

## Book review

**Etty, John (2018) *Graphic Satire in the Soviet Union. Krokodil's Political Cartoons*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press.**

*Krokodil* was an illustrated Soviet satirical journal founded in 1922. First distributed as a weekly satirical supplement to the *Workers' Gazette (Rabochaya Gazeta)*, it became a stand-alone publication a few months later. The 1920s, the period of the New Economic Policy, was the golden age of Soviet satirical journals, with the emergence of dozens of periodical publications targeting different niche markets: office workers, agricultural workers, women, communist youth, and so on. The effervescence lasted only a few years, however. Swept by the wave of centralisation of resources, effectives, and organisations, which characterised the period of the First Five-Year Plan (1928-32), most satirical journals were liquidated. *Krokodil* then became the official satirical journal of Soviet Russia. Its print run rapidly shot up to 500,000 exemplars, reaching six million in the 1970s. *Krokodil* preserved its monopoly until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in spite of several attempts to create new journals that were always short-lived.

In *Graphic Satire in the Soviet Union. Krokodil's Political Cartoons*, John Etty provides close readings of *Krokodil* graphic satire, casting light on how the journal contributed to fashion a particular kind of visual and media literacy. As the author explains in his introduction, the capacity to read images, earnest as well as satirical ones, is increasingly important in the age of Trump and Brexit, in the post-truth climate, and in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* killings and the Musa Kart trial. The book further aims to “extend and nuance our understanding of Soviet graphic satire beyond the concept of state-sponsored propaganda” (p. 6) by looking closely at satirical aesthetics, and fanning back to examine the unique place it occupied in Soviet print media as well as in a network of media. In contrast with existing studies that adopt the “propaganda paradigm”, this book rejects the notion that *Krokodil* cartoons straightforwardly translated authoritative political speech into images. For Etty, they “represented an ideological performance and a graphic exploration of the visual’s power to reveal truth” (p. 7).

In order to achieve these goals, Etty selected a corpus constituted of the 396 issues of *Krokodil* published between January 1954 and December 1964, a period that coincides with the end of the Stalinist era and the period of political relaxation known as the “Thaw”. Focusing on a ten-year window has allowed the author to examine every issue of the prolific publication in detail, drawing out recurrent themes and observing how they evolved over the decade with methodological rigour. On the flip side, it made it difficult for him to take a broader view on how the journal adapted to transformations in what Gill (2011) calls the *Soviet metanarrative* over its near 80-years existence. This targeted approach also precluded forays into how the Soviet satirical scene constituted itself over time and across a variety of mediums, with satirists collaborating and sharing strategies, often being active in film, theatre, and literature, as well as in graphic satire.

The book is organised into eight short chapters. The first, “Explaining *Krokodil* magazine and the Soviet media system” looks at the Soviet media environment, as well as dominant interpretations of *Krokodil*’s role and overall messages. Here, Etty points out how the Soviet media system is often described as a straightforward propaganda environment. For him, the

propaganda paradigm and the totalitarian model have overshadowed discussions of Soviet propaganda during the Cold War and since, with the result that *Krokodil* is often viewed strictly through an ideological lens. While this viewpoint allows some understanding of how the journal functioned, scholars need to reach beyond this oversimplified interpretation by “using theories that extend beyond binaries, hierarchies, and state power structures” (p. 18) and that recognise creators and readers as having at least some degree of agency. This chapter offers a strong reflection on the historiography of Soviet media and graphic satire, and will be equally useful to readers interested in posters, films, and other forms of Soviet cultural production.

