



BOOK REVIEW

**Olga Shaburova, Sovetskii mir v otkrytke
[The Soviet World in Postcards] (2017)
Moscow-Ekaterinburg: “Kabinetnyj uchenyj”**

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Contemporary humanitarian studies sometimes resemble current artistic practices. Both artists and scholars select as their object the exploration of un contemplated phenomena and subjects. Thus, as early as the 1970s, Vadim Siddur transformed a shapeless heap of scrap metal into the face of Einstein; when, several years ago, the street artist Pasha 183 placed the memorial poster “All remember. All mourn” on the window of the “*Akademkniga*” bookshop in Ekaterinburg, which was no longer functioning at the time, his gesture became a kind of requiem for the community of scholars and students who met at the checkout, united by their love of books in the unique environment provided by this shop in the university city.

In her topic for scholarly analysis, Olga Shaburova selected something originally costing no more than a kopeck, something that people (some with regrets and others without compunction) took for recycling, or retained in family archives as memoirs of the past, something without which it is impossible to imagine any Soviet family. We are talking, of course, about handwritten postcards.

The postcard is seen as an important symbol of the Soviet way of life; the ritual of writing postcards – as an integral part of the Soviet order, a special communication through which the public and private spheres are brought into a state of desired harmony.

The author promptly explains that, in considering the postcard as an agent that has absorbed the visual symbols of the Soviet era, not all its axiological and symbolic resources can be revealed.

Shaburova’s book recalls the popular science film, a cinema genre developed and popularised during the Soviet period. This was a rather complex genre inasmuch as it was not always possible to transform scientific knowledge into an art form. In successfully incorporating the rich graphic material (hundreds of

everyday Soviet life. Since the potential readership of the book is wide, the author has managed to keep a balance between purely scientific and informational discourses. Capturing the phenomenon of the postcard requires dual encoding for the two surfaces – (postcards) into a scientific framework, the author has relied on research in the field of social philosophy – in particular, the concept of everyday life – thereby expanding the research field of picture and greeting text – representing two different information sources: the generic stock imagery and the individual private messages.

Although in terms of type of communication and decorative and applied arts genre, the birth of the postcard had already taken place at the end of the 19th century, the author limits the subject of research to the Soviet period – specifically, the period from the 1950s to the 1980s. The term “Soviet world” acquires a literal as well as figurative meaning [translator’s note: the Russian phrase “*Sovietskiy mir*” can be translated as either “Soviet world” or “Soviet peace” – *Pax Sovietica*]. *Pax Sovietica* refers to the time of peace after World War II, following the Twentieth Congress of the Party and leading up to the late Soviet period. With its diverse institutions, commonality and disciplinary practices, the Soviet world encompassed particular communication forms. After all, despite its ideological unity, the Soviet world was highly varied if only because of its multi-ethnic character. And here immediately it is desirable to learn from the author: was the specific national character traced in the outer and inner sides of the postcard or did these differences reside only in the language of the message? The Soviet greeting cards differed from those of the other socialist countries, in a way that, for example, the newsreels of Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Bulgaria and others, which wholly reduplicated Soviet newsreels, did not.

The book draws attention to the fact that the postcard boom coincides with the “thaw” and ensuing late Soviet era. This is understandable, since it was during these periods that the burgeoning interest in private life, which is expressed marvelously in the literature and poetic cinema of the “thaw” period, was taking place. However, the author shows how the value of private life (a postcard is an open, private message) is correlated with ideological messages concerning power relationships. Indeed, in order for the postcard to enter into everyday customary life, it was necessary, at least, for it to have been produced in large editions with a certain specified iconography. And here the author provides stunning gigantism of numbers (for example, the printed output of the postcard artist Zarubin during the 70s-80s totaled 1,588,270,000 copies). Thus it was that a minimal private missive came under the close attention of the authorities; in referring to the 1953 decision of the USSR Council of Ministers “On the improvement of the mass media of graphic art products and literature according to artistic criteria”, and on the Council of Ministers’ decision, which adopted in 1966 a resolution “On the expansion of the production of high-quality color postcards and art books”, the author shows how design affected the officially promulgated system of values.

Thus, postcards are issued, their quality improves with their diversified subject matter, and, once transformed into a mandatory ritual of Soviet life, the practice of writing, sending and receiving postcards acquires the character of everyday practices. Indeed, recalling my own childhood and youth, I can admit that in our family the topic of the necessity to buy cards for the upcoming holidays was regularly discussed. The

phenomenon of the postcard is curious in the fact that it combines the everyday and the festive. The routine of writing text messages and the cyclicity of the correspondences was connected with the desire to produce a new kind of quality. The author examines the canon of writing the text, in which the official is adjacent to the private. All postcards conform to a two-part form – “holiday congratulations and wishes”; this is the name of the first chapter of the book, in which the postcard is compared with the form of the poster. The dominant heroic discourse of the poster is lyrically complemented in the postcard; in the postcard, the admonitory tone characteristic of the poster will be replaced by one simulating free choice.

The ritual greeting is seen in terms of a mass communication practice, in which power-related problems for the organisation and consolidation of the axiological construction of the Soviet world are combined; this takes place according to the Soviet festive calendar, e.g. “November holidays”, New Year, “May holidays”. Postcards also refer to the emergence of new holidays – Day of the Soviet Army, International Women’s Day on 8 March, and, from 1965, Victory Day. People voluntarily took on board the prerogatives of power and authority, converting them into personal stories expressed in postcard texts.

