The Role of Graphic Design in Contemporary Soviet Consumerism

by

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March 1991

National College of Art & Design

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A dissertation submitted to
The Faculty of History of Art & Design & Complementary Studies

In candidacy for a Bachelor of Design in
Visual Communications

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my tutors Dr. Frances Ruane and Bill Bolger, Dr. Patrick O' Meara of TCD Russian Studies Dept. for his enthusiastic response and help, Mrs. Jane Nolan of the Design Museum Library, London, for her generosity, Dr. Delancey of the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies, University of London, for granting access to and translating Soviet magazine articles, Michael and Conor O' Clery for their time and effort, Debbie for her translations, Brenda for her typing and Anita for her tremendous help and support.

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

> No business, even the most certain and reliable, keeps going without advertisement. It is the weapon which is born of competition...We cannot leave this weapon...in the hands of the bourgeois foreigners trading here. Everything in the USSR must work for the benefit of the proletariat. Give advertising some thought! (1)

These are sentiments Constructivist writer Vladimir Mayakovsy expressed in 1923. Since the mid-1980s one Mikhail Gorbachev has echoed these very sentiments and a new march on Moscow has thus proceeded apace.

Although the future of the Soviet Union is by no means guaranteed at present, six years of perestroika and glasnost has represented a path towards a free, open-market economy. With the reintroduction of advertising (this time largely of western origin), it appears inevitable that the Soviet market place is destined to change dramatically. Contemporary Soviet consumerism and its graphically designed by-products are the subject of this dissertation. Also considered, in light of its historical significance, is the role that graphic design in general plays in today's Soviet economy.

It may appear paradoxical that I have chosen to study a subject which decrees much of the terminology and defining criteria of Western graphic design redundant; paradoxical, that I wish to report on an industry where notions of design and marketing, so fundamental to my field of study in the West, are almost non-entities.

My motivation to embark on this excursion into the world of Soviet consumerism lies in a personal fascination with the packaging and presentation of Soviet products. The attraction may be partly due to its contrast with the disposable-orientated, marketing-mad West. The comparatively unsohphisticated technical

and aesthetic properties of the packaging are themselves its charm for me. While much of this dessertation may concentrate on the incompetence of the design and printing quality of packaging and on the perverse stagnation of creativity in the design world, this is not an engagement in an arrogant condemnation of a complicated history. On the contrary, it is primarily an enthusiastic response to the products and packaging of such an environment.

As a result of the state policy of protecting the consumer goods market from foreign competition the USSR has unwittingly preserved articles once near and dear to the West. These articles and their corresponding 'packaging' and 'promotion' appear to be from an era thirty years ago when marketing and sophisticated advertising were less important. The Soviet Union has become a time-warp zone in which product forms, now obscelescent in the West, can mutate in some frozen design limbo. Product packaging is devoid of any of the seductive elements that we have come to expect. It is clear that the notion of competing for consumer choice is redundant in a country which wraps its sugar, flour, rice and salt in identical brown paper bags, indistinguishable but for a smudgy ink stamp. The branding process of marketing - that is the Western opportunity to choose one pretty package over one not-so-pretty package - is alien.

Lacking in the fetistic allure and sex-appeal of their western counterparts, Soviet commodities can appear mundane, curiously unfinished and impoverished [while by virtue of their flaws are, to some of us, touchingly human]. But these products never had to tempt customers. They are the only ones of their kind available. They adorn the shop windows of the local retail stores, unmistakable and self-assured. They are not desirable, glossy or sophisticated because they have not needed to be.

This dissertation is an attempt in part to chronicle the role that graphic design has played in this planned economy of minimal consumer choice.

Chapter One sets the historical perspective for this present period of political and economic change in the Soviet Union. It considers what can be learnt from the revolutionary past and attempts to create a better understanding of how Soviet consumers, and graphic artists serving them, think.

Chapter Two examines the complex condition of graphic design in the Soviet Union today, and considers its relationship with industry there. Attention is given to the chaos in general industry, so as to explain the context in which graphic design finds itself. This chapter also deals with the dramatic difference between goods produced and packaged for the domestic market and those destined for export. It highlights the ill-proportioned allocation of facilities and materials needed for printing and packaging.

In the third chapter, life in the day of a Soviet consumer is examined and compared with that of a Westerner. A detailed description of his interaction with commercial design is given.

The last chapter deals with what the future holds for Soviet graphic design. It records the hopes, predictions and judgments of some Western European designers wishing to avail of new opportunities. The attitudes of Soviet designers and theorists towards their market prospects is considered, as is the state of graphic design training.

The main emphasis of this dissertation is on commercial design rather than, say, political poster art because besides having personal affinity, contemporary Soviet packaging, advertising or window display, have not to my knowledge, been documented before. It also seems quite warranted to report on these subjects when it seems likely that this unique, pallid universe is about to disappear forever. With the introduction of domestic and foreign competition the Soviet supermarket and department store will never be the same.

Commercial graphic design is also an excellent gauge of what role design in general plays in the daily lives of the average citizen. By virtue of its accessibility to the public it is an accurate measure of the extent to which capitalist values have been undertaken. It is, after all, one of the most obviously visible areas of graphic design.

Footnotes for Introduction

(1) Vladimir Mayakovsy, Complete Collected Works vol 13, 1923, p57. Cited after Anikst, 1990, p15

Chapter 1 Historical Perspective

The Beginning for Graphic Design

Early Soviet Graphics

Socialist Realism and Stagnation

CHAPTER 1: The Historical Perspective

The importance of drawing an historical perspective is upmost in the examination of Soviet design. It is hard to think of any other design history where political and social change have influenced its path so profoundly. The role graphic design has played has fluctuated from, on the one hand, occupying the most important place in the cultural activities of the young Soviet republic, to on the other hand, practically disappearing into obscurity since the Stalin years. Its treasures have been created in isolation because Russian culture has had to lock itself up when posing a moral counterpoint, to resist the established system. Czars have disappeared, but oppressive and plaguelike conditions have seemed unending. On the occasions when the barricades were lowered achievements have found universal recognition and staged great influence. In this time of push for perestroika, which has been likened to a revolution, the call must surely be for a firm understanding of the lessons of Russia's revolutionary past.

By examining the path of Russian and then Soviet design and by considering those theories which have thwarted true creativity, an understanding of today's plight may be found.

The beginning for graphic design

The industrial revolution and capitalist development which Russia embarked upon following the abolition of serfdom in 1861, occurred long after equivalent Western European developments. As a result, Russia was a country in a hurry. The fast rate of development and intense industrial production held up until just before World War I. Considering this period in Russian history, and later incidents, it would seem plausible that the longer developments are delayed, the more rapidly they progress when finally set in motion. If such a notion holds true great things ought to be expected from Soviet graphic design in the 1990's.

A tremendous growth in literacy in the Russian Empire was propagated in the later half of the nineteenth century by a non-aristocratic intelligentsia. (1) The demand for books was enormous and publishing expanded in line with educational activity. In the mass production of elementary textbooks, prayerbooks, calendars and pamphlets, graphic design emerged.

Writers and literary critics formed the most influential social group of this late nineteenth century. The public regarded men of letters as prophets and advocates - "guardians of the nations moral and social conscience" (2). These revolutionary ideologies were convinced that art must be of some practical use, meet human needs and subordinate itself to the demands of real life. Their utilitarian approach demanded that art should become the means of achieving the most urgent social and political reforms. The satisfaction of aesthetic requirements was only secondary. Theories denoted a hierarchical system according to which life was placed higher than art, literature above the other arts, and content above form.

From the intellectually dominant field of literature a similar concern with the didactic usefulness of the arts grew in the visual art world, and the primary of theme and content above form and aethestics subsequently reigned. Progressively minded art commentators conducted a demand for non-elitist, popular culture which brought about a resolute concentration on the ideas and content of works of art. Ignoring expressive or artistic merits critics praised artists when content was socially relevant or positively progressive. This approach to art critique, has, incidently, remained in power until very recently.

The platform for such doctrines was provided for in the journals '<u>World of Art</u>' and '<u>Art and Industrial Design</u>' both launched in 1898 and '<u>The Art of Printing</u>' which was launched in 1901. They marked the birth of graphic design as an individual discipline as we know it today, and they reflect public recognition of the importance of design in a newly developing industrial society. These large format, well illustrated productions were to become

focal points of Russian artistic life for several years.

Through regular competitions and provocative articles the journals encouraged a great proliferation of commercial art and design which has only recently been rediscovered and reassessed. Resurrected from the archives of the Rumyantsev Museum public library (now the Lenin Library), where it has remained in obscurity since the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, the work now provides contemporary designers with new source material. Those wishing to draw inspiration from specifically Russian heritage are given new impetus in the recent exhibitions and publications documenting the work. The work itself displays elaborate calligraphic letter forms, an abundance of ornamentation and the pursuit of an opulent, splendid effect (figs 1-3). This contrasts strongly with the graphic design that has prevailed since 1917, when, for example, typography as decoration became strictly taboo.

An aspect of the work which has carried through to become a traditional characteristic of Soviet graphics is the strong tendency towards realistic rendering and real situations. This bias while giving early Russian graphic design its distinctive character, also explains the reluctance of many of its practitioners to experiment with new techniques. Graphic artists and designers who deviated from the accepted views on the relationship between content and form were seen to be contaminated with Western influence.

The search for a new national identity, following the emancipation of the peasants, topped the agenda of the day. Heated debate ensued over whether Russia should develop in the mould of a chosen Western capitalist model, or whether a completely new solution should be sought. Attention focused on the problem of national self-determination, the search for national roots and the reinterpretation of the past.

1 Unknown artist, Ten rouble banknote, late 19 th century, 7 x 4 1/2 in. (17.6 x 10.5cm.)

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3 Unknown artist, Advertising - poster, no date,

27 x 16 1/4 in. (67.5x 40.5cm.)

There appears an uncanny parrallelism here with the present period of change in the Soviet Union. The notion of self assessment is common to both reformational periods, but there are some very different elements at the core of the changes. Fundamentally the socio-political climate is very different. The current situation is fraught with obstacles of apathy, stubborness, prevailing distrust and discontent. During those last decades before WWI optimism and nationalism abounded. In terms of artistic results eclecticism is common to both periods. However, the degree of diversity in today's graphic work is much greater, and the absence of a single stylistic movement is a hopeful sign of democracy. Designers today face a similar predicament to the extent that there is pressure on them to set new precedents and resist emulation of the Western ideas. But absent is the imposition of a stylistic doctrine by design ideologists. The opportunity for experimentation is there.

