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## Totalitarian Visual “Monologue”: Reading Soviet Posters with Bakhtin

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# Totalitarian Visual “Monologue”: Reading Soviet Posters with Bakhtin

Ekaterina V. Haskins & James P. Zappen

*Contemporary scholarship has noted Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s apparent animosity toward rhetoric. Bakhtin’s distinction between monologue and dialogue helps to explain his view of rhetoric, which is both hostile and receptive—hostile to monologic rhetoric but receptive to a dialogic rhetoric that is responsive to others. This article reads Bakhtin’s account of monologue and dialogue as a reaction to the pervasive totalitarian visual rhetoric of the Soviet state. Drawing on Bakhtin’s descriptions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses and various kinds of double-voiced discourse—parody, satire, and polemic—the article analyzes the workings of Soviet visual rhetoric as both monologic and potentially dialogic and recovers the various forms of otherness displaced by this rhetoric.*

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Soviet Russia offers a particularly dramatic instance of totalitarian rhetoric, vividly captured in the poster images that appeared in the period immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and proliferated throughout the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>1</sup> These poster images were printed and distributed in the hundreds of thousands with totals for the entire period well into the millions (Bonnell, *Iconography* 3–7; White 119–130). Along with party slogans and news accounts, these images proclaim the achievements of the Soviet industrialization and collectivization efforts, extol the rewards of Soviet citizenship, and praise Soviet leadership in the person of Comrade Stalin. They simultaneously denounce the Soviet state’s enemies—the capitalists abroad and the “wreckers”

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<sup>1</sup>Bonnell, *Iconography*, “Peasant Woman,” “Representation”; Brooks 19–105; White. The posters have subsequently been widely distributed electronically. Triptych: A Digital Initiative of the Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore College Libraries has posters accessible for academic use, with permission. In addition, the authors recently purchased a collection of 1,700 Soviet posters on eBay for only £5.98.

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at home.<sup>2</sup> This totalitarian visual rhetoric likely inspired one of the most significant contributions to humanistic thought in the twentieth century—the work of Mikhail M. Bakhtin. Although not overtly political, Bakhtin's thought was certainly shaped and influenced by the repressive political culture of his time, which moved him to produce the most sophisticated reflections on dialogue since Socrates/Plato.<sup>3</sup>

Bakhtin's response to this culture is sometimes read as a rejection of rhetoric in favor of dialogue (Bialostosky, "Bakhtin and the Future," "Dialogics"), sometimes as an attempt to accommodate dialogue within the rhetorical tradition (Dentith; Halasek; Jasinski), and sometimes as a recognition that rhetoric is a powerful and dangerous social force to be thoughtfully but cautiously embraced (Murphy). These readings are indicative of a range of possible critical/hermeneutical perspectives, from the foregrounding of the immediate historical context in which the state engages its rhetoric in a pervasive and relentless pursuit of its political agenda—a rhetoric both powerful and dangerous—to the critical distance from which contemporary scholars can uncover the potential for dialogue in even the most uncompromisingly monologic discourse and thus demonstrate the possibility of accommodating dialogue within the rhetorical tradition. From such a contemporary critical perspective, Bakhtin's response to the culture of his time is neither an acceptance nor a rejection of rhetoric plain and simple but an alternative albeit idealistic vision of the dialogical potential of every discourse, even the most monologic and authoritarian discourse. From this perspective, the totalitarian visual rhetoric of Soviet Russia—perhaps the most monologic and authoritarian rhetoric on record—may be historically reconstructed as a rhetorical continuum, ranging from the most authoritarian proclamations of the Soviet industrial and agricultural successes, to attempts to depict these proclamations as internally persuasive, to satirical-polemical assaults on the Soviets' displaced "others," and to overtly polemical images that depict the Soviets' attempts not only to assail but to destroy opposition.

<sup>2</sup>Brooks, 3–105; Hoffmann, 8–11, 32–106; and Kenez, 41–131, trace the economic and political developments from the Revolution through the late 1930s. Historically, Peter Kenez observes, "Russia was an agricultural country in a region that was not well suited to agriculture" (4). Following the Revolution, the Soviet leaders developed a variety of approaches to the problems of modernization of the economy, with increasingly unfortunate and tragic results: an initial period of war communism (1918–21); a mixed socialist/capitalist economy under the New Economic Policy (1921–27); a period of rapid industrialization and the collectivization of farms under a series of five-year plans (1927–1934); and the ravages that accompanied Stalinism at its height (1934–38) (Kenez 284–87). Siegelbaum and Sokolov illustrate the impact of these developments with a large collection of previously unpublished reports and letters detailing the plight of the Soviet people in their own words.

<sup>3</sup>Clark and Holquist, 238–252, 275–320, situate Bakhtin's major works historically and biographically. Morson and Emerson, 123–161, 216–223, 231–268, 306–365, 443–469, explain the major works as contributions to Bakhtin's complex and multi-faceted theory of the novel—his "prosaics."

Bakhtin did not (and could not) respond directly and explicitly to the political culture and the visual rhetoric of his time.<sup>4</sup> He responded indirectly, however, in some of his most important works—*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (published in 1929 and in a revised edition in 1963); “Discourse in the Novel” (written in 1934–35 and published in 1975); and *Rabelais and His World* (written in the late 1930s and early 1940s and published in 1965).<sup>5</sup> In these works, Bakhtin distinguishes monologic and dialogic discourses and typically associates rhetoric with monologic discourse (“From Notes” 150; *Problems* 132). At the same time, he sees the potential for dialogue even in the most traditional monologic rhetorical forms (“Discourse in the Novel” 267–269, 274, 278–285, 353–354). Similarly, while he distinguishes monologic from dialogic discourses, he sometimes also seems to suggest that all discourse is potentially dialogic (Morson and Emerson 130–133, 146–149). With the advantage of historical hindsight, we can uncover, and rediscover, this dialogic potential of the Soviet poster images. Ostensibly, these images represent only a wished-for world of their own making, a world that homogenizes difference and demonizes dissent, a world in which observers are expected merely to nod their heads in silent affirmation, a world that Bakhtin

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<sup>4</sup>But Bakhtin was certainly well aware of this visual culture. Mikhail Ryklin argues that the Moscow Metro, constructed from the 1930s through the 1950s, was a symbol of Soviet unity, heralded at its opening as “a *symbol* (my emphasis) of the new socialist society currently being built . . . and operating upon bases utterly opposed to those upon which capitalist society has been constructed” (“‘The Best in the World’” 262). Ryklin claims furthermore that the Moscow Metro artwork presented a portrait of the “collective corporeality” of the new urbanized, industrialized culture, a portrait of bodies “exhausted in city spaces that are too cramped for their agricultural fantasies, even as they are already infinitely far from a peasant mentality” (“Bodies of Terror” 69, 72). According to Ryklin, Bakhtin responded to the Metro artwork (in *Rabelais and His World*) with his own portrait of the carnival, which inverts the logic of the collective body with “the archetypal pure essence of folk-ness”: “Only the eternal essence of the folk possesses the right to an infinity of speech transformations: it is what urinates, defecates, eats its fill, copulates, continually is born, gives birth, dies—in short, it is what perpetually transforms itself on the rhetorical plane” (“Bodies of Terror” 53). Caryl Emerson maintains, however, that Bakhtin’s portrait of the carnival transcends the immediate context of Soviet culture and encompasses similar images from other eras and from Bakhtin’s own earlier work (*First Hundred Years* 193).

<sup>5</sup>Morson and Emerson, xvii–xx, 83–96, provide a chronology of the major works. Clark and Holquist, 267–268, 306–309, 322–323, 325–326; and Morson and Emerson, 199–200, 235, 267–268, 447–448, trace Bakhtin’s response to the Marxist political agenda and Stalinism in particular. Morson and Emerson find an implicit but inescapably anti-Marxist political agenda in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, in several lengthy attacks on dialectics (267–268). They find the apparent anti-Stalinism of *Rabelais and His World* to be more circumspect: Is Bakhtin’s grotesque characterization of Ivan the Terrible a parody of Stalin’s idealization of Ivan or a counter-idealization of his own? Is his verbal aesthetic, with its parallel to the Futurist aesthetic of the 1920s, at once both resistant to and compliant with Socialist Realism? (447–448). Clark and Holquist find a more direct attack on (and dialogue with) Stalinism in the counterideology of the *Rabelais* book:

Bakhtin’s response to Stalinism is organized around the dichotomy common to all his earlier writings, the distinction between official culture and the culture of the folk. In the case of Rabelais’ world, the official culture was that of the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire, while the folk culture was that of the lower orders in the carnival and marketplace. (307–308).

describes as hell, "as absolute *lack of being heard*, as the absolute absence of a *third party*" ("Problem of the Text" 126; Emerson 284). Viewed from a contemporary historical perspective, however, these apparently monologic poster images are also potentially dialogic, insofar as they seem to contain meanings beyond their self-evident monologism and so seem to elicit unanticipated and unintended responses from the many "others" whose voices they seek to silence or destroy. We can only speculate, of course, about the nature of the actual responses to these self-evidently monologic images. From a contemporary historical perspective, however, enriched by Bakhtin's theories of novelistic discourse, we can reconstruct their potential responsiveness to other people in their attempts to enlist support—or at least silent affirmation—even as they maintain a relentlessly and insistently monologic and authoritarian attitude. Bakhtin locates this dialogic potential in a tension between authoritative and internally persuasive discourses and in a variety of double-voiced discourses—stylized, parodic, satirical, and polemical.

