



MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

‘Forward, Mainline!’ Art as Propaganda during the Baikal-Amur
Mainline Construction (1974–1984)
A Multisite Critical Visual Analysis through Posters, Museums,
and Interviews

verfasst von | submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2025

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

UA 066 656

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme as it appears on the student
record sheet:

Masterstudium CREOLE-Cultural Differences and
Transnational Processes

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Peter Schweitzer

Mitbetreut von | Co-Supervisor:

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Contents

Abstract (Deutsch).....	3
Abstract (English)	4
Figures	5
I. Introduction.....	7
I.1. Construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline: A Timeline	8
I.2. The Current State of Research	12
I.3. Identification of the Research Gap	15
I.4. Research Objectives	16
I.5. Research Questions	17
II. Description of the Methodology	18
II.1. Site of Image Itself: Semiotic Analysis of BAM Posters	20
II.2. Site of Production: Discourse Analysis II of BAM Museum Collections	22
II.3. Site of Audiencing: BAM Audience Studies	23
III. Theoretical Framework	25
III.1. On Visuality of Totality	25
III.1.1. Origins of Soviet Propaganda	26
III.1.2. The Birth and Crystallisation of Ideological Vision	28
III.1.3. Characteristics of Total Battle of Art.....	29
III.1.4. On Modern Art and Effective Equilibration	31
III.1.5. Art in Totalitarian Political Reality.....	32
III.1.6. Socialist Realism as an Art Method.....	34
III.1.7. Official Soviet Art after Stalin.....	36
III.2. On the Origins and Symbolic Language of Soviet Political Posters	38
III.2.1. Posters as a Propaganda Tool in the Early Soviet Times.....	39
III.2.2. Free New World and Visualisation of its Space	40
III.2.3. Framing Utopia: Constructing Images of Socialist Reality and Communist Future	50
III.3. Siberian Myth in Russian Culture	57
III.3.1. Siberia as Ultimate Periphery	60
III.3.2. Siberia as Canvas for Life as Dream.....	61
III.3.3. Siberia as Profane Allegory for Nature.....	63
III.3.4. Siberia as an Indispensable Part of the Greater Whole.....	64

III.3.5. Siberia as Intransigent Space	65
III.3.6. Siberia as Exotica.....	67
III.3.7. Siberia as Tabula Rasa	68
IV. Image of BAM for Outsiders	70
IV.1. Constructing BAM Chronotope	70
IV.1.1. Marking BAM-Time through Bakhtinian Framework of Chronotope.....	71
IV.1.2. Mapping BAM-Space through Foucauldian Theories of Space.....	78
IV.2. Key Themes in BAM Posters.....	83
IV.2.1. The Archetypal Soviet Individual as a BAM Builder	84
IV.2.2. Building Soviet Economy.....	94
IV.2.3. Ecological Motives	100
IV.2.4. Cult of Leaders	104
IV.3. Viktor Koretsky's Photo Posters and the Inception of the BAM Propaganda Campaign.....	106
IV.4. BAM Art as a Social Event: Two BAM Art Exhibitions <i>We are Building BAM</i> (1979) and <i>From the Artists of Soviet Russia to BAM</i> (1984-1985)	113
V. Image of BAM on the Ground	121
V.1. BAM Museum Collections: Crossing the Axis of Visibility.....	121
V.2. BAM Posters as Truth Claims: Localising Spatial Representation	124
V.3. Framing Official/Local Gaze: BAM Image as Seen from the Museum Floor	128
V.4. Acoustic Level of BAM Image.....	132
V.5. The Paradox of (Post-)Soviet Ideology: BAMer Identity as a Case Study	139
VI. Conclusion.....	148
VII. Bibliography.....	156
VIII. List of Images.....	166
IX. Filmography	170

Abstract (Deutsch)

Der Mobilitätsdiskurs in der Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie ist aufgrund der direkten und tiefgreifenden Auswirkungen auf das Leben der Menschen und die menschliche Umwelt seit langem von wissenschaftlichem Interesse. Das Phänomen des sowjetischen „Jahrhundertbaus“ in den Jahren 1974-1984 durch Sibirien – der Bau der Baikal-Amur-Magistrale – wurde aus verschiedenen akademischen Perspektiven untersucht, mit einem integralen Propagandaelement. Gleichzeitig schenkten Visual Studies und Kunstgeschichte sowohl der sowjetischen totalitären Kunst im Allgemeinen als auch der Entwicklung der sowjetischen Plakatkunst im Besonderen zunehmend Aufmerksamkeit und hoben bestimmte Themen sowjetischer politischer Plakate hervor. Allerdings gibt es bis dato nur wenige Studien, die die Rolle der Propagandakunst der BAM-Zeit als eines der Mittel zur freiwilligen Mobilisierung menschlicher Massen sowie zur Werbung für das größte Bauprojekt der Breschnew-Ära für Nichtteilnehmer kritisch bewerten.

Diese Studie zielt auf eine kritische visuelle Analyse des BAM-Bildes ab, indem drei Orte untersucht werden, an denen die Bedeutungen entstehen. Der Ort eines Bildes selbst wird durch semiotische Analyse zweier gesamtrussischer Ausstellungen der BAM-Kunst erkundet. Die Diskursanalyse II befasst sich mit dem Ort der Bildproduktion durch die Untersuchung der BAM-Museumssammlungen als Institutionen und Sehweisen. Schließlich reflektieren Publikumsstudien das BAM-Image aus der Sicht der BAM-Entwickler und nutzen Interviews, um die Dekodierung zu untersuchen.

Die Erforschung der BAM-Kunst als kreatives Produkt menschlichen Handelns der späten Sowjetzeit ermöglicht es, einen Abdruck der Entwicklung der sowjetischen Propaganda und der kommunistischen Ideologie seit 1917 zu verfolgen, die in den 1970er und 1980er Jahren die umfangreiche künstlerische Sprache der Propagandabilder aufnahm. Die semantische Belastung und die nonverbale Ausdrucksweise der kommunistischen Werte und Überzeugungen der letzten sechs Jahrzehnte wurden berücksichtigt und durch die flexible Reaktion auf neue ideologische Aufgaben wurden die entsprechenden Formen und Stile erfunden. Als die letzte ideologisch gesättigte Periode lässt sich die BAM-Phase in der Geschichte der sowjetischen politischen Kunst als Zusammenfassung der wichtigsten sowjetischen Propagandabilder vor dem Zusammenbruch der kommunistischen Ideologie und ihrer Wiederbelebung in den postsowjetischen Jahren analysieren.

Abstract (English)

The discourse of mobility in social and cultural anthropology has long been of scientific interest due to the direct and profound impact on people's lives and the human environment. The phenomenon of the Soviet 'construction of the century' in 1974-1984 through Siberia – the building of the Baikal-Amur Mainline has been studied from different academic perspectives, with an integral propaganda element. At the same time, visual studies and art history have paid growing attention to both Soviet totalitarian art in general and the development of Soviet poster art specifically, as well as have highlighted certain themes of Soviet political posters. However, there have been few studies that have critically assessed the role of the propaganda art of the BAM-period as one of the means used to mobilise voluntarily human masses, accompany Soviet citizens in their endeavour, and advertise the greatest construction project of Brezhnev era to observing non-participants.

This study aims at a critical visual analysis of the BAM image by looking at three sites at which the meanings are made. The site of an image itself is explored through semiotic analysis of the two exhibitions of BAM art. Discourse analysis II deals with the site of production of an image through the study of the BAM museum collections as institutions and ways of seeing. Finally, audience studies reflect upon the BAM image through the eyes of BAM builders, using interviews to explore decoding.

The research of BAM art as a creative product of human activity of the late Soviet period allows us to trace an imprint of the development of Soviet propaganda and communist ideology since 1917, which by the 1970s-1980s absorbed the capacious artistic language of propaganda images, the semantic load and the non-verbal way of expressing communist values and beliefs of the previous six decades, and by responding flexibly to new ideological tasks, invented the appropriate forms and style. The BAM phase in the history of Soviet political art turns out to be the last ideologically saturated period before perestroika and the subsequent collapse of the USSR. In this capacity, it is analysed as a synopsis of the main Soviet propaganda images before the collapse of the communist ideology and their ideological revival in post-Soviet years.

Figures

- I. N. Babin, I. Ovasalov and A. Iakushin, *BAM – the Construction of the Century*, 1977 (fig. 1).
- I.1. C. Ward, *BAM, the Trans-Siberian Railway, Little BAM, and the Amur-Yakutsk Mainline Railway*, 2009 (fig. 2).
- I.1. C. Ward, *The BAM Zone*, 2009 (fig. 3).
- II. G. Rose, *Sites, modalities and methods for interpreting found visual materials*, 2010 (fig. 4).
- III.2.2. *Party of the Socialist Revolutionaries*, poster by unknown author, 1917 (fig. 5.).
- III.2.2. *Second Anniversary of the Great October Revolution*, poster by unknown author, 1919 (fig. 6).
- III.2.2. *The Death of Bourgeois Pompeii*, poster by unknown author, 1920 (fig. 7).
- III.2.2. *Soon the Whole World Will be Ours*, poster by unknown author, 1919 (fig. 8).
- III.2.2. V. Deni, *Comrade Lenin Purges the Earth from the Scum*, 1920 (fig. 9).
- III.2.2. G. Shubina, *Broad is My Motherland*, 1938 (fig. 10).
- III.2.2. G. Shegal, *Kitchen Slavery*, 1931 (fig. 11).
- III.2.2. *Female Comrade Workers*, poster by unknown author, 1920 (fig. 12).
- III.2.2. *What October Revolution Gave*, poster by unknown author, 1920 (fig. 13).
- III.2.3. *Worker! Only Having Broken the Chains of the Darkness, You Will Come to the Socialism*, poster by unknown author, 1919 (fig. 14).
- III.2.3. N. Kotov, *Building Socialism*, 1927 (fig. 15).
- III.2.3. P. Sokolov-Skalia, *From the Station “Socialism” to the Station “Communism”*, 1939 (fig. 16).
- III.2.3. P. Karachentsov, *We were Born to Turn a Fairy Tale into Reality*, 1937 (fig. 17).
- III.2.3. I. Kalenskaia, V. Kalenskiy, *We are Destined to Explore Distant Worlds*, 1960 (fig. 18).
- III.3.3. Advertisement for ready-made *sibirskie pelmeni*, *Ogonek*, 1951 (fig. 19).
- IV.1.1. I. E. Shelepov, *Komsomol*, 1979 (fig. 20).
- IV.1.1. A. B. Iakushin, *BAM – Path of Courage*, 1980 (fig. 21).
- IV.1.1. O. A. Ulanov, *...The Ancient Land is Getting Younger!*, 1979 (fig. 22).
- IV.1.1. L. I. Petrushin, *Do You Hear, Time is Buzzing – BAM!*, 1979 (fig. 23).
- IV.1.2. A. B. Arsen'iev, *Forward, Fly!*, 1979 (fig. 24).
- IV.1.2. N. L. Pavlov, *BAM – the Path of Courage and Glory!*, 1979 (fig. 25).
- IV.2.1. L. A. Golovkova, *BAM Build the Young!*, 1979 (fig. 26).
- IV.2.1. A. I. Teslik, *Siberia is the Youth of Our Country*, 1983 (fig. 27).
- IV.2.1. N. S. Babin, *Forward, Mainline!*, 1979 (fig. 28).

- IV.2.1. G. D. Koptsov, *And I Will Build Roads*, 1979 (fig. 29).
- IV.2.2. A. B. Iakushin, *BAM – Real Work!*, 1979 (fig. 30).
- IV.2.2. V. D. Mekhant'iev, *We Will Reveal the Secrets of the Mountains, We Will Build Cities, We Will Pave New Roads!*, 1979 (fig. 31).
- IV.2.2. Iu. Budanov, *Siberia – the Land of New Buildings*, 1982 (fig. 32).
- IV.2.2. I. E. Shelepov, *To the Construction Projects of Siberia – Shock Work of the Young*, 1983 (fig. 33).
- IV.2.3. V. K. Votrin, *Let's Preserve Our Wealth!*, 1981 (fig. 34).
- IV.2.3. V. E. Chumakov, *To the Orders of BAM – Green Street*, 1979 (fig. 35).
- IV.2.4. N. S. Babin, *The Future Belongs to Communism*, 1983 (fig. 36).
- IV.3. V. Koretsky, *Red Army Soldier, Save Us!*, 1943 (fig. 37).
- IV.3. V. Koretsky, *BAM*, 1975 (fig. 38).
- IV.3. V. Koretsky, *BAM*, 1976 (fig. 39).
- IV.4. O. Kiriukhin, *BAM*, 1977 (fig. 40).
- V.2. *Art Festival "Lights of the Mainline"*, poster by unknown author, photo by M. Yakymakha, 2018 (fig. 41).
- V.2. *BAM-84, 4-5 August 1984, Novaya Chara*, playbill by unknown author, photo by M. Yakymakha, 2018 (fig. 42).
- V.3. *'Festival Tynda' in the BAM History Museum, Tynda*, photo by M. Kirstaetter, 2018 (fig. 43).
- V.3. *BAMer Uniform with Festival Pins, BAM History Museum, Tynda*, photo by M. Kirstaetter, 2018 (fig. 44).
- V.4. *Dean Reed's Installation in the BAM History Museum, Tynda*, photo by M. Kirstaetter, 2018 (fig. 45).
- V.5. *Meeting of the BAM Veterans, Severobaikalsk*, photo by M. Yakymakha, 26 May 2018 (fig. 46).
- VI. G. P. Permiakova, *Space to BAM*, 1984 (fig. 47).

I. Introduction

BAM is the main construction site of the Lenin Komsomol. Here, among our youth, the remarkable features of the Soviet person are especially clearly manifested: the continuity of generations, boundless devotion to the Party, the Motherland, selflessness and heroism in work.

L. I. Brezhnev (cited from Khabarova 1980, 5; transl. by me)

What do *remarkable features of a Soviet person, youth and selflessness* look like? Here is an image of a young, attractive man with an open face in a helmet and work clothes, looking hopefully to his right and slightly up, with a red flag in his hands. Behind him and above his head, three rows of red rails seem to be floating across the golden sky, occupying an iconographic image of the Holy Trinity: the main rails are in the middle, the second ones are slightly shorter on his right and the third ones are even shorter on his left. At the very top, in the form of a spreading lightning on a red wide canvas of the flag, in large golden pointed and unevenly filled letters it is written, 'BAM – the construction of the century!'. This is a poster created by N. Babin, I. Ovasalov and A. Iakushin in 1977 (Fig. 1), which is one of hundreds of similar visual works dedicated to personification and glorification of the image of BAM.



Figure 1: Poster 'BAM – the Construction of the Century' by N. Babin, I. Ovasalov and A. Iakushin, 1977.

The discourse of mobility in social and cultural anthropology has long been of scientific interest due to the direct and profound impact on people's lives and the human environment. The phenomenon of the Soviet 'construction of the century' in 1974-1984 through Siberia – the building of the Baikal-Amur Mainline railway – has been studied from different academic perspectives, equally attending to an integral propaganda element. At the same time, visual studies and art history have paid growing attention to both Soviet totalitarian art in general and the development of Soviet poster art specifically, as well as have highlighted certain themes of Soviet political posters. However, there have been few studies that have dedicated a thorough analysis to the role of the propaganda art of the BAM period as one of the means used to mobilise voluntarily human masses, accompany Soviet citizens in their endeavour, and at the same time advertise the greatest construction project of the Brezhnev era to observing non-participants.

This study undertakes a critical visual analysis of the constructed BAM image by examining three sites at which meaning is produced. The site of the image itself is addressed through a semiotic analysis of BAM posters: the origins of the propaganda campaign are explored through the works of Viktor Koretsky, while its middle and concluding phases are represented by two BAM art events: republican exhibition of 1979 and All-Russian exhibition of 1984. Discourse analysis II examines the site of image production through an investigation of BAM museum collections, focusing on these institutions as both producers of meaning and mediators of visual experience. Finally, audience studies consider the BAM image from the perspective of the BAM builders themselves, using interviews to explore processes of decoding.

I.1. Construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline: A Timeline

One of the biggest, if not the biggest public works project of the Soviet Union, which the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline came to represent, had its predecessors both in the history of the Russian Empire as well as of the USSR and, thus, drew inspiration from the past undertakings of successfully mobilising the human resources and reaping the emotional benefits of a united effort. The period under review of 1974-1984, when the railway was announced as built, was not even the first attempt to lay a railroad through Siberia connecting it to the Far East, and equally not the final one. This decade presents a special academic interest for this study not for the actual technological achievements and unprecedented progress in railway engineering, but for its highly charged propagandistic character and the hopes that the Soviet political leadership of that time pinned on its finalisation, treating BAM as a panacea against all the ailments of the senescent regime.

The first railroad project spanning across the territory of the Russian Empire from Moscow to Vladivostok over the total of 9,289 km was the tsarist Trans-Siberian Railway, which construction started in 1891 and was completed in 1905 during the Russo-Japanese War (Ward 2009, 5). In response to strategic concerns during World War I, a new route was built around the southern shore of Lake Baikal in 1916 to bypass the original line through Manchuria – territory that had fallen under Japanese control in 1905 and again in 1932 as part of Manchukuo (*ibid.*). The security considerations that the Trans-Siberian Railway goes along the Mongolian and Chinese borders, and at such dangerous proximity may be an easy prey to the potential enemy of the Soviet Union, were later used for promoting BAM as an alternative railroad situated further into the well-protected territory (*ibid.*, 6) (fig. 2).



Figure 2: Map ‘BAM, the Trans-Siberian Railway, Little BAM, and the Amur-Yakutsk Mainline Railway’ by Christopher J. Ward, 2009.

Striving for acceleration of the industrialisation, the Soviet Union implemented a series of gigantic technological projects which were posited as necessary steps in achieving a common goal of constructing socialism and were all accompanied by glorification to a considerable extent. Only within the first Five-Year Plan (1928-1933) they included, among others, construction of a steel-making complex in Magnitogorsk in the southern Ural mountains, laying the Turkestando-Siberian Railway connecting Siberia to the Central Asia (also known as Turksib), and opening the Dneprostroi dam, a hydroelectric project on the Dnieper River aimed

at flood control and cheap power supply (ibid., 3-4). Successful implementation of each of these endeavours supplied the feeling of cohesion, insuperable collective power and belongingness among Soviet citizens, and, as Ward argues, more pragmatically helped those of the nomenclature of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), who managed to escape Stalin's Great Purges of the 1930s, augment their position and advance the party career (ibid., 4).

To these survivors who built their careers at the dawn of the Soviet mega-techno-construction era and who later became the CPSU General Secretaries counted Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev. The Khrushchev-era Virgin Lands Campaign, aimed at populating and cultivating the barren steppe soils of the Soviet Central Asia – now linked to the Russian mainland by the Turksib railway – was the first ideologically saturated mass mobilisation project focused not only on building infrastructure but on rendering the territory habitable, winning it over from nature (ibid.). Brezhnev's BAM construction, therefore, followed a familiar procedural and technological trajectory, attempting to inject youthful vitality into an already timeworn ideological course. Eight five-year plans after the Turksib, BAM was presented as the new glorious railroad project destined to unify the Soviet masses once again.

The Brezhnev-era BAM project was known by several grand titles, the most sonorous one being *the project of the century*, but also *the path to the future* and *the second Transsib*, whereas it would have been more accurate to call it *the third BAM*. The first two attempts to build the railway occurred between 1932-1941 and 1943-1953, focusing on the easternmost section between Komsomolsk-na-Amure and Sovetskaia Gavan (also known as Imperatorskaia), both located in Khabarovsk Krai (region). These early efforts relied heavily on forced labour, primarily drawn from the GULAG¹ system, including camp inmates, army recruits, and, during the second phase (1943-1953), thousands of German and Japanese prisoners of war (ibid., 5). It is estimated that around 150,000 of these forced labourers died during the construction (ibid.). The project was abandoned following Stalin's death in 1953 and remained dormant until its revival under Brezhnev.

Baikal-Amur Mainline follows a vast and challenging route through Siberia and the Russian Far East, stretching across 4,234 kilometres of difficult, often sparsely populated and remote terrain (ibid., 6). It essentially runs parallel and 610 to 770 kilometres north to the older Trans-Siberian Railway, providing a northern alternative route. The territory between Lake

¹ Glavnoe upravlenie lagerey i tiurem [the Main Directorate of Camps and Prisons], which was one of the penal system bodies within the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the USSR from the 1930s to the 1950s.

Baikal and the Amur River was referred to as the ‘BAM Zone’ [*zona BAMa*] covering some 3.1 million square kilometres in area during the period of the BAM construction on which the current study focuses (*ibid.*, 6-7) (fig. 3). The geography of the area is characterised by a number of powerful rivers, including the Angara, Lena, Vitim, Amur, Zeia, Selemdzha, and Bureia, as well as challenging climatic, geologic, seismic, and epidemiological conditions, for the area is predominantly covered by the swampy coniferous forest of taiga (*ibid.*, 7).

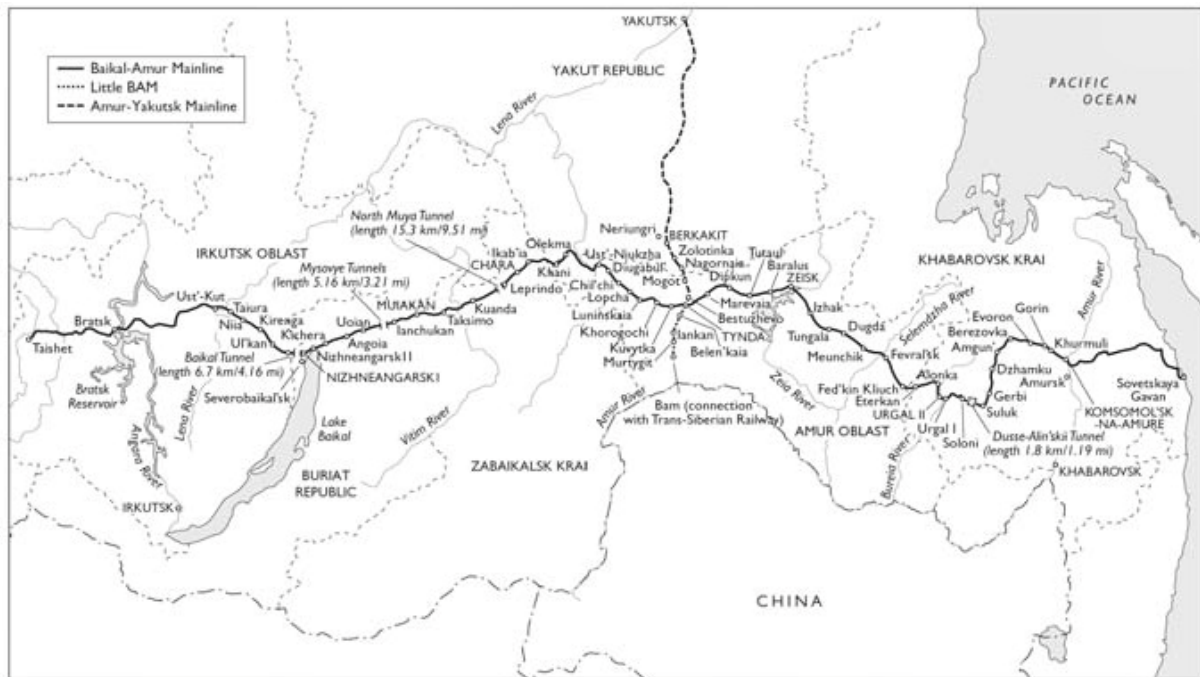


Figure 3: Map ‘The BAM Zone’ by Christopher J. Ward, 2009.

The westernmost point of the BAM is Taishet in Eastern Siberia, northwest of Lake Baikal. From there, the railway runs steadily eastward, passing through Bratsk and its hydroelectric complex at the Bratsk Reservoir, then crossing the Lena River at Ust'-Kut before reaching Severobaikalsk on the northern edge of Lake Baikal. Continuing east, it arrives at Tynda – a major junction where the Little BAM branches southward to connect with the Trans-Siberian Railway, while the Amur-Yakutsk Mainline extends north through Berkakit and Neriungri. The route then crosses the Amur River, connects with earlier sections of BAM near Komsomolsk-na-Amure, and finally terminates at Sovetskaya Gavan on the Pacific coast.

Today, the railway includes 21 tunnels, with a combined length of 47 kilometres, and over 4,200 bridges, stretching nearly 400 kilometres in total that navigate rivers, mountain ranges, and permafrost regions (*ibid.*).

In contrast to the previous phases of BAM construction, Brezhnev declared that ‘BAM will be constructed with clean hands only!’, and available research confirms that no forced or prison labour was employed during this period (*ibid.*, 8). Instead, the workforce was mobilised

under the auspices of the Komsomol² and was predominantly composed of party youth. Between 1974 and 1984, around five hundred thousand workers – known as *bamovtsy* – participated in the construction, nearly two thirds of whom were members of the Komsomol (ibid.). Ethnic Russians made up the majority at 60%, recruited both from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and from other Soviet republics, most notably Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine (ibid., 8). The non-Russian ethnic population was notably diverse, comprising Soviet youth from the fourteen other republics, as well as citizens from Warsaw Pact allies and even more distant countries such as Cuba, Mozambique, and Angola. Women accounted for approximately 40% of the BAM population, with nearly half of them under the age of twenty (ibid., 9).

This demographic composition not only led to the celebrated formation of new families and the much-publicised arrival of BAM children, but also contributed to a divorce rate approaching 80% among the BAM population by the 1980s (ibid., 155). The lure of working far from one's family, in the company of young representatives of the opposite (and in some cases the same) sex, proved too strong for many married people, mostly men, to resist (ibid.).

As Ward notes, the 1984 announcement of BAM's completion was largely symbolic, driven primarily by political motives: Brezhnev – its personal inspirer and ideological architect – had been dead for nearly two years, and the proclaimed goal of 'reaching communism' seemed as distant as ever (ibid., 153). The finalisation ceremony, marked by the driving of the 'golden spike' in September 1984, signified not so much the completion of the railway as the end of political and public interest in its construction (ibid.).

BAM would go on to be declared complete three more times: in 1991, when the Russian government acknowledged that the 1984 declaration had been premature; in 2001, coinciding with the early presidency of Vladimir Putin; and most definitively, on 5 December 2003, with the opening of the 15-kilometre-long Severomuisk (North Muya) Tunnel – the longest tunnel in the Russian Federation – following a protracted twenty-seven-year construction period (ibid., 156).

1.2. The Current State of Research

The research topic concerns visual studies of Soviet propaganda art of mid 1970s-1980s as a multi-layered geographical, temporal and political construct; therefore, the study draws on several disciplines that have contributed to the current state of research.

² Abbreviation stands for Communist Youth League.

A comprehensive review of the history of the BAM construction in a political context was given by Christopher Ward (2001, 2002, 2009, 2015), who critically examined the political necessity of a gigantic construction project aimed at uniting the Soviet masses in a ‘heroic deed’, which, as Ward argued, diverted attention from the accumulated social and political problems of late Soviet socialism. The continuity of the BAM discourse in the 21st century, with its social dynamics and the politics of memory, was further explored by Olga Povoroznyuk (2019, 2020).

Starting from Henri Lefebvre’s theory of ‘production of space’ (2009 [1991]), through which he analysed space in its multiple dimensions as a social, absolute, abstract, and contradictory concept, the mental image of Siberia as a mythical, ambivalent space in Russian culture, bordering between the ‘House of the Dead’ and the land of utter freedom and ultimate riches, has occupied a significant place in the current historical, literary, and anthropological research. Collected essays on the myth of Siberia in Russian culture edited by Galya Diment and Yuri Slezkine (1993) looked at the predominantly literary representation of Siberia ‘from the very beginning’, i.e. from the time when the first Russian trappers arrived in Siberia (Slezkine 1993) through as far as 1990 (Gillespie 1993).

Appropriating Soviet landscape through the art and ideology with the origin in Stalinist times was the focus of the collected volume edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (2003). It provides an important understanding of the methodologies introduced in the 1930s and continued throughout the existence of the USSR, which aimed at sacralising Soviet space by multiple means of what Boris Groys summarised as ‘the art of totality’ (2003): Socialist Realism (Clark 2003), cinema (Bulgakowa 2003), and songs (Günther 2003). Cultural theoretical background of utopias and heterotopias was expounded by Michel Foucault’s (1997) poststructuralist analysis of space as an institutionalised demarcation of power structures. With reference to the USSR, mobilising the Soviet subjects by offering them a topography of utopia ‘eastward’ from the centre, i.e. Moscow, was exemplified by Richard Taylor (2003) through the creative embodiment in the Stalinist musical. John McCannon (2003) explored representation of the mythic landscape of the North in Stalinist popular culture as *tabula rasa*, which concept of the blank page to be filled in by writing exclusively the Soviet history hereupon was further complemented by Emma Widdis’ (2003) essay on mobile perspectives on the Soviet cultural revolution. Thus constructed Russo-Soviet topoi, as deriving from Bakhtin’s concept of a chronotope as an artificial fixation of time and space (1981), were examined by Mikhail Epstein as ‘the journey in boundless longing’ (2003) that could only be resolved by moving to an open, even limitless expanse.

The idea of Siberia as Russia's Wild East by analogy with Turner's (1976 [1920]) thesis of the frontier in American history found its reflection in Eva-Maria Stolberg's edited volume 'The Siberian Saga' (2005). First the Trans-Siberian railroad (Lamin 2003) and later the BAM (Grützmacher 2003) were analysed as technological moving frontiers directed at reaching specific social and political aims for the sake of an empire: whereas the Trans-Siberian railroad had its task in assisting modernising reforms by integrating the Siberia's developing markets into the state agriculture and trade system, the BAM frontier under Brezhnev aimed predominantly at the ideological effect of the last utopia.

The propagandistic nature of the art of the USSR, which many Western scholars define as a totalitarian state, is an integral part of the research devoted to art as propaganda during the construction of the railway, boldly marked with the 'construction of the century'. Peter Kenez defined the first decade of the existence of the USSR as 'the birth of the propaganda state' (1985) and thoroughly laid out the inceptive principles of Soviet methods of mass mobilisation 1917-1929 by, among other methods, the political use of books, films, and posters (*ibid.*, 95-118). Equally, the collected overview of the Soviet art 1917-1992 by Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor (1993) analysed the origin of monumental propaganda already during Lenin's times (Lodder 1993), as well as pointed out source of art motives in early Soviet culture that were subsequently broadly applied till the collapse of the state formation, such as the artistic representation of the 'new man's' body (Clark 1993) and conception of allegorical and iconographical images in Socialist Realist painting in the 1930s (Holy 1993). Developing the thesis of the continuity of Soviet art, Susan Reid gave a retrospective description of the Brezhnev era, defining it as the 'art of memory' (1993).

Igor Golomstock (2011) drew direct parallels between totalitarian art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People's Republic of China, arguing the similarity of the art development, processes and products of these regimes based on the foundation principles of the totalitarian state and the ideological functions that it assigns to art, in the creation and celebration of 'new' culture, and not the essence or ideology of the state foundations themselves. However, given that the Third Reich, as well as the fascist regime in Italy, ceased to exist after 1945, and the People's Republic of China as a definable totalitarian regime only started its existence in 1949, the art of the USSR for the period from 1945 until 1985, where Golomstock's study ended, must have provided unparalleled material at least as far as the development stages of totalitarian art are concerned. Contrastingly, Matthew Witkovsky's and Devin Fore's (2017) collected volume on Soviet art from 1917 through 1930s,

which formed the origins of a later sustained propaganda culture, asserted an inventiveness of Soviet art that was considered by the authors at odds with its propagandistic function.

Several works have been dedicated to the history of poster art with some emphasis on propaganda and ideology, which primarily gravitate towards extensive album formats with a general overview. Thus, in one of the fundamental reviews on the history of posters by Max Gallo, propaganda and ideology were given a period of 20 years from 1925-1945 (1975, 219-71), where propaganda was equally understood as posters advertising household products and services, film poster 'Metropolis' of 1926 and the poster 'Let's give proletarian cadres to the Ural-Kuzbass' by A. Deineka, the diversity of which the author considered to be an eclectic mirror of the surrounding socio-economic and political reality. A dedicated volume on Russian poster art of the 20th century was published by Klaus Waschik and Nina Baburina (2003), in which the authors aspired to provide a comprehensive overview of the Russian poster art development starting from the pre-revolutionary Russia through 2003. A more focused study of Soviet political posters between 1917 and 1953 was conducted by Victoria Bonnell (1997), in which she presented a careful analysis of the iconographic depiction of power under Lenin and Stalin, as well as the messages conveyed by visual propaganda. Whereas Soviet propaganda posters are remembered not so much by names of their authors, but by recognisable imagery, one of the few known Soviet poster artists on whom an academic research has been conducted is Viktor Koretsky (Bird et al. 2011; Wolf 2012; Shklyaruk 2019), whose six decades of creative activity alone (1928 – late 1980s) reflect the evolution of themes and plots of Soviet propaganda posters.

I.3. Identification of the Research Gap

Based on the current state of research, despite the widely studied topics of Soviet propaganda art, or, as some researchers define it, totalitarian art, most studies are focused on the beginning of the formation of the USSR: from 1917 to the latest 1950s, during the Lenin-Stalin period of Soviet historiography. Western researchers, so far, have passed over the propaganda art of BAM period, which, however, was represented very widely, if not overwhelmingly, in the 1970s-1980s. At best, individual posters are listed in the list of illustrations, or the BAM period is mentioned in the historiography of the development of Soviet political posters with several lines and dates (cf. Waschik, Baburina 2003, 373).

Equally, scholars who have focused exclusively on the history of the BAM cannot fail to mention the extremely intense propaganda environment that accompanied it, but the subject of art has remained secondary (cf. Ward 2009: illustrations following p. 68, two of which are

dedicated to the representation of the BAM image). At the same time, in order to visualise the propaganda idea of the construction of the BAM, Ward places the poster, which I analyse in the introduction, on the cover of his monograph, as if introducing the reader into his research, presenting a self-evident and subconsciously readable image that should be understandable without words.

Soviet sources, on the other hand, produced albums based on materials from BAM art exhibitions that took place during the construction (Khabarova 1980) and after its official completion (Soktoeva, Khabarova 1987), but given the exclusively propagandistic text, in full unity with the line of the Communist Party, they present academic interest only as a collection of reproductions. As, perhaps, a not so surprising legacy to the past, albums recently published in Moscow and dedicated to the Soviet political poster of 1918-1940 (Snopkov, Shklyaruk 2021) and the figure of Viktor Koretsky (Shklyaruk 2019) are accompanied by similar texts glorifying ‘strengthening the defence of the USSR amid the class struggle’ (Snopkov, Shklyaruk 2021, 16-8) and ‘the triumph of Stalin’s constitution’ (ibid., 19), which are also kindly accompanied by English translation, apparently for the widest possible access to an international readership.

Despite the fact that the construction of the BAM and, accordingly, the art of this period falls on the period of the so-called stagnation of late Soviet socialism, the art of the Brezhnev era, defined by Reid as ‘the art of memory’ or ‘the art of retrospectivism’ (1993), does not imply repetition or its secondary nature. A separate and close study of the propaganda art of this period is of particular academic interest, on the one hand, as a research of the synoptic embodiment of the main Soviet propaganda images, and on the other, as an attempt to analyse how mature totalitarian art was able to find new forms of expression that met the ideological requirements of the time.

I.4. Research Objectives

The objective of this research is to complement the theory of Soviet propaganda art during the period of stagnation associated with the chairmanship of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev and late Soviet socialism, using the case study of the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline railway in 1974-1984. Based on the progressive theory of the development of the iconographic language of Soviet poster art and analysing its different stages, the study aims to conduct a chronological trajectory, trace the heredity of forms of ideological visual representation, and also give a careful assessment of propaganda poster art of the 1970s-1980s.

In addition, the work seeks to supplement the history of the BAM construction with a thorough analysis of the visual propaganda aspect. Beyond the conventional description of the image and the inference of certain patterns, the thesis aims to extend the method of critical visual research by using three distinct methods to explore different sites of image meaning creation. The site of an image is explored through a semiotic analysis of BAM images created by Viktor Koretsky as well as BAM posters exhibited at two exhibitions dedicated to the art of BAM. Since the BAM image is deeply inscribed in the topographic mythologem, the continuation of the discourse on the construction of Soviet space in general and Siberia in particular by means of art and ideology envisages a bridge between the past, namely the Stalinist landscape, and the Brezhnev heterotopia, which thereby seeks to further contribute to the anthropology of art. Discourse analysis II examines the site of production, namely the representation of the image of BAM on the ground, by looking at BAM's museum collections as institutional actors that define permitted ways of seeing the image, and comparing the image thus constructed with an external one. This externally constructed image is subsequently tested on the site of audiencing by analysing conducted interviews with BAM construction workers who remained along the railway. This methodological approach creates a multidimensional critical visual exploration that engages all three sites of the image.

Finally, the study aims to contribute to thematic visual studies of Soviet art, e.g. Russian Soviet ballet in posters (Baburina 1991) or visual representation of Soviet space dogs (Turkina 2014), thereby providing not only an analysis of a specific time period, but also highlighting the topic of BAM art as a separate cultural phenomenon.

I.5. Research Questions

The study of the propaganda art of BAM in the 1970s and 80s is based on the following questions.

By what artistic and ideological methods was the propaganda image of BAM created? How innovative was it in the iconographic development of Soviet poster art? From the Socialist Realist point of view, how is the BAM period inscribed in the Soviet history of the cultural development of Siberia and construction of Soviet space?

How do museum institutions permit to see the image of BAM? Is the artistic image of BAM, transmitted to the outside world, different from that presented in BAM museums along the railway, and if so, where is the watershed boundary of meaning formation?

How do BAM builders create meaning from the propaganda image of BAM, and how does their own image match the external one?

