

The Visual Language of Photomontage in the Works of El Lissitzky

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El Lissitzky's talents diversified into many artistic fields including graphic design, drawing and photography, making him one of the most important artists in the avant-garde field. The theoretical and visual works of Lissitzky presented to us during his short life encompass various styles facilitating the use of technologies, including the use of photomontage. This article concentrates on analysing the artist's works in the 20th century, by reading his theoretical texts published in the avant-garde magazines of the period and through analysis of his visual works. Based on the results, the diversity of visual messages and speeches is highlighted in his works, specifically through the use of photomontage techniques.

Key words: *El. Lissitzky, Visual language, Photomontages, Collage, Photos, Posters, Books, magazines.*

Introduction

Avant-garde artists were captivated by the idea of the expansion of art into everyday life. All these isms (Suprematism, Constructivism) were transferred to design, and in book graphics this is exactly about how Lissitzky portrays his art.

Together with Kazimir Malevich, Lisitsky organised art workshops in Vitebsk, which were called UNOVIS on the Newspeak of the Revolution, which meant "The affirmation of the new in art." The manifesto of the community was the brochure "Suprematism" by K. Malevich, published in Vitebsk in 1920. At the morphological level, this expansion is combined with a revival of pictoriality, which, however, is accompanied by peculiar "precautions" expressing an ambivalent attitude towards it and which is fully felt in the photomontage structure. This is because constructivist artists seek to rethink visualisation in

the spirit of the concept of life-building, genetically going back to understanding a work of art as a self-explaining object. Such an object refers to external reality not as an object of the image, but as its material. In the language of semiotics, we can say that such a work is not iconic, but instead a symbol of the objective, material world. Victor Margolin, design historian and others, conducted considerable analysis of El Lissitzky's role in produced significant experiments, the main objective of which is to reach the masses directly.

The Purpose of the Work: This article aims to understand how photography was incorporated into the work of the Russian artist El Lissitzky in the diverse areas of presentation (photomontage, posters and illustrated magazines) and how El Lissitzky was able to create significant visual discourses within the posters and magazines, by using the photomontage technique.

The Relevance of Research: Research devoted to analysing the artist's work, while also being a comprehensive study of the various language tools used in it. The importance of the study is also determined by the increased public interest in types of photomontage techniques and the effect of Lissitzky on modern design.

Materials and Methods: To study the techniques used in the artist's works, 5 of his works were selected, in which he used various techniques, these pieces created in different periods of the 20th century.

Results and Discussions: Although the Russian artist and architect El Lissitzky is widely recognised as an abstract painter, in his 20-year career he has produced more works on paper than on any other medium. His production is extensive both in the number of works and also in means of production. He produced drawings, paintings, architectural projects, graphic pieces for posters, books, magazines.

The ideas of Kazimir Malevich had a decisive influence on the formation of the creative personality of Lazar Lissitzky. Malevich's new style inspired El Lissitzky in painting - Suprematism. The non-objective form enthralled the artist so much that he joined the Unovis group (approvers of the new art) and began working with Malevich. However, the role of Lissitzky in this process of interaction was not limited to his creative and theoretical works.

He took an active part in complex creative associations such as UNOVIS. It was the complexity of Lissitzky's artistic work that enabled him to play a significant role in the difficult and controversial period of the early 20s when new architecture and design were born in the process of interaction between various arts. "Lissitzky was fond of Suprematism, where he began to work based on constructivism and Suprematism, synthesising them in his



style: he created his system of puns - projects for approving the new. He came up with these words as a universal system for building the world, from which one could get anything.

In the early years of Soviet power, Lissitzky also acted as a theorist, substantiating his understanding of the process of interaction of the left movements of art and architecture. El Lissitzky, an essential artist of the Russian Revolution, became known as a constructivist who advocated the use of art as a tool for social transformation.

The first example of photomontage in the Soviet vanguard should be considered the work of Gustav Klutsis in "Dynamic City" (1919). The analogue and, possibly, the prototype of the "Dynamic City" are the abstract Suprematist paintings by El Lissitzky - the so-called prouns.

The similarity is reinforced by the inscription made by Klutsis on his photo montage: "Look from all sides" - a kind of user manual, indicating that the picture does not have fixed spatial coordinates. Lissitzky accompanied his pieces with the same recommendations, following the special quality of their spatial structure, which the French critic Yves Alain Bois defines as "radical reversibility" (Bois, 1992).

