



KEIMENA/TEXTS

Children's literature E-journal

KEIMENA για την έρευνα, τη θεωρία, την κριτική και τη διδακτική της Παιδικής και Εφηβικής Λογοτεχνίας, τεύχος 40^ο, σσ. 34-51, 29/02/2024, ISSN: 1790-1782

Ideology in Constructivist children's book illustrations in the Soviet Union (1920-1930)

Missiou Marianna

Assistant Professor, University of the Aegean

missiou@aegean.gr

Antoniadou Pigi

Art teacher, M.A. in Children's Literature

Pigi.Antoniadou@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper investigates the role of Constructivist illustration in children's books from the 1920s and early 1930s, providing a semiotic analysis of the morphological characteristics of images within the political and historical context of the period. Emphasizing the explicit and implicit ideological meanings conveyed through depicted subjects, we analyse the choices made by Constructivist artists in using elements like lines, shapes, and colours to transmit ideas aligned with the Soviet Union's regime. Two illustrative examples are examined, representing distinct phases of the Constructivist movement. The first, from Vladimir Lebedev's 1925 publication *Vchera i Segodnya* [Yesterday and Today], showcases the artist's influence on the Golden Age of children's books in Russia. This period marked a pivotal shift, with avant-garde art directed towards children as a distinct audience. The second example, Alexey Laptev's *Pyatiletka* [Five-Year Plan], published in 1930, represents the transitional phase of Constructivist illustration toward socialist realism. This picturebook incorporates the evolving nature of the movement amidst changing socio-political landscapes. Through a semiotic lens, the paper examines the ways in which these illustrations reflect and contribute to the ideological currents of their respective eras, shedding light on the relationship between art and ideology in children's book during a transformative period in Soviet Union's history.

Keywords: Picturebooks, illustrations, ideology, Constructivism, Soviet Union



Περίληψη

Η παρούσα μελέτη έχει ως αντικείμενο την Κονστρουκτιβιστική εικονογράφηση σε παιδικά βιβλία της περιόδου από τη δεκαετία του 1920 έως τις αρχές της δεκαετίας του 1930 στη Σοβιετική Ένωση. Με εργαλείο τη σημειωτική της εικόνας, εξετάζονται οι τρόποι με τους οποίους αυτές οι εικονογραφήσεις αντικατοπτρίζουν και συμβάλλουν στα ιδεολογικά ρεύματα της εποχής τους, ρίχνοντας φως στη σχέση μεταξύ της τέχνης και της ιδεολογίας στο παιδικό βιβλίο, σε μια περίοδο σημαντικών αλλαγών στην πορεία της ιστορίας της Σοβιετικής Ένωσης. Δίνεται έμφαση στην πρόδηλη και άδηλη ιδεολογία που μεταδίδεται μέσω των απεικονιζόμενων θεμάτων, των γραμμών, των σχημάτων και των χρωμάτων, επιλογές στις οποίες προέβησαν κονστρουκτιβιστές καλλιτέχνες για να μεταδώσουν μέσω της εικόνας τις αρχές της μαρξιστικής ιδεολογίας. Μελέτη περίπτωσης αποτελούν δύο εικονογραφημένα βιβλία, που αντιπροσωπεύουν τις δύο φάσεις της Κονστρουκτιβιστικής εικονογράφησης, η μία ξεκίνησε στα μέσα της δεκαετίας του 1920 και η δεύτερη προς το τέλος της δεκαετίας και τις αρχές της επόμενης δηλαδή 1930. Το πρώτο παράδειγμα αφορά το εικονογραφημένο βιβλίο του Vladimir Lebedev *Vchera i Segodnya* [Χθες και Σήμερα] (1925) και την επιρροή που άσκησε ο καλλιτέχνης στη Χρυσή Εποχή των παιδικών βιβλίων στη Σοβιετική Ένωση. Η περίοδος αυτή σηματοδότησε μια κρίσιμη στροφή, με την avant-garde τέχνη να απευθύνεται στα παιδιά ως ξεχωριστό κοινό. Το δεύτερο παράδειγμα, με τίτλο *Pyatiletka* [Πενταετής Σχέδιο] του Alexey Laptev, που δημοσιεύτηκε το 1930, αντιπροσωπεύει τη μετάβαση της Κονστρουκτιβιστικής εικονογράφησης προς τον σοσιαλιστικό ρεαλισμό. Το εικονογραφημένο αυτό βιβλίο αποτυπώνει την εξελισσόμενη φύση της εικονογράφησης εν μέσω του μεταβαλλόμενου κοινωνικοπολιτικού τοπίου.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: Εικονογραφημένα βιβλία, εικονογράφηση, ιδεολογία, Κονστρουκτιβισμός, Σοβιετική Ένωση.

