Leah Anne Dickerman in 1997, have advanced knowledge of Rodchenko's contribution to the field of graphic design. Dickerman's thesis *Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness* examines Rodchenko's exploration into photography in relation to theories of vision, subjectivity and artistic practice developed by *LEF* in the design of the journals *Lef* and *Novy Lef.* Chapter Three, which examines Rodchenko's unique photographic oblique angles as a new mode of vision, and Chapter Four, which evaluates "factography" as a model of realism, are particularly relevant to this project. Dickerman

argues, as will this analysis, that Rodchenko's photographic exploration was not exclusively an aesthetic exercise.

Margolin's thesis, *The Transformation of Vision: Art and Ideology in the Graphic Design of Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and László Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1933*, which preceded Dickerman's, evaluates the evolution of graphic design in post-revolutionary Russia. Margolin argues that there is a tendency by art writers and curators to depoliticize or downplay the socio-political condition in which some art has been created. Too often art is separated from its context. Margolin demonstrates through the investigation of three avant-garde artists that Soviet political conditions of the 1920s encouraged a unification of art and life for the purpose of social change. Rodchenko was chosen as one of these artists. Indeed, Margolin found his work expressed a strong social vision while harnessing innovative new technologies in its visual representation.[30] I am especially indebted to these two theses since they provide a significant basis for this project. Expanding on the investigation introduced by both writers, this analysis will examine more specifically Rodchenko's graphic design strategies as communication, providing further proof that Rodchenko championed the Constructivist principles of Production Art in his effort to remain an active art producer within the Communist State for the purpose of participating actively in the cultural revolution taking place.

In order to better understand Rodchenko's work in the broader context of design history and communication theory, writings on graphic design, graphic theory and visual culture were explored. Philip B. Meggs' *History of Graphic Design* (2011-5th edition) provided a comprehensive reference tool on the evolution of graphic design. Although there are not many resources on graphic design theory, Malcolm Barnard's book *Graphic Design as Communication* (2005) also provided a great foundation regarding the theoretical approaches of graphic design. Drawing on a range of visual and communication approaches of scholars, such as Derrida, Saussure, Foucault and Barthes, Barnard looks at how graphic design contributes to the shaping of social and cultural identities. Similar to Barnard's book, *Design Studies: Theory and Research in Graphic Design* edited by Audrey Bennett (2006) not only

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[30] Victor Margolin, *The Transformation of Vision: Art and Ideology in the Graphic Design of Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzsky, and László Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1933* (PhD diss., University of Chicago in 1982).

argues that graphic design contributes to the shaping of social and cultural identities, it also argues that in order to produce effective designs that have the ability to alter behavior, it is critical that designers understand their audience. The chapters on *Mediating Messages*, *Shaping Beliefs* and *Encoding Advertisements* were particularly of interest for this project. *Visual Culture: An Introduction* by John A. Walker and Sarah Chaplin was helpful in defining culture and civilization. Chapters on the *Concept of "the Visual,"* and *Visual Culture and Commerce* were specifically pertinent.

It is important to note that there are many more sources, which have not been translated into English that are not included in this analysis, such as the work of French scholar Jean-Claude Marcadé. The main reason for this is that very little has been written, other than in English and Russian, regarding Rodchenko's graphic designs beyond their formal contribution to graphic design as a whole. In fact, very little has been written in English. Although scholars such as Dickerman and Margolin argue that Rodchenko's graphic designs had a socio-political intent, both focus their analysis on the graphic applications *per se*, whereas this project focuses on the communication aspect of graphic design as a means to acculturate a targeted audience.

Overview of the Chapters

Chapter One provides an overview of the group *LEF*, establishing the theoretical basis that buttressed the artistic practices of its members. The launch of the journals *Lef* and *Novy Lef* by some members of the group then will be discussed in detail in order to provide a point of departure regarding Rodchenko's graphic contribution to the journals. *Chapter Two* starts with a brief review of the institutional involvement of Rodchenko within *INKhUK,* which provided the theoretical basis that influenced Rodchenko's graphic evolution. The chapter will then draw on some examples of Rodchenko's graphic designs produced outside of the pages of the journal; it will analyze the potential significance of their content beyond its formal attributes. The chapter will conclude with an examination of Rodchenko's mobilization of new technologies and his exploration of oblique angles in photography. Chapter Three, the final chapter, discusses the notion of acculturation by means of visual communications. It will demonstrate that Rodchenko's active participation in creating

advertising designs for State-owned companies played a key role in his graphic evolution towards producing designs that not only attract the audience's attention, but also, more importantly, communicate a message that alters their thinking. Finally, an analysis of the journal *Novy Lef* No. 5 will be conducted in detail. It will contribute to validating this thesis project's argument that Rodchenko harnessed graphic design and photography first and foremost as a means to "communicate" an intended message.

CHAPTER I

NEW *LEF*

1.1 The Launch of *Lef*

> Art organizes the living images of social experience not only in the sphere of cognition, but also in the sphere of emotions and aspirations. The consequence of this is that it is the most powerful weapon in the organization of the collective's forces in class society—of class power.[31]
>
> Aleksandr Rodchenko

In its inaugural issue published in March of 1923, *Lef*'s[32] neo-Futurist editorial group boldly announced the journal's three main objectives: to fulfill the group's political commitments, to apply the formal principles its members promoted and to establish their organizational plans for the journal *Left Front of the Arts (Lef)*.[33] Their overall intent was manifest: "to prove the revolutionary legitimacy of the avant-garde movement, its natural kinship with Communism."[34] Thus, the main goal for the journal *Lef*—as well as that of its second incarnation *Novy Lef*[35]—was to revitalize Constructivism's Productivist platform

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[31] Aleksandr N. Lavrentiev, ed. *Aleksandr Rodchenko, Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), p. 199.

[32] *Lef* is an acronym for "Левый фронт искусств" (Left Front of the Arts), a literary journal made up of avant-garde writers, artists, and critics committed to the reevaluation of the ideologies and art practices of Lef-ist art within the context of the new Soviet State.

[33] Halina Stephan, *"Lef" and the Left Front of the Arts* (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1981), p. 64.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] When the journal *Lef* was reintroduced in 1927, it was renamed *Novy Lef* (New Left).

developed a few years earlier through the work of the *INKhUK*.[36] *Lef* sought to reposition the artistic activities of the group away from industrial production toward the launch of new communicative practices, which would promote collective modes of consumption, distribution and the development of "factographic" communicative practices (technologies of mechanical reproductions linked to photography and the camera's potential to document facets of reality), aimed at socialist enlightenment.[37] Before examining in more depth the journal's editorial objectives, it is essential to consider the group or collective at the core of the journal's inception.

The existence of the artistic collective *LEF*[38] was first recorded on January 16 1923, when members participated in an Agitprop[39] meeting to discuss the establishment of a publishing venture devoted to the propagation of the artistic expressions promoted by the group.[40] During this meeting they determined that the main focus of publishing would be the printing of books committed to the further development of the experimental art practices of Futurism.[41] Furthermore, they decided that a journal would be created and launched as a "publicity organ"[42] for these books. Essentially, they envisioned the journal as a vehicle to bring together all the experimental art of the early Soviet period.[43] Although some members

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[36] *INKhUK* is a Russian acronym for *"Институт художественной культуры"* (Institute of Artistic Culture) under the charge of *IZO Narkompros* (Department of Fine Arts in the Commissariat of Enlightenment). Established in March of 1920, the institute's program was devoted to and concerned with theoretical approaches to art under communism. It consisted of avant-garde leftist professors, including Aleksandr Rodchenko, Osip Brik and Varvara Stepanova who would later become key members of the group *LEF (*Left Front of the Arts). The work of *INKhUK* is described in Christina Lodder's book *Russian Constructivism,* Chapter 3.

[37] Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, Berkeley (CA: The University of California Press, 2005), p. 193.

[38] *LEF* group consisted mainly of former Futurist writers, artists, film directors and critics including Vladimir Mayakovsky, Osip Brik, Boris Pasternak, Velimir Khlebnikov, Dziga Vertov, Sergei M. Eisenstein and Aleksandr Rodchenko. Please note that going forward, when using the capitalized acronym *LEF,* I will be referring to the "Left Front of the Arts" group, whereas the use of *Lef* will be referring to the journal.

[39] Agitprop refers to the Department for Agitation and Propaganda within the Central Committee of the Party.

[40] Stephan, p. 24.

[41] Following the 1917 February Revolution, Futurist poets and writers such as Mayakovsky and Brik (future members of *LEF*) declared the need to obliterate conventional art practices. Aware that the destruction of Russian cultural life presented a risk to Futurist ideologies, they quickly surmised the necessity to mobilize experimental artists as the established artistic voice of the new Soviet state. Although Communism had removed the autocratic tsarist regime, replacing it with a new political and economic socialist agenda, neo-Futurism or neo-Futurist art would in turn shape its cultural consciousness.

[42] Stephan, p. 24

[43] Stephan, p. ix.

previously had been unsuccessful at launching similar enterprises,[44] Agitprop agreed to support this project, recognizing that the publishing venture by *LEF* was "principled and resolute."[45] Thus, Agitprop members confirmed that they would suggest to the State publishing house Gosizdat[46] to allow and assist in the publication of books and the journal *Lef* (named after the collective), guaranteeing a monthly issue for each of the first six months. Recommending a six-month circulation run was considerable at a time when the Soviet press was undergoing constant production setbacks. The lack of essential materials such as ink and newsprint, which had become increasingly scarce since the start of the Civil War, remained the biggest challenge for all publishing ventures.[47] Statistics suggest that the production of paper had decreased from 33 million *poods*[48] prior to the Revolution down to two million *poods* in 1920. Furthermore, the quality of the paper produced in early Soviet Russia was extremely poor, routinely affecting the readability of the editorials printed on it. Even the national newspaper *Pravda,* the official organ of the Communist Party since 1912, was forced to reduce its size frequently to as little as two pages,[49] affecting not only its format but also its potential for communicative impact. In view of this, it is reasonable to suppose that Agitprop's endorsement of *LEF*'s project was genuine and committed.

In the days that followed the January 1923 meeting, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Sergei Tretyakov organized an editorial team and attempted to finalize legal arrangements with Gosizdat. But unfortunately for the project, and despite Agitprop support, Gosizdat immediately showed hesitation. It refused the proposal to publish six issues over six months.

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[44] In March of 1921, Lenin introduced in a speech at the Tenth Party Congress his New Economic Policy (NEP), affecting many areas of business including publishing. These changes allowed for the opening of private and cooperative publishing enterprises. Immediately following this, Futurists Osip Brik and Vladimir Mayakovsky petitioned for support in a Futurist publishing enterprise, a publishing firm of *Lef*-ist art *MAF* (Moscow Association of Futurists). Unfortunately for the enterprise, it became apparent to the State that there were too many books of anti-Soviet literature being printed under private publishing firms. Therefore, on June 6 1922, the State set up a commission for the organization of an independent writers' union forcing all writers to publish primarily under *Krug*, a new publishing enterprise within *Gosizdat* (State-run publishing house). This would end the Futurists' hope of establishing *MAF*.

[45] Stephan, p. 25.

[46] *Gosizdat* refers to the State Publishing House, which was technically part of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Ministry of Education and Culture) under the direction of Anatoly Vasiyevich Lunacharsky.

[47] Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 44.

[48] *Pood* is a noun referring to a Russian unit of weight, equal to 16.4 kilograms.

[49] Kenez, p. 45.

It suggested instead that the journal be published on a trial basis for a reduced period of three months.[50] Regardless of these challenges set by Gosizdat, on March 23, 1923, Mayakovsky was given permission to publish the journal's first issue. At the same time, *LEF*—the publishing house hence constituted—wasted no time in proposing its initial wish list to publish four books. These included Vladimir Mayakovsky's *About That (Pro Eta),* Osip Brik's *She is Not a Fellow-Traveller (Ne poputchitsa),* Boris Arvatov's *About Mayakovsky (O Mayakovskom)* and Nikolai Chuzhak's *Toward the Dialectics of Art (K dialektike iskusstva).*[51] Despite Mayakovsky and Brik's books being published promptly, Gosizdat pronounced Arvatov's and Chuzhak's books "editorially unacceptable"[52] and these were therefore never published. This confirmed *LEF*'s suspicion that Gosizdat's support for the group was extremely limited and governed.

It is important to note here that Gosizdat was an organization administered by the *Narkompros* (The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, a sort of Ministry of Education and Culture). In fact, in a speech given at the symposium "*LEF* and Marxism," held on July 3, 1923, in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Enlightenment voiced his concerns regarding Futurism and the Left Front of the Arts. Clearly, this would have influenced Gosizdat's support of the group's projects going forward.

> Tret'iakov is one of the most intelligent of the LEF group, [but] he says, "We here are producers; we produce pressure on the emotions," instead of saying that an artist seeks to arouse powerful emotions in his audience, and that is the goal of art. "The production of pressure on the emotions:" it is clear [that] this is playing with words. To prove that a creative artist is a "producer" merely on the basis of the word "to produce" means to admit frankly how confused the Futurists have become.[53]

LEF's venture into book publishing would not have the influence for which they had hoped within Soviet avant-garde artistic circles (the targeted audience). They assigned most

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[50] Stephan, p. 25.

[51] Vladimir Mayakovsky was a Futurist poet who supported the Revolution, Osip Brik was a literary critic, Boris Arvatov was a major theoretician of production art, and Nikolai Chuzhak was a writer, literary critic and theoretician of production art.

[52] Stephan, p. 25.

[53] In this excerpt of his speech, Lunacharsky is making reference to *LEF*'s theory that the only purpose to art is the production of utilitarian things. For the complete speech, refer to the article "A.V. Lunacharsky and LEF," *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1976).

of the fault to Gosizdat. Because it was authorized to publish only four books per year instead of the 40 to which it originally had agreed with the group, *LEF* was convinced that the lack of exposure within the emerging Soviet avant-garde literary market had contributed to diminishing the overall impact of their endeavor. On the contrary, the journal *Lef* was thought by most members of *LEF* to have exhibited more of an influence on its readers. Not considered a real commercial success due to large numbers of unsold copies, even though it was printed in small editions, the journal provided a fresh vehicle for the exchange of artistic philosophies promoting active participation in all aspects of Soviet cultural life.[54]

As noted earlier, the journal had been conceived by *LEF* as a means to allow the merging of all experimental art, which existed at the start of the Soviet era.[55] Although the majority of the *LEF* group was made up of former Futurist poets and artists, after the Revolution words such as "Futurism" or "Futurists" were utilized alternatively to describe avant-garde, or, more precisely "leftist" art, in broad terms. Thus, the journal provided a fresh forum for discussion for many of the numerous avant-garde groups that functioned enthusiastically within the new Soviet cultural life but had no vehicle in which their views could be expressed.[56]

These "Futurists" were extremely supportive of the new socialist regime, viewing it as forward thinking and enlightened. For that reason, they were convinced that all artistic media and practices would now have the opportunity to progress synchronously towards a new period of modern, nontraditional expression. They maintained that the best point of departure was to exploit the aesthetics of Futurism.[57] They also looked to the theoretical work of the Constructivists, in particular their redefinition of "the artist" as a "producer," or someone who was committed to acquiring the necessary technical expertise in order to produce fresh artistic forms. Artistic forms, which would respond to the demands set by the new society, professing that the role of an artist was to produce artwork for its "social" value. Plainly, a

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[54] Stephan, p. 28.

[55] *Ibid.*, p. ix.

[56] Stephan, p. 28. The "avant-garde" was comprised of many different groups and, although I am making a general reference to the avant-garde above, the term was not employed by most artists at the time. They referred to themselves as Futurists, Productivists and, most consistently Constructivists. For a more detailed overview of these groups, refer to Christina Lodder's book *Russian Constructivism*.

[57] Futurism or Russian Futurism in this case refers to a group of poets and artists who were inspired by Italian writer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 1909 manifesto, which rejected tradition and the past in both politics and art and embraced instead modernity, speed and technology.

"leftist" artist post-revolutionary USSR was required to contribute and promote the social experience of Communism.

In order to better understand the evolution towards these new artistic "leftist" practices it is important to go back in history, to 1917. In the days following the Revolution, the Soviet government had needed to organize and put into place quickly a new sociopolitical structure. The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (*Narkompros*), established in 1917 under the leadership of Anatoly Lunarcharsky, was given, among others, the challenging mandate to manage the explosive proliferation of artists' groups and associations all eager to declare themselves the cultural agents of the new society under construction.[58] Not unlike many of the other groups[59], the neo-Futurists (who would later become key members of *LEF*) claimed that they were the only true representatives of proletarian art.[60] Bold in their activities and edicts, they maintained that their revolutionary foundation was based on political convictions similar to those fought for in the October Revolution. They declared that their chief objective was not only to establish, but also to enforce the neo-Futurist, avant-garde cultural program as "the" cultural ideology of the Soviet state.[61]

A keen art enthusiast, Lunacharsky had kept informed about avant-garde activities and was therefore not averse to "leftist" conceptions and practices. He also shrewdly recognized the need for *Narkompros* to associate itself with a group that could help to legitimize the new Soviet cultural administration while endorsing its existence within the government.[62] According to a similar rationale, avant-garde artists and friends Mayakovsky, Brik, and Rodchenko equally understood the necessity to associate themselves with *Narkompros* and become actively involved in the revitalization of cultural life after the Revolution.[63] Their initial objective was to protect the values of avant-garde art against the zealous cultural

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[58] Anna Lawton, *Words in Revolution: Russian futurist manifestoes, 1912-1928* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 40.

[59] The main groups referred to here range from the traditionalist right to the avant-garde left, such as *Proletkult*, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, the Divide, the Imaginists, the Constructivists and the reconstituted group of the Moscow Futurists (*LEF*).

[60] Lawton, p. 40.

[61] *Ibid.*, p. 41.

[62] *Loc. cit.*

[63] Stephan, p. 1.

right.[64] Indeed, with the transition from pre-revolutionary to post-revolutionary culture, the group quickly surmised that the Revolution could also bring about the threat of extinction to Futurism and the avant-garde.[65] Following futurist ethics, the group had been supportive of the eradication of the old artistic establishment.[66] However, as a consequence this had left them, the experimental avant-garde artists, with no viable patronage.[67] Therefore, they became convinced that their best course of action was to become politically engaged artists working collaboratively within the newly formed state organizations in an effort to establish their school of thought as "the" cultural ideology of the Soviet State.[68]

Futurism and Futurists would thus embark on a campaign to establish themselves as the cultural voice of the new state by proclaiming in 1918: "Whereas Communism offered a new political and economic framework, Futurism would shape the culture of the new state and the consciousness of its citizens."[69] In March of that same year, the Futurists, led by Mayakovsky, made their first official revolutionary declarations in print in *The Futurist Gazette (Gazeta futuristov)*. The group optimized the use of this vehicle to introduce their grand plan of reorienting Futurism according to the tenets of "proletarian" art.[70] Mayakovsky pronounced that Communism was a revolution of "content" and as such it was essential that it be enhanced by an equivalent revolution of "form," a form that could only be developed by

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[64] As noted earlier in the text, after the Revolution words such as "Futurism" or "Futurists" were utilized synonymously to describe avant-garde or more precisely "left art" in broad terms. In this context "right art" refers broadly to art groups that were not associated with avant-garde practices.

[65] Stephan, p.2.

[66] In an editorial entitled "Whom is Lef alerting?" found in the first issue of *Lef* March 1923, the group's view on the eradication of the old establishment was clear; "Lef is on guard. Lef will throw off all the old fuddy-duddies all the ultra-aesthetes, all the copiers." For the full version of this editorial refer to Stephen Bann, ed. *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), pp. 80-83.

[67] Stephan does not include any specifics about who made this particular declaration, introducing it only as stated by Futurists. It is, however, reasonable to conclude that the statement was made by either Mayakovsky or Brik, as they both became highly involved in the avant-garde agenda early on and established as the leaders of *Lef*.

[68] For more information about the organization of the "Arts" within *Narkompros* refer to Sheila Fitzpatrick's book *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Eductaion and the Arts under Lunacharsky October 1917-21* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), chapter 6, pp. 110-138.

[69] Stephan, p.2.

[70] Proletarian art at this time was perceived as an art devoid of bourgeois influence. The word "proletarian" was not introduced here by the Futurists in reference to the program according to *Proletkult* (Proletarskaya kultura-organization for proletarian culture). It was introduced to declare the complete break from traditional artistic practices.

the Futurists.[71] The confident statements made in *The Futurist Gazette* prompted the Futurists to be viewed as true revolutionaries, and Futurism as the "revolution of the spirit *(revolyutsiya dukha)*."[72]

Brik and Mayakovsky were aware that, although they were working hard to advocate for the potential of a Futurist agenda, this would not be enough to ensure the continued existence of Futurism. They understood that the key to survival was dependent not only on the patronage of the State, but also on continued access to a printing press. As noted earlier, the Civil War had caused a major shortage in paper in Soviet Russia. To add to the already challenging situation, printing presses were now obligated to conform to the growing demand to prioritize the printing of politically inspired literature.[73] As such, both Brik and Mayakovsky pragmatically acknowledged the need for the Futurists to become involved with Soviet politics. They did this through the Commissariat of Enlightenment *(Narkompros),* when in the summer of 1918 Brik and Mayakovsky accepted an invitation by Lunacharsky to join the Division of Fine Arts at *Narkompros (Otdel izobbratzitelnykh iskusstv-IZO)*.[74] This was an invitation that could not be refused. In fact, it came with a promise of a publishing venture with Gosizdat. Brik and Mayakovsky were now given the means to publish books, something they had not been able to do on their own as yet.[75] The first books they published were aimed at propagating "leftist" art and Futurism. In addition, through the insistence of Brik that *Narkompros* publish its own newspaper *Art of the Commune (Iskusstvo kommuny),* he established the necessary platform to promote Futurist principles. The paper's main intent

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[71] Stephan, p. 3.

[72] *Ibid.* For more information regarding the *Gazeta futuristov* refer to Bengt Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky and Futurism 1917-1921*, *Stockholm Studies in Russian Literature*, 5, Stockholm, (1976), pp. 16-29.

[73] Stephan, p. 3.

[74] It is important to note that more *Lef*-ists such as Mayakovsky and Brik joined *Narkompros*. This Included artists such as Nikolai Punin, an art critic for the journal *Apollon* who joined the Petrograd collegium of *IZO*; composer Artur Luriye, who became a member of the music department (*MUZO*) and later its head; Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin, who led the Moscow branch of *IZO*, and painter/graphic artist David Shterenberg, who became overall head of the department. For a full account, refer to Sheila Fitzpatrick's book *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky October 1917-21.*

[75] Refer to note 14 as to prior unsuccessful publishing ventures.

was to mobilize all avant-garde efforts in order to ensure the authority of Futurism as the cultural force.[76]

Although there were various pre-Revolutionary avant-garde artist groups willing to work with the Soviet government at the time, the leftists (who would become *LEF* members) who were now associated with the newspaper *Art of the Commune* were given much latitude in their aim to propagate Futurism as the modern brand of art for the new proletarian society. As stated by Brik, who was becoming a key spokesperson for the Futurists, traditional art models of pre-Revolutionary times had to be revised and even replaced to reflect the ever-changing social needs of the society. In an editorial dated December 29, 1918, Brik proclaimed that "only such a dynamic art as Futurism could convey the modern experience, reach the audience and, ultimately, provide a guide for the future Soviet culture."[77] Furthermore, Brik insisted that only the modern art of Futurism could properly convey the dynamic energy necessary to fully understand and experience contemporary culture in the new Soviet era.[78]

In order to achieve this, Brik proposed that artists contribute actively to the expansion and modernization of the country by mobilizing their artistic skills to help build and form new models for industrial production. He argued that "workshops and factories [were] waiting to be approached by artists who could give them models of new, yet unseen things."[79] For Brik, any artistic initiative could be viewed as socially legitimate as long as it was developed via fresh methods of utilizing the materials with the aim of producing a new functional object. Only in doing this could an artist truly be recognized as fulfilling his social role.[80] The Futurists who contributed to *Art of the Commune* agreed with Brik's bold statements. They perceived their emerging monopoly on Soviet culture as necessary to ensure legitimate modernization towards the future. As Nikolai Punin wrote in *Art of the Commune*,

> Only that art can be called of the present that anticipates its future, that art in which is felt the pulse beat of the future. Only that which brings us nearer to this art has the right to real existence. One must therefore conclude that also in art it is necessary to install a

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[76] Stephan, p. 6.

