Semiotics of visual iconicity in Leninist ‘monumental’ propaganda

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ABSTRACT
Leninist propaganda conveyed through artistic monuments (referred to in this article as ‘monumental’ propaganda) – painting, sculpture, urban architecture – was intended as a way of communicating key political ideas to a largely illiterate population. The politically motivated character of the visual icon made it a helpful tool of communication and instruction, and gradually the visual icon became confused with reality itself. In the 1920s, the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR) pioneered the use of artistic images as a documental attestation of reality. Under Stalin, monumental visual signs offered an idealized vision of the Communist future as an already achieved reality. Sculptures and paintings secured the state leader’s symbolic presence in every corner of the country. Therefore, the subsequent change of political leadership resulted in damnatio memoriae – the destruction of visual images of statesmen from the previous regime. Leninist monumental propaganda perpetuated the neo-platonic artistic tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church, which meant there was no clear distinction between the iconic sign and its referent.

KEY WORDS
plastic art in political propaganda • representation of power in art • semiotics of visual icons • socialist realism art • Soviet ‘monumental’ propaganda

Our artists are like spies. They depict something but later they themselves do not understand what it is. So, they have encrypted . . . We must watch them . . . Recently we celebrated Leonardo's 500th anniversary. Look at his canvases . . . he is Italian, I've never been to Italy, but I look at his paintings – everything is comprehensible. Why? Because he painted with his soul. (Nikita Khrushchev, addressing formalists on 17 December 1962)

This article reconstructs the Soviet conception of visual iconicity implied in the professional and scholarly discourses on socialist realism and plastic arts.
as well as from recently declassified documents revealing the Communist Party’s policy on artistic life. The period chosen for this analysis is one that spans two crucial dates: the adoption of Lenin’s decree on ‘monumental’ propaganda (propaganda conveyed through monuments) in 1918; and Khruschev’s killing-off of modernist art in 1962.

THE ICONIC SIGN PORTRAYS REALITY

In the seventh century, the reformer of the Christian Church, Pope Gregory the Great, defended visual representation as a book for illiterates – *Liber idiotarum*. Given the fact that 73 percent of Russia’s population was illiterate in 1917, later monumental propaganda was intended to serve a similar function. For Lenin, visual art was a simple and easily comprehended instrument of political communication. Borrowing the idea from Campanella, who envisioned the creation of educational frescoes, Lenin considered that artistic monuments and poetry were the most appropriate media for Soviet Russia’s situation. Such a visual tradition was not alien to the Orthodox Church. Icons portrayed the truth to everybody, even to the illiterate, but theological scriptures were accessible to only a few, and therefore had less responsibility, wrote religious philosopher Pavel Florenskii (1922: 66).

The messages conveyed through artistic monuments are accessible to a vast population in everyday life. This accessibility prompted Soviet theoreticians to claim that monuments represented democracy because their message could be conveyed to all citizens, not just a narrow upper class (Tolstoi, 1983). Under Stalin’s rule, monuments in the form of painting, sculptures, frescoes, mosaics in public buildings and metro stations were the logical consequence of the Leninist philosophy (Tolstoi, 1961).

Defining audience as ‘the widest masses of people’, the socialist plastic arts had to communicate unambiguous messages. Comprehensibility was the sine qua non of art intended as a vehicle of education, which had to influence and persuade the masses in a ‘defined direction’ (Lunacharskii, 1923: 338). The new regime strived for a conscious social modelling through collective effort. Art therefore could not continue to express individuality, it now had to become a stimulus for collective work. Artistic clarity and accessibility for the masses were the criteria of quality. Soviet scholars consistently stressed the important educational function of monumental propaganda in the formation of a new generation of Communists.

Marxist theoreticians exaggerated the semantically motivated nature of the iconic sign, believing it was intelligible and informative for the receiver. ‘Accessibility’ was a common theme in Soviet discourse on the arts. Political propaganda constantly reiterated Lenin’s formula that ‘art must be comprehensible for the masses of people’ (Clara Zetkin, 1934, in her memoirs). Lenin contended that ‘genuine art is one expressed so clearly, that it is perceivable for everybody. Its topic is something more sublime and important for the mass of workers rather than the idle minority’ (Shleev, 1977: 50).
Ideology and art theory underlined the democratization of access to culture. In a conceptual analysis, the artist Konstantin Iuon (1925), for example, made a distinction between three kinds of art: 'experimental', 'folk' and 'art for the people'. Experimental art has a 'laboratory' function necessary for investigations of artistic language but is redundant for the 'wider masses'. Folk art is autonomous and free from interference from professional art. 'Art for the people', as the name indicates, is accessible to the whole population. Among its properties, Iuon listed clarity, simplicity, visual appeal, figurative nature, sharpness, energy, health, joy, laconic style, decorative elements, colourfulness and the effect of artistic monuments on a large scale.

THE ICONIC SIGN'S REFLECTION OF REALITY

Soviet scholars misinterpreted Lenin's theory of reflection outlined in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism (1977[1909]) when they applied it to the arts. In this philosophical essay, Lenin criticized the concept of the conventional nature of the sign and discredited the notion of the arbitrariness of symbol. Rather, he claimed that signs faithfully reflected reality:

'It is beyond doubt that an image cannot wholly resemble the model, but an image is one thing, a symbol, a conventional sign, another. The image inevitably and of necessity implies the objective reality of that which it 'images': 'Conventional sign', symbol, hieroglyph are concepts which introduce an entirely unnecessary element of agnosticism. (pp. 235–6)

The commonsense physiology of perception is proof of the correct reflection of reality. Lenin insisted that the human mind was able to objectively perceive the correct reflection of nature, and this reflection was objective, absolute and the eternal truth. This theoretical position led to equating representation with reality itself. For the iconic sign, it meant recognition of its solely motivated character, ignoring aspects of conventionality. Inspired by this idea, the avant garde artists of LEF (Left Front of Art) endeavoured to portray the objective nature of real facts. Photography was given priority over painting because the former 'fixates the fact more precisely, quickly and objectively' (Novyi Lef, Editorial, 1927).