Introduction

Image contributes significantly to the construction, consolidation, and maintenance of power relations, and has been used to motivate people for collective action. More specifically, as Toby Clark (1997) argues in his book *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century*, when images are used for political purposes and distributed through mass media channels, their power to persuade is significantly amplified. Clark further discussed overt and covert image propaganda and its varied manifestations in art. Overt propaganda, exemplified in regimes like Soviet Communism and German Nazism, is characterized by explicit messaging and rigid guidelines. In contrast, covert propaganda in art operates more subtly, necessitating viewers to decode symbols,



metaphors, or hidden meanings to grasp the intended message (Clark, 1997). Therefore, regardless of whether propaganda is explicit or implicit, considering the broader context becomes essential to recognize the potential for diverse interpretations of images.

After the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia, the Bolsheviks seized power. Realizing the potential of the image, the Bolsheviks used it to propagate the principles of their ideology. From the very beginning, they became conscious of its great importance to enhance their efforts to engineer the New Man that is, the citizen and worker who would build the new communist society (Steiner, 1999). As Porshneva states (2019), this awareness prompted Bolshevik ideologists and leaders of the Communist Party and the Soviet state to shape:

“the institutional and regulatory requirements for the processes of upbringing, education, and propaganda. This group also comprised specialists in the fields of media, culture, and art, who applied creativity to the narrative of the official discourse, creating vivid images and symbols to embody the values of the New Man.” (2019, pp. 71-72).

The propaganda of communism was promoted by artists, mainly painters, sculptors, illustrators, and graphic designers, but also by architects, who, almost without exception, were in favour of the Revolution (de Micheli 1992, p. 289; Steiner, 1999). Through their art they attempted to create a visual language that would transmit the principles of the Soviet ideology. This visual language was named Constructivism, one of the artistic movements of the so-called Russian avant-garde, which already existed prior to the Revolution, but evolved into a dominant artistic movement afterward (1921).

Constructivist artists such as Alexandr Rodchenko, Liubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, and Alexandr Vesnin believed that art should be functional and serve the Revolution, benefiting society and the people's lives, as evident in advertising, typography, architecture, and industrial production. The Constructivists proclaimed the end of “art for art's sake”, which was considered as an urban residue of aestheticism, and they even proclaimed the end of art itself. Painting and sculpture ceased to be representations of the world and had to be constructions, akin to architecture, with a functional role in a visible way (Argan 2012, pp. 365-7). For the Constructivists, construction was to be understood as “a ‘scientific’ mode or organization in which ‘no excess materials or elements’ were involved” (Foster et.al. 2016, p. 201). The form and meaning of the construction are determined by the relationship between its various materials, (which is why it cannot borrow iconographical elements, for example), whereas a composition was ‘arbitrary’ ” (Foster et.al. 2016, p. 201). The Constructivists created works, constructions, and sculptures, in which they applied their theories and succeeded in proving their scientific method, which meant at this time “dialectic, materialist, Communist method: there was no a priori conception (no borrowed image); every aspect of the work was determined by its material conditions.” (Foster et.al. 2016, p. 202).

The Constructivists' contribution played a key role in shaping the new consciousness in the Soviet society (Steiner, 1999) and was of great importance to the propaganda of the ideas of the Revolution. The principles of Constructivism were projected to shape a significant portion of the field of children's book illustration. Steiner



(1999) argues that images from literature and visual arts of the Russian avant-garde strengthened and developed the ideas of the new dominant ideology, and that the fundamental ideas expressed by the artists impacted consciousness deeper than direct teaching. He emphasizes the images' strength to construct ideologically derived meaning within society: "[Images] articulated a field of semantic tension within the society, creating a language for society-building; at the same time, they facilitated a subconscious psychological adaptation to new conditions" (1999, p. 6). As per Oushakine and Balina (2021), illustrated books created for the first Soviet generation of children in the 1920s and 1930s played a crucial role in helping early Soviet society comprehend and narrate its own story. These children's books served as foundational tools for Soviet enlightenment, functioning as manuals for reading, primers for writing, and guides for storytelling, while also playing a role in introducing young readers to politics by immersing them in literature (Oushakine & Balina, 2021, p. 5). In this context, children's literature not only provided the basic vocabulary and grammar for understanding post-revolutionary realities but also instructed young readers in perceiving modern things, events, and processes through a communist lens (Oushakine & Balina, 2021, p. 6).

The present study examines Constructivist illustration in children's books of the 1920s and the early 1930s in order to offer a semiotic study of the image's morphological characteristics in the light of the political and historical context of that period. We discuss the relationship between the depicted subjects and their ideological meanings, conveyed explicitly or implicitly. More specifically, we focus on the selection of specific elements of the image's composition made by Constructivist artists, such as lines, shapes, and colours, for the transmission of ideas that served the regime of the Soviet Union during that time. This semiotic analysis is based on two characteristic examples of Constructivist illustrations during two different phases of the movement. The first example is the illustration of the book *Vchera i Segodnya* [Yesterday and Today] published in 1925 by Vladimir Lebedev (Fig.1), the most important representative of the illustration of that time, who influenced several other renowned contemporary illustrators for children, such as Nikolai Denisovsky, Lydia Popova etc.



