



Figure 1. Alexander Rodchenko, *Shukov Tower*, 1929

The aim of this essay is to investigate the image 'Shukov Tower', the question set for this essay is "How beneficial is the image of *Shukov Tower* 1929 to the communist movement?". This photo was taken by Constructivist photographer Alexander Rodchenko, who was armed with a Leica M3 took photos during the 1920s-1940s. Through this question an exploration of technical choices by Rodchenko will be evaluated on how effective they were, as well as theory and opinion by Alexander Lavrentiev, Alexander Rodchenko, and Terry Barret to also question the effectiveness of the image.

But before one can delve into this question, one must understand who the Constructivists (In Russia was referred to at *Konstruktivizm*) where. They were founded in Russia around 1913-1915 by Rodchenko and Vladimir Tatlin, influenced by Cubism and Futurism. This directive of the modernist movements derived their name from there *Realist Manifesto* in 1920, which was centred the movement about creating art that showed their appreciation for technology, machines and modern materials like Steel, concrete, glass and so on.

Compositionally the image has been angled to exaggerate the height of the 'Shukov Tower', this initially strikes the viewer with powerful and overwhelming imagery. Derived from this the viewer begins making connotations about the structure; that it is a grand structure that dominates the space that it surrounds and that its some iconic almost worshipped building. Lavrentiev also discusses Rodchenko's stylistic and technical choice in his images by saying "*Intentionally stressed perspective and depth by choosing a particular angle*" (Lavrentiev, 2008, p.204), which is certainly the case for this image. It perfectly documents one of the great constructions and the prowess of what the Soviet Union's engineering and manufacturing capabilities of steel. As well how they have a monumental construction that is symbolic of their country and capabilities. Thus, making this element effective in what Constructivists tried to achieve. In comparative to what was being achieved in Europe at the time, photographers in Germany specifically students at the Bauhaus were taking photos of buildings. In aim to serve and worship architecture also. This was based on their own manifesto

curated by Walter Gropius (the founder of the Bauhaus), who wanted all art to serve architecture and design. Where the Modernists of Germany were using art to worship and co-operative with architecture. The Constructivists created art to serve the communist state, which so happened to co-inside with documenting great project.

In terms of form and pattern, the photo illustrates a strong geometric structure composed exclusively of metal. By using a shallower depth of field, it hones the viewer into this array of form making them take note of the details in texture and construction. This was intentional done to draw the viewer in with appeasing imagery making it interesting to look, but the intent was to showcase of the capabilities of the factories present at the time. In relation to this theory, Barrett says "*Visual metaphors also have levels of meaning: What is shown and what is applied*" (Barrett, 2021, P.70). Looking at the photo of *Shukov Tower* we see a sturdy looking structure, built with precisely casted and purposefully built metal. But what the viewer connotes is that this was a nation pushing boundaries and capabilities (of the time) modern engineering. Again, as a result provides a bias and support for what the Soviet Union was achieving during 1929.

Despite this, towards the end of Constructivist movement and (the change in Russian government) meant that Rodchenko's work, including the photo of *Shukov Tower*, was declared anti state. By this point Rodchenko had also become disillusioned by what he was creating and the reasons he was creating art. This is best stated in Rodchenko's personal diary in 1943: "*I want to lead the people to art, not use art to lead them somewhere*" (Lavrentiev, 1943, P.7). From this we can understand that one of key pioneers of the Constructivist movement felt that possibly their art was leading people in the wrong direction, that it they were assisting something that they didn't agree. As a result, the art they had made had become redundant through the passage of time. Similarly, the Bauhaus saw closer in 1933 by the hand of the Nazis. They had also deemed the art anti state and saw that the school was closed permanently till the end of World War two. Possibly, the Modernist movement was too radical, to new, to ahead of its time thus the world saw its demise.

Alongside this Rodchenko had achieved in creating beautiful art in terms of graphics, illustration and much in the case of *Shukov Tower* photographs as well. As Lavrentiev rightly says regarding the artist's work: "*He conveyed the beauty of technical objects & modern architecture*" (Lavrentiev, 2008, p.204) which is true, Rodchenko had captured the flattering side of *Shukov Tower*. However, despite this being the case the value to the people of the Soviet Union it had little relevance to them. The photo firstly does not outline any of the surrounding context of the location, thus meaning it would be difficult to go appreciate in person. Secondly, the photo doesn't outline anywhere how it would positively impact the people of state. It is simple an image that showcases what the government could do for their own benefit. Unlike the Bauhaus, which saw to experiment with architecture and enrich the lives of civilians with great social housing that was functional, modern and subjectively beautiful.

Overall, Rodchenko had utilised photography effectively to empower and showcase what the USSR had created, thus further promoting the notion that it was a prosperous nation capable of many engineering capabilities. In the words of Lavrentiev "*Rodchenko Transformed documentary photography into art*" (Lavrentiev, 2008, P.204), of which through this creative documentation was able to demonstrate to the people of the Soviet Union that they could create many modern structures and they were excelling. In doing so the support for the communist government would have grown, as a result of almost irrefutable photo evidence of *Shukov Tower* created by one of the most important Modernist Photographers, Alexander Rodchenko.

Bibliography:

Figure 1: Lavrentiev. A and Sviblova. O (2008) *Alexander Rodchenko: Revolution in Photography*. Multimedia Complex of Actual Arts

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