



IINA KOHONEN

PICTURING THE COSMOS

A VISUAL HISTORY
OF EARLY SOVIET
SPACE ENDEAVOR



FOREWORD BY SLAVA GEROVITCH

In January 2009, at a conference on Soviet “space enthusiasm” in Basel, Switzerland, I saw a huge, blow-up photo of an untied shoelace projected on the screen. The offending shoelace belonged to Yuri Gagarin, walking to meet the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev upon a triumphal return to Moscow after his pioneering space flight. In her talk, Iina Kohonen used this picture – one of the most ridiculous and at the same time symbolic images of the Space Age – to make a point about a touch of humanity in the idealized representations of cosmonauts by the Soviet propaganda machine.

Previous studies of the visual record of the Soviet space program focused on more obvious issues, such as the retouching of cosmonauts’ group photos to erase perished or expelled candidates, or the elimination of cosmonauts’ photos with Khrushchev after the embattled Soviet leader was ousted in 1964. Such studies addressed the questions of secrecy or immediate political expediency.

Kohonen’s approach is different: she looks at smaller details and bigger context. She studies the photographic record of the Soviet space program not for the sake of finding vanished cosmonauts, but to detect the embedded ideological messages – in other words, to compile the grammar of Soviet visual propaganda.

In this book, each space picture is truly worth a thousand words – Kohonen’s analysis reveals not only the explicit intentions of the media, but also the underlying assumptions of the Soviet visual discourse. Photos of heavenly bodies and depictions of space technology convey the message of conquest. Shades of color and grayness in space paintings display a range of conflicting emotions, from awe to escapism. Typical imagery of Soviet space heroes in public and in private evokes a fairytale script. Representations of humans and machines are blurred in utopian technological visions.

This book shows that neither documentary photos nor artwork can ever be reduced to a single meaning. A slow study of visual images, like slow reading, uncovers what a fast glance often misses – the expressions on the faces of villagers watching a just-landed cosmonaut, or the ordinary details of cosmonauts’ daily lives that undermine conventional stereotypes of masculinity.

The ambivalence of cosmonaut roles – as heroes or ordinary people, as models of masculinity or family men, as emotional humans or extensions of technology – shines through many images in the book. They encapsulate

the contradictory essence of Soviet space mythology – an attempt to build a propaganda campaign around a highly secretive program, to prove the superiority of socialism while stressing the peaceful and international character of the space enterprise, and to mobilize mass enthusiasm for space exploration while reaffirming domestic family values.

My interviews with Soviet space program veterans and the study of personal diaries and archival materials suggest that cosmonauts did not easily identify with their own visual iconography. While the government decreed that a bust of each flown cosmonaut should be erected in his or her home town, Alexei Leonov, the first “spacewalker,” objected to the installation of his monument, which thus had to remain in the sculptor’s studio for 28 years. When Gagarin’s mother asked him for a photo, he did not give her any of his iconic images, instantly recognizable around the world. Instead he found the photographer who had taken a casual picture of him before the historic flight, when Gagarin was still a young, unknown pilot. This photographer told me in an interview that Gagarin wanted to give his mother precisely that old photo, where he was not famous yet, a photo that was not endlessly reprinted in the media, a photo that had captured his humanity before he was turned into a visual symbol of the Space Age. Gagarin, the most recognizable icon of the time, did not see himself as an icon.

Whether flipping through glossy pages of popular magazines or thumbing through dusty old photos in archives, Kohonen brings to life the immediate visuality of Soviet space experience and slices off layer after layer of meanings. Whether you are a seasoned space historian, a space buff, or a casual reader, familiar space images will never look the same to you after you read this book.

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