Sara Pankenier Weld

THE OBLITERATION OF THE AVANT-GARDE AESTHETIC: COMPARATIVE STUDY OF 1930s PICTUREBOOKS BY SAMUIL MARSHAK

Basing its findings on word and image analysis, this article seeks to juxtapose images from early and later editions of classic picturebooks authored by Samuil Marshak and illustrated by Vladimir Lebedev or Mikhail Tsekhanovsky, namely *Вчера и сегодня (Yesterday and Today*), *Багаж (Baggage), Мистер Твистер* (*Mister Twister*), and *Почта* (*The Mail*), to expose changes necessitated by new artistic and political circumstances as picturebooks for children increasingly became a territory of conflict. Contrasts revealed by comparative visual analysis offer insights into the restrictions and adaptations illustrators made as the avant-garde aesthetic came under fire and children's literature began to face increasing censorship. These changes reveal the fingerprints of ideology and censorship in an intermediate stage when a kind of hybridization of the avant-garde was occurring, just before the complete obliteration of the avant-garde aesthetic.

Keywords: Soviet, picturebooks, illustration, avant-garde, censorship, Samuil Marshak, Vladimir Lebedev, Mikhail Tsekhanovsky.

Comparative study of rare 1930s editions of classic picturebooks authored by Samuil Marshak and illustrated by leading avant-garde illustrators Vladimir Lebedev and Mikhail Tsekhanovsky exposes revealing changes necessitated by new artistic and political circumstances as picturebooks for children increasingly became a territory of conflict. Basing its findings on word and image analysis, this article seeks to juxtapose images from early and later editions of the same book to identify the changes that reflect aesthetic and ideological shifts taking place at this time. It includes case studies examining four well-known children's poems by Samuil Marshak in their 1920–1930s avant-garde picturebook editions, namely 1925 and 1935 versions of *Вчера и сегодня* (*Yesterday and Today*), 1931 and 1935 versions of *Багаж* (*Baggage*), and 1933 and 1937 versions of *Мистер Твистер* (*Mister Twister*) by Marshak and Lebedev, as well as 1932 and 1937 editions of *Почта* (*The Mail*) by Marshak and Tsekhanovsky.

Aesthetic shifts revealed by comparative visual analysis offer insights into the restrictions and adaptations illustrators made as the avant-garde aesthetic they had championed came under fire at a time when children's literature, as had literature for adults before it, began to face increasing censorship. Though later and aesthetically insignificant editions of these stories abound, the rare editions examined here uniquely show how artists gradually adjusted their avant-garde aesthetic principles to accommodate changing times. These subtle changes offer evidence for the pressures brought to bear on children's writers and illustrators and how they attempted to adapt in a time of transition. The differences between these 1930s editions thus reveal the fingerprints of ideology and censorship, but in an intermediate stage, when a kind of hybridization of the avant-garde was occurring, just before the complete obliteration of the avant-garde aesthetic. Here we witness the birth of socialist realism from the spirit of the avant-garde in the words of Boris Groys [Groys 1996, p. 193–218].

With radical juxtapositions on opposite pages and on the visually striking cover, Marshak and Lebedev's picturebook *Вчера и сегодня* (*Yesterday and Today*) (1925) displays and celebrates the impact of technological advancements, such as electricity and running water in the lives of individuals. The cover shows "Yesterday" in black and white with three old individuals bent over under the burden of old technologies like a kerosene lamp, a yoke for carrying buckets of water, and an ink well and quill pen. Meanwhile, "Today" is written in bright red echoed by the healthy faces, arms, and legs of three upright young workers taking large strides toward the future and seemingly unburdened by the new technologies they carry. Rather than mere individuals, these figures represent professions — an electrician, a plumber, and a typist. Their images are printed in red, blue, black, and gray to a much more colorful overall effect. One might also note how the frail individuality of the elderly representatives of bygone times is replaced by a standardized and iconic representation of the new guard of young workers: their legs are not bent but straight, just as their posture is upright, and their faces look straight ahead. Likewise, their caps and kerchief and their practical working clothes in blue are also standardized and comprised of geometric fields, like the oval of the men's caps, the triangular skirt of the woman, and the rectangles of the men's pant legs. This standardization also extends to the human form: their hands have no fingers, but are rounded fists; their faces lack noses and facial hair and represent a smooth and standardized profile; even their bodies adhere to a modern and avant-garde aesthetic, which

Вчера и сегодня (Yesterday and Today) (1925, 1935) by Samuil Marshak and Vladimir Lebedev. Princeton University Library.

replaces individual variation with standardized geometry reminiscent of Malevich's representations of people, if more clearly figurative and representative than Malevich's experiments. The cover of this book, first published in 1925, thus signals that the revolutionary aesthetic of the future is avant-garde.

