At the Jewish Museum in New York City

# “The Power of Pictures: Early Soviet Photography, Early Soviet Film”—an exhibition

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*“Art is the cognition of life in the form of sensual, imaginative contemplation. Like science, art give s objective truths; genuine art demands precision because it deals with the object, it is empirical.” A.K. Voronsky*

“The Power of Pictures: Early Soviet Photography, Early Soviet Film,” at the Jewish Museum in New York City through February 7, examines some of the remarkable photography, magazines, film posters and innovative films produced in the years that followed the October Revolution of 1917.

The Revolution ushered in a period of extraordinary artistic experimentation and achievement, a period conclusively brought to an end—after years of intensifying repression—when the Stalinist bureaucracy dismantled independent artist organizations, suppressed the “avant garde” and officially declared for “Socialist Realism,” crude propaganda and adulation of the Soviet leaders, in 1934.

The important exhibition at the Jewish Museum explores early avant-garde film and photography, including the work of world-renowned artists such as Alexander Rodchenko, Boris Ignatovich and El Lissitzky, who inventively turned to the camera as a method of documenting and helping to build the new Soviet reality, along with filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov.

“Initially, the Communist government encouraged the avant-garde: radical style was seen as the expression of radical politics,” the Jewish Museum curators explain, adding that for a time, “artistic invention operated in potent and fruitful synergy with activism. Photographers and filmmakers were urged to try unusual techniques: collage, montage, darkroom manipulation, unconventional camera angles, fast-paced editing, and shifts in depth of field,” techniques that would encourage the Soviet citizen to view the emerging new society from a distinct and insightful viewpoint.

To their credit, the museum curators explain how the avant garde that flourished in the earlier years was shut down. They are unable, however, to offer any explanation for the crackdown, other than to simply assert the truism that Stalin ultimately consolidated his power. Inevitably such a perspective leaves open the door to the conception that the Stalinist dictatorship was an inevitable or logical product of the October Revolution. No truly serious discussion of the period can fail to take into account the role and struggle of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition.

In any event, the exhibition is organized into several sections that attempt to outline different stages in the development of Soviet society and its relationship to and implications for photography, magazine publication, poster art and cinema in the decade and a half or so after the October Revolution.

The different sections, including “New Perspectives,” “Metropolis,” “Constructing Socialism,” “Military,” “Staging Happiness,” “Physical Culture” and finally, “Film and Posters,” trace in a non-chronological fashion the work of photographers, artists and filmmakers as their efforts evolved into an increasingly complex symbiosis with the rapidly changing demands of the Soviet state.

The Soviet Union inherited the poverty and backwardness of tsarist Russia. That heritage, combined with the isolation of the first workers state following the failure of the social revolution to extend to Italy, Hungary and especially Germany in 1923, brought to the fore a privileged caste personified and led by Stalin. By 1924 the Stalin faction openly embraced nationalism and the program of “socialism in one country,” rejecting the fundamental program of socialist internationalism and world revolution that led the Bolsheviks to power under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky. This would have deep and ongoing consequences for every layer of Soviet society, as well as the global working class.

The section “New Perspectives” showcases some of the more imaginative and experimental photographic works of a number of noted artists, painters and sculptors who emerged from Russian Constructivism such as Rodchenko, El Lissitzky and Georgy Zimin.

These artists embraced the camera in addition to darkroom manipulation techniques to create a series of photograms (a non-camera method of exposing objects on top of light sensitive photographic paper in the darkroom), photo-montage (combining both in-camera multiple exposure techniques along with the overlapping of multiple negatives in the darkroom to create a final composite image) and photo-collage.

These methods “offered a formal radicalism that focused on graphic effects,” as the exhibition caption explains, and demonstrated that the formal considerations of the Constructivist movement were not dispensed with outright when the camera became engaged in social documentation.

Georgi Petrusov’s *Caricature of Alexander Rodchenko*, is a compelling example of montage that offers the viewer a simple study of the back of the artist’s head and then transforms the image into a dreamlike exploration of his thought processes and powers of observation.

Similarly, El Lissitzky in his 1924 self-portrait, known commonly as *The Constructor*, makes use of six different exposures in the darkroom that collectively create an image of the artist engaged in the process of production, or “construction.” The theme is somewhat obvious, but the end result is an exquisite, forceful image.

Other parts of the exhibition chart the increasing role that photography and, to a lesser extent, cinema were expected to play in documenting and exalting industrialization, militarization and other processes as the Soviet economy expanded and, thanks in large measure to the disasters and

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betrayals produced by Stalinism, the threat of war grew throughout the course of the 1930s.

One of the exhibition rooms has been transformed into a small theatre where numerous Soviet films are screened in rotation, including works by Eisenstein (*Battleship Potemkin* and *October, or Ten Days That Shook the World)*, Dziga Vertov (*Man with a Movie Camera*), Yakov Protazanov (*Aelita: Queen of Mars*), Grigori Kozinstev (*The Overcoat*) and Vsevolod Pudovkin (*Mother*).

The exhibition devotes a section to film posters created by Rodchenko, Anton Lavinsky and Georgy and Vladimir Stenberg and others. Many of these posters were "masterpieces of design," as the exhibition notes, which incorporated the techniques of collage and montage popular with the Constructivist artists of the time.

**The October Group and ROPF**

Two prominent artist organizations, the more experimental October group under the leadership of Rodchenko and Ignatovich, and the photojournalist-oriented Russian Association of Proletarian Photographers (ROPF), which included photographers Arkady Shaikhet and Georgi Zelma, were both "significantly influenced by avant-garde esthetics and by film in particular," as the exhibition's curators note. The show emphasizes the fact that many members of ROPF were Jews, who had welcomed the Bolshevik Revolution as emancipation from the vicious anti-Semitism and pogroms that characterized tsarist Russia.

