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Published online: 11 Jul 2022.

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NEW MEDIA REVIEW

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VICTORIA VASILEVA

INTRODUCTION

To understand how the current Russian approach to visual culture has developed, it is necessary to keep in mind what was happening in the humanities generally during the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 encouraged growing contact between Russian and international scholars that coincided with a worldwide transformation of historical concerns and research methods, which, among other things, was characterised by an interest in visual culture, often referred to as a 'visual turn'. These new contacts expanded research topics, updated resource bases, exposed Russian scholars to new analytic methods for examining visual sources, and the importation of a new, and unfamiliar, conceptual vocabulary. Most importantly, however, the fall of the Soviet Union precipitated a kind of intellectual crisis about Russian national identity, leading to intense historical reflection on the imperial and national past of Russia and the USSR. In short, the fall of the 'Iron Curtain', concomitant exposure to the West and the collapse of the Soviet Union posed a fundamental question for ethnic/national identity and civilisational belonging: *who are we?* Visual studies in Russia have been embroiled in this quest ever since.

This was the period when

> … alternative representations of the past were publicly recalled, recharged, and even re-lived in ways that would have been impossible a decade earlier. There was a sense that ordinary people were recovering pasts that because they contradicted official history, had remained hidden and protected. (Watson 1994, 6)

A wide range of projects that aimed to revise, complete and reformat personal , group history and identity were launched during this period. In the academic world, this project found expression in the creation of new publishing initiatives (like the *Historia Rossica* series by the *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* publishing house) and journals (for example, the international journal *Ab imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space*). More importantly, this process of reflection and revisiting history received institutional support from new research centres that promoted inquiry into modern and contemporary Russian history based on, inter alia, archival visual and audiovisual sources.

Needless to say, during the Soviet period, archival studies and practices were state-controlled. Because of this, the Moscow State Institute for History and Archives (founded in 1930) started research activity only in 1991. Before that archival theory had stagnated for many decades,[1] because of totalitarian ideological pressure. The Institute was originally subordinate to the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs[2] and suffered much from Stalin's political repressions of archivists and historians from the end of the 1920s to the 1930s, which started with the so-called 'Trial of the Academicians', 1929–1931. During this event members of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR were politically repressed, and a large group of scholars and research fellows were dismissed, many of whom were subsequently arrested, exiled and even put to death on false charges of planning the creation of a monarchist counter-revolutionary organisation. More than one hundred people were convicted, including prominent historians Evgeny Tarle, Sergey Platonov and others (Ananich 2006, 491). Subsequently, the humanities, and especially history, were subject to extensive political pressure during the rest of the Soviet period. Nevertheless, in 1991, the Institute laid the groundwork for establishing the Russian State University for the Humanities (Moscow), which, in short order, became one of the major actors in

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the reform of the humanities in higher education in post-Soviet Russia. This newly created University began to promote the study of primary sources of various types kept in Russian archives, signifying a crucial change of direction in historical research, primarily in Russia's historiography.

THE 'VISUAL TURN' IN RUSSIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Boris Kolonitskii, professor at the European University in Saint-Petersburg, and a specialist in the history of the Russian revolution of 1917 wrote in 1994 that he was influenced by the lectures of Timothy Blanning on the history of the French revolution of the eighteenth century, and realised, like many other Russian historians of the Russian revolution of 1917 that he had undervalued the importance of symbols circulating in contemporary mass culture as resources for studying political culture and political consciousness (Kolonitskii 2021, 3). Later, he turned to the sources, which comprised a wide range of visual representations of monarchist power and political rumours, circulated in the context of censorship of the press in the form of posters and cheap popular prints, illustrated postcards, newspaper and magazine illustrations, including cartoons, he found himself expanding Russian historiography beyond the written sources traditionally used for reconstructing Russian political history immediately before 1917. While the analysis of written sources had usually been a strong point in Russian historical studies, Kolonitski realised that other primary sources – whether visual/pictorial, audial or oral – had been neglected.