Early Soviet Graphics

The avant-garde of the 1910's and the 1920's created a glorious chapter in Russian cultural history, one that cannot be separated from the country's political and social upheavals. The October revolution of 1917 brought about a period of great creativity, fueled by more unlimited revolutionary optimism and belief in the future. Inspired by the revolution, artists abandoned their studios to help design a new society. With very little money available for the implementation of ambitious artistic plans (as the country had barely started its recovery from the exhausting civil war), graphic design became an essential artistic activity.

The idea of graphic design being a 'useful-art', was reinforced and a further stipulation was made that it should serve to reshape the world, rather than depict and decorate it. Graphic design became closely related to mass propaganda. And,

considering that the majority of the population was still illiterate, a graphic solution was crucial for the posters, leaflets and first Soviet books. A new concept in environmental art came about in the shape of Agititational or Agit-Art which transformed trains, vans and even barges and steamers into travelling propaganda vehicles by means of graphic design. The brief explosive era produced Russia's most daring artistic achievements and is her most universally celebrated epoch.

An aspect of the age which must now be attracting the attention of contemporary designers and theorists venturing into the unknown, is the commercialism it experienced. The 1920's was a decade when advertising, capitalism's most glorious face, came to be regarded as a genuine manifestation of Leninist thinking. It came about in the guise of NEP, or the New Economic Policy, which Lenin introduced in an attempt to restore some sort of balance following the civil-war. The policy allowed small private enterprises to compete on the free market. While the similarities with Gorbachev's economic initiatives are obvious, the reprocutions of nouveaux-richeism which NEP experienced must be seen as a warning to the present Soviet leadership. The new entrepreneurial bourgeoisie that NEP inevitably produced is an end product today's government wish to avoid.

Much of the commercialism initially produced appeared to mark a return to hedonism rather than Leninism. The absurdity of the situation, in a country that was strife with famine, is represented in the typical poster for the Restaurant Riche which invited one to "see in the New Year admist flowers and tropical plants. Magnificent cabaret. A battle of paper streamers and confetti".(3)

Even an ad for the state Rubber corporation appealed to essential vanity: "It's a lie to claim you are more elegant without galoshes. Our galoshes are the very foundation of elegance".(4)

More significant than this epicurean outlook, which harps back to earlier philosophies, was the emergence of the Constructivist school. This movement went to make up the central core of artistic creativity in the twenties and it established, by far, the most characteristic style of that era.

The practitioners of this group were primarily responsible for the great creative surge following the Revolution. They initiated the Agit-art and, with the arrival of NEP, they undertook the task of advertising the state's own competitive output with great daring achievements.

The Constructivists believed that a new kind of society called for a whole new approach. Art in any form was to be an expression of that society, and should ideally help to change it further. Typographer and graphic designer, Alexei Gan, the movement's foremost theorist, said "Nothing will be accidental, nothing will derive purely from taste or an aesthetic tyranny. Everything must be given a technical and functional meaning".(5) Outlining such principles Constructivists raised and solved problems of the relationship between function, form, structure and material. They established that there should be, firstly, a correspondence between the designerly aim and the object's function, and secondly that there should be a conscious 'organisation' - a 'construction' of a whole from the elements. In order to achieve such goals, Constructivism required the redundancy of embellishment or stylization, as is reflected in Gan's words.

Constructivism came into being as a new creative method in architecture and design. To the majority of the group's contemporaries however, it was known above all as a clear and specific style. Ultimately, Constructivism stands in the history of 20th century art as a global term, embracing the production of works across the whole range of architecture, theatre, textiles, ceramics, typography and graphic design. Its images are

characterized by formal asceticism, by geometry and the right angle, by principles of montage and 'individual production'. The advertising posters, packaging and labels, with their arrows, exclamation marks and sense of dynamic (eg fig 4-6), produced through the Constructivist participation in NEP, established graphic guidelines for the rest of the world for many years to come. It also established a source from which Soviet graphic designers continue to draw inspiration.

Contemporary graphic designer Mikhail Anikst believes "The influence of constructivism is still strong," adding "only the best pieces have broken away from it".(6). Referring to contemporary work produced in the field of poster design, that seemingly lone 'safe seat' for graphic design in the current cultural arena, Phil Risbeck of Graphis magazine observed that sometimes "the use of typography is not always consistent and concepts [can be] obvious".(7)

An area where obvious poster solutions seem to be accepted is in the enduring promotion of Lenin. In the posters (figs 7 and 8), produced by state printing studios (8), echoes of constructivist-styling may be seen in the elements of photomontage, clean-cut shapes and hand-rendered lettering. They are amalagamated with the knowledge of scale and expertise in depicting heroism, acquired from proceeding eras (the low spectator point is a common device). The striking effect is traditionally Soviet, but may be seen by some as the continued regurgitation of already tried and tested solutions of a genre that is passé.

4 Designer:Alexsander Rodchenko, copywriter : Vladimir Mayakovsky, Ad for baby's dummies, 1923.

5 Alexander Rodchenko, Wrappers for sweets called *Proletarskaia* (Proletarian)

6 El Lissitzky, Page designs for Mayakovsky's *For the Voice* poems ,1923.

7 *1917 Decree of Peace* Dosigned by Palka, Published by Plakat, Moscow ,1987, 70 x 100 cm.

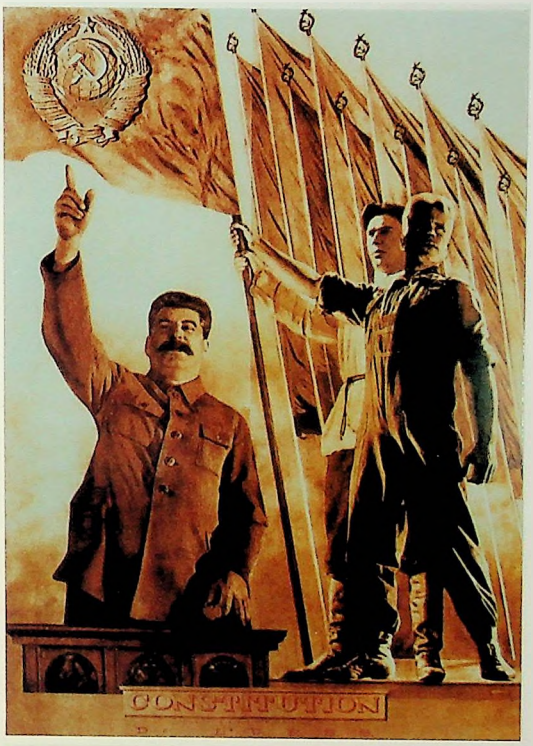
8 *Lenin, October, Peace* Artist : E. Tsvik, Published by Plakat, Moscow, 1987, 70 x100 cm.

Socialist Realism and Stagnation

For those few brief years the Russian Revolution and the modern visual arts had advanced together in step. Then, towards the end of the 'twenties the Soviet authorities decided that, after all, such ideas were bourgeois in origin. Within a couple of years the political situation in Russia shifted strongly towards a hierarchical, totalitarian society. The artistic ideals of the avant-garde became outmoded and politically suspect. The state felt what the Russian people needed was a purely anecdotal art depicting peasants, workers, soldiers and politicians all striving for the good of the Soviet system. In short, they got propaganda, and a new academism was born.

In 1934, the official cultural doctrine of Socialist Realism was adopted. This dogmatically imposed ideology aimed to present a conscious, clean reflection of Soviet life, based on the national tradition of Realism. It required a figurative, mass orientated, optimistic approach for all genres of art. Graphic design in that transitionary period abounds with bizzare attempts to adopt to the official directive, and Constructivist compositions used airplanes, tanks, even apples and oranges, instead of abstract shapes.

The poster "Constitution" (fig 9) by El Lissitzky, done in 1937, is an example of how even the leading Constructivists conformed to the general policy of the communist government (cf fig 6). In 1937 artists became subordinated entirely to the requirements of the rulers, with attention to periods and events of national significance in Russian history being demanded. El Lissitzky's poster featuring Socialist Realist photomontage celebrates the proclamation of the new Soviet constitution of that year. The trend grew becoming more accentuated during World War II.



9 El Lissitzky, *Constitution*, 1937

Because cultural programmes were so tightly regulated and censored, there was very little room for innovation and creativity. Commercial graphic design practically disappeared as the Soviet Union consolidated its centralized, state-owned economy. The very notions of advertising and promotional publicity were associated with Western capitalist society - a dangerous connotation in a country where people were sent to labour camps on charges of 'cosmopolitism'. Graphic design gradually lost its identity as a separate discipline. With the exception of theatre and film posters, it was confined to book illustration, where the omnipresent principles of Socialist Realism reigned.

For decades illustration, the only surviving aspect of graphic design, subscribed to an array of dazzling smiles and well developed physiques, built up through exercises with hammer and sickle. Initially, these limited stereotypes were popular with the people despite being completely at odds with their reality. Art historian Alexander Yegorov, discussing pre-glasnost poster art, suggests that a disturbing "simplified 'poster slogan' way of thinking" amongst the people was thus implanted from above.(9)

After the death of Stalin in 1953, the political situation mellowed somewhat. Eventually, through a common sense and critical intuition of ordinary Soviet people, the stereotypes began to be rejected. The process of that rejection was slow however. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the cultural atmosphere did not change significantly. The mythical world of the graphic arts, filled with symbols continued to celebrate the sanctity of the Soviet way of life, despite the glaring contradictions and failures of that period of stagnation.

There are, in fact, still many traces of that tradition to be found intact, in graphic productions today. An advertisement directed at teenagers (fig 10b) or a poster celebrating the female role in the workforce (fig 11) can display obvious idealism.

10a Child's storybook *Lenin*, Moscow, 1986

10b Promotion for sports centre, from youth magazine, 1987

11 Poster celebrating the female workforce

Examining the poster illustrated, one may find it curiously interesting in its relative subtlety. Without what would otherwise be predictible text, it succeeds in portraying its intended message in a more immediately acceptable manner, currently neccessary. Whether this subtlelty was arrived at accidently or intentionally can only be speculated. On close inspection it is evident that the poster has been altered by cropping. This may or may not have been prompted by a printing error. It is plausible that the decision was made to exclude a line of text along the bottom, thereby lessening the crudity of propagandist overtones. This type of poster represents the lasting remains of a once important ideological weapon in the education of the much-ballyhooed masses. Images of blast furnaces, mines and workers increasing their monthly qotas are now considered more comical than sober by Soviets.