Those theorists, who perceived signification as a more complex process involving the subjectivity of the interpreter, were labelled 'irrational' by orthodox Marxists. Literary critic Alexander Voronskii (1923) agreed that art had cognitive power but, in line with the 19th-century critic Vissarion Belinskii, he insisted that the 'artist investigates life, but does not make a copy of it, does not make pictures; he is not a photographer; he transforms it by the all-seeing eyes of his sensations' (Voronskii, 1923: 350). The philosopher Valentin Asmus (1929) pointed out that LEF was overwhelmed with ideas of rationalism and failed to distinguish between 'fact' and 'object'. Representation is usually transformation into another form; the adequate physical
representation of a fact is impossible in the arts and in science. Asmus defended artistic conventions – invention and imagination – as a necessary part of artistic creation, which allows for the construction of different variants of what is possible.

Aristotle proposed mimesis as a pragmatic and handy tool for the investigation of reality: ‘it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen – what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity’ (2004[350 BC]: 10). Soviet artists constructed three-dimensional variants of the future shape of Communism for educative purposes. However, their disregard of conventionality, combined with the neo-platonic treatment of the iconic sign in the long-established Russian Orthodox tradition, merely helped to portray a message of Communist dreams.

THE ICONIC SIGN’S CREATION OF REALITY

The Bolsheviks sought to change the world through a consciously designed remodelling of society. Art was deprived of its autonomy and, as part of society's superstructure, it was subordinated to collectively defined goals of economics and class struggle. Individual reflections were seen as superfluous obstacles on the way to the realization of a scientifically designed collective project. The expression of any introverted individualism was banned because now the human mind was liberated from the restrictive control of the bourgeois ruling class and was serving communal progress. The class emancipation of the Bolshevik artists distinguished them from the Romantics. While the former were to aid the construction of the new world by inspiring the working class with artistic messages, the Romantics escaped subordination to the ruling class only through an individual ‘aesthetic game’ that went against the socially transformative potential of the arts (Asmus, 1968[1937]). The Bolshevik idealists reproached the Romantic idealists for their ‘incredulity in great and wise creative power’ (Zimenko, 1951: 68). However, a reassessment of Romanticism after 1953 (the year of Stalin’s death) integrated the romantic and subjective point of view into socialist realism:

ideals founded on a scientific cognition of the laws of social development become a material force when taken up by the masses

... An ideal can be realized only if it is not an abstract dream of the future, but the concrete expression of the ideas and tasks of the class struggle. (Gei, 1958: 66)

Guided by the laws of dialectical materialism, Socialist realists knew how to realize their dreams, to transform them into practical force. Romantic ideals expressed desires not yet grounded in a scientific understanding of the laws of social development.

Dwelling on Alexander Bogdanov’s science of organization, the association of leftist artists, Proletkult, demanded that art fulfil a function of
social organization. Art was to merge with life and become a factor in life-building. Religious metaphors leaked into the political and academic discourse on arts, turning visual representation into the process of the realization of an idea. The Minister of Enlightenment Anatolii Lunacharskii stated in 1918 that architects and sculptors had ‘to build temples of human ideals . . . to rearrange the face of the earth according to the human dream of beauty and harmony’ (Tolstoi, 1983: 134). A new material environment would help a human being become a ‘new man’. In opposition to Adam Smith, Lunacharskii stressed that humans were guided by ideals rather than by self-interest. Only enthusiasm ‘may goad every individual to sacrifice his life for the sake of broad class interest. Art must educate people in the direction of such enthusiastic striving for a common goal’ (Lunacharskii, 1921).

Art as a medium of communication was destined to become an active social agent, which had the potential to shape reality directly. The artistic method of socialist realism adopted in the 1930s was not intended to represent reality, but rather to incorporate an idea. The original definition of the method determined that the artists must show life in its development and forward movement, and accept the active revolutionary transformative role of the arts. Soviet artists were supposed to create, consolidate and glorify the new social order, and reincarnate the spirit of Soviet society.

THE ICONIC SIGN AS REALITY

Russian Communism was closely related to the Russian religious tradition, which itself had been influenced by the neo-platonism that penetrated the Orthodox Church from Byzantine religious sources. Disputes over the nature of icons consolidated East-West division by the ninth century. The West adopted a pragmatic approach to visual representation: here the Roman Catholic Church substituted the theological dogma of the veneration of icons with the veneration of art. For Eastern Christianity, art did not merely recall to mind, but rather it was the appearance of the idea itself in sensible forms; the icon allowed the ‘energies’ of a basic conceit to be present in its rendering (Florenskii, 1996[1919]; Averintsev, 1973). In sum, an icon was equated with the represented subject. However, the Orthodox Church held ambiguous views on the semiotic nature of the holy image, and consequently it failed to define precisely its attitude towards iconic representation. Pictures of saints were allowed, but three-dimensional sculpture was banned. Because of sculpture’s close resemblance to idolatry, it was believed to contain too much of the spirit of the represented creature. Such ‘profane’ sculpture was introduced in Russia only in the early 18th century, while the first memorial portrait statue was carved by Ivan Martos in 1803.

Religious philosopher Vladimir Soloviev (2003[1890]), writing on aesthetics, argued that perfect beauty is not only a reflection of an idea from matter but its actual presence in matter. Communism caught hold of Orthodoxy, which believed that the arts could perceive fragments of beauty in their current reality. Through the depiction of a phenomenon, as Soloviev...
put it, ‘from the point of view of its final, definitive status, or in light of the world to come’, artists represent future reality (p. 76). A religious icon is not a portrait, but an image of forthcoming humanity. ‘We do not perceive this humanity in contemporary sinful people, but only imagine it; therefore, the icon can serve as its symbolic representation’ (Trubetskoj, 1993[1916]: 202, original emphasis). In Bulgakov’s words, an icon is a vision of the invisible because it represents the invisible spirit living in a visible body (Bulgakov, 1993[1931]: 282).

