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For Reading Out Loud in Context

Abstract **Visible Language** asked Szymon Bojko and Krzysztof Lenk to respond to Martha Lange's typographic translation of **For Reading Out Loud**. Lange and her students concentrated on the formal characteristics of the poems with regard to verbal and visual translation. While the mythic dimensions of Mayakovsky and Lissitzky do not encourage a critical look at their work, Bojko and Lenk share two requisite characteristics that make them credible respondents: they are design educators and Eastern Europeans with more immediate knowledge of the history and character of events to which **For Reading Out Loud** refers. Bojko and Lenk put the poems into a needed social and historical context by performing a content analysis and discussing the revolutionary nature of the poetic and typographic communication and the circumstances surrounding publication.

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Visible Language: Why do we need to know the social and political context of these poems?

Information about the historical background of a piece of work, the situation and circumstances under which a given piece emerges is indispensable for the understanding of its premise. Further, it is useful for objectifying the work's evaluation.

For Reading Out Loud is a verbal-visual product belonging to the category of so called agit-prop art whose messages addressed the reader's emotions and stimulated action. The poet and the graphic artist intended to raise an emotional response and create desired behavior. Did readers react? Was the goal reached? First, let us examine the content of a few poems.

"Left March" The poem contains a precise description of a detachment of mariners marching in close formation. Regulations of the Russian Navy demanded that files be so close that each man would almost touch the back of the man ahead of him. Another characteristic feature of the mariner's marching was the vigorous throwing up of the left leg. The commander stepping alongside shouts the command "left". Emphasizing the "left" strengthens the rhythm of the march and helps to stress the feelings of strength and dread which marching sailors stimulate. It is a detachment of living people personifying a war machine running non–stop (a tank), inevitably destroying opponents in its path.

In the poem "Left March" the poet uses phrases characteristic of the Bolsheviks' political language of those years. There is a simplified distinction between the right and the left wings. The left one denotes the IIIrd International and, in Russia, only the followers of Communism. From the idea of "the left" the Bolsheviks exclude other socialist factions such as Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, and Anarchists.

The "Left March" raises the use of violence to the level of a moral category (virtue): "Silence, you orators! You have the floor Comrade Mauser". In the

eyes of the poet, the brutal strength typified by a gun dominates all other arguments, i.e., rational, moral, or theological.The poet glorifies the military expansion of the revolution all over the world. The poem "Left March" belongs to the wider group of tenets propagating political intolerance, the tenets which motivated the red terror: who is not with us and does not march left, is against us and must be physically destroyed. In that way the idea that the ends (goal) justified the means (put into practice by Lenin) became a "superior" practice of the Russian revolution and soon after of the Soviet state. As a consequence, those who organize terror are a priori absolved from the sin, since they sin in the name of a good cause.

"Friendly Regards for Horses" On the literal level the poem appeals to human conscience for a humane relation towards horses.[1] Why is the poet concerned with the fate of a horse?

During the civil war, horses were the primary means of transportation for the army as well as work animals in the hinterland.

They were exploited fully in life, then were eaten when dead. In the years 1918–1922 horse meat was rationed and was not available on the market. There is an interesting witness to these times. In the documentary film **Art for the Millions** (directed by T. Pobog–Malinowski), the painter Vladimir Roskin, an author of the agitational posters for Rosta Windows (for whom Vladimir Mayakowsky was a creative director), appeared. The following is Roskin's reminiscence:

> "One day I got the news that food rations were being distributed. I rushed out; food was very scarce at that time. It was a dead horse that was being cut to pieces. But by the time I arrived all there was left was the horse's head. I accepted it gratefully—it kept me alive for six long weeks." Continuing his report, Roskin described the picture–painted later–which showed him carrying the horse's head in a Moscow street in 1918. In the empty store win-

dows, instead of merchandise, large posters by Mayakowsky hung. Ideas substituted for material goods. Incidentally, Roskin was the author of cartoon–like propaganda posters. One of those cartoons reveals a full, gorging American. . .[2]

"Lowlife"

This is a poem about hunger in the region of the Samara river, the fertile land of the Povolzhye region. The poet appears here as a canvasser. Using revolutionary phraseology he accuses England, France, Germany, and the United States of causing the plague of hunger, though the historical facts contradict the interpretation.

"Command No 2 to the Army of the Arts"
The poet speaks:
Give us oil from Baku!
Give us new forms, we're waiting!

The first appeal is directed at the Red Army, the second at the artists. For the latter, experiments with artistic form were acceptible—even expected—they were not a cause for personal risk until a few years later. The call for access to oil sources in Baku is more ambiguous. In that time Baku—located in Azerbeidzhan—was divided from Soviet Russia by Georgia, an independent, democratic state with a multi–party system. The Mensheviks were in the majority and ran the government. An envoy from Soviet Russia was accredited in Tbilisi. After the propaganda campaign (part of which is the poem by Mayakovsky) and numerous provocations by the Bolsheviks, the Red Army invaded Georgia and annexed it to the Soviet Union, thereby opening the way to oil from Baku. Twenty years later the same pattern of behavior was repeated in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. Only mutilated Finland managed to survive by paying a cruel tribute of blood.

III International

The poem praises the world revolution which, beginning in Russian, will soon spread all over the world and will not stop until it sets up red banners on New York skyscrapers. The hammer and sickle will become a common symbol of the new. It is a mad vision, which even in those days caused arguments among Bolsheviks and the Left wing in the Western world.

