

motifs

El Lissitsky

When we published the Jakobson-Tynyanov theses last year (NLR 37), we wished to draw attention to the confrontation of vanguard art and aesthetics with revolutionary politics and theory in the Soviet Union during the decade after the Bolshevik Revolution. El Lissitsky's polemic on the future of the book is another key document from the same period. Just as Jakobson and Tynyanov prefigured much of the current debate on structuralism, Lissitsky in an obvious way foreshadows many of the insights of Marshall McLuhan. By going back to the twenties we are not being in the least antiquarian but posing the problems which, say, Barthes or McLuhan have raised, but in a revolutionary context. Moreover Lissitsky was himself a practising artist, for whom theoretical problems were inextricably intertwined with his work and his politics.

Lissitsky was born near Smolensk in 1890. Before the Revolution he trained as an engineer and architect in Darmstadt, visited Paris and travelled throughout Italy. On his return to Russia he worked as an apprentice architect, but devoted his time increasingly to painting and book illustration, especially children's books. His work was heavily influenced by both Jewish and Russian peasant popular art. In 1917 he rallied to the Revolution and a year later designed the first Soviet flags which were carried across Red Square on May Day. Chagall, who shared his preoccupation with Jewish and folk art, invited him to teach at the Vitebsk Art School. But it was here, paradoxically, that Lissitsky fell under the influence of Malevich, who was to oust Chagall from his post as Principal. In this way he came in contact with Constructivism and entered the modern era. He worked principally on posters, such as the famous *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, architectural drawings and book designs. Lissitsky also devoted himself to elaborating a network of contacts throughout Europe, addressing conferences of Dadaists, contributing to *De Stijl*, lecturing widely and co-founding the trilingual magazine *Veshch-Gegenstand-Objet* in Berlin. During the latter part of the twenties he began to concentrate on furniture and interior design and, after the onset of Stalinism, was able to continue work designing exhibition displays and pavilions and from 1932

onwards was the typographer of the periodical *U.S.S.R. In Reconstruction*. Since 1923 he had suffered from tuberculosis; during the thirties his health declined seriously and he died in 1941.

Lissitsky's own life and work reflect the interpenetration and cross-fertilization of the arts which took place in Russia during the twenties. The idea behind his *Proun* series of drawings was to make a bridge between painting and architecture; he was a pioneer of the integration of word and image in poster and book design. We can see the same thing with many other artists of the time: Tatlin's development from painting to reliefs, architecture and, concerned over every Russian's needs during the cold winter, the design of clothes, stoves and samovars; Rodchenko's work in photo-montage in collaboration with Mayakovsky and Dziga Vertov, the film director; the work of Mayakovsky, Shklovsky, Brik, etc, in the cinema and, indeed, Eisenstein's development out of theatre into film, and his interest in synaesthesia. Once again we are living in a period in which the arts are merging into each other: Lissitsky's projects in typography are clearly related to the growing movement of concrete poetry today; photo-montage re-appears in the work of Rauschenberg and Larry Rivers; and the invocation of Gutenberg immediately calls to mind McLuhan.

However, we should be clear of the distinction between Lissitsky's approach and McLuhan's. Lissitsky stresses that the hieroglyph or ideogram should be the carrier of a *concept* and points out the difference between the American advertising poster, momentary and sub-liminal, and the Soviet agitation poster, designed to be read consciously. This is a far cry from McLuhan's 'sacralization' and 'tribalization'. Moreover, McLuhan's theories are drawn from an uncritical observation of modern capitalist society; Lissitsky's from an active involvement in the construction of a socialist society.

If we are to discuss Marxist aesthetics, we must go back to the twenties in Russia when all the crucial problems were posed in a situation of urgency and struggle. We must consider the kind of relationship which developed then between art and agitation (agit-trains, films, posters, etc) and art and design (architecture, ergonomics, the so-called 'applied arts': furniture, typography, clothing, etc). We must consider how the work started in Russia, found a continuation in the Bauhaus, and its development from there, in order to be able to re-integrate the past into the ongoing present. We must also look closely at futurism—Lissitsky mentions its English manifestation *Blast!*—and at phenomena such as the 'theatre of fact' in the light of the work of Meyerhold and Tretyakov (e.g. his plays, *Roar China!*, and *Gas-Masks* staged in a gas factory) to which Lissitsky also alludes.