II. Description of the Methodology

To situate this research firmly within the disciplinary framework of social and cultural anthropology, I refer to the work of visual anthropologist Sarah Pink, whose internationally recognised contributions to visual methodology offer valuable theoretical and methodological guidance. In the 2013 edition of ‘Doing Visual Ethnography’, she reflects on the interdisciplinary character of visual approaches in the social sciences and proposes a shift towards non-representational theory. This approach enables connections between developments in anthropology, geography, art history, and visual culture studies by addressing ‘the tacit, sensory, habitual, and sometimes seemingly mundane elements of everyday life’ (Pink 2013, 28). By identifying these similarities and exchanging methodological approaches, visual ethnographic practices across disciplines can be mutually enriched in their engagement with visual media and imagery, contributing to what Pink describes as the ‘sensory turn’ in the social sciences (ibid.).

The ways in which an omnipresent ‘image’ can be analysed are manifold. In formulating her own methodological approach to visual ethnography, Pink draws on multiple perspectives from art history and visual culture studies, the latter, in turn, departing from purely cultural studies by concentrating on *visual* language within different cultural media and discourses (Hall 1997, 9, quoted from ibid., 29, italics in original). The broader turn towards visuality in anthropology, sociology, and geography – with their growing attention to the visual dimensions of culture and to the social embeddedness of images – has contributed to the emergence of a distinct body of literature on ‘visual culture’. Rather than treating the image in isolation, this scholarship integrates image analysis into each discipline’s wider academic concerns, recognising images as shaped by, and shaping, the cultural and social contexts from which they emerge (ibid., 29-30).

In a scholarly attempt to develop a holistic approach to analysing the accumulated meanings of the BAM image from multiple social perspectives, I therefore turn to visual methodologies that support such a multi-sited perspective. Drawing on materials gathered during fieldwork, I engage with a range of methodological approaches situated within interdisciplinary visual culture studies, which help to interpret and contextualise the visual image analysis. When referencing specific methodologies applied to particular aspects of the BAM image, I do not attempt to amend the original terminology – even if it might appear ‘non-representational’ from an anthropological perspective – in order to avoid eclecticism and

because I do not claim the disciplinary authority to do so. The theoretical analysis, however, is consistently framed within the perspective of social and cultural anthropology.

In selecting appropriate methodological tools for the analysis of visual materials, I rely on Gillian Rose's proposed framework of sites and modalities (2007, 13–26). She argues that the meanings of an image are made at three **sites**: the sites of the **production** of an image, the site of the **image** itself, and the sites of the perceiving and interpreting **audiences**. Further, each of these sites bear three different aspects, which she calls **modalities**: **technological** (the process and means of creation of an image), **compositional** (materials, qualities and formal strategies of an image such as genre, content, colour and spatial arrangement) and **social** (various economic, social and political circumstances surrounding the image and creating the background for its existence and interpretation) (ibid., 13, bold in original). The various methodologies applied for visual interpretation depend mainly on which aspects are looked at and which questions are considered more important in finding an answer. The borders of the approaches are often hypothetical and intertwine. The multiplicity of the questions and approaches towards visual analysis can be summarised in the below figure 4.

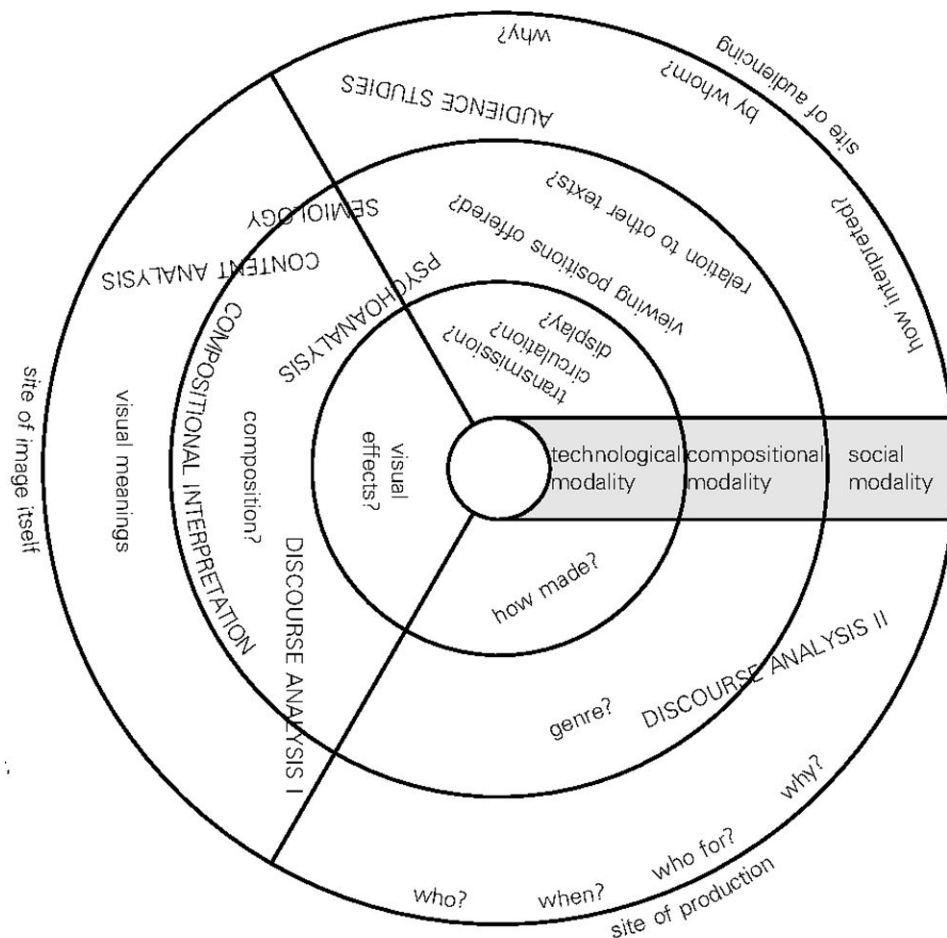


Figure 4: Sites, modalities and methods for interpreting found visual materials by Gillian Rose, 2010.

For a comprehensive analysis of the object of study, the visual image of BAM is considered from three different methodological positions using all sites of meaning formation: the site of an image itself, the site of production, and the site of audiencing, while in the process of analysis the goal is also to, to one degree or another, touch upon all relevant modalities for creating the meaning of an image: technological, compositional, and social.

II.1. Site of Image Itself: Semiotic Analysis of BAM Posters

The form of a poster is most suited for the analysis of the external image of BAM, replicated through printing-presses and distributed in tens of thousands of copies. The visual campaign addressed at BAM mobilisation and glorification can be traced in three period stages. *Opening* of railway construction agitation is reflected in multilevel monumental triptychs of 1975 by Viktor Koretsky (1909-1998) that fall on the later, mature period of his creative career. As a well-established Soviet poster creator, recognised by the state as Honoured Artist of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in 1964 (Bird et al. 2012, 112), selection of Koretsky's work provides a telling glimpse into the scale and ideological objectives facing Soviet artists in the 1970s. Continued artistic efforts are further reflected in two art exhibitions dedicated to the construction of BAM. These thematic exhibitions are of particular academic interest given the focus of current research, because they confirmed decade-long continuity of the established Soviet tradition to involve art into the party objectives since the first major thematic art exhibitions in the 1930s: 'Ural-Kuzbass in Painting', 'Socialist Agriculture' (both 1936) and 'Industrialisation of Socialism (1939) (Khabarova 1980, 7). The first republican art exhibition of BAM took place 5 years after the start of construction, in April 1979 in Ulan-Ude, Buryat Republic in Eastern Siberia, under the title 'We are Building BAM'. The second, All-Russian – 'From the Artists of Soviet Russia to BAM' – followed 5 years later (October 1984 – January 1985) in Chita, thus artistically supporting the announced completion of the construction of BAM. Two of them together provide an insight into the *middle* and the *end* of the visual propaganda campaign. Thus, by comparing different stages in the overall agitation project, it is possible to analyse the direction and intention of visual messages sent from the Soviet state to its citizens, depending on the political necessity of a specific time period.

The intended methodological tool to be used for researching the site of the BAM image itself and its compositional and social modalities is semiotics, which has been widely applied to study and critique of visual materials through its theoretical framework (cf. Williamson 1978; Bal, Bryson 1991). With reference to its Marxist theorists (cf. Althusser 2017), semiotics is particularly well-aimed for analysis of ideological pieces of art, for ideology is an inherent part

of this approach. Recognising and emerging from existing unequal social power relations, semiotics argues that ideology is knowledge constructed in such a way as to legitimise them, while science is knowledge that reveals these inequalities. Althusser lists among ideological State apparatuses (ISA), which are on the side of the (repressive) State apparatus but not to be confused with it, also the cultural ISA: literature, the arts, sport, etc., which function is to creatively represent ‘the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (Althusser 2001, 109). Describing the constituent parts of ideology and analysing them from a scientific point of view, semiotics seeks to identify inequalities and to comprehend them objectively (Rose 2010, 75).

The semiotic method uses a precise and rich vocabulary, the origin of which lies in Ferdinand de Saussure’s ‘Course in General Linguistics’ (2011), to analyse how the structure of images creates cultural meaning. Saussure operationalises the semiotic terms ‘sign’, ‘signified’ and ‘signifier’, whereas he argues that sign, as the linguistic unit, is a double entity that unites a concept and a sound-image. Saussure insists that a sign does not unite a physical thing and a material name, but both terms are of psychological nature and are combined in the brain by an associative bond (*ibid.*, 65f.). He proposes to use the term ‘sign’ to designate the whole, and to replace concept and sound-image respectively by signified and signifier as the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts. The thing in the world that the sign denotes or stands for is called the sign’s referent.

Returning to the object of the current research, the signifier of the image listed as figure 1 is a picture of a man wearing a helmet and work clothes and carrying a red flag that has a particular meaning to a person or group of people. The signified is the conceptual category of a BAM worker. The sign, which Judith Williamson defines as ‘always thing-plus-meaning’ (1978, 17), in this case becomes a representation of a young person, aligned with socialist ideology, of employable age, eager to work in harsh Siberian conditions on a physically demanding railway construction. The referent would be the actual individual who receives a Komsomol work order, packs their belongings, and travels to build the railway in Siberia.

The relations between signifier and signified, and their attachments to or detachments from each other, are of particular interest to semiotics, because it argues that these relations are not inherent, but rather conventional, and as such can be problematised (Rose 2010, 80). Semiotics has been instrumental in creating different frames of reference, which some scientists call ‘codes’ (Hall 1980), ‘referent systems’ (Williamson 1980) or ‘mythologies’ (Barthes 2010 [1957]), and enriching the scientific vocabulary with additional terms that, although quite complex, provide a variety of ways for the researcher to interpret images.

II.2. Site of Production: Discourse Analysis II of BAM Museum Collections

The representation of the image of BAM on the ground, at the site of production and audiencing is analysed through the BAM museum collections by means of discourse analysis II. This visual methodology has been used to explore how different dominant institutions, most often museums or galleries, display images and artefacts (Rose 2010, 172-95).

The origins of the theoretical basis of this approach lie in the intellectual legacy of Michel Foucault, who explores relations between power, knowledge, and the individual in modern society by providing historical analysis of various ‘discourses’ such as madness, medicine, punishment, and sexuality by force of their treatment by institutional apparatuses (Calhoun et al. 2012, 185-89). In his key for this approach text ‘Discipline and Punish’ (2012 [1975]), Foucault uses a case study of a prison to argue that in a disciplining institution, which construction he refers back to Bentham’s panopticon and among which he lists prisons, but also hospitals, schools, workhouses and madhouses, surveillance is used as an effective means of keeping a social order and at the same time as a dominant form of *visuality*, whereas a subject, never sure of their invisibility, becomes an object of knowledge and a ‘docile body’ forced to behave properly at all times.

Foucault calls a prison the ‘museum of human nature’ (ibid., 211), referring to the established techniques of disciplining institutions to produce knowledge, as discreetly as possible, by anonymous instruments of power, ‘such as hierarchical surveillance, continuous registration, perpetual assessment and classification’ (ibid., 213). The aim is,

[...] to substitute for a power that is manifested through the brilliance of those who exercise it, a power that insidiously objectifies those on whom it is applied; to form a body of knowledge about these individuals, rather than to deploy the ostentatious signs of sovereignty (ibid.).

With reference to the museum studies, the production of knowledge is intrinsically connected with the question of representation, i.e. production of meaning through the display of objects and artefacts by making choices on *what* meanings are produced and on *how* meaning is produced (Hall 2005, 8). The *how* is what Foucault calls the institutional technologies that are the practical tools used to exercise the power/knowledge relation. These technologies are ‘diffuse, rarely formulated in continuous, systematic discourse ... often made up of bits and pieces ... a disparate set of tools and methods’ (Foucault 1977, 26, cited from Rose 2010, 174f.).

Rose summarises five types of the technologies applied by the gallery and museum to practise that power/knowledge (2010, 183-90):

- 1) technologies of display: open display, table cases, wall cases, reconstructions, and simulacra (Lidchi 2005, 172);
- 2) textual and visual technologies of interpretation, among which there are labels and captions, panels, and catalogues;
- 3) technologies of layout, through which aspects of the overall layout of museum and gallery space, and the layout of an individual room are explored, including the lighting techniques, spatial organisation of displays, and room decorations;
- 4) tactile technologies, or the most widespread prohibition for museum visitors not to touch anything but only to look (cf. Foucault's notion of a 'docile body');
- 5) spaces behind the displays such as the stores, the archives, the laboratories, the libraries, the offices, and service areas.

Based on my archive work in the Museum of the History of the Baikal-Amur Mainline in Tynda, the largest museum collection in Russia dedicated to the history of the construction of BAM, and photographs taken there, I analyse the image of BAM from the point of *what meaning is produced*, i.e. objects and artefacts presented by the museum to the public as an appropriate representation of BAM, as well as *how this meaning is produced*, i.e. technologies for constructing this image. Finally, I compare thus constructed image with the external image conveyed by the posters for consistency or discrepancy. Drawing on my ethnographic experiences in Tynda museum archives, technologies of knowledge production are also explored as an institutional power that grants access to knowledge only to those 'worthy' of receiving it.

II.3. Site of Audiencing: BAM Audience Studies

To explore how the audiences of former BAM workers make meaning from the constructed image of BAM through the art of propaganda, I apply audience studies to focus on the site of audiencing in its social modality, using different types of interviews conducted during fieldwork on the Baikal-Amur Mainline in May – June 2018. Among visual methodologies, audience studies have been used to study how audiences decode the meanings of images, particularly by examining television audience (Rose 2012, 196-215). For the purposes of this research, the audience has been asked how (ideological) art, in its non-discriminatory manifestations, was used to motivate their arrival and accompany their daily lives during the construction of BAM, and which media particularly influenced them. The findings are examined in the theoretical context of the work of Stuart Hall (2007, 128-38), who

conceptualises the communication process as a continuous circulation circuit or loop through encoding/decoding practices.

In contrast to the linear sender/message/receiver model commonly accepted in mass media research, Hall advocates a constant ‘passage of forms’ of communication, emphasising instead the process – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction. It is the process of transition of the object of such practices, which is meanings and messages, that are the *determinate* moments of encoding/decoding. The encoding of meaning or message is based on a multi-level system of apparatuses (technical infrastructure), social (production) relations and combination of practices within the framework of knowledge that represents a *dominant cultural order*. Thus, *dominate or preferred meanings* are created. Discourse formation plays a crucial role herein.

But it is in the *discursive* form that the circulation of the product takes place, as well as its distribution to different audiences. Once accomplished, the discourse must then be translated – transformed, again – into social practices if the circuit is to be both completed and effective. If no ‘meaning’ is taken, there can be no ‘consumption’. If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect. The value of this approach is that while each of the moments, in articulation, is necessary to the circuit as a whole, no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated. Since each has its specific modality and conditions of existence, each can constitute its own break or interruption of the ‘passage of forms’ on whose continuity the flow of effective production (that is, ‘reproduction’) depends (ibid., 128f.).

Indeed, the audience has three hypothetical ways how to decode a message. In the first, *dominant-hegemonic* scenario, the viewer fully and directly perceives the connoted meaning and decodes the product in full accordance with the reference code used for encoding, that is, the viewer acts within the *dominant code* (ibid., 136). In the second position, which Hall calls the *negotiated code*, the viewer at the global level perceives fairly adequately an encoded message and acknowledges the hegemonic global position, but at the situational level develops the *negotiated version* that is marked by a number of adaptive or oppositional elements, thus resorting to particular or situated logic (ibid., 137). Finally, the viewer may understand the literal and connotative meaning of the transmitted message, but interpret it in the *opposite code*, thus creating an alternative framework of reference.

The analysis of the interviews with the former BAM workers aims to trace which of the possible positions of decoding the BAM image was used by the audience on the ground and which methods/forms of art turned out to be the most effective and complete in achieving a full communication circuit.

III. Theoretical Framework

III.1. On Visuality of Totality

When talking about the subject matter of this research, a question of denomination comes first to mind. On a scale of a negative-neutral-positive terminology, the approach of the Western academic discourse on the art direction connected with the subject of the current research varies from total omission of the subject as not worthy of academic analysis to *totalitarian art* (no inverted commas), '*totalitarian art*' (with inverted commas), *art of totality*, *propaganda art*, *art of propaganda*, *art under totalitarian regimes*, *art of the Soviets*, *[s]Socialist [r]Realism* (with both words in capital or small letters; cf. Renaissance as an art style always with a capital R), *political art*, *modern art*, and *art of political effectiveness*. The way academic people call things can give a glimpse of the taken positions and analytical approaches. I shall attempt to provide an overview of these terms and by virtue of this process define my own academic position.

The analysis of the research materials falls under visual studies within social and cultural anthropology. Gillian Rose (2007) in her comprehensive guidebook on visual methodologies refers to the discourse on increasing importance of analysing visual culture in connection with the visual shift from premodernity to modernity, and subsequently from modernity to postmodernity, since the premodern societies did not depend on images so much as modern and postmodern due to the fewer visual images in circulation (Rose 2007, 3; cf. Mirzoeff 1999, 1-33). It is restrictively suggested that contemporary Western societies are saturated with images, and that they represent the way Westerners see and interpret the world (Rose 2007, 2; Jay 1993; Jenks 1995, 1-2). The area of application of visual studies must surely be further expanded beyond geographical limitations and vague definitions of 'Western' societies, if we are to include also non-Western societies, in the sense non-capitalist, to modernity. Particularly ideological societies are ideally suited for the visual studies analysis, since the power of any ideology lies in its 'vision' – be it an image of paradise, Communist society, or permanent revolution (Groys 2008, 7). In contrast to a metaphorical usage of the term 'vision' as a mental image, Rose uses it methodologically in its direct sense to refer to the reality seen by one's own eyes, the physiological *vision* of a viewer, to be distinguished from *visuality* – culturally constructed ways in which vision is presented: 'how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein' (Foster 1988: ix, quoted in Rose 2007, 2). In the following chapter, I shall aspire to provide a theoretical overview of historical origins and principles for thus constructed *visuality*.

III.1.1. Origins of Soviet Propaganda

The widely used term of propaganda in connection with both the direction of the Soviet politics and the art produced as a result of this political regime, though negatively connoted it may be, has long-ranging roots attributed already to the birth of the Soviet Union in 1917. Peter Kenez (1985) in his fundamental work on Soviet methods of mass mobilisation 1917-1929, examining the first decade of the state existence argues that propaganda was instrumental in the Communists' 1917 victory and even more crucial in their ability to maintain power during the challenging years of the 1917-1921 Civil War. During the comparatively peaceful 1920s, the revolutionary leadership sought to reshape individuals and society through widespread indoctrination, introducing a novel approach to politics.

Since 1917 when the Soviet propaganda was originated, mass mobilisation became a fundamental aspect of the Soviet system in the way how the message was delivered to the mass audience represented by the formerly ignored workers and peasants. The same ability to convey information to a wide audience and to seek mass support and human resources continued over six decades throughout the 1970s and was fundamental to keeping the late Soviet regime afloat with its major construction projects, including the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline.

What does this diffused yet elusive term of propaganda mean? While almost everyone seems to know what propaganda is meant by (one example of a common definition would be information activities of people, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political idea or point of view with which we inevitably disagree), coupled with the common approach of many social scientists to define it as an ideological weapon, in Western societies it has definitely become a pejorative term, not free from value judgements, time or political culture. Kenez, as a researcher of Soviet propaganda, calls for abandoning attempts to find the most precise definition of what propaganda is and is not, and offers instead the following maximally broad definition, which I shall also use in my research, 'Propaganda is nothing more than the attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and thereby behavior' (1985, 4).

To understand the nature of this phenomenon, it would be helpful to remember that originally propaganda came up in 1622 in the religious context connected with the activity of the College of Cardinals established by Pope Gregory XV to spread the Catholic faith in foreign missions, something the Church thought of very highly and nobly in their quest to save the souls. The institution was called *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, or Congregation for the Propaganda of Faith (Kenez 1985, 2). In the belief in the righteousness of their cause, one can

see a striking parallel between quasi-religious activities of the Communists and the Catholics in their propaganda efforts.

Among all organizations, it was the Catholic Church with which the Bolsheviks had most in common in matters of propaganda. Like the Catholics, the Bolsheviks saw nothing shameful about attempting to change the people's mind. On the contrary, they considered bringing their message to the people a necessary and noble task of every Party activist. Indeed, how could it be otherwise, since the revolutionaries believed that they knew what the future of mankind would be and also the fastest and best way to that utopia? It is striking that only Communists and Catholics have proclaimed proudly that they were propagandizing (Kenez 1985, 10).

Soviet publicists are right in emphasising that the October Revolution created a revolutionary state, a new type of political organisation. In the aftermath, Lenin and his comrades faced unprecedented challenges, pursued ambitious goals, and built institutions on untested principles, aiming to get message across to the people and obtain their support. A key aspect of this was the Soviet leaders' approach to indoctrination. The Soviet State was more saturated with propaganda than any other, setting not just propaganda goals but also striving to create a new kind of humanity through political education (Kenez 1985, 4).

The highly effective tool through which the revolutionaries intended to reach this goal was the all-encompassing ideological framework of Marxism that allowed to analyse historical processes. As Marxists, they believed in the perfectibility of humanity and the potential to create a just and rational society. Their ideological convictions drove them to reach out to the poor and previously disenfranchised. Moreover, they believed they alone possessed 'true knowledge'. Consequently, their mission was not to seek out knowledge, as they considered it already attained, but rather to deliver the insights of Marxist analysis to the proletariat (Kenez 1985, 5).

With unprecedented level of condescension, Lenin and the Bolshevik leaders believed that the Russian people's backwardness was the greatest obstacle to building Socialism, more so than the political strength of their enemies. This thought was shared equally by all major Russian intellectuals, regardless of the belonging political camp. To combat this backwardness and build a new society, they focused intensely on persuasion and education, of which propaganda was believed to be an inherent part (Kenez 1985, 6-8).

Although Soviet leaders did not tolerate political competition and sought to control or influence many aspects of life, they largely accepted that much of what we consider 'culture' existed outside the sphere of politics. They not only tolerated cultural activities but also actively

and vigorously supported them. Culture was viewed both as an ally of Socialism and as good in its own right (Kenez 1985, 12).

III.1.2. The Birth and Crystallisation of Ideological Vision

Art is believed to play a crucial function in a totalitarian political system, transforming rational ideology into colourful images and vivid mythology that are consumed by a mass audience, thus turning abstract ideas and ideals into a set of visible impressions and memorable stories that become ingrained beliefs (Golomstock 2011, xii). One can argue that the same objective was already ascribed to art in the post-revolutionary 1920s when the search for new artistic language and revolutionary art forms gave birth to the art of political propaganda and provoked the subsequent ‘battle for art’.

Although Soviet society in the 1920s was not yet totalitarian, it is clear that the groundwork laid during this period was essential for the eventual emergence of a fully totalitarian regime. The training of cadres, the creation of a political language that was equally developed and tested in art, and the relentless politicisation of an ever-expanding portion of life in all its everyday and creative manifestations were all necessary preconditions for the rise of full-fledged Stalinism, and thus totalitarianism (Kenez 1985, 12-3).

Socialist Realism became the officially accepted art style of the Soviet Union from the beginning of the 1930s until its collapse. The turning point for the birth of the conception of monistic approach, or death of pluralism in Soviet art, was April 23, 1932 when the Central Committee issued a decree ‘On the restructuring of literary and artistic organizations’ disbanding all existing artistic groups and formations and prescribing all Soviet creative workers to unite according to professional ‘creative unions’ of writers, architects, artists and so on (Groys 2008, 141; Golomstock 2011, 81). Two years later in 1934, the First Congress of Writers Union announced Socialist Realism as the only acceptable form of artistic expression and obliged its usage for all Soviet artists regardless of the media, including literature, cinema, theatre, painting, and architecture (Groys 2008, 141).

The fundamental basic concept of Socialist Realism both as a comprehensive artistic style and, at the same time, as an exclusive and strictly defined conceptual framework, was inherently contradictory, since the lack of reference points with other styles in the same environment made comparison and definition of its aesthetic specificity and artistic values quite difficult. Thus, the main point of reference became the capitalist West and its ‘decadent’ and ‘formalistic’ style as the antithesis of what the style of Soviet official art should be. In particular,

treatment of the theme of artistic heritage became a turning point in the formation of its artistic agenda (Groys 2008, 144).

III.1.3. Characteristics of Total Battle of Art

Soviet Socialist Realism did not emerge in a vacuum, but followed chronologically and even inherited some characteristics of avant-garde. As an artistic style that emerged in the aftermath of the revolution and also positioned itself as revolutionary, avant-garde objected to the unthinking conventional reverence for preserving the past in the form of artistic heritage if this interfered with the emergence of real, living art. In his programmatic text 'On the Museum' (1919), Kazimir Malevich opposed the Soviet government's efforts to save old Russian museums and art collections in the midst of the civil war, arguing, 'Life knows what it is doing, and if it is striving to destroy one must not interfere, since by hindering we are blocking the path to a new conception of life that is born within us' (quoted in Groys 2008, 142). Avant-garde meant to pave the path to new, revolutionary times by new, revolutionary forms of art.

Socialist Realism, by contrast, sought to appropriate all previous artistic eras in order to use them to build a new socialist art, without condemning any of them. The attitude towards artistic heritage determined the framework for the development of the aesthetics of Socialist Realism, enunciated as opposition to formalism in art in favour of returning to classical models of art-making. By getting rid of all the modernist 'distortions' of the classical form for the sake of realistic representation of socialist content, Socialist Realism finally obtained a distinguishable form and substance from bourgeois Western art (Groys 2008, 144).

Conceptually, this was a political-aesthetic struggle centred on the battle for control over symbols – the privilege of assigning one's own meaning to them. More precisely, this struggle unfolded on two interconnected levels. The first level involved reclaiming the means necessary for aesthetic production – ensuring that artistic practices were not left in the hands of the enemy. Every image, device, and form from art history had to be imbued with a specific ideological significance. These ideological ascriptions then dictated how art could be concretely used in all its forms (Groys 2003, 97).

This battle over the historical legacy of art highlights the divide between totalitarian aesthetes and avant-garde ideologies. The avant-garde, practicing historical asceticism, was willing to abandon the entire pictorial vocabulary of art history, relegating it to the past. However, from the standpoint of total battle, this ascetic approach of the avant-garde was seen as mere defeatism. In contrast, totalitarian aesthetes sought mastery over all historical art forms, strategically employing them in their ongoing battle (ibid.).

On the second level, the battle for control over signs was not just about dominating time, but also about conquering space. That is every piece of artistic creation, be it an image, a building or a literary text was never a stand-alone aesthetic act; it was a statement of victory or defeat in the struggle to symbolically claim space. Totalitarian art does not simply depict the world; it seeks to occupy it. The purpose of such art is to saturate as much territory as possible with symbols that are clearly marked as ‘ours’, in opposition to ‘theirs’ – the signs of the opposing power. Consequently, totalitarian art is always engaged in the broader conflict, celebrating its successes and feeling shame for its failures based on territorial gains or losses (Groys 2003, 98).

Similarly, the enemy was never given space or means to represent themselves: it was always ‘our description of the enemy’ and never ‘a self-description by the enemy’ (ibid.). If we compare the arsenal of Soviet propaganda tools aimed at appropriating the image of the enemy with the first attempts to propaganda of still Tsarist Russia to depict hostile actions at the front in the First World War, it is striking how well the Soviet totalitarian machine was able to draw conclusions from the past and learn historical lessons.

Even before the February Revolution of 1917, a committee, originally a private organisation, named after the general Skobelev was formed to carry out both philanthropy and propaganda (what would be considered an unthinkable frivolous combination in the Soviet times). The government granted this group exclusive rights to produce war documentaries. Despite the vast expanse of the front line, only five cameramen were in operation, two of whom were foreigners. Regardless of their dedication and talent, it was impossible for them to create a comprehensive visual record of the war. The movie division of the Skobelev committee was severely lacking in resources: it had few skilled propagandists and a poor distribution network. As a result, Russian audiences ironically received a more detailed portrayal of the fighting on the Western than on the Eastern front (Kenez 1985, 105). Over the next two decades since these first feeble attempts at propaganda, the enemy had lost their voice or means of self-representation; instead, propaganda art in its totalitarian stage would ascribe the most appropriate description to the enemy (Groys 2003, 98).

Any theoretical analysis of totalitarian culture must therefore consider the aggressive drive behind it. The key difference between totalitarian art and other art movements lies not in the form or structure of the images or texts, as seen in avant-garde art, but in the aggressive appropriation of these elements and their subsequent occupation by ideological meaning. To truly understand the impact of totalitarian art, one must examine how it seizes and redefines

artistic symbols from the vast archive of art history, turning them into vessels for its own agenda (Groys 2003, 98).

III.1.4. On Modern Art and Effective Equilibration

The concept of the opposition of Soviet and Western art as political and ideological antitheses is shared by multiple researchers (cf. Cullerne Bown, Taylor 1993). Highlighting the principles of market economy as fundamental in this equilibrating confrontation, Groys (2008, 1-8) introduces into this debate a novel approach of interpreting modern art in either of the two ways: as the *art of political propaganda*, which functions outside the art market, and *art* that functions within the art world *as commodity*. He embraces under the framework of modern art both contemporary art and what some would call totalitarian. Totalitarian subjects believe they can completely reshape reality at any moment and in any way they choose. This belief is deeply modern, making it impossible for the art created under such conditions and guided by this mindset to be premodern or antimodern (Groys 2003, 99f.). The purity of political effectiveness, according to Groys, can only be revealed in art that is not subject to the rules of the art market and is thus produced not for individual consumers but for the masses, who must absorb and accept the political message that underlies it.

Being one-sided and aggressive is, of course, at least as modern as being moderate and seeking to maintain the balance of power. The modern revolutionary, or, one might say, totalitarian movements and states are also aiming at the balance of power, but they believe that it can be found only in and through permanent struggle, conflict and war. The art that is put in the service of such a dynamic, revolutionary balance of power takes necessarily the form of political propaganda. Such art does not reduce itself to the representation of power – it participates in the struggle for power that it interprets as the only way in which the true balance of power could reveal itself (Groys 2008, 4).

Groys argues that the art of political propaganda as a countermovement directed at the Western art of commodity is equally important as effective equilibration in the art world. He uses the term *totality of art* to underline the inherent feature of any art to always seek for representation of the highest form of power, whether it be divine or natural forces that govern the world in its *totality* (Groys 2008, 2; highlighting mine). By depicting this power, art has traditionally derived its authority from it. In this way, art has always been inherently critical, as it juxtaposes finite, political power with images of the infinite – such as God, nature, fate, life, and death. The modern state also claims to pursue a balance of power as its ultimate goal, though it never truly achieves it. Therefore, one could argue that modern art as a whole attempts to portray an image of the utopian balance of power that surpasses the state's flawed efforts.

III.1.5. Art in Totalitarian Political Reality

Igor Golomstock ranks Socialist Realism from 1932 to 1956 among typical examples of *totalitarian art*, which is to be differentiated from *art under totalitarian regimes* that embraces all art produced in totalitarian countries (2011, xivf.; highlighting mine). From the 1930s until Stalin's death in 1953, the approach in official artistic direction was aimed at an increasingly narrow interpretation and ever growing exclusion of artistic techniques and styles, which together formed the basis of totalitarian art.

Golomstock in his comprehensive comparative research on totalitarian art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People's Republic of China (2011) draws striking parallels in the development stages of official art adopted by totalitarian political regimes. He argues that in a totalitarian political reality, the functioning of the art machine characteristically becomes subordinate to the same fundamental principles as a one-party state, which exclude any pluralism of views (2011, xiii):

- (1) The State declares art (and culture as a whole) to be an ideological weapon and a means of struggle for power.
- (2) The State acquires a monopoly over all manifestations of the country's artistic life.
- (3) The State constructs an all-embracing apparatus for the control and direction of art.
- (4) From the multiplicity of artistic movements then in existence, the State selects one movement, always the most conservative, which most nearly answers its needs and declares it to be official and obligatory.
- (5) Finally, the State declares war to the death against all styles and movements other than the official ones, declaring them to be reactionary and hostile to class, race, people, Party or State, to humanity, to social or artistic progress, etc.

Concurring with this argument, Boris Groys also sees the similarity of all totalitarian regimes, despite all the differences between individual regimes, in the factual approach to considering the entire society as one vast, unified, and homogeneous field of operation (Groys 2003, 96, 99; cf. Golomstock 2011). He introduces in this context the term *art of totality* to refer to the art functioning within totalitarian ideology along with 'totalitarian art', which he sometimes uses in quotation marks, especially when referring to the condescending attitude of Western academic art discourse. The main goal of the totalitarian ideology is the seemingly obvious striving for totality to mold population as a whole, to cover the collective mental landscape without leaving anything or anyone aside. Totality, however, must not be achieved by denying, suppressing or destroying the other, since by excluding part of the existing matter, the totality would cease to be total. Instead, the totality of the world, as seen by totalitarian

ideology, is a permanent struggle and an active fight against the other, which is put forward as an enemy, an eternal adversary (Groys 2003, 96; 2008, 167).

No one and nothing can exclude themselves from the struggle. In the Soviet Union, this concerned all spheres of life, including science, which was contrastingly divided into proletarian and nonproletarian. History became synchronised and a look at it became subordinate to now unified vision from the contemporary position in the constant battle of the opposites. In the Soviet ideology of the 1930s, every individual was always already involved in an inherited world-scale battle that started before the appearance of the individual in that specific place and time (Groys 2003, 97).

If both art historians seem to agree on the fundamental principles of functioning of totalitarian art, Kenez (1985) claims that the Bolshevik propaganda, which lay at the origins of the totalitarianism and, continuing synecdoche, thus of the totalitarian art, differed fundamentally from the Fascist propaganda of the Third Reich and Mussolini's Italy. Whereas German and Italian propagandists, among others Goebbels, copied the same techniques for mass mobilisation from the Soviets and fascinated themselves by the methods of mass persuasion, their ideology remained fundamentally different.

In contrast to the all-encompassing Communist ideology based on Marxism, which presented the invulnerable set of doctrines equally applied to all spheres of human existence and all historical periods, fascism lacked any fundamental study of nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, apart from the vision of a 'thousand-year Reich' (Kenez 1985, 10). The Fascists did not aspire to perfect the humanity through education but to ruthlessly get rid of the elements that did not fit into their vision of the aspired humanity. If Marxism presented a philosophical framework presented to the intellectuals as a self-contained whole, fascism was an intellectual void.

In spite of propaganda differences between underlying ideological regimes, their very framework, according to Groys, makes an artwork function as a paradox-object (2008, 8). Whereas every ideological vision presents itself as a promised image – a projection of what is yet to come, the materialisation of this vision is always deferred, either to the apocalyptic end of history or to the arrival of a future community. Ideologically driven art, then, inherently disrupts this deferral because art is created in the present, in the 'here and now' (ibid.).

Although such art can be interpreted as a prefiguration or anticipation of the true vision yet to be realised, it can equally be viewed as a parody, critique, or even a denigration of that vision – demonstrating that no true change will occur even if the ideological vision materialises. In this way, the artwork replaces the sacred time of infinite hope with the profane time of

archives and historical memory. Once faith in the promised vision fades, art remains as its lasting testament (ibid.).

Groys suggests that all ideologically motivated art – whether religious, Communist, or Fascist – is simultaneously affirming and critical (ibid.). Any realisation of a particular project, whether religious, ideological, or technical, inherently negates that project by ending it as a ‘project’. Thus, any artwork presenting a vision aligned with a specific religious or political ideology profanes that vision, transforming it into a paradox-object.

III.1.6. Socialist Realism as an Art Method

Socialist Realism in the official Soviet art framework was never classified as a style but as a methodological approach, and thus its application to all the possible creative manifestations in multiple media was founded on specific principles while, at the same time, guided by the artists’ best possible interpretations and intuitive grasp of the current political direction (Cullerne Bown, Taylor 1993, 12; cf. Cooke 1993). The successful navigation of one’s creative ship in the murky waters of interpretations of underlying ideological principles and vague political definitions hence became the determining factor in whether the artist would have a chance to bring their artworks to the exhibition port or even successfully survive the next stormy purge (cf. Groys 2008, 141). The artistic battle in the Soviet Union was conducted on multiple levels: not only against the bourgeois West but equally against the censorship, as well as at times opportunistically using the tools of collective criticism to eliminate rivals and score political points. This drama featured numerous heroes who pushed the boundaries of what was permitted and thus earned respect of the art community for creating ‘good artworks’, ‘truly realistic artworks’, or even ‘modernist artworks’ that tested the limits of what was officially acceptable (Groys 2008, 148). It also witnessed the meteoric rise and fall of many an artist’s careers, highlighting the precarious nature of power within a totalitarian regime.³

The official definition for a Socialist Realist artwork was that it must be ‘realistic in form and Socialist in content’ (ibid., 141). Applying these precepts in practice meant that the artist was not to realistically depict life as it was but life always in a flux, in ‘revolutionary development’ (ibid., 144). The main art theme of Socialist Realism was the depiction of the Communist future, and art, thus, was to precipitate its onset by recognising and visualising its

³ For an exciting account of the life of one of the most maligned figures in Soviet art history, see the article on Aleksandr Gerasimov by Matthew Cullerne Bown (1993, 121-139). Gerasimov’s trajectory spanning from his modest beginnings to his domineering reign over the Soviet art world in the 1930s and 1940s, followed by his downfall under Khrushchev, serves not only as a cautionary tale about the fragility and hubris of power in a totalitarian reality, but also offers insight into the internal conflicts that shaped the Russian and Soviet art scene from the 1900s to the 1950s.

signs. The straightforward portrayal of facts was officially denounced as ‘naturalism’, a term distinct from ‘realism’, which was understood to involve an insight into the entirety of historical progress and the capacity to discern the signs of the forthcoming Communist world within the present. The most crucial trait of a socialist artist was considered to be the ability to make the correct, socialist choice of contemporary and historical facts (ibid., 144-5).