Gradually, the Bolsheviks moved away from a pedagogical conception of iconicity. Lenin suggested that reality was usually the foundation of artistic images: ‘It is obvious that an image cannot exist without the thing represented’ (Lenin, 1977[1909]). The ontological definition of a sign served political goals: by stating that images were an objective representation of the existing world, Communist ideology guaranteed the veracity of its messages. Soviet scholars followed religious philosophy in their belief that, by reflecting reality, art helped to consolidate it. ‘There is no mismatch between ideal, dream and reality’, wrote the art scholar Konstantin Sitnik (1950: 36). An idea can be made real by casting it in the form of a material sign. In 1934, the Communist Party supervisor of arts Andrei Zhdanov instructed writers to look ahead to tomorrow. Fantasies about the future were to be brought into contemporary reality. Socialist art ‘finds and depicts facts of the growing Communist reality approximating the latter to today’ (Zimenko, 1951: 68).

The links between an iconic sign and its referent became dislocated. Artists blended these concepts, employing suggestive metaphors to describe the sublme ideals of their craft. The sculptor was a Pygmalion who, for example, ‘figuratively vitalized’ the image of Lenin. The Latvian sculptor Janis Zarins described his work as bringing stone to life: ‘thousands of years old granite stones have accumulated the everlasting time of our people’s life. A sculptor can remove the shell from these old stones so that the images of heroes emerge in front of us’ (Baumanis, 1959: 14).

The sculptor Ernst Neizvestnyi (2005) ironically stated that the authorities believed that the representation of a hero would make heroes of all people. ‘Authorities were afraid of what they did not understand. They saw a demon taking cover behind it’ (p. 73): Sculpture, as a container of a spirit or idea, was transformed into a social actor that had an influence on human life. Given such a natural force, the iconic sign became a simulacrum of reality. The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR) inaugurated this trend with its treatment of the visual sign. AKhRR published a manifesto in the catalogue of its first exhibition in Moscow in May 1922:

Our civic duty before humanity is the artistic-documentary recording of the greatest moment of history in its revolutionary breakthrough. We will depict the present: everyday life of the Red Army, workers, peasants, leaders of the revolution and heroes of labour. (Kniazeva, 1967: 83)
Exhibited works strived for ‘objectivity’, zealously creating illusions of historical or contemporary facts. AKhRR used agitprop techniques for mass communication: paintings were created with an eye to printing so that they could be used for decoration in Bolshevik ceremonial places. For the Communist authorities, it turned out to be an effective medium for communicating political slogans in an accessible visual way. The fifth exhibition held in 1923 was entitled ‘The Lenin Corner’ (Leninskii ugolok). It became a prototype for the Communist ceremonial place known as the ‘red corner’ (see more details later). In this ‘corner’, artistic works were exhibited amidst original documents, photographs and newspaper clips. Artists’ impressions were used as vivid illustrations of documentary materials. Canvases entitled ‘Attempt on Lenin’s Life’ or ‘Lenin Delivering a Speech’ represented significant events which, for various reasons, were not documented in any other way. After the exhibition, the state authorities acquired all the artistic works for the Museum of Revolution.

The Communist reality, as experienced by ordinary people in their everyday life, was far from the utopia promised by the party. Instead, this new world had been created in images. The Permanent Agricultural Exhibition VSKhV, inaugurated in Moscow in 1939, was abundantly decorated with plastic art works. Its task was to affirm reality – sculptors were commissioned to create large monumental images that incarnate the great ideas of socialism and the sublime nature of Stalin’s era (Bolshaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia, 1948: 1532). Visitors to the exhibition could witness the propagandistic cliché that ‘life has become better, life has become more carefree’, materialized in tangible forms by means of 1500 sculptures which ‘narrated the happy and prosperous life of the Soviet people’ (p. 1533). Art was Communism’s simulacrum. According to Tolstoi (1952), the representation of kolkhoz (collective farm) life and ethnic groups was itself ‘the triumph of kolkhoz structure, the celebration of the Leninist–Stalinist friendship of the Soviet national groups’ (p. 60).

The substitution of documentary images with artistic ones was common. Photographs of open-air performances in the 1920s and a frame from Sergei Eisenstein’s film October were used as photographic testimony of the October Revolution. Paintings from the 1920s were perceived as ‘the living documents of a great epoch’ (Gerasimov, 1952: 12). Thematic pictures depicting Lenin and Stalin in action visually affirmed the propagandistic formula ‘Stalin is Lenin today’, which legitimized Stalin’s hereditary rights.

Photomontage that had been widely used during the first half of the 1930s was banned because its obvious use of manipulation overtly discredited the reality of visual representation. Alexander Rodchenko’s constructivist photography proved that the indexical nature of the photographic sign did not guarantee recognition of the referent. The ideological apparatus adopted the montage practice of constructivists. Many ‘Old Guard’ Bolsheviks purged by Stalin were deleted from visual memory also. Retouché was a common practice of Soviet censorship.
THE ICONIC SIGN’S PROVISION OF IMMORTALITY

The metaphysical treatment of iconicity overshadowed the educational task of monumental propaganda. Pre-Christian plastic art reduced the eschatological fear of death. Mummies, small sculptures and funeral masks immortalized the deceased, providing a memorial and space of residence for their souls. One of the tasks of the Soviet plastic arts was the prolonging of Lenin’s life. Sculptor Ivan Shadr was given two days’ access to Lenin’s body so that he could mould a bust and death mask. Shadr’s memoirs imply that he unconsciously assumed the functions of the Egyptian funerary deity Anubis – embalmer of the dead and guardian of their physical bodies. The sculptor described the awe and immense historical responsibility he felt in preserving Lenin’s image in clay when the decision on mummification had not yet been adopted. After finishing Lenin’s death mask, Shadr wrote in his diary: ‘Lenin has not died, Lenin will not die!’ (Trifonova, 1957: 13). Contemporary critiques detected idolatry in the commemoration fervour, worrying that image would obfuscate knowledge. The journal Lef, in an editorial entitled ‘Don’t Market Lenin!’, condemned the mass-market production of busts and pictures. Soviet iconoclasts spoke out against the veneration of images: ‘We do not want icons…. Learn from Lenin, but do not canonize him’ (Lef, 1924: 4).

