

Question 4. From the series of IMAGINED WORLDS research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

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Word count: 2416

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The Russian Revolution (1917) was a time of great change for Russia Socially and Politically. The changes occurring had a great affect on the arts and thus gave rise to the constructivism design movement. It is argued that the formation of constructivism was integral to the success of the Russian revolution as propaganda created under its guise provided a vital connection between it and the Russian populace. But just how integral was constructivism to the success of the Russian revolution and the subsequent rise of the Bolshevik Establishment of the Soviet Union? In order to answer this question, I will construct a 2500-word essay critically analysing key images from the period. Following the work of practitioners such as Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco I will semiotically analyse each image to gain a greater understanding of their perceived meaning and question whether the signs used could be interpreted differently thus creating a different picture. I will also pay close attention to how important the context of culture is to how the signs used are read.

"WE DECLARE UNCOMPROMISING WAR ON ART!" (*manifesto of the constructivist group, 1922*) are the words of Aleksei Gan a considered co-founder of the Russian constructivism movement. It is these words that Gan and his associates Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko base their ideology for the constructivism movement within pre-communist Russia as they seek new art forms to serve the masses (see figure 1.1 as an example of art 'war' was declared upon) . These new art forms proposed building and science to replace artistic expression as their end goal was to influence much more than just art, namely architecture, design, and all mass-produced objects. These methods sought to break the stereotype of what an artist is by replacing the notion of a painter with an engineer, their work used modest materials and geometric forms, often created using utilitarian objects such as compasses or rulers (I will evaluate this further on page 2 of the essay). During the period of constructivism's rise Russia was undergoing social and political change as a revolution had begun under the lead of Vladimir Lenin, which saw the Russian aristocracy abolished and the Bolshevik establishment of the Soviet Union instated (1917-1923). Constructivism therefore set its sights on creating social and political change through what is now known as "agitprop" - ("agitation" and "propaganda"). During this period of "agitprop" (1919-1922) began the "Rosta Windows" project, the Russian Telegraph agency (ROSTA) published more than 1,500 original posters created by artists such

as Alexander Rodchenko. These posters used photomontage techniques to publicise the social and political concerns of the Russian citizens. Within my next paragraph I will discuss an image from the period by semiotically analysing how they convey such themes.



Fig 1: El Lissitzky, *beat the whites with the Red Wedge*, 1919

Figure 1 is an image created by El Lissitzky a prominent artist, architect, designer, and typographer during the constructivism movement. The image titled 'Beat the whites with the red wedge' (1919) is one of his earliest attempts at propagandistic art that was becoming common within the movement. This piece of politically charged work was created in support of the red army as the Bolsheviks led by Lenin began their revolution against the aristocracy. To fully understand this piece of work I will semiotically analyse its formation and apply context where necessary.

'From birth we are taught how to read signs and symbols' (Berger, 1972) meaning that the context of past teachings will have a profound effect on how we judge images. An example of this context embedded within us is the notion of the 'signifier' and the 'signified' (Barthes, 1977:56) that leads us to establish a connection with such things as colour. The colour within this image is signature to El Lissitzky's work at the time and reinforces the message given within the works title. By applying context from the period, we can deduce that the 'signifier' red signifies the Bolshevik revolutionaries who were coined 'the red army' and the white, the anti-communist 'white army'. The colours and shapes created using utilitarian objects therefore take on symbolic significance when the context of the images title is applied. The curved white walls of the circle are being pierced by the sharp point of the 'red wedge' a clear connotation that the red army has pierced the defences of the white. The position of the 'red wedge' within the vast white space connotes that the 'white army' has also been breached from within. The shape of the wedge could also be interpreted to have a Paradigmatic relation with the shape of a chevron, which when applied at the same angle as the 'red wedge' signifies something to be 'greater than' its counterpart connoting the superiority of 'the red army'. The stark contrast of the black could also be interpreted as the white army being backed into a corner. Conversely it is possible for these symbols to be interpreted differently. As stated earlier 'from birth we are taught how to read signs and symbols' (Berger, 1972) meaning that our association with

signs and symbols are based on the teachers understanding. Meaning you could argue that peoples understanding of signs will be different and therefore the symbols used within the image have a different meaning. For example, the vast white space could be seen as the 'white army' engulfing the red Bolshevik revolutionaries which is converse to the artists aimed expression. We must also consider the importance the cultural context surrounding this image has to how the signs and symbols are interpreted. By taking away the title, the main attributor to significant context, the image suddenly loses its connoted symbolism of the Bolshevik revolution and solely relies on the symbolism of its colours and shapes. The stark contrast of the colours could therefore create confusion as to which area of the image is positive? I will construct a similar semiotic evaluation of another prominent constructivist image within my next paragraph and aim to detect any patterns or similarities.



