

Transcription of British Library podcast

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/whatson/downloads/files/btrforthevoice.mp3>

Curator Peter Hellyer talks about the Mayakovsky/El Lissitzky book of poems *For the Voice*

Part of the Breaking the Rules Exhibition at the British Library,
9 Nov 2007-30 Mar 2008

For details see <http://www.bl.uk/breakingtherules>

I'm Peter Hellyer – one of the curators of the British Library's Russian Collections. I'm going to talk about *For the Voice*, a collection of 13 poems by the Russian writer Vladimir Mayakovsky in an edition designed and illustrated by the Constructivist artist El Lissitzky.

This collection of poems was published in 1923 by the Berlin branch of the Russian State Publishing House and was aimed at readers both at home and abroad. It contains poems written over a period of ten years most of which had been previously published in journals and newspapers.

These poems were intended to be read aloud and served as a means of propaganda. In treating the whole book as part of the Constructivist design, Lissitzky regarded himself as an architect of the page – both fabricator and constructor of the book. The book is created with just the resources of a compositor's type-case – pieces of type, rule bars, bullets – and printed in two colours sometimes used in cross hatching and overlays. Lissitzky wrote that just as the poet in his poem unites concept and sound, he was trying to create an equivalent unity using poem and typography. Some years ago the British Library published a facsimile edition of *For the Voice*. This was accompanied by an English translation which attempted to recreate Lissitzky's original graphic design. The cover of the original, together with an illustration from the poem "Left March" from the English translation is shown here.

Vladimir Mayakovsky attended art school in Moscow where he met the Russian Futurists and joined their group. Fellow artist David Burliuk encouraged him to give priority to writing poetry though Mayakovsky continued to draw all his life. His early poetry embraced the urban themes and street language favoured by the Italian Futurists. Parading the streets reciting his poetry, he often wore a yellow shirt with a wooden spoon or radish in his buttonhole. After the Russian Revolution he continued to be deeply involved in controversies about art and poetry and wrote many poems for the masses in a cubo-futurist style, some of which are included in *For the Voice*.

"Left March" the first poem of *For the Voice* was written in a taxi on his way to address a group of sailors in December 1918 and afterwards became a favourite at public gatherings. It opens with a command to march, with the sub-title "to the sailors". In his book *How Verses are Made*, Mayakovsky says that rhythm is the basic force and energy of poetry. In this poem there is a strong drum beat rhythm with the repetition at regular intervals of the word "left", like a musical motif reflecting the synchronised steps of marching ranks. This is also mirrored in the visual layout, where standard verse lines are broken up with single word lines "left, left, left" printed in red forming a column down the page. A contemporary report tells how Mayakovsky spoke the first stanza in a particularly inspired way while lightly stamping his foot, and how the aggressive delivery, the gesture of his hand cutting through the air and the all pervading voice of the poet captured the mixed audience and resulted in thundering applause.

El Lissitzky was one of the foremost exponents of Russian Constructivism. The Constructivists prime aim was to communicate on a mass scale and to connect art to everyday life. Lissitzky believed that the book format with clean layouts and photographs would allow ideas to reach thousands of people "transforming their consciousness". He

transformed books of poetry by Mayakovsky and other writers with bold typography and inventive photomontage which made book covers as striking as posters. In contrast to the small editions of pre-revolutionary times, their books were now being officially published by the State Publishing House in large editions for the masses. Together with other Constructivists he led the world in book design and these books still hold interest for designers today. *The Face* magazine from the 1980s, for example, was heavily influenced by the Russian Constructivists in its graphic design and today we still see their techniques and images in books, magazines and advertising posters.

Some of these techniques can be seen in the cover of *For the Voice*. One commonly used device is where only one letter is used at the intersection of words sharing the same letter as, for example, where the author's name "Mayakovsky" crosses at right angles with the book title "Dlya golosa" and only a single letter "ya" is printed. Throughout the book Lissitzky arranges words so that they are able to share sounds and letters in various positions. This visual economy not only allows the quick absorption of information but also gives rise to numerous word associations and puns.

It is also particularly interesting for those familiar with the British Library logo to see here that the second part of the title "golosa – the voice" is rotated through 90 degrees so that it has to be read sideways as with the Library's logo. This presents the book as a dynamic object which has to be turned round for the title to be read completely.

The cover also illustrates how letters can be read as images as, for example, where the letter "o" is separated from the rest of the text and turns into a stylised mouth with a red inner circle resembling lips. This becomes a symbol "for the human voice". The letters of the Russian Cyrillic alphabet are more block like and geometrical than other Western alphabets so that when they are enlarged or reduced as in this cover they can form part of an abstract image which can be read as picture sound, symbol or word.

One of the most distinctive features of the book design is the alphabetical thumb index, with visual symbols representing each poem together with shortened titles. Each right hand page is cut to reveal a tab which makes it easier for the reader to scan the titles and find a particular poem. The tab leads to the left hand page of each poem. This consists of an image which is sometimes just representational and at others more symbolically related to the poem. As *Left March* was written to address a group of sailors, it is appropriately preceded by an iconic image of a ship with masts and flags. The repeated word 'left' refers to the marching commands and the jagged lines a diagrammatic depiction of kicking legs. On the right hand page appears the title and first words arranged expressively. Type rules and spacing bars are sometimes used to construct some of the larger letter forms – such as capital M for March, and different typefaces, sizes and weights are used for contrast or symbolic value. By using printed symbols as part of the illustration in *For the Voice* he transforms the poems 'for the eye'.