[77] Stephan, p. 7.

[78] *Ibid.*

[79] *Ibid.*

[80] Stephan, p. 8.

> dictatorship, a dictatorship inspired by a desire to achieve the ultimate end of art according to the understanding of new artists: this end being the victory over matter in the sense of achieving perfect mastery of it, of achieving the most perfect forms of expressing the human spirit in matter.[81]

In the spring of 1919, under the pressure of *Proletkult*[82] and other groups, which did not adhere to the Futurist views, *Art of the Commune* was forced to shut down. As a result, the following two years were not as productive as the Futurists would have liked them to be, in particular with regard to advancing their position as the new paradigm for artistic practices. However, in 1921, with the launch of Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP),[83] a measure that allowed for private and cooperative publishing enterprises, the Futurists gained some ground. As the government was scrambling to cope with private publishers providing a voice to numerous anti-Soviet campaigns, the need to join forces with Gosizdat in support of artists' groups, which were sympathetic to Communist ideology became evident. This is how, in 1922, the Futurists were officially recognized as the Left Front of the Arts and their proposal for the publication of the journal *Lef* was finally approved the following year.

1.2 *LEF* Editorial Board and Activities

In spite of the fact that *LEF*, the publishing venture founded in 1923, did not succeed in its attempt to publish any leading Futurist books, its journal *Lef,* also launched that same year yielded favorable results.[84] Essentially, the journal provided *LEF* members with a concrete forum in which they could promote openly avant-garde and Futurist principles and doctrines. Despite the circumstances and challenges surrounding the journal's eventual publication with the first issue in March of 1923, the Futurists proudly recited their

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[81] Stephan, p. 8.

[82] *Proletkult (proletarskaya kultura)* (proletarian culture) was another group comprised of avant-garde artists, which emerged following the revolution of 1917. They were devoted to the radical modification of existing artistic forms by creating new working class aesthetics.

[83] By 1921, Russia's economy had suffered tremendously due to the effects of *War Communism*. Concerned by this Vladimir Lenin declared the need to allow for some private ventures or state capitalism in order to improve on the country's poor economic state. Therefore, in March of that same year he would introduce his New Economic Policy (NEP).

[84] Stephan, p. 28.

triumphant anthem.[85] Their three-tiered program was proclaimed: 1-*"Lef must bring together the leftists forces [...] Lef must create a united front [...]* for the integration of a new culture;"[86] 2-*"We have to reconsider our tactics*, but keep fighting against the old enemies in the new society: passéists, aesthetes, proletarians with a conservative taste, epigones, philistines, bureaucrats, and the like;"[87] and 3-"It's time to undertake *big projects. The seriousness of our attitude toward ourselves is the only solid foundation of our work [...] Futurists! [...] Constructivists! [...] Opoyazists! [...] Disciples! [...] All together!* Moving from theory to practice, think of mastery, of professional skill [...] LEF is the defense of all creators."[88]

While there is some uncertainty as to who actually headed the journal, Osip Brik,[89] who served but was not officially named, as *Lef*'s first editor, continually maintained that it was Mayakovsky who had appealed to Agitprop for approval to launch *Lef* and remained a driving force in the organization.[90] The common belief among most members of *LEF* was that Mayakovsky, as a highly admired poet could provide respectability to the journal. Valentin Kataev, a contributing writer[91] and member of *LEF,* confirms this in his own writings. He expresses the need for Mayakovsky to serve as principal editor in order to legitimize the tenets of the journal. In fact, it was Mayakovsky's name that appeared as chief editor in the first published issue of *Lef.* Moreover, when Gosizdat had agreed to lend support to the publishing venture, it had submitted its approval of the project to "Mayakovsky's group."

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[85] Lawton, p. 42.

[86] Refer to "Za chto boretsia Lef?" (What Does Lef Fight For?), *Lef,* no. 1 (1923), "Program," pp. 1-7.

[87] Refer to "V kogo vgrizaetsia Lef?" (Whom Does Lef Wrangle With?), *Lef,* no. 1 (1923), "Program," pp. 8-9.

[88] Refer to "Kogo predosteregaet Lef?" (Whom Does Lef Warn?), *Lef,* no. 1 (1923), "Program," pp. 10-11.

[89] Brik was associated early on with Futurism because of his continued support of Futurist publications. Decidedly, he is recognized as being one of the most active contributors and organizers of not only *LEF* but also of its journal. Even though the title of editor was attributed to Mayakovsky, Brik and Mayakovsky were also noted as being best friends. Refer to Vahan D. Barooshian's book *Brik and Mayakovsky* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978) for a more comprehensive overview of their collaboration.

[90] Stephan, p. 30.

[91] Kataev was a contributing writer to the journal's second venture periodical publication *Novy Lef.*

This is not surprising, because Mayakovsky's popularity among the masses[92] was notable. His charismatic personality is said to have drawn large audiences to his readings and lectures. Whether addressing a small crowd in a Workers' Club or a larger one in a city square Mayakovsky attracted a huge fan base. For this reason, the journal's continued existence until December 1928 is attributed to its association with Mayakovsky.[93]

Having said this, the extent of Mayakovsky's actual involvement as editor remains unclear and unknown.[94] Based on the writings of some members of *LEF,* it was clear that Mayakovsky's editorship was imperative in order to give the journal prestige.[95] Nonetheless, the official title of chief editor attributed to Mayakovsky in the journals did not necessarily prove his actual contribution to its editorial content. In fact, as a figurehead for the journal, Mayakovsky still could provide a front for the group's proposals while at the same time legitimizing their organ.[96] Mayakovsky in his own biography seems to sustain the impression that his role was more that of a front man, stating that he played a very limited role in the organization of *Lef.* He was abroad for most of the autumn in 1922, and upon his return in January 1923 his mistress Lilya Brik requested a separation, which drove him to the edge of madness according to his close friends.[97] With the journal's scheduled publishing launch date of March of that same year, it is inconceivable that the Futurist poet would have had time to oversee the journal's content and production.[98] Editorial board member Nikolai Chuzhak seems to corroborate this theory, accusing Mayakovsky of "nominal" editorship in one of his articles published in the newspaper *Pravda.*[99] Regardless of Mayakovsky's true role, his level of participation did not affect the eventual publication of the journal or the editorials contained in *Lef*'s printed issues. More critical for the group than Mayakovsky's defined role

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[92] Following the October Revolution, Mayakovsky's popularity rose as he started to recite poems such as "Left March for the Red Marines: 1918" in public arenas. His work for *ROSTA* (Russian State Telegraph Agency), where he designed satirical posters for Agitprop, is also a huge contributor.

[93] Lawton, p. 43.

[94] In the 1930s many Soviet literary historians including Brik himself downplayed Brik's activities in *Lef.*

[95] Stephan, p. 30.

[96] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

[97] For more on this refer to Barooshian *Brik and Mayakovsky.*

[98] Stephan, p. 32.

[99] N. Chuzak, "V drakax za istkusstvo. Raznye podxody k Lefu," *Pravda*, 21 July (1923) referenced in Stephan, p. 32.

was the continued collaboration by all editorial members towards the propagation of their original Futurist principles.

Other editorial board members consisted of pre-Revolutionary literary Futurists Boris Kushner, Nikolai Aseev and Sergei Tretyakov. Others such as Osip Brik, Boris Arvatov and Nikolai Chuzhak, had become more prominent Futurist sympathizers after the Revolution. These editors of *Lef* had all in some respect either been connected with *Proletkult* or been active in Soviet artistic institutions such as *INKhUK* and *VKhUTEMAS*.[100] In fact, as chairman of *INKhUK* in 1923, Brik was able to persuade Constructivists Rodchenko, Stepanova, Popova, and Lavinsky to become graphic contributors to the journal. It was paramount for Brik that the journal's editorials be complemented by strong visual graphics, which structured and contributed to the *Lef*-ist message therein.

The proposal for the journal *Lef* tendered to the Central Committee in 1922 argued the need to have an organ that would take on the fight to guard the "Communist orientation of the modern arts."[101] Furthermore, it stated that the basis for the journal was to establish "a Communist path for all art."[102] They promised to:

> --- review the ideology and the practice of the so-called left art, getting rid of all its individualistic grimaces and developing its valuable sides.
> --- conduct persistent agitation among the workers of art for the acceptance of the Communist path and ideology.[103]

In essence, they proposed the merging of art and life. *Lef*'s inaugural issue was published at the end of March 1923 with a 5000-copy print run. The second issue, devoted to May Day celebrations, appeared in two releases in April and May 1923 due to some technical problems. The initial reviews of the journal, which appeared in newspapers such as *Red Virgin Soil, Press and Revolution* and *Pravda,* were mixed.[104] Its third number released in

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[100] All the members of *Lef* were either associated with or worked at these institutions. For a better understanding of what these roles entailed refer to Christina Lodder's *Russian Constructivism*. In addition, please note that Chapter 2 will explore more fully how the members of *LEF* were involved and how it impacted their work in the journals *Lef* and *Novy Lef*.

[101] Stephan, p. 34.

[102] *Ibid.*

[103] *Ibid.*

[104] Reviews ranged from approval to sarcastic comments but none however, demonstrated support for the program of *LEF*.

June 1923 saw the print run reduced from 5000 to 3000 copies. Nonetheless, in September of that year, Gosizdat agreed to publish another three issues (no timeline was determined), but with an added stipulation that the journal become self-sufficient during that time. Unfortunately for the project, no other issue would be published that year.

Realizing the journal could not survive without the support of other "leftist" artistic groups, the editors at *Lef* approached the group *MAPP* (*Moskovskaya assotsiyatsiya proletarskikh pisatelei*—Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers). Although *Lef* did not share the more formal concepts of literature to which *MAPP* adhered to, like *LEF*, they promoted the Communist spirit of the new art.[105] The two groups were in agreement when it came to practical objectives such as agitation and propaganda to promote a new society free of any cultural relics of the past.[106] It is not clear whether *MAPP* had any true impact on the editorial direction of *Lef* and its publication per se. In January 1924, however, shortly after establishing an agreement,[107] and after a six-month absence, the fourth issue of *Lef* was finally published—the issue was antedated to August-September 1923. Still, the situation did not improve much after this. Long delays between issues persisted, forcing the editors to omit the journal's date of publication. By the time the fifth issue was released, it was well into the midyear point of 1924 (the exact date is unknown but it is assumed to be in June). In spite of a subscription promise to the readers that six more numbers would be released by the end of 1924, only a sixth issue was actually published in the fall, and its print run was down to 2000 copies. January 1925 saw the release of the seventh and last issue.

The cause of the journal's suspension is not entirely evident. A few weeks after the release of the seventh issue, Mayakovsky participated in a meeting of the Literary Commission of the Central Committee, where the chairman of the commission supported the journal. The journal's board members viewed this endorsement as a positive step towards improving the journal's existence and circulation. Furthermore, Mayakovsky was able to improve dealings with Gosizdat, allowing not only the publication of his and Aseev's

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[105] Stephan, p. 42.

[106] Lawton, p. 46.

[107] In their fourth published issue of *Lef*, *LEF* announced that they had reached an agreement with *MAPP*, the avant-garde of young proletarian literature. For full details refer to "Lef i MAPP" (*Lef* and *MAPP*), *Lef*, no. 4 (1924), "Program," pp. 3-5.

collected works but also the publication of a *LEF* almanac. At that point it was reasonable for the board members to assume that *Lef* would continue to exist. Alas for the group, by late summer of 1925, Gosizdat rescinded its offer to publish Mayakovsky's collected works and the *LEF* almanac, and while an eighth issue of *Lef* had been prepared for publication, it was never released.

1.3 The Emergence of *Novy Lef*

Lef's original objective—to represent all "leftist" artistic practices—never really materialized. Along with low readership and technical problems, the failure to sustain its primary intent could also have contributed to its termination. As it turned out, the journal's focus was narrower than what the original proposal suggests. It revolved mainly around literature and "the creation of language."[108] A constant stream of articles published throughout the pages of the journal explained the need for verbal experiments, insisting that only through these experiments could the creation of the language of the future Communist society be realized. Their message was decisive and plain:

> We the Futurists, are builders of a new language and, therefore, of a new psychology; we are building the man of the future, and thus the task of Futurism is identical with the task of communism; we are art workers, and the aim of our productivist art is to serve society; we do not recognize any other art form but ours.[109]

Statements, such as the one quoted above did not have the desired effect. In fact, these forceful declarations exasperated the cultural administration and critics alike. In 1924, Leon Trotsky,[110] then a key member of the Party, declared that *LEF* and its members were not

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[108] Lawton, p. 44.

[109] As cited in Lawton, p. 45.

[110] In 1924 Leon Trotsky in his "Literatura i revolyutsiya" (Literature and Revolution) voiced many reservations in regard to the group *LEF* and its journal. He stated that the Futurists had misinterpreted the Revolution, seeing it as a break from the past when in essence it was a continuation of a new organic development. As such, although Trotsky found value in their experimentations with language he found that it could not be applied to daily life. Furthermore, while he recognized the value of some of the items addressed in *Lef,* such as the relationship between art and industry, he rejected the aesthetics of the group as partisan and rigid. Therefore, he confirmed that it was inconceivable that the Party would accept the art of *LEF* members as the art of the Communist society. For further details refer to Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (Ann Arbor, 1960), pp. 139-140.

going to be recognized nor were they qualified to present themselves as a Communist literary/artistic movement. He offered this explanation:

> We have no reason to doubt that the "LEF" group is striving seriously to work in the interest of Socialism, that it is profoundly interested in the problems of art, and that it wants to be guided by a Marxist criterion [...] However, the Futurist poets have not mastered the elements of Communist point of view and world attitude sufficiently to find organic expression for them in words [...] that is why they frequently produce stilted forms and make much noise about nothing. In its most revolutionary and compelling works, Futurism becomes stylization.[111]

Lunacharsky, an earlier supporter of *LEF,* would be even more blunt in his assessment of the group one year later. In a speech focused on cultural issues announced on February 9 1925,[112] Lunacharsky addressed Mayakovsky directly, but was clearly speaking to the group as a whole:

> [...] LEF is already an almost obsolete thing. I apologize to Comrade Mayakovsky, but as long as Comrade Mayakovsky continues to be a LEF member, he remains an obsolete type [...] Nowadays LEF stays behind; it has lost the tempo of life [...] Comrade Mayakovsky and his friends came out of the aesthetic culture, a culture of the satiated bourgeois, who sought new graces, new caprices, and unusual eccentricities. They have retained this position. Very many of Mayakovsky's comrades have remained there, stuck in the bourgeois camp.[113]

Within that same year, the Central Committee issued its Resolution on Literature, communicating plainly that the members of a group such as *LEF* could at no time associate themselves with Communist legitimacy. Furthermore, its role within Soviet culture would be limited and reduced to contributing to the production of agitational art. Because of this, it became evident to *LEF* that it had to immediately separate itself from Futurism and its nonconformist characteristics if they were to survive.

Again Mayakovsky acted as the group's spokesperson when he declared in New York City, on October 5, 1925, his rejection of "Americanism," "Taylorism" and "Futurism:"

> In the enthusiastic praise that America has for Futurism one sees the essential mistake of Futurism—the praise of technique as such, technique for the sake of technique. Futurism

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[111] Stephan, p. 53.

[112] Refer to "Vystuplenija na dispute" *Pervye kamni novoi kul'tury* (The Cornerstones of the New Culture), 9 fevralja (1925), p. 31.

[113] Stephan, p. 53.

> had its place and has immortalized itself in the history of literature, but in the Soviet Union it has already outplayed its role. The aspiration and work of the Soviet Union find their reflection not in Futurism, but in LEF, which glorifies not chaotic technology, but wise organization. Futurism and the Soviet construction [...] cannot go hand in hand. From this time on [...] I am against Futurism; from this time on I will struggle against it.[114]

There is no known official document suggesting that statements such as the one made by Mayakovsky in New York were the determining factor that motivating Gosizdat to reconsider the publishing of Mayakovsky's collected works. However, we know that in September 1926, the *LEF* group once again applied for permission to publish a new variant of the journal *Lef.* The Central Committee approved the application, and in January 1927, *Novy Lef* (New Left) published its first issue. Thus, it would be fair to presume that the strategy to sever all ties to Futurism by the group had been perceptive and advantageous.

From that moment forward, *LEF* renounced its original Futurist program and devoted the pages of the new journal *Novy Lef* to the promotion of what it termed a "literature of fact" *(literatura fakta).* This new literary theory attracted a wider support than its futurist predecessor both in the Soviet Union and abroad. According to this new approach, writers were urged to abandon fictional writing and devote their art to the publication of facts taken from the social and political realities of everyday life. Favoring prose over poetry, *Novy Lef* propagated prose genres with "relevant" issues, including diaries, travel notes, chronicles and sketches. Additionally, this new theory could thrive beyond the realm of the literary world. Indeed, media such as film and photography, which had the ability to record in "real time," would eventually dominate the editorial content of the journal, as these media provided the perfect documentary representation of factual truths and physical life.

Graphic applications remained an important component, shaping the very essence of *Novy Lef.* However, unlike in the case of *Lef,* the application of graphic elements was toned down significantly to allow photography to take center stage. Like film, photography was considered to enjoy the capacity to capture live action as it happened, thereby possessing the potential to establish the authenticity of the event taking place. This would account for *Novy Lef*'s diminished emphasis on painting and its use of more subdued graphic elements. Instead,

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[114] *Ibid,* p. 55.

a more balanced relationship between text and image was achieved, promoting more prominently Rodchenko's photography and Vertov's and Eisenstein's movie stills.[115]

Novy Lef was able to establish effectively the link between the artistic theory it promoted and its literary content, and as a result it encountered less opposition than its predecessor *Lef*. Nonetheless, by the end of 1928, Mayakovsky—who was once again chief editor—criticized the *Novy Lef* agenda. He declared it restrictive and limiting. Instead of encompassing various "leftist" movements as *Lef* had tried to do, *Novy Lef* had a single agenda: to advocate the use of new technologies such as photography and film in the production of "fact" oriented art. Consequently, after the publication of *Novy Lef*'s eighth issue, Mayakovsky stepped down as chief editor in the summer of 1928. Brik, Aseev and Rodchenko soon followed suit, leaving Chuzhak and Tretyakov in charge of the journal until it finally ceased publication in December of that same year.

1.4 The Visionary Art Direction as Applied by Aleksandr Rodchenko

Aleksandr Rodchenko was an initial member of the group *LEF* and became art director of both its journals *Lef* in 1923 and *Novy Lef* in 1927. In order to better understand his graphic contribution to the journal's visual appearance, it is necessary to review how his artistic vision evolved in the period prior the appearance of *Lef*'s first issue.

In 1920, Aleksandr Rodchenko and his wife Varvara Stepanova collaboratively published their "Productivist Manifesto." They argued that there was an intrinsic correlation between ideology and the constructive organization of materials by the artist. The authors also declared that the manifesto was based "exclusively on scientific communism,"[116] and concerned solely with how artists could effectively contribute to the Revolution. Essentially they put forward the notion that the role of an artist is to fulfill "a synthesis of ideological and formal aspects"[117] in order to facilitate the artist's practical involvement in social life. Furthermore, the authors rejected all aspects of art of the past and promoted instead the

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[115] Lawton, p. 47.

[116] Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, "Productivist Manifesto," *in Aleksandr Rodchenko and the Arts of Revolutionary Russia*, ed. David Elliott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 130.

[117] *Ibid.*

"communist forms of constructive building"[118] rooted in the organized mobilization of materials. They proposed that the link between ideology and form was based on three principles: *Tektonika*, shaped from the ideological characteristics of communism (means of production) and the use of industrial materials, or the merging of ideology and form; *Konstructsiya*, structured by the organization of elements such as line, plane and color through the use of worked materials and *Faktura*, formed by the choice of materials made and the recognition of their intrinsic and extrinsic properties.[119] In a lecture entitled "Line," given at *INKhUK* in 1921, Rodchenko summed up his conception of constructivism concisely: "Construction is a system by which an object is realized from the expedient utilization of material together with a predetermined purpose."[120] It is within this utilitarian sphere that Rodchenko would devote a large part of his career as designer and artist, aspiring to preserve an alliance between artistic form and its potential to affect the material world and shape public opinion.

A few years before the Revolution, many artists influenced by the ideas of Futurism, including Rodchenko, declared the inherent link between new art forms and social life. They enthusiastically espoused the need to remove art from the private hands of bourgeois collectors and bring it to the people, into the streets and out into the open. "Let *pictures* (colors) be thrown, like colored rainbows, across streets and squares, from house to house, delighting, ennobling the eye (taste) of the passerby."[121] As mentioned earlier, Lunacharsky understood the necessity to collaborate with avant-garde artists, promoting the ideas of Futurism within the institutions of *Narkompros*. He justified this support by arguing that "the revolution of artistic form corresponded to the spirit of the political revolution."[122] As such, in 1918, a Sub-Section of Applied Arts was launched within *IZO* (visual arts section of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment). The avant-garde artist Olga Rozanova was named head of the department and Rodchenko served as her deputy. At the outset, the department's

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[118] *Ibid.*

[119] Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 99.

[120] Rodchenko, "Line," in *Aleksandr and the Arts of Revolutionary Russia*, p. 128.

[121] Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Decree No.1 on the Democratization of Art," quoted in Viktor Woroszylski, *The Life of Mayakovsky* (New York: Orion Press, 1970), p. 194.

[122] Stephan, p.5.

objective was to organize workshops for training industrial artists. By 1919, however, the department was converted into the Applied Arts Committee of *IZO* with a mandate to oversee and manage the "aesthetics of design in industry."[123]

During the years 1919 and 1920, Rodchenko continued to explore non-objective art, something he had begun to do earlier in his career.[124] By 1921, he, like many avant-garde artists, especially those associated with *INKhUK*, questioned traditional art forms and their social value. For this reason, Rodchenko participated zealously in many of the discussions that took place at *INKhUK,* which sought to understand the nature of the artistic/creative gesture and he championed the need to develop new methods of representation to fulfill the social needs. Accordingly, in September 1921, Rodchenko declared that he would henceforth only produce art for its social value. In November, a few weeks after this event 25 artists and theoreticians led by Osip Brik announced "the absoluteness of Production art and Constructivism as its sole form of expression."[125] Their efforts were aimed at actively engaging artists in factories, editorial offices, and printing plants.[126]

Production art, or Productivism, as it became known, and the Constructivist principles, which guided it,[127] had come about as a reaction to art for art's sake, a construct it sought to eliminate. As early as 1918, art critic and historian Nikolai Punin introduced the first tentative steps towards articulating the theory behind production art:

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[123] Victor Margolin, *The Transformation of Vision: Art and Ideology in the Graphic Design of Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1933*, p. 18.