The modernity and relevance of Lissitsky's ideas are remarkable at all levels. Specifically on the central subject of this article—the book—many of Lissitsky's headier prognostications have not been fully realized: so far young West German writers have been the quickest to realize the possibilities of the technical innovations Lissitsky refers to. But Lissitsky's implicit condemnation of 'American posters, designed for rapid perception from a passing motor-car' still holds good.

Notions of slicing-up or reorganizing the conventional design of a book are greeted as examples of unbridled, self-indulgent avant-gardism. Notions of varying typefaces for varying series of rhetoric are often dismissed as being technically impossible and economically expensive, and we are thus confined to simple roman and italic type. To asperse the typeface of a book is regarded as pedantic aestheticism. To extol the fact that there are now typewriters with varying type-balls and which automatically justify their margins is not regarded as particularly important, except by the few who realize that these new technical devices have opened up a whole new terrain of communication, no longer held in the rigid and expensive grip of letterpress and linotype. The world of the poster is still largely unexplored. All along the desolate stretches of hoardings and underground stations we have only ephemera, to be consumed in the twinkling of an eye. Only when books can be serialized on large posters in these undergrounds, when we have this kind of expansion of the possibilities of the printed word and the image, will the revolution indicated by El Lissitzky be properly in train.

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The Future of the Book

El Lissitzky

Every artistic innovation is unique, it has no development. In time different variations on the same theme grow up around innovation, maybe higher, maybe lower, but they will rarely reach the original power of the first. This goes on until long familiarity has made the effect of the work of art so automatic that the senses no longer react to the worn means and the time is ripe for a further technical innovation. However, the 'technical' and the 'artistic' (so-called) are inseparable, so we must not lightly dispose of a profound relationship by means of a few slogans. At any rate, the first few books printed by Gutenberg with the system of movable type which he invented remain the finest examples of the art of book production.

The next few hundred years saw no basic innovations (until photography) in this field. In typography there are just more or less successful variations accompanying technical improvements in the manufacturing apparatus. The same happened with a second discovery in the visual field—with photography. As soon as we give up assuming a complacent superiority over everything else, we must admit that the first Daguerrotypes are not primitive artefacts needing improvements, but the finest photographic art. It is shortsighted to suppose that machines, i.e. the displacement of manual by mechanical processes, are basic to the development of the form and figure of an artefact. In the first place, the consumer's demand determines the development, i.e. the demand of the social strata that provide the 'commissions'. Today this is not a

narrow circle, a thin cream, but ‘everybody’, the masses. The idea moving the masses today is called materialism, but dematerialization is the characteristic of the epoch. For example, correspondence grows, so the number of letters, the quantity of writing paper, the mass of material consumed expand, until relieved by the telephone. Again, the network and material of supply grow until they are relieved by the radio. Matter diminishes, we dematerialize, sluggish masses of matter are replaced by liberated energy. This is the mark of our epoch. What conclusions does this imply in our field?

I draw the following analogy:

Inventions in the field of verbal traffic	Inventions in the field of general traffic
Articulated language.....	Upright gait
Writing.....	The wheel
Gutenberg’s printing-press.....	Carts drawn by animal power
?	The automobile
?	The aeroplane

I have produced this analogy to prove that so long as the book remains a palpable object, i.e. so long as it is not replaced by auto-vocalizing and kino-vocalizing representations, we must look to the field of the manufacture of books for new basic innovations in the near future, so that the general level of the epoch can be reached in this field.

There are signs to hand suggesting that this basic innovation is likely to come from the neighbourhood of the collotype. Here we have a machine which captures the subject matter on a film and a press which copies the negative of the material on to sensitive paper. Thus the frightful weight of the subject matter and the bucket of dye is omitted, so that once again we have dematerialization. The most important thing here is that the mode of production of words and pictures is included in the same process: photography. Up till now photography is that mode of expression which is most comprehensible. We have before us the prospect of a book in which exposition has priority over letters.

We know of two kinds of writing: one sign for each concept—hieroglyphic (modern Chinese); and one sign for each sound—alphabetic. The progress of the alphabetic over the hieroglyphic mode is only relative. Hieroglyphics are international. This means that if a Russian, a German or an American fixes the sign (picture) of a concept in his mind he can read Chinese or Egyptian (soundlessly), without learning the language, for language and writing are always one creation as far as he is concerned.

We may conclude that:

- 1 the hieroglyphic book is international (at least potentially)
- 2 the alphabetic book is national, and
- 3 the book of the future will be non-national; for it needs the least education to understand it.

There are today two dimensions to the word. As sound it is a function of time; as exposition, of space. The book of the future must be both. This is how to overcome the automatism of the contemporary book. A world-view which has become automatic ceases to exist in our senses, so we are left drowning in a void. The dynamic achievement of art is to transform the void into space, i.e. into a unity conceivable for our senses.