Buchloh understands photomontage as a transitory landmark between modernism as a critique of representation conventions (especially in constructivism), and the need to build iconic representations for a new audience of the masses, since modernist material self-referentiality (due to collage) does not it is completely abandoned. The image produced in the photomontage procedure turns to the mass-produced image (Buchloh, 1984).

With the Russian Revolution in 1917, combined with the ideals of constructivist and suprematist art, the generations formed by this type of publication found themselves able to use this latent energy for the production of books that had as one of their objectives, the diffusion of the revolutionary ideals of the establishment of a new, more just and egalitarian society all over the world. For Lissitzky, this was at first a new artistic means of designing the book. According to the artist, Russia was the most favourable environment for the establishment of the new book, since approximately 1908, almost all poetry books published in the country contained collaborations made by painters. The poems and illustrations were handcrafted on the same lithographic plate and were aimed at the general public, not the elite.

With this, the artist intended that the development of the action in the book would happen in a similar way to that of the cinema, generating a tactility of the reader's experience when moving it in space and time. The artist believed that the great book of the future would be formed with the most striking posters produced by the revolutionary process. El Lissitzky's innovations in the field of book design relate to montages, both through typographic means and imagery. The artist states: Up to the present moment, there has not been any type of

representation as entirely understandable for all people like photography. Thus, we are faced with a book form in which the representation is primary and the secondary alphabet (Armstrong, 2009).

We begin to understand the artist's claim that photography emerged from the exhaustion of Gutenberg's movable types. Lissitzky defends the existence of two types of writing: one that contains a symbol for each idea, the hieroglyph, and another with symbols for sounds, that is, letters. If the symbolic structure of the hieroglyph is understood, whether, by a Chinese, German or American, he can visually understand, without pronunciation, any type of hieroglyphic language. The hieroglyph is, therefore, international in its power, different from the geographical limitations of writing in letters. Within this utopian project of establishing a universal language, letters would become obsolete, and so would books, being exclusively plastic and representational. Thus, the book of the future will be a hybrid and will have universal reach (Armstrong).

During the 1920s, the Soviet government embraced film and photography as tools to spread its message to a mostly illiterate population. In this context, Lissitzky made radical photomontages, such as this work, which he described as fotopis (painting with photographs).

Runner in the City (Record) is constructed entirely from images by other photographers (Tupitsyn, 1991). Made when Lissitzky was working with members of the Association of New Architects (ASNOVA) on a commission for a sports complex in Moscow, the photomontage combines images in quasi-cinematic effect: a runner, cut out from an unknown publication; a track and hurdle; and a prolonged double exposure of New York's Broadway theatre district at night, shot by Lissitzky's architect friend KnudLönberg-Holm and previously published in Erich Mendelsohn's 1926 album *Amerika* (Mendelsohn, 1926). The artist -wanted the two- to blend into each other; he, therefore, reproduced the two, collected the negatives in the enlarger and exposed the two at the same time onto photographic developing- out the paper (Figure. 1)

Figure 1. El. Lissitzy, Runner in the City, 13.1 × 12.8 cm, 1926, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.



Combining the images by subsequent printing on printing paper, as was the case with other montages. It is interesting to note that for the version owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, appears to have assembled the two negatives differently (Runner).

He created a multilayer image from several photographs when printing, obtaining the depth of the frame due to the influx and intersection of the images. In another version of this work, which is not included here, he cut the print into strips to expand the print and create an impression of an elongated time. However, in any case, the picture has a stimulating and dreamy feeling of energy.

"The Constructor", one of the most famous photographic works of the 1920s, a photomontage in which, Lissitzky presented himself as a kind of visual engineer, with a picture of his hand drawing a circle that lay over his shimmering eye. This work from 1924 not only seems to summarise the fascination of engineers for the industry in this decade, but also their hopes to change the world through revolutionary art and design. The core of New Vision photography

is clearly expressed in this image, which puts the act of seeing at the centre of the scene. Lissitzky's hand, which holds a compass, overlays a shot of his head that explicitly highlights his eye: The perception, which he expressed, passes through the eye and is transferred to the hand and through it to the tools of production. The image, designed from six different exhibitions, unites Lissitzky's personality as a photographer (eye) and image creator (hand) into a single likeness. Lissitzky rejected the idea that direct photography provides a single, unmediated truth, he held that montage instead, with its layering of one meaning over another, impels the viewer to reconsider the world. It thus marks a conceptual shift in the understanding of what a picture can be (Figure. 2).