[124] On February 20, 1914 Rodchenko attended a lecture given by Mayakovsky on a tour through Russia to publicize Futurism and the need to break from the art of the past. This seems to have left a strong impression on Rodchenko as he would later declare that this lecture had provided him with "the second most soul-stirring experience of my life." Soon after this, Rodchenko made a radical break from the traditional exploration of subject matter, methods and materials related to pictorial art. He redirected his efforts towards the creation of unconventional successions of ruler and compass drawings. These drawings became the first examples of Rodchenko's structural use of line, which would influence greatly his application of graphic elements.

[125] Quoted in John Milner's, "Material Values: Alexander Rodchenko and the End of Abstract Art," in *Alexander Rodchenko and the Arts of Revolutionary Russia*, p. 54.

[126] Margolin, p. 16.

[127] Constructivist principles proposed to abolish the traditional artistic practices of composition towards "construction." Objects would no longer be created to express beauty, or the artists' outlook. Instead, objects would be designed to be functional. Linked to Constructivism, Productivism proposed the synthesis of Constructivist principles and formal aspects, so that studio work could be redirected towards more practical activity and the creation of socially useful objects, not works of art. Therefore, Constructivists were to be constructors of a new society, or highly trained master artists for industry.

> [...] no artist knows surfaces as well as certain skilled workers do. The proletariat extends an artistic conception to our everyday life and environment. Bourgeois artists only designed ornamental pieces, leaving their realization to the craftsmen. [...] An entirely new era in art is sure to follow. The proletariat will create new houses, new streets, new objects of everyday life.[128]

Rodchenko, who was fully in agreement with this statement, offered his own support and interpretation in a manifesto published in October 1920, in the catalog for the Nineteenth State Exhibition in Moscow:

> The art of the future will not be the cozy decoration of family homes. It will be just as indispensable as 48-storey skyscrapers, mighty bridges, wireless, aeronautics and submarines, which will be transformed into art.[129]

As a way to further propagate this theory, Rodchenko proposed the notion of an artist-engineer devoted to the production and mobilization of new technology for artistic ends.[130]

It was in the spring of 1920, at *INKhUK* and under the aegis of *IZO Narkompros,* that the principles associated with production art took shape. Rodchenko, a member of its administrative board, founded, along with Varvara Stepanova, Aleksei Babichev, and Nadezhda Bryusova, "A Working Group of Objective Analysis" (*Obsshchaya rabochaya gruppa ob'ektivnogo analia*), which held its first meeting on November 23, 1920. The purpose of the group was to explore the basic elements of artistic forms such as line, color and texture within the context of composition and construction. This is the moment referred to as the period of "laboratory art" at *INKhUK,* when the government allowed for experimentation in all manners of media. In the summer of 1921, however, under the chairmanship of Osip Brik, the focus of the Working Group shifted from experimental to theoretical work. Rodchenko participated actively in the debates, which took place that fall when the Productivist program was defined.[131]

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[128] Nikolai Punin's address at a meeting in the Palace of Artists, November 24, 1918, quoted in German Karginov's, *Rodchenko* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), p. 88.

[129] Statement made by Rodchenko in 1920. Refer to Milner's *Alexander Rodchenko and the Arts of Revolutionary Russia*, p. 8.

[130] Margolin, p. 19.

[131] Margolin, p. 22.

While some theoreticians such as Nikolai Tarabukin proclaimed the "end of easel painting," others such as Rodchenko lectured on the properties of individual pictorial elements such as the "line," explaining the relation between the "expedient utilization of material and an object's predetermined purpose."[132] Thus, in 1922, Rodchenko embraced the principles of production art, as he became an active designer for the State. As early as 1919, he had demonstrated his predisposition for agitational art, when he introduced a style of design, which was both strong in its composition of bold lines and the use of heavy characters and typeset. Clearly, Rodchenko was committed to revolutionizing public consciousness through mass communications, whether on the printed page or in the empirical word.[133] This is notable in his design for a news kiosk, a utilitarian construction exhibited at the Eleventh State exhibition in 1919. Designed as a multimedia information center, the kiosk included a huge billboard, a projector to advertise events, a speaker's rostrum, space to put up posters and a place to display books and newspapers. The design exemplified many of the elements of a Constructivist work. The composition of basic elements and the use of materials are completely in accordance with the tenets identified by Rodchenko and Stepanova in their "Productivist Manifesto" published the next year. Rodchenko had in fact attempted to create a connection between ideology (propagating the principles of Communism) and the constructive organization of materials by the artist.

By the beginning of 1923 Rodchenko was working primarily as a graphic designer. Sponsored primarily by the State and state-run enterprises, Rodchenko found a wider audience for his work by applying his graphic style to the design of commercial packaging, agitation posters and advertisements. During this time, Rodchenko also became an active member of *LEF*. Because of his wide-ranging experience, it is not surprising that he was named art director of the new venture publication *Lef*. Rodchenko's contribution as art director to the journal became evident as soon as the first issue hit the stands. His covers were striking and effectively supported the agitational resolve of the articles the journal contained.

Rodchenko's style was both energetic and powerful. It was characterized by bold and innovative typography. Large characters were organized along thick horizontal and vertical

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[132] *Ibid.*

[133] *Ibid.*

rules directly inviting the eye to absorb the message. Simple, shortened statements (not unlike slogans) along with the use of minimal colors, such as black and red, and the mobilization of photomontage and photography instead of illustrations dominated the journal's pages. But it is the large, compelling typeset throughout, which had the most impact on the reader. It acted in essence as a visual representation of arresting noises shouted through a loudspeaker. This referred to the way loudspeakers were utilized to propagate loudly messages of the state in mass rallies within city squares.[134] Although Italian Futurist painters already had put this visual strategy into practice, for example in Carlo Carrà's 1914 collage *Interventionist Manifestation,* the originality of Rodchenko's contribution is twofold: first, his ability to enhance the transfer of knowledge through visual presentation and layout of text, thereby legitimizing the message; and secondly, his ability to transfer from singular piece of artwork to mass-produced media.

If, as noted above, the covers designed by Rodchenko for *Lef* were strong and aggressive, they also attempted to challenge the reader to take note and participate in the message they offered.[135] On the cover of *Lef* no. 1 (Figure 1.1), and *Lef* no. 2 (Figure 1.2) for example, viewers are visually reminded of a poster, which is designed to be both eye-catching and informative.[136] The printed letters dominate the covers and support the case that Rodchenko's intent was to quickly engage the reader in a way that only posters could.[137] By the third issue of the journal, Rodchenko's visual evolution was palpable; with each new cover, his designs demonstrated his ability to capitalize on graphic applications to improve his approach to propagate a more defined message. Looking at the cover of *Lef* no. 3 (Figure 1.3), the viewer is able to quickly recognize the visual language. An airplane seems to be launching a pen downwards toward an ape that in turn seems to be launching an arrow upwards toward the plane. The word *Lef* is written on the side of the plane. While the visual images are clear and their message remains ambiguous, it is reasonable to assume—based on Rodchenko's

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[134] Margolin, p. 34.

[135] In Chapter 3 I will discuss in more depth the strategic application of graphic elements by Rodchenko in order to better understand how graphic design as an artistic form has the potential to mobilize a targeted audience in order to communicate an intended message effectively.

[136] I will be going into more detail in Chapter 2 on how agitational posters after the Revolution were utilized by the Bolsheviks as a tool to mobilize the masses.

[137] Margolin, p. 35.

productivist theories—that his images suggest that by leveraging progress and technology (the plane), *Lef* (the brand illustrated on the side of the plane) hoped to create a new mass consciousness (the pen) no longer blinded by its inadequate past (the ape). Rodchenko's clever use of image and text, and the graphic rendition of the latter, demonstrates how the elements on his covers formed an optimal combination as a means to attain the journal's objective, whose principal aim was to agitate using new artistic ideas for social ends.

Rodchenko's artistic contribution during the captivating first decade of the USSR can only be described as compelling and revolutionary. When examining his work, it would appear on the surface that Rodchenko's artistic evolution reached its zenith with the development of Constructivism. However, upon further examination it would be remiss to categorize his artistic approach so systematically. It is true that Rodchenko was at the forefront of this movement, contributing to it not only on a formal, creative level but also in the shaping of its theoretical discourse.[138] It is the impact of his inspired graphic designs as "communication" produced in the latter part of the 1920s, however, which continues to influence the field of communication arts today. The next chapter will help to situate Rodchenko's artistic progression during this exciting period—demonstrating the connectivity, which exists between its discursive and institutional context.

[138] Magdalena Drabowsky, Leah Dickerman and Peter Galassi, eds, *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: Abrams, 1998), p. 19.

CHAPTER II

LEF AS COMMUNICATIVE INSTRUMENT

2.1 The Emergence of New Modes of Representation at *INKhUK*

> In essence, communism is dynamic…Whom will communism appoint as its builder? An architect who aestheticizes? Of course not. The realm of spatial and constructive structures in the culture of the future will belong to the Constructivists…If a kind of immortality was what was demanded of earlier structures…the Constructivist [now] faces other kinds of…demands…
>
> [I]f communism demands that certain task be fulfilled today, it has to be understood that tomorrow it will ask that [yet] another task be fulfilled, and this second task must be fulfilled in such a way as to supplement, rather than displace [that] which is fulfilled today.
>
> Aleksei Gan

In spring of 1918, Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda was launched. Citing Tomasso Campanella's utopian work *The City of the Sun,*[139]Lenin details the inspiration behind the Plan,

> Campanella in his *City of the Sun* says that the walls of his fantastic socialist city are covered with frescoes which, serving the youth as a graphic lesson in natural science and history, arouse civil feelings and, in a word, participate in the business of raising and educating the new generation. It seems to me that this, far from being naïve and with certain changes, could be adopted by us and put into operation now…I have called what I am thinking of "monumental propaganda."[140]

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[139] Anatoly Lunacharsky, Commissar of Enlightenment recorded that Lenin had cited Campanella and his utopian work *The City of the Sun.* Christina Lodder's, "Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda," in Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor, eds, *Art of the Soviets*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press), 1993, p. 22.

[140] Lodder's "Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda," p. 22.

According to Anatoly Lunacharsky (who was in charge of the Plan), Campanella's vision cultivated Lenin's own determination of shaping an idealistic socialist society.[141] The Plan had two objectives: first, the elimination of all Tsarist monuments; second, the subsequent replacement of these monuments with "monuments to outstanding persons in the field of revolutionary and social activity, philosophy, literature, science, and art."[142] Detailing Lenin's intent even further, Lunacharsky outlined that the objectives of the monuments were not just political, but served a wider educational purpose. Exhibited in public places, they would "serve the aim of extensive propaganda rather than the aim of immortalization."[143]

Acknowledging the value of artists for having image-making abilities Lenin recognized the benefit of harnessing art for educational purposes. Prior to the Revolution he had often expressed his views regarding the benefits of cultural enlightenment: "there will come a time…when the liberated people will rush into science, knowledge, literature, art and architecture, and will show the world the wonder of new achievements in every kind of field."[144] Based on statements such as this, it is reasonable to assume that Lenin encouraged the exploitation of modern technologies and revolutionary ideas to promote change and growth. Having said this, it should be noted that Lenin was mindful that in order to achieve such change and growth it was imperative to gain the support of the peasant and working class (the masses). Lenin's reasoning was undoubtedly influenced by the philosophical theories of Karl Marx, who proposed in his text *The German Ideology* that a revolutionary consciousness by the masses was an absolute requirement to ensure the effective transition to socialism. Furthermore, Marx discussed how language (both visual and written)—as a system of communication—is essentially a form of practical consciousness, which should be perceived as a social product and as such was part of the social process.[145] Appropriating these convictions put forth by Marx in his own writings, Lenin declared that the successful

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[141] *Ibid.*

[142] Lawton, p. 20.

[143] Lawton, p. 21.

[144] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[145] Karl Marx, *Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, eds, T.B Bottomore and M. Rubel (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 85.

realization of the Party's vision for a new socialist society was greatly dependent on the construction of a new mass consciousness.

Understanding the existing limitations of the public, such as having to deal with a largely illiterate population,[146] Lenin and the party recognized they needed to put into place a powerful offensive to propagate their message. The new heroes, such as the industrial worker, the revolutionary soldier or the Party member, for example, needed to be shown in a way that could be recognized and interpreted instantly. Based on this precondition, the establishment of new systems of communications was necessary—systems comprised mainly of bold, captivating visuals that engaged the viewer to participate in the information. Thus, additional cultural programs along with Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda were initiated by the State including the launch of *agitprop* (agitation-speech/propaganda-visual arts) measures. These enacted measures were comprised mainly of official State parades, spectacles, public kiosks, films, agit-stations (usually located near train stations) and posters, all commissioned and organized as instruments to indoctrinate citizens of the State. Even more noteworthy was the astute tactic of deploying many of these same measures to the countryside via agit-trains and agit-ships, where revolutionary leaflets, newsreels, and *agitki* (short propaganda films) could be distributed and shown in areas where the highest concentration of illiterate citizens lived.[147]

The use of art for political motives, such as Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda is often referred to in the writings of Soviet and Western art historians as one of the pivotal events in a history that saw art exploited specifically to the service of the State and its ideology.[148] Indeed, Lenin's propaganda programs, which were put in practice via painting, architecture, sculpture, graphics and music on the streets of the city, championed the notion of a synthesis of the arts working together to disseminate a desired political objective. Not only were these programs Lenin's interpretation of Campanella's utopian vision, but also

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[146] Illiteracy numbers from 1917 are not available but twenty years earlier a national census released data confirming that approximately 83 percent of the rural population and approximately 55 percent of the urban population was illiterate. Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 4.

[147] For a more concise account of agitprop measures as described refer to Chapter 2 of Kenez's book, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, pp. 50-69.

[148] Lawton, p. 16.

more importantly, they indicated that Lenin was engineering a course towards the fusion of art and life, which was one of the key expedients of transforming mass consciousness as denoted by Marx.[149] The concept was raised in his work *The State and Revolution,* published in 1917, and also in the debates surrounding many of the avant-garde artistic circles at that time.[150] In a speech at the opening of *Svomas* (*Svobodnye gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye masterskiye* – Free State Art Studios) in October 1918, Lunacharsky confirmed Lenin's intent by proclaiming, "To link art with life—this is the task of the new art."[151] Therefore, under the leadership of Lunacharsky, avant-garde artists committed to the Revolution and the socialist agenda were commissioned to aid in the execution of these initiatives set in motion by Lenin and the Party. Rodchenko, who was one of the many artists commissioned by the State who welcomed the Revolution, stated, "I became utterly engrossed in it with all my will."[152]

The impact and success of some of these propaganda initiatives varied. For example, although Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda was perceived at the time to be ambitious and in theory an inspired idea,[153] in the end, due to technical problems such as using impermanent materials (which deteriorated quickly due to harsh climate conditions), and the lack of technically inexperienced sculptors, the Plan is often viewed by some critics as a failure.[154] However, the visual propaganda measures inaugurated alongside the Plan such as the agitprop campaigns contributed significantly towards the support of the State by the population,[155] but more importantly they also provided the foundation for the development of

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[149] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[150] *Ibid.*

[151] *Ibid.*

[152] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 48.

[153] At a meeting with artists and sculptors sometime during the winter of 1917-1918, Lunacharsky spoke of the Plan referring to it as another great and exciting idea from Vladimir Ilich. Lodder, "Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda," p. 19.

[154] One critic to note is John E. Bowlt who referred to the Plan as a "monumental failure." For more on this topic refer to Bowlt's article "Russian Sculpture and Lenin's Plan of Monumental Propaganda," in H. A. Millon and L. Nochlin, eds, *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics* (London: London and MIT Press, 1978), pp. 183-93.

[155] The success of the campaigns and impact they really had is difficult to ascertain. It is a question that is being debated till this day. However, it is reasonable to argue that the campaign did have a strong impact on the society at the time as the socialist agenda set by Lenin and the Party did gain momentum and flourish during the first decade of its existence. For an interesting point of view regarding this debate, refer to Kenez's Conclusion in *The Birth of a Propaganda State,* pp. 251-55.

Constructivism. That foundation took shape by exposing participating artists to three key activities: experience in agitation, experience in practical artistic affairs (administration) and direct experience with revolutionary ideology.[156]

Although briefly introduced in the previous chapter, a more in depth examination of Constructivism and the Constructivist/Productivist principles is necessary as these movements, which were developed at the institution of *INKhUK,* with the participation of Rodchenko, influenced significantly Rodchenko's artistic evolution in the field of communication arts and his subsequent mobilization of new technologies.

Under the direction of *IZO Narkompros, INKhUK* (*Institut Khudozhestvennoi Kultury* - The Institute of Artistic Culture - Moscow), created in March 1920, was a State-funded educational art institution. The main purpose of the institute set by *Narkompros* was to provide members with a research facility devoted to theoretically oriented artistic development.[157] *IZO* director, David Shterenberg, defined the function of *INKhUK* plainly: "We organized the *INKhUK* as a cell *[iacheiku]* for the determination of scientific hypotheses on matters of art."[158] *INKhUK* held a place of importance because it was here that Constructivist aesthetics emerged during its first year of existence when idealism and eclectic debate were at their heights of activity.[159]

One of the more thought-provoking debates to surface in the first year of *INKhUK*'s existence was the question of composition versus construction. Rodchenko, one of the initial members at *INKhUK* and also one of the most committed to the debate, described it as such: "Composition is based on the concept of taste 'outdated artistic values'; mere aesthetics, whereas construction and organization must rise from technology and engineering."[160] Some artists embraced this constructivist ideology; others, however, were reluctant to completely forego aesthetic concerns and the representation of two-dimensional work. Thus, in view of

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[156] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 47.

[157] Gough, p. 23.

[158] *Ibid.* For a more detailed account of *INKhUK's* foundation, refer to Selim Khan Magomedov's, "INKhUK: Vozniknovemie, formirovanie I pervyi perid raboty, 1920," in *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie*, 80, no. 2 (1981), pp. 332-68.

[159] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 78.

[160] *Ibid.*, p. 88.

this, the First Working Group of Constructivists was set up within the *INKhUK* in March 1921. This forum essentially became the arena where constructivist theory was developed. The group, initially comprised of Rodchenko, Stepanova, and Gan, declared: "Art in the past stood in the place of religion. It arose from the mainsprings of individualism and as such, was totally irrelevant to the demands of the present 'purifying period'."[161] The Constructivists concluded that it was necessary to synthesize the ideological part of their work with the formal part in order to have a real transference of laboratory work and experimentation towards real practical activity. Hence, the group moved from theorizing to real laboratory experiments and adopted the basis for "communistic expression of material structures."[162] For Rodchenko there was only one kind of construction. He defined it as "laid-bare construction" (*obnazhennaia konstrucktsiia*), a configuration in which the maker organizes design and materials for a designated purpose or goal (*tsel*).[163] On the other hand, composition was based on the makers' own tasteful selection of elements and therefore lacked any organizational purpose or goal.[164] In other words, real construction was a utilitarian necessity. This utilitarian thesis advanced by Rodchenko was favored by most members of *INKhUK,* thereby forming the basis for the program that emerged and was formalized for the first time in 1922, in Aleksei Gan's book *Konstruktivism*[165]. The program was based on three principles: *Tektonika*; defined as the ideological tenets of Communism: *Faktura*; referring to the appropriate use of industrial materials, and *Konstruktsiya,* the process in which the materials were organized so as to not compromise the integrity of the *Tektonika* or *Faktura.*[166] These three elements became the essence towards the understanding and execution going forward of all categories of industrial production. As a result, during its second year, *INKhUK* members shifted their artistic applications from laboratory Constructivists to Productivists or production workers (*proizvodstvenniki*).[167] In an article published in *Russian Art (Russkoe iskusstvo),* in 1923,

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[161] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 94.

[162] *Ibid.*

[163] Gough, p. 39.

[164] *Ibid.*

[165] For a more comprehensive account of the principles of "construction" refer to Aleksei Gan's book *Konstruktivism* (Tver: Tverskoe izdatelstvo, 1922).

[166] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 99.

[167] Gough, p. 101.

Nikolai Tarabukin quotes Brik who recounted how on November 21, 1921, "Twenty-five leading masters (*masterov*) of the Left, under the pressure of the revolutionary conditions of the present, rejected 'pure' forms of art, acknowledging self-sufficient easelism as obsolete (*izzhitym*) and their own activity as merely that of painters—that is, as without purpose (*bestselnoi*). The new artist hoisted his productivist flag."[168]

Now that *INKhUK* had adopted the Productivist platform, members of the Constructivist group were committed to the idea that they should create useful objects, not works of art, thus involving themselves in real practical work in production. As such, a commitment was made by *INKhUK* to promote "Production Art" as an absolute value and "Constructivism" as its only form of expression.[169] What quickly became apparent, however, was the problem of how to "successfully" merge art and industry. It was suggested that this merger could be "successful" only by shifting the understanding or the role of the artists towards a new profession, an "artist-engineer" or "artist-constructor."[170] This individual would possess the perfect combination of gifted artist and experienced director of technology.[171] Through his mass-produced objects, the "artist-constructor" would be able to provide to the proletariat consumer everyday items that not only represented, but also symbolized the values of the Revolution.[172]

To develop these "artist-engineers/constructors" the Constructivists from *INKhUK* turned to *VKhUTEMAS*[173] (*Vysshiye Khudozhestvenno-Technicheskiye Masterskiye* – Moscow Higher Art and Technical Studios) to explore and put into practice their concepts. Like *INKhUK*, *VKhUTEMAS* was an educational art institution funded by the State, which had been organized in 1920. The purpose of the school was to "to prepare highly qualified master

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[168] As cited in Gough, p. 102.

[169] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, pp. 112-22.

[170] *Ibid.*

[171] *Ibid.*

[172] Viktor Margolin, *Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 84.

[173] In 1918, the Stroganov School of Applied Art and the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, including some private studios were eradicated. *Svomas* (the Free State Art Studios) were formed in their place. The studios had been founded by the Soviet State in the hopes of creating an environment that would inspire the development of individual artistic abilities, free of the repressive principles that had been at the core of the Imperial Academy. In 1920, *Svomas* was replaced by *VKhUTEMAS.*

artists for industry, as well as instructors and directors of professional and technical education."[174] Thus, the studios within the institute were organized into artistic and industrial faculties geared at training artists for industry. While the art faculties taught courses in graphics, sculpture and architecture, the industrial faculties were devoted to teaching textiles, printing, ceramics, woodworking and metalworking. Its contribution put in place a context in which artistic exploration could be practiced; new ideas were generated as artists were given the ability to experiment independently with artistic matters. As we will see, it is within this arena that Productivism or Production Art flourished.