The Communist Aaron defeated Moses. Animistic metaphors were abundant in discourse on the arts. Art critic Trifonova (1957) described Lenin’s death mask: ‘This is the head of a man, as if he were asleep. His beautiful face has fully preserved the vital force.’ And she expected that her contemporary sculptors would carve an impressive monument that would cause the Soviet people to exclaim: ‘It is our Lenin, in a guise in which we know and love him!’ (p. 13). Lenin’s life-sized monument in the Kremlin garden (erected in 1967) also ‘vitalizes’ the creator of the Soviet state: ‘it is intended for observation from a short distance in order to create an impression that Vladimir Il’ich [Lenin] is usually between you and me’ (Cielava, 1981: 21).

The Greeks and Romans perceived statues as living creatures that regularly intervened in everyday life. Suetonius (2000[110]) commented on Caligula’s death:

His approaching murder was foretold by many phenomena. The statue of Jupiter at Olympia, which he had ordered to be taken to pieces and moved to Rome, suddenly uttered such a peal of laughter that the scaffoldings collapsed and the workmen took to their heels 

... (p. 166)

In fact, Soviet scholars fully understood the close relationship between visual propaganda and the pagan past. But Tolstoi (1978) attempted to draw a boundary between the two, explaining that ‘in pre-socialist societies the ruling classes immortalized the reigning order, but Soviet monuments reflected the important problems of the life of the people’ (p. 251).
THE ICONIC SIGN AND SOCIAL STATUS

The proliferation of large statues and the creation of immense, expensive monumental frescoes, bas-reliefs and haut-reliefs helped the Communist Party to monopolize social space. The size and quantity of monuments were very important as they were the expressive form of the regime’s stability (Figures 1 to 3). In 1949, on the eve of Stalin’s 70th birthday, five monuments were inaugurated in Leningrad – a remarkable conquest of the city of Lenin. Sculptor Sergei Merkurov (1953), creator of gigantic statues of Lenin and Stalin, proudly described his project of the 75m-high statue of Lenin: ‘The history of architecture never had such colossuses as this statue. It outdoes the monuments of India, China, Egypt and Greece’ (p. 38). This project, however, was abandoned. Neizvestnyi (1991) quoted his conversation with a KGB general who said that even poor-quality sculptures had a positive function – to prevent other sculpture from occupying the space.

The representation of the glorious political order went ahead on an industrial scale. At the entrance to the Volga-Moskva Canal, 6000 workers erected 26m-high granite monuments to Lenin and Stalin. Twenty trains of granite were employed in the construction work that lasted from May to August 1937 (Merkurov, 1953). In 1952, the government intended to create workshops situated close to railroads for the delivery of marble and granite. Artists borrowed the industrial brigadnyi metod – sculptors and painters worked in brigades, creating immense canvases and making originals and copies of statues.

Figure 1 The Nation’s Thanksgiving to the Leader and Military Commander. Sculptural composition at Taganskaya metro station, Moscow, 1949. Reprinted with the permission of The Russian Archives of Documentary Films and Photographs (RGAKFD).
The impressive scale of the artistic monuments represented the collective efforts of the Soviet people as opposed to the 'individualism of antirealist investigations,' explained the art scholar Tolstoi (1961):

Bourgeois individualism, small-minded interests, antirealist quest, lack of perspective and fear of the future contradicted the essence of monumental arts, whose vocation is to confirm social values. Besides the artist's mastery and financial expenses, the creation of monumental works requires a friendly social environment and outstanding content. (pp. 5–6)

Stalin himself acknowledged the unique political role of sculpture. Lion Feuchtwanger (1937), in an interview conducted in Moscow in 1936, pointed out to Stalin the proliferation of poor-quality busts of him. Stalin replied:

Bureaucrats are afraid: if Stalin's bust was absent, then a newspaper or their boss would criticize them, or their visitors would be surprised. This is about place-hunting, a peculiar 'self-defence' of bureaucrats: the presence of a Stalin bust is a guarantee against interference of others. (Maksimenkov, 2004: 260)

Artistic images attested to Stalin's rights of succession as Lenin's first disciple. Having purged the Bolshevik 'Old Guard' in the 1930s, Stalin had to prove his rights of inheritance. 'Lenin and Stalin – leaders of the Communist Party and the Soviet State' – this was the topic of an artistic competition in 1948. In

Figure 2  Sergei Merkurov, Stalin's monument. Agricultural Exhibition, Moscow, 1939. Concrete. Reprinted from Iskusstvo magazine, 1990.
paintings depicting Stalin in contemporary settings, the inclusion of Lenin’s portrait or a sculpture of him proved his presence at those events. Stalin’s portrait inserted in canvases depicting the everyday life of ordinary people secured his continuous presence among the Soviets. This practice was widely used by the Romans. As Severian of Gabala explained in *On the Creation of the World*:

> Since an emperor cannot be present to all persons, it is necessary to set up the statue of the emperor in law courts, market places, public assemblies, and theatres. In every place, in fact, in which an official acts, the imperial effigy must be present so that the emperor may thus confirm what takes place. For the emperor is only a human being, and he cannot be present everywhere. (Elsner, 1998: 54)

**THE ICONIC SIGN IS AMBIGUOUS**

The ambiguity of artistic messages was recognized in early discussions on representation. Art was thought to reflect class interests and its evolution was related to the class struggle. In Socialist realism it was not the veracity of the visual image, its relationship to the referent that determined the quality of artistic work, but a particular interpretation in the framework of usefulness to the dominant ideology. Plastic arts are not the best medium for the
controlled communication of ideas. Soviet scholars disqualified Impressionism due to its absence of explicit narratives; described as 'charades and riddles', these canvases were inappropriate for political communication. Painting with a plot (siuzhetnaia kartina) or 'thematic art', depicting work and the people in epic narratives, was what was required. Sculptors were prompted to invent narrative by creating relief composition and sculptural complexes which enabled the depiction of historical events. 'Thematic art modifies the human consciousness and educates Communism; this art marches in front of life and guides it' (Lapins, 1957: 47).

