Invention, Design and the Staging of Modernity: Soviet Press Photography under Joseph Stalin (1934–1953)

We were born to make fairy tales come true,
To conquer vast distance and space,
Our reason has made steel wings for our hands,
And throbbing engines our hearts have replaced.

— Pavel German and Yuly Khait, *Ever Higher / Avia March (Все выше)*, 1920.[i]

The Sovfoto Archive at the MacLaren Art Centre comprises 23,116 vintage gelatin silver press prints originating from the New York City-based press agency Sovfoto/Eastfoto. Established in 1931 or 1932, the Sovfoto agency received state-sanctioned photographs from the Soviet Information Bureau (Sovinformburo) on consignment. After receiving the prints, which came with English captions and were often retouched, Sovfoto would license these images to large media organizations, such as the Associated Press and *Life Magazine*. Organized thematically as it was during its days as a working image library, the Sovfoto Archive at the MacLaren Art Centre is an important artifact of Soviet life under Joseph Stalin.

Today, this thematic organization provides insight into the types of subjects that the press agency's clients were most interested in. While these photographs give some insight into these topics of interest, they would have also been staged and edited to fit the regime's strict propaganda programme. For over two decades during Joseph Stalin's dictatorship, Socialist Realism was the only permissible mode of visual expression. Unlike the avant-garde's "art for art's sake" approach, this Marxist aesthetic theory requires that art must actively serve a social purpose.[ii] This visual paradigm, concerned with progress and innovation, projects its subjects into the future.

The sheer number of photographs sent to national and international press agencies speaks to the privileged status of photography above other media for creating propaganda. Soyuzphoto—the press organization that coordinated and approved photographs for publication in the press—disseminated anywhere from fifty to six hundred copies of each photograph between 1931 and 1941.[iii] Photographs were popularly seen as a more authentic portrayal of reality than paintings or illustrations and, unlike film, they were fairly inexpensive to produce.[iv] Soviet photographers and designers controlled subject matter, composition and style to cloud the distinction between present realities and future possibilities.

The "future" in the public imagination is a continuously changing place that moves back and forth in time. During the 1920s avant-garde period and the Cold War years after 1953, the Soviet Future was allowed to take place far beyond any living person's lifetime, in vast cityscapes glittering with highly advanced technology, or even in outer space.[v] On the other hand, the "future" under Stalin (1929–1953) was much closer to the present: close-aim films and literature replaced science-fiction, and the arts optimistically illustrated Socialist Utopia as a very real and nearby achievement.[vi] This desire to make the future loom close to the present was driven by Stalin's change in political approach: by the late 1920s, it had become clear that the spread of communism to other countries was not as inevitable as Lenin and Trotsky had hoped.[vii] Stalin began redirecting state resources to strengthen the USSR internally against outside threats, eliminating internal ones in the process.[viii] The Stalinist period was also a period of intense agricultural collectivization, industrialization and urbanization. This push for modernity did not happen organically; it was a coercive state-sponsored effort to update the nation's feudal economic production methods as quickly as possible, to compete with other powerful nations.[ix] This was executed in a series of Five Year Plans, the first starting in 1928, followed by two others in 1933 and 1937. The first Five Year Plan was completed ahead of schedule, a fact which is widely celebrated by Soviet press (18939). However, nowhere to be seen in the archive are the devastating consequences of this major push: from 1932 to 1933, at least five million Ukrainians, Kazakhs, and other people living in grain-producing regions died from famine as a result of the state's deliberate requisitioning of all major food supplies.[x] At a time of such upheaval and privation, the Stalinist vision of the near future hid the consequences of such rapid change by inventing alternative narratives about the present as well as the future.