In their first year, students at *VKhUTEMAS* took part in the Basic Course. It is within this domain that the influence of *INKhUK* is reflected best as the programs incorporated *INKhUK*'s Constructivist orientation of synthesizing art with technological and social purpose. In essence, the Basic Course provided students the necessary theoretical and practical bases, which would prepare them towards becoming an "artist-constructor."[175]

INKhUK in 1923 described its close relationship with *VKhUTEMAS* and especially the Basic Course in the journal *Russian Art*:

> The vast majority of the Institute's members are also professors at the *VKhUTEMAS*. Their practical work in the studios is inevitably and naturally conducted in ideological union and dependence on *INKhUK*. That hard line of conduct, that friendship and solidarity of the left professors of *VKhUTEMAS* is undoubtedly based on the situation outlined above.
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> Moreover, besides the formal working out of the programmes for the workshops, *INKhUK* itself took part in the work of *VKhUTEMAS*. The principle of the disciplines, introduced at the *VKhUTEMAS*, was worked out at *INKhUK*, precisely at the time when the Institute was concentrating its attention on the basic problems of easel painting. Finally the organization and the work of the pedagogical section of *INKhUK* is a result of this concentration – its establishment was dictated by natural necessity.[176]

The precise content of the Basic Course, which was given for the first three years of the Basic Division's existence, is hard to confirm but five disciplines seem to have been taught: revelation of color, revelation of form through color, simultaneity of form and color on the

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[174] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 112.

[175] As quoted in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 122.

[176] As quoted in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 122.

plane, color on the plane (Suprematism) and construction, which was instructed by Rodchenko. Although teaching in these varied disciplines was based mainly on the art of painting, the introduction of Constructivist terminology is evident in their titles.[177] By 1923, these disciplines were reorganized into three *Kontsentry*'s (foci of study).[178] Graphics, textiles and painting were part of the plane and color *Kontsentr* (by 1925, the graphic disciplines became an independent *Kontsentr*, where Rodchenko played a key role in the development of its program); metalwork, woodwork, sculpture and ceramics were part of the volume and space *Kontsentr,* and architecture became part of the space and volume *Kontsentr*.[179]

Additionally, in 1926, the *Dermetfak* faculty was created by merging the Woodwork faculty (*Derevoobrabatyvayushchii fakultet*) with the Metalwork faculty (*Metalloobrabatyvayushchii fakultet*).[180] The staff included many of the artists who had been instrumental in formulating Constructivist theory, such as Rodchenko, who had been assigned as deputy head of the Metal faculty (*Metfak),* in 1922. The objects produced by the *Dermetfak* were designed based on the principles set forth by the *INKhUK* Constructivists and clearly complied with the production of useful objects by the use of appropriate materials and their intended function. Even though many design prototypes were produced at *Dermetfak,* very few were considered finished objects ready for production.[181] Furthermore, there is no proof that these designs were ever adopted for mass production.[182] This indicates that no real assessment could be made by the students in terms of determining the legitimacy of their designs as part of a real production situation. However, a more direct reason for the lack of production is attributed to insufficient funding and the shortage of materials.[183]

Production Art and Constructivist practices did, in fact, obtain some success in the field of graphic design, textiles, fashion, furniture and theater. For example, designs for objects

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[177] For a full account of *VKhTUMAS,* refer to Selim O. Khan Magomedov, *VHUTEMAS: Moscou, 1920-1930* (Paris: Editions du Regard, 1990).

[178] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 124.

[179] *Ibid.*

[180] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

[181] *Ibid.*, p. 139.

[182] *Ibid.*

[183] *Ibid.*

such as agitational stands and kiosks provided the perfect cutting-edge stage to propagate the communicative agenda set by the State to indoctrinate the masses. Even so, as early as 1924, Pyotr Neznamov published in an issue of *Lef* an article that focused on the constraints that confronted Constructivist artists. He argued that the only two effective areas of practical activity of Constructivism could be found in the design of advertising posters and the construction of models.[184] Gan was even more candid in his comments. Indeed, in 1928, he declared that the Constructivists had been able to illustrate the principles of their school of thought more consistently through practical work in the sphere of "graphics, cinematography and architecture."[185] He argued that in the field of graphics, the Constructivist artist had accomplished the maximal social and artistic impact with the production of books, magazines and newspapers. Defining it as agitational literature, Gan further explained that these "artistic and productionist methods"[186] were primarily designed to engineer the social and political needs of the Party and create a cognitive arena for the viewer.[187]

2.2 Rodchenko and the Mobilization of New Technologies

> The value of the photograph itself came to assume primary importance; the photograph is no longer the raw material for montage or for some kind of illustrated composition but as an independent and complete totality.[188]
>
> Varvara Stepanova

Rodchenko's active participation in the development of Constructivist/Productivist principles at *INKhUK* influenced greatly his own artistic growth. This is evident in the graphic work he realized throughout the 1920s. For Rodchenko, graphic design needed to comply with the tenets of Constructivist thought. The second section of this chapter will investigate Rodchenko's graphic evolution within the scope of Constructivist theory, and it

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[184] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 182.

[185] *Ibid.*

[186] *Ibid.*

[187] *Ibid.*, p. 183.

[188] Stepanova describing how Rodchenko moved from the "conglomerate photomontage" or the assemblage of photographic fragments to the montage or series of individual pictures as quoted by Margolin in *The Transformation of Vision: Art and Ideology in the Graphic Design of Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1933*, p. 62.

will demonstrate how he became an "artist-constructor" in the service of socialism by communicating revolutionary values through his mass media designs.

Capitalizing on the progress of technology in the print and film industry, the poster, which before the Revolution of 1917 was regarded as a basic form of graphic representation, became the Party's favorite instrument of propaganda following the Revolution.[189] As a genre, posters had steadily evolved, establishing their powerful position in the pantheon of communicative arts inasmuch as they had the ability to influence a targeted audience in any sector of society by interfacing directly in a comprehensible graphic vocabulary, utilizing everyday language that was both appealing and gripping.[190] Designed primarily using vivid colors, bold typeface and creative illustrations, posters had the potential to be visually powerful. Additionally, poster art provided the means to represent a variety of themes, which could be designed effectively to respond to social and cultural shifts.[191] Other important advantages included their reproduction value; not only could posters be printed in mass quantities, but also, the format in which they were printed facilitated their physical deployment and distribution.[192]

Recognizing that posters had the potential to propagate on a grand scale their new socialist agenda to the masses, the Party organized within the Russian Telegraph Agency (*ROSTA-Rossiyskoye telegrafnoye agentstvo*-Russia's main news agency) a program dedicated to the design and production of propaganda posters, "forcing poster art into the service of the new progressive social order."[193] Indeed, posters produced under *ROSTA* from September 1919 till midyear of 1921 played a key role in the expansion of the graphic arts. Mainly commissioned to maintain support for the Red Army during the Civil War, the large, rudimentary, stenciled posters displayed mainly in the windows of vacant shops reported current events in cartoon-like storyboards composed of simple pictures, illustrating the

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[189] For a more detailed account of Soviet political posters, refer to Bonnell's *The Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin.*

[190] Bonnell, p. 1.

[191] *Ibid.*

[192] *Ibid.*

[193] Elena Barkhatova, " 'Modern Icon' or 'Tool for Mass Propaganda?': Russian Debate on the Poster," in Alla Rosenfeld, ed., *Defining Russian Graphic Arts: from Diaghilev to Stalin 1898-1934* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999), p. 134.

political forces of good and evil in metaphorical terms.[194] Although text always accompanied the illustrations, the viewer was not obligated to read the narration, as the images were easily decipherable through the plain use of common visual iconography.[195] The poet Mayakovsky, one of the main designers at *ROSTA* in 1920 recalled his work for the agency, "ROSTA Windows are something fantastic. It is a handful of artists serving, by hand, a huge nation of a hundred and fifty million. It's instantaneous news wires remade into a poster; it's decrees instantly published as ditties. It is a new form introduced directly by life."[196]

By 1923, avant-garde theoreticians such as Mikhail Tarabukin (an important member of *INKhUK* from 1920-1924 who contributed actively in the debates surrounding Production Art and Constructivism) and advocates of Production Art considered the poster as one of the leading models of communicative art or graphic design. Tarabukin described the poster as "the most expressive form of inventiveness and artistry,"[197] stating firmly his belief that "the role of the poster artist is fully the equivalent of the role of the engineer-designer."[198] More important for the purpose of this discussion is Pyotr Neznamov's 1924 statement made in the journal *Lef*[199] recognizing that the "two leading areas of practical activity for Constructivists were the designing of advertising posters and construction of models."[200]

As argued earlier in the first section of this chapter, Rodchenko, through his formal and theoretical contributions at *INKhUK,* was forging the path for a more progressive artistic practice in the political service of the new Soviet society. Abandoning painting in 1921, Rodchenko made his final break with traditional artistic practices of the past. This led him to redirect his practice towards graphic arts aligned with the tenets of Constructivism. Drawing on his experiments within the Graphics *Kontsentr* at *INKhUK,* Rodchenko focused on mass media applications, more specifically in the area of advertising and poster art.

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[194] Victor Margolin, "Constructivism and the Modern Poster," in *Art Journal*, vol. 44, no. 1, The Poster, (Spring, 1984), p. 28.

[195] *Ibid.*

[196] Barkhatova, p. 134.

[197] *Ibid.*, p. 133

[198] *Ibid.*

[199] P. Neznamov, "Proz-raboty A. Lavinskogo," in *Lef,* no. 3, (1924), p. 79.

[200] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 182.

Relying on mechanical technologies, such as print and photography, Rodchenko's goal was to propagate "political modernism" in his work.[201] Representing modern technological progress, these modes of visual representations solidified his commitment as an artist who continuously reevaluated his relationship with artistic practices. Thus, Rodchenko's graphic work evolved dramatically during the early years of the 1920s as he participated actively as a propagandist commissioned by the State. It is estimated that between the years of 1923 to 1925 alone, as an agent for the State economic programs, Rodchenko produced close to 150 advertising posters and packaging designs, many of which were created in collaboration with Mayakovsky.[202]

Rodchenko's graphic designs produced during this period became recognized for their effectiveness in presenting a new vision of society, one that promoted the new Soviet worldview.[203] Through controlled geometric structure patterns (the use of horizontal and vertical lines) along with his use of typeface blocks and rectangular *sans serif*[204] characters his compositions exemplified the simplicity of form. But Rodchenko's strategic application of typography and use of pure color was even more remarkable. The manipulation of type, its thickness, size, spacing, boldness, along with the use of emphasis marks (arrows) and accents (punctuations), were all exploited to emphasize the urgency of the message.[205] By arranging words strategically on the page, the "composition" or "information message" created the visual "speech" enticing the audience to engage in its information.[206] This is exemplified in the posters Rodchenko designed for *Dobrolet* (State airline) in 1923. For each poster, Rodchenko prepared and drafted many sketches. Based on Constructivist processes of design (developed as part of the Graphic *Kontsentr*), the sketches allowed Rodchenko to work

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[201] As quoted in Barkhatova, p. 64.

[202] Dickerman, *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, p. 66.

[203] Margolin, *The Transformation of Vision: Art and Ideology in the Graphic Design of Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1933*, p. 58.

[204] In typography *sans serif* refers to typeface that does not have projecting lines, or *serifs* at the end of characters.

[205] John Milner and Kirill Sokolov, "Constructivist Graphic Design in the USSR between 1917 and the Present," in *Leonardo*, vol. 12, no. 4, (Autumn, 1979), p. 278.

[206] Alexander Lavrentiev, *Heroes of the Avant-Garde: Aleksander Rodchenko* (Moscow: Sergey Gordeev, 2011), p. 192.

through every component of his design, thus justifying their use in accordance to the message being communicated.

Examining one of these posters designed for *Dobrolet* (Figure 2.1), it is easy to see why Rodchenko's designs were deemed effective. An airplane soaring upwards dominates the horizontal surface, the word *Dobrolet* is written on the side of the plane (a theme similar to the one discussed earlier which was featured on the cover of *Lef* no. 3), there is a two-color application, minimal use of text with one dominant exclamation on the left vertical plane, "*всем... всем... всем... тот не гражданин ссср кто добролета не акционер—ДОБРОЛЕТ!* " ("all... all... all... he who is not a citizen of the USSR who is not a shareholder—*Dobrolet*!"). The reader who engaged with this poster was being called to action to invest in *Dobrolet* shares. As a shareholder not only could the consumer be enlightened by technical progress, but in addition, and more importantly, he/she could participate actively in the economic development of the new State. Rodchenko's clever application of type and color is also abundant in this example. The dominant exclamation mark strategically placed on the left (socialism) vertical plane is bold. It suggests that the call to action is urgent. The color applications are just as significant; red (Communism)[207] is framed by black (proletariat). There are two additional key observations to be made here. The first is that the color red, which dominates the surface, is a symbol often used by artists to represent the Soviet State in those years. The second regards the use of the color black, which frames the red area demonstrating that only with the active participation of the proletariat can socialist enlightenment be achieved. It is also noteworthy to draw attention to the fact that the horizontal top line of the black frame is left open on the left corner. Instead of enclosing the red area completely, the line with a pointed arrow turns downwards pointing to the plane. This is another clever application devised by Rodchenko, which suggests that the proletariat is being prompted to enter into a new enlightened world and participate in its social order.

While working on his graphic projects with Mayakovsky, Rodchenko began to experiment with photography. It did not take long for Rodchenko to recognize the benefits of

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[207] Following the Revolution certain colors became associated with specific objects and entities. Red represented Communism and black, the Proletariat. For a more detailed account of the iconography that emerged after the Revolution refer to Bonnell's book *The Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin.*

using photographs in his graphic designs. Referring to posters specifically, Rodchenko explains the advantage in applying photographic images:

> This precision and documentary element lend the snapshot a force of effect on the viewer such as a graphic depiction can never attain. A poster on the subject of famine composed of snapshots of starving people makes a much stronger impression than one of carrying sketches of the same.[208]

For Rodchenko, the integration of photography in his graphic designs aided in solidifying the process to "construct" tangible values aimed at revolutionary enlightenment. His writings[209] reveal that he was convinced that new technologies, such as photography would cater more effectively to the modern need for "relevance." Thus, through the exploitation of modern technologies in his designs, Rodchenko could be more effective in communicating the intended information to the masses. Rodchenko believed that this contrast in structure privileged photography as a medium for modern signification.[210] Just has he had done earlier at *INKhUK* with his explorations with constructions, underlining the raw qualities of the abstract line, form, and space, he refused to compromise the mechanical precision of the camera.

Understanding the need to illustrate through his works the utopian struggle for a better future,[211] Rodchenko realized the necessity to integrate elements that would demonstrate time as a dynamic condition in constant evolution. For Rodchenko, photography had the potential to document the visual representation of dynamic events as opposed to the representation of static conditions.[212] He surmised that photography (not unlike film) had the power to unfold in "time." In his 1928 essay, "Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot," his view regarding the benefits of utilizing photography in the context of illustrating reality was evident as he posited the disparity of painting and photography as "a battle between eternity

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[208] As quoted in Margolin, *The Transformation of Vision: Art and Ideology in the Graphic Design of Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1933*, p. 42.

[209] Many of Rodchenko's writings regarding his artistic explorations and motivations can be found in Lavrentiev's Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future.

[210] *Ibid.*

[211] Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy 1917-1946*, p. 13.

[212] *Ibid.*

and the moment."[213] Using the depiction of Lenin as an example, he claimed that a painted portrait could not express Lenin's true nature as well as a file of thousands of photographs of him in different situations.[214]

> It should be stated firmly that with the appearance of photographs there can be no question of a single, immutable portrait. Moreover, a man is just not one sum total; he is many, and sometimes they are quite opposed.[215]

Rodchenko was making reference to the gathering of moments in time that became events by association.[216] Accordingly, Rodchenko started to integrate photographic imagery strategically into his graphic designs. Because Rodchenko was not initially a photographer when he opted to incorporate photographic images in his work during the first few years of the 1920s, he was obligated to commission photographs for his first photomontage constructions. He quickly recognized, however, the limitations of commissioning various artists, as the size, angles, and perspectives of the photographs were dependent on the approach of others.[217] In response to this, in 1924, Rodchenko took up photography himself.

Having worked closely with colleague (at *LEF*) and film director Dziga Vertov on the *Kino-Pravda*[218] newsreels in 1922 seems to have influenced Rodchenko's interest in narrative sequences.[219] Observing Vertov's artistic process, Rodchenko learned that a new type of narrative could be constructed from separate frames of film, each incorporating a different visual link to the main theme.[220] Not unlike the application of photomontage components, which were applied following a designated pattern set by the designer to relay a specific message, Rodchenko concluded that he could provide through his photography more information about a subject by the process of serial production. This led him to declare his

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[213] Margolin, *Constructivism and the Modern Poster*, p. 29.

[214] *Ibid.*

[215] Margolin, *The Transformation of Vision: Art and Ideology in the Graphic Design of Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1933*, p. 62.

[216] *Ibid.*

[217] *Ibid.*, p. 58.

[218] Kino-Pravda (film-truth) was a series of documentary films produced in 1922. Vertov through his art direction focused on capturing fragments of reality, which he believed had the potential for a deeper truth when linked together.

[219] Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia*, p. 126.

[220] *Ibid.*

opposition regarding the notion of unique representation, where an image was to express one conventional truth.[221] Working alternatively between two kinds of sequences, temporal (documenting a subject over time) and spatial (documenting different perspectives at a particular time), Rodchenko discovered that the camera had the potential to be a revolutionary medium. It provided him a fresh approach to communicate new dimensions of reality; this was considerably significant as it demonstrated his astute perception that photographs, although described as a mechanical visual representation of true facts, also had the power to manipulate that fact to reflect a desired message. Rodchenko used photography not only as a propagandist instrument but also as a way to "agitate for a new vision of society,"[222] a vision that would aid in demonstrating the Soviet themes and this was in a direct correlation with the consciousness of the modern man.[223]

It is important to investigate fully one of the photographs taken by Rodchenko during this period in order to interpret more comprehensively the theories described above and situate Rodchenko's photographic evolution, which would eventually influence greatly his artistic contribution to the journal *Novy Lef*. Portrait of Mother is a 22.9 x 15.9 cm gelatin silver print (Figure 2.2), which was taken by Rodchenko in his small Moscovite apartment on Miasnitskaya Street in 1924. Reviewing the photograph for the first time, nothing seems to insinuate that the representation (portrait) of Rodchenko's mother is anything more complex than Rodchenko capturing her image spontaneously during a typical occasion. Upon closer review, however, it becomes unmistakable that there are elaborate political undertones present in the image. As this is a portrait, establishing its intent should be a simple task. Portraits in the traditional sense were usually produced or commissioned to confirm the existence of an individual. Commonly, the subject was surrounded by objects that announced what he/she was or whom he/she would like to be recognized as. However, there is nothing straightforward about this portrait and although the photo is labeled *portrait of mother*, the main function of its message is not transparent. Indeed, its ambiguity is testament to

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[221] *Ibid.*

[222] Margolin, *The Transformation of Vision: Art and Ideology in the Graphic Design of Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1933*, p. 58.

[223] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 202.

Rodchenko's artistic cleverness. I will argue that it is not a portrait of his mother but a self-portrait of Rodchenko himself.

Here are some of the key elements that have prompted this hypothesis. First: Rodchenko's formal use of space. The subject dominates the frame; she is center stage, clearly the story is about her. Interestingly, however, she is not looking directly at the viewer. Why not? Most portraits have the subject looking forward, inviting the viewer to interact and acknowledge what is proposed. Here, however, the subject is looking down, intensely engaged at her task, reading what appears to be a journal or magazine. You "the spectator" are guided to look down with her. And as you do, you are confronted with the object of the subject's interest. Immediately you become intrigued and want to participate in the discourse that has aroused such interest. Rodchenko anticipates this curiosity and tactically has left a space for the viewer, an invitation to sit down in front of the subject and join in the act. Rodchenko has directly established the two main functions of communication: first, the core of the message lies with the "sender;" and second, the "receiver" must participate in the endeavor in order for the message to be fulfilled. In other words, Rodchenko is announcing the subject (himself) and inciting his audience (you) to take part in the conversation. To complete the message's full significance, however, Rodchenko needed to include distinct "signs" creatively to ensure that all channels of communication were working collaboratively, thus solidifying the *intended message.*[224]

Let us review some of these additional "signs" that are of consequence, beginning with the geometric construction of the image. The strategic position and placement of objects within the framework, such as the picture frames hanging on the backdrop (walls) create a vertical and horizontal matrix similar to those found in printed page layouts guiding the viewer on how the message should be read. Also, the subject has been positioned and photographed in front of the corner,[225] where the two walls meet, clearly forging a vertical line. By photographing the subject against this grid pattern, Rodchenko was adhering to the

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[224] "Signs" in this context makes reference to linguist Ferdinand de Saussaure's theory that a "sign" is described as a "double entity," made up of a *signifier* and the *signified.*

[225] Traditionally, religious icons were placed in the corner of a designated room in the house. I am also suggesting that Rodchenko, by positioning his subject in front of the corner of his room, was establishing that socialism had replaced religion and that the new socialist man was now the icon.

Constructivist principles established at *VKhUTEMAS*.[226] Rodchenko only intensifies the use of the geometric pattern with the clothing the subject is wearing. Prominent and severe, the print patterns of the fabrics reinforce the grid with their bold stripes and dots. Additionally, they are clearly worker's clothes. The head scarf, which is tied at the back of the subject's neck, makes allusion that she is a factory worker, a "proletarian."[227] The pose of the subject is also of import. She is sitting and the viewer is able to see only the upper part of her body; Rodchenko is ensuring you are focused on the important elements, her face and her arms. Her right arm is raised with the hand leaning near her temple while holding a pair of glasses. The left arm is resting on the flat surface (table/desk), solidly grasping her right elbow. One hand is directed upwards while the other is directed towards the right. Both are directional, reminiscent of pointing arrows. Renowned semiotician Thomas Sebeok argued that there was much implication in the use of hands in imagery and the manner in which they were directed. He goes on to suggest that pointing "up" signified life, future, high status, having control or power[228] while pointing "right" signified going forward, forgetting the past.[229] For Rodchenko the present was a place where you could set in motion new possibilities for the future.[230] The spectrum existing between the present and the future created an interesting dialogue, a struggle between conditions of life as they were, versus those that had yet to materialize.[231]

Let us now look at another key "sign," the eyeglasses, which the subject is holding. They are not being worn in a traditional sense, why not? Why is the subject holding them in her right hand with only one lens pressed against her right eye? At first, one is reminded of a monocle, a single eyeglass, which was notably worn by educated men. However, it is the portrait of Brik taken by Rodchenko for the magazine *Lef* (Fig. 2.3), which should be noted

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[226] Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia*, p. 128.

[227] New visual vocabularies were created by artists and introduced in posters and media commissioned by the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution. The head scarf tied at the back of the neck was created as representative of a female factory worker. For a concise review of the new visual iconography introduced by artists after the Revolution in support of the State objectives, refer to Bonnell's *The Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin*.

[228] Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), Chapter 4.

[229] *Ibid.*

[230] Margolin's essay "Constructivism and the Modern Poster," p. 29.

[231] *Ibid.*

here. In this photo, Brik is wearing round glasses with an illustration of the magazine's logo painted on the right lens. But as a viewer the photo is reversed and so, the logo is on the left side of the image. Clearly, Rodchenko (based on the argument that the photo is a self-portrait) was associating himself with Brik and *Lef*.

The most persuasive "sign" however, is found in the inclusion of Rodchenko's signature at the bottom right hand corner of the frame. It is here that Rodchenko announces himself as the creator, the "I." Interestingly, his signature is comprised of initials and is designed in such a way that one is reminded of an insignia or a logo. As Rodchenko was working almost exclusively in advertising at the time the photo was taken it can be argued that he was declaring himself a "brand." Rodchenko himself was a product of his own environment. Along with all the other State merchandise he was promoting and designing for, he was associating himself with the Communist regime, "A product worth investing in." And let us not forget that Rodchenko chose to photograph his mother in his own apartment, amongst his own objects.