The October group emerged to a considerable extent from the Constructivist movement. It came under "left" criticism from critics and leading figures among the "Proletarian Photographers." The October group regarded its more "avant-garde" style and methodology, including the use of unorthodox cropping, vertiginous angles, multiple-negative darkroom montage and fragmentation (photographing a subject in a series of parts), as means of breaking with the art of the past and creating imagery to develop the consciousness and cultural education of the Soviet citizen.

In fact, the October group, like the ROPF, was quite dedicated to the development of photojournalism, and publication of their images in the growing number of Soviet magazines—such as *Fotograf* (Photographer), *LEF* (Left Front of the Arts, and later Novy LEF) and *Daesh'!* (Let's Produce!)—was their central focus.

In an address Rodchenko delivered at the October group's 1930 conference in Moscow, he emphasized the importance of magazine photography. "Eighty to ninety percent of any magazine is built on factual material, and neither painting nor drawing can give the sensation of today, the actuality of events … and thus we put our trust in photography, since it shows what happened at a place and factually convinces us of it." He further argued that the best examples of his own and his colleagues' photographs were often published in popular magazines.

However, the1930 conference also brought out differences between October and the ROPF. This aesthetic and ideological rift became the means by which Rodchenko in particular came under fierce criticism for his supposed "formalism."

Rodchenko argued that the principal problem did not lie in deciding what should be photographed, but rather "how." His goal, he explained, was "to photograph not a factory but the work itself from the most effective point of view," and that in the approach to a particular subject, such as "the grandness of a machine, one should photograph not all of it but give a series of snapshots." Rodchenko distinguished between what he called "photo-stills," which he favored, and "photo-pictures." The former represented an attempt to break up empirical reality into fragments, enabling the viewer to view and conquer the process: while the latter, in Rodchenko's conception, rendered a more conventional or "organic" experience.

In *Girl with a Leica, 1933,* for example, Rodchenko creates a destabilizing effect by placing his subject, his longtime protégé Evgeniya Lemberg, in a dramatic grid of shadow and highlights with an almost dizzying tilt of his camera frame. His positioning of Lemberg in the background left corner of the image detaches the viewer from his subject, forcing a more lingering and challenging viewing. The photograph evokes Rodchenko's earlier investigations in his paintings.

It should be noted that Shaikhet's *Automobiles from the Gorky Factory, 1930* and Petrusov's *New Building from Above, 1930*, both works by "Proletarian Association" members, reveal similar formal considerations. There is clearly a shared "avant-garde" influence at work here, as well as perhaps the direct influence of Rodchenko himself.

"Radical" aesthetic approaches to photography steadily came into conflict with the needs and outlook of the Soviet bureaucracy, which viewed with intense suspicion anything it could not understand or that hinted at—or encouraged—critical thinking.

The exhibition notes, "The period of … innovation was brief. By 1932 … Stalin consolidated power, independent styles were no longer tolerated; the avant-garde itself became suspect. Artistic organizations were dissolved … [A]rt was subject to strict state control, and required to promote an approved, idealized socialist agenda."

As Trotsky noted in an obituary for Vladimir Mayakovsky after the famed poet's suicide in 1930, Stalin's officially sanctioned cultural regime had "become simply a system of bureaucratic command over art and a way of impoverishing it."

Rodchenko would ultimately be accused of practicing "bourgeois formalism" in his photographs and forced to recant his "errors." Both his *Pioneer Playing Trumpet* and *Pioneer Girl* (1931), in which he chose to photograph his subjects from a severe low angle, isolating them in a disquieting manner against the background sky, drew harsh criticism. Typically, one critic snapped, "The pioneer girl has no right to look upward. That has no ideological content. Pioneer girls and Komsomol [Young Communist] girls should look forward."

By 1933 it became illegal to take photographs on the streets of Soviet cities without a special permit, at which point Rodchenko became resigned to taking photos of sporting events and official gatherings; by 1934 all independent artistic activity was officially terminated.

Most of the photographers and filmmakers represented in the Jewish Museum were spared the worst punishments meted out by the Stalinist regime, in its genocidal campaign against revolutionary socialist culture and its practitioners in the late 1930s. Many simply continued taking photographs for one institution or another, keeping their mouths shut, like wide layers of the Soviet population.

The list of prominent writers, theater directors, critics and others who were murdered in the monstrous purges is extensive. It includes poets Osip Mandelstam, Nikolai Klyuev, Pavel Vasiliev and Titian Tabidze, novelists Isaac Babel and Boris Pilnyak, theater figures Vsevolod Meyerhold and Sergei Tretyakov, art scholar and writer Nikolay Punin, leading literary critic and Left Oppositionist Alexander Voronsky, German actress and Brecht collaborator Carola Neher and countless others.

Poets Vladimir Mayakovsky and Sergei Yesenin both committed suicide. According to one source, 1500 writers and artists died in the forced labor camps. Rodchenko himself, who is rumored to have attempted suicide at one point, lived the remainder of his life in isolation, poverty and ill-health. All this was the contribution of counterrevolutionary Stalinism, the gravedigger of the Revolution and its extraordinary artistic life.

Despite its limitations and its inability to explain some of the more

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complex historical issues, “The Power of Pictures” at the Jewish Museum points unmistakably to what every bourgeois historian and commentator is at great pains to deny: that the October Revolution, the greatest event in modern history, gave rise to one of the broadest and deepest cultural outpourings in history.

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