Subject Matter

Using the visual tropes of Socialist Realism, Stalinist futurity is communicated in press photography both in the types of subject matter and in the photographer's representational choices. Apart from images of the Second World War, significant photographic efforts were directed at documenting industry, innovations in technology and science, as well as urban planning, new public buildings and city infrastructure projects. It was the responsibility of photographers to promote construction, industry and education.[xi] Naum Granovsky specialized in photographing buildings around Moscow, the new capital (18939); others travelled to remote parts of the Soviet Union to capture the transformation of rural towns into centres of agricultural or industrial production (17233).[xii] Like Granovsky, Vladimir Musinov worked for some time in Moscow (19114) but was also given the chance to travel from Vladivostok to Middle Asia via the Arctic from 1941 to 1942.[xiii]

Composition

As previously stated, the compositions themselves played an important role in achieving the Socialist Realist aesthetic. Figures often pose against the wind, gazing at some distant point outside the frame.[xiv] For architecture and city scenes, photographers oriented their cameras at unusual angles to create a more dynamic and emotional effect. This was frequently done using a diagonal perspective to suggest upward and outward movement. Seriality was also used to create the illusion of a continuous, forward march, using long rows of identical objects—like cars (18956, 19717) or washing machines (19296)—to convey the growing industrial power of the Soviet State.

These visual devices did not only work to illustrate power but invited the viewers' involvement. When the photographic subjects are not looking outwards, they are often focused on studying an object in front of them, like a map (19114) or a switchboard in a science lab (11337). The viewer, whose position is level with that of the engineer or scholar, is invited to share a moment of mutual engagement with the subject, emphasizing the collective effort required to achieve the Soviet Union's ambitious plans.[xv] This scheme as well as techniques to draw in the viewer could be adapted to virtually any subject and were especially useful for promoting the Soviet Union as an advanced and powerful nation to the rest of the world.

Design

In the Sovfoto Archive, an optimistic, future-minded attitude permeates the captions on the reverse of each photograph. Words like "new" and "great" appear across a variety of subjects and are often repeated several times within the same caption (11337, 18949 and 19296). Integral to this investigation of the Stalinist future is the pointed use of "design" in images about new projects, acting both as a noun and a verb to promote a sense of technological prowess and ongoing scientific achievement (15829, 18758, 19114, 19296, 19749).

The design choices in the architecture and material culture of the Stalinist period were varied, from neoclassical columns and statues to the Streamline Moderne style of cars (15829), constructivist architecture (19736) and household goods (19296). Soviet designers frequently looked to Western design trends for inspiration and adapted them to suit the communist ideology. For example, classicism in urban planning and architecture echoes organization, authority, and unity—values which were well-suited to the Soviet Union's massive push to rebuild after the revolution and establish itself as a world power. Meanwhile, during the 1930s and 1940s, the Moscow Metro was constructed in an art deco style. The opulent and lavish metro stations of Moscow were nicknamed "palaces for the people," a conscious reclaiming of bourgeois luxury for the common worker.[xvi] The stations were decorated with patriotic sculptures (18911) and glittering mosaics (18939) to celebrate workers as national heroes.

Another design movement that arose primarily within the Soviet Union was constructivism, which drew its inspiration from Russian futurism and German Bauhaus design.[xvii] As the name suggests, the style is expressed by the visual vocabulary of construction, industry, and technology. Whether in architecture, visual arts or product design, constructivism is a combination of geometric shapes (19741, 19736), straight lines (19097), and technological motifs like radio antennae, concrete frames (10277) and steel beams. The style arose as part of a visual programme that aestheticized the government's nation-wide push for modernity. A fundamental message across all visual expression, especially press photographs destined for publication abroad, was the Soviet Union's incredible conversion from an underdeveloped country into an advanced, industrial world power.

Notions of futurity are perpetually changing, but what remains constant in the art and design of everyday items is an element of desire. Today, the design of some cars and mobile devices can be traced to science fiction films and video games; indeed, it has been often argued that creative interpretations of future technologies have had a direct influence on real technologies. Soviet press photography captures a near futurity reflecting a moment of exchange between design and technological progress, where imagination fuels progress and progress fuels design.

—Daria Melnikov

[i] James von Geldern and Richard Stites, *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays, and Folklore*, 1917-1953 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 257–258.