Figure 2. El. Lissitzky, Self-Portrait (The Constructor), gelatin silver print, image: 19.5×21.4 cm, sheet: 41.7×41.6 cm, 1924.



When Lissitzky described himself as "The Constructor", he had been a leading figure of the idealistic and energetic art scene that emerged in the Soviet Union in the decade after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. He began in 1919 to paint works with the non-objective forms and dynamic relationships of Suprematism. In the works, he called "Prouns", which means Project for the Creation of a "New Art", he explored his theories about the interface between architecture and painting.

Instead, the focus is on other aspects of his life and work, in particular his innovative photomontages from the early 1920s, his exhibition designs and above all, his personal

snapshots and letters to his colleagues. The result is a complete image of the artist rather than of his art.

However, art shows Lissitzky's ability to synthesise various influences in difficult new works. Many avant-garde artists were fond of photo collages in the 1920s and 1930s. However, then the possibilities of photography for the artist expanded, and in 1928 Lissitzky at his famous exhibition "Press" uses photography as a new artistic tool in exhibition design - with photographic panels and active photo montage. He created a multilayer image from several photographs when printing, obtaining the depth of the frame due to the influx and intersection of the images.

Lissitzky spent much of the 1920s and 30s working on international exhibitions to promote Russia abroad, much of which was in his trademark photomontage and constructivist style. This was notably seen in the Pressa exhibition in Cologne in 1928 and the Film and Photography (FiFo) exhibition in Stuttgart in 1929. It seems that his only involvement with the Russian exhibition of book and graphic design, theatre and photography in Zurich in 1929 was this advertising poster. The poster contains a striking photograph of two joyful Russian youths, one male and one female, who have been partially merged so that they share a central eye (the original silver print is now in the Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg Halle). The lower half of the image derives from Lissitzky's exhibition stands from the Polygraphic Exhibition held in Moscow in 1928 (figure.3). A rare version of this poster, without the secondary red printing, which coloured in the letters of "USSR" and "Ausstellung" and the column on the left-hand side; the only feature that does not appear without the red printing is Lissitzky's logo in the bottom left-hand corner (a white "el" should be left blank by the red printing, between the black printed "Lis" and "sitzky", and in some copies, the imprint "Gebr. Fretz AG Zürich" also appears). According to Ribalta, the photomontages present in El Lissitzky's exhibitions come from a direct influence of the experimental practices of Soviet cinema concerning juxtapositions and simultaneity of different times (Ribalta, 2009).

Figure 3. El. Lissitzy, USSR. Russische Ausstellung, poster for the Russian Exhibition in Zurich, 1929



Propaganda materials were an important part of World War II. From the first days of the advance of the Nazi army, propaganda posters appeared on the streets of Soviet cities, designed to raise the morale of the army and labour productivity in the rear, such as the propaganda poster "Everything for the Front, Everything for the Victory!" (Figure. 4).

Figure 4. El. Lissitzky, poster "Everything for the Front, Everything for the Victory!", 1941-1942, 89.2×58.8 cm, Art Museum Moritzburg, Halle.MOIIG12002, Photo: Saxony-Anhalt Cultural Foundation



Lissitzky used the method of photomontage. The poster is addressed to the workers of the enterprises of the Soviet country with the words: "Let's get more tanks, anti-tank rifles and guns, aeroplanes, guns, mortars, shells, machine guns, rifles!". In the centre of the poster are the faces of the workers - men and women, there are beneath a flying aeroplane and a moving tank, the white halos around the plane and the tank he pasted on the surface to make the pieces more explicit and are understood individually, followed by the city. In this poster, the central part of the composition is not highlighted due to the bright colour, but rather because the background is saturated with rich red, on which the appeal and slogan are very clearly visible. Through this poster, the artist wanted to say that the liberation of the country and the approach of victory depended on labour achievements and the amount of necessary military equipment manufactured and delivered to the front.

El Lissitzky's arrival at SSSR on Stroiike revolutionised his design, which until then was limited to the organisation of photographs based on the conjunction with texts. Lissitzky's innovations in his advertising exhibitions were essential to the artist's invitation to join the



periodical, in which he will adapt the visualities and narratives of his exhibitions. Edition 10, 1932, refers to the inauguration of the hydroelectric and Dnipro dam, and was the first under the coordination of El. Lissitzky, who played an active role in monitoring the work of the magazine's photographers and editors in person.