The elaborate montage Rodchenko embarked on in the production of this portrait of his mother could only suggest his desire to convey convincingly the message that the "old" way of living in Russia was extinct, at the same time offering a visualization of what the future looked like. It is a future invested in knowledge, education, and progress (note the inclusion of one of his own commercial advertising posters for *Dobrolet* airlines hanging on the wall). But why did Rodchenko not ask one of his contemporaries to simply photograph him as a representative of the future, as he had done for Mayakovsky and Brik? Why such an elaborate scheme? And why use a portrait as a theme, clearly making reference to traditional artistic practices?

If Rodchenko had chosen to produce a self-portrait, surrounding himself with all the objects that now defined his existence, the only message that could have been interpreted would have been that of an artist proclaiming himself as such. By utilizing his mother in his place, Rodchenko was not only proclaiming that the way of life before the Revolution was over, but more importantly, it never existed. His mother represented the past, if she were dressed in traditional clothing, surrounded by knick knacks of old Russia, how could Rodchenko be recognized as a symbol of the future if he was tied to remnants of the past?

She was he; he was she. They were intrinsically linked, both disciples of Communism. Therefore, the story superseded the medium.

Rodchenko was continuously working towards producing artwork that aimed to illuminate socialist interests, and even though he was experimenting and manipulating artistic means of representation such as line, color, and now photography, clearly the media is not the hero. It is the message therein, it is the exploitation of graphic devices as "communication" that is of the utmost importance to Rodchenko. This will be demonstrated in the next section of this chapter and even more comprehensively in Chapter Three.

2.3 *Novy Lef*: Dissemination of "modernism" in Design

> A photograph of a newly built factory is, for us, not simply the snapshot of a building. The new factory in the photograph is not simply a fact, it is a fact of the pride and joy felt in the industrialization of the country of the Soviets. And we have to find "how to take it."[232]
>
> Aleksandr Rodchenko

In 1925, almost a year after his discovery of photography, Rodchenko began taking exterior photographs of his apartment building on Mianitskaya Street in Moscow. Taking position close to the wall on the ground level, Rodchenko angled his camera upwards; taking shots from below and as such investigating altered perspectives. Focusing his attention on the building's architectural elements, such as the balconies, recessed windows and ladder of the fire escape, Rodchenko's photographs directed the eye to scan across the structure's facades.[233] The effect drew attention to the serial repetition of these forms—balconies, windows and the ladder's steps appeared like stacked blocks, making reference to perfectly structured geometric constructions.[234] What is significant about Rodchenko's new

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[232] Aleksandr Rodchenko, "A Caution," *Novy Lef* no. 11, (1928). As quoted in Margolin's *The Struggle for Utopia*, p. 123.

[233] Leah Anne Dickerman, *Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness*, p. 136.

[234] *Ibid.*

photographic experiments such as the steep plunging photographs described above was his manipulation of the camera to capture unusual viewpoints.[235]

For Rodchenko, his oblique photographs represented a new visual, a new political subject. He did not mobilize the camera to depict social narratives in a voyeuristic way as photojournalists did. As an alternate, he aspired to empower his audience by engaging them with his subjects through the camera lens. He was persuaded that the artist had the ability to train the eye into understanding visual depictions from all angles.

> In order to teach a man to look in a new way it is necessary to photograph ordinary, familiar objects from totally unexpected viewpoints and in unexpected positions, and to photograph new objects from various vantage points so as to give a complete impression of the object. We are taught to look in a routine, inculcated manner. We must discover the visible world. We must revolutionize our visual thinking.[236]

Rodchenko argued that, "the lens of the camera is the pupil of the eye of the cultured man in socialist society."[237] Rodchenko believed that the photograph was a means to re-educate, to broaden the viewer's consciousness within the context of his new environment. The "mechanized eye"[238] of the camera would act as the educator (eye of the lens) of the socialist man in order to give him the means to experience reality through the machine and the "machine aesthetics."[239] Rodchenko was certainly drawing on the Constructivist concept that in order to create a "new reality" of social relevance it was necessary to continuously develop designs for educational purposes. Undoubtedly, even now, Rodchenko was working towards evolving his design skills as an "artist-constructor" extensively investigating the photograph, the camera and the potential for fresh photographic techniques.

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[235] Rodchenko was not the only one to explore with altered photographic perspectives. Other photographers in the 1920s such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy also experimented with this process, but he, like the others, was identified more with artistic avant-garde explorations making reference metaphorically to the skyscrapers of the new modern urban landscape. In contrast, Rodchenko's closest colleagues connected his photographs to a more specific political project.

[236] Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Puti sovremennoi fotographi," *Novy Lef,* no. 9, (1928), pp. 38-39 as translated in Lodder's *Russian Constructivism*, p. 202.

[237] Aleksandr Rodchenko, "K foto v etom nomere," *Novy Lef*, no. 3, (1928), p. 29 as translated in Lodder's *Russian Constructivism*, p. 202.

[238] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 202.

[239] *Ibid.*

In 1926, the journal *Soviet Cinema (Sovetskoe kino),* which served as a forum for many *LEF* writers in the years between the publication of *Lef* and *Novy Lef,* published four photographs from Rodchenko's "Building on Miasnitskaya Street" series of 1925. Accompanying the photographs was an article by Brik declaring that, "Vertov is right, the task of the cinema and the camera is not to imitate the human eye, but to see and record what the human eye does not see."[240] According to Vertov, the film camera, or Film-Eye *(Kino-Glaz)* could augment human perceptions by presenting an object in a way the human eye couldn't. In his manifesto *Kinoki: A Revolution (Kinoki: Perevorot)* published in *Lef,* no. 3 in 1923, Vertov defined *Kino-Glaz*:

> I am in constant movement. I approach and draw away from objects, I crawl under them, I move alongside the mouth of a running horse, I cut into a crowd at full speed, I run in front of running soldiers, I turn on my back, I rise with an airplane. I fall and soar together with falling and soaring bodies.[241]

As previously noted, Rodchenko and Vertov collaborated frequently in their works. Therefore, it is not surprising that Rodchenko was recruited as art director for the layout of the statement Vertov published in *Lef* in 1923. Utilizing powerful typographic applications similar to those he had developed in his work with posters, Rodchenko enhanced the characteristics of the statement's meaning, heightening the importance of the message therein: "The organization of the observations of the HUMAN eye," "The organization of the MECHANICAL eye" and "The BRAIN" are some examples of this.[242] Leah Anne Dickerman, in her dissertation titled *Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness,* proposes that such a paradigm of seeing was present in Rodchenko's work prior to his practice of taking oblique angle photographs, taking as example the alternative maquette of the cover *Lef* no. 1-2 of 1923 (Fig. 2.4), which included photomontage elements and demonstrates Rodchenko's new preoccupation with

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[240] Osip Brik, "Chego ne vidit glaz," *Sovetskoe kino*, no. 2, (1926), p. 22 translated as "What the Eye Does Not See," in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, Christopher Phillips, ed., (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), p. 219.

[241] As quoted in Margolin, *The Transformation of Vision: Art and Ideology in the Graphic Design of Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1933*, p. 60.

[242] As noted by Dickerman in *Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness*, p. 136 who in turn is referencing Vertov's "Kinoki Perevorot" in *Lef*, no. 3, (1923), pp. 141-142.

photography. Although he did not write theoretical articles on photography until 1928, this case in point suggests he was already theorizing (visually) about photography as early as 1923.[243] On the cover of this issue, Rodchenko monopolizes the use of visual metaphors to relay his message, as he had done for his cover of *Lef* no.3 (discussed in previous chapter). The images of this cover, (similarly to the published cover *Lef* no. 3) suggest how through the application of new theoretical approaches (typewriter) and the use of technology (the camera) *Lef* (the enlightened artists associated with the journal – emerging from brain of the camera) possesses the means to redirect vision (eye represented by the lens) towards a new mass consciousness.

As noted earlier, in 1927, two years after the last issue of *Lef* was published, the journal's reorganized editorial board was given the go-ahead to launch a new journal, *Novy Lef.* The title not only made reference to *Lef*'s revival, but more importantly it reflected the significant shift in theory and practice from industrial production towards fresh modes of communicative practices through the mobilizing of modern technologies such as photography and film. Indeed, *Novy Lef* was illustrated solely with photographs. This decision to privilege photography over illustrations is not surprising, since Rodchenko was photo editor (and artistic director) of the journal. During *Novy Lef*'s intermittent two-year run, photographs, usually by Rodchenko, appeared on all but three of the journal's covers (the covers were also all designed by him). Additionally, four pages of photographs and film stills were inserted into the binding of each issue.[244] But Rodchenko's impact on *Novy Lef* went way beyond the publishing of his photographs. Influenced by his theoretical approach to photography, Rodchenko's exploration of capturing moments of "fact" contributed greatly to the editorials that made up the core of the journal's content. *Novy Lef* introduced a new type of literary expression, the "literature of fact." This dual focus comprised of photography of "fact" and literature of "fact" (factography) became central to *Lef*'s new platform for a new realism.[245] Not unlike what Vertov had done with his *Kino-Pravda* (film truth) series discussed earlier,

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[243] Dickerman, *Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness,* p. 140.

[244] *Ibid.*, p. 177.

[245] *Ibid.*, p. 178.

Novy Lef's objective was to use photography supplemented by written reports as a means to illustrate real events of socialist enlightenment happening in actuality.

Brik, an editorial contributor to the journal explained that the era for imaginative writing had passed and that "fixation and montage of facts"[246] was now more relevant and in tune with modern practices. In an article he wrote in 1927, "Fixation of Facts," Brik identified the differences between artistic representations of the past versus the present. He wrote, "If before the artwork itself had a prime position and material was used only as a necessary raw product...now material has stepped to the forefront and an artwork is only one of the possible ways to give the material concrete form.[247] Furthermore, Brik went on to connect photography and film as having the unique ability to record the facts of Soviet life. As Vertov had done earlier, he criticized commercial films produced during NEP for illustrating "invented facts" over "real facts."[248] In 1928, another strong supporter of documentary practice, Chuzhak, wrote in *Novy Lef*, no. 11:

> Our epoch brought forward a slogan—art builds life... In literature this is decoded to mean that writers should directly participate in the construction taking place today (production, revolution, politics, and everyday life) and that all their searchings should be connected with concrete needs... From this comes the emphasis on a document. From this comes the literature of fact.[249]

By this time Rodchenko's photographic approach strongly communicated his own factographic interests. Indeed, Stepanova wrote in her diary on August 25 of that year that "Rodchenko has taken his Sept [camera] and has gone off to photograph Moscow like a reporter." She goes on to describe how Rodchenko walked amongst the crowds, "using general points within the moving masses."[250] Similar to factographic writing, the photographs Rodchenko produced during this period are filled with unexpected details. Folding stands and the cigarettes they contained, small street sale stands, advertising billboards, cable wires of

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[246] Margolin, *The Transformation of Vision: Art and Ideology in the Graphic Design of Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1933*, p. 64.

[247] Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 37.

[248] Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937*, p.37.

[249] Nikolai Chuzhak, "Literatura zhiznestroeniia," *Novy Lef*, no. 11 (1928), p. 15 as trans. in Tupitsyn, p. 38.

[250] Varvara Stepanova, entry for August 28, 1928, "Iz zapisei raznykh let," in Rodchenko, *Stati,* pp. 153-154 as cited in Dickerman, *Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness*, p. 205.

the trams, pedestrian traffic—a profusion of details documenting the objects found in the streets of Moscow. In *Novy Lef* no. 1 of 1928, a series of these Moscow street scenes was published. The detailed representations of the everyday suggest that Rodchenko was actively working towards applying the principles that governed "factography." In essence he was collecting real facts and details in order to provide a catalog of modern life within its context of socialism. It is noteworthy to highlight that Rodchenko, in his role as photo editor, decided to publish some photographic images with the caption "From the *revarkhiv* [revolutionary archive] of A.R."[251] The archive was in essence a collection of images (memory bank) associated with Soviet events. Although Rodchenko viewed these images as being "formally banal" (especially in comparison to his own photographic work), he recognized the similar "factographic" value they provided in documenting events, thus educating the viewer engaged in its dialog.[252] Included in the r*evarkhiv* are photographs of the decapitation of the statue of Aleksandr III and an image of Lenin. It is not the photographs themselves that are notable amongst these images; it is their subject matter, the communicative message, which echoed the political revolution of the country. For Rodchenko, "heightened perception was a part of revolutionary consciousness."[253]

Rodchenko, as a revolutionary artist, was determined to alter mass consciousness. Altering consciousness, however, must be differentiated from manipulating opinion. Rodchenko considered that the manipulation of opinion possessed no potential for permanency and as such, was an ineffective way of mobilizing the masses to adopt socialist teachings. However, by eliminating all existing cognitive perceptions through his artistic work, Rodchenko believed he could reeducate the masses and alter their consciousness immutably. This personal creed was very ambitious. But as we will see in the next chapter, Rodchenko's motivation was primarily driven by Lenin's utopian vision of an enlightened socialist society, thus influencing greatly the evolution of his designs

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[251] Dickerman suggests that these photos most likely came from *Sovkino*, the state cinematic enterprise, as Stepanova in a diary in 1927 mentions the purchase of a photo archive from *Sovkino* for six rubles in *Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness*, p. 207.

[252] Leah Dickerman, "The Fact and the Photograph," in *October*, no. 118 (Fall, 2006), p. 147.

[253] Margolin, *The Transformation of Vision: Art and Ideology in the Graphic Design of Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1933*, p. 65.

CHAPTER III

LEF WORKING FOR ACCULTURATION

3.1 Mediating Messages: the Proliferation of Journals in Soviet Russia

> Art organizes the living images of social experience not only in the sphere of cognition, but also in the sphere of emotions and aspirations. The consequence of this is that it is the most powerful weapon in the organization of the collective's forces in class society—of class power.[254]
>
> Aleksandr Bogdanov

When the Bolsheviks set up the new Soviet State in October 1917, Party leaders, particularly Lenin, understood the difficult task ahead of them. Even though they had seized power, it was merely the first step towards realizing their objective of creating a fully socialist society. The burden the Bolsheviks now faced was the successful annihilation of Capitalism and all manifestations of bourgeois culture. To accomplish this, Party leaders acknowledged that they had to redefine social values by "gaining control over the sphere of public discourse and to transform popular attitudes and beliefs."[255] In other words, the State required the complete "acculturation" of its citizens; they needed to adopt the ideas, values, conventions and behavior that characterized a Communist society. By introducing new symbols, allegories and rituals, and propagating socialist ideology via visual arts and print media,

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[254] Aleksandr Bogdanov as cited in Christina Lodder's "Art of the Commune: Politics and Art in Soviet Journals, 1917-1920," in *Art Journal*, vol. 52, no. 1, Political Journals and Art, 1910-40 (Spring, 1993), p. 24.

[255] Bonnell, p. 1.

the Party believed it could indoctrinate the citizens of the State not only to abandon the values of the past, but also, more importantly, to adopt the ideals of a Communist future.[256]

The objective of acculturation championed by Lenin, and supported by the Party, is at the core of this discussion and it is in this final chapter that Rodchenko's true artistic purpose and intent will be debated in relation to Lenin's ambition. While the previous two chapters examined and constructed a foundation for Rodchenko's artistic evolution within the theoretical and institutional context of his career in the early 1920s, this chapter will now demonstrate how Rodchenko mobilized these graphic design applications mainly as a tool to communicate and contribute to the acculturation process. The analysis of Rodchenko's earliest and most effective graphic compositions, such as his first covers for the journal *Lef*, and his eventual integration of photography within his designs, has aided in situating Rodchenko's artistic progress in the latter part of the 1920s. Although it was critical to my argument to establish how Rodchenko's innovative graphic applications were exploited in an effort to alter vision and opinion, such as the clever use of typography, color and oblique photographic viewpoints, for Rodchenko, the use of the medium became the transparent function by which he communicated, educated and persuaded. As a graphic designer, Rodchenko was, in essence, "sending messages to 'receivers,'[257] or using 'effective media' for 'transmitting' information to 'target audiences',"[258] as a means of persuasion. Hence, in order to understand more precisely how Rodchenko's graphic methodology developed as communication within the context of his contribution to the journal *Novy Lef*, it is necessary to investigate first, how the Party, led by Lenin, promoted print culture, and second, how ideas were propagandized through advertisements and both were harnessed as instruments for acculturation.[259]

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[256] *Ibid.*

[257] Philip B Meggs, *Type and Image: The Language of Graphic Design* (New York: John Wiley, 1992), p. 3.

[258] Michael Cronan, 'None of My Business,' in Deborah K. Holland, ed. *Design Issues: How Graphic Design Informs Society* (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), p. 216.

[259] Peter Kenez, 'Lenin and the Freedom of the Press,' in Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez and Richard Stites, eds, *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 131.

As a journalist himself, Lenin often wrote about the role of the press in the revolutionary movement.[260] "The newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and collective agitator, it is also a collective organizer," explained Lenin.[261] Although in the above citation Lenin used newspapers as his example, he considered print media in general as a model propaganda tool. "The printing press is our strongest weapon," Lenin wrote in 1918.[262] In view of the visually driven propaganda measures launched by the Party, and Lenin's view regarding print culture it was not surprising that a multitude of periodicals were launched following the Revolution. They provided a forum for debates regarding issues of modern art, the role of the artist and his/her relationship with the new Soviet State.

While Party leaders shaped all means of expression regarding governmental policies and foreign affairs through the central press, via the official newspapers of the government, such as *News (Izvestiya)*, founded in March 1917 by the Supreme Soviet (highest legislative body), and *Truth (Pravda)*, an organ of the Communist Party (founded by Russian revolutionaries in May 1912),[263] independent publishers cultivated the Party's propagandist agenda in their own publications. Besides making significant art-related announcements, such as the launch of Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda (in 1918), much of the aesthetic discourse revolved around the importance of harnessing art for the purpose of propaganda and agitation, and the artistic issues of revolutionary art.[264] More pertinent to this study however, is the emergence of numerous journals, which preceded the journals *Lef* and *Novy Lef*, which were committed to current cultural issues and artistic practices in the service of socialism.

Although there were many journals that discussed artistic matters, crucial to this argument are a handful of journals that preceded *Lef* and *Novy Lef*, influencing not only their format, but also, their content. These journals will be introduced briefly in order to better interpret the literary and visual objectives set by the editorial group involved in the journals *Lef* and *Novy Lef*. The first of import are the journals published by *Proletkult*, an

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[260] *Ibid.*

[261] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

[262] Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 3.

[263] Lodder, "Art of the Commune," p. 24.

[264] *Ibid.*

organization independent of the Party and government until 1920[265], which was assembled by Aleksandr Bogdanov in 1917 to assist in the shaping of "socialist forms of thought, feeling and daily life."[266] Its main goal was to promote an "organic" proletarian culture, produced by workers for the workers, with little or no help from artists trained under the Tsarist regime. Together with the establishment of schools, studios, clubs and theaters, *Proletkult* published an array of journals to advance its cause. Some of the more notable journals included *The Furnace (Gorn),* which was published in Moscow (1918-22); *Proletarian Culture (Proletarskaya kultura)*, also published in Moscow (1918-21), and *The Future (Griadushchee)*, published in Petrograd (1918-21). In the second issue of *The Future* published in 1918, proletarian theorist and critic Valerian Poliansky clearly defined the *Proletkult* axiom, "In the days of October we defeated capitalist power and took it into our own hands; now we are going towards a new, more mighty and majestic victory—towards the victory over bourgeois culture."[267] For *Proletkult*, proletarian culture was the new way of life. They argued that the sole creators of this new culture had to be the "workers" and that representational art developed supporting this new way of life had to be realistic.[268] Based on this core principle, *Proletkult* members often criticized "Futurist" artists for abandoning "realism," but drawing on European avant-gardes, referring to their artistic practices as "bourgeois." For *Proletkult,* the Futurists were creating an art that was hermetic, therefore inaccessible to workers.[269]

Other journals of interest were those published by government agencies, which were allied with the Party. *The Flame (Plamia),* issued by the Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Red Army (1918-20), was a richly illustrated journal devoted to science and literature. Intended for a working-class audience, the journal's editorials focused mainly on disseminating information rather than engaging in current cultural debates. Owing to the fact

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[265] *Proletkult* was an organization independent of the Party, which aimed to provide the foundations for a truly proletarian art, one that would be free of all traces of bourgeois culture, created by proletarians for proletarians. In 1920, however, on Lenin's insistence *Proletkult* was forced to abandon their independence as the organization was integrated into *Narkompros*.

[266] Lodder, "Art of the Commune," p. 24.

[267] *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

[268] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

[269] *Ibid.*

that Lunacharsky was made editor in the first year of the journal's existence, apart from literature, which was given much coverage, a good amount of space was assigned to specific government artistic measures, such as Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda. Photographs of the new monuments that were produced as a result of the Plan were routinely published in *The Flame*, at times even on the cover of the journal. When photographs were not employed, the journal was illustrated with work from contemporary artists. It also featured propaganda works, such as posters. In general, the journal promoted an artistic viewpoint that was sympathetic to both avant-garde experimentation and more traditional formal approaches.[270]

In Moscow, the journal *Creation (Tvorchestvo),* published by the Moscow Soviet of Workers and Red Army (1919-22), was considered comparable to *The Flame.* Like *The Flame,* it was devoted to science, literature and art, targeting a similar audience with analogous objectives. When debating issues of art, the journal often published articles discussing the depictions of the proletariat throughout history. It hence demonstrated its penchant for more traditional artistic approaches. Even though the journal devoted some space to modern art practices, most writers who contributed essays and reviews were critical of avant-garde art. Art historian Aleksei Sidorov, an active contributor to the journal stated that although there was some educational and artistic value in avant-garde posters commissioned by the Party, public decorations created by "Futurists" were not effective.[271] The views it published on art indicated that although *Creation* was somewhat liberal, as an independent organ it supported more conventional art practices.

The journals that were the first to debate actively the potential relationship between avant-garde art and Communism were *Fine Art (Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo), Art (Iskusstvo)* and *Art of the Commune (Iskusstvo kommuny).* Published by the *IZO,* these three critical art journals played an influential role in explaining to Soviet readership the role of contemporary art within the context of the new society.[272] Despite the fact that only one issue of *Fine Art* was ever published (Petrograd 1919), it was distinguished for being a luxurious publication

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[270] Lodder, "Art of the Commune," p. 25.

[271] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[272] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

that was beautifully illustrated.[273] More significant than its visual presentation, however, were the articles, which advanced the theoretical basis for the exploitation of a new "art," or an "art of the future," insisting that this art should be completely free from the past.[274]

> Undoubtedly socialist society will have its own way of life, its own science, and its own art; and, of course, this science and art will differ not only in their aims but also in their methods and techniques from everything that has been done in these areas before.[275]

By promoting this artistic position, the editors of the journal were essentially establishing a functional connection between "the art of the future" and avant-garde aesthetics, which rejected academic art.[276] The journal's chief intent was to introduce current artistic developments that emphasized the visual course towards the future.[277] Artworks, such as Suprematist paintings by Kazimir Malevich and abstract counter-reliefs by Vladimir Tatlin, were reproduced in the journal as valid examples of contemporary artworks that reflected the aesthetic representation of a socialist society.