Yet the imposition of ideological monuments is not a solution for political communication. An artistic sign does not communicate per se; rather, it evokes in its viewers a certain attitude towards the entire reality that surrounds them (Mukařovský, 1976[1944]: 237). 'Outdoor sculpture has in it the potential to assume a life of its own', argued the art historian Ernst Gombrich (1999: 156). In order to communicate effectively, a sign has to be inserted into a narrative that provides an appropriate context for the desired interpretation. Sculptures are more resistant to incorporation into a master narrative, encouraging the viewer to plug the semantic gap with their own, potentially heretical, interpretations (Hall, 2000: 117). Asmus (1968[1962]) criticized the Soviet scholars' thesis that, in contrast to the temporal arts such as music or literature, whose meaning unfolded gradually, the plastic arts were perceived 'immediately' in space. He stressed that the perception of sculpture, painting and architecture also depends on time, which is necessary for the consolidation of all visual details.

A monument can serve two functions: as a weapon of ideological indoctrination or a semiotic resource of oppositional discourse. Soviet ideologues realized that monumental propaganda had to be accompanied by a verbal anchorage of meaning. The communication of preferred meanings was assigned to party propagandists and manuals on various ideological topics, including the arts, provided keys to the dominant interpretation: 'One has to know how a monument is to be perceived, evaluated . . . The old proverb says "sculpture is a powerful muse, though silent'' (Savickis, 1970: 9).

In an everyday interpretation, the monuments of Communist leaders departed from their intended messages. Reanimated sculptures were turned into key personages of ideologically mocked narratives. Posture, peculiar foreshortening, and the location of statues vis-à-vis other elements of urban architecture all generated unusual contexts of reception that created bizarre connotations. For example, there were rumours about the exchange of statesmen's heads on industrially produced monuments. There was also a quite widespread anecdote about a monument to Lenin with two caps that was inaugurated in a provincial town: Lenin had one cap in his hand, while another cap on his head had been mistakenly attached to the wrong statue. In Riga, the monument to the leader of the first Soviet Latvian Government, Peteris Stucka, built in 1962 was said to be a remake of an unfinished Stalin statue that was redundant after the dictator's death.3
Towards the end of the Soviet era, monuments were defaced with physical alterations such as a cigarette butt placed between fingers or a cap put on a statue’s head. Police patrols had to regularly oversee the most important monuments.

THE ICONIC SIGN AS THE CENTRE OF A CULT

The dominant interpretation of an icon is provided through ritual. Sculpture creates a centre for a cult, where ritual secures its political veneration. In June 1918, the Artistic Council of the Enlightenment Ministry suggested engraving monuments with quotations: ‘the monuments will serve as street rostra, from which fresh words will fly to the masses of people, awakening their minds, senses and thoughts’ (Shleev, 1977: 260). Minister Lunacharskii added: ‘Monuments will be inaugurated on Sundays. Inauguration will be accompanied by speeches . . . These monuments will function as places of pilgrimage for tourists, pupils, etc.’ (pp. 263–4).

New images took the place of religious icons and, by the 1980s, monuments to Lenin had been constructed in almost every town. In public institutions (schools, factories, large offices), there was set aside a krasnyi ugolok (red corner) – a room for public meetings decorated with portraits and busts of party leaders (Figure 4). In Russian Orthodox religious practice, the ‘red corner’ was a space for prayer in the living room where Christian icons were placed (Figure 5).4

Figure 4
Admittance to Young Pioneers (small sculpture of the infant Lenin and a portrait of Stalin in the red corner of a school). © Photo by Zanis Legzdins, 1952. Reproduced with permission.
In addition to copying the ceremonial worship of images, Soviet art borrowed religious iconography. The three arches of the Soviet Constitution Monument in Moscow (1918) housed crude iron plaques inscribed with the text of the Soviet Constitution, similar to the Ark of the Covenant. The 12 members of the Communist Party Politbureau (Figure 6) resemble the iconography of the last supper with the Communist spiritual leader represented as a bust. Stalin’s sculptural image has much in common with the iconography of Christian saints. He was usually represented standing with a scroll in his left hand and his right hand tucked in his jacket (Figures 7 to 11). The scroll presumably is the newspaper Pravda. The statue of Sergei Kirov in Leningrad (sculptor Tomskii, 1937) displays this newspaper in his hand (Figure 12). The Christian iconography borrowed the image of the scroll from the Greeks, for whom it was an attribute of philosophers. However, Stalin’s right hand differs from usual conventions: unlike the blessing gesture of Christian saints, his palm is hidden under his coat or placed on his chest.

Feuchtwanger (1937) acknowledged that such idolatry was incongruous and even distasteful to a Westerner. But, as he explained, through the use of monuments, people could express their gratitude to Stalin for the manifest improvement of their conditions, ‘and no mere abstraction will suffice: they are not grateful to an abstract “Communism,” but to a tangible man, who is Stalin’ (p. 70).

Monuments served as media for conversion to the Communist ideology and became the venue for new public ceremonies such as political
rallies, weddings and festivities centred around the attainment of adulthood. I remember a solemn ceremony of affiliation to the Soviet Young Pioneer organization (similar to the boy scouts) held in 1978 at the modest monument to Lenin in my native Latvian town Sigulda. Pupils had to pronounce ceremonial words of faith addressed to the monument. At the time I was nine years old, and only later learned about the Christian practice of confirmation.

Soviet monuments were used for the semiotization of public urban space at a time when the church was denied its key role in the spatio-temporal structuring of social life. Rites of passage - those crucial turning points in lives of individuals, extremely important for the community - were arranged around the sculptures placed in squares, museums or ‘red corners’. For practitioners of ideology, the suggestive force of the sculptural image was important. Delineating the centres of towns with artistic monuments fulfilled not just an architectural task of creating civic centres, but created ideological centres as well (Savickis, 1970).

THE CONVENTIONALITY OF THE ICONIC SIGN

Perception of the iconic sign as completely identical to its referent makes it the most appropriate message medium. In practice, however, it became clear that these iconic signs failed to convey the required message. Implicitly,
authorities acknowledged iconic conventionality in their regulation of the production of visual messages. Regulation occurred in the framework of socialist realism, which had to preserve the full identity of the sign and referent. However, socialist realism failed to offer a coherent theoretical foundation of its principles, which were being defined and redefined long after its inauguration in 1934. The absence of a strong definition meant that artists provided ad hoc ideological manipulations to suit the current demands of political propaganda.