Design advances were made, to an extent, in a commercial context during the early 1960s. These were prompted by the trouble the Soviet economy found itself in at that time, but materialized on the export-market front (the public market place remained dull). In 1960 the plan of a young optical engineer called Naum Kaznham to develop pamphlets, broadsheets and other promotional devices for the industrial design sector of the Ministry of Ship Building, where he worked, was approved by the government. With this the first post-Stalinist ad-agency in the USSR was effectively established.

Design developed very slowly. Strict ideological controls exercised by the mid-level bureaucrats and minor, but powerful Party functionaries, continued. Despite their stranglehold on innovation, however, advertising was being accepted in varying forms in other ministries, by the early 1970s. The Ship Building Ministry's agency had itself grown from six to 160 people, including copywriters, photographers, typographers and designers.

This type of growth demanded greater Party and government controls: thus was formed the Union of Trade Advertising. This

organisation published Rehlama magazine which surveyed the work of advertising groups placed in various factory locations throught the USSR. The state continued to monopolize control on artists and designers through the Artists Union, and what waywardly adventurous work was produced, remained underground.

Stagnation has crippled the Soviet Union. Seventy years of ill-conceived and ill-managed economic policies have resulted in shortages of everything needed for normal life. Recent years have seen the sporadic disappearnace of such common items as soap and detergent. In direct contrast to a capitalist economy, where a competitive market dictates the creation of new goods, Russia's collapsing market nullifies any design effort.

In consideration of the country's cultural past, great expectations have been expressed for this new time of change. The question has been posed as to whether a new Russian avant-garde is imminent. But today's creative works differ fundamentally from those that flourished at the beginning of this century. The very notion of an avant-garde is inseparable from the socio-economic aspirations of an industrial culture, with its belief in unlimited technical and scientific progress. As a post-industrial society emerges, such familiar beliefs are being shattered, revealing a great uncertainty about the future and an absence of clear goals for further growth. One could argue whether a post-industrial condition can develop within Soviet society, yet its culture is unquestionably on the brink of profound change. The goal of building an imminent happy future has given way to the notion of a continuous rebuilding (ie. 'perestroika') of the existing structure.

When tomorrow is unclear and today is perpetual, art and design no longer point the way for society. Design becomes a self-generating personal exercise, devoid of the brilliant pathos of the avant-garde, yet equally remote from the totalitarianism of the establishment.

Footnotes for Chapter 1

(1) These were of the new class - the industrial bourgeoisie - mostly descendant from serfs, famous as much for their patronage of national culture as for their business acumen

(2) Anikst, 1990, p15

(3) Anikst, 1987, p8

(4) Ibid

(5) Alexi Gan, 1922, p65

(6) Rombough, 1987, p48

(7) Risbeck, 1989, p60

(8) They were published in 1987 by the all-union Moscow poster publishing house, Plakat. This organization is still managed by Party functionaries who impose constraints and limit production. At less than the cost of a cup of tea, these 70 x 100cm posters are easily affordable by the Russians, and a pittance for tourists - I purchased these at the massive Dom Knigi bookshop in Moscow

(9) Yegorov, 1989, p1

Chapter 2 Graphic Design, Perestroika and Industry

Posters of Perestroika

Graphic Design and Industry

The Co-Opperatives

Products for Export

CHAPTER 2: Graphic Design, Perestroika and Industry

In 1985 the Soviet Union embarked on yet another phenomenonal process of transformation under the leadership of one, singularly responsible visionary, Mikhail Gorbachev. In the name of 'perestroika' and 'glasnost' a revolution of sorts got underway to change and liberate the political structure, the economic system and the cultural atmosphere. 'Perestroika' was the action - the restructuring, refashioning, reshaping or reorganizing. 'Glasnost' meant making accessible for public discussion. It implied the freedom of speech, of information and of the press. In practice it is against the rewriting and falsification of history, against anonymous and secretive decision making, and against the denial of contemporary social problems. The 'revolution' has been embraced by the Soviet people, and their hopes today are linked with its potential and with the man who initiated it all, Mikhail Gorbachev.

When the signs of change first appeared from above it was the Soviet press that led and accelerated the motivation Ogonyok (fig 12), a weekly magazine which for many years remained a typical, stodgy, official paper, became one of the most radical and popular publications. At the beginning of perestroika it was reborn as a herald of the new direction, ready to tackle the most controversial aspects of Russia's past and present. Yet surprisingly, the appearance of the magazine did not change: its format, logo, cover design and type stayed as undistinguished as they had been through the long years of stagnation. Viktor Korotich, the chief editor of Ozanyok, was on a visit to New York in 1987 when the momentum of perestroika was at its peak. When he was asked whether he intended to give the magagzine a new look, he answered, "I would love to change the graphics, but we can't waste time for that - too many issues are waiting to be dealt with." (1) The editor's short remark accurately

12 Cover of magazine *Ogonyok* , September 1989. Art director E.Kazakov

demonstrates the situation in which graphic design finds itself in today's Soviet Union. It has not yet risen from the marginal position it was regulated to in the 1930s. It remains low in the complicated hierarchy of official Soviet culture, and its powers remain untapped by industry.

Before examining graphic design's relationship with industry and considering the reasons for its poor fairing, there is one aspect of the medium which deserves attention by virtue of its healthy existance. It is the art of the poster. While the intention has been stated that I wish to refrain from celebrating further this already well represented aspect of Soviet graphic art, its standing must be acknowledged in order to understand fully the state of graphic design in today's Soviet Union.

Posters of Perestroika

When, in 1984, the concepts of glasnost and perestroika were annnounced to the world, an initial explosion of excitement in the graphic arts took place in the Baltic republics of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. Here poster artists had already been exploring different methods of visual presentation. The new posters, which owed more to the Polish poster style than to the International style, were mostly creations publicizing local cultural and performing arts events - an area that had traditionally allowed artists more freedom. In 1986, a milestone of another poster genre was displayed at a Latvian political poster show. Laimonis Cherberg of Riza designed a poster called 'Perestroika?' that showed two saucepans with different coloured covers. The symbolism, though seemingly obscure, was actually rather pointed. The question Cherberg asked was, if the government could not even achieve the simplest task - that of matching the right cover to the right saucepan - could this really be perestroika? Could restructuring really succeed with the existing mechanisms still in place? (2)

This radical exhibition marked the first time that an artist had publicly attacked an official policy with the weapon of irony. As one Russian critic wrote: "For the first time in a long time, the artist had the right, and he took it immediately, to communicate his own view of the world and its problems". When a selection of works from this poster show was published, it signaled what one Russian critic labelled a 'new orientation in political poster art' and triggered a chain reaction that hit some Muscovite artists almost immediately. (3)

A graphic rejuvenation, while not yet widespread thus came into evidence. And its resurrection in the form of poster art can be viewed as a direct consequence of the relaxation of censorship and the easing of stringent ideological requirements.

Glasnost posters, says historian Anna Suvorova "are called to life by a revolution from above and supported by the powerful mass movement from below". (4) In addition, social ills, until now unmentioned in Soviet public discourse, are being addressed: among the formally taboo subjects are compassion for the handicapped, drug and alcohol addiction, prostitution and AIDS. Government abuses are also subjected to the commentators' art, with lampoons of the bloated bureaucracy and the lingering presence of Stalinist tendencies now becoming increasingly visible.

Dr Suvorova comments that "all the posters created by perestroika/demokratia in the setting of glasnost have the same distinction, a peculiar 'distrust' of the word". The slogans that defined posters in the past are rejected in favour of a 'visual scheme and a plastic flow' the very same artistic attributes that were once deemed bourgeois baggage. But she also says that by comparison with the revolutionary posters of 1917, "the perestroika poster [has perhaps less] spontaneity, drive and mobilizing emotion, but it is enriched with logic, associativeness and irony." With perestroika, graphic art has become intellectualized. The new posters that demand the viewer

decode unfamiliar images, aphorisms and grotesqueries to explore the problems inherent in Soviet society. Indeed one Russian observer has noted, "the poster nowadays is contradictory; it is not always precise and understandable for the general audience." (5)

While still not absolute, the level of freedom of expression afforded artists is unprecedented in consideration of what went before, and many have embraced the challenge of the poster medium as platform. However, while intellectually there is room to breathe, and graphic design serves as the necessary apparatus by way of poster art, material conditions continue to deteriorate. As we are about to see, graphic design has little footing there.

Industry and Graphic Design

The explosion of creativity in poster production has triggered a similar enthusiasm in some graphic designers wishing to work in a commercial capacity. The evidence has appeared in recent issues of Reklama, still the Soviet Union's only advertising magazine. Indeed it includes some of the most interesting work of the 'new wave'. But the problem is that advertising and the relaxed commercial artistic disciplines including packaging design have been sharply limited by the sparsity of Soviet economic resources and state monopolization of goods. It is true that, since perestroika, a degree of commercial enterprise has emerged and design opportunities have arisen, and have been responded to. However, progressive commercial design is effectively negligible in Soviet industry on account of the abysmal condition of the Soviet economy. Any 'new wave' in the shape of consumer orientated design is virtually invisible in the streets and stores.

Basic to the problems of the Soviet economy is the chaos in industry. The diabolical condition of the industrial infrastructure has dogged the country for decades. Only recently have the very fundamental problems been singled out. The realization has been made, through glasnost, by Soviets that everything happening in their society is interconnected and in order to stimulate the economy, changes must be made everywhere.

In wake of the recent food crisis which struck the Soviet Union, the extent of the infrastructural problems was highlighted in both the Eastern and Western media. In an interview on Irish radio, Iona Andronov, vice-chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the Parliament of the Russian Confederation, blamed industry for having "too many lousey bureaucrats, too many chiefs, too many crooks....who are wasting...who are stealing [and] who are selling...on the blackmarket...". He admitted the food crisis was not one caused by natural means but was their own "social disaster". (6) Soviet TV has been showing, year after year, pictures of lorries leaving a carpet of grain on the roads as they drive to storage sites, for example. Vegetables are seen to rot in cellars, milk turns sour for lack of refrigeration, fruits wasted because there is no machinery to process it or goods wagons to transport it.

The agricultural sector of industry, by virtue of its essentiality to life, has been given most attention in the media. The symptoms its distributional system suffer are equalled across all industry.

