



**Katharina Klotz.** *Das politische Plakat der SBZ/DDR 1945-1963: Zur politischen Ikonographie der sozialistischen Sichtagitation.* Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2006. 157 pp. EUR 49.80, paper, ISBN 978-3-8322-4138-4.

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With this short but comprehensive study of the first two decades of poster design in the GDR, Katharina Klotz provides a useful reference for scholars of East German visual culture and its role in the creation of a socialist identity.

Klotz begins by situating the imagery and use of GDR posters in a historical lineage of "visual agitation" stretching from the Reformation to the French Revolution, to nineteenth-century caricature and the First World War. Citing Walter Benjamin, she links the "aestheticization of politics" and the development of a socialist visual vocabulary to the contemporary conviction that the poster could be used as a tool to convert the "irrational" masses (p. 10). During the Weimar era, posters grew to play an extensive role in the characterization of the political goals of competing parties, garnering the poster a status it was to retain through National Socialism and into the post-war period. For GDR designers, these earlier German models were important points of orientation, as was the Soviet socialist poster.

From her initial historical orientation, Klotz works to pinpoint individual links to other design traditions. Here, as elsewhere in postwar German culture, a great deal of continuity of methods and goals was present. The GDR designer walked a thin line, as the goal put forth by the SED was to

integrate the "tradition of militant poster art from the Weimar republic" with "realist" poster art of the Soviet Union (p. 15). For the SED, the designer's job was to create an image that reflected its own commitment to the cause, as only this personal commitment would effectively convince the worker/viewer.

Klotz's discussion throughout the book of the SED's earnest theorizations on the purpose of visual design and the goals of the political poster are especially instructive. Particularly useful in this regard is the distinction she invokes between propaganda and agitation: the former designates the larger ideological context of the Soviet Occupied Zone/GDR, while the latter refers to specific efforts within socialist politics and for the institutions responsible for these efforts, that is, the SED and the mass organizations. Using archival materials, especially from internal discussions of the Verband Bildender Künstler der DDR, Klotz describes the SED's development of the theoretical framework necessary for a cohesive visual agitation. In the early years, this body of thought essentially mirrored developments in the visual arts: the Soviet Union stood as the major example to be followed, while the socialist tradition within Germany first had to be cleaned up before it could be used.

In internal discussions as well as in public debates in the press, designers were carefully monitored for any use of modern or expressive elements that could be understood as "formalism" and were forcefully encouraged to instead look to Soviet examples of "realist" approaches that could be applied to the German case. As she describes this early ideological shaping of graphic design, Klotz misses an opportunity to integrate her discussion into that of the impact of the "formalism debate" on the visual arts, which has been extensively analyzed by art historians (particularly well by Ulrike Goeschen).[1] A step outside the narrow structure of the dissertation could have yielded a more integrated understanding of the development of visual culture in the GDR as a whole.

The strongest aspect of the book, however, is the author's foundational description of how graphic design in the GDR was directed, where it was developed, and by whom. This material includes a register of graphic designers in the GDR with brief biographies, notations of party or organizational roles these individuals played, and bibliographic references. Most importantly, Klotz presents a typology of GDR poster design, using numerous examples to trace the roots of individual motifs and analyzing the grammar and meaning of these designs. Klotz breaks her twenty-year span of poster design into three parts: an initial phase of foundation symbolism based on a differentiation with the West and an emphasis on antifascism, a second concerned with *Aufbau* and the expansion of socialism, and lastly a more refined phase utilizing autosuggestion in the creation of a self-image and the securing of power for the SED and the mass organizations. In her focused discussions of the origin and development of individual motifs, such as the pair of clasped hands used in the logo of the SED, Klotz demonstrates the intimate connection between graphic design and the creation of a cohesive political identity within the GDR.

Although Klotz might have made a broader impact with this material by taking into consideration existing discussions of political iconography and the visual arts, her analysis provides an important addition to the study of visual culture in the GDR. It should prove to be a useful guide for future researchers in this area.

Note

[1]. Ulrike Goeschen, *Vom sozialistischen Realismus zur Kunst im Sozialismus: Die Rezeption der Moderne in Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft der DDR* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 2001).

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