In his book *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (in English, co-authored with Orlando Figes), and published by Yale University Press in 1999, Kolonitskii expanded his research concerns and depicted the Revolution of 1917 as a battle to control existing systems of symbolic meaning, among which were letters, movies, postcards and newspapers, flags and emblems, public rituals, songs, codes of dress, etc. (Figes and Kolonitskii 1999). In a subsequent book *Tragic Erotica: Images of the Imperial Family during World War I*, Kolonitskii showed how the public image of the members of Nicholas II's family was created in official narratives as personified images of sacred power, and how these images were refracted in contemporary popular perceptions (Kolonitsky 2010). The images of court ceremonies and official visits of members of the imperial family were controlled by the Ministry of the Imperial Court and Principalities,[3] and were circulating primarily in the form of censored photographs, engravings and paintings. The author analysed not only

censored images, which depicted Nicholas II and his family in a romantic, heroic, or virtuous fashion, including self-portraits and ceremonial portraits, but also caricatures and pornographic representations, which he argued should be of no less interest to a historian than documentary photographs or realistic paintings, given that they were very popular among the population and especially the common people. Numerous primary sources, which formed the basis for this book, included petitions, diaries, letters of contemporaries, and materials of legal cases against people charged with *crimen laesae majestatis*.[4]

At the same time, research units of the Russian State University for the Humanities (Moscow) became a platform for the development of new approaches and ideas in the field of historiography and source studies. First of all, the Faculty of Technotronic Archives and Documents (created in 1994) began to invite specialists in the field of the analysis of visual and audiovisual records to examine Russian archives and launched many independent research projects. It had a positive impact on further historiographic research processes in Russia. Vladimir Magidov, a historian of audiovisual archives and documents, and one of the founders of the Faculty, was its dean from 1994 to 1997 and from 2006 to 2013. In 2005, he published the monograph entitled *Film-, Photo-, Phono-Documents in the Context of Historical Science* (Magidov 2005), which was the most detailed inquiry, to date, into the specific properties of the varied primary sources now of interest to scholars. The monograph is an in-depth analysis of the numerous collections of visual and audiovisual records stored in Russian archives: It includes a history of the development of the Russian Federation archival fund, an analysis of its content, and also raises theoretical questions related to historiography, source studies, archival studies, documentation science and the archaeography of audiovisual documents. This seminal publication overcame a gaping lacuna in the archival theory and history of archiving, since, during the Soviet period, archival studies could not develop as a fully-fledged research field.

Somewhat later, the Educational and Research Centre of Visual Anthropology and Ego-History[5] (founded in 2006 and headed by historian, Natalia Basovskaya) of the Russian State University for the Humanities, began to play a significant part in formulating research methods and instruments for training purposes. For instance, research fellows of the Centre began to record and publish audiovisual memoirs by renowned representatives of those who had been part of the intellectual elite during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. These records subsequently became important

ego-documents – or first-person biographical transcripts – which, apart from their value as oral histories – revealed how Russian society and Soviet society in particular affected the lives of its people, through the firsthand experiences of the each interviewed person. Such initiatives focused increased attention on the methods by which biographical and autobiographical narratives could be constructed, and in turn, used to articulate a broader lens on developing the forms and practices of narrativisation of the past in various periods of history. The 'visual turn' contributed to this dramatic revitalisation of Russian historiography by, among other things, raising new questions for historians and formulating new subjects for enquiry. One such subject was the relationship between personal and collective identity in the context of specific ways of seeing, inherent in any given historical period.

Among the early publications on this subject, which mainly focused on twentieth century visual records, was a collective monograph entitled *Eye-vident History. Questions of Visual History of Russia the XX*th *Century* (Narskii et al. 2008), which summarised the results of an international conference, *Images in History, History in Images: Visual Sources on the History of Russia of the XX*th *Century,* held a year earlier in Chelyabinsk. One of the prominent topics of the monograph was addressing the issue of the political Other – an 'enemy' whose visual image had been formed during different periods over the twentieth century with the help of various tools, such as propaganda films and posters, and newspaper cartoons. In this way, historian Evgeny Volkov, in a paper entitled *Face of the Enemy: Images of the White Movement in the Soviet Visual Art (1918–1939),* suggested that the Soviet collective consciousness was built based on a 'Manichaean' worldview, which implied that the world was divided exclusively into spheres of good and evil.

In this context, producing a visual image of 'the enemy' was very important for Soviet public historical discourse and propaganda. Leaders of the White movement were depicted using caricatures, posters and paintings (subsequently reproduced on postage stamps). The author argued that in creating the stereotypes about the White movement, the Soviet visual art of 1918–1939 depicted, in many respects, the crimes and vices of early Soviet society itself (Volkov 2008). Another paper, entitled *Photography and the Personal Feeling of History (Auto-Photographic Essay)*, by Alexandr Sologubov, explored how family photographs not only can make family histories visible but also sometimes blur the official historical narrative and contribute to a sort of 'bottom-up' history.[6] As a child, Sologubov found, in a family album, a photo taken by a German soldier during the Nazi occupation of the territory where the author's

family lived. The soldier took a snapshot of the author's father when he was two years old and then gave him this photo. The author remembered how surprised he was to uncover this photograph and its attendant story, as it did not correspond with what he had learned from the public images of the war and the enemy that had been circulated in Soviet media throughout his childhood (Sologubov 2008). This paper exemplifies a growing scholarly interest in mining family photography as a research tool for addressing and revising questions of personal and group (family) identity and history, and as a source capable of shedding light on the national past from a different angle.