Socialist Realism was understood as a dialectical method concerned with dealing with opposing artistic and political forces. ‘What is most important to the dialectical method,’ wrote Stalin, ‘is not that which is stable at the present but is already beginning to die, but rather that which is emerging and developing, even if at present it does not appear stable, since for the dialectical method only that which is emerging and developing cannot be overcome’ (quoted in Groys 2008, 144). The peculiarity of this dialectical method is that the only arbiter deciding what would die and what would emerge is the Communist Party (ibid.).

The distinctive feature of Socialist Realism as an art method, in comparison to avant-garde, is the shift of the focus from the artwork that is typically in the centre of the art market to a viewer (ibid., 147-8). Whereas the artistic avant-garde aspired to break down the existing taboos and boundaries which impeded effectiveness and influence of art, by inventing new art forms and language, the only boundary that stayed intact was the reality, within which the art was presented, and namely, the border between art and its observer (Groys 2003, 100; cf. Groys 2008, 147).

Avant-garde operated within the limitations of an art market and was presented at art fairs, museums and exhibits, where it would be judged by traditional viewers. The external and socially protected position of the observer stayed unchanged. The attempt to revolutionise the tastes of traditional audience was perceived by avant-gardists as Sisyphean toil and gave impetus to ‘hatred of the masses’, which sentiment was not uncommon among avant-garde artists as well as other representatives of intelligentsia (Groys 2003, 100; cf. Carey 1992). The masses had to be subjugated and condescendingly explained the conditions of art perception. The superiority of the spectator had to be overcome, but diverse artistic means that avant-garde was very prolific in inventing and applying were not enough. For destabilising the spectator through innovation has a short-term lasting effect: what is new today seems habitual tomorrow and outdated the day after tomorrow (Groys 2003, 101). Avant-garde did not come to a final solution of how to replace the dictatorship of art consumers with a dictatorship of art producers (ibid., 100), but Socialist Realism was marked by a decisively different approach.

Socialist Realism operated beyond the bounds of the omnipresent power of market and was thus exempt from the influence of the ‘rotting West’; its primary interest lay in educating

a socialist viewer. Soviet art was created with the belief that people would come to appreciate it once they had become morally improved – less influenced by decadence and bourgeois values. The viewer was envisioned as both an essential component of a Socialist Realist artwork and as the ultimate outcome of the artistic process. As Groys puts it, ‘Socialist Realism was the attempt to create dreamers who would dream Socialist dreams’ (2008, 148).

III.1.7. Official Soviet Art after Stalin

With Nikita Khrushchev’s secret speech at the 20th Congress of the CPSU⁴ in February 1956, exposing the ‘personality cult of I. V. Stalin’, the USSR took course toward the ‘de-Stalinisation’, which meant at least partial liberalisation of public life; however, the political regime had not changed in its ideological foundations nor dropped using art in propaganda context nor had a new official art style of the Soviet Union emerged.

There is no unified approach toward the official art of the Soviet Union after 1956, apart from naming Socialist Realism as the dominant art direction. Most researchers dealing with the Soviet art tend to concentrate on the prolific revolutionary epoch under Lenin and Stalin omitting the period after Stalin’s death as the apparent continuation of the earlier set trends. Golomstock thus refers to the founding of the totalitarian state as the defining point arguing that ‘It is the process by which this megamachine is constructed, its concentration or diffusion in space and time, that determines the stages in the formation of totalitarian art, its purity and degree of crystallization’ (1985, xiiif.). His study covers Soviet art up to 1985, so shortly before collapse of the state. Yet Golomstock, on one hand, sees a pure example of totalitarian art in Socialist Realism before 1956, on the other, does not provide any different definition what type of art Socialist Realism became after 1956: whether it was not a purely crystallised but a diffused form of totalitarian art, or no totalitarian art at all.

Groys also sees the turning point for Socialist Realism in the death of Stalin, though he uses moral and aesthetic grounds for its fundamental change. According to Groys, the ambitions of achieving absolute artistic power with Stalin’s death became obsolete, as if the artists themselves lost any utopian aspirations, and Socialist Realism simply became one of the tools of the Soviet bureaucracy (2008, 148). Nevertheless, in the post-Stalinist period, a shift occurred within Socialist Realism, where a new set of values took root. Instead of prioritising artworks that strictly adhered to the core principles and aesthetics of Socialist Realism, the art community began to appreciate those that challenged censorship, explored new creative directions, and expanded the artistic freedom for others. This gradual broadening of boundaries

⁴ Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

eventually led to the dissolution of Socialist Realism, paralleling the collapse of the Soviet state (ibid.).

One of the few researchers studying specifically Soviet art of the Brezhnev era, Susan Reid calls it the 'art of memory' noting visible traits of retrospectivism in Soviet painting of the 1970s. One of the central attempts of this period, she argues, is to establish a line of artistic descent traced continuously from the past traditions to the present (1993, 161). Similar to Groys, Reid sees the return to the past due to the disillusionment in the attainability of the proclaimed bright future of the USSR after Khrushchev's revelatory speech about Stalin and cracked faith in both economic progress and political liberalisation after the Prague Spring was stifled by arms in 1968 (ibid., 162). The necessity to find their moral compass again and ground the shaken convictions in solid facts made one part of Soviet intelligentsia escape in the mythologised, glorious past, which had nothing to do with the withered present, whereas the other part took an approach of critical re-examination of the traversed path with the resolute intention to get to the complex truth (ibid.). In both cases, the art stylistics expanded to include underrated antecedent trends, as well as saw modernist experimentations in combining and recycling existed repertoire. Paradoxically, the same trend, albeit with different political goals, was officially set by the new USSR Constitution of 1977, which in its Article 68 proclaimed 'the preservation of historical monuments and other cultural values' to be 'the duty and obligation of citizens of the USSR' (Great Soviet Encyclopaedia 1979, quoted from Reid 1993, 161).

When establishing general trends in Soviet art development, it is important to note, though, that posters, being a separate genre of visual arts, should never be seen or analysed as a drawing (Gallo 1975, 315). Their existence is generated and can be apprehended only within a specific advertisement campaign, part of which they make. A poster is a reduced image of a complex advertising message directed at a viewer and establishing a dialogue with them (ibid.). Without understanding surrounding socio-political circumstances that provoked the campaign to emerge, the poster is deprived of its original meaning and its message thus gets irretrievably lost.

In conclusion of the general overview of the topic of art of the 1970s, it can be noted that even in poster analyses, the period of stagnation has not enjoyed much academic popularity. Klaus Waschik and Nina Baburina, who devoted a weighty volume to Russian poster art of the 20th century, summarised the period of the 1970s as the 'tired attempts to gain a space for development [...] of a future utopia [which] quickly came to an end' (2003, 120; translation mine). Nevertheless, what these attempts were and what their aim was, against what historical

and socio-political background they were built, and what vision of Soviet utopia they suggested, deserves a deeper analysis.

III.2. On the Origins and Symbolic Language of Soviet Political Posters

The function of the poster today is to appeal to our subconscious feelings and our barely conscious needs and then channel them so that we do what the sponsor of the poster wants us to do. To discover not the literal but the implicit intention of posters is to examine human behavior and history.

Max Gallo (1972, 10)

French historian and author of 'The Poster in History' Max Gallo considers posters as the metaphorical mirror that reflects and distorts the image of the society that created it in its specific historical stage (1975, 12). It serves as a condense embodiment, on the one hand, of the technological level of development of society and an overview of individual possessions to strive for, and on the other hand, a representation of societal expectations regarding the ideal individual. So constructed individual can exhibit the desired looks and be the owner of the depicted possessions, as well as display encouraged behaviour and aspire for the promoted social status. The distinction between commercial and political posters may be much less clear-cut in nature than is commonly believed, since both advertise: the former for consumption, the latter for ideology (cf. Gallo 1975, 315). Analysis of posters, unlike any other pieces of art, is therefore unthinkable without deeper research into the historical context and the then current reality within which the poster came into being and the vital message of which it is insistently delivering (ibid., 12).

The poster can be analysed on two levels: as a creative work of a famous artist or from the point of view of two characteristic features inherent in the poster: firstly, the combination of words and images and, secondly, the possibility of its endless reproduction (ibid., 297). The first approach can be of interest to those looking at the history of the poster development in its origins, which were laid down by well-known artists, among others Edouard Manet, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Alphonse Mucha and Gustav Klimt (ibid., 297-304). In the 1920s, the development of a new artistic language and the search for new forms, including those in posters, were similarly initiated in Soviet Russia by famous avant-garde artists. However, with the appearance of a developed poster industry and the mass reproduction of posters in hundreds of thousands of copies, the personality of an artist becomes subordinate, if not unimportant at all, along the same path as the border between an original and a copy utterly disappears (cf. Gallo 1975, 297).

The following chapter will provide a brief analysis of the development of symbolic language of Soviet political posters preceding the BAM period, which body of images was roughly conceived during the civil war, gradually expanded its semantics at the beginning of the 1920s, and finally struck deep root as a permanent, essential, and characteristic attribute of the Soviet visuality.

III.2.1. Posters as a Propaganda Tool in the Early Soviet Times

Posters, as easily perceived and widely available products, quickly became a ubiquitous part of the propaganda arsenal of the young Bolshevik revolutionary state (Kenez 1985, 111). The numerous reasons why posters rose to high positions in the ranking of propaganda tools included their ability to convey an image even to unsophisticated viewers, the low cost of producing a concise message on a small surface of scarce paper, and the high speed of response to a rapidly changing military and political situation, which was especially valued by the Red Army during the Civil War (ibid., 112). They were also an ideal means of reaching all segments of the population, given that almost 60% was illiterate, especially in rural areas and among women (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 84).

Recognising the potential of the poster and embracing the task to employ it for the revolutionary needs, the implementation of the idea was first halted by the Bolsheviks' lack of the artistic and technical skills, and as a result, the first Soviet posters were of poor quality. Yet, the reason why we are now analysing the Soviet political poster style and not their opponents' lies in the fact that they not only managed to overcome these initial obstacles and outproduce their enemies both in quantity and quality (Kenez 1985, 113), but also made a significant contribution to the theory and practice of the visual communications.

Although pre-revolutionary Russia had domestic traditions of artistic posters and developed some national characteristics, the Russian poster of Jugendstil between the turn of the century and the First World War was an integral part of the international art scene (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 74). Radical socio-political changes and the emergence of a revolutionary state brought to the surface the same principle that influenced both the general art scene and the development of poster art in particular and repudiated the traditions of the past for a new revolutionary beginning (ibid., 75). Many renowned poster artists such as L. Bakst, N. Remizov and A. Benois left the Soviet Russia with the first wave of emigration, and the lack of experienced graphic artists was further aggravated by the fact that many of those who stayed did not appreciate the Bolshevik ideology and preferred to work for the Whites (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 91; Kenez 1985, 113).

Paradoxically, the absence of theory and the arrival to the art scene of young artists, unconstrained by the past traditions and open for experimentation, stimulated creation of 'progressive' poster art, which, uneven in its final quality, was mainly characterised by personal motivation of the artists to channel the revolutionary energy (Kenez 1985, 113.). The necessity to devise powerful and emotionally appealing images, in stark contrast to the customary informational, market-driven and matter-of-factly Russian pre-revolutionary advertisement placards, provoked the new epistemological approach of perception theory being born parallel to and out of practice, laying the foundations for mass mobilisation (cf. Waschik, Baburina 2003, 90).

III.2.2. Free New World and Visualisation of its Space

Central to the idea of the birth of a new Soviet world was a metaphor of liberation from the old political regime through fierce struggle, complete and ruthless destruction of even signs of the things belonging to a former time, and vigilant guarding for any not fully eradicated or newly slyly emerging sights of outdated, but lethally dangerous past. Visually, the indispensable element in the Soviet poster language becomes *the 'broken' chains*, which emerged already in February 1917 on the election poster of Socialist Revolutionaries (fig. 5) and survived through the Cold War to the 1980s. The logical addition of the chains from which proletariat must liberate themselves can be extended almost indefinitely: *the broken chains of oppression, tsarist regime, illiteracy, capitalism, slavery, ignorance, bourgeoisie, church*⁵, only to define any ideologically synonymous concepts, which are 'hostile to the masses' and thus to be successfully overcome (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 95).

Starting 1919, in the midst of the civil war in Russia, struggle gets a physical and violent visual expression in the form of all kinds of stabbing and cutting objects, so a sword, a hammer, a shovel, a pick, a bayonet or an axe become an integral element of entry to this new aspired world. If the Socialist Revolutionary Party is depicted at the beginning of 1917 relatively peacefully as a crowd of neatly dressed, disciplined people who went out to an organised demonstration with flags, while the inferred chains encircling the globe are implied allegorically, and once broken, they will give way to land and freedom, then already in 1919-1920 struggle is visualised literally: in rivers of blood, severed hands, destroyed cities, and expelled socially and politically hostile elements (fig. 6, 7). Mobilisation of masses implies a

⁵ Verbally supported by the derogative general denomination of 'popovshchina', which literally means priesthood, but has a negative connotation of obscurantism.

more direct and active involvement, and supporting visuality speaks to actions rather than initial contemplations.



Figure 5: Poster 'Party of the Socialist Revolutionaries' by unknown author, 1917.



Figure 6: Poster 'Second Anniversary of the Great October Revolution' by unknown author, 1919.

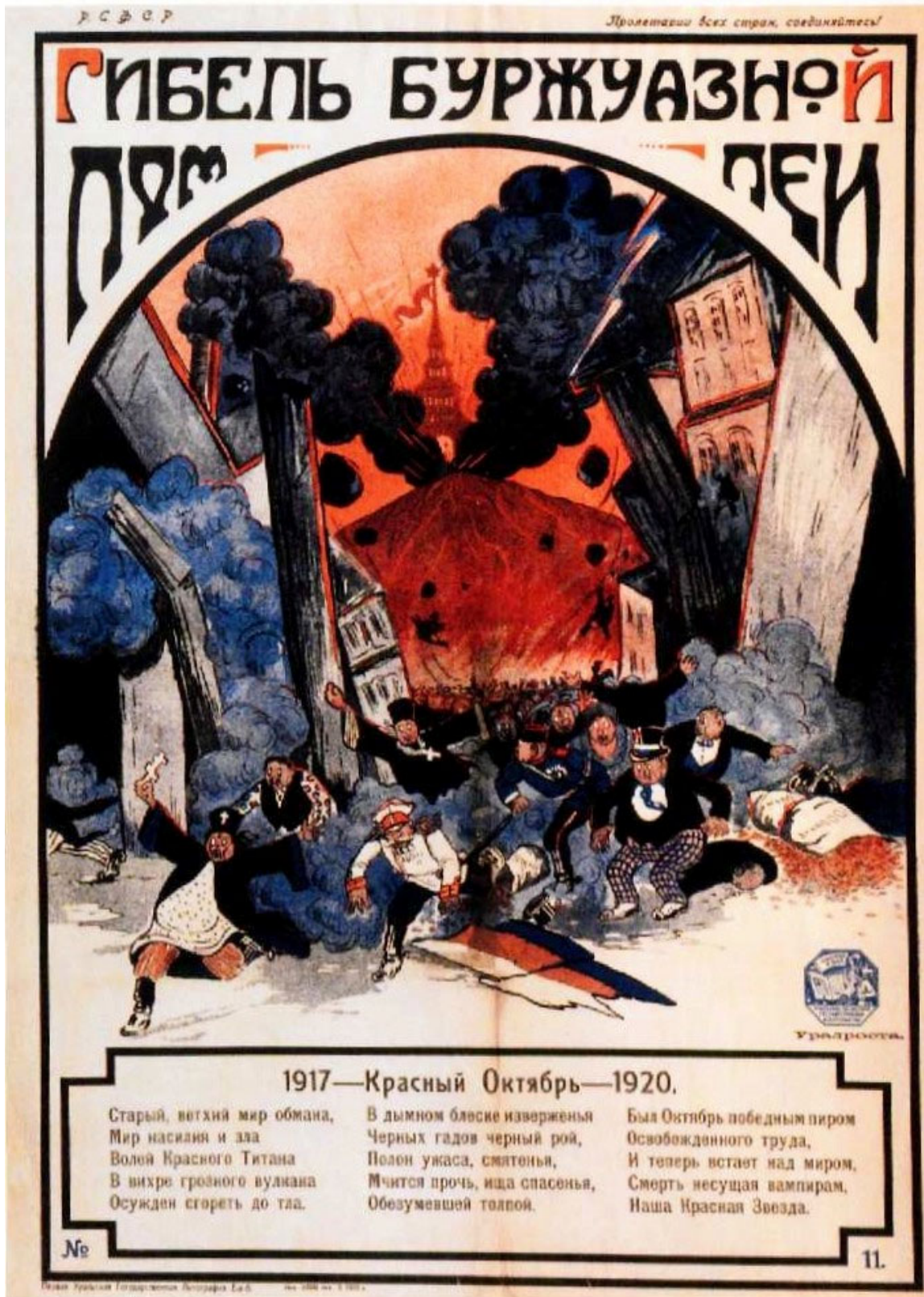


Figure 7: Poster 'The Death of Bourgeois Pompeii' by unknown author, 1920.

The space where the struggle against oppressive past and for the brighter future takes place claims to have a global dimension (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 94). On a poster from 1919, a peasant with a shovel and a worker with a hammer look down from a cliff at the entire earth,

which appears as just a planet in outer space along with other planets. The slogan ‘Soon the whole world will be ours’ (fig. 8) defines the margins of the ideological ambition of the Bolsheviks, as if laying the foundations for further successful advancement of the theme of space conquest. While the geographical borders of the rising revolutionary state are yet unclear and the possible inclusion of further state parties has not been finalised, the hypothetical space for potential allies of the victory of the socialist idea covers the entire globe. The outgoing political position presupposes the existing oppression of the world’s proletariat as the biggest strata of the class society anywhere; therefore, the idea of liberating the ‘enslaved’ and bringing forth the fairer future with the egalitarian society, which aim Soviet ideology proclaims, should not be restricted by any geographical, national or racial borders.



Figure 8: Poster ‘Soon the Whole World Will be Ours’ by unknown author, 1919.

Hampering the way to the unity of the world’s proletariat are solely representatives of the opponents who are vitally interested in keeping the social status quo for their own interests and who act contrary to the interests of the society: clerics who are responsible for spreading religious mist and obscuring the ultimate truth and scientific knowledge, greedy capitalists and enslaving monarchs, all of whom Bolsheviks define as *nechist’* [*scum*] (fig. 9 ‘Comrade Lenin Purges the Earth from the Scum’). Interesting is the selection of the summarising term to define the ideological enemy, for *nechist’* as a derivative from *nechisty* [*evil, unclean*] refers to evil spirits in folk popular beliefs, fantastic creatures hostile to humans who might have the

appearance of a human with some animal features (wood spirits, water spirits, devils, witches, etc.). The human-like appearance of these spirits can be deceptive, and their verbal dehumanising in disclosing their inhuman nature aims to assist the fighters in conducting the ruthless but vitally necessary purge, *for the sake of humanity*. Thus, the space for potential battle and ultimate social purification, still contaminated by poisonous ideas, inhabited by evil spirits and resting on shaky foundations in the swampy lands of history, is limitless.



Figure 9: Poster 'Comrade Lenin Purges the Earth from the Scum' by V. Deni, 1920.

At the same time, the perspective of the already acquired space expands and becomes immense. Already starting from the early Soviet posters, the space goes ‘wider and broader’⁶, creating the impression of the vastness of the territory and the irreversibility of the victory of the socialist idea, for the entire visible space belongs to Soviet people and is thus incorporated into their ideological and physical acquisition. When the enemy’s territory is presented, if at all, its scale is distorted to represent the ludicrous smallness, which can easily be disregarded in contrasting opposition to the territorial hyperbole of the ‘one sixth of the Earth’, introduced by the Soviets. The conquered space is demographically inclusive of all ages and inhabited by men and women in equal proportion, though the typical representatives are fair-haired Slavic-looking types, who could be best described as an imagined Russian ideal (fig. 10).



Figure 10: Poster ‘Broad is My Motherland’ by G. Shubina, 1938.

The gender-inclusive aspiration of the Soviet posters highlights a *liberated woman* as a separate beneficiary of the revolutionary outcome. The role and place of a woman in the new society is visually reconsidered, and her formerly habitual household, caretaking and pedagogical functions are semantically widened to include all productive spheres of the economy (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 99). The *liberation* is therefore not to be understood literally as the abolishment of reproduction duties and household chores but as commissioning of female additional significant working resource to national economy. Posters serve as a visual guidebook appealing to a woman to take a more active role and integrate herself freely and enthusiastically as a worker and full-right member into the new reality, opening a door to a

⁶ For the representation of space in other Soviet art genres [emerging at the same time](#), ref. Hans Günther’s article “‘Broad is My Motherland’. The Mother Archetype and Space in the Soviet Mass Song’ (2003).

‘new mode of life’ [*novy byt*] and away from the ‘kitchen slavery’ (fig. 11), and at the same time ascertaining the already happened fact of the liberation process (ibid.).



Figure 11: Poster ‘Kitchen Slavery’ by G. Shegal, 1931.

Women’s own struggle for liberation is presented on multiple levels and makes an integral part of the fight of the world proletariat. On a poster from 1920 by an unknown author that calls for female comrade workers to come join the communist party to break the chains of the world capitalism, a woman is depicted as a companion to a male partner who carries a hammer and physically breaks the metaphorical chains, whereas she takes parts of the broken chain away from the globe (fig. 12). Her role is presented ambiguously, for, on the one hand, she is an assistant to a man in this global fight and, on the other hand, an empowered subject to take a stand and contribution to the general cause, but only within strictly defined confines and according to the prescribed destination.



Figure 12: Poster 'Female Comrade Workers' by unknown author, 1920.

Equally, the 1920 poster 'What October Revolution Gave to a Woman Worker and Peasant' (fig. 13) shows an exhibition of institutions that are aimed at lightening the woman's burden in caretaking duties such as the house of a mother and a child, a kindergarten and a school, while her own educational and cultural necessities are covered by a library, a women's workers club and a council. She shows at these institutional developments with her right hand and carries working clothes and a hammer in her left hand, which signifies that she is a working woman and can now combine all the prescribed functions. In her working boots, she stands on a rock with an inscription, 'The land to a peasant, factories to a worker'; both of goods beneficiaries are in masculine form.

The theme of the permanent struggle that affects everyone will later change only in the image of the enemy, be it real or metaphorical, and, depending on the current political agenda, will be waged against kulaks, imperialists, fascists, or traitors to the motherland, or aimed at combating one's own vices and overcoming weaknesses. The aggressive and warlike rhetoric of the Soviet poster language will manifest itself most vividly during the World War II, but will periodically emerge during the Cold War. However, it is worth noting that with the ossification

of the Soviet regime and the aging of its practically permanent party Secretary Generals, the visual enthusiasm for the revolutionary struggle in the late Soviet period will subside and transform into a metaphorical struggle against nature, the elements and yet unconquered space, which will also be given over exclusively to the young, or will disappear altogether, replaced by pictures of the peaceful prosperity of developed socialism.



Figure 13: Poster 'What October Revolution Gave' by unknown author, 1920.

III.2.3. Framing Utopia: Constructing Images of Socialist Reality and Communist Future

The primary task of revolutionary poster language was to clearly communicate a new vision of utopia – one that had to be both a recognisable image with associative connections and, simultaneously, a revolutionary departure from the ‘outdated’ pre-revolutionary vision (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 100). This ambitious objective was only partially achieved. While the revolutionary 1920s introduced some new elements, the communist utopia as a whole underwent little transformation throughout the Soviet era. Not only did it generously borrow ideas and imagery from the pre-revolutionary period as a relatively unchanging foundation, but it also gradually became a repetitive tableau of fixed elements, seemingly petrified in a state of timelessness.

The foundations of the Russian revolutionary utopian framework were laid in the 19th century. Although its roots extended back to the Middle Ages, its realisation was closely tied to the anticipated enlightenment, which the revolutionaries sought to hasten, aligning it with the inevitably accelerating dynamics of development (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 100; cf. Heller, Niqueux 1995). The eagerly anticipated utopia was envisioned as a welfare state of abundance in its worldly incarnation, characterised by a distinctly industrial and technical nature (ibid.). In contrast to the hypothetical boundless revolutionary *space* that extended across the entire globe, the actual *place* of realisation of communism was envisioned as an overarching mega-city, integrating all essential social, economic, and (re-)production functions (ibid.). To achieve communism, the supposedly empty, void space had to be transformed into an industrialised urban landscape. In the 1970s, this concept found its expression in the visual reshaping of Siberia, which had been portrayed as a ‘void’ or unutilised space, finally mastered as a centre of industrial activity around the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline – symbol of technological progress. This project came to symbolise the tangible realisation of communist ideals, transforming Siberia’s untapped expanse into a vivid representation of collectivist utopian vision.

The origins of one of the most enduring symbols in Soviet poster semantics can be traced back to Tommaso Campanella’s early Italian utopia ‘The City of the Sun’ [‘Civitas solis’] (2009), first published in 1632 (cf. Waschik, Baburina 2003, 100). In this work, Campanella not only describes a picture of a grandiose, almost inaccessible city atop a hill, outlines a vision of communist governance in a unified world, where property is collectively owned – this includes women and children according to him, but also introduces sun as a symbol of enlightenment and rebirth, representing a new beginning and peaceful governance.

Apart from different political forms of governance – Campanella’s theocratic monarchy versus proletarian dictatorship in the Soviet version, both of which share disdain for democracy – the utopian vision, presented as a dialogue between a Grandmaster of the Knights Hospitallers and a Genoese sea captain who has ‘wandered over the whole earth’ (Campanella 2009, 4) and seen much, is strikingly similar.

Waschik and Baburina note the long-established and wide-ranging connotations of the sun, particularly in Slavic mythologies, where it is deeply rooted in Orthodox religious rituals and rural life (2003, 100-1). Within this framework, certain household and field tasks could only be performed before sunrise or after sunset. Since the 17th century, the Orthodox Church debated whether religious processions should move with or against the sun. In some regions of Russia, such as Vladimir, peasants would greet the sun at its rise and setting by removing their hats and making the sign of the cross. The sun symbolised ‘truthfulness’, ‘spirituality’, and the arrival of a ‘new day’, spring, and, in line with Christian tradition, ‘a new life’.

The Bolsheviks utilised this existing mythological framework to associate the sun with revolution, thereby metonymically transferring its metaphorical attributes to their ideology. This symbolic connection was elaborately exploited in Soviet propaganda posters, both visually and verbally. For example, in a poster titled ‘Worker! Only by breaking the chains of darkness will you reach socialism’, two alternative realities are depicted on multiple semantic levels (fig. 1).



Figure 14: Poster ‘Worker! Only Having Broken the Chains of the Darkness, You Will Come to the Socialism’ by unknown author, 1919.

One reality is characterised by a clear sky and a powerful, all-encompassing sun. In this image, the worker stands surrounded by companions: a woman embraces him, while a boy or younger comrade stands nearby, and an older man looks into the horizon. All figures stretch their hands towards the sun, symbolising hope and collective progress. By contrast, the opposing reality depicts the sun obscured by dense, storm-like clouds resembling smoke. Here, the worker sits despondently on a cliff, chained and alone, his back turned to the ‘future’, the horizon, and the faintly drawn sun. Socialism is here unequivocally associated visually and verbally with freedom from chains, a sense of belonging, companionship, and light – embodied by the sun. In contrast, the absence of socialism is portrayed as darkness, loneliness, despondency, and bondage. This juxtaposition reinforces the ideological dichotomy central to Soviet propaganda.

In the 1920s, the construction of a developed railway and transport system became a crucial prerequisite for the country’s economic recovery following the civil war. Gradually, a train came to symbolise technological progress, prosperity, and an indispensable tool for achieving a promised future (*ibid.*, 104-5). On N. Kotov’s 1927 poster ‘Building Socialism’ (fig. 15), the train occupies a central position in the foreground, delivering goods and facilitating the country’s economic progress. In the image, the railway system encircles the foundation of the welfare city-state, its grandeur evoking comparisons to the technological ‘city of the sun’ and serving as its cornerstone.

However, the stark disparity between the Soviet reality and the proclaimed welfare state necessitated a political decoding of the expectant prosperity. Following the 17th Communist Party Congress in 1934, named also the ‘Congress of the Winners’, in which its Secretary General Joseph Stalin proclaimed significant changes and victories which country had undergone by then, the industrialisation utopia of the 1920s was to be understood from now on as the practiced reality (*ibid.*, 109-10). The ontological shift of the alternative perception of the available reality through substituting real-life experiences and changing the evaluating perspective with a socially optimistic and economically affirmative lens is visually represented in propaganda posters as early as the 1930s.

The technological evolution of symbols representing an accelerating future is particularly intriguing, as this future paradoxically unfolds in the present. The political narrative supporting the transitional phase from socialism, the current state of affairs which is also permanently in state of development and construction, to communism, the ultimate political and societal goal, remains effectively visualised by the metaphor of a train. In P. Sokolov-Skalia's 1939 poster, the entire country is metaphorically depicted as a train laden with political promises, racing from the station *Socialism* towards the station *Communism*, adhering to a carefully planned and publicly proclaimed political schedule (fig. 16). The locomotive of revolution is steered by Comrade Stalin, portrayed as an experienced and reliable driver ensuring the train's adherence to its predetermined course of progress.



Figure 16: Poster 'From the Station "Socialism" to the Station "Communism"' by P. Sokolov-Skalia, 1939.

Over time, posters began reflecting advancements in technology: the train as the incarnation of progress gave way to dirigibles and airplanes in the late 1930s (fig. 17) and, eventually, to rockets with the rise of space exploration theme in the 1960s. Despite the emergence of new technological devices and motifs, there was no corresponding shift in looking for new artistic expression. For example, the poster ‘We were Destined to Discover Distant Worlds’ by I. Kalenskaia and V. Kalenskiy (1960) (fig. 18), dedicated to space exploration, is strikingly similar in its verbal appeal, visual elements, and overall representation to the 40-year earlier poster ‘Soon the Whole World Will be Ours’ (1919) by an unknown author (fig. 8).

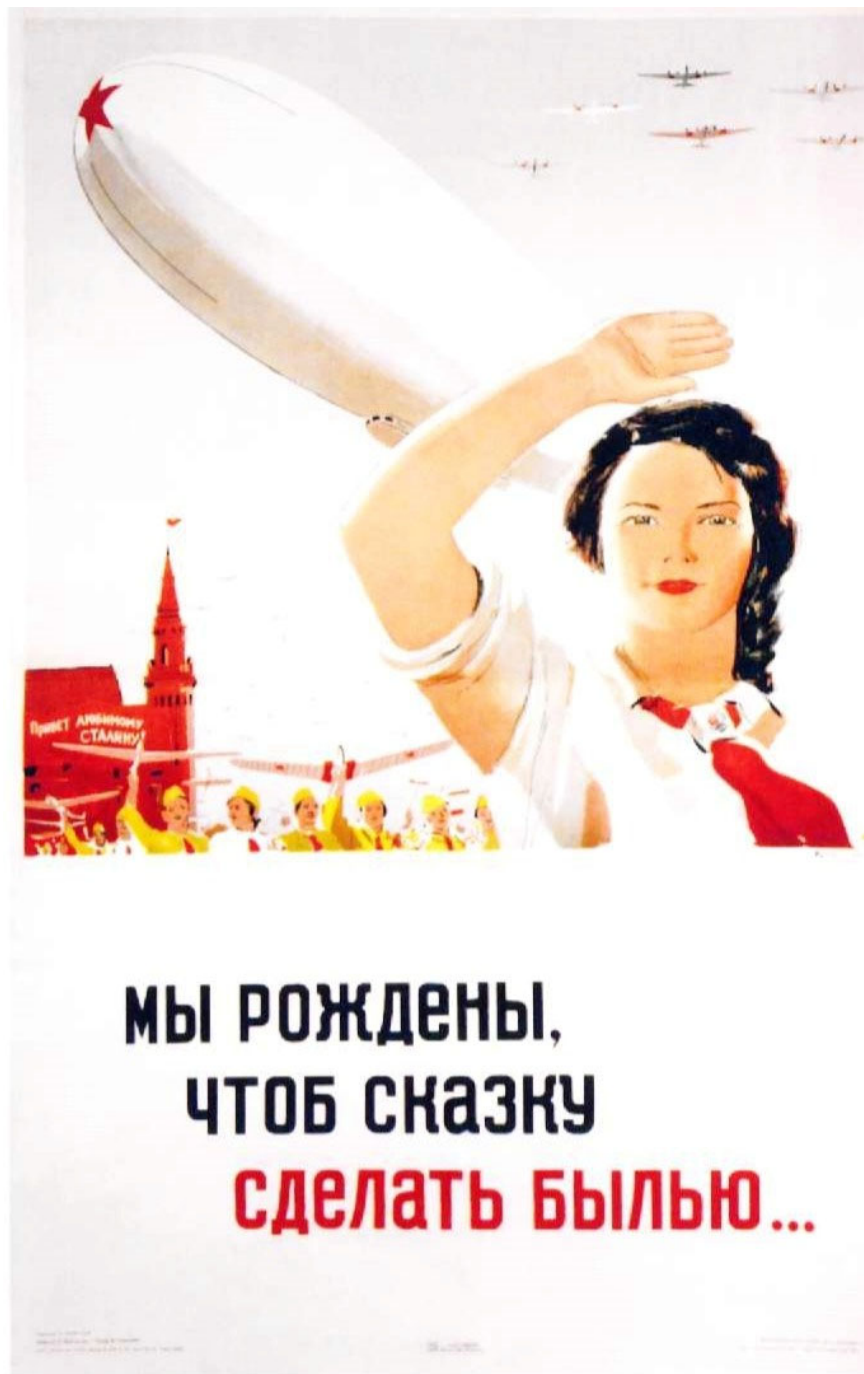


Figure 17: Poster ‘We were Born to Turn a Fairy Tale into Reality’ by P. Karachentsov, 1937.



Figure 18: Poster 'We are Destined to Explore Distant Worlds' by I. Kalenskaia, V. Kalenskiy, 1960.

The later development stages of Soviet ideology, particularly during the BAM period – which proclaimed the aspiration to *final* transition from socialism to communism – saw the reiteration of the formerly pronounced symbols of the 1920s, most notably, the train and the sun. The construction of a railway helped combine both the direct meaning of a train as an object of the campaign and, at the same time, recreate the long established metaphors to present it as the symbol of the future and progress, which, however, in the mid-1970s already looked like the outdated symbol of the progress, given the timely level of technological development, and the future that is still being reached for more than five decades. The propaganda campaign continued, though, the established tradition of the political trajectory as the constant movement, eternal work-in-progress, where the reaching of the goal is not so important as moving towards it.

The symbol of the sun persisted as well, but went to an elevated level of verbal connotations rather than direct visual representation. Its nominal attributes were especially prominent in defining the future, or the path towards it, as a 'bright future' [*svetloe budushchee*] or a 'fair path' [*svetly put*]. In these original Russian phrases, the attributes of brightness and fairness are derived from *svet*, meaning 'light', thereby directly linking them to the sun's symbolic significance. This linguistic connection enhances the sun's role as a metaphor for progress, and enlightenment, while also serving as an indispensable element in reaching both stages of the political trajectory. However, in its representation, the initial, socialist stage is depicted more tangibly and visually, whereas the advanced, communist stage is characterised by a more abstract and metaphorical verbal framing.

The continuity of ideologically charged themes in Soviet poster art can be considered, on the one hand, as an endless repetition of the once discovered topics and their application in all possible formats due to the lack of other innovative ideas. On the other hand, the orientation of the Soviet discourse onto inevitable success and, more precisely, glorious victory imposed thorough planning, in particular in the form of 5-year plans. The development of such plans, on its part, presupposed wise political vision, a near foresight of the great leaders of the party and the only way how ideological goals, set many decades beforehand, can be achieved. In this respect, the reappearance of the same topics, for example, the promise to conquer the whole world, meant also as the whole outer space, if need be to understand it that way, in the 1920s, and the theme of the fulfilled space conquest in the 1960s, executed in the unchanged symbolic language, can be equally transcended as the realisation of the declared promises and the inevitable and steady achievement of the unchanged goals.

III.3. Siberian Myth in Russian Culture

When approaching the topic of the Siberian myth in Russian culture, the academic tradition has always tended towards antithetical terms: ‘the frightening heart of darkness and a fabulous land of plenty’, ‘a place of total privation and darkness’ and ‘the land of opportunity’, inhabited by ‘savages of both gentle and ferocious variety’, wild but containing unimaginable riches (Slezkine, Diment 1993, 2). The mythical topos has been underscored by hyperboles bringing the imagination working on construction of this *fabulous* and *terrible*, *snow-white* and *dark* neverland to the extreme: a ‘remote and apparently limitless [...] world that included everything that one could not or would not find at home, a world where one banished the despicable and cultivated the forbidden, confirmed the contagious and protected the perfect’ (ibid.).

Over time, the typical utopian narrative – rooted in Western ideas of exoticism, savagery, and the notion of a ‘virgin land’⁷ – has acquired not only specific geographical coordinates, reflecting the stage of geographical discoveries and the few remaining ‘unopened’ pages, but has also evolved through the testimonies of those who saw, lived in, and experienced the place (cf. Bassin 1991).