Chapter two, “*Krokodil*’s format and visual language” looks at the aesthetic sources, and the cultural and social traditions that shaped *Krokodil*, before delving into various schematas from which visual critiques were constructed, and finishing with formal descriptions of the journal and the targets of its cartoons. Etty is right to draw a clear lineage between *Krokodil* and European satirical journals such as *Punch*, *Le Charivari*, *Asino*, and *Simplissimus*. These were widely known in Soviet Russia. They had even been collected in the “Satire Cabinet” created at the Soviet Academy of Sciences in the early thirties under the stewardship of former Commissar for Enlightenment, Anatolii Lunacharsky. However, Etty eschews the many local Russian and early Soviet illustrated journals that had an equally strong impact on *Krokodil*’s style and visual strategies. These include roughly 400 short-lived satirical periodicals that emerged during the 1905 Revolution and the ensuing momentary collapse of censorship, and dozens of journals that coexisted with *Krokodil* in the early 1920s. Several artists, writers, and print media technicians cut their teeth working on these publications before they joined the *Krokodil* team, and contributed to shaping its particular aesthetics.

In a section of the chapter that focuses on the visual language of graphic satire, Etty demonstrates eloquently the dialogic, polyphonic, and heteroglossic nature of *Krokodil*’s visual satire. He highlights how a variety of texts and forms, targets and authorial voices cohabited in the journal, often reflecting one upon another, and were intertextual. He also makes a convincing case for the journal’s self-reflexivity. This is a feature that is rarely remarked upon by scholars, and that challenges the understanding of Soviet satire (and Soviet culture in general) as monologic and straightforwardly didactic.

The next three chapters investigate how *Krokodil* graphic satire might be more fully understood using intertextual and transmedial approaches. Chapter three, “A school for laughter: Carnavalesque humour and Menippean satire in *Krokodil*”, presents *Krokodil* as a school where both satirists and their publics learned the codes of laughter. It also situates *Krokodil* in the ancient traditions of Menippean satire and of carnivalesque, which, as Bakhtin (1929, 1965) described, were polyphonic and socially engaged forms of laughter that emerged in periods of intense social struggle. For Etty, these concepts allow for an exploration of *Krokodil*’s dialogic nature, while also providing an alternative framework to the propaganda or totalitarian paradigm.

The fourth chapter, “The co-creation of *Krokodil* magazine”, focuses on the interaction that took place in the 1954-1964 period between the journal and political authorities, as well as other stakeholders: editorial board, staffers, freelance contributors, readers, as well as censors. By demonstrating how creative agency was extended beyond the editorial team, Etty successfully challenges an often-held view that the journal was monolithic, or that it was under total political supervision. Co-creation was essential to the making of *Krokodil*, just as it had been for all early Soviet journals, with key editorial meetings being open to the public and occasionally observed by western visitors. Etty explains in detail how the journal’s production process ran, how its timetable was set, and how themes and images were collectively workshopped.

The transmedial nature of *Krokodil* (how content gets dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels) is explored in the fifth chapter, “Participatory reading: The forms

and consumption of Soviet satire.” *Krokodil* was indeed always more than just a journal. Its reach was extended with pamphlets, theatrical performances, and animated films. Two *Krokodil* ANT-9 aircrafts were commissioned in 1933, in the context of the fifteenth anniversary of the October revolution, to join the Maxim Gorky literary “agitsquadron”, aviation units that flew propaganda tours around the country, allowing journalists and artists to meet their readers, conduct research, and write reports on local issues.

Employing transmedia theory allows the author to explain how *Krokodil* extensions related to the journal and called upon readers to make connections between them. Etty hence challenges another cliché of Soviet studies scholarship, that Soviet citizens were passive recipients of mass media content. He explains how “the aims of Soviet satire were not to condition readers to certain reflexes, but rather to engage them and invite a (...) participatory response” (p. 126).

The final three chapters propose that the journal performed ideology. In Chapter six, “Making the risible visible”, Etty justly remarks that performance (as queer theorist Judith Butler (1990) understands that term) runs through Soviet social and political life. He argues that identity and ideology are enacted corporeally, materialised as physical appearance and as behaviour. Building upon this idea, Etty investigates character construction in *Krokodil*, and how complex and ambivalent ideologemes, such as the omnipresent fat capitalist, became part of a political thought-practice through repetition. What Etty refers to by ideologeme had been theorised by Soviet writers and critics as *tipazh* in the 1920s and 1930s, understood as caricatural visual mechanisms meant to communicate the truth about an idea.