Continuing a research trajectory focused on examining personal and social identity, Elena Vishlenkova, a professor at the Poletayev Institute for Theoretical and Historical Studies in the Humanities, at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow), published *Visual Ethnography in an Empire, or 'Not Everyone Can Discern a Russian'*. In it, she explored the visual narratives of 'Russianness' in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by reconstructing the fantasies and ideas entertained by the Russian people about themselves and about their immediate neighbours, also inhabitants of Russia, which included 'Russians' like Kalmyks, Tatars, Bashkirs and others (Vishlenkova 2011). The author analysed graphic depictions of ethnic groups living in Russia, and how they emerged and were circulated in culture: engravings, *lubok*,[7] caricatures, paintings on crockery, medals, ethnographic portraits and cartouches on maps. The study concentrated on the interrelation of ethnic, national and imperial imaginations of Russians in the visual space. The book has two interconnected topics. On the one hand, Vishlenkova focuses on intellectual products (made by Russian and foreign intellectuals of that time), which recorded the ethnic diversity of the empire, affecting the ideas of contemporaries about its structure and properties. On the other hand, the study was an attempt to comprehend Russian culture through the prism of its visual culture and to trace how Russians participated in constructing this image and how they envisioned their place within it (Figures 1–3).

A similar range of questions was raised in the monograph entitled *A Great Russian. Excerpts on the History of Constructing Ethnicity. Century XIX,* by historian Maria Leskinen, a research fellow at the Institute for Slavic Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her purpose was to analyse the process of the verbal and visual conceptualisation of *Great Russians,* based on various ethnic representations of the Russian people (or Eastern Slavs) during a period of nation-

FIGURE 1.   'Kalmyk Village Girl'. 1809. Engraving (eau-forte) by the drawing of Emel'yan Korneev (1782–1939), a Russian graphic artist, engraver and traveller. Taken from: Vishlenkova, E. 2011. *Visual Ethnography in an Empire, or 'Not Everyone Can Discern a Russian'*. Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie. P. 142.

FIGURE 2.   'Bratsk Tatarian Village Girl'. 1813. Engraving (eau-forte) and drawing of Emel'yan Korneev (1782–1939), Russian graphic artist, engraver and traveller. Taken from: Vishlenkova, E. 2011. *Visual Ethnography in an Empire, or 'Not Everyone Can Discern a Russian'*. Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie. P. 142.

building (Leskinen 2016). Here the author considered the process of stereotyping visual ethnic images in Russia and identified the concepts of the [ethnographic] *type* and the *typical*, which established a protocol for visualising different ethnic groups in the nineteenth century. The author noted that discussions that took place during the nineteenth century, and which had focused on identifying a 'Great Russian type', were revitalised by the Ethnographic Exhibition held in Moscow in 1867. The category of 'typical' turned out to be decisive in the choice of ethnographic attributes and location of each of the presented mannequins and their groups. An exhibit item, which as a rule depicted a real person (based on photographs, portraits, and sculptures), was obliged to be jam-packed with all of the concentrated characteristics of ideal-typical physical appearance and ethnic culture as a whole. As such, an exhibit item could be 'read' by the spectators by relying on an exclusively visual code. Captions and comments were extremely brief and provided basic information about the occupation and the place of residence of a particular person who became a model for depicting the ethnographic type. This combination of 'typification' and individualisation was the most important way that a model representative of a group was chosen. It should be noted that this took place outside the framework of

quantitative and anthropometric methods and bestowed interpretative discretion on an observer without scientific training. The 'observer' in these cases was most often a photographer and less often a painter. In this book, Leskinen re-opens the issues of the observer's gaze as a discretionary act of power, thereby contributing to the development of the post-colonial study of nineteenth century Russian history.