The wilderness of the land and the darkness of its inhabitants, both physical and metaphorical, was expected to recede under the external pressures of transformation – first

⁷ For discussions on the imagery of wilderness and exoticism in Western thought across different historical periods, see Bernheimer (1970) for the Middle Ages, Dudley and Novak (1975) for the Renaissance to Romanticism, and Rousseau and Porter (1990) for the Enlightenment.

through Orthodox religion, which sought to convert pagans and baptise ‘savages’, and, with it, the introduction of *progress* and *civilisation* (Slezkine, Diment 1993, 2). The relationship between Siberia and Muscovy, later the Russian Empire, followed the classic colonialist pattern of military conquest, domination, rapacious resource extraction, and arrogance. However, the goal was not to assimilate the land to the point that it became *civilisation* itself, but rather to preserve its otherness as a point of contrast (ibid., 3). Yuri Slezkine effectively captures the preservationist attitude toward this part of the empire and its position within the mental hierarchy of other such exotica (ibid.).

Backward rather than pagan, and ancient rather than remote, Siberia remained different, and when Peter the Great imported the sixteenth-century European passion for *cabinets de curiosités*, *Kunstkammern*, and *Fardles of Facions*, there was no question as to what part of his own realm was the best source of things monstrous and fabulous.

In the early 19th century, as Russia sought to establish itself as a great political power among European nations despite its economic underdevelopment, the idea of a ‘separate path’ emerged. While this notion was largely a response to Russia’s tangible lag behind the West, the flight from modernity was experienced as a literary genre – one rooted in Romanticism and a belief in spiritual superiority of the Russian people in comparison to the shallow Westerners (ibid.). In this way, all of Russia came to embody a vision of romantic whiteness of snow (read: *purity*) and coldness, intertwined with the notion of immense natural riches, the raw power of the land (most vividly represented by *angry rivers*, *deep mines*, and brown bears) and the ‘mystical Russian soul’, a myth that has remarkably endured to this day. Siberia, in turn, became the ultimate incarnation of literary romanticism, finding its Russian Walter Scott and Jack London counterparts in Kondraty Ryleev’s poems (1956), Vladimir Orlov’s ‘Decembrists’ (1951), Ivan Kalashnikov’s prose (1831, 1833), and Nikolay Shchukin’s ‘Siberian Novel’ (1834) (ibid.). With this shift, the image of the once ‘filthy’ and uncivilised Siberian settlers underwent a radical transformation into that of brave, strong, stately, and morally impeccable frontiersmen. If backwardness was to be celebrated, then the most backward of the backward had to be elevated to the forefront, with the moral import reversed.

With the addition of literary testimonies, the imagined Russian utopia did not necessarily resolve its contradictions but gained greater credibility and became increasingly fictionalised (Slezkine, Diment 1993). Hayden White (1975) describes this process – the interiorisation of the wilderness and its archetypal inhabitant, the Wild Man – as a form of

remythification. He argues that the idea of the Wild Man in Western thought has undergone multiple transformations: originating as myth in Greek and Roman antiquity, reshaped in the Judeo-Christian tradition, then evolving into fiction before returning once again to myth (1975, 7–8). Apparently following the same parabola, the Siberian mythological narrative of wilderness began in the eleventh century with the arrival of the Novgorodians to the Urals (Slezkine, Diment 1993, 1). It continued into the sixteenth century, an era that saw the emergence of tales about savages who allegedly sacrificed their children to nourish their guests, perished each winter as the water from their noses froze them to the ground, and spent the summer submerged in the sea to prevent their skin from splitting (ibid., 1–2). By the 1630s, this narrative took a fictional turn with the birth of ‘proper’ Siberian literature (ibid., 7), transforming the wilderness from an imagined land of horrors into a literary space shaped by adventure, exile, and the promise of discovery.

While Siberia’s role for Russia, within a global Western framework, is comparable to what the American West represented for Europe (cf. Honour 1975; Smith 1950), its more immediate relationship to the empire’s centre – whether St. Petersburg or Moscow – located even further to the north and east and deeper into snow and the unknown, for a northern country which has known snow and darkness not by hearsay, invites an intriguing contemplation.

Seeking escape and hoping for a better life in a place publicly recognised as an exile for convicts – one defined by harsh, if not unbearable, climatic conditions, wilderness mixed with backwardness, and a complete lack of social infrastructure (as we would describe it today) – appears to be a unique mythological phenomenon among northern cultures. The Finns, for instance, also pursued utopian ideals, establishing nearly two dozen utopian colonies in America, the most famous being *Sointula* (‘Harmony’) on Malcolm Island off the coast of British Columbia (Ross 1988). The difference with the Russian utopia, though, lies in its inherently mythological nature, in the fact that even when confronted with the reality, the myth remained unchanged, for it was never intended as a tangible, physically constructed space. Unlike Finnish utopias, which sought to materialise an alternative society, the Russian utopia existed solely as a mental refuge – conspired, imagined, and never meant to take concrete form. The absence of defined geographical borders – no clear beginning, end, or spatial contours of *the elusive country behind the Urals*, or simply ‘behind the Rock’ (Slezkine, Diment 1993, 1) – further reinforced the abstract nature of the Russian utopia envisioned in Siberia.

With the arrival of the Bolsheviks, who declared war on all forms of backwardness, Siberia, bearing the dual mythological facets of Janus, was reinterpreted in a way that was both new and deeply rooted in century-old narratives. On the one hand, it embodied the moral

superiority of peasant communism, where Russia was to find its true destiny, as propagated by Herzen in the 1860s (1958). On the other, it was cast as the land of Siberian kulaks and bandits, figures emerging from the same prosperous peasantry but now labelled as enemies of the revolution, to be relentlessly fought and eradicated in the 1920s (Slezkine, Diment 1993, 4-5). The Bolshevik ideological reframing wiped away historical traces from the very surface of the land, transforming Siberia into a *tabula rasa*, a blank ideological slate. In doing so, it allowed the space to be metaphorically conquered anew, its past erased, and its future rewritten in accordance with Soviet ideological demands. The land itself, once layered with competing histories, was repurposed as a space where Soviet power could inscribe its own narrative of progress, struggle, and ultimate transformation.

Not only literature contributed to the construction of this new mythical space in Siberia. The collected volume ‘The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space’, edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (2003), offers a compelling study of how various artistic genres, including painting, architecture, song, aesthetic criticism, and, most notably, cinema, contributed to shaping the totalitarian space of the Soviet empire. This process culminated in what Naiman (2003, xiv) describes as ‘a lethal aestheticization of life’ (cf. Nabokov 1947; Groys 1992). Siberia played a central part in this metaphysical construction, taking multiple roles, depending on a particular ideological setting and the necessity of the day, and serving as a space of constant transformation and symbolic mobilisation. Out of twelve essays examining the construction of Soviet space during the Stalinist period, half explicitly reference Siberia, with some even assigning it a leading role. While a comprehensive discussion of all these arguments is beyond the scope of this study, I shall provide an overview of key theoretical concepts that illuminate the Soviet ideological framework, which positioned Siberia as a distinct Russo-Soviet *topos* (Epstein 2003).

III.3.1. Siberia as Ultimate Periphery

In the 1930s, cinema, in full compliance with its assigned function by Lenin as ‘the most important of all the arts’, was in full swing defining the visual borders of the new ideological space. There was Moscow – the *Centre*, the *heart* of the country, and the *holy grail*, which was physically reconstructed at the time to respond to the ideological challenges posed to the capital of the new world – and the rest of the Soviet space, generally marked as periphery (Clark 2003). The inherent to the Stalinist culture juxtaposition between centre and periphery, which, we can confidently claim, has persevered for the next century, was reflected in all spheres of artistic realisation. The semantic relationships between these two constituent parts were complex and

intertwined, for only in hierarchical symbiosis could any of them be fully realised. Even though this antithetical framework was constructed and imposed by the centre as a domination structure, the periphery was instead endowed with the moral superiority, purity and naturalness.

In this semantic interplay, Siberia more often than not fulfils the part of the denominative periphery, representing its inherent profane character in inverse proportionality to the sacrality of the centre. This contrasting vision is ever so important, since at this crucial time of constructing the image of the centre, there was no possibility to capture a real topography of Moscow, for as witnesses testified, ‘all of Moscow [wa]s under scaffolding’ (*vsia Moskva v lesakh*) (ibid., 10). The real face of the centre is therefore replaced by the imagined vision of the Moscow-to-come, which, in its turn, is reflected as in a mirror by taking the marginal position from the outer limits of a sacred area (Bulgakowa 2003, 64).

The multiple visions of Moscow produced so cinematically could be as far from reality as the seemingly insurmountable distance between the centre and the periphery. In Ivan Pyrev’s *Party Membership Card* (1936), people arriving from Siberia see an idealised version of a city on a river against the backdrop of fireworks, which surprisingly resembles Venice (ibid.).

Aleksandr Medvedkin’s comedy *The New Moscow* (1938) juxtaposes the vision of Moscow by a short-sighted eyewitness and a farsighted visionary (ibid., 67). On the one hand, there is a local artist and urbanist, who is tasked with compiling a sketch of the existing Moscow, but fails to do so, because buildings disappear overnight, move around and resist being captured on paper, as if claiming his lack of foresight. His antagonist, a Siberian civil engineer, has never seen Moscow in his life but has envisioned it in his Siberian backwoods more clearly than the real Muscovite, and travels to Moscow to present his vision of a dream-like city. Set in a comedy setting, the moral victory seems to belong to the Siberian, but the mock-up model of the *Centre* so constructed is equally lifeless, puppet-like (ibid., 66), and therefore presents only a bold but comic dream. The claimed Siberian farsightedness is morally superior but laughably provincial.

III.3.2. Siberia as Canvas for Life as Dream

The recurring topic of the absolute distance separating the centre from the periphery is paired in the discourse of the Soviet space construction with the analysis of the magic ways how it can be annihilated (Clark 2003). The frequent collapsing of distance, as Naiman argues (2003, xv), makes part of the utopian narrative involving time-lapse and aspiring to advance the desired result by magically overcoming the physical and temporal obstacles. Lev

Kuleshov's children's film *Siberians* (1940) presents a phantasmagorical sample of cinematic art that erodes the border between dream and reality (Bulgakowa 2003, 55).

The fairytale-like plot set in Novaya Uda in Siberia evolves around two boys, a girl, Stalin, and his pipe. Schoolboys Seriozha and Petia hear from the old Buryat Doshindon a tale of a magic Stalin's pipe that he gave to a hunter during his domestic exile in this very place in 1903-04 (Leonidov 1941). The current location of the pipe is unknown, for it was transferred from a hunter to a hunter as an object with allegedly magic powers, but the boys are resolute to find it and give it back. They succeed in finding the object, and at the same time, by withstanding the required school examinations, also happen to be in the group of the most prominent schoolchildren going to Moscow to see Stalin. In such a way, they can deliver the fetish, which, however, turns out to be the wrong pipe. 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe,' Stalin (or Lev Kuleshov) could have said, as if ultimately exposing the treachery of the presented images.

Indeed, the increasing erosion of the boundary between reality and imagination deepens as the plot unfolds. First, the girl Valia, who deliberately fails her exams to avoid taking the place of one of the boys entrusted with a 'higher mission' to Stalin, manages to transcend the physical distance to the centre through a magical apparition in her dream, collapsing both spatial and temporal barriers (ibid., 68, 71). The boys, too, follow in a separate dream sequence, while simultaneously travelling on a real train. Stalin appears not only as himself but also as Grandfather Frost, while the pipe-hunting story in the taiga is partially narrated through the fading consciousness of a child, further destabilising the distinction between perception and illusion. This accumulation of perceptual distortions, as Bulgakowa argues, can be read as the 'products of an agitated, infantilised consciousness' (2003, 74).

Both contemporary critical perspectives, such as Oksana Bulgakowa's analysis, and film criticism of the time, including Oleg Leonidov's article in *Iskusstvo Kino* (Jan 1941), highlight the unmotivated development of the plot and its fundamental refusal to differentiate between reality and imagination, or signal the reasoned transition from one to another. The implications of these interpretations, however, differ significantly. Bulgakowa questions the very validity of what is presented, suggesting that it reflects 'an entire nation's infantile syndrome, in which the nation confuses the boundary between the real and the desired' (2003, 74). Leonidov, by contrast, embraces this ambiguity, arguing that Stalin and, by extension, the sacred core of the country, is meant to exist only as a mental representation, an image to be dreamt of rather than encountered in reality (1941). Aligning with Bulgakowa's analysis, I would further argue that this *entire nation* is, in fact, localised in the image of Siberia, which here does not simply play its usual role as the periphery but also serves as a dreamlike stage

where aspirations of the Soviet life and the methods how to reach them unfold only as an illusion.

III.3.3. Siberia as Profane Allegory for Nature

Soviet space as a multi-faceted, oftentimes binary, construct allows for multiple classifications, conveniently variable depending on the historical exigencies and political demands of ideological development, while hierarchical division into the centre and the periphery could undergo further differentiation between a public space of production and politics, and a private space of consumption and domesticity (Cox 2003, 127). Randi Cox argues that demarcation of these two spaces goes along the line of commercial advertisement, which serves a paradoxical purpose of uniting citizens of any mass-producing societies regardless of their political direction and ideological aspirations – be it Western consumption-oriented societies or Soviet production-oriented one – by suggesting them a visualised ideal of material possessions and aspired standard of life (*ibid.*).

Even though Soviet commercial advertisement substituted public production spaces of the Soviet factory or the idealised kolkhoz with private sites of leisure and cultured consumption featuring a restaurant or a department store, it still played along the formula of the Socialist Realism transforming the actual space into fantasy space ‘as it should be’, and striving to contribute to the education of the Soviet citizens, who in the current context acted as consumers, in the right, *cultured* choice how to spend their money and time (*ibid.*, 126, 141).

The central to the Soviet culture concept of *kul’turnost’* [*culturedness*] is both omnipresent and pervasive, yet hard to define. It is closely tied to consumers, and, as a collective phenomenon, is concentrated in high numbers in places of affluence with typical urban features (*ibid.*, 151). Culturedness embodies all the collected features of *civilisation* and modernity, and serves as a mass methodology, Soviet blueprint how to reach a prosperous and cultured life in exchange for hard work (*ibid.*, 126)⁸. Notably, Soviet social advertising positioned periphery as a consumerist antithesis of urban life to which these urban dwellers could resort for having leisure, if they took enough goods with them (*ibid.*, 154). In this commercial advertising context, Siberia played its antithetical role to culture and acted as a profane allegory of nature.

One of the striking examples is the advertisement of *sibirskie pelmeni* (Siberian dumplings) positioned at the backdrop of impassable taiga (fig. 19). The direct connection of *pelmeni* to Siberia is ambiguous and allows for numerous interpretations. It should either

⁸ More on the concept of *kul’turnost’* [*culturedness*] in Soviet discourse, see Vadim Volkov (2000) ‘The Concept of *Kul’turnost’*: Notes on the Stalinist Civilizing Process.’

underline the natural provenance of the product, or evoke imagination of the possible application of the goods by suggesting city inhabitants take them into one of those escapist getaways from the city to the idealised nature. Cox follows the first alternative and further argues that the placement of the advertisement into a Siberian pine forest was meant to alleviate the distrust of the Soviet consumers towards production techniques of the processed and frozen food products (ibid.). A crude vision of Siberia as an impassable century-old thicket is presented as a place of consumerist trust and escape, but also as a wild, truly *natural* space, beyond the borders of culturedness and civilisation.



Figure 19: Advertisement for ready-made *sibirskie pelmeni*. Ogonek, 1951.

III.3.4. Siberia as an Indispensable Part of the Greater Whole

When presenting all the different parts of the vast space occupied by the communist ideology – USSR – to underline the paradoxical diversity of its constituent parts and at the same time their ideological unity, Siberia is unfailingly mentioned as one of the indispensable

territories: distant, wild, huge, and yet integrated (Widdis 2003, 226f.). Here, the Soviet *imaginary geography*, in the words of Dziga Vertov, who significantly contributed to creating the cinematic image of the continuity of Soviet space, presents the ideological vision of the space as internationalist and decentred (ibid.). Vertov's 'Sixth Part of the World' (1926) constructs the imaginary map of the Soviet Union by highlighting primarily the usefulness of the separate points to the common entity as the sources of resources and uses the montage technique to connect the chain of the Gostorg [state trade organisation] from the Siberian taiga to Dagestan. Both the use of the specifically Gostorg as the state trade and supply organisation for the common denominator and the chain as the link connecting the territory of the USSR, presented as the ultimate interconnected space, equals the parts in its importance and contribution.

The topic of equality and unity of parts constituting the greater Soviet whole is widespread also in other artistic genres, and even though denominations of these parts can differ, Siberia, regardless of its 'exotic' nature or, perhaps, exactly due to it, is always present, as if without Siberia, the whole Soviet Union is unimaginable, would be a lesser whole, not so Soviet, nor diverse. So, Lev Chernomortsev's song *Rodina* [*Motherland*] lists '[t]he Urals, Siberia, the Caucasus, [and] Ukraine' as the separate constituents which all make part of one great Motherland, whereas the differentiation of otherness lies not along the border between these parts, but with the ideological enemy (Dobrenko 2003, 186). Social navigation, thus, embraces both happiness to roam around freely through all different but ideologically same parts of one space, and vigilance, to be able to distinguish the true features of a hostile element in the form of an ideologically foreign spy.

The similarity of these seemingly unlike parts of the Soviet country is underscored by the unanimity principle of their steady transformation going on everywhere on 'Map of the Motherland' (Mikhailov 1949), fluid transition of the space, constant moving of everything somewhere (Dobrenko 2003, 195). Siberia presents the space of permanent conquest, to be transformed not only by moving people but also by creeping wheat and corn (ibid., 177, 195), which agricultural cultures come forward as subjects in their own intention akin to Callon's scallops (1986). The given geography is permanently changed and changing, and the resulting picture lacks any words to describe the miracle of the Soviet spatial transformation.

III.3.5. Siberia as Intransigent Space

Soviet revolutionary impetus demanded existing social and national space to be transformed, and yet the active representation of the Soviet space from the 1920s as boundless,

covering one-sixth of the globe, potentially reaching to the stars and beyond, made this task challenging and daredevil. Mikhail Bakhtin refers the origins of the cultural revolution, which changed the perspective of the Soviet gaze from the medium-range, covering predominantly domestic territory to a new range, ‘very distant or very close’, to Vladimir Maiakovsky, who in the 1920s had sought to introduce new ways of expanding the Soviet horizon [*krugozor*] (Bakhtin 1996, 55, quoted from Widdis 2003, 219). The space reconfiguration thus had to be introduced on the go, in the moving, by ‘raising anchors’ (Widdis 2003, 219f.) and setting out on the journey to the expanse.

The methods how the space metamorphosis was to be implemented consisted of the semantic part of denomination and the technical part of means. Taking the linguistic part under her detailed focus, Emma Widdis argues that the yet unknown Soviet space to be discovered was going through different phases of conversion, first being the subject of *exploration* [*razvedka* or *izuchenie*] during the late 1920s and into the first Five-Year Plan (1928-32), which subsequently changed to conquest-cum-appropriation [*osvoenie*] during the Stalinist years henceforth; with it, the perspective of the space changed as well from the decentered object of quest for information to an obstinate subject in need of control and domination (ibid., 221).

Siberia as a space characterised by superlative attributes of size falls best under the description of Soviet *neob’iatnyi prostor* [boundless territory] that was invariably in the focus of the mobile exploration activities. Mikhail Epstein (2003, 282) posits a psychoanalytical argument of the internal fear of the space void and expanse, which Siberia represents, that Russians try to overcome antithetically by clinging closer to each other in the attempt to become one entity, be it a metaphorical collective, the human mass in the Stolypin car⁹, where any separate individual is not able to distinguish themselves even physically either by breathing or having a clearly distinguishable limb, or the notorious dwelling of Siberia by labour camps.

The technical means how to penetrate the uncharted space is railroad carrying a train, a direct solid iron line traced through the chaotic wilderness and obscurity. In the world of moving images, train is the first-ever topic, for European cinema in general and Russian cinematography in particular took its roots from Lumière brothers’ film ‘The Arrival of a Train’ (1896). However, the arrival of the train topic proper to the Soviet cinema happened later, whereas the train as a visual symbol of conquest of unbounded expanse was effectively used for the first time in Soviet films dedicated to the construction of Turksib, and namely Victor

⁹ A type of a railroad car meant to transport the convicts and introduced by Petr Arkadievich Stolypin (1863–1911), Russian conservative statesman and prime minister (1906–11). He instituted agrarian reforms but was ruthless in suppressing rebellion; assassinated.

Turin's eponymous film work of 1929 (Widdis 2003, 224). Laying rails of Turksib comes to represent *smychka* [joining], linking spots of natural resources of two distant parts of the USSR: Siberian grain and timber and Turkestan's cotton in Kazakhstan.

Even though space obstinately refuses to recede, preserving its characteristics of an intransigent space, rail path is laid down and subsequently domesticated (ibid., 225). The appropriation of the seemingly unsubdued space is underscored by the images of rail tracks being laid through the vast open space, with camels grazing peacefully at both sides of it. Train thus stands for both an indispensable ally of progress and a social mediator negotiating the unconquerable space (ibid.). The same topoi first introduced in the 1930s will be successfully reused in the propagation of the recurring conquest of Siberia four decades later through the advertisement campaign of BAM.

III.3.6. Siberia as Exotica

Siberia occupies a prominent place in visual representation on multiple levels and figures among the key subjects of the state-sponsored ethnographic film production trend that emerged in the second half of the 1920s. The proclaimed aim was egalitarian in intent, seeking to create an 'authentic' portrayal of the diverse peoples of the Soviet Union so that they could all be regarded as genuinely equal (Sovetskoe kino 1927, 12; Widdis 2003, 231).

In 1927, the journal *Sovetskoe kino* [*Soviet cinema*] dedicated a whole block to the methodology and tasks of the ethnographic knowledge production (vol. 4, 10-15). Published statistics attributed a clear *ethno-geographic theme* to seventeen out of fifty-eight cultural and educational documentary films produced by Sovkino, the state cinema organisation (Sovetskoe kino 1927, 14-15; cf. Widdis 2003, 230). This visual documentary endeavour took the form of numerous film expeditions, which documented 'exploration' and the production of knowledge about the Urals, Siberia, and the Far East – territories that were evidently all perceived as different and exotic enough to be included to the kaleidoscope of the nationalities dwelling the Soviet territory (ibid.).

The Soviet epistemologists in their search for definition of what science meant in film differentiated between separate types of the final ethno-geographic documentation and made correspondingly different demands to their quality, content, and target audience. Educational film, for instance, was meant as a lighter quasi entertainment genre to acquaint a village dweller with the city habits and notions; such is the film *Moscow* in 5 parts (Iakovlev 1927, 10f.). As a contrast, scientific-popular film should aim to create 'systematic knowledge', transfer science in a popular way to the wide masses. Its creation is of utmost difficulty, for it should combine

the pure scientific material with the easily perceived technical form. The separate category of a purely scientific film is of interest only to narrow specialists (ibid.).

This is the second category of scientific-popular film that Prof. N. Iakovlev sees as the main realm of the ethnographic knowledge production. Objects of ethnographic filmography proper can include *pagan prayers, medieval rituals of blood feud reconciliation, religious dances, weddings with pantomimes of dances, and so on* – ‘phenomena which we are now, at the turning point of the old way of life, perhaps witnessing for the last time’ (1927, 11). Their documentation is even more important, because they present vestige of the past, a curiosity, which should inevitably die out soon given the logic of the historical materialism, and as Prof. B. Sokolov¹⁰ argues, due to ‘the great and heroic work carried out by the workers’ government to raise the culture and welfare of the *most backward ethnic groups*, whose development had been stifled by former Russian imperialist oppression’ (1927, 12; highlighting mine).

The main recipient for such films is the ‘broad working-class and peasant audience’, who are now offered the opportunity to become acquainted with the ‘true labour life of the peoples of the Soviet Union’ (Veremienko 1927, 14). While this acquaintance is framed as mutual, the positions of the viewers and the viewed differ significantly. The societal development of the working class and peasants is portrayed as superior, owing to the Bolsheviks’ already undertaken efforts to elevate the masses. In contrast, the ethnic groups depicted, with their *peculiar labour life* (ibid.), are still seen as underdeveloped. As a result, they are portrayed as exotic objects rather than progressive subjects within the discourse of colonisation. The gaze on these peoples and the subsequent production of ethnographic knowledge closely aligns with what Donna Haraway describes as the ‘god trick’ (1988, 582) – the self-affirming ‘standpoint of the master, the Man, the One God’ (ibid., 587) – and is anything but equal.

III.3.7. Siberia as Tabula Rasa

Within Soviet discourse, one topic of Siberian representation is recurring and pervasive throughout decades, and that is of a mythical landscape whose history is fluid, can be rewritten or wiped off altogether, with the new developments, most often taking visual representations of active construction activity, new settlements, conversing river-beds and changing the environment to the unprecedented level, take primacy over the previously existing forms, as if they never were, and so re-establish a foothold over time and memory. In such a way, Siberia steps forth again and again as a denominative tabula rasa.

¹⁰ The then Director of the Central Museum of Peoples’ Study in Moscow.

Starting from the 1930s, the concept of ‘uninhabited’, *other* Soviet territories as blank slates, of which Siberia is prominent but not the only one, yet perhaps consistently keeping its attributes of uninhabitableness for a longer period, is supported by the images of cities constructed on an empty space, whereas pre-existence of geographical and architectural forms is radically rejected (Bulgakowa 2003, 75-6). Not only construction space is void and empty, the portrayed builders of the new future are also young, ideological neophytes, unable to possess any memory of the past and not willing to carry this historical burden. Such are the prototypes of Aleksandr Dovzhenko’s film *Frontier (Aerograd)* (1935), Sergey Gerasimov’s *City of Youth (Komsomolsk)* (1938), and Vladimir Petrov’s two parts of *The Conquests of Peter the Great* (1937, 1939), in which Peter built St. Petersburg on nothing but a swamp (ibid.). And such will be the future builders of BAM four decades later.

The argument of not differentiating between different Soviet territories possessing the qualities of *otherness* and attributed to the vague definition of the immense and boundless *North* can be best supported by the analysis of the visual representation of mastering the Arctic as an ultimate *tabula rasa*. John McCannon quotes the words of Norway’s polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen, who called Siberia and the Russian North ‘the land of tomorrow’ (2003, 250-1), and then conducts a parallel in positing the Arctic as the northernmost extension of this promised land. Indeed, the geographical boundaries of Siberia are overwhelming and restricted only by imagination, and the pictures of Siberian Arctic eagerly suggest utmost harshness, ice and cold. Popular culture of the 1930s had a part in creation of this image by depicting the Arctic as the void occupied only by ice and snow, as McCannon calls it, ‘the vast polar expanses served as the perfect blank slate’ (2003, 251), out of which cities of concrete and steel emerged as a result of the first five-year plan; imaginary somethingness created out of nothingness. Similar pictures will be reused in the later poster images of BAM construction, with a brave male figure carrying a necessary engineering equipment and conquering the elements against the background of a snow void (fig. 21).

In adhering to the philosophical concept of the void space, Soviet ideological practice paradoxically contradicts its own Marxist historical materialist foundations. Marxism asserts historical continuity in the development of all previous eras and demands that historical periods be analysed through a framework that establishes inevitable connections between them. From this perspective, the Arctic and Siberia should be viewed as evolving landscapes with distinct material histories. However, instead of recognising this continuity, Soviet ideology, in its contradictions and on the specific example of treating Siberia as *tabula rasa*, implicitly invokes ‘*creatio ex nihilo*’ narrative and unequivocally rejects ‘*creatio ex materia*’ theoretical approach.

IV. Image of BAM for Outsiders

IV.1. Constructing BAM Chronotope

To understand how a mere project of constructing a railway, albeit in harsh conditions and of an unprecedented scale, acquired such powerful qualities to attract huge voluntary masses of people, it is necessary to enter the realm of the imagination, the magical powers of which are well studied in social and cultural anthropology. Arjun Appadurai calls imagination ‘the fuel for action’ and attributes to it titanic changes in mass conscience and movement of human masses (1998, 7).

It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape (ibid.)

Referring to modern world examples, Appadurai makes ‘routine imagining of the possibilities’ responsible for the scaled-up rates of migration, emergence of refugee camps with an expectation of transiting to a better life elsewhere in a different part of the world, while appropriating imagined behaviour patterns of Rambo-like role models (1998, 6-7). Not only imagining, but living in one’s dream, believing in it, trying with all one’s heart to realise it, spurning the contemptible and dull reality, worshipping an idea in one’s mind with all possible rapture and religious zeal, which could formerly be considered a certain reality loss probability, has now become a guideline and a reference point for modern culture. Appadurai claims the qualitative turn of imaginative power in the globalised world with all its inherent characteristics of free and fast movement, and diffused borders, at least mentally. Yet – and here I differ from Appadurai – in a conceptually opposite, closed Soviet society with limited opportunities of self-actualisation and movement up and beyond taking place only within strictly approved ideological confines, imagination could and did present the same all-purpose vehicle for action, which became even more important as one of the few available tools of imaginary escape from the otherwise joyless and controlled reality.

Therefore, the question for further analysis and of particular interest to this study is by what means the imagination was at work during BAM railway construction and how the construction of a persistent formal narrative led to a concentrated final visual image that epitomised that narrative in the single picture. Here I would like to turn to the concept of *chronotope* developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in literary criticism (1975¹¹) and extend it to the analysis of a narrative in images.

¹¹ Bakhtin wrote the original essay ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’ in 1937-1938 and added the final remarks in 1973. The essay appeared in the collection of his works ‘Voprosy literatury i estetiki’

IV.1.1. Marking BAM-Time through Bakhtinian Framework of Chronotope

Bakhtin brings the term ‘chronotope’ (literally, ‘time space’), which originated from Einstein’s theory of relativity, into literature to analyse the meaningful interconnection of temporal and spatial relations in the novel (1975, 234). Despite the inseparability of spatial and temporal signs in the artistic chronotope, Bakhtin argues that time is of paramount importance, since it is time that thickens, becomes denser and artistically visible, whereas space intensifies and is involved in the movement of time, plot, or history as a background. The signs of time are revealed in space, and space is comprehended and measured by time (ibid., 235). In his analysis of the types of novel chronotopes, Bakhtin distinguishes the signs of time over the signs of space and classifies chronotopes according to temporal characteristics. Following Bakhtin’s analysis, I shall appropriate this approach to examine the temporal characteristics (*chronos*) of the BAM narrative as an artistic chronotope, while the second constituent of this concept (*topos*) will be analysed through the cultural theories of space.

Without attempting to engage in literary analysis of the types of novel chronotopes presented by Bakhtin, one cannot fail to note the striking parallel of the constructed narrative of the Baikal-Amur Mainline with the fundamental plot archetypes, the analysis of which, given the literature-centric character of the Soviet society, might be of special interest. With some ideological and geographical adjustments, the chronotope of BAM most closely relates to the one of the Greek romance, or the ‘adventure novel of ordeal’, set in *adventure-time* (1981, 86-7). Bakhtin deduces the enduring nature of this type of time based on the similarity of the plots and elements involved, which, starting from ancient times, turned out to be flexible, but stable enough to live without major changes through modern times, at least until the 1970s, when the author finished his essay and, coincidentally, the BAM construction started.

BAM chronotope consists of an *adventure-destination* of Siberia, where Komsomol boys and girls, in other words, young people of matrimonial age, Soviet-style virtuous and attractive, depart to the festival of *labour*. The inherent obstacles are overcome through thorns on the way to the bright future. At different development stages of the BAM narrative, we see first the departure point, an anticipation of the adventure and visualisation of an ordeal cum feat of labour, i.e. entanglement of a plot, then the process of overcoming obstacles and prove of oneself, through which aspired features of a character build up and crystalise, i.e. development

[Questions of literature and aesthetics] in 1975. Throughout the text, I am referring mainly to the Russian-language original text, with the exception of quotations translated into English and established terms in English-language translation, for which purposes I am providing references to the same essay included in the volume ‘The Dialogic Imagination’ (1981) edited by Michael Holquist and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist.

of the plot; and finally, the desired result or the final point, be it erection of the city of dreams, starting a family, or final subjugation of nature.

In condensed image lexemes, the narrative can take the following form. Departure point, or entanglement, looks like a symbolic railway running to the horizon through the indeterminate but cleanly attractive landscape of eternal snow and schematic mountains (fig. 20). Applied colour palette is clean, light and discreetly festive: white stands for snow, cold and chastity as well as glorification of high ordeal, red signifies the communist ideology, and blue alludes to the slightly menacing yet indistinct surrounding which is to be further discovered and conquered. The way lies in the blue unknown, above which there is a promise of happiness both in the form of a red star as an ideological victory and, more gently, a resemblance of Aurora Borealis, promising wonders of the northern nature. The image is concluded by a shiny icy inscription above on the darker backdrop, 'Into the silence of Siberia, your courage, Komsomol, will pave a new path.' The appeal is directed to VLKSM, the abbreviation for All-Union Leninist Communist Youth League, whose name stands out in big red letters below at the front.

The middle part of the narrative, and namely forging metaphorical victory over hostile elements and at the same time carving out a character of a real person, citizen and ideological entity in defiance of undergone hardships, is portrayed by a figure of a man in heavy winter clothes and with working instruments in hand in a blizzard (fig. 21). The contours of all objects, including the man's body, face and the instruments are diffused, which should signify the struggling movement into the snowstorm against blasts but with determination and consciousness of his call of duty. The reference to the construction of a railway is indicated by a steel track of a railway in vertical section and heavy land-surveying instruments of the man that he carries on his shoulder. Colours are sombre and austere staying on the grey-brown-black palette. The inscription in geometric small uppercase font below at the front exclaims that BAM is a path of courage.

Finally, the narrative conclusion can take several forms, one example of which is the combination of both societal and personal achievements (fig. 22). On a three-layer vertical plan, the lower half of the image is taken by a young family couple of BAM builders in construction helmets and in what can be described both as civilian as well as clean working clothes, depending on the surrounding context. Between them, in the middle of a loving family embrace, there lies an infant with an open face and inspired look. Instead of a helmet, the child wears a resemblance of a kokoshnik, a woman's headdress in old Russia.



Figure 20: Poster 'Komsomol' by I. E. Shelepov, 1979.



Figure 21: Poster 'BAM – Path of Courage' by A. B. Iakushin, 1980.

Thus, the image seems to draw a parallel between the (ab)original traditions that are cared for and loved, but, presented as an attribute of an infant, they must give way to a more mature modernity in the form of a working helmet once the infancy stage of the new-born personality is over. The upper part of the poster is dedicated to representation of societal achievements as a result of group efforts. From the end of the child's kokoshnik starts the vertical axis, along which high-rise housing is erected. There, where the building is being constructed, the nature recedes, as if running from the coming train, enveloped in its steam. The buildings both in the middle and the upper layer seem almost finished, but the presence of the building cranes at the background suggests either work in progress or continuing development of space. Corroborating the idea of constant space conquering as the ultimate goal, the upper layer is adorned by the rainbow-like hemisphere, diagonally from which an airplane and a helicopter sky-rocket. Within the inhabited hemisphere, there is an addition of fuming factory chimneys. The inscription above elucidates transformational changes as 'the ancient land is getting younger', metaphorically alluding to both the new-born generation of Soviet citizens, potential BAM builders, and rejuvenation, modernisation of a territory, the designation of which as ancient also implies backwardness. The battle against this backwardness suggests constructing new modern buildings and conquering the environment.



Figure 22: Poster '...The Ancient Land is Getting Younger!' by O. A. Ulanov, 1979.

At all stages of the development of the narrative, the space itself is not defined in detail, it is given only in general terms, the particular features of which are of no importance, for example, eternal snow, conceptual mountains, a symbolic forest. Defining the interchangeability of space in the Greek romance, Bakhtin notes, 'The nature of a given place does not figure as a component in an event; the place figures in solely as a naked, abstract expanse of space' (1981, 100).

Unlike space, the adventure-time of the BAM chronotope has a distinct characteristic; it is clearly defined by a striving forward and upward toward the future. Time is always in movement, it is *buzzing* of impatience, it does not wait, it speeds like a train and flies high like a rocket (fig. 23). BAM-time has a visual representation of a linear impetuous motion, and a-going it acquires a faculty of being seen through space. Two shiny rails laid above green sleepers meet under sharp angle to transform to the projections of clock hands. Within this accelerating movement, even surrounding atmosphere heats up changing colours from deep green to a warmer orange and finally becoming burning red. The reproduced traffic signalisation at green light gives start to a motion of time, which at the same time is the start of the railway laying, while orange signals of the approaching towards the final goal and alerts of the forthcoming arrival, whereas the end of the path at red also means reaching the ultimate goal. The end of time and arrival at the final destination is represented by a shiny red star and symbolises not only finalisation of the railway construction, but equally final reaching of communism as an ultimate ideological goal.

The visualisation of BAM-time is additionally underscored by paronomastic play on words: BAM as an abbreviation of Baikal-Amur Mainline and 'bam' as a beating sound that the clock produces when measuring time. The inscription on the poster 'Do you hear? Time is buzzing – BAM!' adds an acoustic level to the now acutely perceived and recognised importance of life time. However, movement of time begins only with the decision to go on this journey, metaphorically to board the train.

Bakhtin speaks of the chronotope of threshold with a high emotional load and value intensity, which can be connected with the motive of a meeting, but its primary embodiment is the chronotope of a crisis or a life turning point (1975, 397). The decision to go to a construction site in Siberia is precisely that fateful turn after which the life of a Soviet individual takes on colour and time begins to move. Before it, time may not even exist, it is static, grey and mundane. After this decision, time is visualised and is keenly lived, and rushes forward at full speed. The chronotope of BAM can thus be characterised as adventure-time and threshold, serving as watershed in an individual's life existence.