[ii] For more on Russian avant-garde photographers, see Susan Tumarkin Goodman, Jens Hoffmann and A. N. Lavrent'ev, *The P~p~ower of P~p~ictures~-~: E~e~arly Soviet P~p~hotography, E~e~arly Soviet F~f~ilm* (New York, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 36–39. For Socialist Realism as an aesthetic theory, see Margaret M. Bullit, "Toward a Marxist Theory of Aesthetics: The Development of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union,'' *The Russian Review* 35, no. 1 (Jan 1976): 53–76, https://www.jstor.org/stable/127656.

[iii] Goodman, 19–20.

[iv] Goodman, 15–17.

[v] See, for example, Alexey N. Tolstoy's *Aelita* (1923), a novel and film featuring two Russians raising a revolution on Mars; or Alexander Belayev's novel *The Air Seller* (1929) which follows a capitalist plotting to steal all the world's atmosphere.

[vi~vii~] Biographies of Joseph Stalin are somewhat divided on the exact start date of his dictatorship. Stalin's rise to power was gradual and consisted of a power struggle against Trotsky's opposing faction after Lenin's death in 1924. In 1929 Stalin finally expelled Trotsky and his supporters from the party, securing his position as Party leader. See Stephen J. Lee, *Stalin and the Soviet Union* (Routledge: New York, 1999), 1–2 for a summary ~on~ of the political transition between 1924 and 1929. For close-aim films and literature, see Sanja Bahun and John Haynes, eds., *Cinema, State Socialism and Society in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 1917–1989: R~r~e-visions* (Routledge: New York, 2014, E-Book). For art, socialism and utopia, see Erik Lars Blomqvist, "Some Utopian Elements in Stalinist Art", *Russian History* 11, No. 2/3, (Summer–Fall 1984): 298–305, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24652746.

[vii] For an overview ~on~ of Stalin's new economic policy, see Lee, 35–36. The idea that communism would spread on a global scale is proposed by the final line in Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto: "Working Men of All Countries, Unite!". International socialism was embraced by the Bolsheviks who envisioned Russia at the centre of a global revolution. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed., trans. L. M. Findlay (Broadview Editions: Peterborough, ON, 2004), 94, E-Book; and Elliott Johnson, David Walker and Daniel Gray, "Trotskyism" in *Historical Dictionary of Marxism* (Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, Boulder, New York and London, 2014), 436.

[viii] Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934–1941* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1996), xiii.

[ix] Lee, 35–36.

[x] The 1932–1933 famine is called Holodomor ("to kill by starvation") in Ukraine, where the vast majority of deaths occurred. See Anne Applebaum, "How Stalin Hid Ukraine's Famine From the World", *The Atlantic,* October 13, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/red-famine-anne-applebaum-ukraine-soviet-union/542610/.

[xi] Goodman, 23.

[xii] For more on Naum Granovsky's career, see "Naum Granovsky", Lumiere Brothers Gallery, accessed July 22, 2019, http://lumierephoto.ru/en/artists/naum-granovskij/?info=yes.

[xiii] *Life* 14, no. 13 (March 29, 1943): 11. Google Book Preview. https://books.google.ca/books?id=A1AEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false.

[xiv] An iconic example is the 1937 *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* statue in Moscow. Ari Akkermans, "A Soviet Monument's Enduring Power Over Russian Artists", *Hyperallergic*, February 26, 2016, https://hyperallergic.com/279018/a-soviet-monuments-enduring-power-over-russian-artists/.

[xv] For more on the relationship between composition and socialist realism, including outward movement and viewer engagement, see Graeme Hill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (~Crambrige~Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 61–68.

[xvi] Martin Thomas, "The People's Palaces in Moscow", *The Star,* May 29, 2009, https://www.thestar.com/life/travel/2009/05/29/the_peoples_palaces_in_moscow.html.

[xvii] Charlotte and Peter Fiell, *Design of the 20th-Century* (Taschen: Koln, London, Los Angeles, Madrid, Paris and Tokyo, 2005), 176.

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