KEIMENA/TEXTS

Children's literature E-journal

KEIMENA για την έρευνα, τη θεωρία, την κριτική και τη διδακτική της Παιδικής και Εφηβικής Λογοτεχνίας, τεύχος 40^ο, σσ. 34-51, 29/02/2024, ISSN: 1790-1782



Figure 1

Lebedev's work, as well as El Lissitzky's (Fig.2), both contributed to the shaping of Constructivist illustrations in children's books that would mark the 1920s, known as the Golden Age of children's books in Soviet Union. Furthermore, his picturebooks were among the first to direct avant-garde art to the child 'as a worthy audience in itself' (Pankenier Weld, 2018, p. 62). Lebedev followed Constructivism's principles. He worked abstractly, freed the drawings from unnecessary decorative elements, and turned every composition into a geometric equation (Pankenier Weld, 2018). Our second example belongs to the transitional phase - toward socialist realism - of the Constructivist illustration, Alexey Laptev's *Pyatiletka* [Five-Year Plan], published in 1930 (Fig.3).

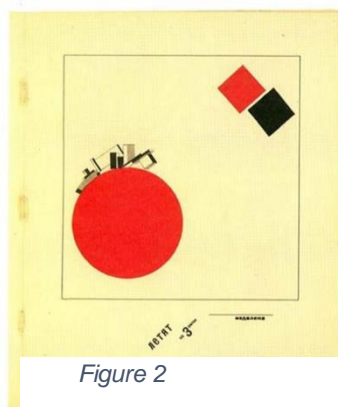


Figure 2

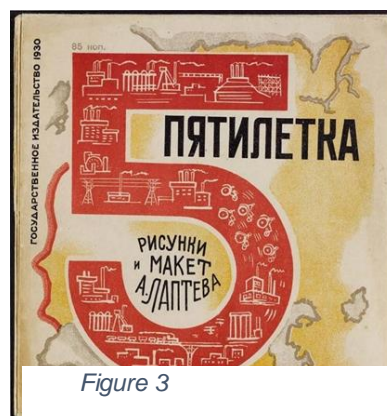


Figure 3

Illustration during Constructivism

The period mainly characterized by Constructivist illustration (1922) begins with the end of the Russian Civil War. Taking place from 1918 to 1920, this conflict saw the Red Army successfully defending the newly formed Bolshevik government led by Vladimir Lenin against various Russian and interventionist anti-Bolshevik forces (Britannica 2023). In a nation that suffered from this war, it would be reasonable to assume that the opportunities for producing children's books were severely constrained.

However, since the end of the war, the children's book had become an important means of propaganda by the regime and the artists, who saw in it a field to express their ideas (Groys, 2012). Thus, the production of children's books increased both in titles and in copies. During that period, the illustration of the children's book followed the movements of the Russian avant-garde and owed its morphological characteristics to them (Rowell & Wye, 2002:13). The dominant ideology was expressed through the work of Constructivists and the Soviet regime encouraged their practices. However, the regime did not quite agree with the morphological characteristics of the Constructivist movement. This discord was not initially expressed strongly enough to stand as a formative factor for art. It was only in the following decade that Stalin's policy intervened in shaping the iconography of the time (Foster et.al. 2016, p. 202-203).

Constructivist illustration was divided into two phases. The first appeared mainly in the mid-1920s and was characterized as pure Constructivist with strictly abstract features (Fig. 1), and the second appeared toward the end of the decade and the beginning of the next (Fig.3) (Steiner, 1999). During the second period, illustrations remained Constructivist but moved away from the pure abstractionism of the first period and became more vivid. This stage is characterized by Steiner as 'transitional' and the transition concerns the predominance of Socialist Realism, an artistic movement imposed by the Stalin regime in 1934, which also influenced children's books (1999, p.157) (Fig.4).



Figure 4

As it is evident from the exhibition catalogue *Adventures in the Soviet Imaginary*, some of the main themes that the Constructivist illustrators aimed to highlight were the class struggle, collectivism, industrialization, and electrification, the new model of



woman, and the model of the Soviet worker-hero (Bird, 2011, p. 19-24). A large section of children's books was non-fiction books, which aimed to acquaint the child-reader with the world of industry, factories, electricity, locomotives, trains and railways, that would be built in the new communist classless society. In a study of that time on the analysis of the children's book, the educator Evgeniya Flerina (cit. Fomin, n.d.) stated that it was necessary to emphasize in the children's book the production process, the movements of the machines, and the changes in the shape and colour of the products, in such a way as to provoke sensory reactions to the child-reader. She also advises creators to draw the reader's attention to topics such as the mechanism and the transformation of raw materials into the final product, the effectiveness of technical inventions, the connection between industry and nature, and the principles of collective work organization (cit. Fomin, n.d.).

After the Revolution, the goal of the regime and the intention of the artists was the formation of the New Man and the construction of a new society (Steiner, 1999). The Constructivist artists aimed to depict, not the present, but the future, incorporating ideas and values aligned with that vision. As the world of the future did not yet exist, it could not be rendered by depicting the existing reality. Consequently, the Constructivists rejected the realistic representation of the world. Working more and more abstractly, they performed their inspirations using geometric shapes and colours. This tendency reflected the ideas and values of the future and were carriers of ideological messages. Practically, the depicted subjects were constructed with geometric shapes without any unnecessary or decorative elements. As for the choice of colours, the palette was limited to the essentials and functioned as a carrier of concepts. The three basic colours (red, yellow, blue) are dominant and flat, without any gradations or light shading, that is, without any descriptive intention of the natural world (Fig.5).