Chapter seven, “*Krokodil*’s hollow centre: The performance of affirmation”, builds upon the observation that, while negative ideologemes like the fat capitalist, the drunken priest, western fascists, and racists abound in *Krokodil* satire, their positive antithesis is rare. This chapter explains how heroic figures of the Soviet worker, or affirmative images of Lenin, Stalin or Khrushchev that often appeared in Socialist Realist art may be absent from the pages of *Krokodil* but nevertheless play a rhetorical role in the magazine. As he argues, “*Krokodil*’s solution was to depict the absent entity by performatively constructing characters whose appearances and behaviour manifested the effects of ideology” (pp. 161-162). This was done through compositional devices and the representation of seemingly innocuous objects that refer obliquely to decrees, laws or events that readers could conjure, reading *Krokodil* intertextually.

The final chapter, “Becoming Soviet in *Krokodil*”, looks at cartoons that attempted to reconcile ideal Soviet behaviour with the failure of everyday citizens to perform such behaviour. For Etty, in this case, *Krokodil* tested “ideology as an interpretive resource for understanding how ordinary citizens interacted with official discourse” (p. 191). It “thereby contributed to the project of encouraging the self-construction of Soviet subjectivity” (p. 191). Here, graphic satire was not aimed at enemies, but rather at readers themselves. It poked fun at them to encourage them to conform to Soviet ideology, to gain a more acute consciousness of their position as Soviet citizens. The chapter expounds on the power of images and language as resources for acculturation and construction of identity. Furthermore, by engaging critically with other media and topical discourses, *Krokodil* heightened viewers’ ability to see images as ideological constructions and cultivated a certain amount of scepticism, or at least consciousness of the act of seeing.

Grounded in empirical analysis of the magazine from 1954 to 1964, *Graphic Satire in the Soviet Union. Krokodil’s Political Cartoons* argues that *Krokodil* was participatory, performative, and “discursively engaged in reflexive relationships with a circle of different influences, including Soviet propaganda” (p. 212). It contributed to the formation of cultural and political discourse, as well as Soviet identity, while never eschewing the productive ambiguity of daily experience. Instead, it often poked fun at the gap between ideology and

reality. For Etty, political cartoons in *Krokodil* may even be regarded as a form in which ideological critiques were defined and extended.

Theoretically astute, the book draws on cultural studies and linguistic theory, and provides useful conceptual tools for readers interested in the analysis of graphic satire and Soviet visual culture in general. His reliance on contemporary theoretical frameworks, such as performativity, intertextuality, and so on, might however create the impression that *Krokodil* workers were producing satire in a theoretical vacuum and had little conceptual understanding of what they were doing. This is far from the case. There was, in fact, great interest in the use of satire as a rhetorical and ideological tool since the very first days that followed the October revolution. The aforementioned Anatolii Lunacharsky himself wrote dozens of theoretical essays on satire and humour. His ideas were debated in public and in print by artists, critics, and scholars throughout the late twenties and early thirties; the Soviet Academy of Sciences even took scholarly interest in the matter in the thirties.

Etty understands satirical vision as a technology that allows for the perception of invisible processes, and becomes a “thinking tool for rationalising divergences between rhetoric and visual experience” (p. 4). His discussions of vision, style, and other formal issues are sophisticated, and permit him to look beyond content analysis in the strict sense, to consider how meaning is produced visually and intertextually. This is one of the greatest strengths of this book: Etty masterfully connects rigorous historical explorations with a great sensibility to the workings of satirical representation.

**Annie Gerin**

Concordia University, Canada

[annie.gerin@concordia.ca](mailto:annie.gerin@concordia.ca)

## References

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1929). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*. Leningrad: Priboj.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1968). *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Gill, G. (2011). *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.