Interestingly, comparative visual analysis of 1925, 1930, and 1935 versions of *Yesterday and Today* shows that, though most images are preserved, one striking change is made for the 1935 edition. This particular scene represents old-timers seated at a table around a kerosene lamp, a technology of "yesterday" rendered obsolete by the electric lamp of "today". The original image shows a charming black and white scene of a woman in a blouse and a man in a bowtie seated at a table with a samovar — with tea to drink, bread and salt to eat, and a newspaper to read. At the center of the table stands an ornate kerosene lamp with blue glass, around which multiple moths that actually resemble butterflies are flying. Overall, this representation of the old is far more pleasant than the 1935 edition, where it is instead replaced by a new image that is blurred and dark and almost fully shaded. It shows a dark and seemingly smoky room where the seated figures are overweight, considerably less refined and privileged in their dress, and absorbed in drinking from their tea saucers in an outdated manner. The table crowded by the samovar and the kerosene lamp is cluttered rather than inviting. The moths, rendered without detail, as white against the darkness not fully dispelled by the lamp, have no resemblance to butterflies and instead have the effect of swarming flies or midges and recall the filth or annoyance they entail. Juxtaposing these two illustrations reveals how the later one replaces the earlier image's crisp use of contrasting black and white fields of color and the emphasized geometry of shapes, which derive from avant-garde

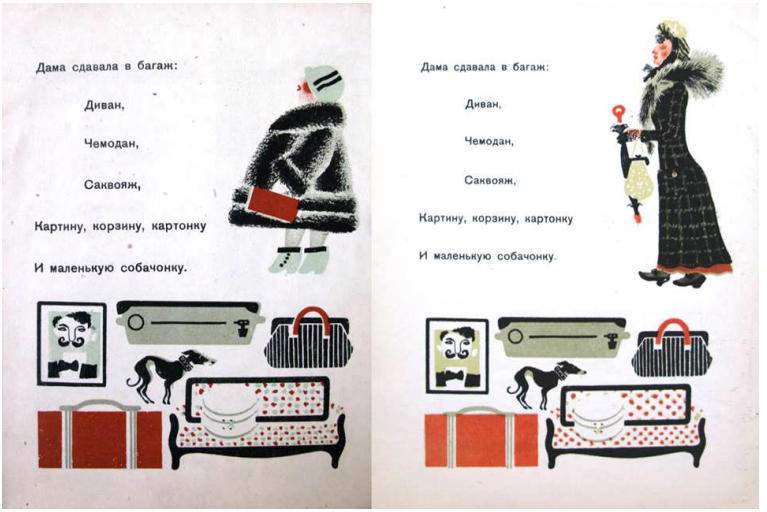
aesthetics as manifest in the picturebook as genre. Its replacement thus eliminates the more visually striking and positive image of the past, a change justified only by ideological considerations. This alteration reflects changes brought on by a later critique that the past must not be represented in too stylized and pleasant a light, as art and ideology move away from avant-garde ideals and the aristocratic past.

БАГАЖ (BAGGAGE)

Comparative visual analysis of 1931 and 1935 versions of Marshak and Lebedev's *Багаж* (*Baggage*) reveal still more changes taking place in the picturebook delivery of Marshak's beloved poem about a lady who delivers an extensive list of belongings to baggage handlers on a train, and the subsequent loss and replacement of her lapdog with a large mutt. The original poem is rife with repetition and sound play, such as the repetitive euphonic refrain which enumerates the lady's baggage: "Дама сдавала в багаж: Диван, / чемодан, / Саквояж, / Картину, / Корзину, / Картонку / И маленькую собачонку [A lady checked her baggage: A couch, / A suitcase, / A hatbox, / A Painting, / A basket, / A box / And a tiny little dog]," and has a playful tone. It might be noted that, in a loaded political context, the text also may be read on an ideological level, where the lady represents the upper classes, as signaled by her lapdog and her extensive material possessions, and is being opposed to the baggage handlers on the train. This ideological interpretation of the poem emerges more clearly in later editions.

The original picturebook edition of *Baggage* marks one of Marshak and Lebedev's most successful collaborations. Its innovative layout inventively utilizes the picturebook form to create a cinematic effect that exploits the possibilities of the picturebook genre with its display of sequential compositions of image and text. Its reader sees train cars depicted from outside and inside on opposing pages and symmetrically placed train cars flashing past with their contents bared and hidden in sequence. In terms of the animated effect of its pages, the book presages the link between early Soviet picturebooks and innovative animation experiments in the subsequent period, such as in works by Mikhail Tsekhanovsky discussed later in this article. Interestingly, in earlier versions of the book, the lady is plump and short, giving her a comic and diminutive effect; moreover, her shape cannot be differentiated from that of the baggage handlers, who also have compacted diminutive forms.

