

## The Golden Age of Russian Avant-Garde Picturebooks

**Sara Pankenier Weld. 2018. *An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 236 pp. ISBN 978-90-272-0018-1.**

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Illustrated, interactive books, specialised picturebooks, and similar materials for children have a long history. Text connected to illustrations is an important aspect of children's upbringing and early learning, so it is not surprising that picturebooks have attracted the attention of all social groups in every historical period. In Russia, the history of illustrated children's books begins in the 17th century, a time when book printing was developing. One of the first recorded examples is *Bukvar'* [Primer] by Karion Istomin from 1694, in which the text and illustrations were engraved on bronze, and they were produced by Leontij Bunin. The Russian avant-garde picturebook, discussed by Sara Pankenier Weld in her book *An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook*, does not reach so far back in history in its analytical part, but it does not fail to mention such an example, as well as the interesting fact that Empress Catherine the Great (1729–1796) read picturebooks to her grandchildren.

Therefore, we have a book before us that is rich in information, a historical overview, but also a book with clearly presented material, exemplified by illustrations, and focused on the first third of the 20th century. The book is divided into four chapters that form larger thematic sections: "Ex nihilo nihil fit: The evolution of the Russian avant-garde picturebook", "Unnatural selection: Censorship and ideology", "Adaptations: Re-orienting the picturebook", and "A question of survival: Facing limitations", each with three subchapters. The book also includes an introduction to the history of the Russian avant-garde picturebook, a very extensive list of sources and literature, and a list of 65 illustrations, mostly the covers of children's books and picturebooks, with precise references to individual editions.

Sara Pankenier Weld has been working in the field of Russian avant-garde and children's literature for many years, as confirmed by her monograph *Voiceless Vanguard: The Infantile Aesthetic of the Russian Avant-Garde*, published in 2014. In her new book, the author starts from two important premises. One relates to the course and manner of the development of Russian picturebooks during the avant-garde era, and the other concerns the justification of the term "ecology" in humanist research. To explain the development, she selected punctuated equilibrium, the concept of interrupted evolutionary development that assumes that some evolutionary processes occur rapidly in a linear fashion, while others stagnate. The author believes this method of development can be applied to the development of Russian avant-garde picturebooks, specifically during the time after the October Revolution. In explaining ecology, a significant and titular concept in her study, the author refers to the book *The Ecology of Language* (1972) by the American linguist Einar Haugen, in which language ecology is expressed through the interaction between language and its environment in the broadest sense. Similarly, Sara Pankenier Weld examines Russian avant-garde picturebooks within their literary, artistic, visual, historical, and political environments. The book explores

the dynamics of the relationship between words and images, as well as between politics and art. The relationships are layered and ambiguous, such as the relationship between politics and the written word, art and state censorship, authorial skills in avoiding censorship, and more. The early twentieth century in Soviet Russia witnessed exceptional imagination and productivity in the development of Russian avant-garde picturebooks. The author notes that the 1920s stand out as an innovative period of creation, while the 1930s mark the end of innovation in that field.

The entire book is imbued with the terms “ecology” and “punctuated development”, but the author also employs other terms from natural science and sociology to more precisely specify the position of Russian avant-garde picturebooks, which, under conditions of political pressure and censorship, “walked a tightrope” in their struggle for survival. Therefore, the author refers to Darwin’s principles of natural selection in evolutionary development, believing that Soviet censorship, through its publishing policies, established a form of “unnatural” selection, namely social selection which deviates from gradual, natural adaptation. Thus, Pankenier Weld wonders how this “unnatural” selection shaped the evolution of Russian avant-garde picturebooks into a resilient literary organism. Adaptation was highly innovative and varied among individual writers. Dealing with political pressure can be achieved through the poetics of silence (a good example being the poem “Silentium” by Fyodor Tyutchev) or by cultivating so-called “Aesopian language” during the harsh Soviet censorship, which metaphorically preserved immediate political allusions that could have led to the banning of a book. The aforementioned 19th-century poem by Tyutchev, “Silentium” (1830), testifies to silence and the unspoken, because when the voice is silenced, aesthetics fight for their own survival (“Literary ecology as a dynamic system”). It is, in fact, a protective camouflage that develops between predator and prey. The strategy of mimicry has a long history and is not limited to the early Soviet period alone. Mimicry should deceive the watchful eye of censorship, even in children’s literature during the time after the Revolution. Russian censorship practices have a long tradition, and it would be incorrect to conclude that it is solely a Soviet phenomenon (“Censorship in Russian literature and children’s literature”). Censorship in the field of children’s literature is particularly indicative because children are perceived as the “hope” and “emblem of the future”, which is why censorship operates in the name of children and their protection, and why resistance to censorship is represented as the exposure of children to various dangers. In other words, the state’s stance is that censorship protects children’s rights from negative social and other influences.