FOLKLORE STUDIES, VISUAL SEMIOTICS AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Unlike Russian historiography, which was significantly transformed during the post-Soviet period, Russian folklore studies directly inherited the approaches and research methods developed during the Soviet period. Folklore studies, like many other areas of the humanities during the Soviet era, had been developing in some respects as a form of 'parallel academy', which consisted of a wide network of informal relationships and contacts, friendly informal or semi-official meetings, taking place at the margins of official academic life, and where research questions beyond the Marxist-Leninist framework were more easily discussed. Scholars, who participated in such 'parallel' activities, often did not
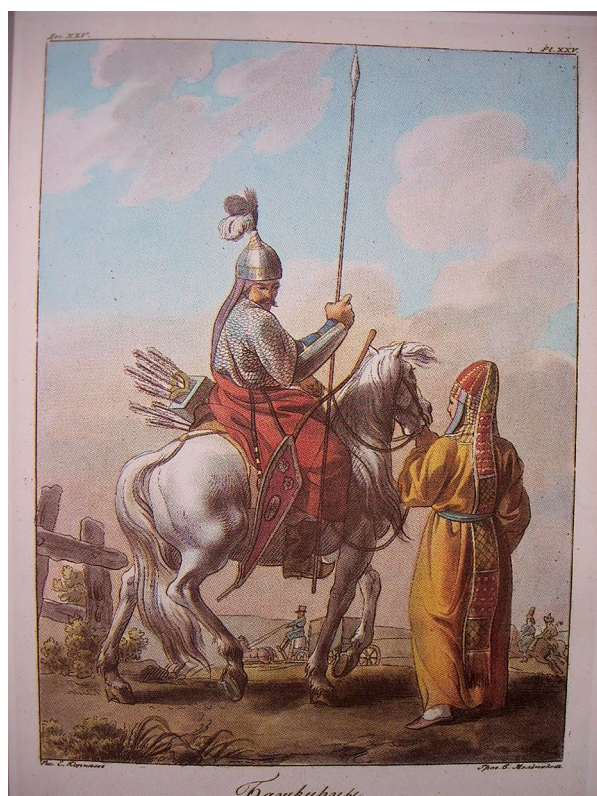
FIGURE 3.   'Bashkirs'. 1809. Engraving by the drawing of Emel'yan Korneev (1782–1939), a Russian graphic artist, engraver and traveller. Vishlenkova, E. 2011. *Visual Ethnography in an Empire, or 'Not Everyone Can Discern a Russian'*. Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie. P. 143.

occupy key positions in the public academic sphere, being ordinary research fellows. Within this 'parallel academy', different research issues had been developed. These were not only narrowed down special issues, but also isolated from dictates of the state, such large-scale projects as the global theory of the semiosphere by Yuri Lotman, referred to as the Soviet version of structuralism and rooted in the ideas of the school of Russian formalism during the 1910s and 1920s. Lotman's theory had been developing around the margins of the Soviet academic establishment in an ideological and organisational sense: beyond a Marxist framework, and, in terms of location, on the periphery of the USSR, namely in Tartu, far from the ideologically controlled Soviet universities and research centres. Lotman was one of the leaders of the so-called Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School, a group of scholars who gathered informally from the 1950s to 1980s to study literature and culture using alternative approaches derived from the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and sharing an interest in Western and pre-Stalinist Russian literary theory. This school was one of the most striking examples of the 'parallel academy' in the late Soviet period (Waldstein 2008).

The phenomenon of a 'parallel academy' emerged rapidly after the so-called Khrushchev 'Thaw',[8] which occurred between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s and allowed for an increased degree of freedom of expression in culture and scholarship. Scholars began to feel safer in, and more confident about, their research activities. Thus, Soviet ethnography and folklore studies in the 1960s included a significant number of expeditions to study living culture phenomena and folklore, academic papers, and collections of ethnographic films and folk recordings. Their principal 'niche' was the All-Union Commission for Musical Folk Art (shortened to the 'Folklore Commission') of the Union of Composers of the USSR, founded in 1972. As the philologist Vyacheslav Ivanov explained in an interview in 2015, the Folklore Commission was not part of the Soviet academic and ideological establishment.[9] It had been organised voluntarily, and its major purpose was to coordinate, integrate and guide research in the field of musical folklore throughout the Soviet Union (Vasileva and Trushkina 2017), which was not seen as being in any way ideologically problematic. Members of the Folklore Commission paved the way for future folklorists' work in terms of theory and methodology, and in addressing issues of how folklore could best be documented. As an example, they began to organise screenings of live camera shots of ethnographic and folkloric subjects taken during field research for documentation purposes.