More problems are caused by the economic policy to export so much of its unprocessed raw material. Dr Patrick O'Meara, head of TCD's Russian studies department says that by doing so "this relieves them of the necessity and problem of research and development and by implication, therefore, of design problems arising". (7) By shipping abroad their coal, iron ore or steel,

the Soviets effectively let others grapple with the problems of processing. One implication of this is that their capacity and willingness to improve on the consumer side of things is impeded. The policy of raw-material export only helps ease the yearn for hard currency. No profits, financial or educational, are returned to domestic industry.

Such a policy in general industry indirectly affects individual industries such as that of design. Pertinent in particular to the graphic design industry is the exportation of pulp - the raw material necessary for paper and card production.

Last year a leading western forest-products consultancy predicted a 'Soviet pulp bonanza' unlike anything since the 'gold rush in the West'. (8) Urging western paper industries to take advantage of perestroika, the company advised on how to go about investment. Attention was brought to the enormous potential of the country's resources - a country where 'presently afforestation and reforestation are virtually unknown'.

Considering the Soviet Union possesses a huge 28% of the worlds total forest resources, the statistics listed demonstrate how mismanaged those assets are. The Soviets annually consume only 40kg of paper per capita compared with 160kg per capita consumed by the British and 300kg by the Finns and Americans.

For the Soviet designer, amongst others, the threat of paper shortages is a constant burden. As shortages tend to occur in phases the problem is complicated. A designer has to keep an eye on availability as well as giving consideration to the fact that a particular paper necessary for the completion of a job may not be available again for over a year. This consideration holds true for nearly all the materials he uses. Also, with varying degrees of availability, the cost of materials can rise unpredictably, often being much higher in the end than the fee quoted for the completion of a job. This is one practical reason for the lack of new packaging commissions, for example.

Determined designers put a brave face on it. Valeri Akopov, of Graphic Design Studio, the largest state run group in the Soviet Union, says "I think it makes our work more essential". We have to think two or three times about what we are doing. First: is it necessary? Second: is it possible? Our colleagues in the West realize their work with few problems".(9) Too few by implication.

In reality the consumer market offers little proof of any effective design. Even for the designer, jobs are often unrecognisable after printing, simply because only certain coloured inks or papers were available at the time of printing. Sometimes labels are not printed on time to go on the product and there are rows of jars and packs on the supermarket shelves with rough paper labels with rubber stamps to describe the contents.

The Co-operatives

President Gorbachev's primary objectives, when he took office in 1984, were to solve the nations economic problems. In 1987 he introduced reforms under the title of the 'Co-operative Movement', which is to date the most dramatic and determined step towards a market economy. Like NEP of the 1920s, this measure allowed for the setting up of private enterprise - although with restrictions on size. The implementation of these reforms reflect the recognition that money has to have a real value, not some notional value. No longer could vast amounts of money simply be moved from one column to another of an accountants ledger in a meaningless act of paperwork. It was a recognition that people needed incentive to work and that by granting them direct interest in their output this could be achieved and attitudes towards reliance on state support would change.

However, although it became legal to set up shop and to offer services (catering, tailoring and hairdressing are among the most common and successful enterprises to have sprung up), the problem was that few had the intrinsic initiative or entreprenurial spirit needed. Many that did had it killed off by mafia-type racketeers demanding protection money. Furthermore legislation has subsequently been self-contradictory, which suggests to some that the government wishes to distance itself from something so ideologically debateable. There has been a lack of back up from the government and as a result the co-operative and individual labour licence schemes have begun to diminish in significance. (10).

In 1988, Conor O'Clery, Moscow correspondent to the Irish Times, wrote that the co-op market places looked destined to becoming flooded and that prices were likely to fall to state level. He noted that the new freedom had led to a decrease in illegal trading and that the city's black market had come under more effective control. (11).

But now signs of failure in the system suggest few prospects are guaranteed by this route. For a time it had looked as though the new private enterprises would be calling on graphic designers for identity programmes and advertising. There appeared to be a chance for more diverse carefully designed projects to take root with the urban Soviet environment. Economists still hope that goods will be designed and produced, serving as a catalyst for the stagnant economy, stimulating competition and productivity. But as President Gorbachev ditches the last of his liberal advisors, so economic perestroika and the free market are still but dreams.

Nikolai Petrakov, Gorbachev's former economic advisor says "You must understand that in the Soviet Union politics always come before economics. Political problems affect what decisions are taken, and that is what is happening in this case. Nevertheless,

I believe Mr Gorbachev is a supporter of the market and the idea of democracy. But right now he's not in a position to act". (12) A delicate understatement.

Products for Export

As described previously, the ratio between domestic availability of processed raw material, and the export of unprocessed raw material is unbalanced. But so too is the difference between the quality of products produced for the domestic market and those for export.

The Soviets have allocated the best machinery and materials to the export market. For the past forty or fifty years in the USSR a sharp and strict distinction between the products destined for export and those sold on the home market has been apparent. The quality of the product for export and its packaging are superior because they have needed to be in order to compete successfully internationally and to meet the demands of the tourist trade. To a great extent this situation continues because the state, embarrassed by its deficit in its balance of international payments, and in order to earn more hard currency, has placed more emphasis on developing export quality. A visit to any Beriozka shop in Russia will enlighten one to what Soviet industry is capable of producing. These shops, the best stocked in the Soviet Union, only accept hard currency. They offer a wide selection of vodka, cigarettes, tea, chocolate, ornaments, clothing etc, all under the one roof, in true Western department-store tradition.

Comparing, for example, the cigarettes (fig 13,14) purchased in a Beriozka shop with their highstreet counterparts (fig 15-17), it is immediately obvious two oppositional standards in packaging manufacture apply. With little expense spared, the 'Trika' (ie. Sleigh) and 'Rossiiskii' (ie Russian) packs satisfy the tourist with presentable gifts for smoker friends back home. The rich

13 *Trika* ('Sleigh')and *Rossiiskii* ('Russian') cigarettes from Beriozka shop

14 *Trika* ('Sleigh') cigarettes

15 *Stolichnye* ('Capital') and *Cosmos* cigarettes

16 *Opal* cigarettes

17a,b *Kasbek* cigarettes (front and back)

colours, gold highlights and over-the-top ornamentation provide for a pastiche on pre-revolutionary Russian design, and convey that required quaint, 'traditional' look - authentic Russian memorabilia. In terms of weight and surface finish the packs are of expected international standard, although they are more likely to be preserved as ornamental souvenirs than constantly handled. In the case of 'Kasbec' cigarettes (fig 17a,b) the contrary is true. To the western sense of touch - conditioned by glossy packaging material - the dull surface here lacks the expected smoothness and erotic suppleness. The rough paper may also visually project a sense of discomfort for the Western smoker as the simplicity of design lends itself to an impoverished rather than 'classical' feel. The insipid, washed out colours extend connotations of a weak, flavourless product inside. [The contents, incidently, with their adversely proportioned filter to tobacco ratio - the offwhite hollow cardboard tube is the filter - are far from weak]

The packaging of chocolate in the Soviet Union is curiously one exception to the rule. Whether in rouble-accepting shops or in Beriozka stores, chocolate bar wrappers possess design applications that signal a pandering to Western style consumerism. Granted chocolate is considered a luxury item in the Soviet Union, but nonetheless the packaging appears as an effort at Westernization.

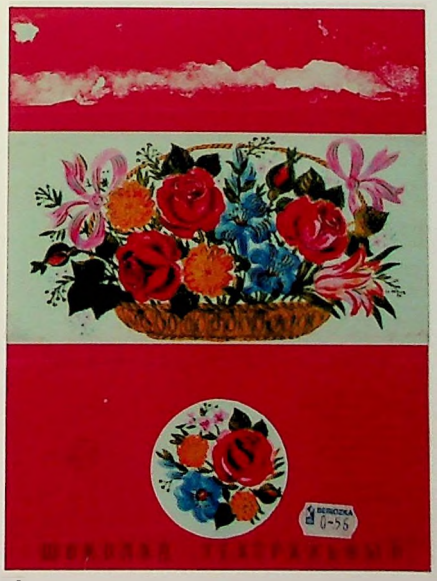
The Santa-Claus clad chocolate-bar wrapper (fig 18) is a small gem. On sale in the foyer of an opera house, this product was more likely to be purchased by Russians on a night out than tourists. It is one of the most delicate, positively moving pieces of packaging design I have come in contact with to date.

Examining the chocolate bars (figs 19-28) adorning the Beriozka shelves in mass, one can see how distinctively Russian their wrappers remain in colour and pattern and yet it is obvious they arise from deliberate commercial motives. The restrain in design and typography of the 'Schokolad Rossiiskii' (ie. Russian Chocolate) bar (fig 28) for example, compliment the luxury dark

18 Chocolate-bar wrapper

19-28 Beriozka chocolate-bar wrappers

19



20

21

22


Шоколад
апельсин

23


Шоколад изготовлен из сахара, какао бобов с добавлением сухих сливок, изюма и дробленых ореховых ядер.
МИНПИЩЕПРОМ РСФСР
Ордена Ленина
экспериментальная кондитерская фабрика
Красный Октябрь
Гост 6534-69
Москва
Масса нетто: 200 г.
Цена 3 руб.

24


Шоколад
Сливочный
Шоколад
Сливочный

25


СПОРТ
ШОКОЛАД СПОРТ
Десертный сладкий шоколад изготовлен
из сахара и какао бобов
Масса нетто 100 г
Цена 1 руб. 80 коп.

26


КОНЕК-
ГОРБУНОК
ШОКОЛАД ОРИСТЫЙ
„КОНЕК-ГОРБУНОК"

27


ШОКОЛАД
РОССИЙСКИЙ

28

chocolate inside. The print detail and rich colouring portray a delicate, sophisticated product. Market-targeting is definitely in evidence. The chunkiness of the 'Sport' bar is reflected in its wrapper design (fig 26) by its embossed elements and its bold traditionally Russian and Soviet colours - red and gold. Based on geometric simplicity the type and layout appropriately conjure a three dimentional, physical sensation. A minor classic.

This selection of chocolate packaging demonstrates a particularly wide design repertoire. The packaging of other Beriozka products does not quite reach the same high standard, yet is still superior to its highstreet equivalent (eg cf figs 29 and 30).

Beriozka wrapping paper (fig 35) reflects more realistically the cheap printing techniques employed and the poor paper quality more generally available in the Soviet Union. But the plastic carrier bags with their complex flexographically printed design (fig 36), would be viewed excessive by highstreet retailers. The A5 size receipts must be kept by tourists for custom inspection on leaving the country. A pocket full of receipts (fig 38) is a reflection of the level of bureaucracy that extends to the act of buying in the Soviet Union.