Figure 5



KEIMENA/TEXTS

Children's literature E-journal

KEIMENA για την έρευνα, τη θεωρία, την κριτική και τη διδακτική της Παιδικής και Εφηβικής Λογοτεχνίας, τεύχος 40^ο, σσ. 34-51, 29/02/2024, ISSN: 1790-1782

The choice of black and white is often chosen in combination with only one of the three basic colours, usually red (Fig.6) (Rothenstein & Budashevskaya, 2013). Furthermore, this first period of pure Constructivism was characterized by the lack of depth and shading, by the white empty space in which the forms were placed, the fragmentation of the form, the use of type fonts sans serif¹ (Fig7), and the use of photomontage and photographs combined with images (Fig.8).



Figure 6

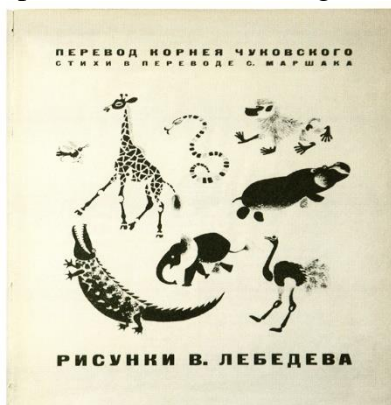


Figure 7



Figure 8

From the late 1920s onward, Joseph Stalin's methods of rule and policies changed the political situation in the Soviet Union. Between 1927-1932, the first Five-Year Plan was implemented, which was promoted by Gosplan, the State Planning Committee. The plan had its roots in Marxism and aimed at the economic development and self-sufficiency of the country through industrialization, in the context of central economic planning. During the years of its implementation, the Five-Year Plan would be the central axis of the Soviet economy. Some of the goals of the program were the creation of industries, factories to produce machinery, cars and tractors, the construction of railways and highways, the construction of hydroelectric power plants that would power mines and factories, the development of the war industry and the collectivization of land. During the implementation of the first program, many of the regime's goals for a new communist society had become a reality. The Soviet Union was now a technologically advanced country with extensive electricity production, large factories, and advanced agricultural production with new technological means. At the same time, however, the impact of the visual language of the Russian avant-garde on the proletarian masses was not as strong as expected. This visual language was not understood by children and adults (Steiner, 1999). In the 1930s, the abstract style of the previous decade was seen as something anachronistic, and it no longer met the revolutions' aspirations. As Steiner explains, the

¹ Sans-serif: that does not have serifs (small lines) used to finish off a main stroke of a letter. This type of typography conveys simplicity, minimalism, or modernity.



project “would not be relegated to some bright future, but would serve as a sacralization of the present, the new imperial age” (1999, p. 170). As he says, the aesthetics of the new consciousness is now expected to pass from the “ascetic, revolutionary, rectangular simplicity” to “the trappings of empire” (1999, p. 170). Having rejected representation and realism, the role of the Constructivists in expressing the communist ideology was then obsolete, while educators demanded realism and no trickery (Steiner, 1999). The abstract style of the Russian avant-garde was considered elitist and sophisticated, therefore no longer suitable for the proletarian masses (Steiner, 1999).

Shortly before the complete imposition of Socialist Realism in 1934, Constructivism with its strict geometric forms was receding, giving way to a heroic and enthusiastic climate, to a more representational depiction of the rapid industrialization, and human endeavour that transcends obstacles (Steiner, 1999). Machines and various kinds of engines in full operation and motion star in the images of this period, while the human figures are depicted undersized in relation to the huge industrial installations, and always in terms of the job they perform (Steiner, 1999). Geometric shapes still exist, but less strictly, and more descriptively. The color palette is once again limited to the three basic hues, but they no longer solely appear as flat and vivid. At times, they exhibit tonal gradations and varying levels of saturation to function in a representational way (Fig.9). Furthermore, the white background has been substituted with depictions of spaces and places.

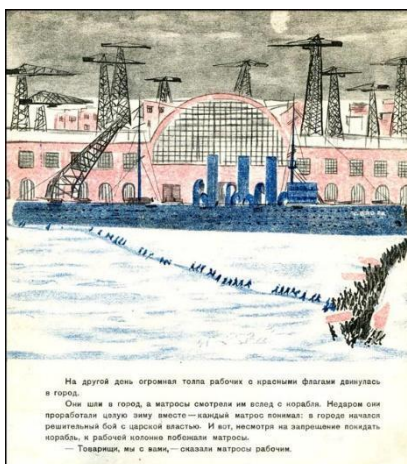


Figure 9

The use of geometric shapes as demarcation line between regression and progress

The example of the children's book *Vchera i Segodnya* [Yesterday and Today] published in 1925 and illustrated by Vladimir Lebedev is an interesting case of purely Constructivist illustration in which the image's ideological dimension is highlighted. On the front cover the reader can see at the top of the picture the word *Vchera*, meaning “Yesterday”, and three human figures (Fig.1). At the bottom three more figures are depicted, however with