Olga Viktorovna considers the practice of postcard holiday congratulations following Yurchak’s definition of the “endorsed ritual” (Yurchak 2014). Is the author interested, as an individual, in “breaking through” into the mechanically-induced behaviours? In exploring greeting texts, we find ourselves witnessing the emergence of the personal. As a rule, official congratulations on the 50th anniversary of the Soviet army, May Day or the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution were supplemented by a set of stories about health, illness, consumer victories or defeats (about the carpet her husband did not like, about the great piece of luck on the purchase of a “gift for a first grader”, or the inability to “obtain” a Voskresenskaya primer). The study of greeting texts reveals a hierarchy of material wealth: the first priority is to obtain an apartment, then a TV then a refrigerator.

The author explores the postcard messages so passionately and enthusiastically that she sometimes loses the sense of distance, not noticing that these texts contain a lot of clichés and stereotypes. There is an idealisation of the process of writing holiday congratulations, which does not take into account the fact that writing such greetings was very often a formalised ritual.

The second chapter, entitled “Glory to Labour: Soviet matrix”, marshalls a huge quantity of graphic material to examine the ideological dominance of greeting cards, showing how the official rhetoric of labour achievements, struggle and progress is transformed into personal, joyful, festive stories.

The studies of a number of different representations of socialist labour allow us to discover in them the characteristics of festive activities. Firstly, socialist labour is understood as free labour, not in the sense of individualistic liberalism, but rather in terms of harmonious unity with the team. Secondly, it is this feeling of harmonious unity that led to a positive emotional effect. On holiday pragmatics, Gadamer pointed out: “The essence of the holiday is not only in its separation from the ordinary, and not only in aimlessness and unconcern, which is anticipated and enjoyed – in the holiday

there is also a certain **positive** content” (Gadamer 1991, p. 157). Arkadii Eremeev also wrote on the positive leitmotiv, understanding the holiday “as the production of happiness, positive emotions, as well as harmony, optimal conditions, additional enjoyment, pleasure, etc.” (Eremeev 1997, p. 189). It is this specifically this labour, having not only a utilitarian but also a symbolic component that was necessary for the realisation of the socialist project.

Leisure activities (having a bourgeois character) were replaced by non-alienated labour; moreover, primarily, by hard, uninterrupted physical work (“Saturdays” and “Sundays” at weekends), but it is precisely such a way of life that should be realised as something desirable (holiday). People who lost their jobs during the collapse of the USSR retained this basic attitude. For example, in the video film by Leonid Tishkov, constituting one of the parts of the project by the artist about the *Verkhoturys* skate factory (Art Residence II Industrial Biennale), an employee acknowledges that “going to work was a holiday and going home was not always what you wanted.”

In order to construct a new type of everyday life (“festive everyday life”), it was not only political means that were used, but also artistic – posters, newsreels and postcards. In contrast to the above-mentioned means, the postcard is relatively democratic; the communications it conduces are mainly private in nature and its public is broad. It is a consequence of the special aesthetic form that the representations of work activities portrayed on postcards have a festive character.

Joy in labour in terms of creativity and making was an integral leitmotiv value for the Soviet citizen. However, the post-Soviet citizen is more likely to refer to work simply in terms of necessity: as noted by D. Bykov, “to glorify the process, it is all the same whether one glorifies alimentation or defecation, since all three components of the cycle (labour – consumption of its products – output of secondary product) are, in general, immanent and rather coarse features of human nature” (Bykov 2014). But, on the other hand, continues the author, “it turns out that labour involves self-hypnosis of the very highest order. What kind of plot of land, ploughed by you personally, inspires you to think about your own power ... What is even fear of destitution – the main fear of the Soviet population during the transition – partly overcome by labour, moreover, by normal, systematic labour” (Bykov 2014).

The iconography of labour receives a variety of interpretations in the Soviet postcard: firstly, industrial-construction symbolism; secondly, rural labour; thirdly, various professional holidays; and finally, the benefits of labour to children. Images of work processes are presented in the main types of postcards – November holidays, New Year, International Women’s Day, and, of course, May Day. The frequency of images of various objects of labour turns out to be representative. So, the champion in terms of the number of “visual references” in the postcards becomes the crane, a new vertical of Soviet life: it is construction cranes and tower-blocks on the shop floor as well as cranes outside of construction projects, generally expressing the idea of construction as the main leitmotiv of Soviet post-war life. If in the 30s, industrialisation found its visual expression in the form of tractors and tractor-drivers (viz. the 1939 cult film “The Tractorists” [*Traktoristy*] by I. Pyr’ev and the song “Give us a ride on the tractor, Petrusha” [*Prokati nas, Petrusha, na traktore*]), then, in the 60s, the place occupied

by the tractor was taken by the “high-riggers”. Postcards apparently complement the popular song “We are not stokers or carpenters” [“*Ne kochegary my, ne plotniki*”] from the 1957 Aleksander Zarkhi’s movie “The Height” [“*Vysota*”]. The postcard unwittingly served as a navigator in the world of working professions – plumbers, masons, welders, metallurgists and surveyors looked at the Soviet man, inviting the worthy to celebrate the New Year and the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. The journey through professions was not limited to the city either – the rural working life was transformed into an aesthetic form of a card in a holiday greeting card that looked at combine drivers, breeders, growers and jolly farmers returning from haymaking. Naturally, after April 1961, a new hero emerged – the astronaut.

Separate chapters are devoted to the analysis of the iconography of cities, in which the urban environment appears like a Renaissance landscape through the window, to postcards about friendship and love; in a word, outgoing paper with a sad figure of a postman.

And although I do not always agree with the author’s nostalgia for the Soviet world as a constructive life practice, one thing that is placed before us in an excellent design performance new slice of everyday life, which Baudrillard (one of Shaburova’s favourite authors) referred to as the mythological subject, minimally functional and “most significant”.

References

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