The Beriozka shops themselves are very quiet most of the day, apart from chatter at the overstaffed checkouts, and the odd intensive half-hour on the shop floor after a bus-load of practiced capitalists pulls up outside. Shopping Soviet-style is a completely different story, as we are about to see in the next chapter.

Despite six years of perestroika which has included the introduction of co-op laws, leading to a free-enterprise scheme of sorts, graphic design has not yet found a footing in Soviet industry. An industry dogged with fundamental distributional problems and complicated further by the governments suicidal economic policies.

Activity in the production of political and social posters perhaps represents a toe-hold - an intellectual input on behalf of graphic design. But any new ideas that have rubbed off into a commercial context remain in small isolated production celebrated in the pages of Reklama ad-magazine. The streets and shops continue to lack graphic vitality. While the government relinquish the country's vast raw material resources, designers are putting on a brave face and adapting to shortages. The designers and public alike despair as daily they observe the production of high-quality capital goods for the world market, as they reside in a grotesquely different world.

Consumerism has long had a dismal reputation in the Soviet Union. While to the political regime it has represented dangerous political and economic demands which cannot be met, the idea of a consumer society is a sick joke to a population that spend half the day shopping.

29a,b Souvenier matchbox set

30a,b Matchboxes

31 *Assortment* Beriozka box of tea

32 Beriozka tins of tea

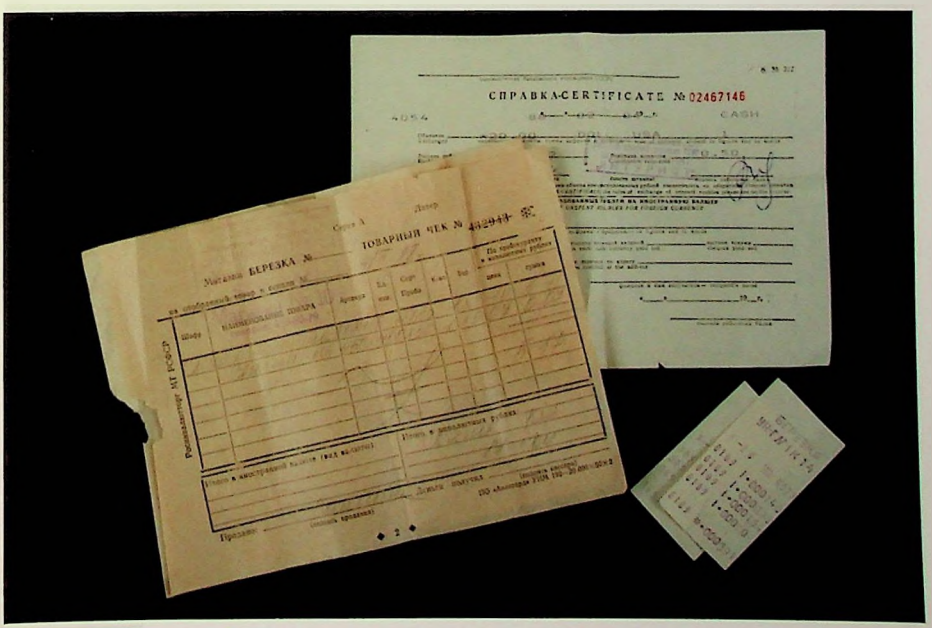
33 Souvenier doll and packaging

34 Souvenier bust of Lenin and packaging

35 Beriozka wrapping paper

36 Beriozka carrier bag

37 Beriozka promotional booklet



38 Receipts

Footnotes for Chapter 2

(1) Wooding, Fall 1989, p6

(2) Yegerov, 1989, p45

(3) Ibid

(4) Op cit (1) p9

(5) Ibid

(6) Andronov, 1991, Interview

(7) O'Meara, 1991, Interview

(8) Salonen, 1990, p30

(9) Akopov, 1987, Interview

(10) O'Meara, 1991, Interview

(11) O'Clery, 1986, p1

(12) Petrakow, 1991, Interview

Chapter 3 The Soviet Shopping Experience

The Environment - Pallid v. Utopic

Inside the Shops

CHAPTER 3: The Soviet Shopping Experience

The Environment - Pallid v Utopia

Monumental, heroic buildings of the modern Constructivist era flank the very wide streets which lead into Moscow's centre. Here, in the forty shades of grey downtown area, hordes of Muscovites stand in line for a daily average of three hours. For the Western tourist the scene suggests war-time lifestyle. The first impression is of outdated, faded shop fronts and odd, anaemic window displays.

While our shops in the West are often packed to the point of visual pollution with point of sale material, window stickers and other promotional gimics, endlessly given away by multinational companies, Soviet retailers are reconciled to stacking packs for impact. Pyramids of boxed cleaning agent may culminate in a spire of off-white cleaning towels, or sachets of blancmange may soar diagonally upward in single file on a piece of nylon wire. Dried flowers in vases, or shiny drapery are typical decorational devices, whilst clothes also fly with the aid of nylon wire.

The displays are notable to the Western first-time visitor via culture-shock, but it is easy to imagine that the Soviet consumer is even more immune to retailers' half-hearted attempts at allurement than we are in our marketing-mad environment. Soviets are only too well aware of the kudos a Western brand name can give. They are reminded of what they are missing on the high street when they see the wares of the blackmarketeers in the back streets. With advertising for Western goods now finding its way into newly erected street billboards, 'Western colour' emphasizes the drabness of Soviet surroundings. "You see a Pepsi logo in a restaurant window in Moscow and it screams at you" says Gary Burandt of Young and Rubican advertising agency. (cf fig 39) (1)

39 Pepsi label

41 Pizza Hut logo

40 Fanta lable

The style of shop-window display that prevails throughout the Soviet Union today, emerged in Moscow in the early seventies. It functioned, as a film set does, to sustain an illusion that the Soviet economy was healthily producing products, virtuous in the best up-to-date technology, in plentiful supply. The reality was that these goods were only prototypes for proposed design that had managed to escape the trade fairs. The state encouraged the development of the product proposals only as far as the trade fairs where they demonstrated Soviet ability to an international audience, but no further. Production targets were so unrealistic that the ideas only reached the shop window, not the cash desk. And even so, the products were generally poor imitations of classic Western designs. The socialist shop window began to look like a 'mini West'.

At this time odd ornamental decorations appeared in the windows so as to suggest a wide choice of goods. Lack of variety has, since then, been disguised usually by arranging two unpopular, yet readily available, products into patterns. Less desirable products are grouped in abstract patterns around a sought after display article that is not for sale.

On viewing such displays, the Western visitor, accustomed to a steady flow of new products, models and designs is struck by a feeling of emptiness or claustrophobia. His speed of visual perception is incompatible with the speed of production in the Soviet Union. The Western visual sense is as saturated as its consumer goods market. And, it is clear that the flow of new ideas and images runs from West to East. As for the Soviet citizen - frustration mounts as Western goods are pumped via the aforementioned, newly established advertising network. While such imagery percolates into the minds of the population, nothing more than obsolete imitations are available.

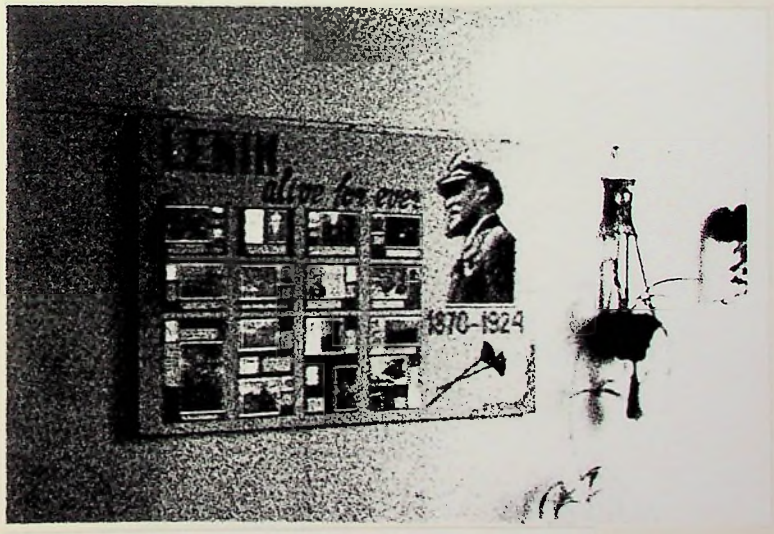
Until not so long ago promotion of a non-commercial nature did prevade the streets of Soviet cities. The onslaught of Communist Utopic symbolism and party slogans has diminished somewhat in favour of a less mythical depiction and a more realistic representation of the plight of the Soviet people. But the image of Lenin still prevails. Throughout the Soviet Union his word is invoked in almost every conceivable situation. From the school classroom to the factory floor to the badges worn by the shop assistants, his persona passes through many subtle transformations. In a playschool (fig 42) an avuncular Lenin smiles with appropriate benevolance while in nearly every Soviet public square his bronze alter-egos are stern and eternally vigilant.

The juxtaposition of such drama and power with the lackluster and pallid, indites an obstinately perverse situation in the socialist community. The irony of an impoverished planned economy is a sick joke the Soviets live with, while the spirit of Lenin looms ubiquitiously in the background. The glossiest, most dynamic graphic creations are reserved for his mainstay, (fig 44-46), but most of the people would sooner endorse a Michael Jackson t-shirt or a poster of U2. That is not to say that almost every citizen does not see Lenin's life as the model example - an inspiration to us all.