An alteration in the structure and mode of language implies a change in the usual appearance of the book. Before the War, printed matter in Europe was appropriately enough converging in appearance in every country. A new optimistic mentality laying stress on immediate events and the fleeting moment underlay the origins in America of a new form of printing. They began to modify the relation of word and illustration in exposition into the direct opposite of the European style. The highly developed technique of facsimile-electrotype (half-tone blocks) was especially important for this development; thus photomontage was born.

After the War, sceptical and stunned Europe marshalled a screaming, burning language: all means must be used to maintain and assert oneself. The catchwords of the epoch were 'attraction' and 'trick'. The new appearance of the book was characterized by:

1 broken-up setting

2 photomontage and typomontage

These facts, which are the basis for our predictions, were already foreshadowed before the War and our Revolution. Marinetti, the siren of Futurism, also dealt with typography in his masterly manifestos. In 1909 he wrote:

'The book will be the futurist expression of our futurist consciousness. I am against what is known as the harmony of a setting. When necessary we will use three or four colours to a page, and 20 different typefaces. E.g. we shall represent a series of uniform, *hasty perceptions* with *cursive*, a **scream** will be expressed in **bold** type and so on. So a new painterly typographic representation will be born on the printed page.'

Many of today's creations do not go beyond this demand. I should like to stress that Marinetti does not call for playing with form as form, but asks rather that the action of a new content should be intensified by the form.

Before the War the notion of the simultaneous book was also proposed and, in a sense, realized. This was in the Poem of Blaise Cendrars, typographically conceived by Sonja Delaunay-Terk. It is a foldable strip of paper 5 feet long—an attempt at a new book-form for poetry. The lines of poetry are printed in colour, with colours always discontinued in the content and changed into others.

In England during the War the Vortex group published their magazine *Blast!* in a crude, elementary style, using almost only unrelieved capitals, a style which has become the token of all modern international printing.

In Germany, the 1917 Prospectus of the little *Neue Jugend* Portfolio¹ is an important document of the new typography.

The new movement which began in Russia in 1908 bound painter and poet together from the very first day; hardly a poetry book has appeared since then without the collaboration of a painter. Poems have been written with the lithographic crayon and signed. They have been cut in wood. Poets themselves have set whole pages. Thus the poets Khlebnikov, Kruchenich, Mayakovski, Asseeyev have worked with the painters Rosanova, Goncharova, Malevich, Popova, Burlyuk, etc. They did not produce select, numbered, de luxe editions, but cheap unlimited volumes, which today we must treat as popular art despite their sophistication.

In the Revolutionary period a latent energy has concentrated in the younger generation of our artists, which can only find release in large-scale popular commissions. The audience has become the masses, the semi-literate masses. With our work the Revolution has achieved a colossal labour of propaganda and enlightenment. We ripped up the traditional book into single pages, magnified these a hundred times, printed them in colour and stuck them up as posters in the streets. Unlike American posters, ours were not designed for rapid perception from a passing motor-car, but to be read and to enlighten from a short distance. If a series of these posters were today to be set in the size of a manageable book, in an order corresponding to some theme, the result would be most curious. Our lack of printing equipment and the necessity for speed meant that, though the best work was hand-printed, the most rewarding was standardized, lapidary and adapted to the simplest mechanical form of reproduction. Thus State Decrees were printed as rolled-up illustrated leaflets, and Army Orders as illustrated pamphlets.

At the end of the Civil War (1920), we had the opportunity to realize our aims in the field of the creation of new books, in spite of the primitiveness of the mechanical means at our disposal. In Vitebsk, we brought out five issues of a magazine called *Unovis*, printed by typewriter, lithography, etching and linocut.

As I have already written: 'Gutenberg's Bible was only printed with letters. But letters alone will not suffice for the handing down of today's Bible. The book finds its way to the brain through the eyes, not through the ears; light waves travel much faster and more intensely than sound waves. But humans can only speak to each other with their mouths, whereas the possibilities of the book are multi-form.'

