

# A conversation with Rick Poynor, author of *David King: Designer, Activist, Visual Historian*

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In mid-October, we reviewed a significant new work, *David King: Designer, Activist, Visual Historian* (Yale University Press), by Rick Poynor, a writer in the UK on graphic design and visual communication.

David King, who died in 2016, was a British artist, designer, editor, photohistorian and archivist who devoted his intellectual and aesthetic life to establishing the truth about the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, its betrayal and degeneration at the hands of Stalinism, and the role of Leon Trotsky, the Russian revolutionary leader murdered by the Stalinist secret police in 1940.

Over the course of half a century, among his varied efforts, King designed or oversaw the publication of numerous invaluable works devoted to that history, including *Trotsky: A Documentary* (1972); *How the GPU Murdered Trotsky* (1977); *Trotsky: A Photographic Biography* (1986); *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* (1997); *Ordinary Citizens: The Victims of Stalin* (2003); *Red Star Over Russia: A Visual History of the Soviet Union* (2009); and *Russian Revolutionary Posters: From Civil War to Socialist Realism, from Bolshevism to the End of Stalinism* (2012).

As King explained in a 2008 interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, he had begun 40 years earlier “collecting material out of an overwhelming interest in discovering the truth about what happened to the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union. I wanted to uncover, through visual means, what happened, to collect visual evidence.”

In a 2016 tribute to King posted on the WSWWS, David North observed that although the artist-designer had never been a member of the Socialist Labour League (later the Workers Revolutionary Party), the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Trotskyist movement, “David greatly respected its theoretical work and political activity in the working class. He followed with enormous interest the investigation initiated by the International Committee in 1975 into the assassination of Leon Trotsky. He contributed his time and many photographs in his private collection to the design of *How the GPU Murdered Trotsky*, published in 1977.”

As we noted in our recent review of *David King: Designer, Activist, Visual Historian*, “Poynor’s book surveys the history and evolution of King’s print communications work in a comprehensive and conscientious manner.

“By presenting examples of King’s most significant projects as a graphic designer, art director, visual editor, historian and writer—along with careful research about his life and career, including interviews with those who worked with him—Poynor successfully reveals the artist’s lasting contribution to graphic communications over nearly five decades.”

We recently spoke to Rick Poynor.

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David Walsh: Thank you for this, and thank you for the book.

Rick Poynor: Thank you for the write-up. You really picked out the key elements.

DW: I was struck by the book, it was elegantly and intelligently done. I think it’s a high compliment to say that it’s worthy of the subject, David King.

RP: I worked on the book with the designer Simon Esterson, who is also an admirer of David King’s work. Both of us have admired him for decades. Right from the start, I knew I would be collaborating with someone who understood the material from a visual point of view. A key consideration for us both was to convey through the book’s design the spirit of David’s work, and even to a degree, the look of his work, without falling into pastiche that merely replayed all his favorite graphic devices.

I’d be very surprised if David would have agreed to the book. I wanted to do this for a long time, and I decided to arrange a meeting with him about something else, and then slip in the idea of a book and see if he would consider it. But I fully expected him, first time around at least, to say, “I’m too busy, I want to do books about other subjects, not about myself.” I would have had to try again, and maybe eventually he would have agreed.

The sad, ironic thing is that because he died and couldn’t collaborate on the book, we were free in the end to interpret the work more openly and honestly than might have otherwise been possible.

DW: For the benefit of our readers, could you explain something about your own background?

RP: I’m a writer, and I’m also a very visual person. I came very close to studying fine art at university, but opted for the history of art. I started going to art galleries in my early teens. In my mid-20s, having realized that I wasn’t going to write the great British novel, I got into journalism, and it’s very lucky I did, because it turned out I was suited for it.

I enjoyed the craft of reporting on the encounters and interviews I had with people and telling the story. I always had a point of view, and after a few years of learning the job, I became increasingly confident about exploring my own view of the world through journalism and critical writing.

