



De wederzijdse relatie tussen het verbale en het visuele op de boekomslagen van Majakovski: de verborgen betekenis van de avant-garde

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**Interrelation of the verbal and the visual in Mayakovsky's book covers:
A hidden meaning of the avant-garde text**

SUMMARY

The introduction gives background information on the subject and provides insight into the present understanding of the “problem of the book cover”; there is also a survey of the literature dedicated to the editions of Mayakovsky's book that were published during his life. Moreover, it discusses the problem of the “hidden” meaning of a book cover: the pictorial-textual composition of the book cover does not only have utilitarian and decorative functions; it sometimes reflects the author's intentions and even may become a key to the understanding of the book, enriching the author's playful strategies and appealing either to the narrow circle of “those who understand” or to the readers who are familiar with “the art of seeing”.

The first chapter, “Mayakovsky's ‘Cryptography’ or Magic Squares of the Russian Avant-garde” has mainly a conceptual character. It discusses for the first time the problem of the playful character of a number of early book covers by Mayakovsky and, more in general, the problem of the playful potential of the book cover as such. The structure-forming matrix of five covers by Mayakovsky is considered the so-called Magic Square, in its more classical version — the Sator Arepo Square (or its numerical invariant — the Mars Square). Besides, in a separate paragraph of the dissertation there is a discussion of a particular, not discovered before, numerical “code” of the Russian avant-garde — a predilection for number “13” not only with Mayakovsky himself, but with his entire futurist entourage. Accordingly, the textual compositions on a number of Mayakovsky's book covers can be seen as the author's subtle play with sacral symbols that are simultaneously realized on various levels: verbal, numerical, pictorial and spatial-geometrical.

Mayakovsky's design of several of his book covers reminds one of the baroque tradition of *carmina curiosa*, when the graphic text level is presented as semantically relevant — in this way, the title as well as the graphics on the cover become a transformable field of sacral meanings.

The “typographic revolution” realised by the avant-garde is one of the achievements of an epoch that radically changed the image of the book. A number of declarations by the futurists and later theoretical works (by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Nikolay Burlyuk, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksey Kruchenykh, Aleksey Chicherin, El Lissitzky, Grigory Vinokur, Pavel Florensky and others) in some way or another state the problem of visual, graphic language, i.e. graphics presented as a linguistic problem.

Already the early avant-garde considers the audience (reader, viewer) an integral part of the artistic process: the author acts as someone who irritates, provokes and manipulates the audience’s reactions. In other words, the reader/viewer must become a co-author — this idea was already stated in one of the early declarations by Nikolay Kulbin, published in “The Studio of the Impressionists” (1910): “The theory of creative art <...> seems to me to consist of three parts, that is the psychology of the artist, of the painting and of the viewer...” In a later work he explicitly says that “the artist does not present a representation in the exact sense, but he presents something that irritates the creative imagination of the viewer”.

A number of texts by Mayakovsky that emphasize the “magic” and the “mathematical harmony” of poetic discourse, and — what is particularly interesting — some hints by contemporaries, can be perceived as “keys” to the reading of his books or as indications of the deeper meaning of the visual-verbal complex of his book covers. In this connection utterances of Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh are analyzed, which give additional justification for the search for the hidden meaning of the avant-garde text.

The second chapter, “Books by Mayakovsky: politics, statistics, aesthetics”, is devoted to a thorough analysis of all Mayakovsky’s books that were published during his life. Annual statistics are presented: on average the poet published six books a year in the course of seventeen years — from 1913 to 1930; the heyday was 1923: nineteen books. Comparative statistical data are offered on publications by Igor Severyanin, Sergey Esenin, Demyan Bedny — in various years “rivals” of Mayakovsky in the poetical hierarchy.

It is demonstrated that the widespread opinion that the majority of Mayakovsky’s books belongs to constructivism is erroneous.

Analysis of the book covers made by Mayakovsky himself made it possible to attribute to him a number of anonymous covers on the basis of the similarity of structural methods and characteristic typography.

A separate section is devoted to Mayakovsky’s books for children, which were canonized in the second half of the 1930s as classical literature for children and were reprinted many

times in millions of copies. During the author's life they got severe critical reviews, which led to their boycott and withdrawal from libraries.

Finally, a separate section deals with the *name* of Mayakovsky on his book covers: among the books by Mayakovsky that were published during his life there are no less than seventeen in which the *name* of the author occurs in the title, in this way making it a particular "brand". In three early books the poet uses this life creating strategy to the highest extent: when the name of the author on the book covers in fact replaces the title.

The third chapter, "Two constructivist masterpieces of 1923", is devoted to a detailed investigation of the most important books by Mayakovsky — "For the Voice" and "About That".

The collection "For the Voice", designed by El Lissitzky, consists of thirteen poems. The book was published in Berlin in 1923 and is a model of constructivism, a striking manifesto of the new "industrial" aesthetics. The book is a ledger, a musical score, a thing and a construction, and embodies all of Lissitzky's theories about the new, socially charged visual book. The chapter analyses the cover, the title-page and the frontispiece of the book with their typographic ideograms according to their particular visual program.