Fig 2 : Gustav Klutsis ,*Oppressed Peoples of the Whole World (...)*, 1924

Figure 2 is a poster created by Gustav Klutsis another prominent figure of constructivism and a pioneer of photomontage. The poster titled "Oppressed peoples of the whole world" (1924) was created during the Bolsheviks rise to power and is a typical example of what we would now equate to be a constructivist propaganda poster.

The image depicts Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Bolshevik establishment of the Soviet Union, addressing what was considered as the "Oppressed peoples of the whole world" at the time. The use of colour is almost identical to figure 1 and a clear pattern is forming within constructivist art, the 'signifier' red once again signifies the Bolshevik establishment and their 'red army'. The stark contrast of the red draws attention to the now illustrious message "oppressed peoples of the world, under the banner of comintern overthrow imperialism" which when put into context is a clear message to the 'oppressed' people that communism is the answer to all their problems. The use of the word "oppressed" denotes that anything but a communist government will treat its subjects unfairly and the imagery of Lenin voicing this opinion connotes that he and the Bolshevik establishment are the people who will exact this change for them. If we apply the theory of Ostension (Eco, 1976, p.224:26) It could be argued that the imagery of Lenin himself in this instance has become a form of 'metonymy' as without the

context the signifying red brings he stands alone as the face of the communist solution. The powerful imagery of the 'oppressed' people, which appear to be the working class, also creates a sense of fellowship as they have been collated in a way to suggest that they are a collective. It is unclear but there is an argument to suggest that these people depicted could be from different ethnic and religious backgrounds signifying that communism is for everyone again creating this sense of togetherness. Contrarily it is possible for these signs embedded within the image to be interpreted differently, an example of this is the imagery of Lenin. With the use of hindsight, it is possible to attribute the depiction of Vladimir Lenin here to be somewhat similar to a dictator such as Adolf Hitler. The towering scale of his depiction compared to the "oppressed" people could connote a feeling of superiority not dissimilar to the imagery used within Fascism's rise in Germany during the late 1930's. The omission of the works title, and the context it brings, could then lead to the signification of the working-class collective being "oppressed" by communism which is converse to Klutis's aimed expression. I will continue my analysis of Constructivist art within my next paragraph as I aim to document a semiotic response to another prominent artwork by Gustav Klutis drawing on their similarities.



Fig 3: Gustav Klutis, *'Let's fulfil the plan of great works'*, 1930

Figure 3 is another poster created by Gustav Klutis using photomontage techniques. The Political revolution is now over with the death of Vladimir Lenin (1924) giving way to the industrial revolution. Lenin's successor General secretary Joseph Stalin now begins his first five-year plan to build up the Soviet union's economy a plan this image is in aid of.

The use of colour is almost identical to figure 2 as the bold red of the Bolshevik Establishment dominates the images background and once again draws attention to its typographical counterpart – "lets fulfil the plan of great works" signifying that this is the message of the political party. The imagery of the hands once more creates a feeling of fellowship, as the context of the posters title

connotes that it will take the public as a cohesive unit to 'fulfil the plan of great works'. The use of male and female faces further suggests that Russia as a whole will need to get behind the Bolshevik Establishment throughout these endeavours. The use of metonymy is once again present, in this case the hands signifying the work that will need to be done in order to 'fulfil the plan'. Conversely without the titles context it is possible that these signs could be interpreted differently. Under close examination you will see that the hands used within the imagery are all the same, a small detail which could suggest the feeling of being controlled, such as under the rule of dictatorship. Pair this with the stark red and an image of oppression under communism could be created, a meaning not intended by the artist. Within my next paragraph I will conduct my final analysis of another prominent constructivist poster created by Alexander Rodchenko during the period of agitprop.



Fig 4: Alexander Rodchenko, *Books (Please)! In All Branches of Knowledge*, 1924

Figure 4 is arguably one of the most recognizable posters created during the period of agitprop (1918-1929). The work titled "books (please)! In all branches of knowledge" was created by Alexander Rodchenko and is a typical example of the photomontage technique endorsed by the constructivist artists of the period. The work, like its counterparts, harbours political intention and therefore to fully understand how such a piece could have influenced this period of social and political revolution I must once again semiotically evaluate its structure.