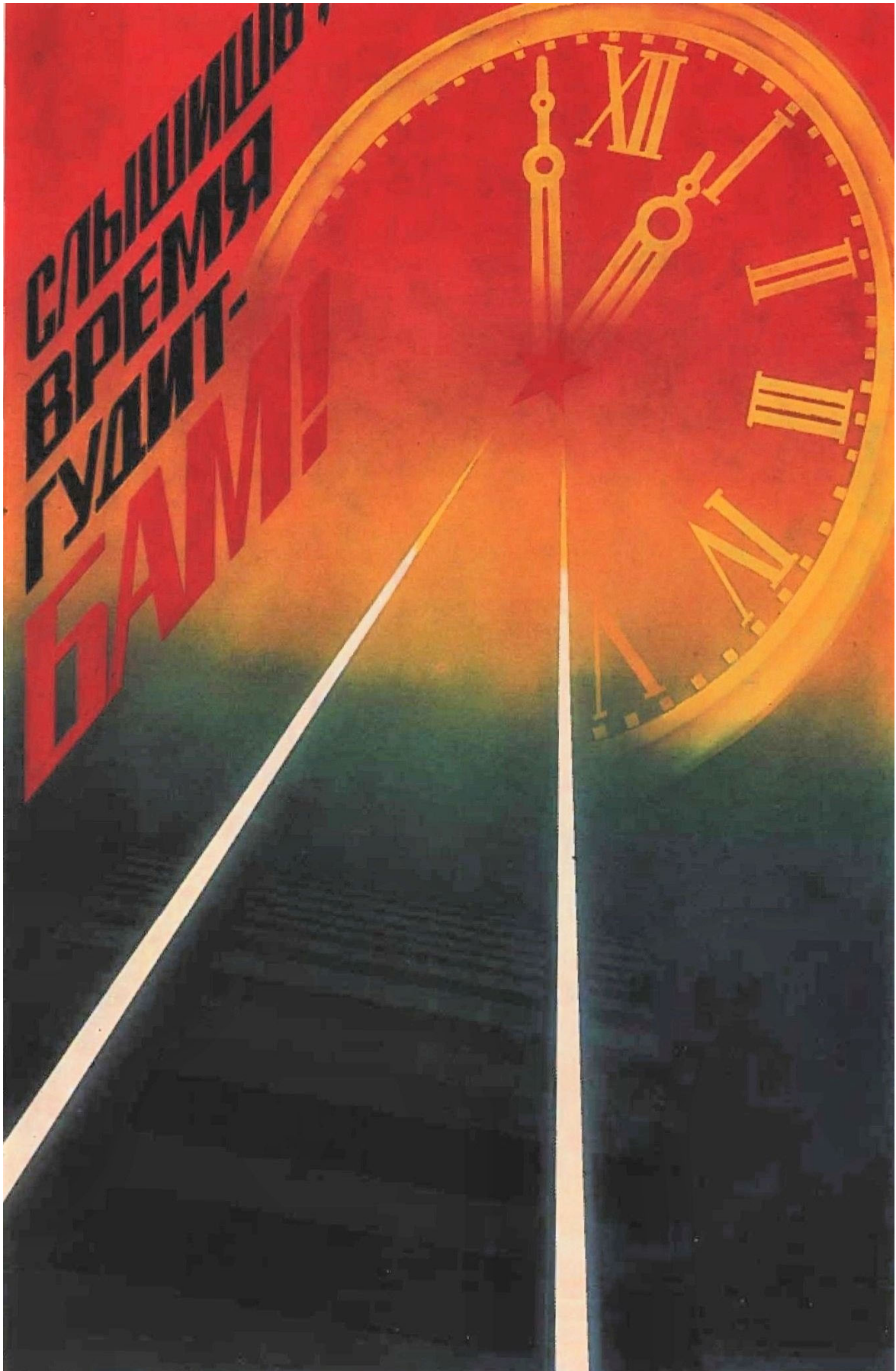


Figure 23: Poster 'Do You Hear, Time is Buzzing – BAM!' by L. I. Petrushin, 1979.

IV.1.2. Mapping BAM-Space through Foucauldian Theories of Space

Contributing to Bakhtin's theory of chronotope, even though not directly in dialogue with him, Michel Foucault (1997, 350) argues that the 20th century was the era built upon simultaneous living of seemingly juxtaposed spaces: the near and the far, the side by side and the scattered. Foucault sees a relation between space and time as a certain ideological conflict based on the controversies between, what he enigmatically calls, 'pious descendants of time and tenacious inhabitants of space' (ibid.). Unlike Bakhtin, he is much more concerned with space than time, and therefore his theories of space can be best used to analyse the topos in the philosophical concept of the chronotope.

Contemporary space, according to Foucault, has not completely lost its sacred characteristics, and the contrasting opposition of space can still exist, albeit on the phenomenological level: that of the utilitarian space and the one of imagination.

The space of our primary perception, of our dreams and of our passions, holds within itself almost intrinsic qualities: it is light, ethereal, transparent, or dark, uneven, cluttered. Again, it is a space of height, of peaks, or on the contrary, of the depths of mud; space that flows, like spring water, or fixed space, like stone or crystal (1997, 351).

It is as if Foucault were to symbolically describe the visualisation of the dream space of BAM (fig. 24), this light space of flight of ideas rushing like a train at full speed into the space of peaks and mountains, rapid streams and dark forests that need to be overcome and broken through. An imaginary movement into this space is both forward and upward. In contrast to the heterogeneous real space in which a Soviet individual would find themselves with different colours, specific set of relationships, and life routines, an imaginary space of BAM is stereotypically homogenous. Its landscape always possesses a railroad, a forest, a river, and some attribute of physical work. Its connotative meaning, in contrast to the daily routine, necessarily implies longing for adventure, overcoming obstacles, physical and spiritual breakthrough. It calls for a specific type of personalities, adventurous, enthusiastic, inspired, but also agreeably attractive and young. Existence of this space is simultaneous with the living of a real space, and this trip to a dream can be made at any moment.

The homogeneity of the imaginary space of BAM is related to its utopian characteristics, since utopia does not exist in real space, and its relationship with the real space of society has a direct or inverse analogy. Utopias are intended to represent either a completely perfect society or its opposite, and since no one has ever seen it before, it may not exactly relate to reality (Foucault 1997, 352).



Figure 24: Poster 'Forward, Fly!' by A. B. Arsen'iev, 1979.

However, BAM space is different from a typical utopia, which is situated in unknown places, because in contrast to them, it has a specific and reachable location. It thus matches what Foucault describes as *heterotopia*, 'effectively realized utopia, in which all the real

arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and at the same time represented, challenged, and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable' (ibid.). By effective realisation, Foucault means exact places that have acquired different, at times shifting, meaning and have stayed in both mythical and real dispute to the real living space. The existence of heterotopias can be structurally analysed through a systematic description of what Foucault calls heterotopology (ibid., 353-6), and I shall follow his steps and apply its principles to the claimed heterotopia of BAM.

Firstly, heterotopias are present in all societies and cultures, and Soviet society should therefore be regarded as no exception. The first known heterotopias in the so-called primitive societies were those of crisis, which were meant as privileged, sacred or forbidden places where individuals who found themselves, or were found by the society to be, in crisis would depart, for example, youth in the process of coming of age, women in menstruation or labour, or group members of old age. These heterotopias of crisis have gradually given way to the heterotopias of deviance, which were meant for members of society who happen to be in state of diverging from usual or accepted standards, especially in social behaviour. From this perspective, Siberia has been heterotopia of deviance since at least the end of the 16th century, to which the disgraced boyars and later convicts were sent into exile as a severe punishment intended to rectify their behaviour.

Secondly, existing heterotopias never vanish, but can change their meaning, which has been accepted by society until now, while they receive another function. Thus, over time, the heterotopia of Siberia also acquired the meaning of a land of inexhaustible wealth and the boundless possibilities associated with it, but unattainable under the protection of a harsh climate and all-conquering nature.

Thirdly, the heterotopia can bring together two contrasting spaces, images, or ideas in one place, placing them together but emphasising the differences between them. That is, the heterotopia of Siberia becomes a place of punishment and self-overcoming, where you are sent into exile and where you go voluntarily as an adventure to prove yourself, but from which, if you survive and endure the test, you emerge a better person and a more useful member of society.

Fourthly, heterotopias are associated with the flow and subsequent disruption of real time, which Foucault defines as 'a pure symmetry of heterochronisms' (1997, 354). In this regard, Brezhnev's political programme of the 1970s and the logic of the development of late socialism create the heterotopia of the Baikal-Amur Mainline as a separate heterotopia, which is based on the existing and long-established heterotopia of Siberia. With heterochronism comes

the additional meaning of youth, a high but voluntary ordeal, the construction of the future, and the glory associated with it.

Fifthly, heterotopias represent an isolated system of entering and exiting, or opening and closing, but at the same time they are penetrable. Usually, no one enters the heterotopia of their own free will, which is true of the heterotopia of Siberia as a place of exile, condemnation, and possible death. On the other hand, the heterotopia of BAM is supposedly open to everyone, and entry into it is not only voluntary but also desirable. However, acceptance into the heterotopia of BAM is not unconditional, and there are criteria for entry, even physical ones, since the heterotopia is open if not exclusively, then primarily to the young, the brave, and the hard-working. If another type tries to enter it, they will either have to undergo a purification process (acquire the necessary criteria, such as courage and hard work), or they will not exit (perish due to lack of strength).

Finally, the heterotopia seems to acquire a function between two opposite poles. On the one hand, it has the task of creating a space of illusion, which nevertheless convinces us that the real living space with all its locations is even more illusory. On the other hand, by opposing the imperfection, the bad concept and the disorder of the real space, heterotopian space becomes a space of compensation.

Foucault regards ships as heterotopias *par excellence*, for ‘it is a floating part of space, a placeless place, that lives by itself, closed in on itself and at the same time poised in the infinite ocean, and yet, from port to port, [...] it goes as far as the colonies, looking for the most precious things hidden in their gardens’ (1997, 356). I shall draw a bold parallel here and claim that what the heterotopia of the ship represented for an empire with colonies, the heterotopia of the train and, even more, the construction of a railway in the existing heterotopia of Siberia, considered as a colony, represented for the Soviet Union: the heterotopia *par excellence* of a moving part of space, placed in the endless expanses of wild nature, and striving for a better future.

Accordingly, the heterotopia of BAM seems to have achieved communist ideals, at least in terms of the desire to eventually move to a classless communist society, since the hierarchical set of relations that inevitably determined the position of Soviet people in the real living space is absent there due to the general imaginary equality. The individuals represented are either alone in the image with their inner world of ideas and a high sense of duty, or in a surprisingly unanimous, literally identical group (fig. 25). On the declarative poster ‘BAM – the Path of Courage and Glory!’ a group of three men in red, presumably young, judging by their postures and hairstyles, synchronously salute a large red star that rises at the narrow higher end of the mainline, marking the arrival of a new era after the completion of construction and the laying

of the railway into the future. The inscription testifies to the fact that this group of men not only resemble each other in appearance, but also have unifying personal qualities, namely courage, which will be rewarded with glory. The differentiation of the group members on the BAM posters is possible only in the context of gender differences for successful starting a family, getting married, and having a child.

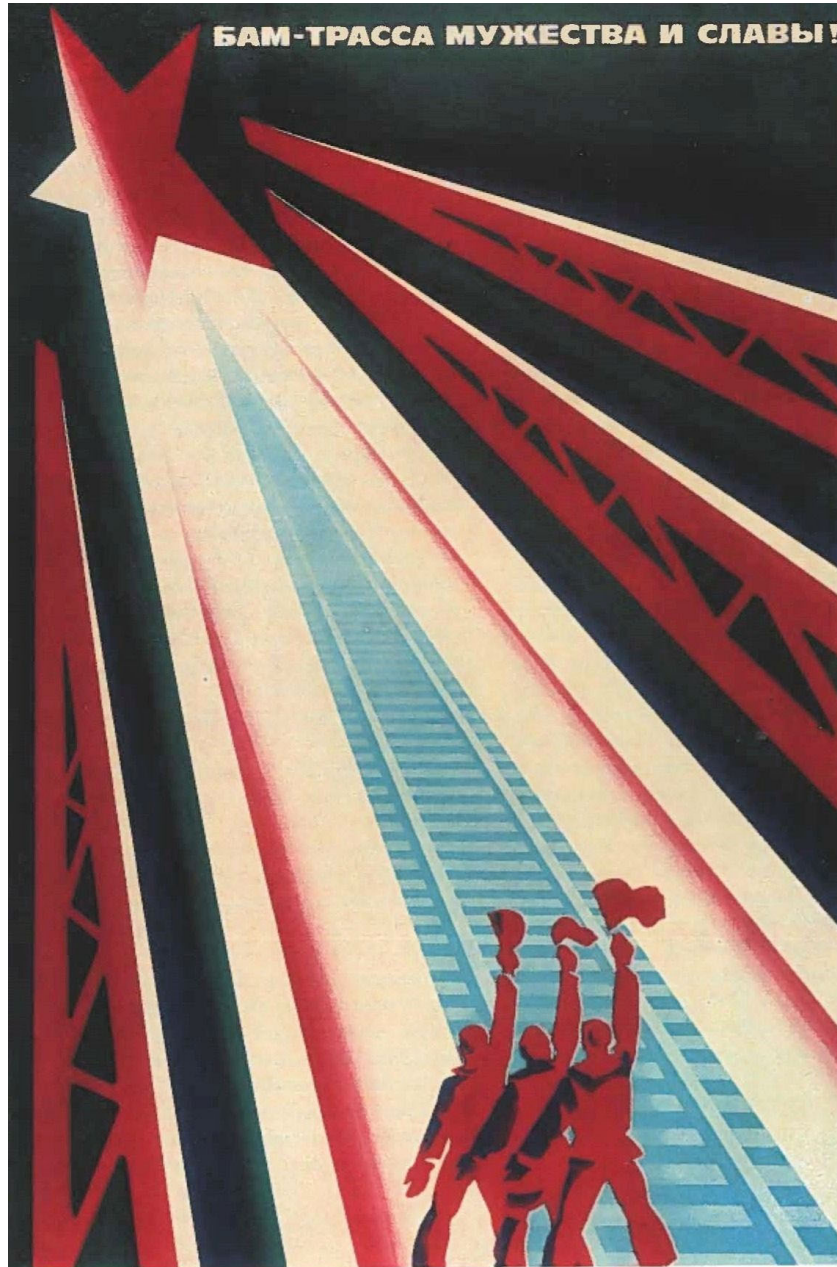


Figure 25: Poster 'BAM – the Path of Courage and Glory!' by N. L. Pavlov, 1979.

The railway itself in this space is an arrangement of transition to the utopian societal goal (cf. Foucault 1997, 352). It does not stop nor even temporarily halt and apparently does not provide for any need to interact with the real living space, which in this place is empty until a new one is created, in accordance with the ideals of heterotopia. The train on a railway will only stop when it has reached the final destination.

IV.2. Key Themes in BAM Posters

The representation of BAM-space through an all-encompassing, imposed ideological vision creates, in its overarching character, a visual totality that manifests as a solid-cast monumentality of meaning. In his seminal work ‘The Production of Space’ (1997), Henri Lefebvre argues that *monumentality* permeates all dimensions of *spatiality*: the lived, the perceived, and the conceived. Such organisation of space follows the purposes of the space use: the first level is that of affective, bodily, lived experience; the second level concerns the perceived, socio-political signification; and the third level is the level of the conceived, “where the dissemination of the written word and of knowledge welds the members of the society into a ‘consensus’, and in doing so confers upon them the status of ‘subjects’” (ibid., 142).

Monumental space can shift freely between all three levels, depending on the form of representation – from private visual expressions in everyday imagery, through public forms in architecture and urban design, to the ideological and symbolic use of space in propaganda posters. The analysis of how space is represented in images can thus relate to the third, conceptual level, when it is ideologically envisioned and then translated into the perceived level by the target viewers, who, in turn, may physically experience the same space in different ways.

Social space – comprising social practices and the social relations of production, work, and non-work – brought into being through the wholehearted participation of each subject, encompasses all the levels mentioned (ibid., 139, 142). According to Lefebvre, it can only function under the conditions of the generally accepted Power and, equally, of the generally accepted Wisdom (ibid., 139). However, in the case of the mythologised conquest of Siberia and the subsequent construction of BAM-space, it remains open to question whether this imposed Power and accompanying socialist Wisdom were truly accepted by all. It could be further argued that those rendered powerless – cast in the role of the conquered and subjugated – be it aboriginal people or elements of nature – were perhaps not afforded the possibility of genuine acceptance, but rather found themselves forced into submission under the ideological framework of Soviet monumentality.

Lefebvre argues that no space remains innocent before it is developed, as it inevitably responds to particular tactics and strategies (ibid., 144). Although he refers primarily to the dominant capitalist mode of production and its governing body embodied by the bourgeoisie, any political regime of dominance in possession of power, knowledge, and resources to cultivate and transform space will exhibit the same *modus operandi*, be it capitalist or socialist. Similarly, a space-transforming actor – whether an architect, as in Lefebvre’s examples, or a builder or engineer, as within the BAM discourse – plays the role of a demiurge: a designer and

visionary of future space. These actors are driven by the will to power and endurance of their creations and transform once ‘blank’ space into an inhabited, living one, at the same time following ideological foundations underlying political power and knowledge (ibid., 142). However, they do not operate with a virgin sheet of paper either, for there, in architect’s or engineer’s eyes, a space undergoes reduction to blueprints. Continuing Lefebvre’s analogy, a space that has not been seen or lived but needs to be visualised is likewise reduced, in the artist’s eyes, to the world of images, which then become the enemy of imagination.

In analysing monumental space so produced, Lefebvre warns against excessive semiotic categorisation (codifying) and the search for fixed symbolic explanations (1997, 140):

A monumental work, like a musical one, does not have a ‘signified’ (or ‘signifieds’); rather, it has a *horizon of meaning* [italics in the original]: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which now one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore, by means of – and for the sake of – a particular action. The social and political operation of a monumental work traverses the various ‘systems’ and ‘subsystems’, or codes and subcodes, which constitute and found the society concerned. But it also surpasses such codes and subcodes, and implies a ‘supercoding’, in that it tends towards the all-embracing presence of the totality.

While attempting to analyse all the potential meanings of a single poster through semiotic analysis, some of these meanings will inevitably be overlooked or subjectively left behind. Therefore, to fully grasp the totality of the produced propaganda art, I shall elevate the analysis to a higher level and apply a thematic approach to examine the BAM poster art as a whole. This approach will serve as a means to analyse the ideological ‘supercoding’.

IV.2.1. The Archetypal Soviet Individual as a BAM Builder

The Soviet political poster has constructed the desired image of a *new person* – an exemplary Soviet citizen – since the 1917 revolution and continued its constant reproduction, with adjustment to the then current historical developments and political exigencies, throughout the whole twentieth century, invariably dictating fixed role standards for a representative of the Soviet ideological collective. A ‘human image’ so constructed was reduced in its predestination to its primary socio-economic usefulness and was fundamentally deprived of any individual emotions and needs apart from the inherent desire for work, struggle, or defence (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 137). The oxymoron of a *freed* person who was neither emancipated nor functionless consolidated in the autopoiesis of an ideological system which first introduced characteristics-cum-codes to define this new ‘person’ and then presented them as a desired result of both the future utopia and of the present (already existing) reality, negating any non-

desirable divergencies as non-existing, and serving as a self-referential circle of fixed images (ibid.).

Soviet representatives of different social roles could therefore be easily recognised by universal anthropological features, allocated according to the executed profession or designation and executed with temporal differences depending on a specific decade of the Soviet historical period. The consistent representation of the worker, the farmer, or the soldier allows to define their phenotype and, at the same time, reduce their parsing to a few differential signs. To give an example of a typical proletariat, in the 1920s this would be a man of an indefinite nationality (on a Russian Soviet poster) of appr. 30 to 40 years old, muscular and with naked arms, without a beard, having an obligatory attribute in the form of a steel worker's apron and dressed in dark trousers (ibid., 139). The farmer of the same historical period would be some 10 years older, with a beard, dressed in a long shirt engirdled at the waist, and light thinly-stripped trousers, with bast-shoes on his feet. The attributes of the professional designation and the background at which the human image is located (factory-furnished chimneys, a combine harvester, or a rifle) remain the main reference points to locate a Soviet citizen to one or another social group.

No different in its primary goal-setting is the poster cluster dedicated to BAM construction, for it not only constructs the image of the brand new professional designation – *the BAM builder* – and serves as an advertisement campaign to 'try on' and appropriate the excitingly fresh life role, but also fundamentally fixates the image of the *ideal* BAM builder as an already existing ideologically desirable and socially accepted character.

The difference of BAM poster campaign in comparison to the previous Soviet political poster approaches lies in departure from defining specific anthropological features uniting people of the same profession towards the inner ideological motivation to execute it – the BAM *spirit*.

Soviet individuals, though visually united in their demonstratively enthusiastic looks and spirit, seem to have different motivation to approach BAM heterotopia according to **gender** differences. If the promotion of the BAM space as a place for courageous people doing a *real job* concerns, first and foremost, men, the romantic line seems to be the main incentive offered for women to embark on this adventure. The images of individual women on BAM posters are few, which can be explained by the gender bias of the poster artists themselves, who were, with few exceptions, predominantly male, and by the need to provide an ideologically and socially acceptable motivation for women going to the construction site in the Siberian wilderness. Thus, the only female poster artist Lidiia Golovkova, of those identified who drew BAM posters

for either of the two BAM art exhibitions, suggests youth as a unifying factor for both genders (fig. 26).



Figure 26: Poster 'BAM Build the Young!' by L. A. Golovkova, 1979.

The heroine on the poster has an open, smiling face looking straight at the viewer. She is wearing a red working helmet and swamp-coloured working clothes. These two colours of different shades occupy most of the image, the red standing for the ideological directedness, which paves the bright and confident way through the green vastness of impassable taiga and swamp, serving as a well-proportioned, elegant bridge and a high-flying building crane, both of which unite this wild territory to the civilised world.

The visual Soviet representation of the so presented dichotomy “culture/nature” can be analysed within the line of argument by Sherry Ortner in her groundbreaking article ‘Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?’ (1972). Drawing on the culture/nature opposition, Ortner defines men as ‘the “natural” proprietors of religion, ritual, politics, and other realms of cultural thought and action’ (ibid., 18) who are thus ‘identified with Culture in the old-fashioned sense’ and its derivatives (ibid., 19), and women as the direct associates of nature. The young female BAM worker represents nature even in the predominantly green colour palette, for her figure blends with the surrounding environment, whereas only the red helmet on her head signifies her commitment to the ideologically correct postulates and thus mediated association with culture.

The layout of the proclamation inscription on the poster, ‘BAM Build the Young!’ resembles the same line of thought as of her male companion on Arkadiy Arsen’iev’s poster, ‘Forward, Fly!’ (fig. 23), but if the man’s gaze is directed to the future, above and beyond, she looks with joy and anticipation at the bright present.

The helmet is not so much a working tool for the woman as an item of clothing, the equivalent of a proletarian lady’s hat, judging by the coquettish way she holds it by the brim. The created image does not give the impression of a hard physical or mental work and self-conquest, but rather of an attractive profession in an interesting place. We do not know what exactly she is doing on BAM construction, whether she is an engineer or a tunnel builder, since her profession does not matter much. This young, smiling face could equally well be imagined in a stewardess cap against the backdrop of an airplane and a runway, or in a circus costume with a tiger on a pedestal and a whip in her hands. If a man is the creator of a railway, which comes straight from his thoughts, first visualised in his ideas and then realised, she has both a railway bridge and a building crane behind her, in the backdrop. She does not live in the clouds, but in an exciting space, where there are many brave, austere but romantic young men of matrimonial age, with her place unequivocally located in the ‘domestic’ rather than ‘social’ domain (cf. Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974).

The example of one such young man of the appropriate age and looks participating in the BAM construction is visualised by the poster 'Siberia is the Youth of Our Country' (fig. 27).



Figure 27: Poster 'Siberia is the Youth of Our Country' by A. I. Teslik, 1983.

The image depicts a slender, agreeable, rollicking young man who either plans to embark on a folk dance (judging by the right arm tossed up in the air and the slightly bent posture to the side as if in the interrupted swift movement) or cordially greets someone with exuberantly lively gestures. His whole figure speaks of joy, healthy and carefree youth, and a devil-may-care attitude, if not for the open, smiling and typically 'socialist' face, which erases any hints of the socially deviant behaviour. The sailor's jacket looking out beneath his working overalls adds to the perception of joviality and draws a parallel with the equally romantic maritime occupation, thus justifying his unusually cheerful behaviour by the individual psychological type – he is an adventurer. However, he is a Soviet adventurer, and therefore, his helmet is securely attached with a strap beneath his chin, his clothes are neat and fit, and he is cleanly shaved, with allowance for the acceptable and then highly fashionable moustache.

The colour scheme is of greater contrast here than in comparison to the previous poster with the woman BAM builder, whereas the human male figure is maintained in distinct brown and cannot be mixed with any of the background elements in red, white and blue. The background elements themselves are strictly geometrical with clearly defined borders and angles, which underlines their man-made, technological provenance versus the fluid borders of the natural creation.

The technopolitan background against which the man is propelled shows the reformed Siberian space leaving nothing of the original swamps and taiga. This is an embodiment of the Soviet techno-culture reduced to symmetrical rows of factory chimneys, techno towers, and power dams. This young man arrived to the mere railway construction and successfully transformed the whole Siberian space; he salutes to his comrades, the whole Soviet populace and the party in a proud and ideologically justifiable enthusiasm as a space-transforming actor. His joy is thus understandable and enviable, not only because of his youth and health, but because of the importance of his actions to the greater Soviet whole.

Both images clearly define and anticipate the expected roles and place of each gender in this Soviet endeavour, and at the same time complement and oppose each other in their dichotomised values.

The BAM poster topic defining the archetype of a model BAMer does not limit itself only with the young strata of population, even though the main persuasive effect is apparently directed at youth. The necessity to attract seasoned railway and bridge builders and experienced engineers and architects generated ideological impetus to visualise these types of people working on BAM as well.

The representation of a middle-aged BAM professional can be summarised in the poster 'Forward, Mainline!' (fig. 28).



Figure 28: Poster 'Forward, Mainline!' by N. S. Babin, 1979.

This is typically a man of around 30 to 40 years, with the average build of middle age – heavier than a younger man, perhaps, but also more grounded and dependable. He stands confidently, his hands resting assuredly on his hips, with the composed, no-nonsense expression of someone in control of his actions and accountable to himself. Were it not for the accompanying visual clues revealing his profession, one might take him for the proud owner of a prosperous farmstead. Yet, in the context of the USSR where all private ownership was abolished – or, to put it ideologically correctly, where all land and resources were considered the collective property of the people – every Soviet citizen could, at least in communist theory, regard everything on the land, in the sky, or beneath the surface as their own.

The professional association with the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline is conveyed through several visual elements: the thick, warm work clothes, gloves, pullover, and winter cap, all of which – combined with the bluish-white cold colour palette – indicate that the work is taking place in the northern regions; the welding shield, which signifies the worker's profession; and the soaring pontoon bridge in the background, situating the scene in a specific environment. The inscription 'Forward, Mainline!' leaves no doubt as to which construction project is being referenced.

The font and placement of the inscription resemble the opening station break of Soviet television news – a setting in which this typical representative of the BAM working class might well have appeared as a prominent guest star. The poster thus functions as a potential still from such a TV segment promoting the BAM construction project.

It is impossible to determine with certainty how effective posters alone were in mobilising Soviet citizens to join the endeavour, but the impact of another visual medium – television – was both ubiquitous and highly persuasive. A BAM veteran woman whom I interviewed in 2018 recalled leaving the sunny Black Sea resort of Sochi – widely considered one of the most desirable places to live in the USSR – after seeing a television reel featuring a young woman in Siberia contributing to the 'construction of the century'. The persuasive force of that visual image, together with the imagination it stirred and the socially endorsed narrative it supported, proved decisive.

The interviewed BAMer was young when she saw the television reel, and the woman featured on screen was also young – a visual and emotional association that facilitated identification and self-projection. On BAM posters, however, not only are women represented far less frequently overall, but those who do appear are almost exclusively depicted as youthful. This visual pattern suggests that only young women were imagined – and ideologically framed – as suitable participants in the Siberian construction project, regardless of whether this

reflected the actual demographic reality. The narrative implied that, once these women arrived and moved beyond the blossoming age of youth – often marked by childbirth – they would symbolically and practically transition into the ‘domestic’ sphere, belonging to the ‘social’ domain only temporarily and conditionally. While the young father from Ulanov’s poster ‘...The Ancient Land is Getting Younger!’ (fig. 22) could plausibly evolve into the figure shown in Babin’s ‘Forward, Mainline!’ (fig. 28), she, by contrast, remains confined to her primarily prescribed domestic role – not necessarily of only a mother, yet, with no visual or narrative path of professional progression beyond it.

Even though the archetypal image of a BAM builder does not exceed the middle **age** even for men, the BAM poster topic freely envisions a new generation of potential builders, effectively laying the ideological foundations for generational continuity. The children born to the BAM builders while at home from their duty trips, judging from the envelope with a letter coming from home (fig. 29), or on the BAM itself – at least the boys – are implicitly offered the prospect of a glorious future as road builders, following in their fathers’ professional footsteps.

The childlike picture on the poster ‘And I Will Build Roads’, framed within an already reduced poster symbolic representation, schematically includes all the main elements comprising the signified concept of the BAM construction and simplifies the essence of the project to the limit. Its constituent signifiers are images of rails, a waggon, a fir tree, and a self-envisioned young builder in a helmet signed ‘BAM’, above which there is the smiling sun as a perennial symbol of progress, light and happiness.

The more mature representation of BAM reality around the child’s picture depicts darker colours – it is unclear whether the surrounding darkness comes from the time of the day, the northern polar night, or the ‘darkness’ of the yet unassimilated territory, through which the train as the beam of sun and conductor of culture is still to be laid. Taiga has not lost its thickness nor been reduced to a single decorative tree yet, and the only source of light and hope emanates from the child’s vision of the coming future, in which this child intends to partake.

As in the early Soviet political posters of the 1920s, which simultaneously proclaimed the anticipated results of the October Revolution while depicting the promised welfare society as already present (cf. Waschik, Baburina 2003, 110), the BAM representation on posters from the same period shows an interesting temporal divergence. BAM is visually constructed as already completed – and thus at least mentally fully realised – and as a project still awaiting construction. In the case of BAM, however, the suggestion that its construction would continue into the next generation – with the children of BAM builders portrayed as future participants –

casts a new light on the perceived duration of the so-called 'construction of the century'. In retrospect, this vision proved not entirely unfounded.



Figure 29: Poster 'And I Will Build Roads' by G. D. Koptsov, 1979.

IV.2.2. Building Soviet Economy

A separate cluster within the Soviet propaganda picture-book dedicated to the Baikal-Amur Mainline focuses on the depiction of labour itself – ranging from general praise of its authentic character, through the affirmation of its economic necessity and social value, to the visualisation of specific job responsibilities and the projection of expected results. This thematic group can be divided into two distinct temporal layers, which correspond to the symbolic watershed of meaning marked by the two major BAM art exhibitions: *We Are Building BAM* (1979) and *From the Artists of Soviet Russia to BAM* (1984–1985)¹².

The visual inception narrative of the labour theme, presented at the first BAM art exhibition, features male figures engaged in the physical act of laying rails – either through a rough, undefined void (fig. 30), or through a tall, presumably centuries-old forest (fig. 31). The arrival of the rails, and with them the terrifyingly powerful equipment required to conquer the terrain, anticipate a symbolic transformation of an intransigent, hostile space into a habitable one. The topoi employed here continue a visual and ideological line of thought already established during the construction of the Turkestan-Siberian Railway (Turksib) in the 1930s (cf. III.3.5.).

The familiar visual BAM signifiers are reinforced by accompanying text, which draws a distinction between performing the same type of work on the BAM and elsewhere. While railway construction may generally be regarded as useful and socially important, its menial nature and emphasis on physical labour would not necessarily place this profession among the most prestigious within the Soviet occupational hierarchy of the mid-1970s. This is not the case with the BAM construction, though, for this work not only has a *real* attribute attached to it (fig. 30), but also carries metaphorical significance of ‘revealing the secrets of the mountains, building cities, and paving new roads’ (fig. 31). The signified of Baikal-Amur Mainline thus acquires complex and multi-layered symbolic meanings.

The representation of BAM labour at the second All-Russian BAM art exhibition, which may be considered the closure of the visual narrative, performs a metonymical shift from the process and hardships of railway construction to the visualisation of its completed results. The designation ‘BAM’, previously functioning as a symbolic junction with the culture and civilisation, gives way to a broader focus on Siberia as the new transformed space and a greater whole.

¹² The years of poster reproductions are taken from the albums dedicated to the exhibitions and issued respectively in 1980 and 1987; hence, the difference between poster dates and exhibition dates.



Figure 30: Poster 'BAM – Real Work!' by A. B. Iakushin, 1979.

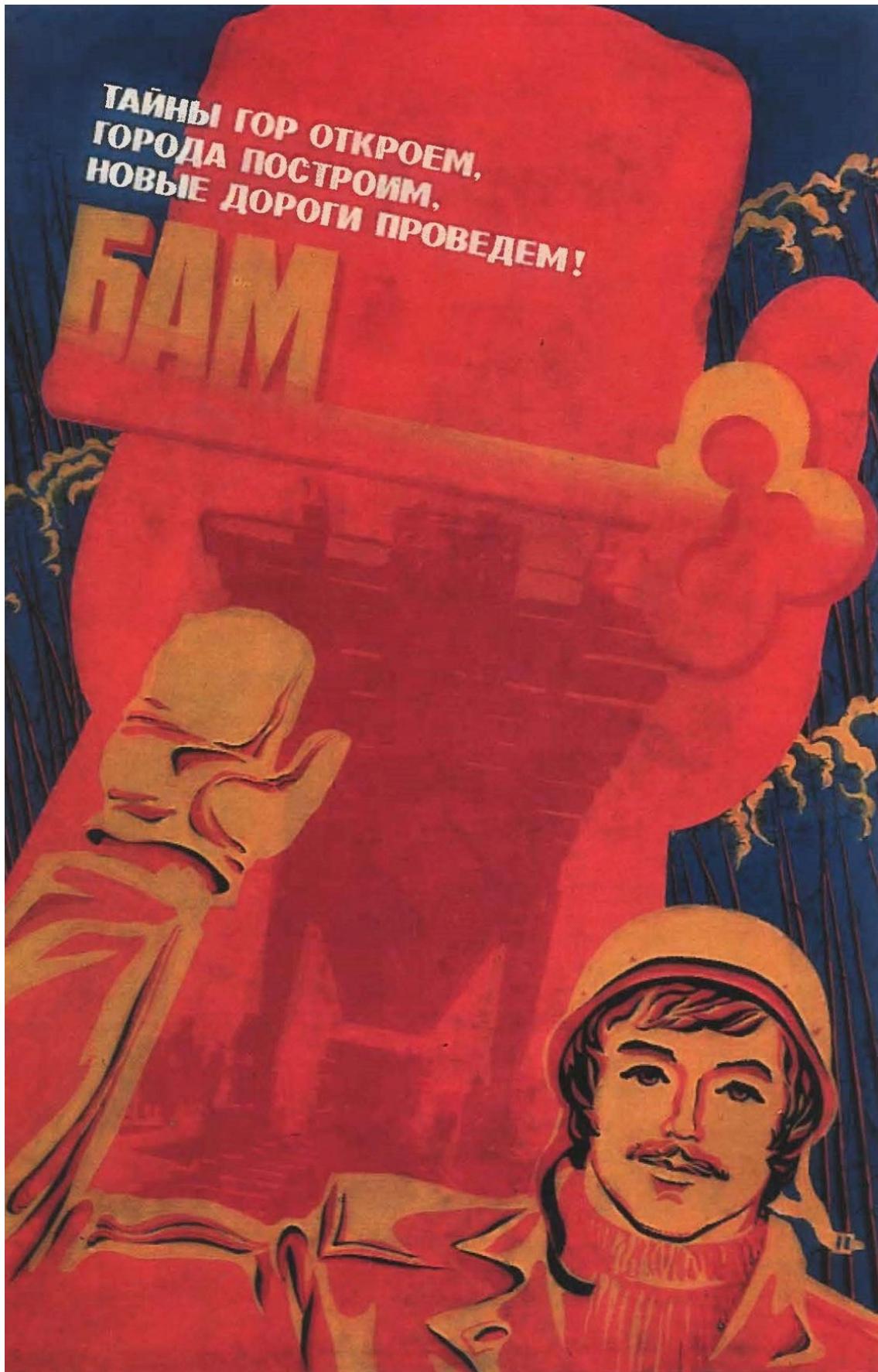


Figure 31: Poster 'We Will Reveal the Secrets of the Mountains, We Will Build Cities, We Will Pave New Roads!' by V. D. Mekhant'iev, 1979.

The newly created space is characterised by the abundance of constructing activity and shows no previous signs of wilderness, hostility, or cultural backwardness. The arrival of BAM has finalised once and for all the century-old conquest of Siberia and helped finally transform the space into the Soviet model representation of modernity and renewal. The emphasis is still laid on the work-in-progress nature of the construction, the headlong fluidity of the transformative moment, and the necessity to employ youth to keep the reinvigorating effect going.

The poster ‘Siberia – the Land of New Buildings’ (fig. 32) visualises its textual affirmation by separating the space into two contrasting colour palettes: the one with the bright colours of light green, yellow, white, grey, and red is attributed to the insert with high dwelling buildings, factory chimneys, and building cranes. The remaining tall trees are thinned and reduced to the cultured nature companions of the city dwellers in parks and public gardens. The general diagonal direction of the image resembles the eternal movement of the BAM representation: forward and upwards. The bright and promising insert has a shape of a trowel, thus unequivocally specifying by what means the space has been transformed.

The contrasting taiga environment is rendered in varying shades of grey, signifying the original, unaltered state of the space in which this titanic construction has taken place. Yet even this space is not left untouched: power lines now cut through the forest, interspersing the trees.