Mayakovsky's poem "About That", published in May 1923 with photomontages by Alexander Rodchenko, amazed the poet's contemporaries. Later it was recognized as the most expressive experience of the visualization of the poetical word. This innovative work by Rodchenko is of particular importance, due to the fact that the author and the characters of the poem "About That" (i.e. Mayakovsky himself and Lilya Brik) for the first time in the history of book design were included in the photographic illustrations of the book as real people: staged photographs of the poet and his beloved were commissioned by Rodchenko to portrait photographer Abram Shterenberg. All in all, eight photomontages were included in the book, but there also exist five variants of four of them, chosen by the artist (or maybe by the poet himself) for illustrations.

The chapter analyses the reactions of the contemporaries to this poem, who were often shocked by this synthesis of word and image, by the "breakthrough" from everyday life into art, and by the direct passage from literature into reality. There is also a detailed analysis of the book cover and of the ambivalent title of the poem. To a certain extent, the text of the poem, as well as Rodchenko's illustrations, are similar to Nikolay Evreinov's "theatre for oneself", its subtleties being clear only to the chosen few. The chapter points out the prosaic analogue of Mayakovsky's poem, which was published almost at the same time — the epistolary novel "ZOO or Letters Not About Love" by Viktor Shklovsky (Berlin, 1923).

In this chapter also appear works by other artists who borrowed the design solutions of El Lissitzky and Rodchenko; these borrowings range from pastiche to plagiarism.

On the whole, 1923 can be considered as the year of the highest achievement for Mayakovsky: in the first place, in this year appeared nineteen of his books, in the second place, nothing that can be compared to conceptual books as “For the Voice” and “About That” was ever published.

The fourth chapter, “A complete catalogue-album of books by Mayakovsky published during his life”, is of a factual character: the catalogue is the most complete record of all the books by Mayakovsky that were published during his life. Every book is provided with an extensive bibliographic description — apart from standard data it contains: month of publication, size, number of pages, print run, the presence of portraits and dedications, information about the number and character of the illustrations, and about the designers of the book covers (in some cases artists were identified by deciphering their monograms).

The catalogue is made up in chronological order and consists of five sections. For the first time Mayakovsky’s musical editions are described; for the first time also the book covers that Mayakovsky published in co-authorship, the covers he made for collective editions and the drafts of covers for not realized publications.

The catalogue-album containing the description of the 110 editions of Mayakovsky published during his life and 126 reproductions of all the above mentioned book covers was earlier published by the author of the dissertation.

The Supplements are devoted to two parallel topics that cast additional light on the problems raised in the dissertation.

Supplement 1. “To the numerological ‘codes’ of the avant-garde: number ‘7’ in the poetry of Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, Kamensky” develops the problem of numerology which was introduced in the first chapter. On the basis of a number of texts by Mayakovsky himself and by some of his close associates (first of all Velimir Khlebnikov and Vasili Kamensky) and on the basis of the structure of some important futurist collections of poetry, it is demonstrated that for the members of the literary association “Gileya”/cubo-futurists / budetlyane the number “seven” represented the idea of the universe, the entire composition of the futurist “pantheon”.

Supplement 2. “Ararat” and “Columns” by Nikolay Zabolotsky: book covers as the element of playful strategy” is devoted to the analysis of the covers of the famous debut

collection of poetry by Nikolay Zabolotsky, “Columns” (Leningrad, 1929), and the preceding hand-written collection “Ararat”. The hypothesis that Zabolotsky intentionally plays with the titles of these books and with the graphic visualization of these titles is confirmed by his extremely intriguing correspondence with the artist Lev Yudin. Two surviving letters of Zabolotsky to Yudin make it possible to talk about the peculiar ‘secret geometry’ that was programmed by the author on his book cover and that was addressed to those who are familiar with “the art of seeing” (“at first glance there is nothing special there, but if you look closely you will find something absolutely new...”). Particular “secret signs”, a common element in the esoteric tradition as well as in adventure novels, are used by the poet in his own playful strategy.

The analysis reveals the hidden potential of the two book covers, their anagrammatical stratum, as well as their possible expressionistic and dadaistic prototypes which appeared a decade earlier in Munich and Hannover.

The dissertation contains illustrations and six iconographic tables in which the important visual contexts of Mayakovsky’s book covers are generalised.

The dissertation contains a List of abbreviations and a Bibliography (more than 340 titles).

On the subject of the dissertation a monograph¹ and sixteen articles (in Russia, The Netherlands and USA) were published by the author; one more article is in print.

¹ Rossomakhin, A.A. *Magic Squares of the Russian Avant-Garde: The case of Mayakovsky; with the complete illustrated Catalogue of books by V.V. Mayakovsky printed during his life*. St. Petersburg: Vita Nova, 2012. — 176 p., 200 ill. — 170×240 mm. ISBN 978-5-93898-380-9.