The image depicts Lilya Brik, an associate of Russia's cultural avant-garde, and subsequent friend of Rodchenko. Brik here exemplifies a woman 'joyfully' exclaiming "Books (please!) In all branches of knowledge" a clear statement of intent towards women's rights. On closer inspection it is clear to see that the kerchief donned upon Brik's head (a common item of clothing among the 'peasant' Russian community) signifies the connotation of the working class, a common theme we have deduced from the previous figures. The bold red, once put into context, connotes the Bolshevik establishment, and therefore suggests communism strives for such gender equality sought by the working-class women of Russia. The 'joyful' facial expression of Brik implies that the working-class women are rejoicing at communism's role within facilitating the equal rights they desire and thus could be interpreted as the Bolshevik establishment being the answer to all their problems. However, as we have established previously, our association with signs is directly influenced by our teachers understanding as 'from birth we are taught how to read signs and symbols' (Berger, 1972) meaning it is possible for the image to be interpreted differently, for example the 'joyful' expression. Joy in the context of a sign signifies all forms of happiness including laughter meaning depending on one's interpretation of joy, this facial

expression could be seen as a mocking of the working class, as in this form a statement of equality directed toward them is being laughed at. If we apply the notion that context 'is capable of reproposing as new' (Eco, 1984) the signification of the communist red paired with this interpretation of the joyful expression suggests that communism mocks the working class, in particular women which as we know is converse to the artists intention.

In summary then we can deduce that yes, the constructivism design movement played a pivotal role within the success of the Bolshevik Establishment of the soviet union's rise to power during the Russian revolution. "War" was certainly "declared" on the expressionist archetype that art previously displayed within the period as the notion of the 'engineer' took rise. The signs used within the propagandistic poster's create a coherent picture that glorify the Bolshevik establishments work and communist ideologies, which would seemingly have a positive effect on the Russian population's thoughts toward the political party. It is also clear that the cultural context surrounding the period of revolution are integral to the success of the imagery used and therefore the proposed misinterpretation of said imagery, in my opinion, can now be deduced as false. In order for the misinterpretation to occur there must be an absence of cultural context, which given the circumstances, would not occur due to the overriding factor that the images were created during a time of social and political revolt that would in turn effect the populace as a whole. It is also important to consider that with hindsight we can confirm that the imagery used to glorify the Bolshevik establishment and their support of the people is not entirely accurate (Gulags , poverty) however this would not have been known at the time of creation and therefore holds no weight within an argument of the posters effectiveness.

Figures:

Fig 1: El Lissitzky. (1919) *'beat the whites with the Red Wedge'* (digital image)

Fig 2: Gustav Klutsis. (1924) *Oppressed Peoples of the Whole World, under the banner of comintern overthrow imperialism* (digital image)

Fig 3: Gustav Klutsis. (1930) *'Let's fulfil the plan of great works'* (digital image)

Fig 4: Alexander Rodchenko. (1924) *Books (Please)! In All Branches of Knowledge* (digital image)

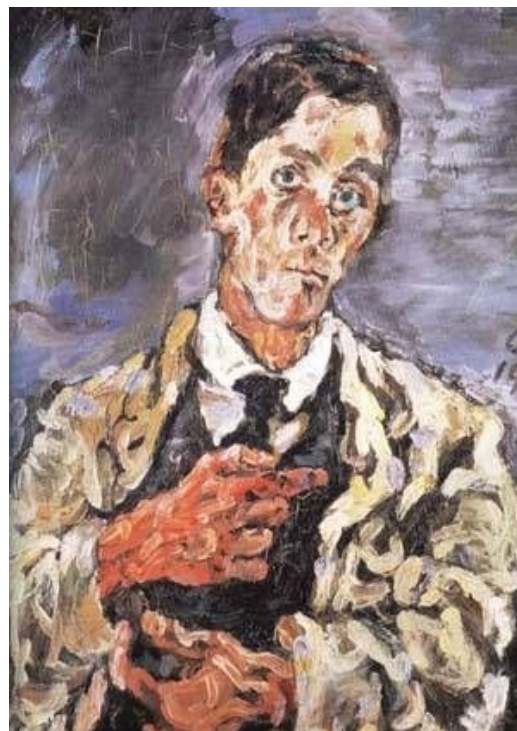


Fig 1.1 : Oskar Kokoschka, *self-portrait*, 1917 (an example of self expression art artists such as Alexander Rodchenko were opposed too)

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