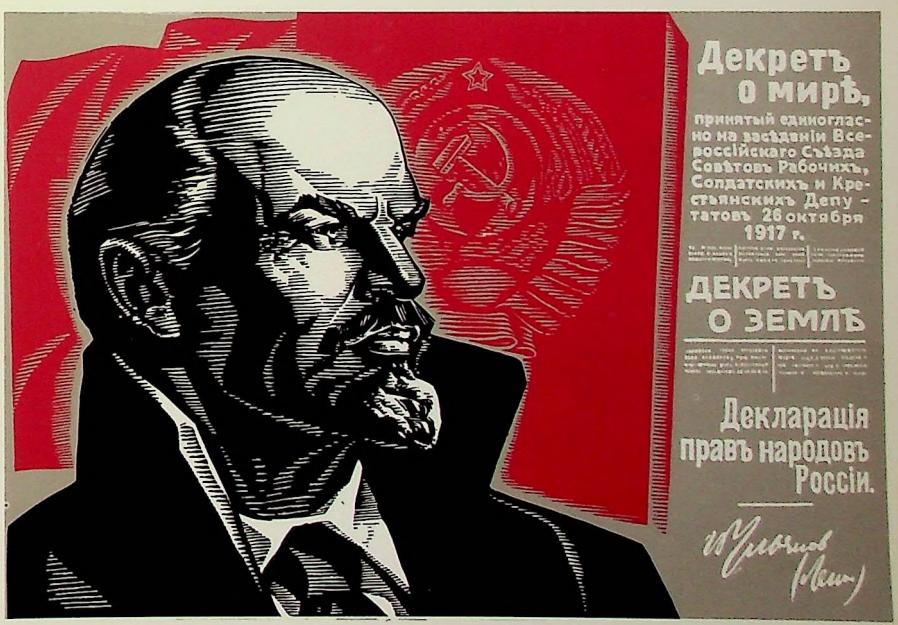
Walking in and around the public squares one is reminded of how important an element environmental graphics has been in the history of Soviet visual arts. The traditions of banner and mural design are manifest. In keeping with the scale and forms of the monumentous buildings, they serve to embelish such elements. Here colour succeeds as it is set in contrast to the concrete structures. The angular shapes are traditional in their confidence and positiveness.

The expertise in environmental graphics comes out of the Soviet practice of socio-political propaganda. Along with the travelling

42 Pre-schoolers at the Khabarovsk's Kindergarten rehersal for a pagent under the watchful eye of 'Uncle Lenin'



43 *Lenin Alive for Ever* mural in classroom of School no. 248 (06.02.'88)



Lenin greeting cards, printed in 1983 and '85 respectively

Скульптура худ. Л. Кербеля, оформление А. Щедрина
© Издательство «Плакат». Москва, 1985 г.
Изд. № 10171871. З. 5-1161. Т. 1200000. А-02416-85 г. Ц. 4 к.
Тип. изд-ва «Соц. Харківщина»
ОТПРАВЛЯТЬ ПО ПОЧТЕ ТОЛЬКО В КОНВЕРТЕ

46 Lenin Greeting Card, printed 1985

propaganda vehicles previously discussed in relation to post-revolutionary Agit-art, architecture was also strongly effected by graphic design in the 1920s. In the design of lecterns, platforms and open stages, graphic design practically merged with architecture, greatly influencing the finished structure. Many Constructivists designs for government buildings, hotels and workers' clubs incorporated words and strange graphic elements that appear striking even today.

Mural decorations of fantastic graphic strength endow the Moscow metro. The mosaics (eg fig 47) typically depict Bolshevik heroism and the plight of the righteous worker. Dating back to the early 1930s, when the underground system was being completed, the illustrations are absolutely in keeping with the sense of scale and colour around them.

The metro is a magnificant show case in its spacious architectural design and its lavish decoration of white marble, stucco, stationary painting, chandeliers and colonades. It is one of the few public places protected by law from advertisements or notices of a commercial nature. [State legislation regarding advertising is ironically scant due to former lack of necessity].

Inside the shops

Having queued past the uninspiring window displays the indoor crowd scene becomes a familiar one. This confrontation is necessary, at least, whenever a desired product has appeared in stock. Mad rushes caused by shortages have long been a consequence of the failure of the Soviet centralised economic plan to provide sufficient consumer goods.

But most Soviet consumers say they prefer shortages, rationing and queueing at state stores to paying higher free-market prices for food and other basic goods and services. The shortages cause another extreme in terms of crowd gatherings (fig 48-49). When

47 Metro mosaic

48 Empty shop

49 Empty shelves

the shelves are simply empty, deserted shops with idle workers also become a symptom of the economy.

Another problem equally pertinacious, is the near Byzantine intricacy of the act of shopping in a Soviet store. To make a purchase, for instance, customers will queue three times - to make a selection, as seen in figure 50, to pay and then to collect the purchase. The inefficiencies are often, as in this case, less a direct result of the economy, than they are of an inbred cultural tendency towards chaos.

Browsing is not a Soviet pastime. On visiting the Moscow suburban supermarket 'Tagaskii' (fig 51) (simply named after the district), one realizes the criterion for a purchase decision is not dictated by which label attracts or appeals most, nor which brand name sounds best. Labels simply give information about the contents. There is little evidence to suggest legibility or immediate product or brand identification have been design considerations. Soviet designers are certainly not constrained to having to realistically portray the contents of packs.

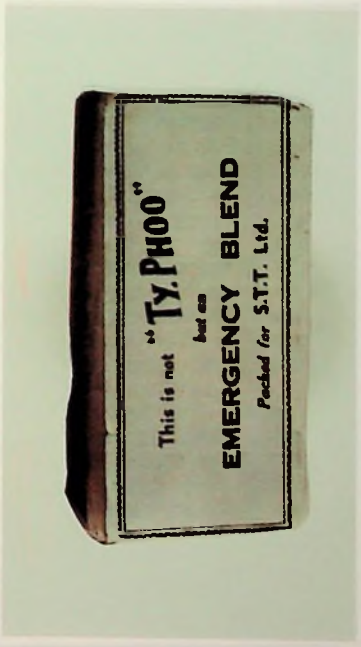
Chancing upon a rough cardboard box, devoid of any trace of aesthetic design, and bearing a crookedly pasted label of anonymous character (fig 52) one realizes the redundancy of the branding concept. The inscription reads 'Black Tea' and gives details of weight, price and a state factory number. The box recalls the thriftiness called for in the West during World War II when packaging materials and ink were scarce (fig 53). Nearby, milk is being sold in one litre brown glass bottles. To the westerner it could be mistaken for cough medicine on wholesale. Appetite value is as sparce on all the supermarket shelves.

On entering the extensive GUM department store in Moscow's red square, it is clear, judging by the few quaint-looking, graphically inept 'advertising' posters, that the range of goods is not quite so extensive. Amongst the oddly unrelated objects for sale, side by side, items such as sunglasses (fig 54) and

50 Comparing values at the Moda clothing store, Moscow

51 Tagaskii supermarket

52 Box of 'Black Tea'



53 Typhoo tea packaging during WW2

54 Sunglasses and packaging

55 Razor blades packaging

razor blades (fig 55) have packaging that looks as though it were printed with no higher technology than an aging photocopier - the ink has been diluted so much. Although typographically these two particular packs are very different from each other, they share the quality of blatant inappropriateness in this respect. The box of 100 blades employs the anonymity of a Helvetica inspired Cyrillic face (fig 63) throughout. The box belonging to the shades is adorned with a beautifully ornate typeface that recalls on art-nouveau style - but is completely inapt. The word to the right is presumably the 'brand name' (although its typeface differs from that of the 'product name' only in that it is condensed). Pronounced 'Ochki' it is just a name; it means nothing else. The word along the bottom, the 'product name', means 'eye-shading' and suggests something more in the line of cosmetics or possibly something medical. Even in collaboration with the chosen image little indication is given to the exact contents of the box. The image itself is unimaginative. Cropped in this fashion eyes usually lend themselves to being a striking visual device, but here they are only conspicuous by the absence of the product - glasses! Overall the package is typical in its unwillingness to promote or even reflect its contents.

Consumer products in the USSR, from cigarettes to sunglasses have little in common with their Western counterparts. Given the absence of competition and advertising, Soviet products feel no need to make a pitch, either by name or by design and packaging. They look clumsy and come with a built in yesteryear quality.

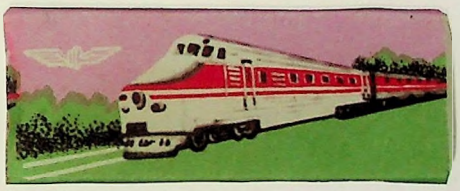
In all, the shopping experience of the average Soviet citizen is a drab and difficult one. They are a patient and long suffering people, but are now disabused. Materially worse off today than when under Brezhnev, the Soviet public now say "so much for perestroika".

The approach of an open market remains quite uncertain. On the one hand economic misery after perestroika has given the conservative left a new animation and 'demokratia' is a term long since dispensed with. On the otherhand, glasnost has allowed the

population a voice and none of the same speeches of old will silence that now. There is no turning back.

The consumer environment, as briefly mentioned before, has recently become speckled with dabs of Western style colour. The big Western companies, Pepsi, McDonalds, Pizza Hut, Kodak, Johnson & Johnson, Adidas, Ford, Colgate, Rank Xerox, B.A., ICI, Visa and Mastercard are all touting their wares right under Lenin's nose. So is this uniquely pallid environment destined to change? If so, how and when? In anticipation of great new opportunities, in the promised new commercial sector, Western graphic designers are eager to avail. The last chapter deals with this situation.

56 *Armek* waffer biscuit packaging, made by Red Front Confectionaries



57 Sugar lumps packaging

58 Beriozka vodka label

59 Vodka lable

60 Wine lable

61 Aeroflot packaging

62 Packaged lunch

Footnotes for Chapter 3

(1) Shone, 1990, p62

Chapter 4 The Last Frontier

Western Designers Moving In

Soviet Designers' Challenge

CHAPTER 4: The Last Frontier

Western Designers Moving In

In July 1990 the Design Museum in London held a seminar entitled 'Design in Eastern Europe' which aimed to educate British designers to the differences and difficulties in the newly developing market place in the East. More recently 'Design Week' featured a couple of brief articles of a cautionary nature, directed at those entrepreneurs with inclination towards setting up business in the Soviet Union. In America 'Design World' and 'Metropolis' published similar commentaries within the past year. Spectrum MultiLanguage Communications (USA), which (specialists in translation and typesetting of marketing and general business communications into all world languages) just recently released an updated version of its folder demonstrating typefaces for composition in the Cyrillic alphabet offering a choice of 55 text and display typefaces. - Clearly, Western public interest in the developments of the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc have extended to the design world.

The USSR is recognised as the largest and potentially most lucrative remaining untapped consumer market (the most recent estimation of its population was 281.7 million). With numerous manufacturing facilities and a cheaper labour force the pickings look rich for Western firms. The Western design world is asking itself 'is there a new market for our expertise?' What they discover is that there are two potential client groups. Firstly, there are the new Soviet co-op enterprises aspiring to capitalist conducts, and secondly, there are the Western companies themselves.