The second journal of import was *Art* (Moscow, 1919). Published mainly to inform the public about the activities of the *IZO*, it also allotted some editorial space to the discussion of artistic life in general. Only eight issues were printed, four in January and February and four more in March and September 1919. Plainly illustrated in comparison to *Fine Art*, the journal provided a vehicle that promoted spirited discourse dealing with avant-garde issues. While the bulk of the journal was devoted to yielding informative details regarding art exhibitions, competitions, events and government institutions, its editorials often included articles on Futurism, Futurist aesthetics and the printing of revolutionary poetry, such as Mayakovsky's verses.

The most explosive debates relating to avant-garde art and its potential to cultivate the Party ideology were found, however, within the pages of *Art of the Commune* (Petrograd, 1918-19). Though it was introduced briefly in Chapter One, a more comprehensive review of this journal is essential here. Indeed, it was within this organ that future key editorial

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[273] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[274] *Ibid.*

[275] *Ibid.*

[276] *Ibid.*

[277] *Ibid.*

members of *Lef*, such as Brik, Punin and Mayakovsky started to put forth the theoretical basis for a new kind of artist-constructor working in industry. Regardless of its short existence (nineteen issues were published, starting in December 1918, until April 1919), the journal was considered very influential in promoting avant-garde aesthetics as "the" true socialist mode of representation.[278]

In a similar manner to the journal *Art*, *Art of the Commune* functioned as an informational digest. It published the latest news regarding the various events taking shape within sections of the *IZO*. Its main objective however, which was articulated clearly in its inaugural issue, was to persuade its targeted professional audience that there existed an intrinsic kinship between progressive avant-garde art practices and Communism. "Our paper is for everyone interested in the creation of the future art of the commune."[279] By the second issue, published in December 1918, Brik had established the foundation for his own argument in relation to artistic production under the new regime in an article where he questioned *Proletkult*'s definition of proletarian art. He attacked the organization's presumption that all workers are inherently creative and therefore, their production becomes proletarian culture. Brik refuted this hypothesis advanced by *Proletkult*, contending that proletarian art could only be created by an "artist-proletarian who unites a creative gift with a proletarian consciousness into a single whole."[280] Additionally, he argued that the "artist-proletarian" differentiated himself from a bourgeois artist because he understood his role as creator; the production of art was not created in order to advance personal growth, it was created to educate the collective.[281] Brik developed his argument further by clarifying his conviction, "The bourgeois artist creates in order to reveal his 'I,' the artist-proletarian creates in order to carry out socially important work."[282] In conclusion, Brik proposed that the best way to ensure success in producing true proletarian art depended on the commitment of the "artist-proletarian" to fight

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[278] Lodder, "Art of the Commune," p. 29.

[279] *Ibid.*

[280] *Ibid.*

[281] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[282] *Ibid.*

popular tastes of the past, creating instead innovative works that demonstrated current social significance.[283]

Arguments such as those introduced by Brik established not only the tone of the journal, but also, more decisively, its desire to rattle the prevalent discourse taking place amidst art circles during this period. Therefore, it was not surprising that subsequent issues of the journal contained a wide variety of articles devoted to promoting the natural parallel in ideological beliefs among the Futurists (avant-garde), who promoted themselves as the true creators of the new art and Communism. As Punin explained in his article *Proletarian art (Proletarskoe iskusstvo),* published April 1919, "The artistic culture of communism will be created by those who... possess creativity, for creativity is the basis and content of art."[284] Punin consistently argued in all his contributing articles that the "realists"[285] were "not revolutionary,"[286] maintaining that Futurism was the single most persuasive art style that could effectively shape socialist culture.[287]

> Only the young, affiliated with the so-called "Futurist" movement, know, and know very well, what they want, and have presented the whole extent of the problem of proletarian art, and naturally, no-one else can solve it. We have not usurped power, we are the diviners of the future. "Futurism" is not one among many artistic trends, but the only correct path for the development of universal human art.[288]

Besides continuously attacking *Proletkult's* principles, the journal was equally antagonizing certain members at *Narkompros.* After only three published issues, Lunacharsky warned the editors of the journal that they were to tread carefully in their statements regarding the style of art that best suited the Party, further insisting that under no circumstance were editorials permitted to speak on behalf of the government. Both Brik and

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[283] *Ibid.*

[284] *Ibid.*

[285] When referring to "realists" Punin is making reference not only to *Proletkult* members, but also to "The Wanderers" who were members of the Society for Traveling Exhibitions *(Tovarischchestvo peredvizhnykh khudovhestvennykh vystavok),* which was established in 1870 independent of the Academy in order to promote a realist art that reflected a realistic view of Russian conditions at the time. Lodder, "Art of the Commune," p. 30 and p. 33.

[286] Lodder, "Art of the Commune," p. 30.

[287] *Ibid.*

[288] *Ibid.*

Punin, who were assigned posts within the *IZO* back in June of 1918, were well aware of Luncharsky's directives. Indeed, they had agreed to adhere to specific terms set by the Commissar, which included the directive that "all art movements and trends be given the opportunity to develop freely."[289] Although Lunacharsky admitted that the Futurists were recognized for being the first to offer their help following the Revolution, he upheld his position by explaining that the role of *Narkompros* was not to adhere to one school of creative thought but to remain impartial in its assessment of varying artistic trends.[290]

Regardless of Luncharsky's warning, the journal remained focused on its objectives to promote the aesthetics of Futurism. It even went as far as printing articles that condemned some measures initiated by Lenin and the Party.[291] For example, in an article by Punin published in Marçh 1919, Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda was criticized for "following the Tsarist practice of celebrating its achievements and its supporters with commemorative statues."[292] Monuments should be functional, not static, Punin insisted, such as Tatlin's Monument to the Third International.[293]

Art of the Commune was committed to its cause, constantly promoting the advantage of harnessing progressive art in the service of Communism. Not only did the journal introduce the benefits of merging art with industry, a concept that would be defined later during artistic debates at *INKhUK,* but it also explored the notion of "functional objects" contributing to the future development of "production art." Moreover, in its desire to conform to the journals progressive artistic theories, the aesthetic style of *Art of the Commune* illustrated a fresh approach to graphic design as demonstrated in its modern application of typography in the headline and the clean simplified page layout of its content. However, the journal did not present workable practices on how art could fuse with industry beyond theoretical conjecture.

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[289] Vahan D. Barooshian, *Brik and Mayakovsky* (The Hague, New York: Mouton, 1978), p. 30.

[290] Lodder, "Art of the Commune," p. 29.

[291] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

[292] *Ibid.*

[293] Exhibited in November 1920, Tatlin's Monument to the Third International (it was never erected) was a Constructivist tower, which would have been built from industrial materials, functioning as a symbol of modernity. Lodder, "Art of the Commune," p. 31.

The suspension of *Art of the Commune* provided an opportunity for a new periodical to be formed that would further evolve the artistic debates raised in its articles. Thus, it was not surprising that many of the contributors involved with the journal became active participants in the creation and development of the ensuing journals *Lef* and *Novy Lef,* which endeavored to achieve what *Art of the Commune* had not: illustrating how theory can become practice. Therefore, working from the premise that it was necessary to initiate a journal that could illustrate how artistic theory could be translated into practice, the editorial members of *Lef,* including Rodchenko, worked diligently in support of Lenin and Party objectives to transform and revolutionize the cultural sphere, exploiting the use of print culture to establish "discursive domination," by involving the population in the discussion and process that would restructure their social life.[294] By reworking existing patterns and replacing them with new principles and ideals, which represented the new world, the editors believed they could not only contribute to changing behavior, but also the public's whole way of life.[295]

Political historian Graeme Gill, in his book *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics,* describes how the creation of metanarratives is an important component of the acculturation process. Gill defines these metanarratives as bodies of discourse that translate in a familiar language the ideologies of the dominant group (new Communist regime). According to Gill, it is a form of communication between the governing regime and the citizens that live under it. Furthermore, he explains that the focus of the metanarrative lies in the "symbolic construction of the society and the projection of a conception of society that both explain current reality and future trajectory."[296] In other words, metanarratives can integrate and fix the meanings of certain concepts while alienating others. As such, it is the meanings found within the discourse of the metanarrative that provide significance to the regime's practices, which in turn define the collective and what it symbolizes.[297]

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[294] Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 1.

[295] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[296] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[297] *Ibid.*

For Gill, the metanarrative becomes the backbone of the reconstruction of the culture that the revolutionary regime aims to achieve.[298] He goes on to argue that there were four major devices that were harnessed by the Party in its efforts to acculturate the citizens of the State. The first was language, viewed as the most important by Gill. Indeed, it was the means by which the government was able to relay its ideas and concepts widely within the public arena; it was the "explicit representation of the ideology."[299] Thus, it was the main communicative tool of aural and written forms, which permitted the Party to propagate on a grand scale its concepts to promote change. The second device used was the visual arts, or the representation of change through artwork. In the service of political authorities, art had the potential to express emotion and feelings experienced by those who participated in its discourse. Although it is difficult to have complete control of art and what artists create, Gill argues that if the dominant group encourages certain productions and offers incentives, such as commissions (especially in a no "private" art market) or applications of penalties (after enacting guidelines), it is possible to direct the shaping of artistic landscapes. Thus, the dominant group can influence the artwork that is not only produced, but also shown and distributed. The third device, physical environment, is important, as it can be constructed, decorated and used to establish authority, projecting power and as such, molding people's outlooks and values. The fourth and last device as argued by Gill is ritual. Described by Gill, rituals are "formalized collective performances, usually combining movement and both visual and verbal discourse."[300] Whichever form the ritual takes, it becomes meaningful in the value of the action. Gill describes how, for Lenin and the Party, three sites of rituals were utilized: rituals regarding everyday life, which marked important aspects of the everyday; feast days, which involved public festivities that celebrated new programs, and institutional culture, which consisted of restructuring modes of activity within the political sphere. In conclusion, Gill explains that what is crucial to the effective sustenance of metanarratives lies in how they are defined and who defines them, and it is within these parameters that acculturation is influenced.

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[298] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[299] *Ibid.*

[300] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Eric Hobsbawm, renowned Marxist historian, proposes that acculturation can also be obtained by the construction of "invented traditions,"[301] arguing that their creation could fulfill three distinct yet overlapping functions. First is "establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities";[302] second, "establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority,"[303] and third, "socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behavior."[304] By establishing distinct "invented traditions" as characterized by Hobsbawm, the new dominant group could then, in essence, construct alternate collective standards, which legitimized the ideologies and processes mandated from above. Thus, the new traditions promote the interaction of the members of society with the new group as they go about their daily lives.

Examples of what Hobsbawm describes can be found in the introduction and creation of new Communist representations as set by Lenin and the Party, such as the hammer and sickle (representative of the industrial and agricultural workers); rituals, such as May Day Celebrations (workers' day); the wearing of the red scarf (Young Pioneer organization of the USSR), and Lenin corners (political shrines for the display of propaganda). All were invented by the Party in an effort to build the "master narrative"[305] as set by the regime,[306] reconstituting the individual citizen to think, speak and act like a socialist subject united by communal, social and political beliefs.[307] However, according to both Gill and Hobsbawm, whether it is the creation of a "metanarrative" or an "invented tradition" the successful acculturation of a group can only be achieved if the measures are consistent, repetitive and communicated in a manner that is understandable to the intended audience.[308]

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[301] Eric Hobsbawm, introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, eds, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 1.

[302] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[303] *Ibid.*

[304] *Ibid.*

[305] Bonnell, p. 2.

[306] *Ibid.*

[307] *Ibid.*

[308] Hobsbawm, p. 2.

Although the press and journals played a key role in establishing the Party's ideological metanarratives and invented traditions through the use of such devices as language, rituals and symbols, the next section of this chapter will analyze and concentrate on the mobilization of visual arts via print culture to propagandize ideas and authenticate new realities. Along with what has been discussed so far regarding Rodchenko's artistic evolution, the true purpose of his graphic designs will be established.

3.2 Encoded Communications: the Propagandizing of ideas

> Ceux qui ont gouverné les peuples dans tous les temps, ont toujours fait usage des peintures et statues, pour leur mieux inspirer les sentiments qu'ils vouloient [sic] leur donner, soit en religion, soit en politique.[309]
>
> Chevalier de Jaucourt

What value can be attributed to a work of art? The answer is not a simple one. Art historians and theorists alike have been attempting to define art's function for decades. Although many viewpoints exist and have been argued, two main schools of thought have emerged.[310] The first suggests that the function of art lies in its utilitarian usefulness to educate a targeted audience in the service of a determined ideology.[311] Often labeled as propaganda, whether "political" or "sociological,"[312] the ensuing representation is deliberate and conscious. The second school of thought maintains that the function of art is the search for aesthetic gratification void of any extraneous motive.[313] It is the first school of thought however, that is pertinent to this discussion and it is within this context that the graphic designs of Rodchenko will be analyzed for their communicative value to contribute to the acculturation process for a targeted audience to adopt a socio-politically driven message.

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[309] Chevalier de Jaucourt cited in James A. Leith's *The Idea of Art as Propaganda in France, 1750-1799*, (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1965), p. 3.

[310] Leith, *The Idea of Art as Propaganda in France, 1750-1799*, p. 3.

[311] *Ibid.*

[312] The use of the terms "political" and "sociological" propaganda refers to Jacques Ellul's definitions put forth in his book *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vantage Books, 1973), pp. 61-70.

[313] *Ibid.* For a more detailed account of how propaganda was mobilized for political objectives refer to Oliver Thomson, *Mass Persuasion in History: An Historical Analysis of the Development of Propaganda Techniques* (Edinburgh: Paul Harris Publishing, 1977), and Toby Clark's, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: The Political Image in the Age of Mass Culture* (London: The Everyman Art Library, 1997).

Communications theorist Harold D. Lasswell defined the use of art for political enlightenment as "the manipulation of public opinion by means of political symbols," or, "the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols."[314] He also distinguished the contrast between education and propaganda. For Lasswell, education was "the passing on of accepted skills," whereas propaganda was the "passing on of controversial attitudes."[315] In other words, Lasswell believed no measures of propaganda existed without a degree of duplicity.[316] Therefore, the employment of propaganda measures, which comprises elements of persuasion, can fulfill a number of objectives, such as political, economic, war/military, diplomatic, didactic, ideological and escapist.[317] Mobilized by Lenin and the Party, these measures were essential prerequisites for acculturation of the modern Soviet State. Historian Régine Robin's proposed four-level schematic of acculturation is helpful in this context to demonstrate how certain elements aid in effecting a new-cultured state.[318] The first is the cognitive level pertaining to education and knowledge; the second is the axiological level, which introduces new discourse and instills new values through the use of agitation and propaganda. The third level is symbolic, striving to create new social imagery obtained by the creation of new holidays, new songs, new heroes, and lastly, the fourth level, considered the subtlest by Robin. It pertains to initiation of new social codes, new practices and new behaviors, which characterize the various social groups. Although Robin's schematic includes four levels, it is the first two levels that are of interest when considering print culture. For Robin, after knowledge and education, the most effective method of acculturation can be achieved through agitation and propaganda.

It is therefore not surprising that propaganda was a tool deployed by Lenin and the Party to realize acculturation. According to historian Oliver Thomson in his book *Mass Persuasion in History: An Historical Analysis of the Development of Propaganda Techniques,* the most

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[314] Oliver Thomson, *Mass Persuasion in History: An Historical Analysis of the Development of Propaganda Techniques*, p. 3.

[315] *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

[316] *Ibid.*

[317] Thomson, p. pp. 11-13.

[318] Susan Grant draws on Régine Robin's four-level schematic for acculturation in the "Introduction" of her book *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society: Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 3.

established type of propaganda is political, which refers to all measures of propaganda aimed at gaining political power, and, more importantly, holding on to that power once it has been attained.[319] Flags, anthems, processions, are all examples of this type of propaganda. Economic propaganda refers to all measures of propaganda devised to persuade a targeted group to buy, sell or conserve goods in order to stimulate certain sectors of the economy.[320] The launch of mass advertising campaigns promoting State-manufactured products is a perfect example of this type of propaganda. Didactic propaganda, which is tied to the science of social cybernetics, involves the education of a targeted group to live according to specific norms.[321] The reading rooms set up across the USSR by the State exemplify this type of propaganda device; not only did it provide a setting where citizens could be taught to read, it also nurtured the propagation of information about Party policies. Ideological propaganda, however, is one of the most challenging types of propaganda and the most threatening, involving the diffusion of complete idea systems, "the subjective, emotionally violent upsetting and rebuilding of peoples' minds."[322] Lenin's plan to engineer a total cultural revolution by harnessing art can be viewed as ideological propaganda.

Influenced by propaganda theorists Peter Tkachev, Georgi Plekhanov and A. Kremer, Lenin developed the idea of agitation-propaganda, or agitprop (introduced in Chapter One) in his work, *What Is to Be Done?*[323] Lenin described how a conscious leader of the proletariat was obligated to engage actively in political education.[324] Only through political education or revelation could the masses gain a sense of communal attachment no matter where or for whom they worked.[325] Furthermore, Lenin explained how the "agitator" or "propagandist" is the one who is best suited to identify the most critical concern of the audience; by exposing what was wrong with society, the "propagandist" would stimulate the masses towards a new

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[319] Thomson, p. 11.

[320] *Ibid.*

[321] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[322] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[323] *What Is to Be Done?* was a political pamphlet, written by Lenin at the end of 1901 and the beginning of 1902, which proposed the formation of a revolutionary party that would direct the efforts of the working class.

[324] Randal Marlin, *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*, Peterborough (ON: Broadview Press, Ltd., 2002), p. 77.

[325] *Ibid.*

consciousness."[326] Lenin confirmed this was best achieved by means of the printed word for the propagandist and the spoken word for the agitator.[327] For example, after the signing of a decree in August 1919 nationalizing all cinema enterprises, film was useful as a propaganda tool to "reveal" how terrible life was prior to the Revolution, reminding audiences that the shortcomings of Communism were bearable in comparison.[328] An important example of such a film was Eisenstein's very popular classic *Battleship Potemkin.*

Peter Kenez, a historian specializing in Russian history, has argued that the Bolshevik regime, of which Lenin was the leader, "was indisputably the first to not merely set itself propaganda goals but also through political education aimed to create a new humanity suitable for living in a new society."[329] He also argued however, that the Soviets were not systematically or immediately persuaded by Leninist propaganda, but eventually succumbed to it nonetheless. He attributes this to persistence, determination, repetition, consistency of message and the sustained mobilization of new technologies aimed at improving the "machine."[330] In this sense, a cultural revolution can be realized. It is based on this assumption that Rodchenko evolved his artwork from Constructivist objects of production towards graphic design as communication, participating actively in the process of acculturation.

For this reason, in 1922, when Rodchenko became an active graphic designer working for the State, he committed himself fully to an art of propaganda and agitation aimed at arousing revolutionary consciousness as set out by Lenin.[331] Working in collaboration with Mayakovsky, Rodchenko created some of the most visually compelling commercial designs produced during this period. By 1923 Mayakovsky and Rodchenko became official partners operating under the collective name "Mayakovsky-Rodchenko Advertising-Constructor." Rodchenko was chief designer and Mayakovsky was responsible for soliciting work and writing the complementary texts and slogans. As "artist-constructors" Rodchenko and

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[326] *Ibid.*

[327] *Ibid.*

[328] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

[329] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

[330] *Ibid.*

[331] Margolin, "The Struggle for Utopia," p. 22.

Mayakovsky were committed to the production of artwork that would answer both a pragmatic and ideological purpose. In essence, they hoped to promote effectively products manufactured by the State. Not only would this aid the Party financially, it would aid the Party itself in their aim to acculturate the citizens of the State.

Accordingly, Rodchenko and Mayakovsky presented themselves as design experts for hire, creating a portfolio of their work to be viewed by prospective clients and attaching a set price list.[332] In his own writings on advertising, Mayakovsky maintained that "revolutionary forces had to mobilize the instruments of capitalism against capitalism itself."[333] As opposed to refuting advertising as a "bourgeois trick," Mayakovsky argued that "under the NEP, it was necessary to employ all weapons used by [our] enemies, including advertising, for the popularization of state and proletarian organizations, offices and products."[334] Mayakovsky and Rodchenko would thus express the need to mobilize the instruments of capitalism against capitalism itself[335] (this view is clearly borrowed from Lenin's writings introduced earlier). In his desire to define more accurately his motives, Mayakovsky further argued that advertising and propaganda were intrinsically linked, calling propaganda the "advertising of ideas" and advertising the "propagandizing of things."[336] Proposing "universal advertising,"[337] which involved the creation of a "full scale multimedia assault,"[338] Mayakovsky aspired to coordinate campaigns that would use a wide variety of media to build one unified branded message.[339] Critically, Constructivists viewed this strategy as progressive, as it altered the role of the artist as an "alienated inspired genius" to a "professionalized, collaborative, and

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[332] Dickerman, "The Propagandizing of Things," p. 68.

[333] *Ibid.*, p. 67.

[334] *Ibid.*

[335] Consumer commodities sold on the NEP (New Economic Policy-proposed by Lenin and announced to the public in March 1921, permitted the existence of limited private business ventures) market were important for the government as they competed with other commodities, which were either imported or sold through private trade. In order for State-run industry to be profitable, thus contributing to the socialist economy, it needed to produce eye-catching packaging and advertisements to stay not only competitive in the market, but also to maintain productivity in both collective industry and agriculture.

[336] Dickerman, "The Propagandizing of Things," p. 67.

[337] *Ibid.*

[338] *Ibid.*

[339] *Ibid.* This was not a new concept, corporate identity had already been developed in Germany and France by this time.

instrumental" individual working collectively.[340] Thus, the advertising designer was contributing directly towards strengthening the economic condition existing at this time.

An example of Mayakovsky's and Rodchenko's commercial work is the packaging project for Red October *(Krasnyi Oktiabr')* factory (Fig. 3.1), commissioned by the State in 1923. The client, in this case the "State," presumably would have provided a creative brief to the chief designer (Rodchenko), defining explicitly the demographic of the targeted audience, the function of the product and the intent of the message illustrated.

> Our goal is to show the consumer the best that our state produces, to attract his attention and remind him of goods, to bring state products to the general public, to urge the consumer to spend his money on the state products, turning him away from the private producer and merchant toward our state and cooperative traders in every possible way ... [Even] in our economic system, advertising is an engine of trade.[341]

Although the document commissioning this work is not available for review, by investigating the properties of the packaging itself, the objectives of the design can be inferred. Red October factory, located in Moscow, manufactured chocolate, candies and cookies. Rodchenko's task was to design packaging for Red October caramels. Based on the notion that Mayakovsky and Rodchenko were committed to designing commercial objects that promoted "advertising of ideas/propagandizing of things," the "structural style"[342] approached by the duo involved the use of emotional propaganda techniques. According to propaganda historian Oliver Thomson the use of emotional propaganda can produce a "purging of the mind, followed by the implantation of its real message."[343] Possessing a ritual quality, this structure is often characterized by simplified repetitive forms and linguistic techniques, such as rhyme and rhythm, making the message more suggestive and inviting.[344]

Even though at first glance the caramel box designed by Rodchenko is composed of simple geometric elements (stripes and triangles) with a restrictive color palette (black and

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[340] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

[341] Cited by Randi Cox in his essay, "NEP Without Nepman! Soviet Advertising and the Transition to Socialism," in *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside,* eds, Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 127.

[342] Thomson, p. 17.