Unlike the thematic block that celebrates individual feats of labour in railway construction and prominently features Soviet citizens, the imagery of Siberian transformation from the mid-1980s either omits people altogether or presents them as a homogenous collective in a matter-of-fact depiction of the workforce. In Shelepov’s poster ‘To the Construction Projects of Siberia – Shock Work of the Young’ (fig. 33), a colossal technocomplex – possibly a smeltery or other form of monumental industrial site – dominates the image. Absent are the familiar visual markers linking the scene to either the BAM zone or Siberia; it is only through the textual inscription and the curatorial framing within the second BAM art exhibition that the regional and thematic attribution becomes apparent. Just as in the early stages of the visual BAM campaign ten years prior, the youth are once more positioned as agents of purposeful and socially valuable labour – this time in a space already fully transformed by the prior construction of the railway.

The closure of the BAM narrative thus adds a new dimension to the already multi-layered symbolic burden carried by Siberia, establishing it as a land of new construction and logically completing the narrative arc – from pioneering efforts and the ‘path to the future’ to the arrival destination of a ‘land of renewal’.



Figure 32: Poster 'Siberia – the Land of New Buildings' by Iu. Budanov, 1982.

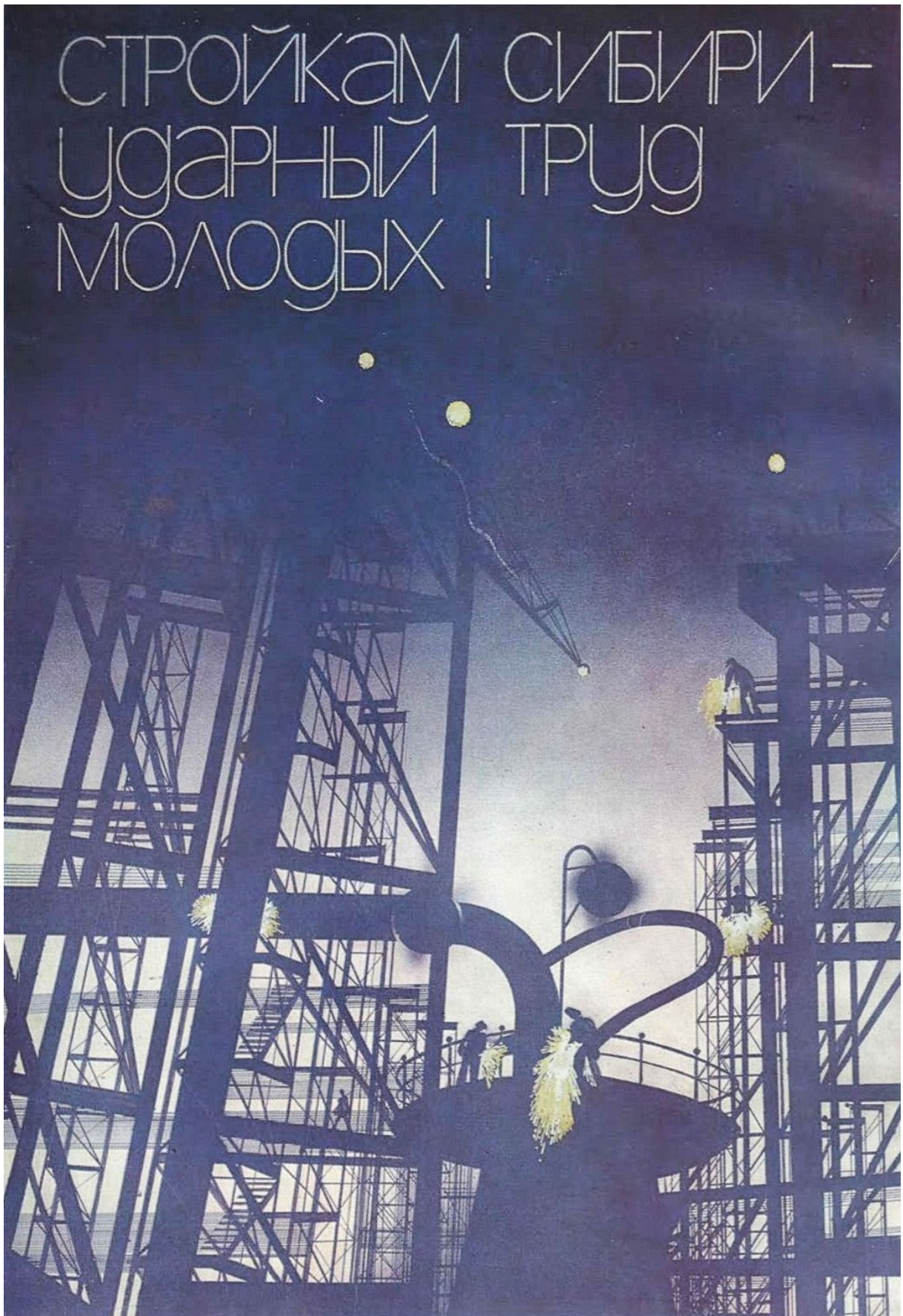


Figure 33: Poster 'To the Construction Projects of Siberia – Shock Work of the Young' by I. E. Shelepov, 1983.

IV.2.3. Ecological Motives

The official rhetoric of rapacious subjugation of nature – a tone that had permeated the BAM narrative from its inception and was actively propagated by Moscow – began to encounter resistance by the 1970s, as some Soviet citizens voiced concern over the widespread environmental damage and the disruption of fragile ecosystems along the BAM route. Christopher Ward (2009, 12-41) offers a detailed and engaging historical account of this struggle between Prometheanism and emerging conservationist sentiment on the railway. Even though ecological concerns remained marginal and ultimately had limited impact, their occasional representation in propaganda poster art offers a revealing glimpse into the clash of opinions within the officially sanctioned visual narrative of the BAM project.

The group of BAM ‘environmentalists’ was outnumbered, yet it included influential administrators within the Komsomol, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and the USSR Ministry of Transport Construction in Moscow, as well as locally based scientists (*ibid.*, 13). Lacking the institutional backing afforded to the dominant BAM discourse, these individuals grounded their arguments in the very foundations of Leninist ideology, which they interpreted as inherently pro-environmental. Rather than directly opposing party decisions, they sought to counteract environmental negligence by promoting the activities of various voluntary societies and initiating a range of conservationist projects (*ibid.*, 26).

Ward (2009) argues that not all such environmental protection initiatives were driven purely by altruistic motives or genuine ecological concern. Some Komsomol officials, he notes, hoped to advance their careers by having their enthusiastic efforts noticed in Moscow. The implementation of such initiatives also came with tangible material benefits and financial incentives. This dynamic aligns with Lefebvre’s (1997) argument that spatial transformation can unfold in both directions. During periods of accelerated development, older spaces are often destroyed with little hesitation as long as such destruction appears profitable or expedient. Later, however, these very same spaces may be painstakingly restored in anticipation of greater gains through cultural consumption, tourism, leisure, or material benefits, ‘...what had been annihilated in the earlier frenzy of growth now becomes an object of adoration. And former objects of utility now pass for rare and precious works of art’ (*ibid.*, 143).

Whereas Soviet space was typically represented as something to be transformed – modernised at great cost and forcefully reshaped from an uninhabited expanse into a place fit for human dwelling – a surprising reversal occurs in visual eco-oriented propaganda designed to temper the Promethean impulse: a shift toward spatial conservation, in which formerly wild nature is redefined as ‘our wealth’, with an appeal to preserve it (fig. 34).



Figure 34: Poster 'Let's Preserve Our Wealth!' by V. K. Votrin, 1981.

These initiatives, however, gained only limited support among the BAM workers themselves. The paradox of the eco-oriented campaign lay in the construction conflicting priorities: building the BAM on time left little room for strict adherence to ecological standards. Moreover, the much-celebrated youth of the BAMers ultimately worked against the success of these initiatives: the majority were under 25 and lacked both the specialised railway education and the environmental training necessary to implement conservationist measures effectively. In the absence of significant financial penalties for non-compliance, and under strong material encouragement to complete the construction on schedule, most workers simply chose to ignore the ecological directives (Ward 2009, 14).

From the outset in 1974, the creation of the unwaveringly heroic BAM myth owed much to mostly Moscow-based journalists writing for nation-wide mouthpieces such as *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* (ibid., 16f.). A recognisable vocabulary of specific lexigrams, epithets, and metaphors, drawn from the rhetoric of conquest, military vanguardism, and frontier heroism, permeated the dominant discourse.

According to the testimony of one of my interviewees in the BAM zone (Severobaikalsk, 26 May 2018), a former newspaper employee, the local press adopted a more responsible stance. Public clashes were not uncommon, for instance, between the newspaper's editor-in-chief, who criticised certain environmentally harmful developments (such as the inadequate condition of local treatment plants), and the head of the railway, who in response reportedly suggested that the journalist be sent to a 'mental asylum' for opposing 'such a project'.

The visual representation of the differing approaches to the 'green' agenda by conservationists and dominant discourse holders offers a compelling example of how the officially sanctioned Promethean narrative appropriated environmental themes while simultaneously reconfiguring their original meaning. The poster 'To the Orders of BAM – Green Street' (fig. 35) may be seen as an early example of Soviet greenwashing: it shifts the meaning of the word *green* from one associated with ecology and environmental protection to a signified of authorisation and forward movement. In this reinterpretation, the *green street* signals permission for yet more technological advancement across the BAM territory, with the trains themselves rendered green in visual alignment. No trace of nature is represented in the image; the newly built spatial environment is now a techno-green landscape, where the colour green no longer signifies nature, but progress.

Although environmental concerns had been voiced throughout the entire period of the BAM's construction, they became more pronounced with the onset of *perestroika* in the mid-

1980s. In visual terms, however, this change did not take place, and the BAM imagery available to us, with hardly any exceptions, speaks with only ‘one voice’, still originating from the Soviet concept of propaganda (cf. Kenez 1985; Ward 2009, 15).



Figure 35: Poster 'To the Orders of BAM – Green Street' by V. E. Chumakov, 1979.

IV.2.4. Cult of Leaders

The utopian message of the Soviet Union was primarily embodied in the image of its leaders, foremost among whom was Vladimir Lenin. His recurring representation in poster art reflects the broader evolution of Soviet visual propaganda throughout the twentieth century. The image of the second key figure, Joseph Stalin, was equally omnipresent from the 1930s until his death in 1953, though his representation is often interpreted as a ‘joining and completion myth’ (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 156). For the purposes of this study, the early combination of Stalin and railway imagery in the 1930s is of particular interest, as it illustrates the emergence of the Soviet regime’s idealist direction closely tied to technological advancement (fig. 16). However, following Nikita Khrushchev’s 1956 denunciation of Stalin’s cult of personality, Stalin’s image gradually lost its hegemonic presence in poster art.

Waschik and Baburina argue that the forcible demythologisation of Stalin’s role as the ‘father of all nations’ prevented any subsequent leader from fully assuming a comparable symbolic position, thus interrupting the visual succession implied by the formula ‘Stalin is the new Lenin’ (2003, 167). As a result, the representation of later party leaders, such as Khrushchev or Brezhnev, was confined to an operational mode that lacked the cultic veneration and visual awe characteristic of Stalin-era posters. In a similar vein, BAM railway posters of the mid-1970s to 1980s, while continuing to seek political legitimisation through references to party leadership, either depict the contemporary General Secretaries – Leonid Brezhnev, who initiated the campaign, or Mikhail Gorbachev, under whose leadership BAM was completed – or return to the ideological foundations of Soviet utopianism by invoking the image of Lenin.

To ideologically confirm that the completion of the mainline has a higher goal of the imminent victory of communism, the second All-Russian BAM art exhibition *From the Artists of Soviet Russia to BAM* (1984-85) presented a model poster with the classical figure of Lenin against the background of a red flag, hammer and sickle, and the meaningful prophecy ‘The Future Belongs to Communism!’ (fig. 36). Nothing in this typical example of a Soviet propaganda poster, in strict red-white colour palette, would betray its connection with BAM, not even a hint of railway paraphernalia, if it had not been created specifically for the final BAM exhibition by the artist who also painted the poster ‘Forward, Mainline!’ for the first exhibition (Babin 1979; fig. 28). It seems that one idea unites these two events: the construction of the railway, a euphemistic path to the future, and the approach of this future. However, the slogan ‘The future belongs to communism!’ leaves open the question of whether this is a general statement, or whether this future has been already achieved on the BAM, or whether its speedy achievement is felt closer there than anywhere else.



Figure 36: Poster 'The Future Belongs to Communism' by N. S. Babin, 1983.

IV.3. Viktor Koretsky's Photo Posters and the Inception of the BAM Propaganda Campaign

Although the personalities of individual poster artists will not be the primary focus of this study, the artistic style and contribution of one of them – Viktor Koretsky (1909–1998) – to the visual discourse surrounding the Baikal-Amur Mainline merit special attention. Koretsky's extraordinarily long creative career spanned nearly six decades, from the late 1920s to the mid-1980s, effectively mirroring the entire duration of Socialist Realism as the dominant artistic paradigm in the Soviet Union. His mature work thus provides a valuable lens through which to analyse the fully developed strategies of visual persuasion of Soviet political posters by the mid-1970s and his attempts to reinvigorate their effect in the period of 'stagnation', which were particularly visible at the inception of the BAM propaganda campaign.

The beginning of Koretsky's artistic career coincided with the ideological battle over the future of art in the USSR and the eventual defeat of the progressive aspirations of the avant-garde to Socialist Realism as the sole officially sanctioned artistic direction (cf. III.1.3.). Boris Groys argues that the alleged retrogression of totalitarian art towards a mimetic image, in contrast to the bold innovations of the avant-garde, should not be seen as a 'straightforward return to the past' (2003, 102). Rather, the renewed emphasis on the figurative involved the use of new media that precipitated the birth of mass culture with its direct visual impact on the viewer and successfully borrowed from the avant-garde. Among these media, photography as one of the most influential tools, which did not adhere to any specific national borders, played a crucial role in innovatively diversifying the array of resources applied by a typical socialist realist political poster.

In Soviet ideological circumstances, photography like all the other art forms served the interest of the state and persuasively affirmed realisation of its planned achievements. Interesting, however, is its original kinship to the avant-garde in approaching images through the unconscious lens of production (Groys 2003, 102). The artists of the avant-garde claimed that they created their images unconsciously of a seemingly photographic, transcendental, hidden, but authentic reality, which the viewer was thus bound to accept as true. Wassily Kandinsky in his book *On the Spiritual in Art* (1910) substantiated the role of the unconscious in the artistic appropriation of power by the select artistic elite who, by virtue of talent, could control the soul of the spectator, manipulate them and mould them into a new and better person (ibid., 103). Similarly, photography has to be accepted by the viewer as having a direct, verifiable and hence more genuine relation to the reality than, for instance, a painted image

(ibid., 103), even though the setting of the photo shot, the direction of the photo *gaze* and the decision to present that or another visual utterance lies fully with the photo artist and is, therefore, mediated.

The application of photography to posters was first integrated as photomontage and later led to the creation of a new genre – the photo poster. Photomontage, in turn, originated as a self-conscious and critical practice of the Dadaist circle in post-World War I Berlin, whose representatives, disillusioned with the bourgeois institutions responsible for the horrors of the war, rejected traditional art and its establishments (Wolf 2012, 2). Instead, they proposed the creation of a new artistic reality by mechanically assembling (from German *montieren*) various elements of the everyday material world producing so called *Klebebilder* (glued pictures) composed of advertisements, press cuttings, photographs, fragments of popular culture, and remnants of daily life (ibid.). In this way, photomontage creates new, distinct images through a combination of photographs (one or several) and/or text and, by offering visual testimony of a subject, simultaneously reveals other *truths* about it (ibid., italics mine).

One of the most uncompromising Berlin Dadaists, John Heartfield, was later to play a significant role in shaping Soviet photomontage. In response to the war experience, like many of his contemporaries, Heartfield underwent a critical self-appraisal, destroyed his earlier paintings, and rejected the label *artist* in favour of the designation *Photomonteur*, thereby emphasising the mechanical, industrial nature of his artistic practice henceforward (ibid.). Politically, he turned to the German Communist Party at the very moment of its foundation in December 1918. In the 1920s, he abandoned conventional artistic practices and instead focused on creating Communist political photomontages intended for mass reproduction in books, magazines, and posters, using photography as a tool in the class struggle (ibid.).

In the USSR, Latvian artist Gustavs Klucis¹³ – considered the first Soviet artist to explore photomontage – followed a similar political trajectory (ibid.). As a member of the Communist Party, he committed himself to the chosen ideology and produced politically charged works of agitational propaganda aimed at a mass audience (ibid.). The application of photography in the evolutionary transition of Soviet art during the 1920s from the Russian avant-garde to a new mimetic image was equally evident in the works of its leading representatives, such as Alexander Rodchenko and El Lissitzky (Groys 2003, 109). The use of photomontage for the design of posters, books, magazines, and other graphic materials

¹³ Some studies (Wolf 2012; Gough 2009) adopt the Latvian spelling of the name, while other sources (e.g. Tupitsyn 2010; Groys 2003; etc.) predominantly follow the Russian-language transliteration tradition and spell it as Gustav Klutsis. In this text, I adhere to the Latvian spelling.

intensified with the launch of the First Five-Year Plan in 1928 and the subsequent cultural revolution (Wolf 2012, 3).

The cultural upheavals of the First Five-Year Plan also marked the beginning of artistic career of Viktor Koretsky. Born in 1909 in Kyiv, Ukraine, to the family of an opera singer, Koretsky became interested in art, when the family moved to Moscow in 1921 (*ibid.*). Initially, his main focus was on painting: he took lessons from the artist Mikhail Leblan and subsequently enrolled in the 1905 Memorial Academic Art School (*ibid.*). There he studied with the Soviet critic and Marxist art historian Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, who instilled on him the necessity to develop new forms of art for representation of new themes of Soviet art (Snitovskaia 1984, 6; quoted in Wolf 2012, 3). Photomontage was on the surge during Koretsky's studies, and so his earlier works trace the influence of the first generation of photomontage artists, such as Klucis, Vasiliĭ Elkin, Nina Kulagina, Nataliia Pinus, and Sergei Sen'kin (*ibid.*).

After graduating in 1929, Koretsky embarked on a career as a graphic and poster artist. Following a brief period devoted to advertising posters, he soon focused primarily on political poster production (*ibid.*). He belonged to the first generation of post-revolutionary artists who developed their careers within the transformed system of state-sponsored and officially sanctioned art, in which artistic creation functioned merely as a tool to achieve ideological ends (*ibid.*). Simultaneously, the range of permissible artistic styles and methods was increasingly streamlined and rigidly defined. Poster production, like other forms of art, came under authoritative regulation. In March 1931, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union issued a resolution placing all political poster production under the control of the State Publishing House for Fine Arts (Izogiz), where Koretsky began working as a contract artist the same year (*ibid.*).

At the same time, the actively promoted critical discourse on posters in the Soviet press and specialised journals sought to define a distinctively Soviet mode of artistic representation. Within this context, photomontage increasingly came under criticism as an incomprehensible form for the broad masses, due to its image fragmentation, shifting scale, and distorted spatial representation (*ibid.*, 4). As the 1930s progressed, Soviet photomontage underwent a gradual yet distinct shift towards more fluid and seamless imagery (*ibid.*). This transformation was equally evident in Koretsky's work. Following in the footsteps of John Heartfield and his staged photographic compositions, Koretsky began to rely on carefully arranged photographic scenes, which he subsequently enhanced through painting and retouching techniques (*ibid.*). In order to distinguish this emerging genre from the now increasingly pejorative term *photomontage*, Koretsky introduced a new label: the 'photo poster' (*ibid.*).

Dissociation from photomontage proved beneficial to Koretsky, especially during the period of the Great Terror and Stalin's purges of Communist Party and government officials, when politically undesirable individuals who had been arrested became increasingly associated with photomontage. Among them was the pioneer of Soviet photomontage, Gustavs Klucis, a Communist Party member since 1918, a Latvian rifleman, and a former member of Lenin's bodyguard (ibid.). Wolf suggests that it was this political affiliation, rather than his artistic activity, that led to his demise (ibid.). Maria Gough, in her compelling study 'Back in the USSR: John Heartfield, Gustavs Klucis, and the Medium of Soviet propaganda' (2009, 137), argues, however, that this period was also marked by a fierce professional struggle over the production of 'genuinely proletarian art'. Klucis, associated with the October Group, stood in opposition to the Russian Association of Proletarian Artists (RAPKh) and the Russian Association of Proletarian Photographers (ROPF). John Heartfield's own initial affiliation with the October Group dissolved during his eight to nine months of 'apprenticeship' in the USSR (1931-32), where he and his photomontage work were appropriated by RAPKh and ROPF as a polemical weapon in their attacks against artistic rivals (ibid.; cf. Gassner 1992).

As a result, *Pravda*, the official mouthpiece of the Central Committee, published a series of articles that, in essence, reflect the fulminant developmental trajectory of photomontage as well as the fates of its artistic adherents and defectors. On 11 and 13 October 1937, *Pravda* reproduced several of Koretsky's posters (Wolf 2012, 4). On 18 October, an article entitled 'Election Posters and the Izogiz Bamboozlers' (*Predvybornye plakaty i izogizovskie ochkovtirateli*) criticised the Izogiz publishing house for delays in producing election posters for the first elections to the Supreme Soviet. Koretsky's poster 'Young Soviet People Vote for a Happy Youth' received the only favourable mention amidst otherwise vitriolic condemnation (ibid., 5). On 7 February 1938, *Pravda* denounced photomontage's significant flaws and mockingly renamed Izogiz as 'fotogiz' (ibid.). Meanwhile, Klucis was arrested on 17 January 1938 and executed on 11 February. Boris Malkin, the director of Izogiz and a key editor of photomontage works, was arrested the following month (ibid.). The fall of photomontage paved the way for the meteoric rise of Koretsky and his photo posters.

The highlight of Koretsky's artistic productivity came during the Second World War, when he produced his most iconic work 'Red Army Warrior, Save Us!' (fig. 37), regarded as one of the most memorable Soviet war posters of the period (ibid., 6). His contribution to wartime propaganda between 1943 and 1944 was formally recognised with the awarding of the Stalin Prize in 1946, which he shared with fellow poster artists Viktor Ivanov, Aleksei Kokorekin, and Leonid Golovanov (ibid., 7). However, even the receipt of the second Stalin

Prize in 1949, awarded for his collaborative postwar work with Ivanov and Kokorekin, did not shield Koretsky from personal attacks on his use of ‘photographism’ and ‘formalism’ during the Anti-Cosmopolitan Campaign, launched in December 1948 and largely directed against Jewish cultural figures (ibid., 7-9). In response, Koretsky increasingly turned to more graphic and painterly effects, and following Stalin’s death in March 1953 and the onset of the Khrushchev Thaw, his career continued to flourish.



Figure 37: Small print of Viktor Koretsky’s ‘Red Army Soldier, Save Us!’, 1943

In the post-war period, however, Koretsky himself admitted to the difficulties of adapting to peacetime themes and transitioning to affirmative messaging, indicating a general sense of artistic exhaustion (Koretsky 1958, 105; quoted in Wolf 2012, 7). This persistent return

to the inescapable theme of war and the recycling of familiar topoi and compositional patterns can also be traced in his later works, particularly those produced during the Brezhnev-era stagnation. Wolf notes that a significant shift in the artist's approach occurred in 1974 with the establishment of the culturally influential publishing house *Plakat*, divided into 16 editorial offices (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 288), where Koretsky was employed as an editor from its inception (Wolf 2012, 375). In an effort to reinvigorate a genre that had long ceded its persuasive power to television, film, radio, and other media, and had consistently failed to engage the viewer, *Plakat* began producing monumental, epic-scale poster canvases. Two of these (figs. 38 and 39), produced at the outset of the BAM campaign – by which time Koretsky was already sixty-five years old – present a striking contrast in their visualisation of the project's ideological beginnings.

The 1975 monumental poster *BAM* (1175 × 2385 mm) (fig. 38) depicts a fraternal handclasp between two Russian epic heroes (*bogatyr*s), painted in blue and wearing helmets inscribed with the names *Baikal* and *Amur*. This symbolic union (*smychka*) represents the joining of two immense water sources: Lake Baikal, the world's largest reservoir of freshwater, and the Amur River. The painterly central figures are juxtaposed with black-and-white photographs of the actual construction site. The radiating faces in the foreground are rendered in close-up, with recognisable facial features, while the monumentality of the project is conveyed through a multi-level composition: the middle ground features progressively smaller human figures, excavated foundation pits, and construction machinery, all contributing to an impressive sense of scale and realism. At the lower centre, two groups of people carry a banner bearing the slogan, "The Party asked, the Komsomol answered, 'Yes!'", affirming the propagandistic message of the construction. The only other colour present besides blue is red, used for the large *BAM* letters emblazoned above the site, reinforcing the project's ideological framing.

The 1976 poster *BAM* (1190 × 2400 mm) (fig. 39) presents the progress of railway construction: in place of the previously excavated pits, the background now features a photographic depiction of actual track-laying, set against a backdrop of forest, mountains, and cranes. In contrast to the painted representations of imagined 'wilderness' typical of BAM posters, this image creates the impression of documentary authenticity, as if this is precisely what the BAM construction site looks like: a collective effort of well-coordinated groups of men engaged in physically demanding, yet socially necessary and ideologically unifying labour. The exclusively male workforce is composed of professionals from various fields, identifiable by their uniforms and tools: railmen, engineers, geodesists, and builders. The elevated purpose

of the project is underscored by the retouched photographic image of a Red Army soldier dominating the upper section of the composition, replacing the reddish sky. This visual metaphor implies that the ‘grandfathers’ of the Great Patriotic War are passing on the baton to the younger generation; the labour effort on the BAM is thus elevated to the level of a heroic deed, comparable to the wartime defence of the motherland.



Figure 38: Poster ‘BAM’ by V. Koretsky, 1975.



Figure 39: Poster ‘BAM’ by V. Koretsky, 1976.

These monumental posters, produced by a well-established artist at the end of his career and dedicated to the ‘construction of the century’ in the mid-1970s, epitomise the visual culture

of late socialism – marked by characteristic gigantism, densely populated scenes, and sprawling construction sites. The reappearance of the ever-present war motif, here embodied in the figure of the soldier, further underscores the ideological continuity and cyclical nature of Soviet imagery. This very theme appears never to have faded nor lost its mental presence, finally materialising once again in contemporary Russia. Koretsky's late monumental works thus not only mirror the aesthetic of late socialism, but also testify to the regime's persistent reliance on familiar tropes as well as to the thematic and aesthetic exhaustion of the dominant artistic paradigm. What had seemed innovative in the early 1930s, and remained inspirational through the mid-1940s, had by the final decades of the Soviet era lost its sense of progressiveness and relevance – both in art and in life.

IV.4. BAM Art as a Social Event: Two BAM Art Exhibitions *We are Building BAM* (1979) and *From the Artists of Soviet Russia to BAM* (1984-1985)

The poster functions both as a historical artefact of its era and as a medium through which subsequent generations engage with the past, interpreting it as a visual testimony that shapes their understanding of history. Beyond their public display, posters have been central to exhibitions and retrospectives, fostering a visual conversation about key issues of the past and present. The Soviet exhibition practices, along with their evolving roles, also highlighted broader cultural and socio-political shifts over time (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 292).

The history of the Russian poster exhibitions goes back to the end of the 19th century when the First International Exhibition of the cultural affiches took place in Saint Petersburg in 1897 (Moscow 1898, Kyiv 1900), serving as an important impetus for the then only incipient Russian poster art (ibid.). Before 1914, the general development trend was more of a cultural than socio-political direction, tending to present the poster art successes in aesthetic categories rather than socio-economic achievements (ibid., 292-3). Only with the recognition of the poster medium as a powerful ideological tool did the poster exhibitions and competitions gain on the political weight. Chronologically, the shift coincided with the outbreak of the First World War (first political poster exhibitions taking place in 1914 - "The War in Lubok and Poster" and 1916 - "The Exhibition of English War Poster", St. Petersburg) and the October Revolution (ibid., 293).

With the recognition of the importance of propaganda posters and the subsequent promotion of their omnipresence came the introduction of strict rules and minute directives regarding their proper execution, along with punishments for their destruction or removal (ibid.). From the 1920s onwards, poster exhibitions and competitions became the primary

reason for creating and accumulative source of emergence of political posters. To advertise participation in these exhibitions, prominent central and regional newspapers published engaging, declarative appeals, urging writers and artists to create ‘images and thoughts [that would] inspire millions of our peasantry in building a prosperous and strong Russia’ (“Vsem dramaturgam, literatoram, poetam i chudozhnikam” [To All Dramaturges, Writers, Poets, and Artists], *Sovetskaya Sibir*’, 5 March 1921; quoted in Waschik, Baburina 2003, 294).

Even though up until the early 1930s poster exhibitions were not a standard feature of official state celebrations or party events, occupying instead a relatively minor role, the 1931 Poster Regulation brought new momentum to exhibition activities within the Soviet Union, as it became necessary to demonstrate that posters could indeed fulfil the propaganda role demanded by the Party (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 296-7). As an immediate consequence of this regulation, in April 1932, ORRP¹⁴ organised a major showcase of Soviet posters – primarily focusing on contemporary industrialisation – titled *The Poster in the Service of the Five-Year Plan*. Held at the exhibition spaces of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, the event displayed 410 posters by over 200 artists and became a celebration of photomontage (ibid., 297).

During the 1930s, posters were prominently displayed in major art exhibitions, such as the AKhR¹⁵ exhibition in 1928, the extensive ‘Artists of the RSFSR in the Last 15 Years’ exhibition in 1933 (which featured 905 works), and the themed exhibition ‘15 Years of the Red Army’ in the same year (ibid.). The ‘Artists of the RSFSR in the Last 15 Years’ exhibition was particularly notable, as it included, for the first time, a survey to assess the reception and effectiveness of posters. Although over 1,000 responses were collected, the lack of clear respondent criteria limited the analysis, revealing only that Soviet posters, and photomontage in particular, received mixed reviews. Over two-thirds of participants rated posters as ineffective or poorly executed, criticising them for being ‘unrealistic’, ‘abstract’, and ‘atypical’, especially in their depiction of figures. This critique was primarily directed at photomontage, which dominated propaganda for the First Five-Year Plan. In contrast, there was a demand for ‘realistic’ depictions of workers and production processes, a style that later became central to Socialist Realism (ibid.).

Efforts to systematically analyse poster reception remained inconsistent. The State Academy for Art Sciences (GAKhN¹⁶) included this in its research agenda but failed to produce substantive results, partly due to ideological reluctance (ibid., 298). The party was unlikely to

¹⁴ Society of Revolutionary Poster Workers [*Obshchestvo rabotnikov revoliutsionnogo plakata*].

¹⁵ Association of Artists of the Revolution [*Assotsiatsiya khudozhnikov revoliutsii*].

¹⁶ *Gosudarstvennaya akademiya khudozhestvennykh nauk*.

endorse studies that might reveal negative perceptions of its agitprop, as this could challenge entrenched conventions and vested interests. Guestbooks at exhibitions solicited visitor feedback, but the surviving entries offer little insight, consisting mainly of general remarks.

Exhibitions dedicated to propaganda posters – or those in which posters played a prominent role – became a staple of the political agenda and continued to be organised until the fall of the USSR. The construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline was no exception, marked by two exhibitions: *We are Building BAM* in Ulan-Ude (April 1979) and *From the Artists of Soviet Russia to BAM* in Chita (October 1984 – January 1985). These exhibitions showcased a variety of art forms, including paintings, graphic arts, sculptures, and tapestries. The following analysis focuses specifically on posters, which form the primary object of study in this paper, but also looks into official way how the BAM art exhibitions and their goals were presented in the exhibition catalogues, and how their presentation differed within seven years that passed between their publications (between 1980 and 1987), and five years after the initial start of the campaign and three years respectively after the construction had been announced completed. Analysis of the overall time lapse of thirteen years between these events: 1974 – inception of the BAM construction, 1979 – first BAM art exhibition, 1980 – publication of the first catalogue, 1984 – second BAM art exhibition, 1987 – publication of the second catalogue, and the parallel political tectonic changes that the USSR was undergoing with *perestroika* and *glasnost* in full swing, can provide a useful glimpse into the documents of political art of the era and their respective presentation in motion.

The first republican art exhibition ‘We are Building BAM’ coincided with the 4th plenary session of the Council of Artists of the RSFSR in Ulan-Ude. At the same time, there were two more art events dedicated to political anniversaries: sixty years of the first communist *subbotnik*¹⁷ and fifty years of the first five-year plan (Khabarova 1980, 7).

This trend to celebrate fulfilment of every party decision and measure time in anniversaries was typical of the Soviet political reality and saw its first artistic manifestation already in 1918 with the end of the civil war and celebration of ‘one year of proletarian dictatorship’ (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 132). What was initially presented as the survival success of the young revolutionary state evolved, decades later, into a rigid *modus operandi*: a collection of political events, party decisions, and ideological concepts habitually glorified across all areas of cultural production. Sharing of the timing and location of the first BAM art exhibition with the other two typical Soviet anniversaries, equally celebrated through official

¹⁷ The gratuitous performance of some socially useful work during overtime hours by a voluntary association of people (originally carried out on Saturdays).

art, organisation of the exhibition under the auspices of the Council of Artists of the RSFSR, and explicit highlighting of these connections in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue unequivocally demonstrate the politically charged objectives that BAM art was required to fulfil.

The monumental character of the exhibition was anticipated by the sculptural composition of four BAM builders executed in forge copper by O. S. Kiriukhin in front of the Republican Art Museum named after Ts. S. Sampilov (Khabarova 1980, 8; ref. fig. 40). Three young men in the front and one woman of the same age slightly behind, all in working clothes and boots, climb the railway embankment and follow the rails. The portrayal of the railway either directly in the form of rails and sleepers or as a symbolic train running on them is an almost indispensable element among more than 2000 works executed by 960 artists (*ibid.*).



Figure 40: Sculpture 'BAM' by O. Kiriukhin, 1977.

The posters were exhibited in the first hall and thus meant to give the general orientation of the construction campaign. The intentions of poster artists A. Arsen'iev and V. Mekhant'iev are quoted in the same modestly heroic clue, characteristic also of other *heroes of labour*, 'We went to BAM not only to gather impressions and draw sketches. We went to work. We had to help in the artistic design of the villages, in the creation of an ideological and aesthetic environment in which people live there. This task is now being solved with the help of the expressive language of the poster' (quoted from Khabarova 1980, 12; transl. mine).

Having dedicated a column to the BAM art posters out of in total 16-column text, the experienced art critic and editor of the BAM art exhibition album Margarita Khabarova so evaluates the symbolic language of the presented poster works.

"Fly forward!" is written on the red banner fluttering above the locomotive in the poster of the same name by A. B. Arsen'iev. Every visitor will *involuntarily* remember and continue to themselves the words about the locomotive flying to communism. Probably, this is how the idea of the connection between generations is born, *gradually, unobtrusively*.

(ibid.; transl. and highlight. mine)

This linguistic understatement of the *involuntariness* and *unobtrusiveness* of the created images, juxtaposed with the entrenched symbolic vocabulary of Soviet posters – unchanged since the establishment and consolidation of Socialist Realism in the 1930s – produces a contradictory effect akin to an oxymoron.

A separate aspect of analysis involves the visual locus – the site of construction – depicted within the long-standing traditions of Soviet colonialism. Siberia is portrayed as 'the once wild taiga region, a place of exile and penal servitude under tsarist Russia, [which] after the Great October Revolution is transformed before our eyes into a flourishing region, an outpost of socialist economics and culture' (A. Modogoyev, First Secretary of the Buryat Regional Committee of the CPSU; quoted in Khabarova 1980, 5; transl. mine).

This condescending attitude extends to the original inhabitants of the 'wild' region, reflected not only in the presentation and displays of their artwork but also in its evaluation. Despite the proclaimed international character of BAM – bringing people from across the Soviet Union – local inhabitants are notably underrepresented in the visual commemoration of railway construction heroes. Their contributions to the first BAM art exhibition were primarily framed through the preservation of traditional crafts such as toy-making, stone carving, and products made from fur and birch bark. The preferred method in which such craft products

should be fulfilled was also explicitly described as not to display traits of industrial art. Otherwise, it would be ‘detached from the spirit of the folk creativity’ which goes *back* to the best traditions of folk artisans of the 1920s-40s (ibid., 14). This emphasis appears to underscore a primitive or ‘savage’ stage of their development within a colonial discourse reminiscent of ‘Indians vs. European colonisers’.

In contrast, modernity is symbolised by the train, industrialisation, and the figure of the young BAM builder. Situated on the other side of the modernity, the *aboriginal* inhabitants (Soktoeva, Khabarova 1987, 18), represented by the artworks of masters of Khabarovsk Region¹⁸ and Kamchatka¹⁹, and lumped together under the common denomination ‘peoples of Siberia and the Far East’, have to preserve their traditions, due to the ‘fundamental changes taking place in their lives’ (Khabarova 1980, 13).

The decision to conduct the first BAM art exhibition in April 1979 was taken at the 4th Zonal Conference *Soviet Far East*, held in Vladivostok in September 1974, defining that the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline would remain a central theme for the following five years in political art commissions. This decision established the subject as a primary artistic priority (ibid., 7, 14). The formal designation of approved artistic themes and their announcement at professional creative conferences – similar to party plenums – was a characteristic feature of the totalitarian political system, in which cultural and artistic workers were expected to serve the interests of the party and the state.

A decade later, the second BAM art exhibition, *From the Artists of Soviet Russia to BAM* – or, as the exhibition album was titled, *BAM is Built* – was held at the Chita Art Museum to commemorate the official completion of the construction on 1 October 1984. Although the exhibition lasted for three months, from October 1984 to January 1985, its scale was more modest than that of the first republican exhibition, featuring 570 artworks by 362 artists (Soktoeva, Khabarova 1987, 12). The results of this artistic endeavour were reported in statistical terms, mirroring the fulfilment of a typical five-year production plan: the exhibition attracted 9,000 visitors, hosted 225 thematic excursions, and covered audiences of ‘workers and employees, schoolchildren, students and teachers, soldiers of the Soviet Army, residents and guests’ from BAM cities and villages, as well as from Vladivostok, Blagoveshchensk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, and Ulan-Ude (ibid., 12, 14).