Advertising firms, almost by definition the ultimate capitalist by-product, are amongst these, demonstrating just how imminent and open market is perceived by Western industry.

Gerry Roberts, European General Manager at ad-agency Ogilvy and Mather says "Eastern Europe is the last frontier for us hotshot advertising agencies, like Latin American was twenty years ago and Europe fifty years ago". (1)

In November 1988, the first Western advertising agency to open offices in Moscow was Young and Rubican (Y & R). The fact that such a venture is now in Moscow is highly significant not least by way of political ramifications. It was not so long ago the Great Soviet Encyclopedia described advertising as "a means of swindling the people and foistering upon them goods frequently useless or of dubious quality". (2) Lenin himself called advertising-men 'leeches'. Now in the Soviet Union tens of large companies from McDonalds to Aer Rianta are touting their wares,as said, right under Lenin's nose. And as more try to set up joint ventures the traditional means of selling them have gone too. The big international ad-agencies are now established in offices all over the USSR.

Taking the example of how a product is marketed in the West, one can see how inappropriate and obscure it appears, having considered the Soviet environment. Detergents, for example, are sold as ecologically responsible: One brand ensures it comes from plants, another that its packaging is recyclable, another that you need only use one third the normal amount. None of this works as an advertising premise for the Soviet Union. Ironically the method that has been perfected over forty years in the West, the sophisticated soft-sell, does not work in the East. The Soviets are on the whole deeply suspicious of advertisements, as Tom Shone, writer for The European, says, "not so much because they reek of capitalism, but because in the Soviet Union the only reason they have advertised before is to try and shift products they can't get rid of, rather than try to introduce new ones". (3). What is needed is the hard sell. The product must be presented forthright by listing its function, price and whereabouts, clearly and concisely. Presently, the design work

called for is thus less creative than might have been hoped for. In addition, advertising cannot yet be considered completely viable, as there is, after all, the woeful economic burden which restricts goods from becoming widely available. It is almost cruel to tease the Soviets with goods they cannot buy. Mark Ingle of Satchii & Satchii says, "The general opinion is of frustration and anger at Western companies for coming in and putting ads [up] for products that aren't there" (4). With no real audience, Western companies have even taken to mutual back-slapping as seen from the recent billboard ad: COCA-COLA WELCOMES McDONALDS TO THE SOVIET UNION.

Eilika Emmerlich, an international vice-president of J Walter Thompson, believes that the West has a duty to open up its cornucopia, but must do so appropriately. In reference to Western poster ads in the East she says "Some of them make me shudder. They look so fake in that environment". (5) Whatever the moral obligations, advertising is in its infancy in the Soviet Union and has much to learn - but perhaps not all from its 'matured' Western counterpart.

In the short term more design opportunities exist in commercialism directed back at the Westerner. The two main avenues of demand are still in tourism and export. Although the state has a tendency to push its own native design expertise, most working co-operatives seek Western expertise. They seem to recognize that indigenous design talent lacks the experience needed to meet the changing demands. Hotel, contracts, for example, are being snapped up by overseas joint ventures partners. A case in point is Allied Lyons' commission of the British consultancy Design House who designed everything from the interiors to the graphic package of Intourist hotels.

It is a similar story in export, with foreign designers again being called on to do most of the work. Taking the range of jeans marketed under the label 'Soviet' one sees they are actually manufactured in Italy for sale throughout Europe.

Sketches for the jeans were faxed through from the Soviet Union to an Italian design team which added its 'European interpretation'. (6) In this way, Soviet design is being diluted.

FW Barker of A.D. Creative Consultants (UK) says "The Soviets are agog with the market economy, they find it hard to believe that in the UK, and even Japan, there are many businesses going bust, and that not everything in the capitalist system is as rosy as it may look from outside". He notes that previously the only meaningful measure of success in Soviet industry was meeting production quotas, and warns that there are no professional auditing firms or other such practices. (7)

The Soviets have their own way of doing business and Westerners must comply. A level of bureaucracy, unlikely to have been encountered in the West before, is an element designers face. Jeremy Myerson of Design Week described a Soviet contract he had before him in a recent article. (8) The full title to this contract, in typical Soviet-speak was 'Statute on Remuneration of Non-staff Artists and Photographers Supplying Graphic Arts and Photographic Works for Publication'. All lines of business in the Soviet Union have a comprehensive statute setting down the standard fees for 'everything under the sun'. This was the one for graphic design. It detailed such information as the fee to be expected from a bookjacket, for example - 200 roubles (just over IRf200). Photographs of animals, birds or insects fetch 50 roubles, while an educational chart rates as high as 300 roubles. Everything from how to commission and what to expect of the designer is written in black and white - fees for technical illustration, for instance, rise according to whether the job is of 'medium complexity, complex, or highly complex'. While such comprehensive standardization may be seen as overbearing by bureaucratic, Myerson sees it alternatively as perhaps being a brave attempt to map and organise a commercial area whose Western counterpart is at times fraught with free-for-all on fees.

Pencil Design, are a group who were invited to work in the Soviet Union by a client of another British company with a toehold in the market already. Graphic designer, with the group. Martin Nunn is quoted to have remarked that by bucking the system his company has managed to earn higher fees that those decreed by the Soviet authorities. (9) Presently the design group is inundated with commissions from divisions of the Soviet Ministry of Merchant Marine. Nunn has observed that the Soviet companies are sharpening up their marketing act. Design briefs are increasingly coming from domestic state-owned businesses facing privatization, as well as from Western companies moving in.

Also in great demand is the work Brendan Lynch does for Aer Rianta in the Soviet Union. He is head of the Retail Display team for the company, and has on occasion worked in conjunction with Soviet teams on Soviet-to-Soviet commissions. In a personal interview, he told me, "The Soviets have reacted tremendously to our work...we have had their department stores approaching us...asking where we get our stuff...our ideas". (10) Most of Mr Lynch's time is taken up conducting the window displays of some fourteen different Beriozka shops throughout the Soviet Union. Often his team will bring about changes in the packaging of the products they must display: "If the buyers found [products were] very badly packaged and wouldn't put them on their stands, we would then go in and help", he says. The bureaucracy encountered in trying to make such design changes is extensive, and very often a member of Mr Lynch's graphics team will need to oversee a printing job from start to finish so as to ensure something of the intended effect is achieved.

Referring to his own particular area, window display, Mr Lynch says that, more often than not, a graphic panel, decorated with spanning ribbons will be used by Soviet retailers.

In the absence of products text becomes their medium, but this hardly amounts to a developed design discipline. Nothing like the window-graphic art produced in the 1920s looks remotely possible.

The Soviet consumer market, the largest under-developed remaining in the 'civilized world', was once firmly closed to outsiders. Although with conditions, it is now most certainly open. Understandably, revenue reaped from a developed domestic taste for good design in consumer goods is something that the Soviet Union would rather keep for itself. But how practical is it to expect increased domestic demand?

Soviet Designers' Challenge

The realities facing Soviet designers today are, as demonstrated, daunting. Commercial graphic design does not exist as is understood by the Western sense of the word. There are no 'boutiques' or free-lance designers offering their services to industries. Instead, most factories have their own in-house person or team responsible for repro-printing facilities. The typically anonymous look of Soviet packaging of 'promotion' is due in part to the subordinated position such a 'designer' holds. Again, opportunities in real commercially biased design, lie in the export and tourism industries. Otherwise the more intellectualised field of poster-art is available for contention.

An attempt at the re-integration of graphic design (along with other disciplines), into industry has been made recently by the new society of Soviet Designers (SSD). This semi-entrepreneurial and self-governing professional organization was established in April 1987 as an alternative to Vriite, the 'State Design System'. Whereas Vriite had been mostly industrial design orientated, SDD carries a large umbrella which encompasses graphic design also.

The new society provides opportunities for designing to work outside the previous constraints, often directly for industry. With several specific schemes in mind the SSD plan to provide further impetus on both sides of the design/industry relationship. But it remains unclear as to how these schemes

will be funded - no financial support is provided by the government for SDD's work. Initially support was given to establish special studios around the country. These studios, still in existence, operate more like consulting offices but with a definite socialist/communist orientation. A studio operates like a consultancy in the respect that they offer their services to industry and some remuneration is made, be it a fee or a royalty. To date, there are twenty-five design studios, six of which specialize in graphics. Such studios must build on that versatility so characteristic of Soviet designers. As JoAnn Wooding, American designer, wrote "The Soviet designer had both a broader and a more limited view of design than we do in the West. The Soviet view draws fewer demarcations between art and design and the designer can seemingly move between sculpture, heavy equipment and women's fashion with great dexterity and few concerns". (11). Indeed the most interesting work in current Soviet graphics, be that poster art, book illustration, or commercial design for export, is created by people who are not graphic designers but work in related fields such as fine art, architecture, and interior design.

To a great extent this diversified creative atmosphere with its highly variagated population, is a result of a deunified design educational system. Indirect governmental support by way of provision for design training is also lacking here. There are only a handful of small departments that teach graphic design and they are buried in much larger institutions, of not entirely related character. For example, book designers are trained in a 130-person department that is part of the printing industry's huge engineering school, Moscow Polygraphitchesky Institute.

It is not by chance that the more interesting books (or at least those being noted in Western magazines) are usually designed by people who never studied there (eg fig 65 a-i). Graduates of such institutions, in turn, often find their way into the fine arts, teaching, or perhaps something like exhibition design. Some join one of a handful of state run design houses which tend

to be very large and mechanically serve the limited demands industry make of them.

One such design house is the Graphic Design Studio, though it is the exception in so far as that it services the 'quality design' market aswell. Situated in the heart of Moscow, near Pushkin Square, for the past twenty years, it has by far the largest professional team of graphic designers in the Soviet Union - some two hundred. They deal with every sort of commission that comes their way, usually a 'casual isolated' one, sometimes one destined for widely international consumption. Currently they are commissioned by some of those Western companies wishing to advertise to the Soviet people.

The group's main claims to fame include the winning of the Grand Prix of the Graphic Design Biennale in Brno in 1986, and before that, the designing of the pictograms for the 1980 Moscow Olympics (fig 64).

Recently the Studio redesigned corporate identity for two Soviet companies, Sudioimport and Stroymaterialintorg. Such undertakings reflect a move towards Westernization both in the design results and in the very fact that two industrial firms should see it necessary to revitalise their image.

Designers V Akopov, V Dyakonov and R Guseynov started right at the beginning with this job. They proposed name changes for the companies. In true pop-culture fashion the original multisyllabic titles were reduced to 'Sudo'and 'Strom'.