[343] *Ibid.*

[344] *Ibid.*

gold), it is a prime example of Rodchenko's commitment to producing designs with social significance. Main components of the design include images of industrial items, such as a crane, a steam engine and an airplane on the top and sides of the box. The text on the top of the box states the name of the factory, Red October, and announces the product within, "Caramels, Our Industry" *(Карамель... Наша Индустрия)*. The typography is modern (without serifs) and primarily black. On the bottom of the box, Mayakovsky's accompanying text is printed:

> From the "Factory Caramel" / we had no losses. / From left and right / and everywhere come praise and fame! / Take this candy / with all certainty as a sign. / The songs on its covers / become more and more known. / This new venture / teaches better than a textbook. / "Factory-made" caramels / force out ordinary-tasting ones. / The village and the factory / will call them the best![345]

The text on the top of the box clearly identifies the brand of caramels (Our Industry) and the manufacturer (Red October). It provides strictly referential information. It is the text found on the bottom of the box, however, that solidifies the emotional structure of the propaganda message as the rhythmic lines, which aid in memorability, validate the collective properties of the means of production, at the same time accentuating the status of the caramels as a product produced by a collective working community.[346] The integration of the industrial images combined with the text strengthens the meaning of the message further: through progress and technology, "we" (the collective) will stay ahead of our enemies (both foreign and domestic). Furthermore, the manufacturing of these caramels, and subsequent purchase of this product allow the consumer to contribute actively to the collectivization and industrialization of the Soviet Union."[347]

The journal *Lef* supported the Constructivist advertising of Rodchenko and Mayakovsky, recognizing that their collaboration as advertising-constructors contributed to the design of real socialist objects, thus contributing to socialist production. Often Rodchenko's designs were described as powerful and revolutionizing taste, "clearing the ground for the future

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[345] As translated in Dickerman, "The Propagandizing of Things," p. 193.

[346] Dickerman, "The Propagandizing of Things," p. 68.

[347] *Ibid.*

nonaesthetic, but useful, material culture."[348] In an article published in the first issue of the journal *Lef*, Brik expresses admiration for Rodchenko's productivist insistence to enter into production and construct appropriate new things for the new socialist consumer.[349] In two subsequent articles published in the magazine *Zhurnalist* (Journalist) in June 1923 and 1924, Brik endeavors to define Soviet advertising. The first article strongly supports Mayakovsky's and Rodchenko's decision to enter into advertising, claiming that "advertising does not only promote commerce, it also promotes culture; it has an enormous agitational and cultural significance."[350] In the second article, Brik, having been exposed to many more of Rodchenko's and Mayakovsky's advertisements that year, argues that the primary aim of advertising is not only to inform consumers of useful objects, but more importantly, to create the need for those useful objects.[351] By promoting industrialization through the use of images and modernity through the use of graphic elements, Rodchenko's commercial design projects aimed to catch the consumer's attention and entice him/her to participate in the economic construction of the new socialist way of life.[352] Drawing further on the concepts of propaganda as "structure" and the application of graphic design as communication, the last section of this study will demonstrate how Rodchenko in his role as art director of *Novy Lef* broadened the objective of his own innovative graphic compositions introduced first in the journal *Lef* and ensuing commercial designs, to construct a more determined intended message. Expressed in terms of functions, such as illustrative, persuasive and informative graphics, Rodchenko's contribution to the journal will corroborate the hypothesis that his artistic creations were primarily designed in the service of politics in an effort to participate actively in the Cultural Revolution envisioned by Lenin.

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[348] Osip Brik, 'V proizvodtsvo!' in *Lef* no. 1, (1923), pp. 105-108, as translated by Richard Sherwood as 'Into Production!' in Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), pp. 83-85.

[349] Christina Kiaer, *The Russian Constructivist "Object" and the Revolutionizing of Everyday Life, 1921-1929* (PhD dissertation submitted to the University of California, 1995), p. 102.

[350] Osip Brik, 'Iskusstvo ob "iavliat",' *Zhurnalist* no. 6, (1923), p. 26 as translated in Kiaer, p. 115.

[351] Osip Brik, 'Kakaia nam nuzhna reklama,' *Zhurnalist* no. 10, (1924), p. 24 as translated in Kiaer, p. 116.

[352] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

3.3 "Electrification" *Novy Lef* no. 5, 1927 (a case study)

The cover of the fifth published edition of the journal *Novy Lef* designed by Rodchenko in 1927 provides a model example of how Rodchenko mobilized modern technologies, such as photography, to transform his graphic designs from Constructivist-Productivist objects to "factographic" communicative practices aimed at socialist enlightenment. Reorganizing his graphic compositions, which focused mainly on layout, typeface and color, towards content, which emphasized the "communicative message," Rodchenko refocused his artistic practices to communicate visually "actual" socialist progress. Before investigating further the communicative functions employed by Rodchenko as art director when designing the cover of the journal *Novy Lef*, it is necessary to consider more in depth Lenin's notion of social enlightenment by way of modern technologies and the need for a Cultural Revolution.

Technological progress—in particular the electrification of Russia—was one of the chief objectives championed by Lenin following the Revolution. For Lenin, electrification was critical in transforming Russia economically from a "small-peasant basis into a large-scale industrial basis."[353] By remaining a small-peasant country, Lenin maintained that Russia was "weaker than Capitalism,"[354] not only on a world scale, but also within the country.[355] "Only when the country has been electrified, and industry, agriculture ad transport have been placed on the technical basis of modern large-scale industry, only then shall we be fully victorious,"[356] Lenin proclaimed. Furthermore, Lenin believed that electrification could enlighten and educate people, transitioning them from an existence kept in "darkness and ignorance to an informed normal life."[357]

In December 1920, at the Eighth All-Russia Congress of Soviets held in Moscow, Lenin delivered this historic statement: "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the

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[353] V.I. Lenin, "Eighth All-Russia Congress of Soviets," Part II 22 December 1920, in *Collected Works*, 4th English Edition, Progress Publishers, Moscow, vol. 31 (1965), pp. 461-534, Internet Archive, 2002. http://marxists.anu.edu.au/archive/lenin/works/1920/8thcong/index.htm, (accessed 11 January 2009).

[354] *Ibid.*

[355] *Ibid.*

[356] *Ibid.*

[357] *Ibid.*

whole country."[358] It was pronounced during a key report to the delegates to the Congress who had traveled from all over Russia.[359] Poorly dressed, hungry, sitting in the unheated, dimly lit auditorium of the Bolshoi Theatre, the delegates listened attentively to their leader.[360] Describing how the late 19th century had originated a network of technologies that had transformed the urban sphere, such as transportation (trains, trams, automobiles), communications (telegraph and telephone), and health (water and sewerage), he argued that electrification was "the" revolutionary technology because it had the potential to completely transform the workplace and industry, elemental to the proletariat and socialism. With exhilaration and renewed enthusiasm, the delegates unanimously approved Lenin's plan for the electrification of Russia.[361] Although it seemed bold and audacious it was Lenin's passionate "conviction" that "convinced" the crowd. *GOELRO* (*Gosudarstvennaya komissiya po elektrifikatsii Rossii* - State Commission for Electrification of Russia) would thus become the first Soviet plan for national economic recovery and development. The electrification of the country set in motion the program that would not only advance the political and economic goals as set by Lenin, but also distinguish the Party from the old regime.[362]

Lenin's long fascination with technology and its ability to solve social issues is at the forefront of his interest in "electrification" dating as far back as 1896.[363] Exiled in Siberia at the time, Lenin penned with Gleb Krzhizhanovsky,[364] *Development of Capitalism in Russia (Razvitie kapitalizma v Rossii).*[365] Lenin envisioned a socialist future in which "the

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[358] *Ibid.*

[359] *Ibid.*

[360] Please note that it is impossible to confirm the accuracy of the statements made about the mood and condition of the delegates as described in excerpts of Lenin's speech at the 8th All-Russia Congress of Soviets. Refer to *Collected Works*, 4th English Edition, Progress Publishers, Moscow, vol. 31, (1965), pp. 461-534.

[361] *Ibid.*

[362] Jonathan Coopersmith in his book *The Electrification of Russia:1880-1926* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 1.

[363] Vasilii I. Steklov, V.I. Lenin 'i elektrifikatsia,' Moscow: Nauka, (1975), p. 19 as noted by Coopersmith in his book *The Electrification of Russia:1880-1926,* p. 153.

[364] Gleb Krzhizhanovsky is credited to be the electrical engineer who not only championed Lenin's plan, but also was a critical leader in its creation. Coopersmith, p. 151.

[365] *Ibid.*, p. 153.

'electrification' of all factories and railways [would] accelerate the transformation of dirty, repulsive workshops into clean, bright laboratories worthy of human beings."[366]

> ... the organization of industry on the basis of modern, advanced technology, on electrification which will provide a link between town and country, will put an end to the division between town and country, will make it possible to raise the level of culture in the countryside and to overcome, even in the most remote corners of land, backwardness, ignorance, poverty, disease, and barbarism.[367]

Drawing on observations made by Marx and Engels regarding the value of electricity,[368] Lenin saw technology, more specifically electricity, as the best means of civilizing the common man, as it had the power to reconstruct markets, the military, manufacturing and the cities themselves. For Lenin, setting in motion a Cultural Revolution was the best means by which the common man could become civilized and one of the most effective tools to aid in the process of acculturation.

By the end of the Civil War, Lenin verbalized his concerns- "What presents the greatest danger for our revolution?"[369] Lenin's retort to his own question was straightforward: "The gravest danger threatening our revolution is the lack of culture-as-knowledge (communicative art), and, consequently, the lack of civilization (enlightenment). Solve that problem and the revolution will be irreversible."[370] Lenin's rationalization was based on the belief that once civilization is gained, the problem of ideology; hence the ideological fidelity of the masses, can be secured.[371] To better understand this reasoning, it is important to define what Lenin meant by the term "culture" and "civilization." As it is described in Lenin's

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[366] *Ibid.*

[367] V.I. Lenin, "Report on the Work of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars Delivered at the First Session of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee, 7th Convocation," 2 February 1920, in *Collected Works*, 4th English Edition, Progress Publishers, Moscow, vol. 30, (1965), p. 335, Internet Archive, 2002. http://marxists.anu.edu.au/archive/lenin/works/1920/feb/02.htm, (accessed 11 January 2009).

[368] V. I. Lenin, "A Great Technical Achievement," in *Collected Works*, 4th ed., ed. Institute of Marxism-Leninsism, 60 vols., Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964, pp. 61-62.

[369] Carmen Claudin-Urondo, *Lenin and the Cultural Revolution* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1977), p. 14.

[370] *Ibid.*

[371] *Ibid.*

writings, there are three distinctions: culture as civilization, culture as ideology and culture as knowledge.[372] It is this third distinction that dominated Lenin's theoretical thinking, however.

Almost obsessively, Lenin professed the need "to learn, learn and keep on learning."[373] Lenin deemed it essential, for only with knowledge could you participate in the revolution with intelligence, purpose and success.[374] This knowledge to which Lenin referred was the knowledge of science and technology: the "civilization par excellence" of the industrial societies of the West.[375] Lenin would continually stress this point: "Culture, namely, knowledge, is the aggregate of what mankind knows, that 'general culture' which is the appanage of 'civilized' societies."[376] Moreover, he confirmed, "Knowledge, the knowledge of science and technology was the achievement of advanced capitalism, long the possession of a minority."[377] For Lenin, now was the time to attain this type of enlightenment.[378] Only then could the revolution be brought to completion. In essence, Lenin believed that Western civilization offered Russia a "ready-made" model that could easily be adapted to conform to the political needs of the proletarian regime.[379] Science and technology is the most valued tool, professed Lenin:

> The data of the problem are obvious; no revolution without developed industry, no developed industry without modern science and technology. To ensure the irreversible success of Soviet construction, "industry ... must be rehabilitated on the basis of modern technology, which means the electrification of industry and a higher culture."[380]

At the Congress, Lenin would thus prompt and induce all delegates to recognize and adopt these theories in the form of his "electrification" plan, which was aimed at restoring the entire economic structure base, raising it to the level of the most up-to-date technical development. Without this plan of electrification, Lenin declared it impossible to undertake

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[372] *Ibid.*

[373] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[374] *Ibid.*

[375] *Ibid.* p. 15

[376] *Ibid.*, p. 22

[377] *Ibid.*

[378] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[379] *Ibid.*

[380] *Ibid.*,p. 22.

any real constructive work.[381] Lenin went on to explain the importance of tearing up the roots of capitalism and undermining its foundation. As an example of the plan's potential to alter deep-rooted perceptions, Lenin recounted an event that he had the opportunity to witness. When attending a peasant festival held in Volokolamsk Uyezd, a remote part of Moscow Gubernia, where the peasants had been given the advantage of electric lighting, Lenin described how he took part in a meeting arranged in the center of the town. One of the peasants came forward and began to make a speech welcoming this new asset in their lives.

The peasant expressed how "unenlightened" they had been in the past and how an "unnatural light" had now appeared, which had lit up their peasant existence.[382] For Lenin, this comment made by the peasant was very telling as it corroborated his hypothesis of "culture as knowledge." Essentially, the peasant was confirming that not only did electricity (technology) transform his existence, but it also had revealed to him how truly primitive his way of life had been under the old system of government. These words did not surprise Lenin.[383] Although the peasant had referred to being enlightened by unnatural causes (artificial lighting), what Lenin considered unnatural was "that the peasants and workers should have lived for hundreds and thousands of years in such backwardness, poverty and oppression under the yoke of the landowners and the capitalists."[384] Thus, after recounting his story, Lenin stressed the importance of trying to convert every electric power station built into "a stronghold of enlightenment to be used to make the masses electricity-conscious, so to speak."[385]

> We must see to it that every factory and every electric power station becomes a centre of enlightenment; if Russia is covered with a dense network of electric power stations and powerful technical installations, our communist economic development will become a model for a future socialist Europe and Asia.[386]

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[381] Lenin "Eighth All-Russia Congress of Soviets," in *Collected Works*, vol. 31, pp. 461-534.

[382] *Ibid.*

[383] *Ibid.*

[384] *Ibid.*

[385] *Ibid.*

[386] *Ibid.*

In order to educate the masses about the necessity of electrification, in order to ensure the complete transformation of society, Lenin proposed that all propaganda and agitation efforts be transferred from political and military interests to economic development. Lenin announced that the creation of the Central Bureau for Production Propaganda of the All-Russia Central Council of Trade Unions, and the amalgamation of its work with that of the Chief Committee for Political Education, would play a key role in ensuring the plan's success. Furthermore, Lenin noted that the publication of additional newspapers for the respective industries, which were to devote attention not only to production propaganda but also to its organization on a countrywide scale, would be launched.[387] Lenin defined the important task of everyone involved to continue to educate the masses as they had done thus far, with verifiable facts, not with lies as previously propagated under the old regime.

> We are now declaring war on the relics of inertness, ignorance and mistrust that prevail among the peasant masses. We shall achieve nothing by the old methods, but we shall achieve victory by the methods of propaganda, agitation and organized influence, which we have learnt.[388]

In response to Lenin's plea, the Congress instructed the government and requested the All-Russia Central Council of Trade Unions and the All-Russia Congress of Trade Unions to take all possible measures to implement the largest possible propaganda campaign aimed at the broadest sections of the population in urban and rural areas of the country. Furthermore, the Congress commanded that the study of this plan be introduced into all educational establishments. In addition, every electric power station, well-organized factory and state farm had to become a center for teaching the principles of electricity and modern industry. Finally, the Congress called on all persons who possessed sufficient scientific or practical knowledge to be mobilized as collaborators. They were to succinctly communicate all manner of propaganda for the "electrification" plan, providing the proper knowledge necessary to have the plan understood and accepted.[389]

Propagandists would thus adhere to this initiative, seriously creating many designs in the form of print and mass media, such as Gustav Klutsis' 1920 agitational poster *The*

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[387] *Ibid.*

[388] *Ibid.*

[389] *Ibid.*

Electrification of the Entire Country, created to commemorate Lenin's Plan for Electrification. The poster was composed of a photomontage of images depicting a towering Lenin marching confidently forward while holding an iron structure (undoubtedly an electricity pylon). Geometric constructions soaring upwards from the center of the poster further emphasize the message of progress.[390] This became a recurring theme in the new iconography used by artists. Alongside images of Lenin pointing forward, symbols—such as pylons, lightning bolts, rays and lightbulbs—became synonymous with Lenin's Plan for Electrification. Not surprisingly, images of electrification circulated all over the country, whether in the form of posters or in the editorial pages of newspapers and magazines; agitprop measures ensured that the plan for electrification was a priority. The circulation of these images all over Russia not only promoted the plan for electrification on a grand scale, but also provided a visual representation of how improved everyday life would be as the country became electrified. They were meant to inspire the citizens of the State to support the measures taken by the new regime.

Let's now return to the cover of the fifth issue of the journal *Novi Lef*, published in 1927. Rodchenko, acting as art director, and designer of the cover in question, incorporated the theme of electrification in this image by utilizing one of his own photographs of an electrical tower. A second photograph (taken from a different angle) of the same tower is found inside the journal; it is labeled "Photo A. M. Rodchenko Electrical Mast at Shaturskaya." (Fig. 3.2) It is impossible to ignore the powerful organization of the lines, shapes and planes of the photograph Rodchenko used for the cover. The angle of the shot taken from below emphasizes the dynamic diagonal structure, guiding the viewer's eye to follow the path of its linear pattern, evoking feelings of an object soaring skyward. The contrast of light and dark tones elevates the energy emanating from the image. This sharp play of lights connotes qualities of "power" and "dominance." The shapes, the negative and positive space and the marked slanting lines, which fill the frame, are reminiscent of Rodchenko's earlier graphic designs.

In terms of technique, Rodchenko's photograph continues to explore the method of shooting objects in "oblique" angles. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Rodchenko's approach

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[390] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 190.

to photographing objects in unconventional ways may have been motivated by Viktor Shklovsky's critical study *Art as Device*, published in 1925.[391] In this essay, Shklovsky introduces the concept of "ostranenie" or "defamiliarizations," arguing, "perceptions become habitualised, become no more than mechanical reflections of a seemingly given reality."[392] For Shklovsky, habits, or routines dulled perceptions; therefore, in order to alter them, it was necessary to take something that had become familiar and transform it into something refreshed.[393]

> Since the purpose of imagery is to bring the significance of the image closer to our understanding, and since without this, an image has no meaning, then, the image ought to be better known to us than that which is explained by it.[394]

In his essay *Making Strange: The Shattered Mirror*, Simon Watney expands on Shklovsky's theory suggesting "unseen landscapes" can be materialized with a camera, correcting the inadequate perceptual cognition of the viewer.[395] In other words, the photographer with the use of his camera had the potential to capture new views of familiar objects, thus allowing the viewer a chance to discover new aspects of the object, which he had not consciously noticed before. For Rodchenko, this aesthetic approach of defamiliarization, applied to photography, was extremely important. It allowed him to alter vision. Indeed, he felt it was necessary to create a whole new way of seeing things, reframing them with a specific Communist narrative. In other words, Rodchenko was manipulating properties of art and design as tools for acculturation. Therefore, when analyzing Rodchenko's photograph, it is essential to consider the aesthetic processes, which, along with the content affect the manner in which the photograph itself acts as visual communication. In the specific context of this photograph, the technique by which the photograph was taken enhances the value of the subject matter.

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[391] First chapter of the book *Theory of Prose* originally published in 1925. English translation by Benjamin Sher (Illinois State University: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991).

[392] Simon Watney, 'Making Strange: The Shattered Mirror,' in *Thinking Photography*, ed., Victor Burgin (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), p. 160.

[393] *Ibid.* It is important to note that Shklovsky's theories revolved more around the ideological of the everyday than modes of production. However, his discourse is relevant in understanding the role of "art" as a potential tool to alter perceptions.

[394] Cited in "Art as Device," in *Theory of Prose*, p. 1.

[395] Watney, p. 155.

What is graphic design? Most communication theorists agree that graphic design is the transformation of messages or information, a "conveying" of ideas.[396] In essence, it is the vehicle by which "something is transported from one place to another. This 'something' that is transported, or communicated is the 'message' and the 'places' between which the 'messages' are conveyed are described as 'senders' and 'receiver'."[397] Thus, communication is defined often as the transfer of information between people.[398]As the purpose of any visual communication is "to encourage in the audience some belief about the past ... the present ... or future," the audience, therefore, becomes a key component of the process of visual communication.[399] Accordingly, during his creative process, the creator (artist) aims to influence a specific targeted audience to adopt an idea or a conviction through his design.[400] This intent to persuade can fulfill one of the following purposes: "encourage an audience to take some measures; to educate an audience (persuade them to accept information or data); or provide the audience with an experience."[401] Essentially the graphic designer employs distinct graphic functions in order to communicate.

Two of the more notable functions include the "informative" function, which transmits knowledge, or intelligence, while the "persuasive" function, or rhetorical function is used to, persuade, convince or affect change in thought and behavior.[402] Clive Ashwin, in his chapter *Drawing, Design and Semiotics*, refers to two other significant graphic functions. The first he defines as "phatic," which involves a method of communication that initiates, continues or concludes a conversation. Using comics as example, Ashwin explains how the framing of a design can aid to direct the viewer where to go next.[403] Furthermore, he suggests that "arrows, changes of viewpoint or of perspective" are also examples of a phatic function. The second

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[396] Malcolm Barnard, *Graphic Design as Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 18.

[397] *Ibid.*

[398] *Ibid.*, 20.

[399] Ann C. Tyler in her essay "Shaping Belief: The Role of Audience in Visual Communication," in Audrey Bennett, ed., *Design Studies: Theory and Research in Graphic Design* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), p. 36.

[400] *Ibid.*

[401] *Ibid.*

[402] Barnard, p. 14-15.

[403] Clive Ashwin, "Drawing, Design and Semiotics," in Victor Margolin, ed., *Design Discourse: History/ Theory/Criticism* (Chicago: university of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 208.

graphic function proposed by Ashwin is "metalinguistic." It involves the utilization of a language to talk about some other language, describing it as a "communication that comments on, explains, clarifies or qualifies another piece of communication."[404] Furthermore, Ashwin argues that the metalinguistic function is connected to codes (semiology). As noted earlier, communication is the transmission of messages, which involves "senders, signals, channels and receivers."[405] When semiology becomes part of the communication process, the message transforms into a more complex "exchange of meanings."[406] According to John Fiske in his book *Introduction to Communication Studies*, "the cultural position of 'senders' and 'receivers' generates meaning, and the exchange of meanings produces the cultural positions of senders and receivers."[407] Therefore, the purpose of the "message" or the "communication" is to engage the audience to interpret the signs and codes within the message based on existing cultural principles, which can either identify, or reject, the proposed idea.[408]

The relationship between the audience and the process of communication has many perspectives and therefore can be perceived in a variety of ways. For example, one of the concepts is the audience as passive reader, which is characterized by the audience decoding the message but not actively participating in its meaning. Another concept is the audience as active reader, which is characterized by the audience being able to identify with specific markers (signs-semiotics) within the message, thus participating in its meaning. Roland Barthes in *Rhetoric of the Image* proposes that denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (implicated meaning) differentiate the message in visual communication.[409] Basically, Barthes proposes that the audience is not only able to read the literal meaning but also is able to decode the signs that convey the "iconic message."[410] Furthermore, Barthes argues that even though these signs can be interpreted in a multitude of ways outside the communication

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[404] *Ibid.*

[405] Barnard, p. 25.

[406] *Ibid.*

[407] John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 3.