While working as deputy editor of an architecture and design magazine called *Blueprint*, based in London, I was the founding editor of *Eye*, a quarterly international review of graphic design. Simon Esterson was *Blueprint*’s original designer. That was in 1990 and, incredibly, *Eye* is still going as an independent magazine. *Blueprint* and *Eyewere* platforms for a lot of my early writing.

After seven years at *Eye* I left editing behind to concentrate again on writing. Journalism was still flourishing, even in the early days of the World Wide Web. There were lots of design magazines, places that would pay good fees for writing. I contributed to American magazines and I was able to sustain that sort of freelance existence. At the same time, by giving

lectures at universities and art schools, I was gradually drawn into academia. I became a visiting professor at the Royal College of Art in London. How does a visual arts writer survive? It's often by doing other things: lecturing, teaching, curating exhibitions. I have published a number of books.

For two days a week I'm now professor of design and visual culture at the University of Reading. I have what Americans would call tenure, and a regular pay check. The job came at a time when writing opportunities were drying up because publications were closing down, and rates of pay were static or decreasing. I was getting older, and design writing is a young person's game, if it's a viable career at all these days.

DW: Over the course of these decades, what have been some of the themes or concerns that have drawn your attention?

RP: I have written a lot about the history of British graphic design. I'm always attracted to more experimental forms of practice. One theme is particularly important in relation to the David King book: I was very interested in graphic designers who treated the medium of design as a channel or platform for expressing their own ideas. The conventional idea of a designer is that he or she is a person for hire. As the client, you have a message, you want to communicate it, and you commission a designer to make it look good, give it a high degree of impact and connect with an audience.

Designers do all of that and those are their core skills, but some of them find ways to use the medium of design as a way of saying something more personal and challenging about the world.

Within the British design scene, David King is, in my view, the ultimate example of that tendency. He starts out as a graphic designer, gets a job as a designer on the *Sunday Times Magazine*, a weekend color supplement, and rapidly becomes a visual journalist—so already this is more than just designing. He was thinking in terms of editorial content and subject matter he could research and shape for himself. And he was using his opportunity on the magazine to discover how to tell primarily visual stories (although he turned out to be rather a good writer too).

Several of my books are about designers who found ways to take a more authorial approach to design. One is about a Dutch graphic designer, now in his 80s, called Jan van Toorn, a highly influential figure in the field. His early working years, in the 1960s, were a political education. He was in his 40s before he discovered his true direction as a designer. He's a man of the left, with a sophisticated grasp of cultural and political theory. His designs were Brechtian and disruptive. He used his projects as a medium for critiquing Dutch politics and society. Colleagues accused him of being too personal, too idiosyncratic, not distanced enough or sufficiently "objective." Van Toorn's work, like David King's, shows that "neutrality" in design is an illusion.

Van Toorn knew King's work, too. He told me that he would go to Amsterdam Central Station once a week to pick up copies of the *Sunday Times* and the *Sunday Times Magazine* because he loved the way Michael Rand and David King handled the pictures.

As I try to show in the book, King is a paradigm of the graphic designer as a new kind of author. Designers in particular have a lot to learn from such a multilayered and fascinating body of work.

DW: When and how did your interest in his work develop?

RP: I met him in the early 1990s. I would visit him from time to time at the house in London you also visited, and, as you know, it was like a private museum—packed with treasures from his collection of Russian revolutionary graphics, publications and photographs. He would walk you around and show you posters by Dmitry Moor or someone, and he would say, "That just doesn't exist! I've spent years looking for that." He would take you into his library and show you his copies of *USSR in Construction*, and he had every issue, in all five languages that it was produced in.

When I was editing *Eye* magazine, he showed me material that

eventually surfaced in *The Commissar Vanishes*, to do with the falsification of art and photography under Stalin. I commissioned him to write a short piece for *Eye* on the subject, which was titled "Brushed Out of History."