### Bakhtin on Rhetoric

Bakhtin's seemingly ambivalent, even contradictory, attitude toward rhetoric helps to explain the equally varied and even contradictory responses of contemporary scholars and critics. On the one hand, Bakhtin recognized that rhetoric can be overtly and explicitly monologic. On the other hand, he also recognized that rhetoric—all rhetoric, even the most traditional monologic forms—is potentially dialogic since every utterance is meaningful only in relationship to other utterances ("Problem of Speech Genres" 71–75). In his most bitter and hostile statements, Bakhtin is openly and thoroughly scornful of rhetoric. In its linguistic representations, Bakhtin claims, rhetoric is monologic in its orientation toward its referential objects: in rhetorical discourse, thoughts "stop and congeal in one-sided seriousness or in a stupid fetish for definition or singleness of meaning" (*Problems* 132). In its orientation toward its audience, rhetoric is monologic in its attempts to defeat or destroy: "in rhetoric there is the unconditionally innocent and the unconditionally guilty; there is complete victory and destruction of the opponent" ("From Notes" 150). In "Discourse in the Novel," however, Bakhtin also recognizes that even the most overtly and explicitly monologic rhetoric is potentially dialogic (267–269, 274, 278–285, 353–354). All rhetorical forms, he writes, while "monologic in their compositional structure, are oriented toward the listener and his [or her] answer" (280).

Even the traditional Aristotelian genres—"the rhetoric of the courts," "political rhetoric," and "publicist discourse"—however monologic in structure, nonetheless "possess the most varied forms for transmitting another's speech, and for the most part these are intensely dialogized forms" (353–354). These genres "provide rich material for studying a variety of forms for transmitting another's speech [...] though "the rhetorical double-voicedness of such images is usually not very deep" (354).

This seeming ambivalence toward rhetoric is actually an ability to see rhetoric both ways—as both monologic and potentially dialogic—both unresponsive to the point of seeking the complete destruction of the other and receptive to the other by virtue of rhetoric’s basic orientation toward its audience. Contemporary scholars and critics recognize both of these rhetorics. Don H. Bialostosky reads Bakhtin’s rhetoric as monologic and rejects it in favor of dialogue, distinguishing dialogue from both dialectic and rhetoric and offering Bakhtinian dialogics as a model for the practice of literary criticism (“Dialogics” 788–792). Others, in contrast, seek to accommodate Bakhtinian dialogue within the rhetorical tradition by viewing every utterance—not least rhetorical utterances—as situated in relationship to some other utterance. James Jasinski, for example, like Bialostosky, reads Bakhtin’s rhetoric as monologic but views individual utterances as components of an ongoing conversation (24–28). According to Jasinski, Bakhtin insists that rhetorical performances are “monologic and finalizable”—aimed at victory for the rhetor and defeat of the opponent; authoritative—admitting only “complete affirmation or complete rejection”; isolated, purely instrumental, and completely practical; and directed toward the pursuit of individual advancement (24–25). Bakhtin, however, fails to recognize that “the rhetorical act participates in the ongoing and in principle unfinalizable conversation that is constitutive of civic life as it engages the contingent specifics of its immediate situation” (25). Rhetoric, in other words, is dialogic by Bakhtin’s own standard: “rhetorical performance shares with dialogue the need to maintain discursive and deliberative space” (25).

In contrast to both, John M. Murphy maintains that we need to take Bakhtin’s cautions against rhetoric seriously and seek not so much to accommodate Bakhtinian dialogue within the rhetorical tradition as to embrace the power of rhetoric even as we guard ourselves against its dangers (268–275). Murphy argues that rhetoric is both interested and powerful. Because rhetoric is powerful, it is also “*dangerous*” (272). According to Murphy, however, we need not for that reason reject rhetoric but rather embrace it, even as we guard against its dangers. Jasinski and Murphy thus accent different aspects of rhetoric’s power. Jasinski takes a panoramic view that emphasizes the constitutive nature of rhetoric as a kind of substratum of civic life (or a kind of social knowledge constructed by a multiplicity of rhetorical performances). He thus emphasizes rhetoric’s power as a social activity that cannot be reduced to individual acts of persuasion. Murphy, in contrast, emphasizes the power of rhetoric as a force embodied in these individual acts. One way to guard against the power of these individual acts is to adopt the social view, to explore rhetoric’s dialogic potential—its potential to contain meanings beyond its overt and explicit monologism, to evoke unanticipated and unintended responses, seemingly to invite other voices even as it seeks to silence or destroy them. To view individual rhetorical utterances thus in relationship to other utterances is not to deny or diminish their power and their dangers but to seek to understand also the potential of individual utterances to elicit other utterances, which themselves may be powerful and dangerous—or powerful and enlightening or liberating.

## Bakhtin on Monologic and Dialogic Discourses

For Bakhtin, rhetoric is part of a larger world of monologic and dialogic discourses, some of which seem to be wholly and exclusively monologic, all of which seem to be at least potentially dialogic. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson observe that Bakhtin uses the term *dialogue* in three distinct senses: "as a global concept, as a view of truth and the world"; as a view of language "according to which every utterance is by definition dialogic"; and as a seemingly contradictory view of language "which allows some utterances to be dialogic and some to be nondialogic (or monologic)" (130–131). This distinction between monologue and dialogue—not entirely consistent—helps to explain Bakhtin's view of rhetoric, which is at once hostile and receptive—hostile to monologic rhetoric but receptive to a dialogic rhetoric that is open and responsive to others. This distinction, as Simon Dentith and Catherine Ciepiela observe, is essentially ethical and political, for "all language carries the ideological accents of its use in previous contexts," and its meanings are negotiated and renegotiated in each new context—"the forum, the marketplace, the academy, the various institutions of government, the still more various rituals and institutions of private life" (Dentith 321–322; Ciepiela 1010). The Soviet poster images are overtly and explicitly monologic. In their attempt to convey an appearance of responsiveness to others, however, they are also potentially dialogic, for they enlist not only a wholly monologic and authoritative voice but also a posture or pretense of responsiveness, which Bakhtin captures in his characterization of novelistic voices. These voices are authoritative and internally persuasive and also double voiced—sometimes satirical, sometimes polemical, even to the extent of becoming overtly polemical, seeking the utter destruction of "the other."

Monologue, in Bakhtin's characterization, is wholly unresponsive to others (Morson 65–66; Morson and Emerson 146–149, 234–243). The author of a monologic discourse "does not recognize someone else's thought, someone else's idea, as an object of representation" (*Problems* 79). Such an author admits only the simple acceptance or rejection of his or her discourse: "In the monologic world, *tertium non datur*: a thought is either affirmed or repudiated; otherwise it simply ceases to be a fully valid thought" (*Problems* 80).

Monologic discourse refuses to recognize another person as its immediate audience—an addressee or second party; it refuses also to recognize any third party of higher authority—a "superaddressee"—capable of an "ideally true responsive understanding" ("Problem of the Text" 126; Morson 65–66; Morson and Emerson 135–136). Monologic discourse is thus wholly unresponsive, indeed deaf, to any other: "Monologism, at its extreme [. . .] is finalized and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any *decisive* force. Monologue manages without the other" (*Problems* 292–293).

Dialogue in contrast, insists upon responsiveness to the other and the other's discourse (Morson and Emerson 49–56, 130–133). For Bakhtin, as Morson and Emerson point out, dialogue is possible between people, not between elements

of language (131). Thus Bakhtin distinguishes between the sentence and the utterance, the sentence being grounded in language, the utterance in the exchanges of speaking subjects. The sentence is “a *unit of language*”; the utterance, in contrast, is “the *real unit of speech communication*,” marked by “a *change of speaking subjects*” (“Problem of Speech Genres” 71, 73). Sentences as units of language “belong to nobody and are addressed to nobody”; utterances are “directed at someone, addressed to someone” (99). Indeed, “addressivity, the quality of turning to someone, is a constitutive feature of the utterance” (99). This quality of responsiveness to other people is the cornerstone of Bakhtin’s characterizations of novelistic discourse and its dialogic potential.