The presentation of the BAM construction theme changed as well, shifting from the initial enthusiasm surrounding the heroic labour feat to a more matter-of-fact portrayal of task

¹⁸ 2600 km away from Ulan-Ude and not within BAM zone.

¹⁹ Peninsula in the Far East between the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Okhotsk.

execution. At that, this shift was not driven any more by metaphorical aspirations for the next stage of political development – namely, communism – but rather by achievement of a concrete, tangible objective: the construction of a railway and the industrial development of Siberia. The epigraph, previously based on Brezhnev’s political foundations, was replaced with a quotation from the new General Secretary of the CPSU, Mikhail Gorbachev. This change not only introduced a distinct economic focus but also noticeably lacked the political pathos characteristic of earlier rhetoric (ibid., 11).

A sense of conceptual exhaustion and repetition is evident in both the number and subject matter of the posters presented. The album features poster reproductions by eight artists, the works of three of whom – N. Babin, I. Shelepov, and A. Iakushin – had already been included to the first BAM art exhibition album.

No different, if not latently critical, is the evaluation of the album editors, albeit seasoned in habitual political clichés but also acknowledging ‘not such an active efficacy [of posters] as in the first BAM exhibition, [but] still offer[ing] the most laconic reproduction of *as if* symbols of nature, technology, and a person’ (ibid., 18; transl. and highlight. mine). The ‘symbols as it were’ are also complemented by ‘typically catchy decisions’ and poster contribution of ‘certain accents to the substantial foundation of the exhibition’(ibid.).

It is worth noting that the original word *opredelemnnye* in ‘certain accents’ possesses ambiguity that allows it to be understood, depending on the context, as ‘certain’ or ‘specific’. The duality of the assessment, on the one hand, reinforces the posters’ role in shaping the exhibition’s ideological foundation, while, on the other, leaves room for interpretation regarding the precise nature or significance of these contributions.

The exhibited BAM posters, thus, played the role of a common denominator schematically representing the space within the dominant mode of production and eagerly providing specific signifiers for designation of hard work, youth, happy family, nature, cultured form of leisure, and adventure, and so substituting the necessity to really see or experience the space (cf. Lefebvre 1997, 144). This comes then as no surprise that all nine posters included to the catalogue of the first BAM art exhibition were created very far away from the place of the construction: eight posters were drawn in Moscow at more than 5,000 km away and one in Kaliningrad, which is the westernmost Russian city at more than 6,500 km away from even the western starting point of the Baikal-Amur Mainline. The place of the artists’ dwelling is missing in the catalogue ‘BAM is Built’ for the second BAM art exhibition; however, it is safe to assume that the place of artists’ residence had not drastically changed and material for creative work was gathered at most on short-term trips. Working en plein air could indeed seem excessive if

the goal was not to convey the space as accurately as possible, but to offer an ideologically acceptable and sterile embodiment of meaning in the form of image-signs.

Applying meta-semantic analysis, the selection of words and the execution of evaluative commentary can reveal more than just an assessment of artistic contributions – it subtly reflects the evolving dynamics between adherence to ideological expectations and implicit recognition of artistic and narrative stagnation. This lexical ambiguity, whether intentional or a product of conventional Soviet rhetoric, reflects the broader shifts in cultural production during perestroika period, where overt enthusiasm gave way to a more constrained, perhaps even reluctant, artistic engagement with state-directed themes.

The reiteration of familiar tropes, both in art and in its evaluation, aligns with the previously noted signs of thematic fatigue and suggests that poster art, while still functioning as an ideological tool, had become increasingly perfunctory in its execution. The same way as the tired Soviet art historians produced the routine album dedicated to yet another politically motivated art exhibition, this exhibition could produce no more enthusiasm but only establish the fact of the finished ‘path to the future’ and thus verify the death of the communist future.

V. Image of BAM on the Ground

V.1. BAM Museum Collections: Crossing the Axis of Visibility

There are many museums along the Baikal-Amur Mainline. During my three-week field research from 16 May through 7 June 2018 covering a cycle itinerary of 5,350 km on 7 different trains and starting from Irkutsk eastward to Ust'-Kut and further to Severobaikalsk, Novaya Chara, Tynda, Chita and finishing in Irkutsk again, I visited at least one museum in each destination, and for many locations, the fieldwork agenda specified multiple museums also in neighbouring sites. There are museums dedicated to the construction of Baikal-Amur Mainline, Evenki cultural centres, ethnographic museums and museums of local lore, museums addressing Siberia's penal past and regional museums covering a little bit of everything: history, geography, local traditions, heroic achievements, and visions of the future. In some form or another, the railway features in all of them. Yet there is one museum that stands out – the Museum of the History of the Baikal-Amur Mainline in Tynda, which holds the largest museum collection on the subject in Russia and where I carried out the main part of my research.

In her overview of studies on museum and gallery technologies as practical techniques used to articulate particular forms of power/knowledge (cf. Foucault 1977), Rose Gill notes that the majority of academic research focuses on the public display areas of the institutions in question (2007, 184). Although she acknowledges that the so-called 'spaces behind the displays', comprising archives, laboratories, libraries, offices, service areas, and stores, are fundamental to museum knowledge production, there is little critical inquiry into the contradictions inherent in operationalising these institutions' regimes of truth (ibid., 189f.).

In relation to these spatial divisions, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1992, 7) problematises the *axis of visibility* constructed by the museum, which enforces a strict public/private divide between 'members of the public' and 'museum curators'. The task of the former is to view objects in an authorised manner, while the task of the latter is to collect and classify objects and broaden the viewing audience, though this expansion of viewership is understood only within existing power relations and does not imply a blurring of the boundaries of the axis of visibility. Hooper-Greenhill further argues that even museum curators visiting institutions other than their own remain viewing subjects only, unless they reveal their professional identity and request special permission to cross into the 'invisible' domain, thereby gaining access not only to the hidden objects but also obtaining the authority to speak about them (ibid.).

Yet neither Gill nor Hooper-Greenhill further address the question of how access to these spaces is actually obtained, or of who is granted or denied it. I seek to address this gap by

offering reflexivity on the process of negotiating access to the museum's 'space behind the scenes' and thus crossing its axis of visibility.

Upon arrival in Tynda, the right to approach the museum's archival collections had been informally pre-arranged during an initial visit. The intention was to formalise the agreement the following day in the presence of the museum director and the responsible curator. The museum curator, however, immediately granted permission for me and a fellow student photographer to take pictures of the publicly accessible museum exhibitions, thus allowing to capture the officially sanctioned way of seeing. At the same time, she spoke openly with me about the past of the BAM and its projected future, voicing frank scepticism and criticism regarding the persistent inequalities in centre-periphery relations. This sentiment, as I consistently observed during interviews, is not uncommon along the Baikal-Amur Mainline: widespread resentment about the collapse of the system – both the broader Soviet regime and, more locally, the unfulfilled promise of the railway – tends to be primarily directed towards Moscow. The photo documentation and accompanying semi-structured interview concluded on an amicable note.

The meeting the next day in the museum director's office, however, took on a more reserved and cautiously suspicious tone. The university delegation consisted of a professor acting as the fieldwork coordinator, a postdoctoral researcher as co-leader, and me, a master's student, serving as the team leader. All three of us spoke fluent Russian, and two were native speakers. The unexpected issue raised by the museum concerned the nationality of the delegation and, more specifically, passport ownership. Only the postdoctoral researcher held Russian citizenship, while the professor was Italian and I was Ukrainian. Both colleagues, however, assured the museum representatives that they would not necessarily need to conduct archival research themselves, and they volunteered to limit access exclusively to me, allowing me to carry out research on my own topic and photograph relevant materials on their behalf. The materials were to be selected and prepared for the next research appointment by the museum curator.

When I arrived for the research appointment, I was met with what can best be described as open hostility. There was no trace of the previous friendliness, and it was made explicitly clear that no critical – though not so rare – remarks previously voiced about the centre could be referenced. Any proxy of trust that had been built was now unequivocally revoked. The materials, however, had been prepared as agreed, and I began taking pictures. My work, though, was under close supervision, and the curator openly expressed political indignation toward my nationality and, by extension, towards me personally, thus, obviously doubting the correctness of the decision to let me enter this other space.

Neither my attempts to explain that I was representing the University of Vienna and had been living in Austria since 2011, nor my deliberate avoidance of any political discussions shielded me from what turned into a three-hour-long verbal flagellation, which seemed to intensify entirely on its own – all the more so given my conscious reluctance to be drawn into what I could already anticipate as an open political confrontation with a TV-infused propaganda discourse. The session ended with me completing the photo documentation, and it was made unmistakably clear that this exceptional granting of access was a one-off opportunity – not to be reconsidered or requested again.

While I do not necessarily recall this incident as traumatic, it was undoubtedly a highly unpleasant experience. Yet the presence of such a ‘controversial’ figure as a Ukrainian researcher in a Russian museum dealing with the Soviet past and still promoting an uncritical, state-supported narrative in which the Baikal-Amur Mainline prominently features as a Soviet-era achievement, may itself offer a valuable lens through which to examine the conditions imposed by an institutional apparatus, under which access to knowledge is granted or denied, as well as the authorised ways in which this knowledge may be represented and spoken about.

To provide background information and place the negotiation of access in its relevant context, it is worth noting that this took place in 2018, at a time when the anti-Ukrainian public campaign – following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the onset of the Russian proxy war in Donetsk and Luhansk in 2015 – had long been in full swing. It followed the earlier anti-Georgian campaign, which had peaked with the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 and Russia’s subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The palpable societal alertness and suspicion – within an ever-narrowing circle of political friends and an ever-expanding sea of perceived enemies – manifested itself in the constant search for reliable means of classifying those with whom knowledge was to be shared, or from whom it was to be withheld: into allies or adversaries.

I reflect on how this societal watchfulness, and the seemingly never forgotten skills of sorting strangers into politically reliable or suspect categories, which I witnessed during my fieldwork and which significantly affected my research while on the BAM, manifested itself on a personal level among the contemporary BAM zone population in Chapter V.5. The present vignette points to the persistence of surveillance logic well beyond the Soviet era, also at the institutional level, and highlights the resemblance between the Soviet societal atmosphere and the climate of 2018, marked by decreasing openness to ideological ambiguity, critical inquiry, or identities deemed insufficiently aligned with the post-Soviet dominant narrative. The museum, as an institution of power applying institutional technologies in the Foucauldian sense

as ‘a disparate set of tools or methods’ through which that power/knowledge is practised (Foucault 1997, 26), preferred an unequivocal orientation marker: asking for a passport.

It is also worth pointing out that, albeit the negotiation of access turned out to be a bumpy road and its implicit revocation took place only after the materials had already been gathered, such access would no longer have been granted at all some four years later, with the onset of Russia’s full-fledged aggression against Ukraine in 2022. However, even though access to knowledge was, albeit reluctantly, allowed, the selection of the materials – of *how* to see and *what* to see – remained firmly predetermined by the museum.

V.2. BAM Posters as Truth Claims: Localising Spatial Representation

In response to my request to museum curators to help me access BAM posters, nearly a hundred bills announcing musical evenings or festivals were unearthed and prepared for me. Thus, the first semantic discrepancy in the interpretation of the term *poster* (*plakat*), and more specifically *BAM poster*, by outsiders and insiders emerged during my exploration of the BAM museum archives. *Plakat* in Russian is a neutral generic term referring to a type of graphic art, typically executed on a large sheet of paper or fabric, containing some kind of message or appeal in concise textual form, and it is most closely translated into English as *poster*. Related genres include *afisha* (placard), *programma* or *ob’iavlenie* (bill or notice, as in a theatre programme), and *listovka-afisha* (broadsheet), all of which may be referred to as *plakat*. However, my expectations regarding *BAM posters* (*bamovskie plakaty*) in BAM museums were very specific.

I was looking for the familiar striking images of railway ties, bearded men, and a stylised representation of the North through taiga, snow, towering mountains, and swift rivers, all accompanied by exhortative slogans urging people to come and join the construction, or glorifying those who had already done so. In other words, I expected to find the entire BAM zone saturated with the imagery that, having been born in Soviet Ukraine only shortly before *glasnost* and the tectonic shifts that shattered both the ‘indestructible union of free republics’ and the railings of the ‘path to the future’, I seemed to know intimately, as though I had myself participated in this ‘construction of the century’.

Instead, what my field research revealed was that *BAM posters* within the BAM zone are not the same *BAM posters* as those seen from outside it. Here, the anticipation of the expected and the contrasting plainness of the actual material artefacts documenting everyday life created a cognitive dissonance, highlighting the absence of the associated paraphernalia and exposing the presumed *fake* quality of the BAM poster. If this was not the *true* BAM poster,

then perhaps it was not the *true* BAM either. And what BAM poster type of the two is then to be considered as true? Of course, no poster, whether inside or outside the BAM zone, could truly represent the lived experience of its participants, for the poster serves not as a revealing but as a propagandistic medium. Nevertheless, the collections preserved in BAM museums and archives come much closer to the materiality of that experience, as they serve as documentary attestations of human activity in real, as opposed to imaginary, time and in existing, rather than idealised, space.

Referring to Lefebvre's differentiation of spatial levels (1997, 144), the visualised distinction between conceived, perceived and lived space can be further explored through the analysis of BAM posters in situ. Once conceived, the representation of BAM space on posters is assumed to be truthful – at least by those exposed to them in the absence of any real alternative, if not by those actually inhabiting the space. When asked about the role of art in their everyday lives or about the visual means that accompanied moments of leisure during the construction period, BAM builders seldom, if ever, mentioned the ideological BAM posters analysed in Chapter IV and exhibited at BAM art exhibitions. Nevertheless, visual artistic presence on the ground was equally ubiquitous. However, in practice, propagandistic posters were replaced by playbills announcing artistic programmes. These served primarily functional purposes, containing practical information about the time, place, and nature of cultural events, thus aligning more with the organisational than with the ideological dimension of spatial visualisation.

Depending on the site of production – central or local – these two types of posters reflect differing conceptual approaches and visual strategies. A representative example is the playbill for a concert commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Great October Revolution (1977), held within the framework of the arts festival *Ogni magistrali* [*Lights of the Mainline*] (fig. 41). This poster displays recognisable iconography: a section of railway track; a stereotypical blond Russian male dancer in folk costume, holding a bayan (a type of Russian accordion); and a stylised natural backdrop, possibly depicting the waters of Lake Baikal or the Amur River, along with schematic mountains. A large red flag, symbolising the October Revolution, dominates nearly half the composition, ribboning across and encircling the other elements.

The colour scheme is bright and harmonious: creamy gold is used for the railway track, the dancer's shirt, the mountains, and the sky; various shades of red for the flag and the bayan; blue for the water, the mountain mist, and outlines of the track; black for details such as the dancer's trousers, shoes, and the bayan's keys; and orange and yellow for decorative accents, including the dancer's hair, shirt trim, sash, and boot patterning. The presence of a state printing

number in the lower right corner and the absence of any concrete date or venue information suggest that this poster was centrally produced for use in a series of concerts touring along the BAM in 1977.



Figure 41: Poster 'Art Festival "Lights of the Mainline"', photo by M. Yakymakha, 2018.

In contrast to the centrally produced poster commemorating the 60th anniversary of the October Revolution, the locally produced playbill announcing the 3rd Festival of Amateur Guitar Patriotic Song of the Chita section of the mainline, held on 4–5 August 1984 in Novaya Chara (fig. 42), is devoid of any graphic embellishment and is partially handwritten. Instead, it is rich in specific and practical organisational details, including the time and location of auditions for prospective participants, as well as a precise schedule of the festival itself. Lefebvre (1997, 144f.) refers to such spatial differentiations as ‘functional localizations’ – specialised representations of space that reflect divisions of need. In the case of these posters, this division can be read as ideological versus practical purpose, centralised versus local production, and visual-graphic versus textual content.

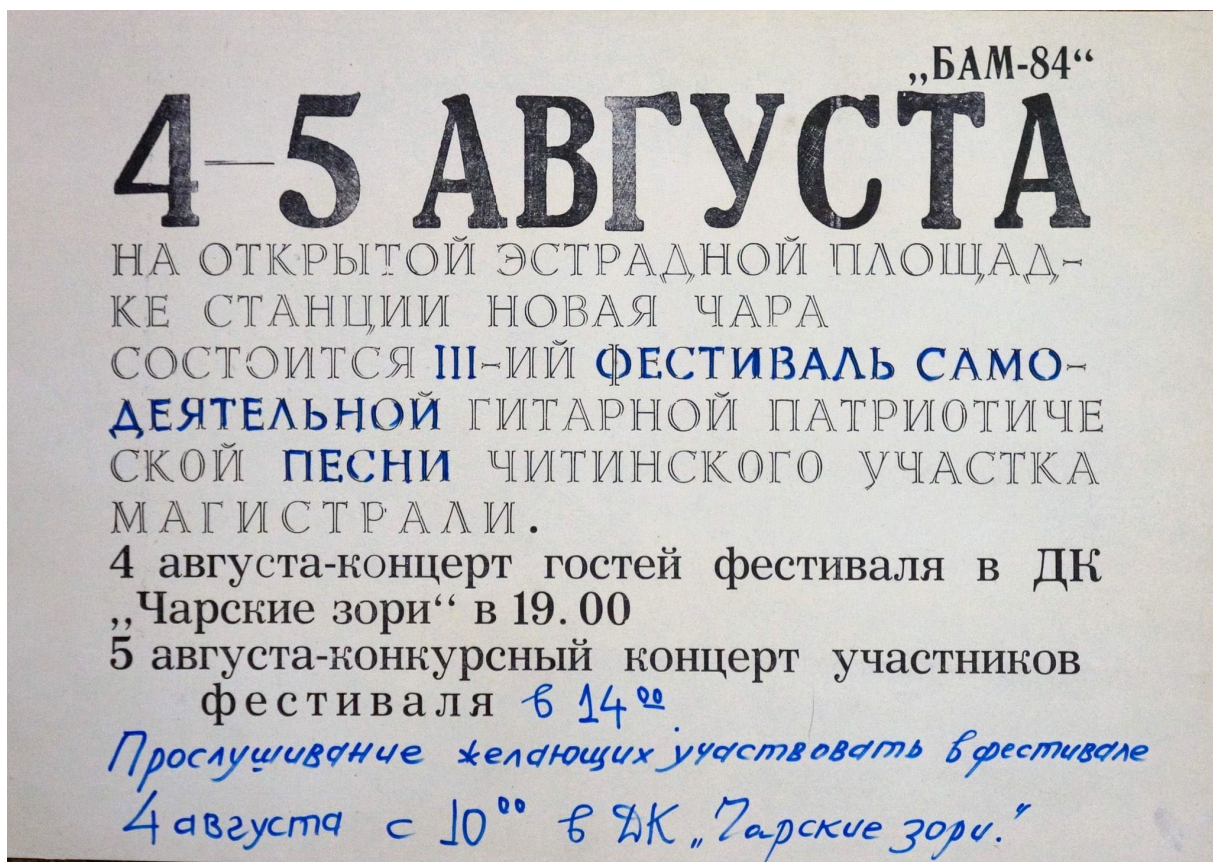


Figure 42: Playbill ‘BAM-84’, 4-5 August 1984, Novaya Chara, photo by M. Yakymakha, 2018.

In this localisation of spatial representation, the distinction between conceived, perceived, and lived space becomes particularly apparent. The users of space inhabit a concrete, subjective realm in which time, place, and specific activities matter, whereas those who conceive and represent it – architects, engineers, and state-employed poster artists – operate within an abstract, representational domain composed of images, blueprints, and ideological projections. Lived space, understood as private and experiential, thus comes into conflict with conceived or perceived space, which is public and abstract, and seeks to assert itself as the only

space that truly matters in the context of everyday life. Indeed, the poster celebrating the 60th anniversary of the October Revolution cannot, on its own, provide sufficient information or incentive to attend the vaguely announced concert; its lack of temporal and spatial specificity renders it ineffective in practical terms. Only when paired with a second, informational type of poster does it become viable and usable. The second type, however, functions independently, and may choose to incorporate the first type for aesthetic or symbolic purposes, though this is not a necessity. Their functional distinctions are thus clearly delineated.

The dominance of lived (private) space over represented (public) space is further evidenced by the holdings of the Tynda Museum, which maintains the largest collection of BAM-related material culture: the overwhelming majority of posters preserved there are informational in nature, locally produced, and almost entirely devoid of propagandistic visual symbols. These posters, while vital to the users of the space, would hardly have qualified for display at national exhibitions of BAM art – and conversely, the types of political posters analysed in Chapter IV were not found in original form on site at all; they remain preserved exclusively in Moscow, the site of their conception and institutional validation. This raises the question: how might the meaning of such political posters – products of the conceived BAM space – change if juxtaposed visually with the real, lived environment of the BAM builders? Would the abstract, ideological imagery still hold relevance? In Lefebvre’s terms, the façade cannot dominate the dwelling when it enters the lived space domain; to do so would expose the inherent contradictions between these spatial regimes (*ibid.*, 145).

V.3. Framing Official/Local Gaze: BAM Image as Seen from the Museum Floor

To acknowledge the partiality of the analysis offered here – the way in which I saw the gathered collection of BAM imagery and the visual readings I derived from it, it is necessary to reflect on the specificity of vision itself, which is inseparable from the body to which these eyes belong. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s evocative metaphor, even an aspiring researcher must ask herself, ‘With whose blood were my eyes crafted?’ (1988, 585). Yet this vision was itself mediated, as the very collection I was permitted to see, and the archival holdings deemed accessible and worthy of academic inquiry, had already been preselected by the BAM History Museum staff²⁰. This curatorial decision, together with the subsequent display of one specific assemblage of artefacts, rather than another, as the only, or at least the currently legitimised,

²⁰ With reference to a relevant case study concerning museum processes, cf. Nuno Porto’s invoking Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, which emphasises that a mediator partly constructs what is mediated (2007, 182; Durrans 2012, 199).

way of seeing BAM, lies firmly within the domain of representation: the creation of meaning through visual language (Hall 2005, 6).

As Brian Durrans notes in his analysis of the relationship between anthropology and museums, in addition to the institutional aim of deepening visitors' understanding of a given culture, a museum's own 'culture of representation' must itself become an object of analysis (2012, 199). While it is standard practice for anthropologists to study ethnographic collections and thereby contribute insights grounded in their field of expertise, Durrans argues that any kind of museum, regardless of its primary focus, may be treated as a subject of anthropological research, even if such approaches remain relatively uncommon (*ibid.*).

The BAM History Museum thus offers particular interest for the present anthropological inquiry into BAM visuality. It functions not only as a social institution that constructs a space for memory and negotiated engagement with its visitors (Durrans 2012, 199), but also as an institution of power that steers and maintains an official narrative (*cf.* Foucault 1977). Whose memory, then, is being preserved, and to what extent does this representation adhere to the state-sanctioned heroic pathos surrounding the BAM construction? Interrogating the narrative so constructed becomes all the more crucial in the broader context of global museology, which must extend beyond national and metropolitan institutions to include provincial and peripheral museums (Durrans 2012, 200; Shelton 2006, 74–79).

One of the dominant threads in the narrative curated by the BAM History Museum appears to centre less on the hardships of labour and more on the remarkably vibrant leisure life during the construction period, presenting the memory of BAM as a sustained celebration. This is reflected, quite tellingly, in the name of one of the exhibition halls – *Tynda festivalnaia* [*Festival Tynda*], where posters of varying colours but recurring imagery (a guitar, part of a railway track or work tool, and the word 'BAM'), all hand-drawn on pieces of fabric, document what appears to be an almost annual festival activity (with the exception of 1980) (fig. 43). Two signs placed in front of the poster wall, one bearing the title *BAM* and the other reading *Tynda* in the left corner, might just as well suggest that this was what BAM ultimately signified – a major annual guitar music festival held in Tynda. At least, nothing among the displayed artefacts seems to contradict this reading. Could this be understood as a Soviet metonymic gesture, positioning Tynda as a socialist counterpart to iconic music events such as Woodstock or Glastonbury? Or was it rather a local attempt to affirm BAM and Tynda in this symbolic role?



Figure 43: 'Festival Tynda' in BAM History Museum, Tynda, photo by M. Kirstaetter, 2018.

The festive tone continues across other installations. The displays consist predominantly of material artefacts, which plausibly aim to document real individuals and their belongings. Numerous envelopes bearing personal addresses, photographs of BAM participants singing, performing or sitting in the audience before a stage are presented alongside a green-coloured BAMer uniform, richly adorned with BAM festival pins, as if these were honorary distinctions awarded for the feat of labour (fig. 44). The material documentation of BAM-as-a-festival surprisingly aligns with one of the officially promoted visual narratives found in posters, where BAM builders are depicted as archetypal Soviet youth enjoying the best time of their lives on a Siberian construction site (see fig. 27 and IV.2.1). In this way, the conceived BAM space with its heroic narrative intersects with, and is seemingly affirmed by, the lived BAM space, in which such labour is indeed rewarded, thereby lending the official concept both viability and plausibility.

As with any other museum, the politics of visual representation – and, more specifically, how the experience of a particular culture is to be viewed and decoded – rests both in the aesthetic realm and in the personal taste regimes of museum curators (Durrans 2012, 198). These regimes are notoriously non-negotiable, as few museums allow visitors to participate in the 'editing' of exhibitions (ibid., 207, note 8). However, to claim that this is merely how the BAM History Museum staff wished BAM to be seen would be reductive. The material culture

referring to the lived space of BAM, and thereby constructing the experiential image of BAM, can be analysed within the framework of Igor Kopytoff's cultural process of commodification (1986). Within this framework, the museum and its contents can be viewed as part of a broader cultural and cognitive process in which objects (signed envelopes, photographs, cameras, or pieces of fabric) undergo a potential status shift – from commodity to non-commodity and vice versa – through acts of individuation and singularisation. In this context, the object of analysis is not only the artefacts preserved by the museum, but also the museum itself as a curated, meaning-making institution (Durrans 2012, 204).



Figure 44: BAMer Uniform with Festival Pins, BAM History Museum, Tynda, photo by M. Kirstaetter, 2018.

What ultimately emerges from this analysis is a layered understanding of the BAM History Museum as not merely a passive repository of cultural remnants, but as an active participant in the shaping of historical consciousness. The museum curates not only objects, but modes of seeing – privileging certain narratives, aesthetics, and experiential dimensions over others. Through its selective acts of display and omission, it both reflects and reinforces dominant regimes of value and meaning. In this light, the museum becomes a site where material traces of the past are not only preserved, but transformed – commodified, singularised, and recontextualised within a broader representational economy. The question, then, is not only what kind of memory is being constructed, but to what ends, by whom, and for whose gaze.

V.4. Acoustic Level of BAM Image

The collected visual materials in the BAM History Museum, including those situated at the perceived and lived levels of BAM space, testify to the use of visibility on the ground not merely as an ideological abstraction intended for visual consumption, whether or not it produced any measurable effect on the viewer, but as an aesthetic or informational means supporting a different mode of perception, namely the auditory. In contrast to the centrally produced Soviet propaganda art materials, such as BAM posters, the museum collection predominantly documents a striking musical activity, revealing that alongside the visual construction of the BAM image, its acoustic, lived dimension was not only present but considered even more important to preserve than the purely visual one.

Interestingly, however, the preservation of the acoustic level at the official level did not materialise through direct means such as recorded music, even though some traces can now be found on YouTube, uploaded by individual enthusiasts. The museum, however, did not opt for the creation of audiovisual installations but instead chose to document this auditory dimension through visual materials or installations of material artefacts intended to testify to this sensory aspect having taken place. The reasons for this choice may be manifold: assumed elevated costs, the unavailability or scarcity of suitable recordings, lack of necessary expertise, or adherence to established museum practices. Still, this reflects a broader tendency: the BAM history museum, in dealing with the Soviet past, continues to adhere to the principles of Soviet visibility – a system governed by a specific code of rules and clear criteria for measuring success or failure – which prevailed over other sensory domains and prescribed even the imagination of the non-visual through the rigidly defined paradigm.

The discovery of a different level in the construction of BAM space aligns with Lefebvre's argument that spatial experience cannot be apprehended solely through looking (1997, 142). Spaces as any 'monuments are also liable to possess acoustic properties, and when they do not this detracts from their monumentality' (ibid.). Space is measured by the ear; thus, living the vast Siberian space, which was promoted as void and numb before being explored, conquered and inhabited, necessitated filling it with a new music of Soviet life. What this music meant to be was decided on usual antithetical terms in defiance of capitalist values.

The arrival of jazz, rock and roll in the capitalist West after the World War II contributed to emergence of new youth subculture, which aimed at provocation and shocking the bourgeois older generation. In Britain, it took form of Teddy Boys, mods, rockers, skinheads, and punks, in Germany – the *Halbstarke*, and was, as William Jay Risch argues, part and parcel of Western capitalist consumer culture (2015, 5). Whereas in Western Europe these societal developments

were with time accepted as the ‘normal’ outcome of the liberal democratic society and tolerating them as demonstration of true democratic values, the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc looked at these forms of youth behaviour with growing anxiety and unease (ibid., 4-7).

The relationships of the Soviet satellite bloc, in general, and the USSR, in particular, with the growing impact of the rock ‘n’ roll on the youth were anything but straightforward. Aversion to rock music on the part of the older generation, who happened to be in power, could be attributed partly to the generational gap as a response to safeguard public morals against a radical, incomprehensible, socially reforming and potentially subversive creative form (Ramet 1994, 7). Moreover, absorption of the alien to communism views and the imaginary immigration to the West threatened to shake the unshakable principles of the socialist ideology. The results of polls conducted in the Eastern bloc at the end of the 1970s – beginning of the 1980s confirmed such fears to be well-grounded. Young Hungarians possessed a much deeper knowledge about the latest rock stars in the United States and England than they did about Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev or Marxism (ibid.). Bulgarian authorities argued their banning of the rock group *Signal* in 1982 with the arousal of ‘excessive excitement’ among its listeners (ibid.). In Czechoslovakia, the anti-rock campaign frontman writer Jan Kryzl expressed publicly his indignation against Czechoslovakia’s punk bands, displaying ‘obscene gestures, with men performing in women’s panty hose, colored stripes across their faces, equipped with heavy chains and locks, crosses and other shocking junk’ (Ryback 1990, 200, quoted in Ramet 1994, 7).

With the realisation of the impact of rock music came the necessity, if not to counteract it, then at least to co-opt it for the needs of socialism (Ramet 1994, 8–9). In the USSR of the Brezhnev era, special directives were issued to regulate the emergence of musical groups as VIAs – the Russian acronym for Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles [*vokal’no-instrumental’ny ansambl’*], which served as officially approved channels for producing ideologically acceptable music (Ramet 1994, 9; Ward 2015, 260). Belonging to a VIA contributed to the financial and social security of its members, but it also hampered the creation of independent music capable of addressing pressing societal issues. The organs responsible for maintaining moral order included the so-called musical patrols [*muzykal’nye patruli*], composed of ideologically conscious youth leaders and Komsomol cells, who policed musical repertoires and granted official authorisation to perform in discotheques and concert halls (Ward 2015, 261).

BAM zone as the ultimate space for Soviet youth forging became the destination of mandatory musical pilgrimage of numerous VIAs propagating the allowed Soviet musical narrative, which passed Baikal-Amur Mainline off as an object of artistic worshipping and

inspiration. Not surprisingly, the majority of the performing groups glorifying BAM came from outside the BAM zone, for the number of registered VIAs on BAM was relatively small (Ward 2015, 260). As with the official narrative propagated in posters, the dominant-hegemonic discourse in music was also introduced from outside and not reproduced but merely consumed on the ground.

Christopher Ward's (2015) research on rock music activity along the mainline offers a critical perspective on the officially endorsed 'BAM-on-the-rock' narrative. The inclusion of rock music at BAM was part of the initial planning, notably through the construction of local houses of culture [*raionnye doma kul'tury*, or RDKs] – official venues for leisure and entertainment, the first of which were already being built in 1975, just a year after the project's launch (ibid., 256). This cultural initiative was steered by the RSFSR Council of Ministers' plan for organised leisure for BAMers, titled 'On the Organisation of Cultural Services for the Builders of the Baikal-Amur Railway', and was to be implemented by the RSFSR Ministry of Culture and Goskomizdat [the State Committee for Publishing], supported by an allocation of 992,000 rubles (ibid.).

The plan, however, was not implemented as originally intended: the number of organised spaces for leisure and 'mass-political work' proved insufficient, and even where RDKs were constructed, they often failed to offer safe venues for state-sanctioned, cultured relaxation. Instead, they reportedly became sites of brawling, fighting, and heavy drinking (ibid., 257). The circulation of rock music along the BAM frequently relied on the illegal copying of Western rock, punk, and heavy metal through underground pirating practices known as *magnitizdat*. As a result, the BAM zone evolved into a grey area for rock music, where two mutually exclusive forms coexisted: officially endorsed, politically permissible rock on the one hand, and alternative rock, consciously diverging from Soviet norms, on the other (ibid., 258).

Whereas the topic of musical accompaniment and incessant concert tours emerged as a master narrative in the responses of all BAM builders when asked how art – broadly understood – supported their daily lives, this dominant narrative stood in stark contrast to Ward's critical historical accounts. Interviewed BAMers exhibited unfailing pride when listing the names of multiple performers who used to come to BAM zone to honour their – BAM builders' – feat of labour. These memories were impregnated with a strong feeling of joy and enthusiasm, and whenever interviews were held in groups of two, there seemed to be a competition in remembering as many famous names as possible. Whereas Soviet artists such as Joseph Kobzon and Sofia Rotaru were held in high regard, with the infinitely many other well and not so well-known individual artists, musical groups and artistic collectives, special affection was given to

the *American*, the epitome of a foreigner, singer-songwriter Dean Reed. Unsurprisingly, the image of Dean Reed on the BAM – or rather, the special place he held in the Soviet cultural pantheon – was also represented in the BAM history museum in the form of an installation (fig. 45).



Figure 45: Dean Reed's Installation in the BAM History Museum, Tynda, photo by M. Kirstaetter, 2018.

The record on display has a surprising Czech origin, as evidenced by the inscription ‘Dean Reed a jeho svět’ [Dean Reed and His World]. The cover shows the artist in two images: one, a close-up of his face emerging from the trunk of a tree, with branches sprouting from his head; the other, a full-length figure of Reed with a guitar, now at a normal scale relative to the tree, gazing – if I may add, with amazement – at the face. This representation of Reed’s closeness to nature and the ‘rootedness’ of his artistic practice is further underscored by the curatorial choice to place the record beneath a guitar and a photo camera – two of the supposedly most common leisure activities of BAMers – and above photographs of those very BAM workers performing with guitars. This composition either places Reed in the same row as the BAM performers or elevates them to stand alongside him. The positioning of Dean Reed not among a distant pantheon of star performers, but among the ‘ordinary’ performers – the true BAM builders themselves – is further reinforced by the installation’s placement near an improvised campfire, evoking the cosy intimacy of a friendly circle where familiar and beloved songs would be played on the guitar.

This psychological appropriation of Reed’s iconic figure requires further elaboration. Dean Reed was a Western pop singing performer turned to a political phenomenon of the Cold War era. The attitude to his personality can be reflected by various denominations academics studying Dean Reed have attributed to him: *rock ‘n’ roll radical* (Laszewski 2005), *comrade rockstar* (Nadelson 2006), *the singing Marxist* (Harner 1999), and the least political and most affective one *Mr. Simp³tico* (Mularski 2014). The fascinating life and premature mysterious death of a 1938 Colorado-born American with good looks, blue eyes and many performing talents could be personification of any Hollywood film, to career in which he so much aspired.

By 1960, Dean Reed had a contract with music production company Capitol Records, had issued four pop albums and appealed to a limited audience in the US while still waiting for any major roles-to-become-breakthroughs in movie industry. In spring 1960, his recording company Capitol Records sends him on a forty-day promo tour of Brazil, Chile and Peru, when discovering that Reed’s significant fandom lies in another hemisphere in South America (Harner 1999). During this tour and the next years to follow, Dean Reed becomes a superstar idol in Chile, with his hit ‘Our Summer Romance’ surpassing Elvis Presley’s in Chilean hit parade polls. At the same time, he becomes politically active in Chile, siding with the socialist politician Salvador Allende and the poets Pablo Neruda and Victor Jara, and eventually taking residence in Buenos Aires, Argentina (Mularski 2014, 3). His political actions directed against the US American foreign policy like washing the American flag in front of the US embassy in Santiago de Chile off ‘the blood of thousands of Vietnamese women and children, who have

been burned alive by bombs of napalm which are dropped from U.S. planes of aggression' (Mularski 2014, 9) strains his relationships with the US authorities and opens up for him Eastern European markets where he is welcomed by the opposite political regimes.

Reed's first singing performance in the Soviet Union follows in November 1966 after, according to different sources, either meeting Nikolai Pastoukhov, head of the Soviet Youth Organisation and a delegate to the peace conference in Helsinki, Finland where Reed performed on 15 July 1965, and who subsequently invited him to join Pastoukhov's outbound train to the USSR (Harner 1999), or having an affair with the Soviet actress in 1966 in Buenos Aires who was part of a Soviet delegation and who equally invited Reed to the Soviet Union (Hayes 1994, 168). Since both events are not mutually exclusive, I tend to believe that meeting a Soviet political figure had more of a say in whether Dean Reed gets a green ticket to the Soviet musical scene and thus becomes the first American rock musician to perform in the USSR. With Moscow's Variety Theatre sold out, Dean Reed's first Soviet performance is an incredible success. He undergoes three encores, twenty-five minute standing ovation, and the fan hysteria when the personification of an American cowboy in denim blues and wide bell-bottoms with red, white, and blue fairs tries to manage through the screaming and clothes-tearing crowd to the exit (ibid.). On this tour, Reed visits twenty-eights cities, makes rock video recordings and subsequently produces the first rock 'n' roll record in the history of *Melodiya Records*, the Soviet state recording agency (Harner 1999). The officialdom claims that Reed cannot record in the United States for his opposing political views, but apparently the Soviet audience does not care much for his political views. As Ariana Harner quotes one of the Soviet citizens, 'He wore cowboy boots and he came from the land of the free and the home of the brave and Chuck Berry. He meant everything' (1999, n.p.).