The creation of picturebooks as a distinct form of literature for children, consisting of text and images, aligns with the creation of the new Soviet individual. During the 1920s and 1930s, many writers, poets, visual artists, and intellectuals directed their efforts toward a new experiment, both in shaping a new individual and in the aesthetic transformation of Russian avant-garde picturebooks. According to Nadezhda Krupskaya, children’s literature was one of the possible tools for the socialist education of the new generation (55). Certain authors deserve particular attention, such as Korney Chukovsky and Samuil Marshak, who played with innovative picturebooks in the 1920s and 1930s. It is worth mentioning that Korney Chukovsky (1882–1969) remains the most widely published author of children’s books to this day. Samuil Marshak (1887–1964) stands alongside Chukovsky and was

awarded one Lenin Prize and four Stalin Prizes. The books of verses by Chukovsky and Marshak, illustrated by Vladimir Konashevich and Vladimir Lebedev, marked a true creative explosion in their time. They were particularly notable for the synergy of different art forms, which, after all, was a goal of avant-garde art. However, in the later period, especially in the 1930s, the ideological component prevailed over the aesthetic, and the Russian avant-garde aesthetic lost its significance. A good example is the poem “Iz doma vyšel čelovek” [A Man Came Out of the House] (1937) by Daniil Kharms. Although seemingly innocent, the poem about a man who left his house and disappeared into the dark woods was interpreted as dangerous and resulted in the loss of freedom for Daniil Kharms. On the other hand, in the 1920s, the children’s fairy tale *Tri tolstjaka* [*Three Fat Men*] (1928) by the well-known Soviet writer Yuri Olesha, which could be seen as an allusion to the wealthy “nepmen” (new entrepreneurs, from the acronym NEP – the New Economic Policy, introduced by Lenin in 1921), was considered ideologically acceptable. Cryptic writing or mimetic camouflage, as described by Sara Pankenier Weld, was the only means of survival in the early Soviet era.

Russian avant-garde picturebooks did not emerge out of nothing. Even in the pre-revolutionary era, they were characterised by innovation. However, the author demonstrates that a radical shift occurred in the 1920s, in a positive sense, as both the concept of words and images underwent significant changes during that time. She particularly highlights (and numerous visual examples in the book demonstrate) the emergence of a new, geometrically sharp image, mechanicism, new primitivism, distinct use of colour, material experimentation, and the square becoming one of the avant-garde’s distinctive features. Good examples of this are the picturebooks *Dva kvadrata* [*About Two Squares*] (1922) by El Lissitzky and *Moroženoe* [*Ice Cream*] (1925) and *Znaki prepinanija* [*Punctuation Marks*] (1926) by Samuil Marshak with illustrations by Vladimir Lebedev. Additionally, and no less importantly in the context of a book on the ecological aspects of Russian avant-garde picturebooks, there was a general shift in the attitude of politics toward books and the written word. The radical change that occurred politically in 1917 was reflected in society as a whole. The mentioned visual artist and graphic designer, also known as the designer of numerous avant-garde posters, Vladimir Lebedev, and the internationally renowned artist El Lissitzky (Lazar Markovich Lissitzky), played a significant role in avant-garde art and created the most innovative early Soviet picturebooks. Their popularity domestically, as well as their breakthrough on the European and global stage, was not insignificant. Lissitzky created the experimental children’s picturebook *Suprematičeskij skaz pro dva kvadrata* [*A Suprematist Tale of Two Squares*], which was published in Berlin in 1922. In the same year, Lebedev and Lissitzky illustrated Rudyard Kipling’s children’s story “The Elephant’s Child”, translated by Korney Chukovsky. Marshak’s innovative picturebooks *Priključenija Čuč-lo* [*The Adventures of Scarecrow*] (1922), *Cirk* [*Circus*] (1925), and *Mister Twister* (1933) reflect a specific Soviet perspective on the West, especially the United States, and elevated the author to one of the greatest Soviet children’s writers. With their avant-garde aesthetics accompanied by revolutionary ideology and a unique linguistic strategy, this authorial duo created an “ecological niche” for Soviet picturebooks. The aforementioned picturebook *Znaki prepinanija* and particularly the poem “Mnogotočie” [Ellipsis] are cryptic expressions that play with what is left unsaid. It may be less known, although significant for

