Murawska-Muthesius on Gérin, 'Devastation and Laughter: Satire, Power, and Culture in the Early Soviet State (1920s-1930s)'

Review published on Thursday, March 18, 2021


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Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=56156

There are many books on literature, cinema, and art in the early Soviet state but virtually no studies on the visual satire of this era. Annie Gérin’s book fills this gap. As she writes in the introduction, the motivation behind this book was the scarcity of research on laughter in the project of social change in Russia. It was the realization of the impetus with which the tropes of visual satire, many of them originating in the eponymous ROSTA (Russian Telegraph Agency) windows, had entered the world of street performance, circus, and cinema, as well as the pages of the satirical magazines that prompted the book. Gérin launches a comprehensive inquiry into the origins, ubiquity, and transmediality of visual satire, and into its theorization and critique. Disseminated by major artists of the time, to include Vladimir Mayakovski, Aleksandr Deyneka, and Dmitrii Moor, the characters of enemies and allies of the communist transformation could be found “everywhere.” Borrowing freely from lubki (popular prints), pasted on shop windows, they were multiplied by cartoons in the state-sponsored media, rehearsed in early agit films, performed in theater and in the street, and returned in some feature films of the 1930s. Drawing from her earlier study on the journal Bezbozhnik u stanka (Godless at the Workbench: Soviet Illustrated Humoristic Antireligious Propaganda [2003]), combing through other journals and archives, and integrating recent Russian research of this vast field, Gérin provides an overview of how caricature and other visual forms of satire permeated the avant-garde world of the Bolshevik era, lasting well into the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the early Stalinist period, when the tenor and the idiom of the revolutionary critique was modified and reoriented, targeting new enemies and adopting different forms of expression.

To a large extent the arguments of the book are formulated in relation to the writings and activities of Anatoly Lunacharsky, who, appointed by Vladimir Lenin as People’s Commissar of Enlightenment in 1917, promoted, practiced, and defended satire and laughter as tools of Marxist critique and of the long processes of acculturation in Soviet Russia. Having developed his interest in the social functions of satire during his exile in France (1912-14), Gérin argues, on his return to Russia, Lunacharsky wrote satirical scripts, some of which were turned into film scenarios. His high-powered position did not temper his belief in the power of laughter. Not only did he affirm his unwavering pro-satire stance in numerous articles, reviews, manifesto-like papers, and an unfinished book on laughter, but he also went as far as to use his authority to establish, in 1931, a dedicated governmental
department, the Commission for the Study of Satirical Genres within the Soviet Academy of Sciences. As narrated by Gérin, he even began to assemble its library and archives (Satire Cabinet). Alas, the commissar’s untimely death stopped this unmistakably avant-garde project, which, taking some clues from Charles Baudelaire, might have evolved into a first ever Ministry of Laughter, problematizing perhaps the evil premises of the communist apparatus of power that was soon to be unmasked by George Orwell.

The first chapter of Gérin’s book analyzes the origins and the major points of Lunacharsky’s conception of laughter as a tool of social transformation, stressing his differentiation between punitive satire (a weapon of class struggle) and nonmilitant humor. This distinction provides a conceptual frame for the book’s argument on the rise of biting Bolshevist satire and its mutation into trivial bourgeois humor in the NEP era.[1] Vivid citations from Lunacharsky’s writings—laughter “is not only a sign of strength, it is strength itself” or “Laughter is especially powerful when linked to artistic realism” (pp. 75, 172)—open all the book’s sections: three chapters on diverse manifestations of visual satire (in print culture, in performing arts, and in cinema), followed by a chapter on satire’s strategies and a final chapter on socialist realism. The book ends with Gérin’s superb translation of Lunacharsky’s manifesto “On Laughter,” written for the inaugural meeting of his Commission for the Study of Satirical Genres in 1931. This text itself deserves to be reprinted in any future anthology on humor, next to those by Baudelaire, Sigmund Freud, and Henri Bergson.

Apart from the tribute to the force of Lunacharsky’s inquiring intellect, Devastation and Laughter also constitutes a particular homage to another enthusiast and collector of satire as well as a vast range of Soviet visual paraphernalia, David King. Almost all the images in the book come from his immense collection, which, located in Tate Modern, was made readily accessible to Gérin, a rare occasion indeed in the days of stringent restrictions imposed by copyright holders of press imagery. A unique photo of Lunacharsky laughing widely while reading the satirical magazine Chudak (The oddball, 1928-30), taken in 1929, an index of his engagement with caricature, would not have been possible without King’s extraordinary collection.

Caricature indeed plays a special role in the book since more than half of the illustrated material are cartoons from diverse journals, mostly from Bezbozhnik u stanka (Godless at the workbench, 1923-31) and Krokođil (Crocodile, 1922-2000; 2001-4; 2005-8). The book presents compelling analyses of a number of those images, such as those that comment on the oppression of women under the tsarist regime and on their liberation in the Soviet era, which unmask the abuse inflicted by the church, as well as those that engage in the massive campaign to vilify Leon Trotsky after his removal from power. In chapter 5, “The Strategies and Targets of Satire,” Gérin classifies caricature as one of the techniques and forms of expression used by visual satirists, alongside collage, parody (which trivializes the original source), and irony (which implies meaning by the opposite). Although she defines caricature as charged portraits of individuals, groups, or social classes, significantly, the workings of both parody and irony are illustrated in the book by means of caricatures from satirical journals (illustrations 5.5, 5.13-5.16). Unlike irony and parody, which are literary terms, caricature was “invented” and theorized within the realm of the visual arts. A critical art form practiced in Russia since the nineteenth century, caricature extends the boundaries of exaggerated portraits, using the language of allegory and visual metaphor, borrowing from a multitude of texts from various spheres of culture, including literature, theater, and film, and turning them into complex images.
Since the appearance of *Devastation and Laughter* in 2018, John Etty published a book on the later years of *Krokodil*, focusing on the late 1950s and early 1960s (*Graphic Satire in the Soviet Union: Krokodil’s Political Cartoons* [2019]), and a new book on ROSTA windows, edited by Vera Terekhina, is being prepared by the Mayakovski Museum (*ROSTA Windows* [forthcoming 2021]). But there is a lot still to be done. The Kukryniksy and Boris Efimov’s formidable output, spanning all periods of Russian satire in the twentieth century, as well as their writings on caricature, are awaiting serious studies. Gérin’s book, thoroughly researched, convincingly argued, and lavishly illustrated, sharpens the appetite for more discussions on satire and on caricature, as much from the early Soviet era as from the years of the Cold War and perestroika.

Note


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