KEIMENA/TEXTS

Children's literature E-journal

KEIMENA για την έρευνα, τη θεωρία, την κριτική και τη διδακτική της Παιδικής και Εφηβικής Λογοτεχνίας, τεύχος 40^ο, σσ. 34-51, 29/02/2024, ISSN: 1790-1782

a different way of representation, accompanied by the word *Segodnya* that is “Today”. Keeping in mind the historical context in which the image was created, it is easy to understand that “Yesterday” represents the pre-revolutionary era and “Today” the post-revolutionary era. In the upper row, the black and white human figures have a hunchbacked or bent posture, their external characteristics and their clothing are indicative of their age and the social order to which they belong. The figure of the woman refers to an elderly woman, while the visual indications imply that she belongs to the lower popular class. The next two characters are male and have the characteristics of older people. The three forms give the impression of people physically depressed by age and fatigue. In contrast, at the bottom of the page the three human characters are depicted in colour, and they look young and strong. The objects they hold imply that they are workers. The “Today” people are proletarians in the terms of Marxism, that is people from the working class. They have an upright posture and steady march that project confidence. The shapes of the first group, associated with “Yesterday”, are depicted using curves. They have specific physical characteristics and qualities, resulting to a more human effect, while facial features intensify this impression. Kress and van Leeuwen state that “circles and curved forms are associated with the organic and the natural. They are more sensual and affect-laden.” (2020, p. 52). They also argue that those who lean towards these forms are likely individuals who appreciate what is perceived as natural rather than human-made. Additionally, they tend to prioritize “the emotive and the sensual over the rational and the technical.” (2020, p. 52). However, in “Yesterday”, these properties are used in a negative way, as they project deterioration and decay. The rounded bodies look tired and depressed with unstable gait, while the woman’s curved body type refers to a miserable lifestyle.

Contrastingly, the shapes in the “Today” group are depicted in a geometric manner. In nature, these geometric shapes are not naturally occurring. Specifically, Kress and van Leeuwen argue (2020, p. 53) that “The square can connote the ‘technological’ positively, as a source of power and progress or negatively, as a source of oppression which, literally and figuratively ‘boxes us in’.[...] The triangle is angular, like the square—an element of the mechanical, technological order.” Consequently, in “Today” man-made and rational concepts such as engineering, technology, the construction of the city, and everyday objects are depicted through angular geometric shapes, reinforcing a connection to the mechanical and technological aspects of that period. The “Today” group is placed and shaped in such a way that its movements project stability and confidence. The “Today” figures are juxtaposed the one in front of the other and their gait is rendered with uniformity, referring to military-type gait, and unity. Furthermore, as there are no signs of facial features, individuality is moderated. The almost identical figures, having the same body posture and movement and lacking individual characteristics, lose their uniqueness, and emphasis is placed on the community, its importance, and its power (Steiner, 1999). This constitutes an ideological statement highlighting the elevation of masses to the detriment of the individual, which becomes more apparent when combined with teamwork and collectivism themes, a concept very common in Soviet children's



book production. The square shapes, the uniform gait and the lack of individual characteristics are all related to a projection of the individual who has lost his human qualities and acquires the characteristics of a machine. This projection can be perceived as something positive considering the specific social and historical context, whereby technological development and industrialization are both a priority and a national goal (Pankenier Weld, 2018). The working people of “Today” have managed to overcome their human weaknesses, to work with the stability of a machine, to build an industrial society, and to use technology. Indeed, the objects they hold in their hands confirm this argument. The figures of the first pre-revolutionary era appear with obsolete technology objects, such as the kerosene lamp, while the post-revolutionary forms appear with objects of advanced technology such as the electric lamp.

While in *Vchera i Segodnya* [Yesterday and Today] basic geometric shapes are used to represent the human figures and objects associated with the present, in *Pyatiletka* [Five-Year Plan] (Fig. 3) the geometric shapes still dominate but now break with the simplicity and the strictness of the previous period. For example, the forms of the buildings are placed in such a way that there is a relative complexity in their structures (Fig.11, 12). The important event that led to the creation of the book is the first Five-year Plan. At the time of *Pyatiletka's* publication, the plan was already in place, and the book was specifically created to support it. The goal was no longer to generate abstract ideas, as was the case during the first Constructivist period, but to depict the reality of the present—a present that coincides with the book's publication.

Pyatiletka, unlike a conventional book with sequential pages where the reader turns the pages, unfolds like an accordion, with each page opening up and down, resembling more a map or architectural-industrial plan (Fig.11). The shape, the layout and the materiality of the book, intentionally chosen by the author, aim to familiarize children with industrial and construction concepts and serve as a visual representation of the short and long-term goals of the Five-Year Plan, complemented by explanatory text (Fig.11). When closed, each page's upper and lower folds represent short-term goals, relevant to the Plan's first year (1927-1928), while opening them reveals long-term goals for the final year (1932-1933). It is the materiality of the book that undertakes the responsibility of promoting the Plan's goals, detailing targets such as how much wheat will be produced or how much wood will be cut, even how many schools and libraries will be built.