One of the active members of the Folklore Commission was the folklorist and ethnographer, Elena Novik,[10] a researcher of Siberian shamanism, and a representative of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School. She was one of the very first scholars to introduce the idea of 'visual anthropology' into academic circulation in the late Soviet Period. Soviet/Estonian filmmaker and ethnographer, Lennart-Georg Meri,[11] who was a member of the Folklore Commission, had already made use of this term, and had been influenced by his contacts in the West. Thus, 'Visual anthropology' was treated then, for the most part, as an ethnographic film. Novik greatly influenced, Olga Khristoforova, an anthropologist and folklorist, who continued to develop folklore studies in terms of theory and examine how folkloric/ethnographic subjects could be documented.[12] She continued to advance semiotics methods for the study of verbal and visual folk culture, and afterwards directed the Centre for Typological and Semiotic Folklore Studies at the Russian State University for the Humanities. The Centre was formed in 2003, following the seminar 'Folklore and Post-Folklore: Structure, Typology, Semiotics' held at the Russian State University for the Humanities in the mid-1990s. The activities of the Centre resulted, among other things, in a series of publications, including a yearbook *In Umbra: Demonology as a semiotic system* (Antonov and

Khristoforova 2013). This periodical includes research papers on mythological characters – ambivalent and deleterious spirits, inferior deities and demons. Ideas about invisible enemies – tempters, spoilers, disease agents – play an important role, in traditional and post-traditional cultures. Spirits are perceived as coexisting with humans, and relationships with them are built using magic rituals. Demonology is considered by the editors of the series as a phenomenon, existing in all the segments of culture, including graphic symbols, folklore, medieval miniatures and computer games. This series analyses the dialectic of visibility and invisibility in folk and post-folk cultures, interprets visual imagery of the invisible and considers visual signs as part of a wider multimodal human–spirit interaction.

The yearbook *In Umbra: Demonology as a semiotic system* was a striking example of the development of post-Soviet visual anthropology, or, more precisely, an *anthropology of the visual*, which went beyond the traditional subjects of ethnographic research and began to extend to the study of contemporary history and culture. Thus, in 2019, Dmitry Antonov, a cultural historian and specialist in the semiotics of Russian iconography who was also Olga Khristoforova's co-author, headed the newly established Centre for Visual Studies of the Middle Ages and the New Age at the Faculty of Cultural Studies of the Russian State University for the Humanities. He published the second edition of the collective monograph *The Power of the Gaze: Eyes in Mythology and Iconography* (Antonov 2019). In the preface, Antonov referred to Jan Plamper, who, in his book *Alchemy of Power: The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts*, recounts an anecdote about a group of Moscow students, six of whom were veterans of the Great Patriotic War, 1941–1945. The students wanted to talk frankly about troubling events that had occurred on the frontlines of battle. However, they were intimidated by a portrait of Stalin hanging on the wall. To discuss the past candidly, the former soldiers turned the picture to the wall (Plamper 2010, 5–6). In telling the story, Antonov emphasised the fact that the portrait was not taken out of the room or hidden, but instead had been deprived of an opportunity to visually confront the veterans recounting unpleasant truths (Figure 4).

This story illustrates the monograph's central argument that Russians believe that the eyes are a source of power and aggression, and this is a central theme undergirding many of the beliefs, mores, rites and rituals, narratives and pictorial canons in the Russian and European Middle Ages, and also in the folklore and mythology of a quite varied assemblage of peoples, such as Nganasans, Mongols, Altai groups of peoples and others. This image of a malevolent gaze finds expression in numerous

contexts in Russian history through miniatures, medieval manuscripts, icons, frescoes, portraits and posters. It includes the evil eye, blindness, erasing and scraping off eyes depicted in paintings, all eye abnormalities, the asymmetry of right and left eyes, eye diseases, etc. The eyes as a source of the gaze often play an ambivalent role in these narratives. On the one hand, they serve as instruments of aggression. On the other, they are often the target of the aggression itself and, therefore, need protection. Thus, the book chapter 'Blinding a Saint and Blinding the Devil: The Reader's

FIGURE 4.   Book cover: Antonov, D., ed. 2013. *The Power of the Gaze: Eyes in Mythology and Iconography*. Moscow: Russian State University for Humanities. This picture demonstrates the wooden image of Mow-nyama (Mother Land); the picture was taken from Nganasans. 2010. *Culture of the People in the Attributes of Everyday Life: Catalogue of the Ethnographic Museum on Lake Lama*. Norilsk. P. 194.

Aggression in Medieval Manuscripts', by the historian Mikhail Maizuls, focused on the variety of possible reasons why the viewers of medieval miniatures often attacked painted images by blinding them or face erasing (Maizuls 2019). Among the reasons, included the fear of visual contact with the devil, punishment or act of vengeance towards sinners, neutralising indecent images, and the ancient magical ritual of neutralising the devil by pricking his eyes out or erasing his face.[13] Maizuls argued that exterminating images in this way was certainly an unexamined cultural practice with pagan roots, but which could also take the form, inter alia, of a 'secret gesture', providing a sense of liberation in an oppressive society. As a 'secret gesture', this practice has been useful throughout history, including up to the present. In this connection, Maizuls referred to a paper by historian Alexey Tikhomirov, where the author examines an incident in East Berlin in 1949, when, on the eve of the 70th anniversary of his birthday, a portrait of Stalin was found, smeared with ink and dirt. Stalin's mouth and eyes were pricked out. Similarly, someone pricked out the eyes on portraits of German Communist leader Ernst Thälmann (Tikhomirov 2012) (Figures 5 and 6).