The artist uses in the first editions the same strategies as his publications of the 1920s, continuing and expanding the sequential narrative presented, for example, in about two squares (1922) and the use of icons as in the experimental 'For the voice' (1923), by Vladimir Mayakovsky, both books were designed by Lissitzky. For the issue of the magazine in question, the artist creates a continuous narrative flow inspired by cinematographic diegesis as a means to represent the modern world. The cover of the edition is made from a photograph of the plant at night at the time of its inauguration. On the back cover, Lenin's phrase is printed in red, which is the central motto of the entire edition: "Communism is the Soviet Government plus the electrification of the whole country (Communism, 1997)". The magazine begins with a series of photomontages and photographs showing the first achievements of the five-year plan.

Lissitzky's photomontages on the dam and the hydroelectric plant had a heroic character, and the juxtaposition emphasised extreme contrasts of scale, giving the scenes an aspect of grandeur (Figure. 5). The artist blurred the boundaries between the photographic parts of the montages, making the appearance of the images more realistic.

Figure 5. El. Lissitzy, photo montage for magazine SSSR on Stroike. Edition 10, 1932. Spherot Foundation



This highly rhetorical visual narrative will mark the structure of the next magazines under Lissitzy's responsibility. During the 1930s, the emphasis on the industry was strengthened to transmit to the population a developmental conception of national unity and well-being. In this context, El Lissitzy begins to develop a narrative that emphasises the strong political and ideological aspect of the journal, which relates historical events to contemporaries through the frequent use of contrasts of scale, sequentiality and the precise arrangement of images on the pages. Margolin understands that these issues were already present, more concisely and experimentally, in the artist's first books, but it is in SSSR at Stroike that this visual narrative language presents greater grandeur, establishing a new level of narrative construction that Margolin will call "epic style"

This new style was characterised by its historical sweep and by how it gathered large amounts of visual information, mainly photographs, photomontages, drawings, paintings and maps in a coherent structure. It was also marked by visual devices, such as heraldic emblems, banners and other perks that gave dignity or nobility to the theme. This style was

characterised both by a sense of visual flow that conveyed the diversity of a region, presenting unique iconic images, events and metaphors that characterised it (Margolin, 1996).

El Lissitzky was influenced at first, by both socialism and Suprematism, he produced an extensive artistic work marked by the desire for a better society. Such production was permeated by collective and transformative thinking that emerged in his first constructivist proposals, including the use of photomontages as a means of information and culminating in the graphic projects of the Soviet propaganda magazine SSSR on Stroike. According to Margolin, El Lissitzky was one of the creators of the realistic socialist style that would become essential not only in the magazine but in official Soviet art, although he was also able to apply experimental resources from the Russian avant-garde.

We thus perceive how the narrative emerges from design, showing how the Soviets saw powerful photography. The analysis of the texts raised here shows the importance of El Lissitzky in the uses of photography that go beyond the domain of art and seek to reach the great masses. Influenced by the growing mass culture, the artist started to use his resources to spread his ideas. Realising the impossibility of traditional art communication with the masses, exemplified by easel painting, El Lissitzky fragments and reconstructs the photographs, creating a striking visual and narrative discourse. It thus shows itself as an important contributor not only to the use of photography in books and exhibitions (which will become expressive in contemporary art in recent decades) but also to the rupture process of modern art, as Buchloh points out (Buchloh, 1984).

It is important to understand the path of this rupture of a universalising order that begins with constructivist abstractions (beginning a thought of democratising art in Lissitzky), passes through the use of suprematist symbols (which we can relate to the hieroglyphs that Lissitzky comments) and finally arrives at photography, the main medium used by the artist in the last decade of his life. Lissitzky shows that he does not believe in an evolutionary aspect of art, but in the exhaustion of technical and artistic possibilities marked by its expressive uses in society.

Conclusion

Without wanting to dwell on prophecies, we can see how innovative the artist's thinking was, which, seems to affect our perception of art and mass culture even today. The main goal of his entire career, the desire to remove the viewer from a supposed passive state of contemplation concerning the exposed work of art and put it in a more critical and active situation. Thus, to recognise El Lissitzky's contributions, both practical and theoretical, is to reinstate him as a fundamental thinker of 20th-century art that has seen its limits constantly blur with mass culture.



A distinctive feature of Lissitzky's method of work is the ability to synthesise different styles and artistic techniques and transfer them to various spheres of art and human activity. His activities influenced the development both of the Russian and European avant-garde including photomontage and collage as a visual language to deliver messages to the target audience, where photomontages combined with texts start to create compelling and persuasive ideological discourses.

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