KEIMENA/TEXTS

Children's literature E-journal

KEIMENA για την έρευνα, τη θεωρία, την κριτική και τη διδακτική της Παιδικής και Εφηβικής Λογοτεχνίας, τεύχος 40^ο, σσ. 34-51, 29/02/2024, ISSN: 1790-1782

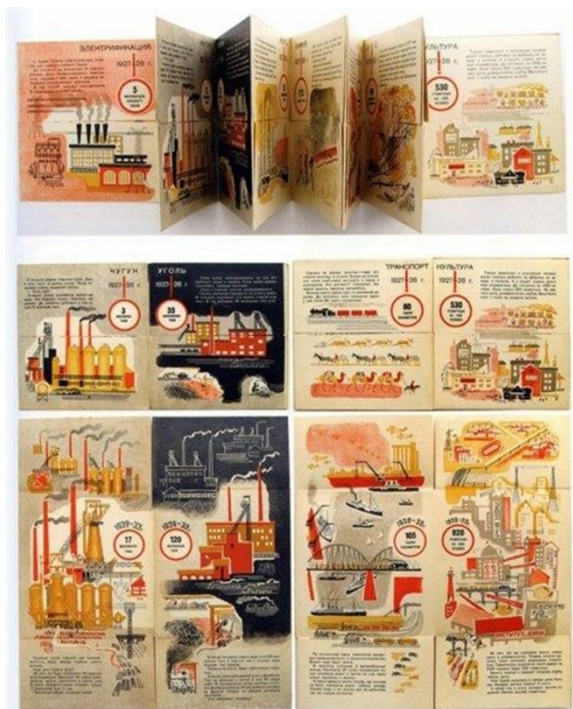


Figure 10



Figure 11

In addition, the book contains illustrated maps of the Soviet Union that depict, according to the Five-Year Plan, the locations where, for example, power plants, metal processing factories, and industries will be built, the placement of heavy industries, and the areas designated for organizing *sovkhos* (state farms) and *kolkhoz* (cooperative farms).

Throughout the book, the presence of humans appears to a very small degree. In most images, they are portrayed in a diminutive size, typically in black without any distinctive features. People are presented in relation to the work they perform, such as

workers transporting or cutting wood, machine operators, tractor drivers, and so on. The very small human figures placed near the vast factory and industrial structures intensify the comparison. The verbal text further highlights the role of humans as workers in the process of industrialization. Even in images depicting themes unrelated to industrialization, such as the establishment of cultural and educational institutions, the text refers to the aim of educating workers to develop and enhance productivity in their jobs (Fig. 12).



Figure 12

The size of the page is also an important element. The page size for the year 1932-1933, along its vertical axis, is larger than that of the year 1927-1928 (Fig. 10). Consequently, it provides more space for depth and landscape to expand. This technique creates the impression of the program's significant expansion geographically and chronologically. As the program evolved, the various goals of industrialization took shape. This is evident on all pages of the book related to the goals of the final year's plan (1932-1933). A direct frontal angle suggests an objective perspective (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 140). In *Pyatiletka*, the frontal depiction of the buildings adds objectivity to the message conveyed by the image. This objectivity is further enhanced by the details on them, the buildings in the foreground, and the framing shaped by the background. The form and shape of the two books mentioned above dictate how they are read and necessitate the active participation of the reader to compare shapes, open and unfold pages, compare visual data, and explore maps.



KEIMENA/TEXTS

Children's literature E-journal

KEIMENA για την έρευνα, τη θεωρία, την κριτική και τη διδακτική της Παιδικής και Εφηβικής Λογοτεχνίας, τεύχος 40^ο, σσ. 34-51, 29/02/2024, ISSN: 1790-1782

Colour and background as portrayals of the old and new era

Throughout history, colours have served as a means of projecting and expressing ideas, and in the early 20th century “abstract painters returned to the use of colour for the expression of ideas” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002, p. 348). This is evident in *Vchera i Segodnya*, in which the three figures at the top of the front cover associated with “Yesterday” are displayed in black and have tonal gradations (Fig.1). They are rendered as shadows, to insinuate that they belong to an old era which has lost its relevance. On the contrary, the figures of “Today” have flat, highly saturated colours. The vibrancy of the colours refers to strong emotions, which, during the first post-revolutionary years, are related to the enthusiasm for the revolutionary vision and to the strong encouragement to participate in it. While the word *vchera* (yesterday) is written in black letters on the front cover, the word *segodnya* (today) is written in red, a colour widely used to grab attention, convey a sense of power, and symbolize revolution. The contrast of colours and the selection of red in the typography suggest that “Today” belongs to a world structured according to communist principles, with which the red colour is strongly associated. While red is active, blue is associated with calm and passivity. Thus, the workers’ blue uniforms refer to stability in the pursuit of their common goal. The chromatic similarity of the human figures’ clothes makes them look connected. They have a common goal and together they are moving toward achieving it. However, as members of a group, they seem passive and disciplined without any individual will.