The 1935 edition, meanwhile, makes significant adjustments that compromise the overall design and sequencing of images that make



Багаж (Baggage) (1931, 1935) by Samuil Marshak and Vladimir Lebedev/ Princeton University Library.

the original so innovative. Due to the disruption of compositions across double-spreads and sequences of pages, none of the innovative visual effects remain. Indeed, though the 1935 edition maintains the original cover and final pages, it readjusts the delivery of the story to focus on the vilification of the lady and her actions, as well as the negative outcome for her. In the later edition, the lady is shown as tall and thin with multiple accessories displaying her wealth — a purse, umbrella, and bountiful fur collar. Her features become individualized instead of being rendered more symbolic or geometric, as may be said of the lady in the original, whose face and head employ round lines and whose bundled up body has a distinctly triangular shape. The lady's vilification renders her more individual, as the old-timers are in *Yesterday and Today*, and now differentiates her more from the railway workers, whose shape has remained the same. The otherwise rapid and rhythmic delivery of the text slows down to dwell on the rage and destructiveness of the lady as she demands the return of her own dog, who has been replaced by a large proletarian mutt. This large panting dog, which is displayed simply on the final page of the original for dramatic effect, in the later edition takes on a more active and punitive role. On one doublespread its lunging large shape and open jaws, canines, and tongue threaten the surprised lady, who is leaning (or falling) backward in terror. These alterations render the later

Мистер Твистер (Mister Twister) (1933, 1937) by Samuil Marshak and Vladimir Lebedev. Princeton University Library.

version more overtly ideological and further vilify the lady, whose caricatured representation no longer reflects avant-garde aesthetics, even as the threat to the old world order becomes more apparent.

МИСТЕР ТВИСТЕР (MISTER TWISTER)

Comparative visual analysis of 1933 and 1937 versions of *Мистер Твистер* (*Mister Twister*) by Marshak and Lebedev also reveal the elimination of innovative cinematic effects and in certain instances show a move toward a socialist realist depiction of human figures. This popular anti-American poem describes an American businessman's visit to Russia with his wife and daughter. The playful text makes a catchy refrain of Mister Twister and his power and holdings, "Мистер / Твистер, / Бывший министр, / Мистер / Твистер, / Делец и банкир, / Владелец заводов, / Газет, пароходов (Mister / Twister, / The former minister, / Mister / Twister, / Business man and banker, / Owner of factories, / Newspapers, steamships)" [Marshak 1931, p. 5]. He is described as an inveterate racist [Marshak 1931, p. 7], a description that also characterizes the United States of America, in effect. Through the course of the story, however, Mister Twister discovers that racism is not acceptable in the Soviet Union.

Although the covers of the books seem similar, the application of color and use of line render the 1937 edition more subtle and realistic

Мистер Твистер (Mister Twister) (1933, 1937) by Samuil Marshak and Vladimir Lebedev. Princeton University Library.

than the 1933 version. While the earlier edition uses dark outlines that emphasize lines and features and turn characters into caricatures, the later edition eliminates these outlines to create a more realistic representation. These changes reveal how similar images undergo an adjustment, such as the addition of considerable detail and nuance, to move away from stylization in order to reflect new socialist realist aesthetic principles. Some interior images remain the same, such as black and white pen and ink drawings of characters in motion printed in small size on the pages of the text; but the 1937 version includes many more full plates, focusing particularly on the main character Mister Twister being vilified by the poem for ideological reasons.

The 1933 version proves significantly more innovative in its effects, including in the stylized representation of an African gentleman, whose mere proximity provokes the racist outrage of Mister Twister. This stylish man's reflection is literally multiplied and rearranged across the double-spread for a maximally dynamic and cinematic effect that recalls Buster Keaton. A plate in the 1937 edition depicts this African gentleman significantly more realistically. Here the man's hat, profile, and pipe are reflected repeatedly in the multiple mirrors surrounding the stairs, as described in the book, rather than in a stylized way. Another instance of a cinematic effect results from the depiction of porters carrying the numerous bags of the Twisters. The accompanying text reads, "Следом / четыре / идут / великана / Двадцать четыре / несут чемодана (Behind / four / giants / are / walking / carrying / twenty-four bags)" [Marshak 1931, p. 8]. In the 1933 version, four porters carrying these many bags extend across four pages without text, thus dwelling on the visual display of this procession of material goods carried by each

porter in turn, while the effect of turning pages is utilized in a cinematic and wordless way. The 1937 version reduces this to two pages depicting two porters approaching and departing while carrying multiple bags, thereby losing the innovative visual effect of these four pages.