### Authoritative and Internally Persuasive Discourses

In “Discourse in the Novel,” written in the mid 1930s, Bakhtin distinguishes authoritative and internally persuasive discourses—thus very likely taking “a sideways glance” at his own cultural situation (375–376). The Soviet cultural program sought to create a new industrialized, collectivized, socialized person, in a process by which the authoritative word from without became the internally persuasive word within—a process that Bakhtin characterizes as “an individual’s ideological becoming” (342). In Bakhtin’s idealized portrait, this process is the outcome of the genuine struggle by which we make the words of others truly our own. The Soviet cultural program co-opts this process by creating poster images representing its own authoritative word as the internally persuasive word of others.

In Bakhtin’s characterization, dialogue resides in people. Hence our language and our very selves are defined in relationship to other people. We become ourselves in our relationships to other people when we make their words our own, that is, when the authoritative words of others become internally persuasive for us (“Discourse” 288–300, 337–355; Morson and Emerson 218–223). For this reason also, our internally persuasive words are best captured not in language only but in the image of speaking persons. We do not find our words in dictionaries, Bakhtin insists, but “in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions” (“Discourse” 294). Insofar as we are “responsive” to others, our words, “half someone else’s,” become our own (280, 293). As we make others’ words our own, they become no longer “authoritative” but “internally persuasive” for us (342). The authoritative word forces itself upon us from without; it “demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally” (342). Authoritative discourse is thoroughly monologic: it exists by and for itself alone, both in its relationship to other discourses and to other people. Although it may be surrounded by other discourses, it does not address or even acknowledge them; although it may seem to address other people, it does not seek a response but mere affirmation: “It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. It is indissolubly fused with its



authority—with political power, an institution, a person—and it stands and falls together with that authority" (343).

In contrast, internally persuasive discourse lives in its relationship to other people. Internally persuasive discourse is initially another person's discourse. It becomes our own only insofar as we affirm and assimilate it and, in the process, create new and independent words for ourselves: "another's discourse, if productive, gives birth to a new word from us in response" (346–347). Once we have made this discourse our own, it no longer exercises authority from without: the "internally persuasive word [...] is denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society" (342). Internally persuasive discourse is thus "fundamentally and organically fused with the image of a speaking person" (347). Such an image may become the site of ideological struggle, as various discourses battle within us in the process of becoming our own "internally persuasive word" (348). The Soviet poster images recreate these ideological struggles in their portraits of internally persuaded speaking persons no doubt intended to evoke silent affirmation and perhaps even cooperation but also, potentially but no doubt unintentionally, capable of provoking active—and vocal—doubt and dissent.

### Double-Voiced Discourses: Satire and Polemic

This dialogic responsiveness to other people can also take the form of double-voiced discourses ranging from the merely imitative to the brutally destructive, from stylization and parody to satire and polemic, both hidden and overt ("Discourse" 400–410; *Problems* 181–204; Morson and Emerson 146–161, 344–348). These double-voiced discourses, Bakhtin explains, always contain "two voices" and "two semantic intentions" (*Problems* 189). Thus they are not so much sets of stylistic features as responses to other people, defined by their self-evident intention toward the other, from the merely imitative to the overtly hostile. The Soviet poster images take the most hostile forms toward the others whom they seek to assail or destroy. Of the merely imitative forms, stylization, for example, presupposes another person's intention: "that is, it presupposes that the sum total of stylistic devices that it reproduces did at one time possess a direct and unmediated intentionality and expressed an ultimate semantic authority" (189). It responds to this intention by introducing a second intention of its own: "Stylization forces another person's referential (artistically referential) intention to serve its own purposes, that is, its new intentions" (189). It does not fundamentally alter or challenge the other's intention, however, but merely "casts a slight shadow of objectification over it" (189).

Other double-voiced discourses more directly challenge the discourses of others. Thus parody, for example, unlike stylization, directly opposes another's intention:

Here, as in stylization, the author again speaks in someone else's discourse, but in contrast to stylization parody introduces into that discourse a semantic

intention that is directly opposed to the original one. The second voice, once having made its home in the other's discourse, clashes hostilely with its primordial host and forces him [or her] to serve directly opposing aims. (193)

Unlike stylization also, parody, despite itself, invites a response from another, for parody is not, like stylization, a "fusion of voices" but "an arena of battle between two voices" (193). When the battle becomes intense, "the parodied discourse rings out more actively, exerts a counterforce against the author's intentions" (198). This potential for response is the dialogic potential that we find in all double-voiced discourses, excepting the merely imitative but including the parodic, the satiric, and the polemic.

Satiric and polemic discourses are closely related although polemic—both hidden and overt—is perhaps the more hostile. Both types of polemic strike a blow at the other's discourse, directly or indirectly:

To draw a clear-cut boundary between hidden and obvious open polemic in any concrete instance sometimes proves quite difficult. But the semantic distinctions here are very fundamental. Overt polemic is quite simply directed at another's discourse, which it refutes, as if at its own referential object. In the hidden polemic, however, discourse is directed toward an ordinary referential object, naming it, portraying, expressing, and only indirectly striking a blow at the other's discourse, clashing with it, as it were, within the object itself. (196)

In either case, the discourse encompasses two voices and two intentions, the one clashing, striking a blow, at the other, more or less directly.

Satire merges with polemic in novelistic discourse ("Discourse" 400–410; Morson and Emerson 344–348). Tracing the novel's two stylistic lines, Bakhtin associates the first line with a world of finished and polished elegance ("Discourse" 401). He associates the second line with the real-life world of rogues and fools and clowns—a world of satire and parody and polemic. These three figures mock the world of high languages and polished elegance: the rogue parodies them, the clown maliciously distorts them, and the fool naively fails to comprehend them. In the figure of the fool, however, parody and satire merge into polemic, for "stupidity (incomprehension) in the novel is always polemical: it interacts dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty pseudo intelligence) with which it polemicizes and whose mask it tears away" (403). But this presumed stupidity of the fool is itself a mask, concealing the wise fool who perceives the lie in others' accepted and canonized but nonetheless false discourses: "Stupidity (incomprehension) in the novel is always implicated in language, in the word: at its heart always lies a polemical failure to understand someone else's discourse, someone else's pathos-charged lie that has appropriated the world and aspires to conceptualize it" (403). These more hostile double-voiced discourses—satire merging into polemic and polemic into its most overt and open forms—appear in the Soviet poster images, which display the same dialogic potential as their linguistic

counterparts, the same potential for response from those whom they seek to silence or destroy.

### Russian Visual Culture and Soviet Rhetoric

Poster images were the most dramatic and pervasive form of public rhetoric in the Soviet Union from Revolution to Cold War. Upon seizing power in October 1917, the Bolsheviks endeavored to gain control over information dissemination and to establish absolute monopoly over cultural production. Within a year, they shut down oppositional newspapers, nationalized printing presses, centralized news production, and instituted censorship (Brooks 3–18). Although from the outset newspapers served as a principal means of keeping up the ideological drumbeat, visual propaganda—in the form of posters, films, and pageantry—infiltrated the daily life and as such was far more effective in reaching an illiterate and semi-literate population (Bonnell, *Iconography* 3–10). In addition, leading newspapers—such as *Pravda* and *Izvestia*—displayed an elitist bias in their themes and vocabulary, which made them less appealing to the masses who possessed rudimentary reading skills but lacked what Communist Party leaders called “political literacy” (Brooks 11–12). By the late 1920s, Party leaders “abandoned their attempt to use the press to convert common readers to their cause” and shifted their focus “to a narrower and less-critical audience of insiders” (15–16). Images, by contrast, allowed the Party to simplify as well as to amplify its general line, if not its reasoning. They functioned, as Victoria Bonnell argues, as “an incantation designed to conjure up new modes of thinking and conduct, and to persuade people that the present and the future were indistinguishable” (*Iconography* 14). This understanding was made explicit in the 11 March 1931 resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party on the importance of political posters as a “powerful tool in the reconstruction of the individual, his ideology, his way of life, his economic activity” and a means of “entering the consciousness and hearts of millions [of people]” (quoted in Bonnell, “Peasant Woman” 58). These poster images were overtly and explicitly “monologic,” in Bakhtin’s sense of the term, by virtue of their construction of an utterly fictional world in which all difference was either assimilated to the authoritative voice of the state or repudiated and demonized as alien.