Socialist realism regulated the technique and content of representation. Artists were required to represent the objective world like photographic reality, 'as it is perceivable by a normal human eye, rather than one mutilated by unhealthy fantasies and needless fancies. To be perceivable means to see in the way that millions of people see' (Nedoshivin, 1950b: 78). Lenin was apprehensive about the ambiguity of plastic signs: 'I cannot value the works of expressionism, futurism, cubism, and other isms as the highest expressions of artistic genius. I don't understand them' (Zetkin, 1934: 12). This shows how the Soviets failed to appreciate an authoritative and persuasive theory of visual communication. The Communist Party's assault
on artists represented by the infamous decrees of the Central Committee in 1946 (known as Zhdanovism in cultural policy) was underpinned by the substantial legitimizing foundation of Marxist-Leninist theoretical tradition. The party recognized that scholars ignored problems of aesthetics. Ideological conceptions should have been imposed from legitimate scientific discourse: ‘aesthetics points at general principles and methods of artistic work ... Soviet critics failed to counteract the formalist influences and decadent relics in Soviet art’ (Voprosy filosofii, 1948: 278). Time and again, artists were criticized for demonstrating a weak knowledge of life because the arts were defined as an immense force of social transformation.

The philosophical foundation for this theory can be found in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism (1977[1909]). The leading theoretician of Soviet Marxist aesthetics, Guerman Nedoshivin (1950a, 1950b), admitted that not only was a complete mirroring of reality impossible but it was not even welcome. When depicting objects of reality, artists should represent ‘typical images’ that would display general qualities and eliminate accidental
Accidental features should be subordinated to the revelation of the key phenomena of an event. ‘Labour Day may fall on a day that is sunny or rainy. An artist depicting the Labour Day demonstration as taking place in wet weather would demonstrate his gross ignorance of the essence of the event,’ explained Nedoshivin (1950a: 83).

He defined artists’ ‘moral intelligence’ (ideinost’) as an understanding of the profound essence of reality. The basis of this intelligence resided in ‘party-mindedness’ (partiinost’) as outlined by Lenin (1962[1905]) in an article on the tasks of literature in political struggle: ‘literature must become a part of the common proletarian affair, “a cog and a screw” of one single great Social–Democratic mechanism’ (p. 45). This article dealt with the tactics of the party’s press (journalism was called ‘literary work’) in the particular circumstances of the Revolution of 1905. Later, this article was given excessively broad interpretation demanding partiinost’ from all arts since all of them were integrated in the state–party ideological apparatus.
Having acknowledged the ideological and subjective nature of art taken from real life, Nedoshivin (1950a) attempted to prove that his conclusion did not contradict the thesis that art was a reflection of reality. Here he found support for his view in a new article by Stalin on linguistics, published in May 1950. Stalin assigned an important actively transformative role to superstructures, for example, of the arts: the superstructure not only reflects the economic base, but actively influences it, helping the new regime to eliminate the old structure and out-of-date classes. In addition, Nedoshivin drew support from Lenin’s theory of reflection. Consciousness did not merely reflect reality – it created it as well. In order to exclude unwelcome attempts at artistic creation, variable ‘goal-setting’ was introduced. In other words, a human being is guided by the knowledge of objective characteristics and the usual qualities of various phenomena. ‘Human consciousness
becomes a powerful weapon in the struggle with the environment, an instrument of the creation of reality, because it designs, directs, adjusts, improves the praxis itself'(Nedoshivin, 1950a: 88). Nedoshivin's theory implied that artists were in subordination to the Bolshevik Party. In the 1930s, Stalin had defined artists as 'engineers of human souls'. Nedoshivin treated this metaphor literally: 'An artist examines reality. He reincarnates results of this examination in his artwork. The latter acts on the people's mind, feelings and will, shaping their consciousness and pointing it in a certain direction' (p. 88).

But the very existence of reality created problems for the Communist Party as real life lagged behind utopian conceptions. Artists were given specific instructions about eliminating personal fantasies from their depictions of reality, and the negativity and conflict of real life were banned as non-existent. 'The beautiful world' was said to be unfolding here and now. 'Where can these “contradictions” and “ambiguity” in images of Soviet art come from, if they do not exist in life itself, because there is no fertile soil for them?' (Zimenko, 1951: 70). Artists were required to select 'telling and
consequent examples' from the surrounding reality of trends in Communist development. Special lists of 'recommended themes' (temniki in artistic jargon) and party/state commissions reminded artists how to gratify the whims of the party and avoid suspicions of aberration. Party tactics changed often: as state policy, or a particular branch of the economy experienced problems, ideological campaigns were launched that identified a scapegoat and imposed new hasty solutions. Political allegiances may have undergone important changes in the period between the placing of the state commission and the acceptance of a work of art on its completion. Artists, especially those dealing with time-consuming arts like painting and sculpture, had to guess what the eventual volte-face of the policy might be in order to get their works accepted. Thus, in practice, partiinost' and ideinost' were the missing variables that determined reality and its 'realist' representation; they provided room for manoeuvre when artistic productions were evaluated after shifts of ideological priorities. Nedoshivin grasped the shadowy nature of socialist realism when he wrote that 'in the final analysis, the essence of the artist's creative work is to compel the existence of such a life in his work of art that it should exist according to our conceptions' (p. 90). Much to the misfortune of the artists, these conceptions were not even clear to the policy-makers themselves as they were often subject to abrupt modifications.

Non-thematic and non-narrative modernist art resisted semantic closure and favoured the application of different codes of interpretation. Because of its non-realistic nature, this art communicated something that could not be defined with certainty, remaining a matter of conventionality and contextual agreement between sender and receiver. Conventionality meant that the iconic message was a coded one. After the debacle of modernists at

Figure 12
the Manège art exhibition in Moscow on 1 December 1962, the Soviet Prime Minister, Nikita Khrushchev, met with artists three times to explain the party’s concern about the messages being communicated by modernists. ‘Our artists are like spies. They depict something but later they do not understand what it is. So, they have encrypted ... We must watch them. A surveillance institution is required’ (Minchenok, 2002: 10).

