

Margarita Tupitsyn. *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996. 228 pages; 140 b/w and 25 color illustrations.

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Soviet photography was embedded in debates about how to portray life in the new postrevolutionary society. Out of such debates, which embraced issues of form as well as content, came the insistence that photographs were instruments of persuasion to which the artist's vision had to be subordinated. Photographs were intended primarily for publication in the mass media and for exhibition rather than for sale as art objects, a fact that makes Margarita Tupitsyn's book *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* particularly relevant to graphic designers.

Tupitsyn analyzes the development of the Soviet photograph within a series of chronological stages, each framed by some large political change which include Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin's emergence as the Communist party leader at the end of 1927, and the first and second Five-Year Plans that followed. She does not use these changes to overdetermine the influence of politics on photographic form but argues that individual creativity during the 1920s and 1930s was inextricably intertwined with political demands. This results in a penetrating account of how the changing political climate in the Soviet Union between 1924 and 1937 shaped critical debates about photography's social role but it also leads the author to make unnecessarily reductive pronouncements about a particular photographer's political commitment to the state or lack thereof.

The book's title suggests a comprehensive history of Soviet photography in the 1920s and 1930s but one is not to be found. Instead of presenting a broad account of the medium, Tupitsyn tells her story through close analyses of a select group of photographers and photomontage artists. Her concern is with the use of photographic images as representations of social life; hence she considers the development of photomontage to be an important component of her narrative. Gustav Klutcis, the Latvian artist who claimed to have made the first political photomontage in the Soviet Union, is a principal figure for Tupitsyn and she measures the political commitment of other photographers against his unwavering agitational impulse. She characterizes Klutcis, along with his friend Sergei Sen'kin, as progenitors of the formalist-sociological method, which combined strong visual design with political iconography. This method is exemplified in issues of the magazines *Young Guard* and *Herald of Labor* and in the book *Children and Lenin* for which both artists did photomontages in the mid-1920s.

By contrast, the author labels Alexander Rodchenko's and El Lissitzky's early photographic work as merely formalist. For Tupitsyn, Rodchenko did not become politically

engaged as a photographer until 1928, when he began to publish photojournalistic stories in mass-media publications such as *Thirty Days*. Lissitzky, she says, does not make the transition from apolitical modernist to political artist until his 1931 cover for the journal *Artists' Brigade* which shows two proletarians clasping hands.

Unlike many art historians who claim that the best work of the avant-garde was done in the more liberal 1920s, Tupitsyn insists that the avant-garde was active until the Second Five-Year Plan ended, in 1937. Her willingness to acknowledge visual innovation in work done after the adoption of the First Five-Year Plan in 1929 is part of a new, more open, approach to the Soviet visual arts. It enables Tupitsyn to write in depth about photographers such as Boris Ignatovich, Eliezer Langman, and Arkadii Shaikhet who published actively in Soviet magazines like *USSR in Construction* in the 1930s, and to offer an appreciation of the political posters that Klutcis, his wife Valentina Kulagina, and others such as Natalia Pinus, did for the propaganda organization IZOGIZ in the early 1930s.

Tupitsyn deftly explicates the debates that divided photographers of the 1930s into two main camps, those who favored the 'photo-picture' versus those who preferred the 'photo-still.' The former group, exemplified by Arkadii Shaiket and Max Al'pert were more concerned with content than novelties of form. To explain their position, Tupitsyn offers a close reading of Shaiket's and Al'pert's photo essay, "A Day in the Life of a Moscow Working-Class Family" which was produced for exhibition in Europe. The images are of entire scenes rather than isolated fragments and demonstrate what Tupitsyn calls "an organic work of art." The principal figures in the opposing group were Rodchenko, Ignatovich, and Langman. These photographers frequently created fragmented images taken from unusual angles, such as Langman's "Ploughed Field," a closeup of a furrowed field from an extreme worm's eye view.

Tupitsyn uses the criticism of the period to explain these debates about social representation. To the voices of the time, she adds her own interpretations drawn from the more current critical theory of Barthes, Benjamin, Deleuze, and others. The combination of historical documentation and contemporary critical analysis provides a rich context for the work she discusses. The author had access to extensive private archives, particularly that of Klutcis, and she includes pictures that have not been widely published in books on the avant-garde, such as the progressive versions of well-known Klutcis posters including "Let Us Fulfill the Plan of the Great Projects," with its many hands raised in allegiance to Stalin, and "We Shall Repay the Coal Debt to the Country."

Lissitzky again becomes the object of Tupitsyn's attention after 1933 for his work as an art director on the propaganda magazine *USSR in Construction*, published monthly between 1930 and 1941. She recognizes that Lissitzky was a political asset to the Soviet government in the 1930s because of his great skill as a designer of publications, posters, and exhibitions. At

the beginning of the Second Five-Year Plan, he, along with Rodchenko, Klutcis, and others, started creating what Tupitsyn calls “mythographic,” as opposed to “factographic,” representations. The striving for documentation had become more blatantly an exercise in manipulation in light of Stalin’s need to present the Soviet Union in a positive light at home and abroad. Instead of attempting to represent Soviet life through fragmented documentary sequences such as those Rodchenko had created, photographers were called upon to produce scenes of happy Soviet citizens at work and leisure.

This book reveals how much is at stake in the social production of images. The author links photomontage and photography to Soviet debates about the social purpose of art and shows how these debates created a demand for photographs that supported Stalin’s regime. The debates were frequently reductive and created an unnecessarily restrictive climate for some experimental artists but they also signified the close relation between image production and social discourse. The criticism that resulted from this relation contributed to the creation of complex and important work. *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* can help us reflect on what we are missing in the current laissez-faire atmosphere, where the cleverest manipulation of new technology, regardless of subject matter, receives the widest public accolades.

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