Although overtly monologic in its single-minded promotion of new Soviet realities, visual propaganda still had to possess cultural legibility. Images work both by making present certain objects and by evoking a set of associations in the viewer through the use of recognizable pictorial conventions. It is virtually impossible to produce a purely referential image, one that conjures only an external object without any traces of style and cultural usage. From the perspective of iconography, then, the new ideology did not—and could not—start from scratch but in fact re-appropriated already existing visual imagery and techniques of graphic storytelling. Ironically, even as the Party ruthlessly dismantled the tsarist

regime's symbols of authority, its ideological objective required a degree of creative receptivity to enduring cultural patterns.

These patterns were shaped, first and foremost, by the Orthodox religion's emphasis on the veneration of icons and the role of ritual.<sup>6</sup> Before the Revolution, most believers, regardless of their economic or social status, had icons in their homes. The Bolsheviks' assault on the vestiges of the old regime targeted religious art and architecture along with religious practices. Icons were publicly burned, churches were closed or destroyed, and members of the clergy were exiled or murdered. At the same time, the new regime appropriated many of the visual conventions associated with Orthodox spirituality. Artists represented selfless devotion to the cause of socialism as sainthood and accorded the leaders, especially Lenin and Stalin, the status of deities. Some posters and illustrations used religious reference quite overtly, as in the depiction of Leon Trotsky as St. George slaying the serpent labeled "counterrevolution" (Bonnell, *Iconography* 152–153). Others evoked sacred iconography in a more subtle manner through color, image size, and composition. For example, many posters of Lenin use the color red, distorted perspective (featuring him as a larger-than-life figure), and a circular frame to surround the leader's image.

The new regime also emphasized "proper" performance of piety—in this case, the quasi-religious veneration of the Revolution and its leaders. Similar to religious processions during major church holidays before the Revolution, public demonstrations marking various anniversaries of the Soviet republic became ever more ritualized. By the end of the 1920s, all demonstrations became subject to careful planning to eliminate any politically impious expression:

Standard decoration strategies were approved, and among them the leaders' portraits took up an important place. Amateur posters made by the demonstrators themselves were confiscated and destroyed. Secret brigades of "mass activists" were formed under the observation of Party committees. At proper moments they were instructed to jump onto tribunes and fill the air with screams and wild expressions of emotions following a previously prepared script. (Zakharov 212)

The purging of spontaneity and amateur expression from public demonstrations marked them as clear instances of "authoritative discourse," which, Bakhtin observes, "permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders,

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<sup>6</sup>In their discussion of the symbolism of Orthodox icons, Ouspensky and Lossky remark, "[f]or an Orthodox man of our times an icon, whether ancient or modern, is not an object of aesthetic admiration or an object of study; it is living, grace-inspired art that feeds him" (49). Bonnell and White emphasize the influence of both Orthodox religious iconography and the *lubok* tradition on the Soviet political posters (Bonnell, *Iconography* 12–13, 70–71, 111–112; White 1–7). Thus, for example, the familiar color symbolism of the martyrs' red blood carried over quite naturally to the sacrifices endured by the Bolshevik workers (Bonnell, *Iconography* 12–13).

no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants of it" ("Discourse" 343).

Besides the sacred tradition, Russian habits of "reading" the visual were also influenced by the popular genre of *lubok* (illustrated broadside), with its distinctive color symbolism, stock characters, and storytelling format. Mass produced in Russia since the second half of the seventeenth century, *lubok* prints were notable for their "decorative appeal and brevity": the color combinations were "contrasting, loud and harsh"; "figures were magnified and shifted towards the foreground and there was usually no middleground" (Sytova 8). For example, posters created in the early years of the Soviet Republic typically used the *lubok* conventions to rally the population against the "class enemy" and to celebrate the transformation of life after the Revolution (Bonnell, *Iconography* 14, 207–211; Siegelbaum and Sokolov 12–13). These conventions included the contrasting format (to represent "before and after" or "us versus them"), the use of the color red to convey positive qualities and black to denote negative attributes, and allegorical imagery (Bonnell, *Iconography* 107, 141).

Associated with the festive atmosphere of the marketplace, *lubok* pictures were a graphic equivalent of a show-booth folk performance. Consequently, although their subject matter ranged from religious stories to spicy jokes, most *lubok* pictures were amusing rather than serious in tone. Even in the ones containing religiously flavored content, the coloring "often blithely contradicts their moralizing or ascetically sombre subject matter" (Sytova 11). For example, in the print *The Woman of Babylon*, the title character is shown riding a seven-headed dragon; however, "the dragon, like the demons featured in the other moralizing prints [...], has the amiable aspect of the characters in the folktales or the comic fair-ground shows" (11). Thus, even ostensibly negative types receive an ambivalent treatment in the *lubok* tradition.

The attitude of playful ambivalence dominates the depiction of the popular stock characters, the chronic failures Foma and Yerioma, the folk jesters Savoska and Paramoska, and the foreign personages Pan Tryk and Khersonia. Similar to their Western European counterparts discussed by Bakhtin under the categories of the rogue, the clown, and the fool, these social types embody popular suspicion toward any expression of lofty seriousness and revel in their ability to mock high genres. Therefore, despite the Manichean view of the world promoted by the majority of Soviet posters, *lubok*-inspired caricatures of internal and external "enemies of socialism" may act as a dialogizing force by virtue of their connection with the tradition of folk laughter.

As Bakhtin point out, all language carries "the ideological accents of its use in previous contexts" (Cipielea 1010). What distinguishes dialogue from monologue is whether the fact of previous usage and ideological difference is acknowledged and respected. The Soviet posters were monologic insofar as they refused to acknowledge or respect these ideological accents, refused, that is, to acknowledge or respect any referential object or any context except the world of their own

making. But they were also potentially dialogic insofar as they retained a connection to a variety of culturally and socially entrenched visual lexicons even though the realities and social categories they conjured were novel.

The tension between a desire to create a new visual language befitting the spirit of the times and a need to appeal to popular tastes can be seen in the evolution of the Soviet political iconography. Graphic artists and a cadre of cultural critics appointed to judge their work struggled to forge politically correct representations uncontaminated by ideologically alien associations. This task proved to be difficult because, by purging “otherness,” artists were sacrificing cultural legibility. In the period immediately following the Revolution, for instance, posters often employed allegorical imagery to depict class enemies—capitalists, kulaks, and priests—as giant spiders (Bonnell, *Iconography* 196, 202, 205–206). However, this allegorical approach fell out of favor because of its perceived association with “bourgeois” aesthetic conventions and the officially sanctioned imperative to create visual types faithful to the ideological program of socialist construction. Allegory was therefore replaced with signifiers of progress (such as tractors and locomotives) and the technique of photomontage to convey the connotation of objective factuality (Barthes, “Photographic Message” 9–14). Similarly, the heroic figure of the blacksmith that traditionally symbolized the dictatorship of the proletariat—and the young Soviet Republic more generally—by the late 1920s gave way to a composite portrait of the working masses, typically represented by identical and virtually faceless silhouettes. Such depiction matched the new ideological emphasis on ordinary workers as builders of socialism. As the Party line changed once again in the mid 1930s, the need for “heroes” became paramount, and images of exemplary shock workers in industry and agriculture took center stage, along with the ultimate icon of the era—Comrade Stalin himself (Bonnell, *Iconography* 3–10). On the whole, posters from the mid 1930s and beyond increasingly rely on photomontage and other conventions of pictorial realism—probably because such techniques minimize unwanted cultural and ideological connotations.

Even when the images were consciously crafted to avoid any reference to a different style or context of usage—when they were overtly monologic—their ability to signify generally exceeded their creators’ intended range of meanings. This problem is not unique to Soviet posters, of course. As Roland Barthes points out, “in every society a certain number of techniques are developed in order to *fix* the floating chain of signifieds, to combat the terror of uncertain signs: the linguistic message is one of these techniques” (“Rhetoric of the Image” 28). Caption is the most typical form of linguistic message; it sometimes can serve simply to denote the object depicted, but, more often than not, it guides the interpretation: “the text *directs* the reader among the various signifieds of the image, causes him to avoid some and to accept others; through an often subtle dispatching, it teleguides him toward a meaning selected in advance” (29). Barthes suggests that thanks to this ideological “anchoring” of the image, “the text has a *repressive* value, and we can see that a society’s ideology and morality are principally invested

on this level" (29). Linguistic messages can also perform a "relaying" function: "here language [...] and image are in a complementary relation; the words are then fragments of a more general syntagm, as are the images, and the message's unity occurs on a higher level: that of the story, the anecdote, the diegesis" (30).