In the 1960s, gradual acceptance of the conventionality of representation forced scholars to admit that even an indexical cinematic message was open to different interpretations. Thus, it was not only artistic production that required regulation according to party principles, but the message receivers also had to follow partinost, applying dominant codes of interpretation. In his article ‘Reading as Work and Art’, Asmus (1968[1962]) denied the author’s omnipotence and argued that readers had to make their own efforts in the process of receiving messages (p. 61). Interpreting this article for ideological needs, cinema theoretician Semion Ginsburg (1974) expressed concern that receivers who did not possess ‘a correct worldview’ may perceive the content of artwork in a contrary way. Since viewers are not protected from the effects of art works that treat reality in a distorted fashion, filmmakers had a duty to make films with simple themes.

ICONOCLASM AGAIN
As images have such a powerful force, dismantling ancien régime monuments and erecting new ones become inevitable as ideological policies change direction. De-Stalinization began with the re-evaluation of iconic principles, semiotically marking the change of political regime. Damnatio memoriae – the destruction of images – is the other side of the veneration of icons. In 1961, Stalin’s mummy was removed secretly at night from the mausoleum in Moscow and his monuments were gradually dismantled. More than one hundred statues and panels were removed from the Moscow metro in the 1950s (Lebedeva, 2005). The large mosaic, Stalin on the Rostrum, in the metro station Narvskaya in Leningrad was covered over by a false wall.

A remarkable example is Gelli Korzhev’s painting In Days of War and its working drawing. Viewed together, they portray the artist’s self-reflection on his role in the changing political atmosphere – the subject is a wartime artist drawing a poster. In the sketch produced in 1953, the fictional artist is portraying Stalin for this poster, while in the painting rendered by Korzhev one year later, the artist is sitting in front of a blank canvas (Bown, 1998). A new image is needed to replace the departed leader. But which one? A bewildered artist awaits a new commission from the changed political order.

The politics of representation and commemoration followed the requirements of ideological forgetting and memory rewriting. After a year-long discussion, the party leadership abandoned the gigantic statue of Lenin in the Palace of Soviets. In its place, in February 1957, the government announced a competition for the construction of a modest Lenin monument in Moscow. A return to the principles of the founding fathers was on the...
agenda. In 1961, a monument to Karl Marx was inaugurated in Moscow. The 
magazine *Iskusstvo* promoted a new image of Lenin as a humble and modest 
man in contrast to Stalin's personality cult. Pravda commented on 7 
February 1957: ‘Lenin's monument as an outstanding work of art must be 
humble and sublime.’

Right up to the 1980s, political censorship resulted in the removal of 
undesirable persons from visual representation, e.g. in collective portraits 
and paintings. Immediately after the dismissal of the Chairman of the Soviet 
Parliament, Nikolai Podgorny, from his post in 1977, his effigy was erased 
from Dmitrii Nalbandian’s large group portrait of Communist leaders 
(completed in 1976) in the Tretiakov Gallery, where it was exhibited. The 
Department of Censorship of the Ministry of the Interior issued a special 
decree on 27 August 1953 demanding the removal of all effigies of Lavrentii 
Beria, who had been arrested two months earlier.

The order for the general removal of Beria’s portraits applies to 
individual portraits as well as to collective portraits, paintings, 
reproductions, diapositives, film-strips carrying Beria’s image. It is 
prohibited to demonstrate canvases, oil-paintings and film-strips 
before corrections are made. (Blum, 2004: 371)

Libraries and subscribers to the Soviet Encyclopaedia were asked to replace 
two pages devoted to Beria and his portrait in the fifth volume printed in 
1950: ‘The specified pages must be cut off by scissors or razor blade, and the 
new pages glued to the left-hand margins’ (p. 372).

**THE ICONIC SIGN AS MATERIAL OBJECT**

An iconic sign has non-semiotic characteristics determined by the 
investment of material, financial resources and human labour. Apart from 
aesthetic considerations, the fate of an artistic movement depended on 
competition for state commissions between rival groups of artists. The 
building of monuments drained the state budget and, in November 1955, the 
government adopted a decree entitled ‘On the Elimination of Extravagance 
in Architectural Design and Building’. A new, modest, industrial-style 
modernism was in direct contrast to the false classicism of Stalinist art.

The change in the political atmosphere led to a revision of Stalin’s 
institutional structures such as the Artists’ Union. The union was headed by a 
non-elected organizing committee (Orgkomitet) formed in 1939 with the 
objective of reconvening the union’s founding congress. The two key 
institutions responsible for the implementation of party directives in visual 
arts - the Orgkomitet and the Academy of Arts, founded in 1947 - were led 
by the Kremlin’s favourite painter, Alexander Gerasimov. He also maintained 
friendly relations with the leadership of the governmental Committee for Art 
Affairs where he chaired the Artistic Council (Khudsovet) from 1939 until 
1953 (see more about Gerasimov in Bown, 1993). However, the congress was
deferred until 1957. The Kremlin ‘court’ socialist realists took over the financial arrangements and monopolized the awarding of contracts, commissions and acquisition of artworks. The Committee for Art Affairs awarded contracts to only a small group of artists. In 1950, Tomskii had thirteen contracts, the duo of Kerbel and Tsigal nine and some others had five to seven each (Zezina, 1999: 76). Members of the committee staff awarded contracts to themselves. However, due to their poor quality, their works were never displayed and were immediately sent to the repository stacks.

The production of replicas was widespread among sculptors. There is hardly any difference between the images of Stalin cast by Tomskii, Merkurov, Kibalnikov and others: they are all static figures, their right hands under their coats, paper scrolls in their left hands. True, sculptors had to be wary. Critics reproached Tomskii for breaking the lofty canon when he carved a statue of a smiling Stalin in 1951. A simplification of industrial production was favoured. In May 1953, the Department of Culture condemned the ‘unregulated’ construction of replicas of statues. The report made particular mention of Tomskii, who made a profit from copying his own sculptures. He erected the same monument to Lenin in four cities, a monument to Stalin was built in six cities, while another one was replicated in three cities. In a classified document, the government disclosed that artists and local authorities had misused the state budget for personal profit. The report stated bitterly: ‘In the history of Russian monumental sculpture, there had previously been no cases of the replication of monuments’ (see Afanasieva et al., 2001: 97–8). The authorities criticized the over-abundance of sculptural monuments, declaring: ‘there are only a few monuments of high artistic quality; for the most part, replicas of the same model have been erected in different cities’ (p. 259). Making effigies of Communist leaders was big business in the ideology-permeated state. Painters also managed to get additional royalties by making copies of their original canvases for thousands of ‘red corners’.