One textual difference between the 1933 and 1937 versions is reflected in the illustrations of the foreigners welcomed by the Soviet Union at the conclusion of the book. The 1933 version shows four stern male visages whose heads are turned threateningly toward the text and villain, it might be presumed. These reflect the stanza: "Только при этом / Имейте в виду: / Номер направо / Снимает китаец, / Номер налево / Снимает малаец, / Номер над вами / Снимает индус, / Номер под вами / Снимает зулус (Only be sure to bear in mind: / The room to the right / Is taken by a Chinese man, / The room to the left / by a Malaysian, / The room above you / by an Indian man, / The room under you / by a Zulu man)" [Marshak 1933, p. 44–46]. The 1937 version, meanwhile, extends the enumeration of foreigners by an entire stanza: "Номер напротив / Снимает креолка, / Номер над нею — / Монгол и монголка / А в недалеком / Соседстве / От вас / Будут / Бушмен / Туарег / Папуас! (The opposite room / Is taken by a Caribbean woman, / The room under her — / By a Mongolian man and woman / And near / neighbors / of yours / will be / San, / Tuareg, / and Papuan people)" [Marshak 1937a, p. 44–46]. The illustration of six of these figures face the reader quite directly. This added stanza and greater preponderance of images further emphasizes the point about the internationalism of the Soviet Union, which amounts to a critique of American racism, while also including both men and women in the text and its depiction, thereby showing more diversity and gender equality in the Soviet critique of America as well. Another textual difference in the 1937 version that underscores the ideological point is an epigraph from Baedeker, which reads "Приехав в страну, старайтесь соблюдать ее законы и обычаи во избежание недоразумений… (Having arrived in a new country, try to observe its laws and customs to avoid misunderstandings…)" [Marshak 1937a, p. 3].

The scheming of the doorman in teaching the Twister family this lesson receives considerably more emphasis in the illustrations of the 1937 version, which opposes the doorman and Twister more directly through the imagery of the book. The doorman is depicted in several more images, including opposed pairs of images showing him making several phone calls to ensure that the Twisters would find no accommodation. In fact, opposed paired images are prevalent in the 1937 book, including

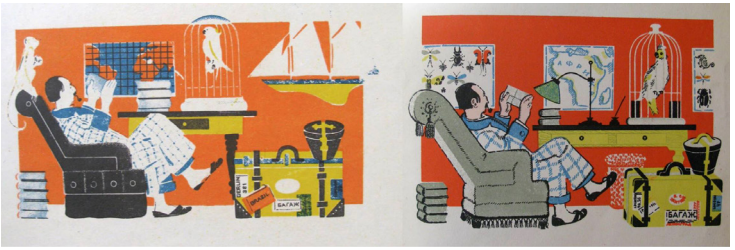
also the four porters carrying bags [Marshak 1937a, p. 10–11], the family running and the car driving away [Marshak 1937a, p. 26–27], and two hotels denying spaces to the Twisters [Marshak 1937a, p. 30–31]. Indeed, the 1937 version further emphasizes oppositional conflict and ideology, while the 1933 version still contains more playful and innovative effects within the ideological tale. Again, artistic and aesthetic choices increasingly give way to ideological considerations and binary oppositions.

ПОЧТА (THE MAIL)

Comparative visual analysis of 1932 and 1937 editions of *Почта* (*The Mail*) by Samuil Marshak and Mikhail Tsekhanovsky reveal the most subtle aesthetic changes and thus show the most directly how ideological considerations increasingly delimit aesthetic possibilities, regardless of the underlying message, which here remains the same. Marshak's poem *The Mail* traces the story of a letter traveling the world in pursuit of its intended recipient. The poem praises proletarian postmen around the world and applauds their hard work in delivering mail wherever it must go, concluding: "Честь и слава почтальонам, / Утомленным, запыленным, / Слава честным почтальонам / С толстой сумкой на ремне! [Honor and glory to all the postmen, / Wearied and dusty, / Glory to the honest postmen, / With a heavy bag on a strap!]".

For the 1932 cover, the artist Tsekhanovsky borrows heavily from his mentor Vladimir Lebedev in his visually exciting use of dramatically contrasting blue and orange geometric shapes within shapes, such as rectangles within rectangles and the semicircles that make up the stamp's edge, or relevant images of train and ship. The 1937 cover is much less visually interesting; it uses a plain unprinted background featuring only the text of the title and author and a striding postman whose shape is reflected repeatedly in the text. Unlike the covers of avant-garde picturebooks of the preceding period, which represented in themselves a particular art form drawing from posters and advertising, this cover is in no way distinctive as a cover design and proves largely indistinguishable from an interior page, such as a title page or an illustrated page of text.