Early *lubok*-inspired posters illustrate the relaying function: they often used two or more panels connected by fragments of text to create a story or convey a moral. By the late 1920s, this convention was almost entirely abandoned and replaced with a single-frame poster accompanied by a short, sometimes rhyming caption. Many captions from the early period of industrialization reference the first of several so-called five-year plans and begin with an exhortation "Let us": "Let us fulfill the plan of great works!"; "Let us storm the third year of the five-year plan!"; "Let us merge shock troops into shock brigades!" These exhortations convey the unequivocal goodness and urgency of collective action and imply a ready and enthusiastic audience. Subsequently, the rhetoric of the "socialist offensive" of the first five-year plan yielded to a less militant—albeit no less unequivocal—discourse of celebration of achievements under Stalin's leadership summarized by declarative sentences, such as "Beloved Stalin is the people's happiness" (Siegelbaum and Sokolov 6–7, 28–102).

How did contemporaries regard these posters? The Soviet ideological leadership apparently took great interest in the issue of reception, as the Central Committee resolution of 11 March 1931 concerning visual propaganda indicates (Bonnell, *Iconography* 111). Among other measures, the resolution called for the creation of worker and peasant review committees to judge the effectiveness of poster design. Few reports from such committee meetings survive, but those that do give historians rare glimpses of just how presumptuous and ill-conceived some of these posters must have seemed even to their intended audiences. Bonnell describes one reviewer's evaluation of the most emblematic of collectivization posters, "Join us, comrade, in the collective farm," which depicts a young woman shouting the invitation:

His point was that the phrase "Join us in the collective farm" happened to be printed across her midsection—by implication, a sexual invitation. The suggestion that collective farm women proffered sexual invitations had grave significance in the contemporary context, amplifying fears of a linkage between communalization of peasant property and the peasant woman's body. (*Iconography* 114)

This example suggests that audiences were sensitive to seemingly minute elements of pictorial and textual design if these elements resonated—positively or not—with concerns of the day. Because of the scarcity of data regarding the reception of political art in the Soviet Union, it is possible only to speculate about the range of responses that specific posters might have received. However, scholars of art history and visual rhetoric insist that in reading visual artifacts audiences rely not only on their experiential knowledge of the world but also on a repertoire

of cultural associations or frameworks for interpretation (Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image” 22–26, 35–40; Baxandall; Finnegan 33–36).

We have already mentioned the importance of enduring cultural patterns of “reading”—such as color symbolism, imagery, and certain representational and storytelling formats—presumed in the composition of poster images after the Revolution. These associations likely remained stable (even if some of them, like allegorical associations, were sometimes declared “bourgeois”). What changed were the Party line and the official narrative frameworks for interpreting propaganda images en masse. Posters worked not as individual utterances but as reiterations of the same general message that was conveyed across genres and media. Posters thus provided context for other posters on the same topic, as did newspapers, public meetings, festivals, songs, and poetry readings. The monopoly on cultural production allowed the state to infiltrate all aspects of public life and thereby to displace other narrative frameworks for making sense of reality. Audiences of the early Soviet posters, most of whom were workers or soldiers in the Red Army, learned to fit their visual experiences into the narrative of the “class war”; a decade later, the refrain was “socialist building”; at the height of Stalinism, “happy life” became the chief slogan of the day (Brooks 21–27, 37–53, 59–66).<sup>7</sup>

Visual propaganda, like the rest of public culture in the Soviet Union, aimed to construct the audience as an approving “chorus” and thereby consign to political non-existence all those who might have voiced reservation or dissent. This cultural reality, we suggest, matches Bakhtin’s description of monologic discourse as “finalized and deaf to the other’s response” (*Problems* 293). The tragedy of living in a totalitarian state may be not so much knowing that the state lies to you but knowing that an alternative to the official lie is nowhere to be found. As Jeffrey Brooks observes, “for most people the choice was between new, prescribed public images and no public images” (17). At the same time, these new public images derived at least part of their persuasive power from earlier traditions of representation and patterns of reading despite the efforts of ideologues to impose correct interpretation from the top down.

### Soviet Visual Rhetoric: Monologue Versus Dialogue

Soviet public culture, from the 1917 Revolution through the rise of Stalinism to the mid 1930s, reflects the dramatic social changes occurring during this period: “the socialist offensive”—the single-minded commitment to socialist building through the industrialization and collectivization movements; the creation of a socialist utopia through invocations or incantations of a happy life for Soviet

<sup>7</sup>Brooks calls these frames “schemata,” which are “akin to ‘media packages,’ [...] that is, combinations of metaphors, examples, slogans, and visual materials writers use to shape diverse but related information” (21).



people of all nationalities; and a commitment to the transformation or elimination of all of those perceived to be enemies of the Soviet state—a displacement of the other in the interest of promoting a unified vision of a prosperous future imagined by the Bolshevik ideology.<sup>8</sup> The Soviet poster images from this era depict these changes as social realities and seek to enlist support, or at least silent acquiescence, by displaying these social realities as the only authoritative image of Soviet life, by showing Soviet people as internally persuaded to participate in the new social order, and by vilifying the enemies of the new socialist state in satiric-polemic and increasingly hostile and overtly polemic images.<sup>9</sup>

### *Models of Socialism: Authoritative and Internally Persuasive Discourses as Potentially Dialogic*

The socialist offensive sought to hasten dramatically the course of industrialization and the collectivization of farms—the organization of workers into shock brigades designed to increase production and the centralization of farms under Soviet management, perceived as a necessary step to provide sufficient food for the rapidly growing urban industrial populations. These two initiatives aimed to fulfill Stalin's mission of establishing "socialism in one country" and were captured in poster images of the new Soviet man and woman united in their support of industrialization and collectivization (Brooks 19, 21, 37–53).<sup>10</sup> These posters reveal the tension between the authoritative word of the Soviet state and its efforts to render this word internally persuasive to the masses of people, whose ideological struggles it sought to neutralize by presenting the authoritative word as the one and only word. The industrialization posters are openly and overtly authoritative, but even these posters convey hints of dialogic potential in their echoes of the visual iconography of earlier periods, such as the individualized human figure of the blacksmith and the images of the Orthodox saints. The collectivization posters seek to

<sup>8</sup>Hoffmann, 8–11, 33–42, 73–86, 91–99; and Kenez, 84–101, describe the industrialization and collectivization movements and trace the mass migration of peasants to the newly industrialized cities. Brooks, 59–97, explains the Stalinist cult of the late 1920s through the mid 1930s as the "Stalinist economy of the gift," captured in the phrase "Thank You, Comrade Stalin, for a Happy Childhood" (83). Siegelbaum and Sokolov, 6–7, 28–102, explain the "socialist offensive" and document the plight of the industrialized workers, the collectivized farmers, and the millions who starved to death due to Soviet mismanagement of the collectivized farms. Kenez, 103–131, describes Stalinist Terror of the mid 1930s as "mass murder on an extraordinary scale" and speculates that it can only be explained by "a general cheapening of the value of human life" due to a long period of war and famine (103–105).

<sup>9</sup>Figures 1–5, 7, and 9 are from the authors' collection of electronic images, with translations by Ekaterina V. Haskins. Figures 6 and 8 are from the Triptych Soviet Poster Collection, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Triptych Visual Resources Database, with translations by Triptych, used with permission.

<sup>10</sup>Bonnell, *Iconography*, 21–46, 74–85, 101–123; Brooks, 19–53; and White, 26–27, 34–36, 120–121, trace the changing images of the industrialized workers and the collectivized farmers, both male and female, from the Revolution through the 1930s.

render the authoritative word internally persuasive by introducing speaking persons, thereby projecting a dialogic potential in the form of an invitation to respond—to heed, or not to heed, the call to support the Soviet socialist agenda. The Stalin posters, in contrast, are the most blatantly monologic and authoritarian. These depict Stalin as the beloved leader of a grateful people and introduce other people only to demonstrate that the only acceptable response to his authoritative word is universal admiration and silent assent.

The industrialization posters reflect the economic and social history of the time: the ten years following the Revolution; the period of rapid industrialization and collectivization beginning in the late 1920s; and the rise of Stalinism, culminating in the Terror of the mid 1930s. During the revolutionary period, the worker appeared in a variety of iconographic representations. In the decade following the Revolution, the dominant representation of the worker was the image of the blacksmith—always male—swinging his hammer onto an anvil or striking the chains with the hammer to set himself free (Bonnell, *Iconography* 79; White 34, 36). The blacksmith was occasionally pictured together with the peasant to symbolize the union of the proletariat and the peasantry. Sometimes he was shown with a female assistant holding, with tongs, a piece of hot metal on the anvil (*Iconography* 24–34).