FIGURE 6.   Fragment of a miniature from the Commemoration Book [Sinodik] of the eighteenth century: the eyes of the devil were scraped off. Taken from: Antonov, D., and M. Maizuls. 2020. *Anatomy of Hell: Guide for Visual Demonology in Medieval Russia*. Moscow: Forum, Neolit. P. 176.

FIGURE 5.   Fragment of a miniature from the Commemoration Book [Sinodik] of the eighteenth century: the eyes of unclean spirit were scraped off. Taken from: Antonov, D., and M. Maizuls. 2020. *Anatomy of Hell: Guide for Visual Demonology in Medieval Russia*. Moscow: Forum, Neolit. P. 83.

The latter reference to the mode of interaction with the 'devil' or 'enemy' was earlier analysed in detail, on the Soviet material in the paper entitled 'Soviet Iconography and "Portrait Cases" in a Context of Visual Politics 1930s', by historian Svetlana Bykova (Ekaterinburg). This paper was a part of the collective monograph *Visual Anthropology: Regimes of Visibility under Socialism* (Iarskaya-Smirnova and Romanov 2009), which, in its turn, became a part of book series entitled *Visual Anthropology*, published in 2007–2009 by the Centre for Social Policy and Gender Studies with varying subtitles (Saratov).[14] The book series focused, largely, on the analysis of the visual manifestations of Soviet culture from the perspective of social (cultural) anthropology and visual anthropology, in the sense of reflection on visual images and artifacts, created during the Soviet times and presented a set of meanings, transmitted by their authors, intentionally and unintentionally.

The editors of the book series concentrated, among other things, on visual forms and practices that became part of the political discourse of socialism in the different periods of Soviet history. Svetlana Bykova's paper studies the criminal cases that discredited various Soviet leaders; and examined the rough anecdotes, ditties, verses, and mockery that constituted these portrayals, which became

prevalent in Soviet unofficial oral culture from the late 1920s to the 1930s. In many of the anecdotes uncovered by Bykova in the criminal cases of the 1930s, obscenities were used freely. For example, one of them read as follows:

> When two friends met, one of them complained to the other that he did not know how to cure a sexually transmitted disease. In response, he heard – "Put Stalin's portrait on your […]; immediately everything will disappear, everyone is afraid of him". (Bykova 2009, 110)

Bykova is clear that appreciating this pattern of black humour requires an awareness of how ever-present these portraits of Soviet leaders, mainly Lenin and Stalin, were not only in official settings but also in the local milieus of everyday life. This iconography was displayed on official reports in printed media and hung on the walls of houses, squares, factories, collective farm clubs, schools and many other public institutions. Portrait paintings were an intrinsic part of public celebrations, meetings, demonstrations and parades.

At the same time, many Soviet people sought to have portraits of political leaders at home or in the workplace. One effect of these practices was to create an illusion of intimacy as the images of the leaders often became entwined with private life and space, in much the same way that icons and other religious objects were during earlier epochs Ordinary people responded to these pictures in various ways. They may have been carefully attended to – worshipped even – or, and this sometimes might involve the same people – inflicting unintentional or malicious harm, often caused while intoxicated or as the result of one kind of frustration or another. Thus, in 1935, one of the factory workers in Nizhny Tagil was imprisoned because, while quarreling with family members, he painted prison bars on Stalin's portrait. While being arrested, he vilified Soviet rule by shouting that 'it was necessary to put him [Stalin] in prison for a long time … , at home I had already put him behind bars' (Bykova 2009, 111).

Such an increased 'sensitivity to the visual' dimensions of social life, specific to the Soviet 1930s, was later considered carefully in the book *Dangerous Soviet Things. Urban Legends and Fears in the USSR* co-authored by folklorists Alexandra Arkhipova and Anna Kirziuk (Moscow). The book attempted to consider, in anthropological and folkloristic ways what the population of Soviet Russia feared, the reasons why such fears arose, how they turned into urban legends and rumours, and how they influenced people's behaviour (Arkhipova and Kirziuk 2020). Speaking of the very same 1930s, like Svetlana Bykova in her above-

mentioned paper, the authors emphasised that this culture was oversaturated with visual imagery. Soviet authorities relied on the visual as an instrument of social control over a population that was often barely literate and immersed in a collective consciousness populated by mythological dynamics.