[408] Taylor, p. 36

[409] Roland Barthes, 'The Rhetoric of the Image,' in Robert E. Ennis, ed., *Semiotics: An Introduction Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 192-205.

[410] *Ibid.*, p. 195.

device, based on cultural tenets and assimilation, the audience ventures an interpretation of the connoted message, thereby becoming an active reader.[411]

As art director of *Novy Lef*'s fifth issue, Rodchenko designed the overall layout of the journal. The application of graphic elements on the cover is kept to a minimal, with only a few constructed geometric shapes incorporated. There is no text, with the exception of the journal's title and date, and only two colors are employed, black and steel blue. The photograph of the tower is the focus; it is central to the discourse proposed. The denoted message is clear; the tower is a symbol of electricity. In order to determine the connotated message, the existing context at the time the journal was published provides a basis for evaluating the intent of the communication put forth.

The implementation of the electrification plan did not go as smoothly as Lenin and the Party had hoped, hindered by inadequate funding, due to the slow economic recovery following the Civil War. The government in June 1921 was forced to stop construction on all regional stations except for the promising ones such as the Shatura Station.[412] However, by the end of 1926, as part of the State's renewed industrialization push, the plan was back on target, expanding beyond the regional areas of Moscow and Leningrad, including the Urals. As the fifth issue of the journal was published in 1927, Rodchenko's decision to print a photograph of the Shutura tower on the cover was decisive. Not only was this tower one of the first to be erected following the implementation of electrification, but its continued existence validated the legitimacy of the plan. Clearly, the graphic function of information and persuasion can easily be identified within Rodchenko's cover design. He was informing, or educating his audience of the technological advancement ushered in by the State, persuading them at the same time to support its continued existence. It is the two functions proposed by Ashwin however, which lie at the core of the argument that Rodchenko was manipulating design for acculturation. The framing, the oblique upward angle of the photograph, the subject matter, were all exploited by Rodchenko strategically. The message is manifest, this is an ongoing story, a story that communicates that the electrification of the country is soaring and "your" (citizens of the USSR) government is working relentlessly to

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[411] Barthes, pp. 199-201.

[412] Coopersmith, p. 200.

bring "you" a better way of life, an enlightened life. Using the "effect of real" often associated with photographs, Rodchenko was making an argument that the information communicated was not only "fact," but also, it was "true."[413] Therein lies the message of the work.

In 1922 Rodchenko wrote a poem entitled *Charlot.* While it refers to Charlie Chaplin, it is also a direct homage to Lenin and his utopian vision of acculturation through technology. Within its lines, Rodchenko professes his commitment not only to Lenin himself, but also to the construction of a new Soviet consciousness. Here is a brief excerpt:

> Every master-inventor is inspired to invent by new events or demands.
> Who is it today?
> Lenin and technology.
> The one and the other are the foundation of his work.
> Thus is the new man designed—a master of details, that is, the future anyman.
> Today this is the artist and the actor Charlie Chaplin—a master of details.
> The masters of the masses—
> Are Lenin and Edison.
> Why is he needed?—
> It's clear:
> 500, 000, 000 people
> Have lost their own worth, the worth of a wave of the hand. Drunk with the
> Ideology of the sublime, they do not know the purity
> Of putting on a bowler derby—
> Of a person's walk.
> They found out,
> That simply nothing—the ordinary—is higher than the pompousness and
> Muddleheadaches of speculative ideologies.
> Charlot is always himself—the one and only, the ordinary Charlie Chaplin.[414]

As this poem demonstrates, Rodchenko as a revolutionary artist developed his artistic practices in the service of socialism. For Lenin, a cultural revolution signified the accession of the masses towards enlightenment. In response to this call to action, Rodchenko became a devoted propagandist mobilizing modern technologies in his desire to transform through his designs the viewer's consciousness, thus participating actively in the cultural revolution taking place.

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[413] Tyler, p. 42.

[414] Rodchenko in Lavrentiev, p. 147. It is interesting to note that Rodchenko chose to include and link the name of Edison (inventor of the electric lightbulb) in his poem. This is indicative as it makes reference to Lenin's Plan for the Electrification of Russia.

CONCLUSION

On February 26, 2009, *ADWEEK* magazine announces the launch of the new spring marketing campaign by U.S. retail giant Saks Fifth Avenue. Right from the start of Kenneth Hein's opening remarks in his article *Saks Selects Shepard Fairey for Spring Ad Effort,* the reader senses the ironic undertone, "The proletariat surely wouldn't care for a bourgeoisie brand like Saks Fifth Avenue, however that hasn't stopped the retailer from borrowing the look of a Russian Communist-era poster."[415] The article reports that the struggling luxury chain, which was experiencing declining sales in view of the recession, had hired Fairey to create an "eye-catching"[416] limited edition campaign consisting of new packaging (bags), catalog covers, window displays and in-store presentations. Hitting the stores on March 12 of that year, the campaign received much attention not only from its targeted audience, but also from many critics who were blunt in their review of the work created by Fairey and approved by Saks marketing executives. Unlike Hein, who kept the ironic undertone of his report subtle, Alice Rawsthorn, in her February 6, 2009, New York Times article *The Enduring Legacy of Soviet Constructivism,* begins her review with a more aggressive statement:

> I'd like to think it's ironic. If not, it's in lousy taste. At a time when unemployment is soaring and social unrest rising, Saks Fifth Avenue, the American department store chain, is trying to woo shoppers with a Constructivist-style advertisement featuring a model raising her arm in a communist salute and carrier bags bearing the slogan 'Want it!'

Even more ironic according to Rawsthorn is Fairey's inspiration for the campaign, which exploited the graphic design work of artist Aleksandr Rodchenko who had started to design

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[415] Kenneth Hein, "Saks Selects Shepard Fairey for Spring Ad Effort," in *Adweek*, 26 Feb. 2009, http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/saks-selects-shepard-fairey-spring-ad-effort-105351, (accessed 3 December 2012).

[416] *Ibid.*

advertisements for the State-run department retailer *GUM*[417] (Main Universal Store - *Glavnyi Universalnyi Magazin)* in the 1920s. Quoting Mayakovsky's (Rodchenko's advertising partner) infamous expression, "deploy all of the weapons used by our enemies," Rawsthorn questions not only the timing of the campaign, but more importantly, the objective. Persuading people to buy a "slouchy bag" instead of a new political system was for Rawsthorn, farcical.

This is an interesting debate, and as such, it is an important example to investigate with respect to this project. Putting aside the political undertone of the campaign within its existing socio-political context in the USA at the time, where American artists were exploiting Communist-era programs to promote industry in the U.S. (not unlike Soviet artists Rodchenko and Mayakovsky exploiting capitalistic programs to promote Communism back in the 1920s), is a much bigger discussion and not pertinent to this study. However, what is pertinent are the graphic elements employed by Fairey in designs presented to Saks and his own objectives for exploiting them.

Creating bright marketing collateral,[418] which consisted of vivid contrasts of words and images printed in dramatic color applications of red, black and white, the Saks advertisements are clearly executed in the same Constructivist style Rodchenko employed in his own graphic designs in the 1920s. (Fig. Concl.1) In one of the advertisement posters, a young woman (looking very proletarian with her determined expression and authoritative stance) raises her arm with clenched fist demanding the goods Saks Fifth Avenue offers. (Fig. Concl. 2) The main slogan says, "Arm Yourself" while the secondary message says, "With a Slouchy Bag." This is obviously not about raising your fist to demand better stitching on your Prada bags,[419] but it is clearly attempting to cleverly catch the audience's attention to buy the product being promoted and be proud of supporting the brand. Another poster has a male model wearing relaxed cropped shorts, which are described as "Brave Pants." (Fig. Concl. 3) Looking like they were produced to defend workers' rights, these designs promote a call to

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[417] *GUM* is an abbreviation of the Russian: *Главный универсальный магазин* .

[418] Please note that the term "collateral" in this context refers to a marketing industry term in the world of advertising, which refers to the individual components that make up an advertising campaign.

[419] Robert Weitz, "FashionProp – One Revolutionary Style That Fits All," in *The Brand Wash*, 14 January 2009, http://www.thebrandwash.com/tag/rodchenko/2009, (accessed 3 december 2012).

action.[420] This objective is made even clearer by the campaign's main slogan "Want It!" found on advertising as well as packaging, including the final sale bag, which is viewed outside of Saks by a secondary audience. This is a concrete example of the legacy of Rodchenko's work even today.

Although Rodchenko's objectives were very different from those of Fairey, he recognized the effective communication aspect of the graphic applications created by Rodchenko. Clearly, for Fairey, Rodchenko's innovative designs could be transported to any context because at the core of their execution the graphic elements employed communicated a strong message that would aid in stimulating the masses to participate in its idea. Even though the U.S. was in a recession and sales of goods were down, Saks was petitioning the masses to join them in an effort to stay strong together, not only helping their American brand, but more importantly, contributing to the economy as a whole. Asked if his work could be misunderstood as a form of retail indoctrination, Fairey stated, "Some people might think it could be making fun of what's going on right now, but I think most people are sophisticated enough to realize it's a way of grabbing attention. It's commerce."[421] Furthermore, Fairey said that he had decided to create the new campaign because "I'm not interested in speaking to a small group; I've always thought it was the duty of intelligence to make art for the people."[422]

Prior to Fairey's Saks campaign, Pernod Ricard USA, a leading producer, importer and marketer of premium spirits, including Stolichnaya vodka, had announced the launch of a similar, multi-million dollar campaign in 2007 for the iconic Stoli family of vodkas, reminding consumers to "Choose Authenticity." At the time, Patrick Piana, senior vice-president, marketing, Pernod Ricard USA, stated, "Stolichnaya is the best-known Russian brand in the Western World, with a legendary history and a pioneering spirit." Launching the advertisements in May 2007 in issues of leading magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *In Style* and *GQ*, "the new campaign's visual style is based on a Russian artistic movement called 'Constructivism,' which celebrated the bold, strong, industrial structures of the early 20th

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[420] *Ibid.*

[421] Eric Wilson, "Consumers of the World Unite" in *New York Times: Fashion & Style*, 7 January 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/08/fashion/08ROW.html?_r=2/2009, (accessed 3 december 2012).

[422] Cited in *Ibid.*

century when Stolichnaya was created," Piana further explained. Inferno, the London-based agency that was part of the overall design team for this campaign, described the motives behind their inspiration to exploit the Constructivist style of Rodchenko's graphic designs, "The essence of Constructivism is about function in design, over design for design's sake. This is reflected in this campaign."

This statement made by Inferno is at the core of this project's main argument and could not have been summarized more aptly. By investigating and analyzing Rodchenko's artistic evolution from the time he became an avid member of the *LEF* group, worker at *INKhUK*, advertising collaborator with the State, and finally, artistic director of the journal *Novy Lef* (1927-28), Rodchenko's motivation and intent were made clear. He mobilized modern technologies in his artistic work, such as graphic design and photography, in an effort to alter mass consciousness and acculturate the new citizens of the Soviet State to participate in the Cultural Revolution taking place. In saying this, it must be added that Rodchenko's innovative creativity lies in his ability to interpret and tailor the themes and ideas on behalf of his clients (the State) and turn those issues into simple visuals, which could be deciphered easily by the targeted audience, thus accelerating the understanding of the intended message. Rodchenko did not create artworks just to please the eye of the viewer; his motives were calculated and politic. He employed elements of design that not only promoted the item being illustrated, but more significant in its execution, he "communicated" an idea.

Rodchenko's artistic contribution in the 1920s has been given much attention these last few decades in scholarly articles and in museum exhibitions such as the retrospective *Aleksandr Rodchenko* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in June 1998, or the more recent exhibition *Rodchenko & Popova: Defining Constructivism* at the Tate Modern in London in February 2009. Both highlighted Rodchenko's innovative designs. However, the full impact of his work in the field of graphic design has not yet been explored fully. Even though the accompanying catalogs of these two exhibitions consist of editorials that discuss the contribution Rodchenko made in the field of design beyond its graphic elements, alluding to its socio-political content and the political motives that drove Rodchenko to design as he did, there is something missing from the discussion. This omission revolves around the aspect of graphic design as "communication," a notion that is at the core of Rodchenko's graphic

creations. This is not completely surprising as communication theory is still an area of research that is new and developing, as well as complex. But as this project demonstrates, Rodchenko's revolutionary graphic applications were created in order to emphasize and promote the main objective of the design, which was rooted in communicating an explicit, desired "message" to a targeted audience. This argument is corroborated by recently published scholarly works such as Barnard's investigation of graphic design as communication, where he affirms, drawing on the research of many specialists in the field of communication theory, that the role and function of graphic design is, and always has been, communication. Thus, a whole new realm of study is opening regarding Rodchenko's true contribution to the field of design.

In view of this, working on this project has brought to light many additional areas of research that are worthy of exploring further. Rodchenko's graphic evolution in the early 1920s until 1927 as an art director for the journal *Novy Lef* was extraordinary in its scope. Not only did Rodchenko evolve the aesthetic application of graphic elements in his designs, he constantly reevaluated the needs of his clients and audience, developing inadvertently the potential of the "communicative message" being promoted. Due to this new approach, Rodchenko's graphic work in the '30s under Stalin is just as captivating in its innovation, specifically his contribution to the journal *You Give* (*Daesh*) and *USSR in Construction* (*SSSR na Stroike*). There is very little written about Rodchenko's graphic work for this journal beyond the socio-political context of Stalin's decree that all artistic representation must adhere to Socialist Realism.[423] Many scholars argue that Rodchenko abandoned his principles once he started to work under Stalin. However, this is extremely simplistic in its assessment. After reviewing Rodchenko's work for the journals, it is plain that, even after Stalin's new artistic mandate, Rodchenko continued to explore and develop his graphic designs as communication, working just as diligently as he did in the '20s to be an artist who produced art as a means to "communicate" and "inculcate" ideas. Therefore, the interesting question to investigate further would be whether Rodchenko under this new politicized mandate set by Stalin continued to harness graphic design as communication.

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[423] Socialist Realism became State policy in 1932 when Soviet leader Joseph Stalin launched the decree "On the Literary and Art Organizations," which dictated that all artistic representations would from that moment on be realistic in nature and promote the goals of Socialism and Communism.

Were Rodchenko's designs effective tools of visual communication? We believe they were. This is why today's graphic designers are regularly exploiting Rodchenko's Constructivist-style in their own work. Did Rodchenko's designs indeed educate and motivate the targeted audience to accept and adopt the "message," thus taking action? This is difficult to assess. What can be argued, though, is that Rodchenko worked relentlessly to promote the socialist ideological agenda as set by Lenin and the Party. However, whether the audience deciphered fluently the communicative "message" intended is arguable. As Stuart Hall summarized in his influential essay *Encoding, Decoding in Television Discourse*, "images are first encoded by the producer and then decoded by the viewer."[424] This, he confirms, can work only if the producer and viewer are compatible.

[424] Cited in Liz Wells, ed., *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 211.

FIGURES

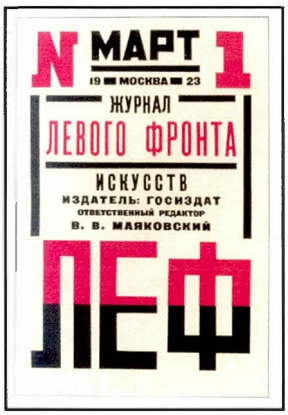


Fig. 1.1 Aleksandr Rodchenko. Cover for *Lef,* no. 1 (1923).
Reprinted from *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, p. xxx
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 1.2 Aleksandr Rodchenko. Cover for *Lef,* no. 2 (1923).
Reprinted from *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, p. xxx
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 1.3. Aleksandr Rodchenko. Cover for *Lef,* no. 3 (1923).
Reprinted from *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, p. xxx
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 2.1. Aleksandr Rodchenko. Dobrolet (1923). Offset lithograph, 35 x 45.4 cm. Reprinted from *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, p. xxx The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 2.2. Aleksandr Rodchenko. Mother (1924). Gelatin silver print, 22.9 x 15.9 cm. Collection of Howard Schickler Fine Art, Sarasota, Florida.

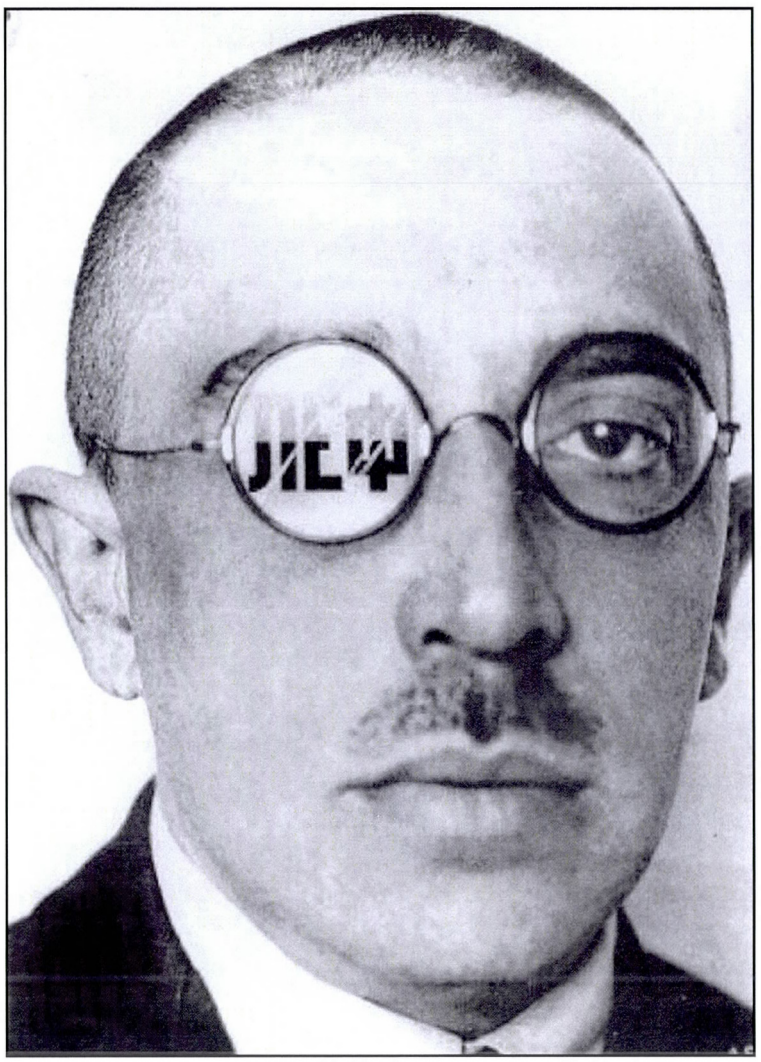


Fig. 2.3. Aleksandr Rodchenko. Portrait of Osip Brik (1924).
Variant design for cover of *Lef.* Gelatin-silver print 24.2 x 17.9. Reprinted from *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, p. xxx The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 2.4. Aleksandr Rodchenko. Photomontage maquette for variant cover of *Lef*, nos. 1-2 (1923). Reprinted from *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, p. xxx The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 3.1. Aleksandr Rodchenko. Box for "Our Industry" caramels, (1923). Reprinted from *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, p. xxx The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

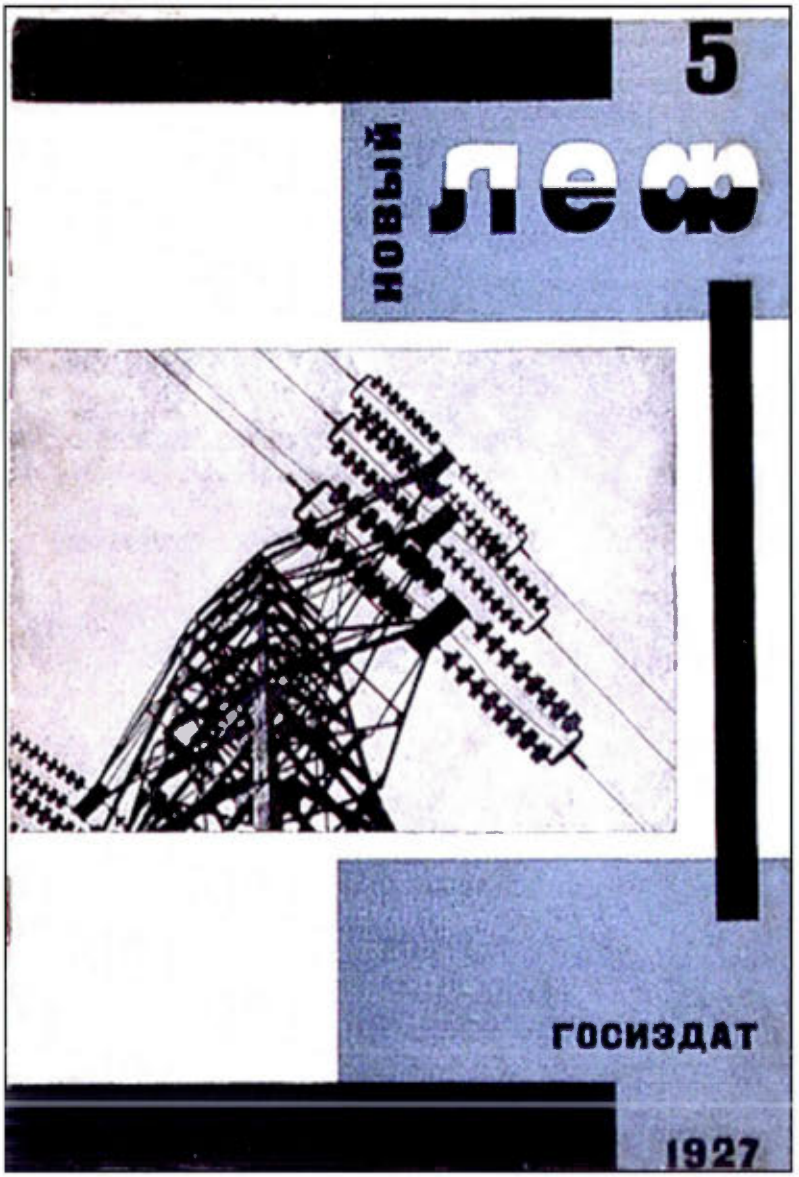
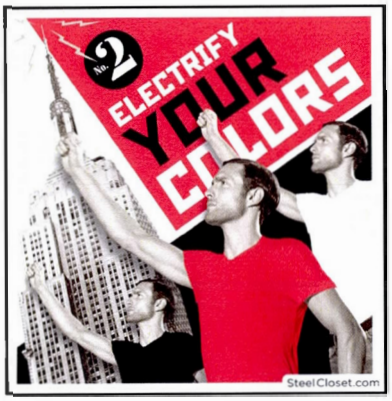


Fig. 3.2. Aleksandr Rodchenko. Cover of *Novy Lef*, no. 5, (1927). Reprinted from personal collection.



Concl. 1. Shepard Fairey. Spring "Want it!" campaign for Saks Fifth Avenue (2009). "Electrify Your Colors." Reprinted from *ADWEEK* magazine, Februrary 26, 2009.

Concl. 2. Shepard Fairey. Spring "Want it!" campaign for Saks Fifth Avenue (2009). "Arm Yourself." Reprinted from *ADWEEK* magazine, Februrary 26, 2009.

Concl. 3. Shepard Fairey. Spring "Want it!" campaign for Saks Fifth Avenue (2009). "Brave Pants." Reprinted from *ADWEEK* magazine, Februrary 26, 2009.

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