With the beginning of industrialization in the late 1920s, the poster images transformed the traditional representations of workers into images that convey a selfless devotion of men and women alike to the cause of socialist construction and thus depict the authoritative discourse of the Party slogans as a universal and unquestioned commitment. For example, the posters “Let us merge shock groups into shock brigades” (Figure 1) and “Liberated woman, build socialism!” (Figure 2) draw on different visual traditions but articulate essentially the same message. The shock workers swinging hammers in unison evoke the blacksmith of the early years of the Revolution, and the woman worker resembles the saint of Orthodox icons. These representations are thus infused—perhaps unwittingly—with a previous history of signification.

These posters, however, seek to transform these prior significations into icons of unified collective action. Thus, in contrast to earlier workers typically shown singly, the industrialized workers as represented in “Let us merge shock groups into shock brigades” (Figure 1) are typically shown in groups (Bonnell, *Iconography* 35–38). These industrialized workers retain vestiges of the traditional portrayals of the blacksmith, such as the swinging hammers. But the figures appear in groups, working in unison, with virtually no distinguishing individual features. According to Bonnell, these figures no longer represent individual workers but a model or idealized type of the new Soviet worker, a social category properly rendered—a *tipazh* (*Iconography* 38). The figures thus constitute a kind of incantation that conjures up an image of an army of like-minded (and single-minded) shock workers, whose individual identity is willingly subordinated to the ideal of the socialist state.



**Figure 1** “Let us Merge Shock Groups Into Shock Brigades” (1929–30?). Industrialization: The Shock Brigades. Authors’ Collection of Soviet Posters.

Similarly, in contrast to earlier representations of the blacksmith’s assistant, the poster image of the industrialized woman in “Liberated woman, build socialism!” (Figure 2) depicts her as heroic, strong, and determined (Bonnell, *Iconography* 77–78, 97; White 120–121). This image tacitly invokes Russian religious iconography—the traditional depictions of stern Orthodox saints in portraits with halo images. The woman in this poster with her white circular “halo” of light thoroughly dominates the poster. But the woman is shown in black and white, with a red banner indicative of her commitment to the cause of building socialism, and the caption affirms as well her commitment to woman’s liberation (presumably from marriage and children) to ensure her unyielding devotion to this cause. Thus the selfless devotion of the Orthodox saint is replaced by the woman’s devotion to industrialization in the interest of promoting the socialist agenda, as the hint of Orthodox religion is being supplanted by the new “religion” of the Soviet



**Figure 2** “Liberated Woman, Build Socialism!” (1926). Industrialization: The Woman Worker. Authors’ Collection of Soviet Posters.

state—the celebration of “self-sacrifice, the disavowal of personal needs and interests, and the denial of homes and families” (Brooks 24–25).<sup>11</sup>

Poster images of the collectivization movement seek to render the authoritative word internally persuasive by placing it in the mouths of speaking persons, thereby seeming to invite a response. Like the industrialized workers, these speaking persons are idealized types, but, unlike them, they speak to their audiences directly, projecting images of a better life and inviting others to become like them. The industrialization posters and the collectivization posters follow a similar trajectory

<sup>11</sup>Brooks notes that newspapers from the 1920s “contain hardly a single picture of a family or of a child with a parent” (25). He also points out that public praise of revolutionary self-denial was often couched in a quasi-religious vocabulary (25–26).

toward more idealistic representations. During the period following the Revolution, the blacksmith worker with his hammer and the peasant with his scythe—both male—appeared side by side in countless posters, with little variation from one to the next (Bonnell, *Iconography* 79; White 26–27). Images of women peasants began to appear in 1920, most often, however, in the company of men or in satiric or otherwise negative representations (Bonnell, *Iconography* 80–82). These women were portrayed as full-figured and robust but also as ignorant and politically naïve—a reflection of the Bolsheviks' contempt for the peasant class. With the beginning of collectivization, the poster images become more positive, presenting idealized types rather than realities. Images of women became more frequent, even pervasive, as emblems of the movement (101–123). These women are portrayed as slim, youthful, and fit—suited to "production, not reproduction" (105). Sometimes they are shown driving tractors or even, in parallel with the industrialization posters, rows of tractors (106). But most often they are idealized versions of their audiences and speak to them directly, thus inviting a response. In one of these posters, "Come join us, comrade, in a collective farm!" (Figure 3), a woman and a man appear together, the woman in a dominant position in front of the man, calling out to others to join them in a collective farm (102). Like the figures in the industrialization posters, these figures represent a model or idealized type of the collectivized farm worker—a *tipazh*—an incantation invoking a prosperous future, perhaps envisioned by an urban artist, rather than a faithful representation of farm life. Both the woman and the man are depicted as urban rather than rural. Both are young and trim and fit, the man is clean shaven and wears a cap, and the woman has a kerchief tied behind her head—details consistent with the image of the new urban worker. Although they are idealized types, however, they represent their audiences as they might wish themselves to be, and they speak to them directly, as persons like themselves. Thus they internalize the official invitation to join the collective farm and extend the invitation to others in their own voices, the authoritative word of the state thereby rendered as internally persuasive.

The embodiment of the authoritative word in the person of speaking subjects becomes more direct and explicit in some of the later posters. By 1934, following the Communist Party's "Congress of Victors," Soviet visual propaganda ceased to exhort urban and rural populations to join the industrialization and collectivization efforts and focused instead on demonstrating that socialism has already arrived (Bonnell, *Iconography* 116). This improbable claim was disseminated and exemplified in images of newly built factories and dams, modern machinery, and model collective farms (Brooks 74–75; Fitzpatrick 262–285). But the principal strategy of the Stalinist rhetoric of socialist utopia was the depiction of joy and contentment in response to the alleged successes of the socialist construction (Bonnell, *Iconography* 114–123). It is not surprising, then, that the serenely smiling or jubilant faces of happy citizens replaced the more abstract silhouettes of faceless laborers in the visual lexicon of the period.



**Figure 3** “Come Join us, Comrade, in a Collective Farm!” (1930). Farm Collectivization: The Prosperous Life. Authors’ Collection of Soviet Posters.

It is doubtful that many enjoyed the life of plenty portrayed in these posters. Yet discontent or criticism could not be freely aired in public. Because of the state’s monopoly on information, “no enlightened naïf could stop the show by proclaiming that the emperor had no clothes” (Brooks 69). As a rule, only letters of appreciation were published in Soviet newspapers, while those who questioned the depicted reality or offered stories of experience that contradicted the sunny utopia disappeared into state files. These positive and supportive responses were mere repetitions of the official Party slogan of the 1930s, “Thank You, Comrade Stalin, for a Happy Life” and exemplify what Brooks calls a “theft of agency from individual citizens” (27). Visual propaganda contributed to this theft of agency by conjuring the fiction of a better life and by modeling the only socially acceptable reaction to this fiction. Common citizens were expected to voice approval by faithfully mimicking authoritative utterances of the Party and its infallible leader,

thereby creating the appearance that the authoritative word has become internally persuasive. The attitude of joyful gratitude was thus fashioned not simply as an emotional response to alleged improvements in economic conditions but as a requisite—and increasingly ritualized—social attitude.

This attitude is evident in another poster, "Life is getting more joyful day by day!" (Figure 4). The caption seems to contain an explicit echo of Stalin's pronouncement, in 1935, that "Life has become better, life has become merrier" (Brooks 89)—one of a number of such echoes in posters from the mid 1930s to Stalin's death in 1953. The poster itself features a woman who has apparently risen to a position of leadership in agriculture. She, too, is an idealized type, representative of the wished-for successes of industrialization and collectivization. She is placed in a sea of ripening crops and wears a kerchief, thus implying a connection to farming, and her status is signaled by the presence of a shiny new automobile and the Hero of Socialist Labor star gracing her tailored blouse. Her pose of proud contemplation is visually amplified by signifiers of prosperity—a car, fine clothing, and a wristwatch. Shading her eyes with the left hand, she is surveying a countryside positively altered by the successes of socialist modernization: high-voltage power lines connote the benefits of electrification, a barge on the river in the background is loaded to capacity, and a sailboat and a passenger steamer hint at the possibility of leisure. The woman's social mobility is thus paralleled—and explained—by the country's economic successes. Like the farm couple, too, this woman seems to speak to her audiences directly, rearticulating Stalin's official pronouncement, rendering his authoritative word as her own internally persuasive word. Both posters thus invite a response, presumably a positive response, an



**Figure 4** "Life is Getting More Joyful Day by Day!" (Early 1950s). A Happy Life: Socialist Accomplishments. Authors' Collection of Soviet Posters.

acceptance of the invitation to join a collective farm or at least a nod of approval and silent assent. They are also, however, potentially more intensely dialogic in the sense that the invitation to respond may also be perceived as an invitation to ponder the invitation, to engage in an internal ideological struggle, even, perhaps, to disagree, if only by declining the invitation.