Soviet officials pursued a complex visual policy: they were trying to eradicate a pre-revolutionary visual culture while quickly introducing a new one to sacralise as quickly as possible a whole new set of icons. At the same time, it sought to create images of political enemies. These included not only entities and people who were seen as external threats, but also, and in large measure, were internal, namely Leon Trotsky and other Bolsheviks, who had left the USSR or were repressed, and whom Stalin considered hostile to his interests and personality. As a result, the process of identifying political enemies and hostile-to-the-Soviet-regime symbols reached astonishing proportions in the 1930s. Arkhipova and Kirziuk called this phenomenon 'hypersemiotisation',[15] emphasising the fact that at this time people living in the Soviet Union, whether they be elites or ordinary people, existed in a condition of intense and increasing anxiety, because of the widespread belief, fostered consciously and inadvertently by Soviet officials, that there were numerous enemies everywhere who wanted to destroy the young Soviet state. Detecting the hidden sign which did not exist and, therefore, continuing to detect the new, previously neglected or unnoticed meanings of an image or artifact became a routine practice in everyday life. For example, people could see, in an inverted form, Trotsky's profile with a beard on the label of the matchbox of the Leningrad match factory (Arkhipova and Kirziuk 2020,

Ил. 3. На этикетке спичечного коробка в перевернутом виде можно углядеть профиль Троцкого с бородкой

FIGURE 7.   Leon Trotsky's 'profile with a beard' on the label of the matchbox of the 'Demyan Bedny' match factory in Leningrad. The moulage of the matchbox with the original label is kept in the International Memorial. The picture was taken from Arkhipova, A., and A. Kirziuk. 2020. *Dangerous Soviet Things. Urban Legends and Fears in the USSR.* Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie. P. 110.

109–111). Subsequently, the design of the label of the matchbox was radically changed in 1937. The semiotic approach applied by the authors, in this case, seemed to apply to Soviet history in its entirety since this imagery can be considered as the product of a consciousness characterised by an extreme iconic overload (Figure 7).

CONCLUSIONS

A survey of the selected part of the recent Russian-language literature in the field of visual culture allows us to conclude that the 'visual turn' in the post-Soviet humanities occurred as a part of a wider 'anthropological turn'. Thus, we may speak of an emerging 'anthropology of the visual', which serves, as a general theoretical framework, for many research projects, from history to the study of folklore. This framework determines the relevance of approaches and methods of post-colonial studies, and which should be viewed in the context of the specific post-Soviet situation of the search for cultural identity and a perceived need to revise Russia's historiography. Another group of relevant approaches and methods derives from semiotics, which, starting from the late 1950s and early 1960s, developed gradually in the margins of official Soviet academia and continued to develop after 1991 in various research areas. Both approaches contribute to an 'anthropology of the visual'. The first approach implies a close analysis of visual evidence that reveals something about the people that created the cultural products, their ideas about themselves and others, and shared stereotypes. This approach permits us to conclude the systems of symbolic meanings circulating during various periods of history. The second approach encourages studying the behaviour of people in response to images that they did not create, and which were imposed upon them. Each approach raises a range of questions about how ways of seeing are determined historically, and how we should proceed to interpret images and interact with them. Because of this pattern of intellectual development, visual studies in Russia focus on the Russian past and Russian culture, considering them as an integrated set of visual artifacts and social practices. Thus, the object of visual studies in Russia has been to help find an answer to the fundamental question posed to the post-Soviet humanities: what is Russia's ethnic, national and civilisation identity. Or, in short, who are we as a people?

Notes

[1] Archives in the USSR were initially used only for political purposes. For example, during Stalin's rule, in the context of the mass purges in the state and public organisations, archives received direct instructions from the Party and government bodies to identify incriminating materials to discover 'enemies of the people'. In the 1930s, every effort was made to 'militarize' the whole archives management system. Education in the field of archival studies, and archiving generally, was viewed very narrowly and did not imply any historical research.

[2] People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs ('NKVD') of the USSR was established in 1934 as the central body of the Soviet state administration for combating crime and maintaining public order; in 1934–1943, it also served as a secret police.

[3] Ministry of the Imperial Court and Principalities of the Russian Empery was established in 1826 and united all parts of the court administration outside the control of any other institution. It was headed by the minister of the court, who was under the direct supervision of the sovereign. In 1858, a branch for ceremonial affairs was joined to the Ministry of the Imperial Court.

[4] Criminal cases about insult to Majesty.