Dean Reed's phenomenon is actively employed at the glorification of BAM. In 1980, Reed records a film-concert 'Dean Reed is Singing' where there is a special place for Baikal-Amur Mainline, which he visits a year earlier and produces a hit 'BAM' with the following lyrics²¹:

Deep through the taiga,
sixty below,
Cut down the timber,
fight through the snow.

²¹ The YouTube video of Reed's performing 'BAM' can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qXZWSp6_gY, accessed 4 December 2024.

Chorus:

BAM! We plan to build it so very strong.

BAM! We plan to build it with a song.

BAM! Come on, and everybody sing along.

...

BAM! The rails shall all be laid.

BAM! The towns are here to stay.

BAM! It's the future of our day.

...

BAM! Far as the eye can see.

BAM! Built for you and me.

BAM! People can be free!

...

Building a railroad

'Baikal Magistral'.

Building a future

Come on, sing it loud!

An easy-going, attractive and free-spirited, with his wide smile and charisma, Reed's affection by Soviet people resembles that of a decade earlier deceased Yuri Gagarin – the hero of the space conquest and equally fascinating, young, and loveable male role model. The difference, however, lay in the fact that Gagarin was 'our hero' – someone to be proudly admired, fully entitled to bring 'us' to the leading frontier of space development – whereas Dean Reed was 'theirs', who had consciously chosen the Soviet Union as 'the better of the two systems', while still representing everything that was not Soviet (Harner 1999). The sincerity and depth of Reed's political views were questioned even during his lifetime, including by his political allies (Harner 1999; Mularski 2014; Hayes 1994), while the US State Department regarded him and his political forays as an 'incompetent nuisance' (Harner 1999). Indeed, Reed's opposition to and persecution in the United States was exaggerated, mainly by the USSR and in its political interests, for Reed retained his American citizenship, regularly renewed his US passport and oftentimes visited the United States for personal reasons, political actions, but also with commercial aims, for example to promote a documentary on himself 'American Rebel' in 1985 (Hayes 1994, 169; Harner 1999).

Dean Reed happened to be a politically convenient and likeable rock 'n' roll substitute, with popular following but no real influence on rock music, at the background of no valid competition in the socialist camp. By the time of his death in 1986 in East Germany, *glasnost*

was in the pipeline, and real changes in music contents, form and shape took root in the USSR. New influential performers such as Boris Grebenshchikov, Sergei Kuriokhin and Mike Naumenko emerged on the rock scene sweeping away the traces of the Soviet-style harmless and ever so joyful singing of panegyric on socialist living (Hayes 1994, 175). However, the appearance among the official BAM singers of an American, a free man and a foreigner, albeit a compromise from a musical point of view, but politically acceptable and outwardly so unlike the usual Soviet performers, left a bright, enduring memory that the BAM builders fondly cherish even 40 years later.

V.5. The Paradox of (Post-)Soviet Ideology: BAMer Identity as a Case Study

For a researcher of Soviet ideology, the question logically arises of how deeply Soviet citizens in general, and those determined ones who came to the BAM construction site in particular, believed in the ideology themselves, or whether they simply adapted to political circumstances, simultaneously acquiring some material privileges. Some researchers who study the BAM topic in a historical perspective and who gained access to the BAM builders in the 1990s at the critical moment of the collapse of the USSR and the greatest economic, political and identification crisis both at the regional BAM level as well as the supranational one, witnessed a significant level of bitter disappointment, disarray and confusion. It is objectively impossible to compare the sentiments of that time with the initial ones in the mid-1970s – 1980s due to the lack of independent sociology in Soviet times. This led, for example, Christopher Ward, who was conducting well-grounded research on the topic at the time and in the 2000s, to interpret the entire BAM endeavour as a futile enterprise economically and a sham campaign politically (2001, 2002, 2009). While I do not contest his conclusions, it is necessary to take into account the surrounding circumstances at the time of the observation and interviews and to take a critical account of the sample and composition of interviewees. Likewise, the same critical stance should be applied to my research conducted three decades after Ward's in 2018 and 34 years after the BAM was officially declared complete.

Former BAM construction workers who did not leave the area after the project's completion for various reasons were found in numerous BAM veterans' organisations along the railway. In 2018, these organisations still held regular meetings in a nostalgic setting to commemorate the 'labour feat' of BAM and relive the days of yore. The very belonging to the group and the acceptance of this status so long after the fact implied sharing the same ideals and even surrounding oneself with artifacts and symbols of Soviet past (fig. 46).



Figure 46: Meeting of the BAM Veterans, 26 May 2018, Severobaikalsk.

Access to this part of the field was obtained through the established connections of the fieldwork coordinators and enabled multiple foreign academic researchers to observe the official rituals conducted by the BAM veterans' unions. The setting was predetermined, short-term, formally structured, and ideologically saturated. These personal connections made it possible to identify the BAM builders directly, as those who self-identified as such and actively participated in commemorative events, thus increasing the likelihood of interviewing them later, as well as building the initial trust necessary to do so. On the other hand, the chances of encountering divergent perspectives were minimal, as those who did not identify themselves as BAMers or follow the preserved ideological narrative would not be present in such settings.

In contrast to the structured encounters at official commemorations, conducting fieldwork outside these settings along the Baikal-Amur Mainline on trains offered a markedly different experience. The emotionally and politically volatile state of Russian society in 2018, against the background of simmering conflicts with neighbouring countries, the decline of democracy, the erosion of freedom of speech and human rights, and the generally moderate to low income level among the observed BAM zone population, had led to a kind of societal pupation along political lines. This atmosphere fostered a pervasive sense of being surrounded by an enemy camp and an urgent need to distinguish friend from foe.

Ways of recognising the identities of aliens in Russia are many, and the perceived necessity of doing so remains as pressing as it was in Soviet times. A state of constant vigilance was imposed on every Soviet citizen, whether on duty or at leisure. As Evgeny Dobrenko argues (2003, 179-188), since the Stalin era, the art of social navigation encompassed not only the prescribed notions of how the Soviet individual should look and behave, what they should feel – namely, happiness at living in the Soviet motherland – and where they were permitted to roam, should they temporarily step beyond their defined confines, but also instructions on how to decode the stranger. A cheerful and vigilant hiker finding themselves near the border with the enemy had to be able not only to recognise a spy or saboteur – who had allegedly infiltrated the motherland with hostile intent – but also to disarm them, thus demonstrating patriotism and heroic qualities. Yet even deep within the country, at its very centre, vigilance could never be allowed to lapse – as Mikhail Bulgakov’s satirical episode in *The Master and Margarita* shows, not even the devil himself could escape the scrutiny of ever-alert Soviet citizens.

The habitual verification of one’s belonging to a group of allies operates on multiple levels and can be reconsidered at any moment. In relation to strangers, as observed during the fieldwork, distinctions based on appearance become less prominent. Along the Baikal-Amur Mainline, where the predominant ethnic background is Caucasian European, white Eastern or Western Europeans do not stand out, and previously noticeable differences in clothing or accessories no longer fulfil their sorting function in a globalised world with a largely universalised commodity market.

In the absence of other visible cues such as ethnic difference, language becomes the most immediate and accessible marker for distinguishing friend from foe. Throughout the fieldwork, this identification of the alien revealed itself in a recurring mixture of curiosity and distrust, often tinged with passive aggression, and expressed by locals towards fellow students who mostly spoke German or English among themselves. Even when the language is adequately ‘possessed’, the presence or absence of an accent may help locate an individual on one side or the other – or prompt further questioning. Yet even the absence of an evident accent can prove misleading if it fails to provide clear cues, as was the case with me.

Born in Kyiv, in what was still Soviet Ukraine in the 1980s, into what had by then become a Russian-speaking family, I was educated at a Russian-language school where Ukrainian was taught on an equal footing, and later studied in Ukrainian at university. My school and university recollections revolve around the imperative of speaking a ‘pure’ – that is, accent- and interference-free – language, whether Russian or Ukrainian. Both ‘Ukrainian Russian’, perceived as a mark of insufficient education in Russian, and ‘Russian Ukrainian’,

read as a sign of not being fully Ukrainian and, by extension, lacking patriotic legitimacy, were treated as deviations from the ideal of linguistic purity and, depending on the language environment, were firmly discouraged and socially condemned. The necessity to juggle both linguistic spheres – though not experienced as an imperative back then – resulted in my being raised distinctly bilingual, with no discernible accent in either language.

While my interviewees along the Baikal-Amur Mainline would typically ask where I was from – less out of suspicion than out of curiosity, prompted by the fact that they could not auditorily place me – my answer would elicit varying responses, ranging from neutral to awkward or even hostile. The latter was not often expressed openly, though it did occur. The disclosure of my foreign nationality could also shift the course of the narrative that the interviewee had been following, especially if it clashed with the ideological framework underpinning it.

The dominant narrative of the Baikal-Amur Mainline – one of collective enthusiasm and the fraternal unity of Soviet peoples who had come together in a single impulse to build the railway²² – could suddenly be supplemented with bitter asides. Some interviewees would lament that although every Soviet republic contributed to the construction, veterans from certain now-independent countries no longer claim this identity, no longer associate themselves with the BAM zone, nor attend BAM veterans' gatherings. Ukraine, along with the Baltic countries, was typically among the first to be mentioned as an example of such perceived betrayal, often accompanied by vague allusions to the regrettable current 'political situation'.

If my nationality became known or was disclosed at that particular moment, the conversation would typically halt, and the tone would shift. The obvious resentment remained unspoken, but palpable. The recurring tension I experienced around revealing my national affiliation was, at one point, jokingly addressed by the fieldwork coordinator, who suggested that we invent an alternative origin for me. The only other post-Soviet country I knew well enough to convincingly pass as a national was Lithuania, where I had spent part of my childhood and spoke the language. However, the professor remarked that this would be 'even worse'.

The three dozen or so interviews I conducted were strikingly homogeneous, with the exception of personal details, in their accounts of BAM's past and unanimously followed the officially proposed Soviet ideological path. The group members defended their homogeneity in sharing values and, while accepting the divergence of some former members in their

²² For a critical reading of such unanimity, cf. Ward 2009, 98-125.

worldviews and motivations, denied them the right to belong to the true builders of BAM, *nastoiashchiie bamovtsy*. How did these BAM builders carry their ideals unchanged for more than 40 years? Who is the true ideologist of BAM? Understanding the foundations and driving mechanisms of the very ideology of Soviet dialectical materialism, apparently still alive in the hearts and minds of the true *bamovtsy*, can provide insight into multiple, but not mutually exclusive, answers.

Any ideology can be treated in either of the two ways: sincerely executed by an ideology bearer who must be unaware of multiple visions of the reality and thus treat it unconsciously as the only existing reality and its only true vision, or it can be consciously interpreted by an ideology critic who is cognisant of the ideological character of the suggested vision of reality and sees it as one of many possible alternatives (Groys 1995, 76). In the former case, the very ideological nature of the ideology escapes conscious understanding by the ideology bearer who must preserve children-like naivete towards the forced choice. Otherwise, a change in a person's awareness or perception of ideology would necessitate their change of a fulfilled function from an ideology bearer to an ideology critic (*ibid.*).

In contrast to the general rule, Soviet ideology presented an 'ideology of a special type' (*ibid.*, 76f.), which did not shy away from proclaiming itself as an ideology but also claimed its true character. The corner stone of the theoretical approach towards analysis of ideology was laid by Marxism, which applied the class theory for reasoning the inevitable awakening of the workers' class consciousness and subsequent arrival of the new ideology. It equally claimed to be the essence of this new ideology, and with that, the advocated distinction between scientific character of Marxism as distanced ideology criticism and its very ideological content was showing signs of inner cleavage, should self-reflexivity be applied (*ibid.*, 77). There was an additional option of 'revisionism' to look for a different point in time from which to analyse and describe the ideology, but this would require a constant repetition of the process. Lenin, instead, decided to change linguistically the connotation of the term of ideology from negative to positive and so provided a frame for dialectical materialism (*ibid.*, 78).

Marxism's awareness of itself as an ideology, in contrast to all other 'bourgeois' ideologies that are unaware of their true character, is the moment of the birth of dialectical consciousness and the 'theory of reflection' introduced by Lenin. The ability of dialectical consciousness to *objectively* reflect a constantly changing reality, while recognising the internal contradictions of the dialectic of things, presupposes the universal character of such an ideology (*ibid.*, highlighting mine). The impossibility of reflecting the 'entire experience' of human existence, though, because it is infinite, through which the dialectic of things is revealed, and

therefore its materialistic part, inevitably entails the incompleteness of any attempts to speak unambiguously on the subject of things (ibid., 78, 85).

The last word and the only definite statement on any question were given by the decisions of the party, which were justified as ‘a conclusion from the total experience of the party’ or as the result of ‘all world history, understood as the history of the struggle for social progress and the liberation of mankind’, for only the experience of mankind, taken in its totality, would be the right path to truth as opposed to the one-sidedness of individual experience (ibid., 86). The Soviet dialectical materialism acted as a tool for clearing the way for the party instructions by scattering the accusations of one-sidedness against any private standpoints. Groys so defines the role of this novel ideological approach in carving the overwhelming political direction.

Soviet Marxist dialectical discourse could be defined as a speech designed to silence everyone else and then itself remain silent so that against the background of this general silence only the voice of the party instructions could be heard. This is precisely why the principles of dialectical materialism could not be considered as one philosophical concept among many others. They were rather meta-rules for conducting ideological discussion, which were opposed to the traditional rules (ibid., 95; translation mine).

The Soviet ideologist, therefore, had to superimpose two exclusive types of consciousness, the consciousness of the ‘bearer of ideology’ and the consciousness of the critic of ideology, in order to be able to ‘objectively’ recognise the influence of ideology on themselves and to find a remote position for its analysis, while at the same time displaying absolute trust and unshakable faith in its premises. The practical implementation of such a theoretical approach implied self-doubt in any of the attempts at a critical analysis of ideology, whereas any undertaking of this kind would be anticipated by the author’s humble remark about their individual, and therefore inevitably one-sided, viewpoint, considering which such an attempt on their part should not be taken too seriously (ibid., 85). This disclaimer allowed for existing of multiple schools of analysis, the opposition between which was based not on recognising the shared points of views and looking for inconsistencies and controversies, but on universal acceptance of the fact that any theoretical analysis must be inherently controversial for the sake of true reflection of dialectical materialism and as an opposition to *transcendental, mystical, idealistic, metaphysical, bourgeois, one-sided* falsehood. As a result, Soviet ideology successfully adopted a position of self-irony and doubt in any of its attempts to define the state of affairs as a struggle against one-sidedness and unoriginality, which at the same time

paradoxically could not claim to be the only possible path. Being the only ideology with self-referential claims, it was aimed at scientific self-denial and at the same time ideologically denied any other alternatives.

Groys argues that this belief in self-disbelief struck root in the Soviet society as ‘codified cynicism’ (1995, 91). The more cynicism and pessimism about the promised bright future became stronger, the more certain became the main principle of Soviet ideology that nothing can be taken on faith, *idealistically*, since everything serves someone’s personal interests (ibid.). In this respect, the final dissolution of Soviet ideology launched its autopoiesis as an infallible Catch-22.

Faced with the traumatic experience of the 1990s, which all interview participants who remained in the Baikal-Amur Mainline zone remember as a black time of abandonment, collapse of hopes and reference points and generally as one of the darkest pages of their lives, Soviet ideology did not go away, because no coherent set of ideals and guiding lines came to replace it. People of different occupational ability patterns who came to stay on the BAM tried to re-orient themselves in new economic and political reality. Some of them helped build the cities which did not exist before from the scratch, in whose origin they took pride and for whose fate they felt responsible.

Indeed, topography and history of the places along the railway differs significantly and so does the perception of the city dwellers towards their (cities’ and dwellers’) connection to the railway. If Ust’-Kut (Lena²³) in the current Irkutsk Oblast was formed already in 1631 as a Siberian Cossack fort and an important port on the Lena river, had a history of Siberian political exiles and was the end point of the railway from Taishet in 1951, the beginning of the BAM construction in 1974 made it the starting promising point, the railway-space launching site into the future. With the announced finalisation of the construction project, the city came to terms with its original self: as an important transport knot and a river port, having added some glorious pages to its past as a place that marks the beginning of the *path*.

The history of Severobaikalsk in the Republic of Buriatia is quite different. Founded only in 1974 as a work settlement for BAM builders and envisioned as a future railway hub, it was granted city status in the 1980s. The spacious, regular layout of the streets, the bold architecture of the railway station designed in the form of a sliding ski slope, the northern location on the shores of Lake Baikal, referred to by locals as the Great Baikal Sea, and the surrounding mountains all contribute to the visual impression of a utopia realised.

²³ Name of the railway station.

A former chief engineer responsible for the construction of the Severobaikalsk railway station recalled his attempt to engage in private enterprise after the introduction of the quasi-capitalist system in the 1990s, when he opened a bakery. He spoke with pride about the quality of the bread his family produced and the entrepreneurial joy of running one's own business. Yet the endeavour ultimately collapsed under the weight of corruption, unregulated market conditions, and an underdeveloped democracy that failed to provide adequate mechanisms for protecting citizens' rights and freedoms. Notably, the very word *democracy* never appeared in our conversations and did not seem to be looked upon favourably.

If the new post-Soviet Russia has brought nothing of value to those who once 'laid down their lives and youth' for the great construction, if no new reliable system of values has emerged, and no critical rethinking of the past has been undertaken, then the only thing left is to relive the heroic past again and again – nostalgically yearning for the days of youth and glory. In the Soviet past, there was at least a guiding hand: the Party collective, which claimed to know where the country was headed, why the sacrifices were necessary, and how to interpret the contradictions of reality – always correctly, and always as the sole truth.

Olga Povoroznyuk (2019) analyses the post-socialist mnemonic narratives of the BAM builders as two opposing sets of emotions, with the switch occurring in the 1990s with the political transition to a new form of state and the simultaneous oblivion of the former socialist construction project. The time *before* is marked by feelings of pride, joy, solidarity and fraternity, superimposed on nostalgia for a *strong* state which is no more (ibid., 28, 41). The time *after* is filled predominantly with resentment, anger and fear against the background of the then-introduced *offensive* narrative of official criticism in the media of the feasibility of the railway construction (ibid., 40-1). Personal and collective narratives are intertwined, creating a common social memory that shapes the identity of the BAM workers, which is manifested in strict adherence to remembrance rituals and participation in commemorative public events (ibid., 47). The third turning point in the formation of emotional meaning since the 2000s follows the improvement of economic stability, the retreat of negative media speculation about the necessity of BAM, and coincides with the growth of 'patriotism' defending the current political regime, associated with a strong state (ibid., 42). In 2014, the launch of the second track of the Baikal-Amur Mainline, renamed and integrated into RZhD²⁴ back in 1997 and by then only historically celebrated, coincided with a revival of enthusiasm for the celebration of

²⁴ Russian abbreviation for the largest state-owned company of Russian railways.

the 40th anniversary of BAM, which is again seen as a modernisation project of the *future* (ibid., 43).

It is worth noting that this is how the experience of those people who fell under the reference group of BAM workers, remained on BAM and actively participated in meetings of BAM veterans is reflected. It was not possible to establish closer ties with some former BAM builders who subsequently found themselves in another role for their reluctance to conduct interviews. This is also confirmed by the experience of the BAM activists themselves, who, on the one hand, spoke about the unbreakable friendship and cohesion of the multinational BAM teams from *other Soviet republics*, and on the other hand, complained about the reluctance of many former BAM workers from now different states to join them on social networks or participate in the anniversary meetings. We can only assume that the alternative vision may exist, but does not come up to the surface so easily and eagerly as in officially organised settings.

In modern Russian reality, Soviet ideology has been reborn in a post-Soviet modality, having lost its theoretical foundations in dialectical materialism, socialist orientation, and future-directed aspiration. No longer self-referential, it has become a true ideology in the classical sense – one devoid of self-awareness. The post-Soviet ideological landscape is characterised not only by the eclectic display of Soviet symbols, such as red flags and busts of Lenin at BAM veterans' meetings, the reinstated Soviet anthem with new lyrics for modern Russia, or the continued enactment of commemorative Soviet rites, but also by an economic reality antithetical to the Soviet one, a political imagination rooted in the past, and the vague, unstable outlines of an undefined future.

The true bearers of this ideology must be many, scattered across the expanse of contemporary Russia, yet their particularly high concentration can be observed along the Baikal-Amur Mainline, where the century's great construction project was once so boldly proclaimed, and whose idealistic vision of the future ultimately failed to materialise. This is not the future the BAM builders envisioned nor the one they hoped to find themselves in.

To revisit the analysis of Soviet ideology, it is precisely this internal contradiction that may have once constituted the premise of its theoretical immortality. Yet, with the erosion of its philosophical underpinnings, the post-Soviet form – confused, contradictory, and eclectic – has been left to wither into degeneration.

VI. Conclusion

Despite the ambiguous outcomes in terms of technological and industrial achievements and the unfulfilled hopes for regional and national development, construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline in 1974-1984 entered history as the apotheosis of Soviet propaganda and ideological pinnacle of Leonid Brezhnev's 18-year rule. Ward argues that the efforts devoted to glorifying BAM and exaggerating its successes often exceeded the actual costs of construction (2009, 2). Visual art as the effective and habitual propaganda means played a crucial role in shaping the BAM image and was characterised by its irrepressible enthusiasm, emotional intensity, linearity of ideological message, and contagious spreading. Its overwhelming ubiquity and the power of the state propaganda apparatus are argued to have significantly affected the perception of the project's necessity and of the heroism of its participants, whether or not they directly influenced the voluntary mobilisation of half a million predominantly young Soviet citizens, who constituted the much-needed labour force at the Siberian construction.

The current thesis has drawn on multiple disciplines that have addressed different aspects of the object of study, in order to establish its academic foundations and to articulate a holistic theoretical approach to art created for propaganda purposes and directed at a specific topic, viewing it as a multi-layered political, temporal, and geographical visual construct. Within each of these fields, the aim has been to approach them from the specific focus of this research, not merely assembling the necessary theoretical framework as a puzzle, but also addressing, wherever possible, the research gaps they have left. The academic outcome is grounded in visual studies from the perspective of social and cultural anthropology, drawing upon the anthropology of art and the anthropology of mobility whenever feasible and necessary.

The study of BAM-related art as a creative product of the late Soviet period makes it possible to trace the trajectory of Soviet visual propaganda and communist ideology from 1917 onwards. The theoretical approach has drawn on three major areas: first, the origins of Soviet totalitarian visuality and the consolidation of Socialist Realism as the only accepted art method; second, political posters as a distinct medium in which this sanctioned visuality flourished and assumed specific recognisable visual language; and third, the formation and development of the multi-faceted, often contradictory Siberian myth in Russian culture, which later served as the foundation for the recurrent appropriation of Siberian space in the BAM campaign. Given the limited scholarship on these thematic clusters in relation to the Brezhnev era, this study has sought to trace their origins in order to analyse the trends that persisted and to argue that the

BAM campaign emerged as the product of an accumulated Soviet visual-propaganda mythology – by then both mature and fully developed, yet also stagnant and repetitive – reflecting the state of the political regime that sustained it.

The peculiarities of Soviet propaganda lay in the fact that the emerging Bolshevik state did not conceal its propagandistic and ideological nature, presenting propaganda as something to be proudly embraced and openly employed as an ‘educational’ tool directed at the broad masses (Kenez 1985). From the very beginning, Soviet art was declared a politically and socially inscribed instrument, whose existence was not merely justified but purposefully juxtaposed in opposition to the adversary capitalist values and as an effective equilibration within an antagonistically polarised art world (Groys 2008). Political art created within this framework should therefore not be dismissed in pejorative comparison with the so-called ‘free world’ art of the West, but examined as a coherent system in its totality, integrating ideology, permeating all spheres of social life, and maintaining integrity of representation (*ibid.*).

Out of all the available genres of Soviet political art, this study has focused on posters, chosen for their distinctive correlation between condensed form and meaning, and because the construction of the BAM image was significantly shaped by this medium. The USSR’s decision to continue relying on this medium in the 1970s for an unprecedented campaign of the ‘construction of the century’, by which time the population was predominantly literate, raises questions about its effectiveness at that stage, or whether its persistence simply reflected an unexamined adherence to a propaganda ‘bluebook’ first drafted in 1917, under entirely different conditions of literacy and novelty.

Equally, the long-established Soviet poster tradition of constructing archetypal representatives of specific professions, for example, a worker, a farmer, a soldier, or a working woman, was effectively applied to create the figure of the BAM builder. This not only enabled the state to project its desired and socially sanctioned image of the BAM worker to the population as intended poster audience, but also allowed Soviet citizens contemplating or aspiring to join the BAM construction to identify with the implied prototype – at least hypothetically. Analysis of the BAM worker archetype as presented through poster imagery reveals a set of common, desirable traits: youth, social optimism, and courage, all framed within explicitly socialist ideological values propagated by the Komsomol. An implied gender distinction is, however, evident: women are consistently portrayed as young, motivated primarily by the romanticism of the adventure on offer, and implicitly destined to establish families on-site, thus ensuring the continuation of the BAM narrative across generations. Their professional or career advancement is rarely represented beyond matrimonial age, and their

depictions are in general far less frequent than those of men. By contrast, male BAM workers appear across at least three generational stages: as romantic or spirited youths, as seasoned middle-aged professionals, and as a prosperous younger generation of boys positioned to follow in their fathers' footsteps.

A separate and essential dimension in identifying the visuality of the Baikal-Amur Mainline construction was that of space. The decision to route the railway specifically through Siberia defined the parameters of this space as mythological and its promoted narrative as one of conquest, thereby invoking the multi-level metaphorical modes of Siberian space appropriation in Russian culture. The mythological theme of Siberia's exploration can be traced through at least seven distinct visual facets identified in Soviet Stalinist culture, whose representational trends are argued to have been consistently re-applied during the BAM construction campaign. Depending on the ideological priorities and political exigencies of the moment, Siberia could be framed as the ultimate periphery, a canvas for life-as-dream, a profane allegory of nature, an indispensable part of a greater whole, an intransigent space, an exotic realm, or a *tabula rasa*. In the 1970s, all of these facets were drawn upon in turn, with the addition of a new BAM-specific dimension: Siberia as a land of renewal and large-scale construction.

The construction of BAM spatiality has been examined through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the *chronotope* (1975), which underscores the interconnection between temporal and spatial relations in narrative. Although Bakhtin developed this framework primarily for literature, I have treated the BAM narrative as a visual discourse and applied the concept to two distinct categories of meaning – BAM-time and BAM-space – which, analysed both separately and in their interplay, form a complex assemblage of meanings constituting its cultural representation.

Drawing on Bakhtin's literary studies, I have argued that the *chronotope* of BAM most closely aligns with the traits of the Greek romance, or the 'adventure novel of ordeal', situated in *adventure-time* (1981, 86-7). The heightened emotional intensity and value-laden significance of the decision to embark on this journey, evident in BAM's visual representations, further situate it within the *chronotope* of the threshold, embodied in moments of crisis and decisive turning points (Bakhtin 1975, 397). Taken together, the BAM *chronotope* can thus be understood as both *adventure-time* and threshold, functioning as a watershed in a Soviet individual's life trajectory. The spatial dimension of the BAM *chronotope* has additionally been examined through a Foucauldian lens, conferring on BAM-space the characteristics of a *heterotopia* (1997).

By the mid-1970s, Soviet political propaganda, developed over more than five decades, had accumulated a capacious visual vocabulary of iconographic techniques, rich in meaning and capable of expressing communist values and ideals non-verbally. The choice of a deeply familiar visual language allowed Soviet citizens to read and grasp the intended message with ease. Perhaps, it was precisely this routine use of familiar visual tropes and signifiers, symbolising the new world, the communist utopia, and the aspired future just beyond reach that ensured uninterrupted continuity of the ideology and thus secured its acceptance as the correct path to follow.

In this respect, it is particularly revealing to trace the origins and evolution of transport motifs in Soviet political posters from the train of the 1920s, symbolising progress, prosperity, and a bright future, to its replacement in the 1930s by aeroplanes and dirigibles representing the new air-conquering era; to spaceships in the 1960s, following Yuri Gagarin's flight into space; and finally back to the train in the mid-1970s, by which time its novelty could scarcely have been perceived as embodying the most advanced technological means, yet its symbolism had become multi-layered and deeply ingrained in the Soviet ideological imagination. The intended elevation of this familiar mode of transport to the status of the latest technological achievement, placing it on a different metaphorical plane through its spatial orientation 'up, forward, and into the distance', is exemplified most vividly by the tapestry 'Space to BAM', exhibited at the Second All-Russian BAM Art Exhibition (fig. 47). In this metaphorical alignment, the theme of space exploration in Soviet iconography endows the BAM project with the same utopian optimism, affective energy, and romantic spirit of pioneering conquest, yet does so without even depicting the train itself at all.

At the same time, late Soviet political art demonstrated proficiency in selecting appropriate forms and styles to convey the ideological priorities of the moment, drawing on the collected visual catalogue at its disposal. While continuing the traditions of Soviet agitprop from the 1920s to the 1960s, the visual representation of BAM was characterised by notable thematic shifts: a rejuvenating focus on Komsomol youth, a democratisation and softening of thematic content, the elimination of class struggle, a near absence of militarism, the inclusion of gender roles, albeit understood in the traditional sense of combining profession and family, and a reassertion of collective, attainable heroism, in contrast to the individual self-sacrifice emblematic of earlier decades, which was subordinated to the envisioned collective effort.

Simultaneously, the state apparatus for producing political poster art had become fully institutionalised, exhibiting the characteristics of a mature propaganda bureaucracy. This is evidenced by the founding in 1974 of the publishing house *Plakat*, which comprised sixteen

editorial offices (Waschik, Baburina 2003, 288). Thematic exhibitions, including those related to BAM, followed the decisions of the plenary sessions of the Council of Artists of the RSFSR. The first republican BAM art exhibition coincided with two other art shows marking political anniversaries: sixty years since the first communist *subbotnik* and fifty years since the first five-year plan (Khabarova 1980, 7). Most poster artists who exhibited at both BAM events were not based in the BAM zone but resided in Moscow or other major cities of European Russia.



Figure 47: G. Permiakova. Tapestry 'Space to BAM', 1984.

This professionalisation and bureaucratisation left little scope for genuine creativity or innovation. As a whole, BAM art often displayed signs of fatigue, repetitive use of established tropes, and striking internal contradictions. Viktor Koretsky's BAM posters exemplify this stylistic accumulation. His lifelong engagement in political poster production, with the BAM theme falling on his mid-sixties, has been read as a condensation of the Soviet poster journey in its long-run development: the heritage from the avant-garde in the form of a photo poster, the comparison of BAM heroism to the endeavour and sacrifice of the Second World War, and the monumentality characteristic of the Brezhnev era. Ultimately, the attempt to revive a forward-looking narrative in the BAM project, evoking the revolutionary drive of the early

Soviet state, stood in stark contrast to the late socialist regime, marked by pervasive political and economic stagnation.

It is important to recognise the gap between the ways BAM-related art and its ideological messaging were instrumentalised for different audiences: the intended audience – observants-to-potentially-become-future-participants in the construction – and those already ‘inside’ the BAM experience. A central thesis of this research is that the visual-artistic strategies designed to mobilise the masses for railway construction differed markedly from those later used to sustain leisure and cultural life among the recruited BAM workers. This shifting visibility, embedded in the multilevel production of space, has been examined through Henri Lefebvre’s tripartite spatial framework of the conceived, the perceived, and the lived (1997).

The conceived level of spatiality, articulated in poster imagery by designers and visionaries of the space, sought to glorify the heroic act of embarking on a journey to a remote northern region and undertaking arduous physical labour. These materials functioned primarily as promotional tools, selling a dream and appealing largely to the imagination. Posters from this ‘outward’ or pre-BAM phase – particularly those showcased at the two BAM art exhibitions of 1979 and 1984 – are archetypal examples of Soviet agitprop. This language became so deeply embedded in everyday life that, as former BAM workers testified in interviews, it ceased to have any consciously perceived effect. Yet, it may be precisely this invisibility and habituation of an omnipresent visual reality that testifies to the pervasive influence of totalitarian art: it permeates the *totality* of human activity and becomes the only known and ‘native’ environment.

The very totality of this art, and its inescapable presence in the daily life of Soviet citizens suggests that although its direct effectiveness in mobilising people to work on the BAM cannot be conclusively demonstrated, it is reasonable to assume that prolonged immersion in an ideologically saturated visual environment leaves (in)visible traces. These traces inevitably shape whether such propaganda art is critically assessed or, rather, accepted as the only familiar visual reality, particularly when the state amplifies the emotional charge of a specific political objective through visual means.

In contrast, the visual materials preserved *in situ* in the Museum of the History of the Baikal-Amur Mainline in Tynda reflect the lived cultural reality of BAM residents: concert posters, announcements of organised cultural activities, and hobby evenings. These two strands of ideological visibility – mobilisation and maintenance – rarely intersect and instead appear as two sides of the same coin: one targeting those yet to arrive, seeking to mobilise and entice; the

other aimed at those already on site, sustaining the ideological and cultural infrastructure of post-arrival life.

The museum as an essential mediator of the gaze, determining how the BAM image is represented and what is permitted to be seen, has been analysed through Foucault's concept of the institutional apparatus, exercising power to grant or restrict access to knowledge (1977). The museum's focus on primarily material artefacts, belonging to the lived level of spatiality, and the resulting mode of vision mark a shift from the conceived representation of the BAM as a feat of labour to its construction as a festival of labour. Its negotiation between the official and local gaze is embodied in the acoustic dimension of the BAM image, which creates a shared sensory ground between the museum's collections and interviews with BAM participants, thus linking the site of production of an image and the site of its perceiving and interpreting audiences (Rose 2007, 13-26). This integration of image and sound reinforces Lefebvre's argument that monumental space – BAM as a meaningful concept – cannot be fully apprehended by vision alone, but is also experienced through sound (1997, 142).

The argument that discourses across different levels of reception – visual and verbal/acoustic – are closely intertwined is supported by the striking consistency between the Soviet-era visual environment, complete with red flags and Lenin busts, reconstructed at BAM veterans' meetings, and the ideology-infused verbal narratives from the same historical period, which former BAM builders continue to echo in their interviews long after the project was officially completed. The political and ideological vision embedded in so constructed visuality appears to be inseparably linked with the verbal testimonies.

The ideological BAM project was meant to have an end, aiming to testify to the achieved goal, and there was an inevitable shift from the monumentality of the BAM space to its ordinary, lived spatiality – a transfer repeatedly enacted through the reiterated celebration of the railway's 'completion' in 1984, 1991, 2001, and, finally, in 2003 (Ward 2009, 156), and further consolidated through the mundane renaming of BAM as the Eastern Siberian Railroad. However, as democracy in modern Russia appears to have suffered a defeat, the pervasive nostalgia for the Soviet era – so evident in interviews with former BAM workers – has culminated in an unmistakable general return 'back in the USSR'²⁵, accompanied by the restoration of original propaganda narratives celebrating the 'feats of the Soviet yore.' It is impossible not to draw parallels between the political and ideological climate of the Brezhnev era and that of the Putin regime.

²⁵ Notably this is the title of the website dedicated to celebration of the 50th anniversary of BAM: <https://back-in-ussr.com/2025/04/50-letie-s-nachala-stroitelstva-bama.html> (accessed 18 Aug 2025).

Of particular interest for this study is the instrumentalisation of this revival through the concept of ‘BAM’, enacted via the re-monumentalisation of what is now a utilitarian transport infrastructure. This is evidenced by the restored tradition of commemorating the anniversaries of BAM’s inception every five years, starting with the 30th anniversary in 2004 (only one year after its final completion) and culminating in a grandiose 50th anniversary lasting for three days in July 2024 in Tynda, amidst the full-scale Russian invasion on Ukraine. Notably, such a revival is visually and acoustically supported by the very same means as half a century ago.

However, the collapse of temporalities – the late-Soviet stagnation period versus Putin’s 25-year almost immovable rule – combined with clashing ideologies (communism versus unbridled capitalism) and conflicting political agendas (celebration of youthful heroism versus restoration of an archaic ideological order) produces a discordant eclecticism. This artificially reconstructed environment feels inert and incongruous - it is no longer lived, cannot be believed in, and reveals the highest level of cynicism, thereby unmasking the very foundations on which it claims to be grounded.

This attempt to elevate BAM in accordance with the museum’s suggested narrative of a festival appears to reverse a transfer from a building back to a monument, echoing Lefebvre’s argument, ‘Buildings are to monuments as everyday life is to festival, products to works, lived experience to the merely perceived’ (1997, 141). Perhaps, the renewed necessity to embark again on an imagined train towards some distant bright future is the only possible escape from the lived present. Yet it is crucial to remember that this future remains merely perceived, and that the imagined railway can only ever arrive at an imagined terminus.

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IX. Filmography

City of Youth (Komsomolsk). Soviet Union 1938. Director: Sergey Gerasimov.

Frontier (Aerograd). Soviet Union 1935. Director: Aleksandr Dovzhenko.

Moscow (Moskva). Soviet Union 1927. Directors: Mikhail Kaufman, Ilya Kopalin.

Party Membership Card (Partiynyy bilet). Soviet Union 1936. Director: Ivan Pyrev.

Siberians (Sibiryaki). Soviet Union 1940. Director: Lev Kuleshov.

The Arrival of a Train (L'arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat). France 1896. Directors: Auguste Lumière, Louis Lumière.

The Conquests of Peter the Great, Part One (Pyotr pervyy I). Soviet Union 1937. Director: Vladimir Petrov.

The Conquests of Peter the Great, Part Two (Pyotr pervyy II). Soviet Union 1939. Director: Vladimir Petrov.

The New Moscow (Novaya Moskva). Soviet Union 1938. Directors: Aleksandr Medvedkin, Aleksandr Olenin.

The Sixth Part of the World (Shestaya chast mira). Soviet Union 1926. Director: Dziga Vertov.

Turksib. Soviet Union 1929. Director: Victor A. Turin.