In contrast to the industrialization and collectivization posters, which exhibit some tension between the authoritative and the internally persuasive word and even, in the case of the collectivization posters, explicitly invite a response, the Stalin posters seek to neutralize any possible internal ideological struggle and to silence any possible dissent by representing the authoritative word of the beloved leader as the only word. The Stalin posters, which became increasingly pervasive at the height of the Stalinist cult of the mid 1930s, are blatantly and unapologetically monologic. These posters celebrate the successes and accomplishments of the alleged socialist utopia and offer assurances of a happy life for all Soviet peoples— industrial workers and collective farmers, Russian and non-Russian nationals— under the leadership of their beloved leader, Comrade Stalin.<sup>12</sup>

With the rise of Stalinism in the early to mid 1930s, posters exalting the worker/hero frequently included the figure of Stalin himself, sometimes in the background, on a flag, sometimes looming large over a crowd of workers (Bonnell, *Iconography* 45, 158). These posters link Stalin by association with claims of the ever-increasing accomplishments of the worker and persist from the mid to late 1930s through the end of World War II to Stalin's death. One of these posters, "Beloved Stalin is the people's happiness" (Figure 5), displays the adulation of the leader by the masses of festively dressed and appropriately excited men, women, and children. The occasion is a holiday parade in the Red Square (most likely the May Day), with Stalin (standing on the Mausoleum housing Lenin's embalmed remains) looming above the crowds carrying red banners, flowers, and portraits of Lenin and other Soviet leaders. Stalin benevolently smiles and claps his hands at the sea of ecstatic faces.

The presence of Lenin as literally the foundation upon which Stalin stands and as a smaller portrait amidst other portraits and banners is quite significant: it implies that Stalin is a legitimate heir of the leader of the Revolution. However, he is also a "beloved leader," a father figure. The visual composition thus certifies Stalin's symbolic role in the Soviet pantheon and casts the Soviet people as an approving chorus.

### *Enemies of Socialism: Satire and Polemic as Potentially Double-Voiced Discourses*

Representation of internal and external enemies was integral to the Bolshevik ideological project from the very outset. Whether or not binary thinking is a

<sup>12</sup>Bonnell, *Iconography*, 155–168; and Brooks, 59–89, trace the depictions of Stalin from early images of Stalin with workers to the glorifications of Stalin as a father to his grateful people.





**Figure 5** “Beloved Stalin is the People’s Happiness” (1949). The Beloved Leader with His Happy People. Authors’ Collection of Soviet Posters.

traditional Russian pattern, as some have suggested (Bonnell, *Iconography* 187–224; Lotman and Uspensky), the Soviet visual propaganda made it into its chief rhetorical strategy. The rhetoric of demonology created a Manichean picture of the world, separating it into the unequivocally good and the unequivocally evil, without a neutral ground. As such, it was a necessary complement to the monologic discourse of the Party, allowing the leadership to discount any form of disagreement or reservation as the enemy’s attempt to undermine the building of socialism. By introducing the images and inviting the voices of its demonized “others,” however, the Soviet visual rhetoric—no doubt unwittingly—releases the dialogic potential of this rhetoric. As Bakhtin so pointedly observes, double-voiced discourses such as parody, satire, and polemic clash with their objects and so permit them to speak back to their author’s original intentions. Even overt polemic cannot utterly destroy its object, for one cannot strike a blow at that which no longer exists. Moreover, because visual propagandists imagined the enemy by drawing mostly on the rich satirical tradition of *lubok*, their attempts to silence and demonize “the other” produced a number of potentially dialogic scenarios, in which the enemies manage to parody and otherwise disrupt the supposedly inviolate ideological authority of the state.

Because of the abstract nature of the Party’s plans, the enemy often presented a much more tangible target for political artists. During the first five-year plan, “large mannequins representing particular types (*capitalist/burzhui*, priest, kulak, and others) occupied a central place in May Day and November 7 celebrations”

(Bonnell, *Iconography* 210). Posters, too, concentrated on developing easily recognizable images of the enemy. Accompanied by a poem by Bolshevik poet Demian Bednyi, the poster “Enemies of the Five-year Plan” (Figure 6) satirically conjures up the enemies of socialism. The artist uses the two-frame format to draw parallels between internal and external enemies. The left frame is crowded with caricatures of internal enemies (the landowner, kulak, priest, and drunkard). On the right are the exiled remnants of the old regime (the journalist, capitalist, Menshevik, and White officer), whose powerless hatred matches the rage of the enemies within. These characters are ludicrous in their grotesque impotence—they even lack articulate speech and express their animosity by howling, hissing, and baring teeth. But perhaps they are not as voiceless or lacking in resources to express their opposition as their “caged” appearance would suggest. The “corrupt” journalist has a pen tucked behind his ear, and the Menshevik is holding a newspaper. Thus, the exiled characters can be interpreted as trying to speak back from behind the satire—and so perhaps protesting the Soviet regime’s stifling of the freedom of speech. They are the “rogues” in Bakhtin’s sense—those outlaw figures whose malicious interest also serves to expose the state’s official lie.



**Figure 6** “Enemies of the Five-Year Plan.” The Landowner is Staring Like an Evil Watch-Dog; The Kulak is Breathing Heavily Through His Crooked Nose; The Drunk is Like a Fish from Sorrow; the Priest is Howling with a Frenzied Howl; the Corrupt Journalist is Hissing; the Capitalist is Baring His Teeth; the Menshevik is in a Rage; the White Warrior is Cursing; Like Uncaged Dogs, All Those who Stand for the Old Ways; Damn Wickedly the Five-Year Plan and Proclaim War on it; they Threatened to Ruin it, Understanding that the Plan Means their Imminent Death!; Demian Bednyi (Damian the Poor). *The Menshevik Herald* (Title of Newspaper) (1929). Enemies versus Economic Progress. Triptych Soviet Posters No. 42 (Identifier scpcp0055).

Besides reminding audiences of the ongoing class struggle and the need to stay on the correct side of the bipolar world, images of enemies also helped to account for numerous setbacks and failures in the supposedly flawless course charted by the Party and Comrade Stalin. Problems in industry were frequently explained by the sabotage of various workplace villains, from wreckers to loafers to red-tape bureaucrats, as shown in the poster “Through the socialist offensive” (Figure 7). Until the 1930s, “many of these people were considered redeemable, given proper guidance and enlightenment” (Bonnell, *Iconography* 193). This poster, however, consigns to the category of “class enemy” several types of villains. Those depicted on the left and resisting the advancement of the proletariat are a wrecker (who is conveniently clutching a “wrecking plan”), a drunkard/loafer (signified by a bottle), and a kulak (who is conventionally depicted with a beard and tall boots).



**Figure 7** “Through the Socialist Offensive Let us Crush the Resistance of our Class Enemy, Overcome Difficulties and Multiply Achievements” (1928–30?). “Wrecking Plan” (Words on Document at Top Left). Worker Versus Wrecker, Drunkard, Kulak, Bureaucrat. Authors’ Collection of Soviet Posters.

A smaller figure trying to thwart the worker on the right side of the frame is a generic villain whose suit and spectacles connote education and perhaps a managerial status. The placement of this last type of “enemy” between the worker and other bona fide villains is noteworthy. The indeterminate identity of this character suggests that any educated person in a management position could be an enemy in disguise. Indeed, the official culture of paranoia encouraged citizens to be on the lookout for enemies everywhere, including one’s circle of family and friends. The 1930s saw a proliferation of enemy types to match “an official policy of class warfare and a government campaign of persecution and terror directed first against the so-called bourgeois specialists, then against the peasantry, and then, from 1934 onward, against a broad spectrum of Soviet citizens, including many party members” (Bonnell, *Iconography* 211).

At the same time, the poster’s *lubok*-inspired design permits audiences to perceive the various enemy types with more ambivalence. While showing the proletariat as a red giant and rendering the villains as black dwarves, the composition nevertheless accords more individuality—and hence narrative agency—to these negative characters. The hulking yet oddly abstract body of the worker, whose face is almost entirely concealed, is visually aligned with a tractor, a conventional signifier of industrial and social progress in Soviet iconography. Yet this visual parallel also implies that the worker’s determination is that of an unthinking machine, not a human being. By comparison, the villains’ faces, fully exposed and animated, display more humanity in their grimacing than the virtually faceless, muscular body of the worker. Although their resistance is diminishing, judging by the shrinking visual space they are given in the poster, the bespectacled saboteur is shown still hanging on to the worker. This compositional element introduces contingency into the scenario of the “socialist offensive”; the worker’s exposed ear (his only completely visible feature) may, in fact, heed the pleas of his seemingly doomed enemy. Like “The Enemies of the Five-Year Plan” (Figure 6), these villains seem to exert “a counterforce against the author’s intentions” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 198).