Compared to the 1932 version, all of the postmen in the 1937 version have become more realistic and comply more with a socialist realist representation of the human body. The 1937 postmen also have become more like one another, with less stylization or individual variation than in the 1932 version. Yet, this differs from the 1925 opposition of *Yesterday and Today* where the new standardized forms were distinctly avant-garde; instead the new physical standard shown here is a socialist



Почта (The Mail) (1932, 1937) by Samuil Marshak and Mikhail Tsekhanovsky

realist one. Compared to the 1932 color scheme, the use of color in the 1937 version has become more varied and subtle, minimizing the effect of simple fields of contrasting primary colors. The trains too have become less stylized while urban scenes have been altered. For example, the 1932 view of London is visually exciting with abundant advertising text and two red double-decker buses, which contrast with the blue image of a city block and also echo the postman's red bag as he strides by in the foreground. The 1937 London scene, meanwhile, is drab and significantly more gray as if meant to be less enticing an image of a foreign country. With reduced depth, it offers a narrower view of plain symmetrical buildings without advertising details and shows parts of two incongruously blue double-decker buses. The depiction of the letter and the stamps upon it at the end of its peripatetic journey remains perfectly rectangular in the 1932 version, where avant-garde angularity and geometry predominate over realism. In the 1937 version, however, the letter and the stamps upon it have become rounded and bent and tied up with string in a more realistic, if less striking, representation. Interestingly, the red lines struck through subsequent addresses on the letter in the 1932 version are eliminated in 1937, when censorship considerations, as might also be evoked by red lines, have increased.

Most interesting of all from an aesthetic perspective, however, is the final scene, when the recipient Boris Zhitkov, himself a children's author, reads the well-traveled letter once he has returned home, where it too finally has been sent. Here virtually the same image is reproduced in 1932 and 1937 versions: Zhitkov seated in an armchair, reading the letter beside a desk and a travel bag, with a cockatoo in a cage and map on the wall. At the same time, however, significant aesthetic choices have been made and added, thus displaying the artistic changes and compromises necessitated by external considerations. The 1932 version features contrasting blocks of color in red, yellow, black, and blue.

The white negative space is also used to maximal effect, such as through the sailboat, monkey, or Zhitkov's white face contrasted with his black hair. The 1932 version employs no outlines, relying instead on boldly contrasting color fields to distinguish different shapes. The 1937 version, on the other hand, adds outlines particularly to the figure of Zhitkov and his armchair, as well as adding numerous details to the cockatoo, bag, map, and posters. Many more shades of color are also employed, like in the posters on the wall or the pink skin of Zhitkov's face and hand. At the same time, however, the colors do remain bright and dramatic, such as in the use of red and yellow, which is largely preserved. In this sense these images display a hybridization of avant-garde and socialist realist aesthetics, since some avant-garde elements remain even as new aesthetic accommodations are being made.

The most notable change in the image, however, is the addition of perspective to the scene. This new use of perspective is evident in the stack of books, armchair, and travel bag in the foreground of both images. In the 1937 version, additional angles upon the same basic image have been added in order to reinstate a conventional use of three-dimensional perspective eschewed by the avant-garde. In the original image, in accordance with avant-garde aesthetics, a flattened use of perspective and virtually two-dimensional imagery predominate throughout the composition. The only exception is the stacked travel bags, which use a flattened or inverted perspective to render two sides of a three-dimensional object in a naively distorted manner. Here the two-dimensional, maximally contrasting, and geometrical world of avant-garde aesthetics is recalibrated to the conventions of realism. This one scene thus shows the gradual obliteration of the avant-garde aesthetic in process, but during the brief period when avant-garde and new socialist realist principles underwent a fleeting hybridization.

For at this time, in this brief transitional period, these original avant-garde images could still be rehabilitated, rather than being done away with completely. The next step, already written on the walls, is the complete obliteration of the avant-garde aesthetic. By this late point, however, it is only a matter of time, for the early Soviet picturebook iconotext, which had proved a last bastion of avant-garde innovation, would be next to succumb to the demands of censorship and socialist realism in its strictest interpretation. Ultimately, the works of avant-garde innovators who survived would prove wholly unrecognizable — with all characteristic avant-garde innovation eliminated. Within a few years, it would be as if the avant-garde picturebook had never existed.

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