[5] Methodology of 'égo-histoire' is based on supposition that personal history is not separate from political or intellectual history. The term was used first by Pierre Nora to refer to the collection of essays by historians writing the history of their own lives: in 1987 Nora invited several famous French historians to write neither autobiographies nor psychological portraits, but rather histories of their own academic lives, using professional epistemological instrumentation and methods (Nora 1987; Aurell 2017).

[6] The term 'bottom-up' [memory] was introduced by scholars of the Popular Memory Group at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies while developing the concept of 'popular memory', that they believed should expand what scholars included in writing history (Johnson et al. 1982).

[7] Popular cheap woodprints, called 'lubok' or 'lubochnye kartinkee', are the specific type of graphic art widespread in Russia in the middle of 17th century until the end of 19th century. They reproduced, with the help of primitive graphics, narratives and stories taken mainly from popular literature, folklore, religious texts.

[8] The Khrushchev 'Thaw' is the term introduced by Russian/Soviet writer Illya Ehrenburg (1891–1967), who published in 1954 (after the death of Stalin) the short novel *Ottepel* (*The Thaw*). Subsequently, the term became an unofficial name for the period in the history of the USSR from 1953 to 1964, and related to Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971), who held the post of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1953–1964). During this time a partial liberalisation of political and public life and a slight weakening of the totalitarian regime occurred.

[9] Interview with Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov, dated on 16 July 2015 (Peredelkino). Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov (1929–2017), Soviet/Russian philologist and

anthropologist, specialist in Slavic, Baltic, and Indo-European linguistics, mythology and folklore. Participant of the Folklore Commission meetings.

[10] Elena Novik (1941–2014), Soviet/Russian philologist and folklorist. She belonged to the Moscow-Leningrad (since 1991 Saint-Petersburg) circle of structuralist-folklorists. Specialist in archaic traditions of the people of Siberia, author of the concept of shamanic ceremony as folkloric fact. Follower of Eleazar Meletinsky (1918–2005), one of the major figures of Soviet/Russian academia in the field of folklore, literature, philology and the history and theory of narrative. Elena Novik was a key personality in the research group 'Folklore on the Screen' organised within the Folklore Commission, and one of those scholars who in the 1970s–the 1980s developed theoretical approaches to shamanism free of ideological clichés.

[11] Lennart-Georg Meri (1929–2006), Estonian public official (from 1992 to 2001 President of Estonia), filmmaker, ethnographer and writer. He published several books based on expeditions to Siberia, the Soviet Far East and the Arctic. Meri's books have been translated into a dozen languages. His ethnographic films in the 1970s and 1980s won international renown. He was not permitted to travel out of the USSR until the late 1970s. When the Soviet authorities finally gave him permission to go abroad, Meri began to establish cultural and academic links with western countries (first, with Finland) and to do all he could to remind the free world of the existence of Estonia. In particular, he founded the non-governmental Estonian Institute (Eesti Instituut) in 1988 to promote cultural contacts with the West. Meri was a leader of the movement to restore Estonian independence from the Soviet Union. A member of the Folklore Commission Bureau and active participant in the Folklore Commission's meetings in Moscow and other places.

[12] During the Soviet period and in the 1990s the term 'ethnography' was used in the same sense as 'ethnology' within Western academia. So, 'ethnography' in fact did not mean purely descriptive practice, and included theories and theoretical work as well, but the name itself was supposed to protect the discipline from political pressure, especially in Stalin's time. The tradition of using the term 'ethnography' continued in the 1990s and disappeared only in the 2000s.

[13] Mikhail Maizuls identifies such a technique of maleficence as *envoutêment*, which was much older than all medieval practices and was repeatedly mentioned in the witchcraft cases in the medieval West (Maizuls 2019).

[14] The book series entitled *Visual Anthropology*, published in 2007–2009 under the guidance of the Centre for Social Policy and Gender Studies (Saratov), included collective monographs with the following subtitles: *New Social Reality Outlooks* (Iarskaia-Smirnova, Romanov and Krutkin 2007), *Regimes of Visibility Under Socialism* (Iarskaya-Smirnova and Romanov 2009), *Tuning the Lens* (Iarskaya-Smirnova and Romanov 2009), and *Urban Memory Cards/Mental Maps* (Iarskaya-Smirnova and Romanov 2009).

[15] By the term *hypersemiotisation* the Arkhipova and Kirzyuk (2020) identify the practice of attributing a sign to a semantic field that has no real place for that sign. The authors suggest that the term was first used with this meaning by the culture semiotician Vladimir Toporov (1928–2005).

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

FUNDING

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