As collectivization began to spread through the countryside, it was met with much resistance from peasants who often viewed the new policy with apocalyptic terror as the coming of the Antichrist or a return to tsarist-like serfdom. Women were especially vocal—and sometimes violent—in their opposition (Bonnell, “Peasant Woman”; Viola). Authorities attributed rural women’s protests to their political illiteracy and overall irrationality, the qualities that supposedly made peasant women vulnerable to the agitation from various internal enemies, especially priests and kulaks. The model peasant woman striding confidently toward the collective farm in “Peasant woman, join the collective farm” (Figure 8) obviously knows better than to listen to such counterrevolutionary “elements” (a trio of usual suspects—kulak, drunkard, and priest), who are pictured as Lilliputian figures desperately trying to arrest her deliberate movement. Given what we now know about the extent of female rural protest, the fictitious nature of this poster



**Figure 8** “Peasant Woman, Join the Collective Farm.” “Road to the Collective Farm” (Words on Sign) (1930). Collective Farmer Versus Drunkard, Kulak, Priest. Triptych Soviet Posters No. 93 (Identifier scpcp0110).

is particularly revealing. By projecting various politically undesirable qualities of the rural female population—their interest in private property, their religious piety, and so on—onto recognizable types of enemies, authorities purified the image of the peasant woman and made it into a model *homo sovieticus*. Images of women in rural propaganda thus aimed both to silence any opposition on the part of the peasants and to explain the failures of collectivization by the pernicious efforts of counterrevolutionary elements.

Yet the depiction of the drunkard, the priest, and the kulak as ridiculous anti-heroes unwittingly serves the dialogizing polemical function that throws the suspicion of falseness and interestedness back onto the authoritative word. As muted outlaw voices, these figures have the effect of questioning, however implicitly, the inevitability and correctness of the socialist course. In the poster

“Peasant woman, join the collective farm” (Figure 8) they seem to be offering a counterpoint—“Peasant woman, don’t join the collective farm!” The figure of the peasant woman is thus a battleground between the authoritative discourse of the state that exhorts her to follow the Party line and the muted voices of “counterrevolutionary” elements.

Even the most hostile overt polemic cannot silence its enemies. One of the enemies posters, “Let us destroy the kulaks as a class” (Figure 9), showing the fruits of collectivization, presents a vision of a model collective farm, featuring a symmetrical grouping of residences, expansive farm facilities, and modern farm equipment—signified by the long straight row of tractors—all against a bright



**Figure 9** “Let us Destroy the Kulaks as a Class.” “In the Areas of Total Collectivization, All Confiscated Property of the Kulaks, with the Exception of the Portion that Goes to Cancel their Debt to State and Cooperative Lenders, Shall go to Kolkhoz Funds to Cover Membership Fees of Poor Peasants and Sharecroppers Joining the Kolkhoz” (1930). Farm Collectivization: The Destruction of the Kulaks. Authors’ Collection of Soviet Posters.

red-orange background, indicative of a commitment to the building of socialism. A representative of the collective farm—who looks more like a pilot or a race-car driver—aims his tractor at a handful of kulaks. The kulaks are the seemingly more prosperous peasant farmers, enemies of the collective farms, whose doom is predestined by Stalin's promise to eliminate the kulaks as a class. As represented in the poster, the kulaks are a disoriented yet still ferocious bunch of abject scavengers, only half human, one of them trying to stop the tractor with his pitchfork, others scattering in panic or gnawing on animal carcasses. The destruction of the clergy, another enemy of the collective farms, is similarly preordained, as signified by the half-destroyed Orthodox church at the lower right corner of the collective farm. Given the relatively long text that accompanies the image and the relatively short caption, this poster was likely intended for an urban audience—or those urban enthusiasts of collectivization who were recruited to assist with the transformation of the peasant villages. The poster is particularly candid in its portrayal of the ruthlessness of Stalin's quest for total collectivization of the farms. Its implication is that anyone objecting to collectivization automatically belongs to the class destined for destruction. Even so, by depicting the kulaks as enemies destined for destruction, the poster invites us to hear, if nothing more, their cries of anger, anguish, and perhaps even acceptance of their fate.

Seen together, these posters collectively present an instructive narrative of political and cultural engineering from the top, performed against the backdrop of a traditional culture turned upside down but not completely obliterated. From the Revolution to the height of Stalinism, visual propaganda adjusted its modes of representation and its objects of praise and blame to the shifting objectives of the supposedly straight Party line. It remained consistent in its monologic treatment of "otherness," by either assimilating it, benignly, to the authoritative representation of social types (worker, peasant, ethnic national) or by vilifying it as enemy. Above all, it contributed to the theft of agency from the audience by treating its assent as a foregone conclusion. Nonetheless, it could not escape the dialogic potential released by its own attempts to depict its authoritative official word as internally persuasive and to depict its enemies as "others" in parodic and satiric and polemic portraits capable of speaking back at their creators.

### Implications for Rhetorical Studies

Bakhtin's expressed reservations about "rhetoric" as a discursive form and his championing of dialogic prose novels make it difficult to assimilate Bakhtin into the canon of rhetorical theory. This difficulty nevertheless has stimulated rhetorical theorists to think anew about the rhetorical tradition(s), the nature of rhetorical transactions, and, more broadly, about the responsibilities of rhetoric as an intellectual enterprise. Bakhtin, it is true, quite deliberately and systematically subordinates rhetoric to the novel (Halasek 2–4; Jasinski 24–25; Murphy 268–273). In comparison to novelistic discourse, in Bakhtin's view, rhetoric is

monologic, polemic, and dogmatic. We believe, however, that a Bakhtinian reading of the Soviet poster images helps to explain his seeming hostility to rhetoric as a response to the reality of the Soviet monologic rhetoric that he could neither escape nor ignore.

Bakhtin's agenda was not only literary but also political. Given his historical situation, Bakhtin's privileging of novelistic discourse should be regarded as a politically informed choice rather than an opposition to rhetoric as a discursive form or a discourse tradition. In response to the fictional world of the alleged Soviet utopia represented by ubiquitous state-sponsored public images, Bakhtin created alternative fictional worlds—polyphony, heteroglossia, carnival—celebrating multi-vocality, equality, freedom, and diversity. Not surprisingly, he found the highest expression of these ideas not in any contemporary genre of public culture but in the novels of authors from other historical epochs and cultures, namely in the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and François Rabelais.

Over and against a strictly disciplinary interpretation of Bakhtin, we maintain that his chief theoretical and critical distinction is between monologue and dialogue. This distinction does not reside in any specific generic features of discourse. Rather, it is manifested in the orientation of discourse toward “the other.” Taking monologue and dialogue as opposing tendencies in the construction of any socially significant utterance, we can go beyond the position that pits literature against rhetoric or philosophy and instead endeavor to evaluate discourses according to their political and ethical responsibility toward their various “others.”

Bakhtin recognized both monologic and dialogic tendencies in rhetoric because rhetoric's orientation toward its listener is its “basic constitutive feature” (“Discourse” 280). That orientation can be deliberately suppressed, the listeners ignored, their voices silenced. Such was, indeed, the practice of Soviet political art. But a Bakhtinian dialogic perspective, supported by a historical account of these suppressed and silenced voices, can restore the dialogic potential of even the most pervasive and persistent monologic rhetoric, such as the monologic rhetoric of the Soviet state. Our reading of Soviet posters extends the understanding of rhetorical invention as an act of subversion of “the master's tools” by those on the margins of dominant culture to argue that even the most dominant forms of rhetoric are burdened with dialogic elements despite their apparently monologic intention. Scholars agree that rhetorical invention always relies on previous discourse and therefore must engage the available symbolic resources (Campbell 112; Demo; Gates; Owens 3–11). Even the authoritative discourse of the Soviet state by necessity had to appropriate existing resources of language and imagery in order to become culturally legible and internally persuasive. However, by building upon older forms of pictorial representation and narrative, Soviet visual propaganda allowed in a host of cultural assumptions and reading conventions. Some of these cultural conventions—such as the practice of Orthodox religious ritual and the veneration of icons—arguably contributed to the promotion of Stalin's personality cult while others—especially the folk tradition of satirical



and parodic laughter embodied by the *lubok*—likely inspired subversive readings. Therefore, no regime, however authoritarian and oppressive, can fully control or silence its cultural and ideological “others” because it does not own the rhetorical tools it needs to convert the unconverted and to rally the faithful.

## Note

Full-color high-resolution versions of all images in this article are available on the RSA website, <http://www.rhetoricsociety.org/>. Navigate to the RSQ section of the site and then to the abstract for this article.

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