In *Pyatiletka* (Fig. 3), there is consistency related to the first phase of pure Constructivism, where primary and highly saturated colours dominate. For example, factory installations are depicted in bright yellow and red. Despite this, there are variations in saturation levels. The colours appear sometimes vividly, usually on the depicted objects, and some other times duller, usually in the background. As per Kress and van Leeuwen, colours can either bring liveliness to an image through their appealing brightness or, conversely, to make the image uninteresting if they are dull (2020, p. 242). In *Pyatiletka*, saturation, in particular, conveys a spectrum of emotions, ranging from intense to subdued. The vivid colours of the objects evoke strong emotions, which are nevertheless tempered by the muted tones in the background, creating a harmonious balance. Such distribution of intensity across the image's surface prevents a singular focus on any one object, encouraging a more balanced, calm, and careful observation of the picture. Given the informational nature of the book, designed to familiarize children with new objects, its objective is to prompt them to observe and comprehend the presented elements. The connection to Kress and van Leeuwen's perspective on the interpersonal function of colours is explicit: “Colour does not just ‘express’ or ‘mean’ things such as ‘calm’ and ‘energy’, people also use colour to try and energize or calm down other people, to act on others, to send managerial messages to workers, for instance, or parental messages to children [...]” (2020, p. 241).

Moreover, it was very common in the first period's Constructivist illustration for the objects to be rendered within a white empty space; there were no frames, no surrounding space, and no background. Kress and van Leeuwen point out that objects



“shown in a void”, become “generic, a ‘typical example’, rather than connected with a particular location, a specific moment in time, a specific point of view and so on” (2020, p. 156). In *Vchera i Segodnya* the figures are placed on a white background (Fig.1). Thus, objects, as well as people, undertake the generic role of typical examples, aligning with the intentions of Constructivist artists to convey an idea rather than a plausible reality. In contrast, in the book *Pyatiletka* (Fig.3), the space in which objects and figures are placed gains substance, and the images acquire depth. The white background is eliminated, and space is now represented. At the time, the priority was the depiction of the real world being constructed. For instance, the image in Figure 10 delineates a landscape featuring factories and buildings. The installations are depicted using intense and opaque colours, set against a semi-transparent red background. Within this scene, a grey river flows from the top to the bottom of the page. The background is situated in the upper section of the image, featuring a linear drawing of a landscape with factories and structures, while the lower section, in closer proximity to the reader, shows the facilities of a hydroelectric dam. A series of pillars connected by wires extends from the electric power plants to the river, gradually fading into the depths of the landscape. Notably, the inclusion of a landscape in the background signals a distancing from strict Constructivism, favouring a more realistic and descriptive portrayal of reality.

Conclusion

To summarize, the exploration of the two books shows two facets of the political and ideological landscapes. Firstly, *Vchera i Segodnya* raises as a dominant issue the comparison between the two periods to symbolize two different political systems. On the one hand, the bourgeois class is associated with the old system and on the other, communism and workers are associated with the new system and the associated technological progress and concepts such as hard work and collectivism. From this comparison, the new era and the ideology of communism emerge as ideal. The aim is therefore to highlight the new ideology and the effort to make it solid to the citizens, who, soon, will be solicited to build it. The book follows the models of Constructivism, which, as a dominant artistic movement in the revolutionary environment, and as a visual language with communicative characteristics, had clear ideological propositions. Secondly, *Pyatiletka* was published at a time when the regime and the new ideology were already in place. It is essentially a non-fiction book, that, through the observation of images, informed child readers of its time of the upcoming developments and prepared their gradual visual acquaintance with the new rapidly changing society by industrialization. Thus, the transition to a more figurative style was considered necessary. The aim shifted from promoting the new ideology as an ideal political system to recognizing it as an established regime, marking the time for society to be constructed based on its values. With industrialization now a reality, education on relevant issues became imperative.

The question that arises at this point is whether the ideological thesis depicted by the illustrations in the two books faithfully project the Marxist ideology that generally embraced the period of their publication, and the ideology they were intended to project. In other words, do the images convey Marxism? In general, the answer is yes. The pictures clearly depict the class struggle, as it has been discussed above. They also reflect the contribution of the workers to the benefit of society and the concept of collectivism. However, artists, embedded into the idea of modernization, industrialization, and collectivism, have depicted the individual as a mechanistic part of a social class. Let us recall the case of the workers and their depiction in the illustrations of the two books reviewed in this paper. Human beings are depicted without individual characteristics, portrayed as members of a group, and solely in relation to the labour they undertake. It seems that for the artists, of greater importance was the rise of the collective.

In the process, Lebedev and Laptev depicted the alienation of humans, a concept directly contrary to Marxist philosophy. Consequently, one might question the presence of the human nature that Marx discussed in his theory of alienation. The depiction of human figures solely as workers and as part of a mechanized process, without their individual characteristics, aligns with the 'estrangement' of human nature that Marx opposed. Therefore, it appears that the illustrations in the two books have moved away from the principles of Marxism. The application of communism in the Soviet Union and, consequently, the depiction of this ideology, as well as whether it aligned with Marx and his views, are beyond the scope of this paper. What is certain, however, is that the image of the children's book serves as a powerful carrier of ideological meanings and propaganda. In the case of the Soviet Union, it was used, among other purposes, to shape the conscience of the new society, even if, in some respects, it implied a distancing from certain aspects of the Marxist's ideology.