the avant-garde, that Boris Ender illustrated Osip Mandelstam's picturebook *Dva tramvaja* [Two Trams] in 1925. Osip Mandelstam, one of the greatest Russian poets of the 20th century, although better known as a writer for adults, also wrote for children for a certain period: "Primus" (1925), "Šary" [Balloons] (1926), "Kuhnja" [Kitchen] (1926).

Pankenier Weld does not forget to mention other significant poets of the avant-garde era, such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, a writer who earned the title of revolutionary poet, as well as representatives of the OBERIU group (*Ob'edinenie real'nogo iskusstva* – The Association of Real Art). The name is misleading, as the members of OBERIU were not "realists"; on the contrary, they opposed realism and canonical literature and visual art, advocating principles of absurdity. The group, which was quite diverse, operated in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and brought together prominent figures such as D. Harms, A. Vvedensky, N. Zabolotsky, and others. They all wrote children's verses on various everyday topics (about food, play, animals) in a memorable and fast-paced rhythm.

The inspired poetic of the avant-garde, which proved to be highly imaginative in the creation of children's picturebooks and successful in playing with censorship, begins to reach its end in the 1930s. The author refers to Boris Groys and his article "Roždenie socialističeskogo realizma iz duha ruskogo avangarda" ("The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde"), which indicates that by the late 1930s, even in Maršak's poetry, a decline in avant-garde power was evident. During that time, revolutionary ideology and avant-garde poetics were converging, and the era of totalitarian Stalinist art emerged. In children's publishing, it is evident how censorship and ideological pressure narrowed aesthetic possibilities and dulled the edge of avant-garde provocation. The journey from avant-garde capriciousness and imaginative text and illustration to the extinguishing of avant-garde innovation and merging into proletarian art is well illustrated by Maršak's poem "Počta" [The Post] in the 1932 and 1937 editions about a proletarian postman carrying a heavy bag, visiting residents from door to door to deliver necessary letters or packages. The picturebook was illustrated by Lebedev's student, Mikhail Chekanovsky, and the 1937 edition presented it in the new style of artistic drawing. This already represents the style of socialist realism, completely distant from the playful avant-garde of the 1920s.

In any case, *An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook* by Sarah Pankenier Weld, an American professor of Slavic literature, is an interesting and scientifically grounded book primarily intended for experts in the field of literature. The book will also interest a broader audience beyond the narrow scope of philology, as it offers insights into the innovations of Russian avant-garde art in the 1920s and 1930s.

## A Comprehensive Guide to Picturebooks

**Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, ed. 2018. *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*. London and New York: Routledge. 525 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-85318-8.**

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*The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks* is dedicated to the importance, influence, and scope of picturebooks in today's literature and culture. In the introduction headed "Picturebook research as an international and interdisciplinary field", the editor, Bettina