With the advent of the period of reconstruction in 1922, the production of books also rose rapidly. Our best artists seized on the problem of book production. At the beginning of 1922 I and the writer Ilya Ehrenburg edited the periodical *Veshch-Gegenstand-Objet* which was

¹ The June 1917 number of *Neue Jugend* (Berlin) was described as 'Prospectus for the little Grosz portfolio', published that autumn. The typography was by John Heartfield.

printed in Berlin. Access to the most developed German printing techniques enabled us to realize some of our ideas about the book. Thus we printed a picture-book *The Story of Two Squares*, which we had finished in our productive period of 1920, and the *Mayakowski-Book* which made even the form of the book corresponding to the particular edition a functional structure. At the same time our artists were exploring the technical possibilities of printing. The State Publishing House and other printing establishments put out books which were shown, and appreciated, at several international exhibitions in Europe. Comrades Popova, Rodchenko, Klutskis, Stepanova and Gan devoted themselves to book design. Some worked directly in the print-shop with the compositors and presses (Gan, *et al.*). The growing esteem in which book design is held is indicated by the practice of listing on a special page the names of all the compositors and finishers concerned with the book. This means that there has grown up in the print-shops a stratum of workers who have developed a conscious relation to their craft.

Most of the artists produce montages, that is, lay out photographs and suitable captions together on a page which is then made into a block for printing. Thus is conceived a form of undeniable power, apparently very simple to handle and therefore easily diverted into banality, but in skilful hands extremely fruitful as a means to visual poetry.

At the outset we said that the expressive power of each artistic innovation is unique and has no development. The innovation of easel-painting made great works of art possible, but it has now lost this power. The cinema and the illustrated weekly have succeeded it. We rejoice in the new means which technique has put into our hands. We know that a close relation with the actuality of general events, the continuing heightening of the sensitivity of our optic nerves, the record-breaking speed of social development, our command over plastic material, the reconstruction of the plane and its space and the simmering force of innovation have enabled us to give the book new power as a work of art.

Of course, today's book has not found a new overall structure, it is still a single volume with a cover, a back and pages 1,2,3, . . . The same is true of the theatre. Even our most modern drama plays in a theatre like a peepshow, with the public in the stalls, in boxes and in rows in front of the curtain. But the stage has been cleared of all the paraphernalia of painted scenery, the stage-space as a painted perspective has perished. A three-dimensional physical space has been born in the same peepshow, allowing maximal unfolding of the fourth dimension, living movement. Within the book modernism may not yet have gone so far, but we must learn to see the tendency.

Notwithstanding the crisis which book production, like every other area of production, is undergoing, the avalanche of books grows with every passing year. The book is the most monumental art form today; no longer is it fondled by the delicate hands of a bibliophile, but seized by a hundred thousand hands. This illuminates the hegemony of

the illustrated weekly in this transition period. We should add to the number of illustrated weeklies the flood of children's picture-books. Our children's reading teaches them a new plastic language, they grow up with a different relation to the world and space, to image and colour, so they are preparing for a new kind of book. But we shall be satisfied if we can conceptualize the epic and lyric developments of our times in our form of book.

Literature between myth and politics

Jirí Hájek

If socialist literature is to give a fuller and more comprehensive interpretation of reality than all other schools, it must systematically demythologize the countless myths that cover up man's alienation in capitalist society. At the same time it must examine critically how far and under what conditions the factors making for alienation in socialist society are being overcome.

Any reality which takes the form of an order of things tends to hide its own inconsistencies and try to perpetuate the state of affairs reached at the moment. Socialist society likewise is subject to these factors, which are rendered all the easier to understand, and all the stronger, by the fact that, in the world's present state, socialism is involved in a perpetual war of defence against a capitalist propaganda which operates by means of a well-tryed, traditional, psychologically proven system of false myths. The 'Left Myth', as Roland Barthes has called it, springs of course not only from the need to fend off external enemies but also from internal reasons: thus a victorious revolution will secure and consolidate its first, historically relative successes chiefly by trying to deny their relativity, turn them into something absolute and identify them with its ultimate goals. Once its own equipment for revolutionary control and self-criticism stops developing or is thrown out of gear, as happened in the Stalin period—once everything is declared to be not only sensible but beyond question—then socialism's whole historical perspective is at stake. For a revolution that allowed itself to be guided entirely by its illusions about itself would lose its sense of reality, its revolutionary dynamism and perspective.

The 'Right Myth' (to cite Barthes once more) has an openly conservative function: it hides capitalist society's class composition, lending an air of legitimacy to the existing order of things by identifying it with an unchangeable and long-prevalent world hierarchy. The 'Left Myth' has quite a different nature and social origin. The society brought about by the revolution has no cause to conceal its class composition or demonstrate the unchangeability of an allegedly old-established order of things: quite the contrary. None the less it too operates as a brake, though in a different manner. Note that for the moment I am speaking of myths as the expressions of a false