The piece presented two case studies of Stalinist retouching and David wrote perhaps 400 words. It was the first writing of his that I had seen. It was written almost like an old school, typewriter-pounding, slightly hard-bitten newspaper journalist. It had punch and verve. There wasn't a wasted word and each sentence was extremely vivid.

It was only later when I was researching the book that I understood how he had put the collection together. He was absolutely relentless, sending out letters and want-lists to bookshops across America, across Europe, endlessly pursuing the issues of *USSR in Construction* he didn't have. He used duplicates and triplicates to trade for missing copies. That's just one example of a publication that he collected. He was doing that across the board.

He was excitable and exciting to be around. He loved to convey his enthusiasms. Everyone who met him got pulled into his orbit and became fascinated by what he was doing.

DW: What do you think is David King's general standing and reputation, if any, in design circles now?

RP: This is an important point. King made a big impact during his ten years on the *Sunday Times Magazine*. I didn't realize until I was researching the book and looked in old design annuals how many awards he won for his work on the magazine. These awards were often shared with Michael Rand, who was the art director—David was the art editor. They seem to have been in close sympathy with each other and totally agreed, given a pile of photographs, how those pictures should be used on the pages.

Designers were very aware of King up to the 1980s. They knew his Penguin book covers, his political posters, his covers for *City Limits* magazine. By the end of the 1980s, he was much more focused on his collection. His enormous photo library became a business. He provided pictures of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet era to newspapers, magazines, broadcasters, educational publishers.

Gradually he pulled away from design. He slowly lost interest in being a designer. He didn't want to have to adapt to computer-based designing. He had exhibition projects and book projects to work on, as well as the photo library. As a result, he dropped out of view in the design world, and he wasn't very bothered about that. Tate Modern in London had a room showing changing displays from the David King Collection. His work was visible, but to a different audience.

Part of the purpose of the book is to bring him back into view, to show how one area of his work leads to the next, and that there is a direct relationship between David King the visual journalist and David King the collector and visual historian—these are not different people. There is an absolutely logical progression through the phases of his career: from journalism to activism to history.

DW: These processes are intertwined. There was also a change in the world, and in politics, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and all the blather about the end of history and the end of socialism. In other words, he changed the contours of his life as the world was changing in some ways. I would think there also has to be an element of his falling out of favor because of his political and historical interests and views.

I do think he is an extraordinary artist and artistic personality. He has a unique body of work. I think he should be more of a "household name" than he is. Your book brought to my attention many things I wasn't aware of, including the posters and the albums.

RP: I think the times now are more favorable to appreciate what he did. We live in an era of protest. Younger designers absolutely get King's posters. They're excited by them visually, but they're also excited by the spirit of political protest and opposition in which they were made. And I

don't think that would have been the case if we were talking in the late 1990s. You're absolutely right. As early as the mid-1980s, David could see that the times had changed.

This was the long period of the Conservative government, which was depressing for people on the left. David felt this too. There was a sense of urgency on the left at the end of the '70s. Then [Prime Minister Margaret] Thatcher arrived in 1979 and this gave the left a renewed sense of purpose in the early '80s as it fought against the emerging Thatcherism. When Thatcher's government began to win political battles, including the famous miners' strike in 1984-85, it was as though the left was being ground underfoot. By the mid-'80s, David too was feeling a sense of despondency about the state of politics.

Later in the decade, it was the era of glasnost that allowed his work with the collection to take off. David had all this material and suddenly newspapers and TV broadcasters were turning to him as a source of imagery relating to Russian and Soviet history, as they came to terms with perestroika and glasnost and the Gorbachev era.