In summary, we see in the analysis of the context of these poems how deeply they were set in the reality of that time. Mayakovsky put into the poetic stanzas the hopes, illusions, myths and also the diffused phraseologies, half–truths, and lies of Bolshevik propaganda.[3]. El Lissitzky gave compelling graphic form to the poems by Mayakovsky.

Visible Language: were these poems revolutionary? In terms of their communication or in terms of their aesthetic form?

Mayakowsky's poetry used new means of expression. The poet introduced a street vocabulary, colloquial speech, military terms, as well as the abbreviations used by Bolshevik agitators. Mayakovsky beats a rhythm, applies repetitions and assimilates a poem to a poster stripped of ornaments and equivocalness. A poem frequently takes the form of an agitator's monologue performed in front of a crowd.

The artistic and aesthetic values of Mayakovsky's poems are indisputable and have been precisely described by many international scholars. Mayakovsky's poetry destroyed canons of classical order and evoked both objections and enthusiasm from numerous imitators. The myth of Mayakovsky, his creativity and tragically– ended life, continue to inspire new generations of poetic search.

Visible Language: visually, the poems appear strong and energetic but also quite dispassionate and objective—did they inspire strong emotion and action?

For readers of Mayakovsky's poems, especially for those who know the historical and social context and remember their experience of these times in youth, Lissitzky's graphic solution appears to be cool–minded, aesthetic and too speculative [4]. The famous thumb–index, borrowed from dictionaries and encyclopedias has, in the case of a small book containing thirteen poems, only a decorative value.

The usefulness of the typograhic composition in facilitating the reading aloud is a separate question. With a little imagination and common sense, one notices immediately that Lissitzky's typography does not lend itself to be read aloud but demands to the looked at. This was the original intention. A literal interpretation of the title of the book causes a misunderstanding.

Immediate emotional influence upon a reader (agit–prop) was Mayakovsky's presupposition; this is visible in the majority of his poems created during the most difficult period of the revolution of 1917 and the civil war of 1918-1921. Lissitzky's book, created several years later under different circumstances does not show the drama of Mayakovsky's poems.

For those who are familiar with the time, place and circumstances of this book's genesis it is clear that Lissitzky's experiment was not intended to be used in Russia and was not known there. The first Russian review of *For Reading Out Loud"* was given in the 1960s by Khardshyev. Until that date there was silence on the topic.

In the case of Lissitzky's work on this project, we deal with a type of graphic mystification that begins with the reason for its publication. *For Reading Out Loud* was

printed in 1923, in Berlin, in the Lutze & Vogt Press as an order of the State Publishers RSFR Staatsverlag (an organ of the Soviet government), which had its office in Berlin. Judging from its world market price, this publication appeared in a small edition. The book was intended to be experimental; it was not planned for mass readership.

In the 1920s many publications of different kinds were published in Germany by the commission of the official Soviet authorities. Berlin was the first place of contact between revolutionary Russia and the West. It was a city where two waves of Russian immigrants met with equal possibilities: the whites (connected with the czar's Russia and the liberals), and the reds (Soviet Russian emissaries such as Ehrenburg or Lissitzky) whose task was to throw bridges across to the leftist intellectual and artistic circles in the West.

The Weimar Republic was the first Western state which recognized post–revolutionary Russia. Germany was first to begin trade, technological, and military exchange with the Soviet Union. A quick second was the United States, which made huge investments in automobile and chemical industries. Helped by the spirit of American–Russian cooperation, Mayakovsky and other writers visited the United States in the mid-20s.

Lissitzky, who was educated and well connected in Germany (not to mention his personal intentions and reasons), played the role of emissary; he carried out governmental commissions. Thus the publication of *For Reading Out Loud* was a part of the propaganda program. It presented Russia as a center of European avant–garde and played a role in creating a positive "image" of post–revolutionary Russia.[5]

Lissitzky's world position as an innovator and experimentor in various fields of art and design is unquestionable. Nevertheless, *For Reading Out Loud* evokes controversy and, perhaps, needs a new, critical, analysis. From our point of view, Lissitzky's experiment takes on a formalistic and decorative character. The book is detached from its time and space, suspended between functionalism and aesthetic constructivism. Although it has a certain position in the history of typographical experiments, it is not as completely successful a work as *The Story of Two Squares* by the same author.

Notes

1 Perhaps the poet is using a metaphor to appeal for an attenuation of the cruel customs of that time. Another outstanding Russian poet Maximilian Voloshin describes fussilades in the volume *Terror* (this was never published in the USSR).

2 See Szymon Bojko. *New Graphic Design in Revolutionary Russia* New York: 1972.

3 See Szymon Bojko. Three waves of Emigration, in *Samizdat Russian Art.* New York: 1986.

4 It is worth remembering the beautiful, poetic books in the style of Chagall, in Yiddish, which created the second, parallel movement in Lissitzky's production.

5 Projects from the 1930s presented in a recent exhibition of Lissitzky's works at Harvard University raise a number of questions concerning evaluation of the designer's creativity in terms of both his accomplishments and his failures.

While both Szymon and Krzysztof speak English, it was easier to discuss these ideas in Polish. Bozena Shallcross translated their discussion into English.