In 1954, the highly critical reports of the Ministry of Culture and the Central Committee’s Department of Culture exposed irregularities in this art machinery. No universal tariffs, fees or distribution of state orders existed. Stalin’s cohort of sculptors – Vuchetich, Tomskii, Motovilov, Manizer – got the lion’s share of orders and payment. For the Stalin monument on the Volga-Don Canal, Vuchetich was paid 511,645 roubles, while other members of his brigade received sums far below their contribution, ranging from 5000 to 94,000 roubles. In comparison, the entire budget allocated to artists in 1953 was 16 million roubles (Afanasieva et al., 2001: 299–319; Zezina, 1999: 91–6).

According to Neizvestnyi (1984), in the late 1950s, modernists started holding posts in the auditing commission of the Artists’ Union, making the ‘old guard’ of socialist realists worried about the eventual exposure of squander and theft of the state budget. Neizvestnyi believes this was a reason for the merciless attack on modernism which culminated in the Manège exhibition in Moscow in December 1962. A small group of leading artists
who controlled the Orgkomitet monopolized creative contracts when the more transparent procedure of the state commission was abandoned in 1949. Other artists had to rely on public demand. They sold their works in the salons of the Arts Fund and artistic cooperatives, thus indulging in a practice that was alien to socialist art, ‘aesthetization and private, individual motifs’ (Gerasimov, 1956). Artists were thus encouraged to produce marketable pieces for private customers rather than following the ideological regulation of monumental propaganda.

The state commission was renewed in 1957 and the government allocated an annual budget of 35 million roubles for the acquisition of artworks. In addition, the decentralization of state contracts made them more accessible to provincial artists in Soviet republics who complained about the financial appetite of their colleagues in Moscow. In 1961, the state budget was more than doubled, amounting to 80 million roubles. The exhibition for the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution illustrates the magnitude of the state-managed market, which issued 1800 contracts for paintings, sculptures, graphics, applied and decorative art. More than 1000 artists received state-sponsored business trips. Artists had to demonstrate, in truthful and emotional images, the life of our heroic people, the development of communist relations, international struggle for peace, the demonstration of the great and strong character of the Soviet people, the sublime nature and beauty of the Soviet Motherland. (Sovetskaia kultura, 1956)

THE ICONIC SIGN IS FREED

After Stalin’s death, art criticism picked up speed. The Academy of Arts demanded freedom for the arts from the photographic and other strictly determined requirements of portraying reality. Prime Minister Georgii Malenkov favoured an increase in the production of goods for the mass market. Decorative applied arts and design were included in artistic discussions. In an editorial on the new agenda, the magazine Iskusstvo (1953) declared: ‘We need artistic goods that can decorate the flats of consumers’ (p. 4). Well-known socialist realists were bitterly attacked and the artist’s right to subjectivity was finally acknowledged: ‘artists were previously presenting a passive, objectivist, naturalistic depiction of reality. But the image should contain the artist’s own feelings, his attitude to life’ (Kostin, 1953: 51). From this time on, realists were allowed to indulge their creative fantasies and Nedoshivin (1953) proudly concluded that ‘the proscribed regulations are alien to the spirit of Soviet art theory’ (p. 259).

Inspired by the denunciation of Stalin in 1956, artists criticized ideological control and overtly opposed the official method of socialist realism. The authorities had to broaden the boundaries of this artistic form even further. Pravda (1957) insisted that the realistic method offered wide opportunities for artists, but they interpreted the method restrictively.
Greeting the Congress of the Union of Soviet Artists, the Central Committee of the Communist Party warned against a dogmatic interpretation of socialist realism, admitting ‘creative individuality, diversity of forms and genres’ (CC CPSU, 1957). In his address to the congress, the Ideology Secretary of Central Committee, Dmitrii Shepilov (1957), even urged artists ‘to struggle courageously for diversity of artistic phenomena, methods, styles if they serve the people’s interests’.

A new movement emerged that was opposed to ‘gigantomania’ and permitted the artistic treatment of subjective psychology rather than a visualization of lofty Soviet ideology. A good example is Arkadii Plastov’s painting Tractor-Driver’s Meal. In 1952, Iskusstvo keenly criticized the work for a modest lyrical presentation of what in fact was ‘the grandiose life’ of a kolkhoz (Sosedova, 1952: 10). However, in 1959, the work was given a positive critique for its ability to communicate psychological impressions of evening in the countryside.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Nina Dmitrieva (1961), whose treatment of visual iconicity respects motivational and conventional aspects. Discussing the work of Chinese painter, Chi’i Pai-shih, whose exhibition was held in Moscow, she explained how this work resolved the problem of relations between reality and representation by following a rather evasive oriental practice: the mastery of art requires a fine line between similarity and dissimilarity. ‘Excessive similarity means reaching out to narrow-minded people, but dissimilarity is lying. Excessive similarity is the mimicking of nature, a lack of similarity is disrespect for nature’ (p. 3).

The infamous debacle of modernists in 1962 blocked further open debates on the nature of the plastic arts. However, by this time, the iconic sign had already been freed from its solely political mission.

NOTES

1. Documents on the Communist Party’s cultural policy can be found in Afanasieva et al. (2001) and Blium (2004).

2. This expression underwent a curious metamorphosis. The first edition of the memoir in 1925 quoted Lenin as saying: ‘art must be comprehended by people’. Subsequent quotations of Lenin’s words charged the artists with responsibility for making art ‘comprehensible to people’.

3. These anecdotes became a reality in 2003. On the eve of the parliamentary elections in Russia, a monument to the Communist leader Gennadii Ziuganov was erected in his native village: due to lack of resources, the head was the only feature that was a true representation of Ziuganov. The torso was borrowed from a Lenin sculpture.

5. B. Iofan's project of 1931 featured a 460-storey building. On 13 July 1931, the government decided to build it on the site of the Church of Christ the Saviour.

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