As the 1990s proceeded, though, this subject matter went out of fashion. He struggled to get the books he wanted to do published until *The Commissar Vanishes*, this extraordinary story that he discovered within his own collection—that's the way he described it. He went back and forth between all his Soviet images, and slowly he pieced these visual stories of Stalinist falsification together. A few of them had appeared in other publications before *The Commissar Vanishes*, but he investigated the phenomenon more thoroughly than anyone had ever done it before.

By 1997, when *The Commissar Vanishes* comes out, he has a story the world is ready to hear about. There was international interest in what he was doing, and at that point, his book work takes off again. Then comes *Ordinary Citizens*, and this phase of publication culminates in *Red Star Over Russia* in 2009, which I see as one of his finest works, perhaps his masterpiece.

DW: To shift subjects, when you speak about King's ability to see a photograph in a particular manner, unlike others could see it, this also raises the question of artistic intuition. Intuition being the truths that have been discovered and learned in the past and that have passed into the sphere of the unconscious, so they are available to the artist apparently spontaneously.

RP: This is really interesting. As a researcher, what I would have loved to hear from David, or from people in his milieu, is a theory of how one constructs a visual narrative on the page. What does it mean to select a better picture, or the "best" picture, as opposed to an inferior one, and then to bring it together with other pictures in a way that tells the story with visual power and a sense of drama? We might be able to recognize these qualities on the page, but how did the person doing the layout, David in this case, acquire that skill, and what were the guiding principles, both aesthetic and intellectual?

I did some probing along those lines, but I didn't get any definitive answers. There's a passage in the book where a photographer named Red Saunders, a man of the left himself, who worked for the *Sunday Times Magazine*, talks about sitting in a room with Rand and King, and they're projecting Saunders' pictures on to the wall. These are 35-millimeter color slides. They've got them in a carousel and they're just cracking through them, one after the other. As Red tells the story, they're saying, "No ... no ... no ... yes ... no ... that's a double-page spread ... no ..." They're doing this really fast together, and they seem to be in total agreement making these decisions, without having to talk about it or give a reason. It's as though they've so internalized the qualities of a good picture that it's become a form of tacit knowledge. They are indeed proceeding intuitively.

It's possible to break those visual stories apart after the event, and explain why this picture works with that one, how it leads to the next, and what these sequences mean. Now that doesn't mean that David himself

would have wanted to talk in that way about his work. He would probably have thought it was boring and unnecessary—don't the pictures speak for themselves?

Of course, they do, but I'm wondering if a critical history of the craft of using photographs on the page can be written, whether we can know enough about it to move beyond "intuition" as an explanation. That's for a future project. David King is certainly an excellent example of a person who was both a picture researcher and an image-editor, with a decisive, intuitive sense of how to shape his material.

DW: What's been the reaction to the book?

RP: Designers who see the book have reacted to it amazingly positively. They love the material, and the way it's come together in the book. We've had a few reviews, not perhaps as many as I'd hoped for, but it's still early days. Some of them will appear later in magazines and journals. The best publicity we've had so far has been in America, oddly enough.

*Interview* magazine asked me what I would like to do, and I suggested that I interview Judy Groves, David's working partner and close friend. We recorded a long conversation.

DW: What are your own political views?

RP: My position is absolutely on the left, let's put it like that. On the other hand, I've never been a joiner or a party member. I've been thinking about this question for my entire adult life. When I was young the ideas that excited me most came from a not necessarily compatible mixture of revolutionary surrealism and anarchism. I support the need for social justice, equality and fairness for everyone, and the redistribution of wealth, however that could be achieved. The colossal inequality between the lowest-paid and the new class of billionaires is extraordinarily damaging for all of us. I don't know how we can address that.

I despair of British party politics engaging with the issues I care about most. The Labour Party repeatedly disappoints. We are a long way from a fair system of proportional representation. My natural home would be with the Green Party, if it had any serious political representation in Britain. The climate emergency is our gravest and most alarming challenge. So I remain a non-aligned leftist.

*Information about the new book can be obtained at:*  
<https://www.davidkingdesigner.com>



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