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***Picturing the cosmos. A visual history of early Soviet space endeavour.* Bristol: Intellect, 2017, 205 pages, 125 colour plates**

ISBN: 9781783207428, Price £27.50

Reviewed by Dennis Zuev, Research Fellow, Centre for Sociological Research, CIES-ISCTE, IUL, Portugal and Institute for Advanced Studies in Science, Technology and Society, IAS-STS, Graz, Austria

## ***The Visual Making of the Soviet Cosmic Exploration***

Space exploration in Soviet Union and Russia has been a source of national pride and essential part of the Soviet visual sphere, where the figure of cosmonaut and the images of space roving rockets and spaceships appeared in different ideological messages, posters, postal stamps. Space and the cosmonauts who explored it became a part of the material culture with multiple objects: glass-holders filling the kitchen cabinets, playground objects, toys and children clothes, posters in schools and work places. The world tour of Yuri Gagarin, the first cosmonaut has been one of the most successful publicity events organized by the Soviet state of the Soviet way of life (see Andrews and Siddiqi, 2011). Exploration of space remains one of the main sources of the modern Russian “techno-nationalist” identity. Thus, delving into the history of the space exploration and the construct of “space nation” status is truly a worthwhile objective of exploring how the “out of sight” exploration of space, an experience outside of everyday life of Soviet citizens was introduced through photographs into everyday life and material culture.

Lina Kohonen’s book, *“Picturing the Cosmos”* is one of the first comprehensive studies of the imagery produced on the space exploration and its coverage in Soviet media even though based on a limited time-span. The book focuses exclusively on imagery from *Ogonyok* magazine between 1957-1964, corresponding to the title of the book and intention of exploring *the early history* of Soviet space endeavour. The study uses “visual history” approach to investigate the embedded ideological messages along with the socio-historical context in which the images were produced and circulated: secrecy, censorship, controlled publicity and at the same time liberal cultural policy of Nikita Khrushchev’s “Thaw” period.

Despite the ambitious take of the book, the analysis is relatively simple and based on two interpretative contexts: the conquest of outer space and multiple facets of heroism. The aim is to explore the contradictions in the photographs, but the theoretical framework on which the author builds her visual analysis is rather thin, with the exception of a short mention of Roland Barthes (1985) and “tireless repetition of contingency” (23 in this book)) there are very few other ideas referring to the actual visual analysis. The author often provides thick descriptions and insightful socio-historical accounts regarding the representations, sending us to Hollywood films and providing broader reflections on the aesthetics of space depiction and Soviet visual culture.

The book comprises of several chapters. A short introduction, chapters two and three are linked to the analysis of space-related images contextualizing the Soviet propaganda of space exploration (regime of secrecy, symbolization) and the initial steps of the visualization of Space age. Chapter three specifically examines the sub-genre of representations related to cosmic landscapes, some of which painted by cosmonauts themselves. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 are the variations of the visual narratives of the hero, loosely following the Propp’s analysis of functions of a fairy tale (85 and 155). While chapter four contextualizes the figure of the cosmonaut as a

new type of hero in Soviet history, chapter five places the hero within the discourse of ideal citizenship of Khrushchev era. Chapter six is full of interesting details on “domestication” of heroes within the everyday life roles and (brief) comparisons, such as the one between American astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts (128). Chapters 7 and 8 deal with depiction of space exploration within discourses of modernization and man-machine technological utopia. The author does not, perhaps for the sake of space and description, give the reader idea of the technicalities, challenges of the research process and reflections on working with archives are only briefly mentioned in the concluding chapter (154-157). A more unpacked reflection on methodology could have been a very useful contribution to the further studies of visualization histories.

The book is rich with color images although it is rather difficult to follow them in the text, as all images are lumped in one color inlay in the middle of the book. This of course could be a publishing feature beyond the control of the author, and fortunately there are over a hundred images included and referred to, which makes it visually rich text that is only a few degrees removed from coffee-table status. References to pictures are hard to find, and thus make searching for captions quite a mission. One can find Yuri Gagarin images in the beginning and in the middle of the inlay but without captions, so if one wants to see the visual inlay as a story in itself, it would still have benefited from some captions – especially useful for a non-specialist reader.

Some of the questions that might be further asked regarding the representation of space heroes and analysis of the photos of the space exploration and the cosmonauts – the true and worthy celebrities of the past and present: how the staging of the “celebrity” photographs was orchestrated back then? The author notes the tension between the need to display the technological achievements and at the same time maintain the regime of secrecy. How the cosmonauts were actually portrayed and visually incorporated in public space (beyond magazines)? – the question which could potentially be explored as well through archival research of everyday photographs. Finally, the most obvious question never asked: What is missing in all these media photographs? It could be well worth trying to fish out those invisible Barthesian “punctum” off-centering details to the Soviet (Russian) viewer more obvious to a Western eye.

The visual dimension of Soviet space exploration as a scientific, technological and national endeavour, is an aspect that has eluded researchers’ attention and which this book attempts to explore. The book however feels as a predominantly western intellectual interpretation of the space exploration and ideological ambience of those years, and misses out the views of how the cosmonauts have been perceived by the Soviet (Russian) citizens themselves until now. Few references are made to the Soviet audience itself, and here is the limitation of archival research. Some photo-elicitation interviews could have been helpful with senior Russian citizens to understand the impact and memories of the space imagery. This again reminds us about necessity of contextualizing the images and offering wider multiple interpretations in order to understand their full societal impact. Again, one should have a lingering thought, that often *less* images in a book is *more* provided they are given a “thicker” description and more comprehensive analysis. I would not suggest to focus simply on iconic images of the Space Exploration Era, but a few iconic images of that time could be given a more thoughtful attention and analysis.

Space exploration is continuously an aspect of high political and cultural relevance, where the aesthetics of depicting space remain a luring but underexplored domain in social sciences.

Therefore, the book despite some of its visual analytical shortcomings is an important visual-historical study of the representation of space in the Soviet Union, and significant in its attempt to decipher political messages of conquering nature with science and technology tools, designed and operated by Soviet citizens.

Overall, *Picturing the Cosmos* provides a useful introduction to understanding the media representations of space exploration in the Soviet Union and is an important staging-post on the route for understanding the highly relevant topic of “*out of sight*” experiences entering the material world and every day life of common citizens. The book is an easy read and visual-historical approach allows for some fascinating insights, which would have benefited even more with more attention to methodological reflections for further researchers of this important aspect of human endeavour. The book is written principally for aspiring students and scholars in studies of visual history and post-communist studies, and to a lesser degree would satisfy a scholar with an interest in nuances of visual methods and visual culture analysis.

**References:**

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