Valeri Akopov, who led the design work on the 'Sudo' job, says in an interview with Polish arts magazine Projekt there is a new approach in his field of graphic design which reflects a recognition of the realities of their nation and its relationship to the world at large. There is a new awareness amongst designers that they have a "role to shape the visual environment of the people" (12) and that they should contribute new values and raise the prevailing aesthetic standards. However, he points

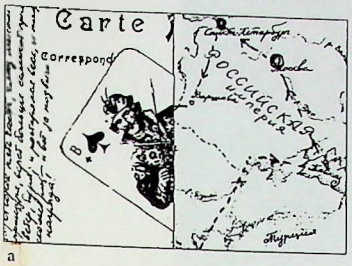
out, that not enough has changed in the Soviet design world. Too few artists themselves are aware of the "actual mission of graphic design". They still subscribe to the accepted design language instead of initiating their own precedents. The result is that society goes visually uneducated, absorbing "awkward lettering, incompetent drawing [and] dirty colour. These cannot be switched off the way a TV set is when a programme is bad. They are with us everywhere whether we want it or not".

The Graphic Design Studio's portfolio features much work executed for export and tourism. Displayed proudly are the package designs for tinned-food exports (fig 66,67) and fruit juice labels for quality Beriozka destined produce (fig 68,69).

63 Helvetica '85, designed by Anotij Ivanovic Kudrjavcev, published in Reklama, 1985

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOP
QRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrst
uvwxyz
АБВГДЕЖЗИЙКЛМН
ОПРСТУФХЦЧШЩЪ
ЫЬЭЮЯЁ
абвгдежзийклмнопрс
туфхцчшщъыьэюяё
1234567890

64 Pictograms for the 1980 Moscow Olympic games, designed by the GraphicDesign Studio, Moscow



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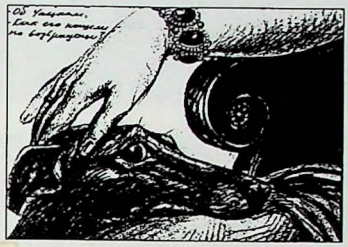

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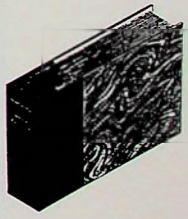
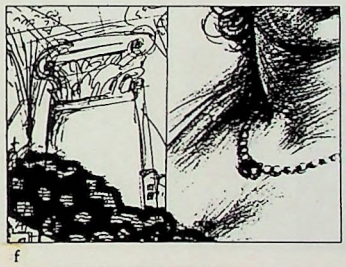
i



e



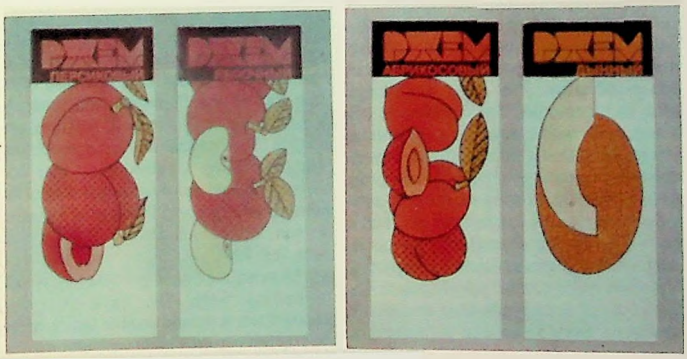
f

g

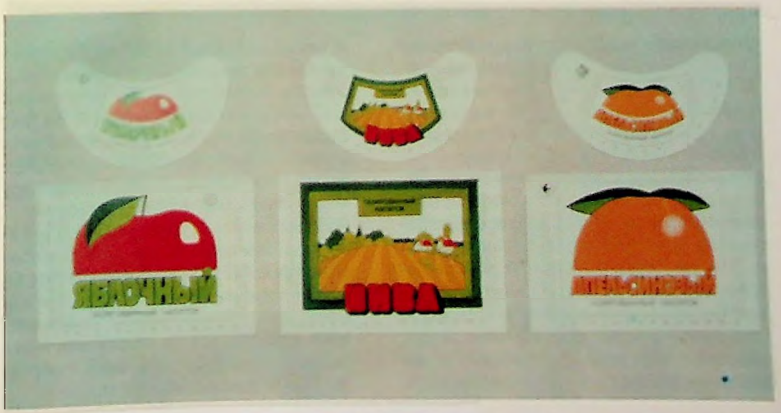
h

65a-i Illusrations and box for *The Golden Notebook* , Tanya Arzamasova, Lev. Evzovich, Eugene Svyatsky.

66,67 Tinned food lables, designed by K. Ivanov, GDS, 1984



68 Fruit juice labels, designed by K. Sukhanov, GDS, 1987



69 Fruit juice lables, designed by S. Logvinov, GDS, 1986

Footnotes for Chapter 4

(1) Tom Shone, April 1990, p61

(2) Op: cit pg62

(3) Ibid

(4) Winston Fletcher, 29 October 1990, p8

(5) Geraldine Bedell, 4 July 1990

(6) Design, March 1990, p46

(7) F W Barter, 30 November 1990

(8) Jeremy Myerson, 23 November 1990

(9) Ibid

(10) Brendan Lynch, Interview in Dublin, 5 December 1990

(11) Wooding, 1989, p161

(12) Akopov, 1987, Interview

Conclusion

CONCLUSION

> Socialism is unthinkable without a planned state-run organisation, summoning millions of people to strict adherence to a uniform standard in the production and distribution of products.(1)

With this postulate Lenin bound socialism inseperably to state organization. However after seventy years of centralized government control the curtain has been lifted and the irony of a 'planned economy' in miserable condition, has been highlighted. Clearly collectivisation is not conjusive to maximum production.

The Soviet economy is one where there is no incentive for employees to work or managers to manage. Until the factories, farms and shops of the Soviet Union are in the hands of the people who have direct interest in their output, the quality and quantity of goods available to the consumer will continue to decline.

Against the general background of the Soviet Union's economic situation, design and even its most serious efforts, seem futile. It is hard to find reasons to design new products and packaging when no-one can buy the old ones. To most Soviets the very notion of a commercial graphic designer must seem confusing, if not superfluous.

Long neglected, Soviet graphic design may become revitalized in this time of glasnost and perestroika if it can help bolster the failing economy. Its future depends to a great degree on whether it will be able to encourage positive change in that economy. Packaging, display and advertising, new kinds of merchandising, still little known in the Soviet Union, may be called upon to play a part in the activities of the new free-enterprises - an inkling of hope for the co-operative system still exists. The stimulation of competition in the economy is the element needed to bring about industrial productivity.

Commercial artistic productivity would prosper within such novel conditions. If manufacturers were to begin producing the much-desired consumer goods and materials, the escape to design would assume an entirely different meaning. It would no longer signify a marginalized, defiant existence but would gradually come to offer a legitimate, private, expressive livelihood within the nascant values of pluralistic Soviet society. The overall picture of Soviet design, that vast anonymous void with its colourful margins, would then turn into a diversified patchwork of personal creativity.

It would be arrogant and presumptuous to predict the future of consumer orientated design. But it is unlikely that the development of simple, unpretentious, pragmatic designs will continue in the Soviet Union, once the economic problems are curbed, and design is accepted as a viable participant in the march.

The question as to whether they will emulate Western ideas or set new precedents is on the mind of the international design world. So far, judgements have been drawn from the traditionally recognised posters, and reactions have varied from 'mixed' to 'wonderful'. In place of the unique symbolism, and other qualities that made Soviet graphic design stand out against all other schools, elements of Polish poster design, Swiss typography and American expression are evident in contemporary work. Some may consider this a loss of national authenticity and distinctiveness, a high price to pay for reaching 'world standards'. But many Soviet designers would argue that they are only the beginning; that time is needed to bring their own intents on national identity to fruition. Akopov admits that at this stage the percolation of ideas from other schools of graphic design is evident and argues that "in design, we may speak about the crossbreeding of mutually enriching ideas, which has raised the functionality of our design tastes".

Considering the public's preoccupation with all objects Western, it is credible that a certain amount of Western-stylism will develop. There will always be designers who mimic, especially in the socialist state where such practice is authorized by the government. But potential should not be underestimated, nor should expectation be limited to the field of poster art.

Possibilities lie in a wider cultural sense. The consumer environment in the Soviet Union may form foundations of a new moral simplicity on which the country can shape its own commodity identity. As mentioned in conjunction with pre-revolutionary times, the longer developments are delayed, the more rapidly they progress when finally set in motion. The Soviets might well be expected to take further those theoretical elements currently being debated in the West, namely that a shift should be made away from surplus and overproduction, that a 'new modesty' should be sought. In the West concern for the environment and new technology are combining to produce a new simplicity in the digital age, in which mobility and variety are simply taken for granted. In the Soviet Union aspects of this debate may coincide with that long held unremitting affirmation of the ethically negative characteristics of the 'consumer society', to produce new precedents in the next millenium.

Although divorced from their docrinaire socialist context, such ideas are inbred and will be accomodated in the newly developing national identity. It is indeed plausible that Western capitalist design will borrow from the East. One may suspect that this situation exists already. The unplanned and arbitary design 'decisions', for which paradoxically a planned economy provides more scope, are providing, I'm sure, inspiration for Design Punk. In a related way Soviet commercial design has prompted my personal interest. Flaws in the design and production of small mass-produced packagings have indeed prompted this discertation.

If memories of pallidity can be vivid and subsequently inspiring, then my interest may be explained by juxtaposition of context. The small collection of objects and their packaging which I brought back from a visit to Russia, are a little world onto their own when examined in Western surroundings. That world is exciting, in one respect, by virtue of contrast. In its correct environment the aesthetics of commodities are of no particular significance to the Soviet citizen. To the Western visitor they are still part of the whole queer time-warp. In his own environment the Westerner is inundated with visual stimuli. Large manufacturing companies are fighting for his attention, all the time raising his visual immunity levels. Soviets, by contrast, find their environment uninteresting and joyless.

Hope for the Soviet consumer is linked with the co-operative system working and the economy sorting itself out. The realization that all advances are interconnected is just recent - formally it was understood only as abstraction. These uncertain hopes will take some time to be fulfilled. In the meantime, in the West, capricuos endulgements such as mine, into the world of Soviet consumerism may be permitted. And hopes for a fresh contribution to the design world may be anticipated.

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