Books discussed

Laptev, A. (1930). *Pyatiletka* [Five-Year Plan]. Gosizdat.

Lebedev, V. (1925). *Vchera i Segodnya* [Yesterday and Today]. Raduga

References

Argan, G. C. (2012). *Η Μοντέρνα Τέχνη*. [Modern Art.] Απόδ. Λίνα Παπαδημήτρη (L. Papadimitri, Trans.) Crete University Press.

Bird, R. (Ed.). (2011). *Adventures in the Soviet Imaginary, Children's Books and Graphic Art* (Exhibition catalogue). The University of Chicago Press.

Clark, T. (1997). *Art and Propaganda in the 20th Century: The Political Image in the Age of Mass Culture*. Harry N. Abrams.

de Micheli, M. (1992). *Οι Πρωτοπορίες της Τέχνης του εικοστού αιώνα*. [The Avant Garde Art of the 20th Century] Μτφρ. Λ. Παπαθεάκη. (L. Papamatheaki, Trans.). Odysseas.



- Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2023, October 20). *Russian Civil War*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Russian-Civil-War>
- Fomin, Dm. (n.d.). Pyatiletka. Risunki i maket Alekseya Lapteva [Five-year plan. Drawings and layout by Alexey Laptev]. In *Rarus's Gallery*. <http://www.raruss.ru/best-soviet-childrens-books/2692-laptev-five-years.html>
- Foster, H., Krauss, R., Bois, Y.-A., Buchloh, B., & Joselit, D. (2016). *Art since 1900: Modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism* (Third edition). Thames & Hudson.
- Groys, B. (2012). *The Birth of Socialist Realism from the spirit of the Russian avant-garde*. In D. G. Ioffe & F. H. White (Eds.), *Russian avant-garde and radical modernism: An introductory reader* (pp. 250-276). Academic Studies Press.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2002). Color as a semiotic mode: Notes for a grammar of color. *Visual Communication*, 1(3), 343-368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/147035720200100306>
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2020). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. Routledge.
- Oushakine, S. A., & Balina, M. (2021). Primers in Soviet Modernity: Depicting Communism for Children in Early Soviet Russia. In M. Balina & S. A. Oushakine (Eds.), *The Pedagogy of Images: Depicting Communism for Children* (pp. 3-48). Toronto University Press.
- Pankenier Weld, S. (2018). *An Ecology of the Russian Avant-garde Picturebook*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Porshneva, O. (2019). Bolshevik Engineering of the “New Man” in the Early Soviet Period: Theoretical Bases, Political and Ideological Priorities, Evolution of Approaches. *RUDN Journal of Russian History*, 18(1), 67-84. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2019-18-1-67-84>
- Rothenstein, J., & Budashevskaya, O. (Eds.). (2013). *Inside the Rainbow: Russian Children's Literature 1920-1935: Beautiful Books, Terrible Times*. Redstone Press.
- Rowell, M., & Wye, D. (2002). The Russian Avant Garde Book 1910-1934. In *The Museum of Modern Art*. https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_155_300153266.pdf
- Steiner, E. (1999). *Stories for Little Comrades* (J.-A. Miller, Trans.). University of Washington Press.

Sources of images

All images used in this paper are sourced from the public domain.

Fig. 1. <http://www.raruss.ru/childrens-books/page-child2/3164-lebedev-marchak-yesterday-today.html>

Fig. 2. <http://www.raruss.ru/avant-garde/2451-more-about-two-squares.html>

Fig. 3. <http://www.raruss.ru/best-soviet-childrens-books/2692-laptev-five-years.html>



KEIMENA/TEXTS

Children's literature E-journal

KEIMENA για την έρευνα, τη θεωρία, την κριτική και τη διδακτική της Παιδικής και Εφηβικής Λογοτεχνίας, τεύχος 40^ο, σσ. 34-51, 29/02/2024, ISSN: 1790-1782

Fig. 4. <http://www.raruss.ru/childrens-books/page-child6/3338-rotov-mikhalkov-small-ships.html>

Fig. 5. <http://www.raruss.ru/childrens-books/page-child2/3166-lebedev-marshak-ice-cream.html>

Fig. 6. <http://www.raruss.ru/best-soviet-childrens-books/2655-charlys-voyage.html>

Fig. 7. <http://www.raruss.ru/childrens-books/page-child2/3167-lebedev-kipling-small-elephant.html>

Fig. 8. <http://www.raruss.ru/best-soviet-childrens-books/3055-chichagovy-egor-monter.html>

Fig.9. <http://www.raruss.ru/childrens-books/page-child7/3391-inozemtsev-shvarts-aurora.html>

Fig. 10, 11, 12 <http://www.raruss.ru/best-soviet-childrens-books/2692-laptev-five-years.html>