The Legacy of 1917 in Graphic Satire

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In 1917, revolution was performed in Russian graphic satire. Political cartoons—images, traditionally hand-drawn, that use various graphic techniques to suggest a satirical critique about politics—always comment upon current events, and the existing literature on visual culture in 1917 rightly highlights the way graphic art reflected the revolutionary shift in power relations.

The notion that the October Revolution represented a cultural as well as a political rupture is familiar, and although political cartoons are often overlooked in studies of revolutionary artistic experimentation, the aesthetic impact of the Bolshevik regime upon cartoon art and graphic satire has been considered in some recent literature.[1] The artistic response in the period between the two revolutions, however, is less thoroughly explored.[2] Based on images selected from a corpus of over four hundred images published in Russian magazines during 1917, this essay focuses on the period between the revolutions of February and October, when Russia "was awash in images, as artists of all kinds and from all political persuasions attempted to capture the essence of the time."[3]

In 1917, political developments and their concomitant depictions in cartoons were accompanied by another shift, and it is this change, which has not previously been considered, that I choose to explore. As this essay argues, the fundamental change detectable in the political cartoons of 1917 was towards a kind of visual satirical discourse that possessed performative power. Looking beyond cartoon content, and proposing a new conceptual framework for analysis based on theories of performativity, this essay contributes to the discussion on the repercussions of the 1917 revolutions by revealing the performative force of political cartoons.

In this essay, I consider how political belief and individual identity are performatively constructed together in cartoons from 1917, and how artists employed theatrical and ocular graphic metaphors to "perform seeing" and reveal an otherwise hidden truth. These two questions reflect central strands in scholarly discourse on performativity, and are observable in Soviet-era political cartoons and traceable in the images of 1917. Cartoons published in Soviet satirical journals such as *Krokodil* are distinguished by their use of performatively-constructed, highly ideologically-charged characters (the fat capitalist, for instance). They also stand out by their frequent recourse to

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1. Cartoon art, poster design and graphic satire in the early months of the Bolshevik regime is explored in, e.g., José Alaniz, *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia* (Jackson, 2010), 31–56; Stephen Norris, *A War of Images: Russian Popular Prints, Wartime Culture, and National Identity 1812–1945* (DeKalb, 2006), 171–179; Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley, 1997), 21–33.
2. Graphic satire in the period between the revolutions is covered briefly in Norris, 170–171; Vladimir Lisin, *Russkaia karikatura, 1812–1985* (Moscow, 2006); and John Bowlt, "Art and Violence: The Russian Caricature in the Early Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *20th Century Studies* (December 1975): 73–76.
3. Norris, *A War of Images*, 170.

theatrical performance and façade as metaphors to enable the satirical exploration of boundaries between reality and illusion. This approach derives partly from the philosophy of Judith Butler, whose arguments develop the theory and politics of individual and gender identity.[4]

An artwork's power to activate its viewers is familiar to us, especially considering the age of socialist realism (from 1932 onwards), when the artwork was commonly understood as a mechanism for effecting a psychological shift on the part of its readers. Moreover, after the worldwide protests prompted by *Jyllands Posten*'s publication of Muhammad cartoons (2005), and following the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* offices (2011) and staff (2015), discourses that describe the agency of political cartoons are familiar. A conception of the performative force of political cartoons—those from 1917, in this case—is therefore helpful for understanding the meaning of the visual critiques to be found in Soviet graphic satire.

Pre-Revolutionary Graphic Satire: "Capturing the Images of Our Great and Terrible Times"

After 1917, cartoon art became an essential component in Soviet visual culture, and *Krokodil* magazine (1922–1991) published thousands of images, but the development of graphic satire in the region before the communist revolution was fitful and stunted.[5] State censorship, harsh punishments, and the absence of a tradition of critical comment meant that before 1917, cartoonists could satirize freely only during periods of war or political upheaval.[6] At such times, political cartoonists felt the tension between the urge to satirize and the patriotic charge of the national mood. At the outbreak of war in 1914, Russia's leading satirists agonized over their professional responsibilities in wartime, and concluded that "We shall be glad if *New Satirikon* succeeds in capturing the images of our great and terrible times."[7] "Capturing the images" of the time, indeed, expresses the generally patriotic sentiment of the Russian literary-satirical journals and characterizes Russian cartoonists' approach up to this point.[8] Rather than contributing their own critiques of the politics of the period, Russian cartoonists up to 1917 tended to present fantasies—visions of imagined situations—in which ironic messages might be interpretable. Like visual

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4. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990).

5. Excellent accounts of the development of Russian graphic satire are provided by Bowlt, "Art and Violence: The Russian Caricature in the Early Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries"; David King and Cathy Porter, *Blood and Laughter: Caricatures from the 1905 Revolution*, (London, 1983); Norris, *A War of Images*; and Alaniz, *Komiks*.

6. In this sense, the example of Russian cartoon history supports the hypothesis that cartoons are products of power conflicts. See Lawrence H. Streicher, "On a Theory of Political Theory," *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, 9, no. 4 (July 1967): 441.

7. Quoted in Lesley Milne, "'Novyi Satirikon,' 1914–1918: The Patriotic Laughter of the Russian Liberal Intelligentsia during the First World War and the Revolution," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 84, no. 4 (2006): 644.

8. See Hubertus Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia During World War I*, (Ithaca, NY, 1995): 31–39.

Aesopian language, these cartoons made their points using situational irony, incongruity or caricatures. Before 1917—even when graphic satire blossomed in the revolutionary year of 1905—a Russian tsar was almost never depicted in a Russian cartoon. While various cartoons pictured government ministers unflatteringly, Tsar Nicholas II was almost always the absent player.[9] Such images prefigure cartoons published after 1932, in which the USSR's leading politicians are bodily absent. While their presence is always implied by artistic reference to distinctive markers (apartment-building, for instance, was associated with Khrushchev), Russia's political leaders were only infrequently visualized.[10]

State authority, and the systems of government, were regularly represented in pre-revolutionary and Soviet-era images as symbols and personifications. Peter the Great was famously imagined as a cat being buried by mice, and Nicholas II was visualized as an ass.[11] As Oleg Minin suggests, cartoonists in the revolutionary period 1905–08 were unable to visualize Nicholas II, and they thus depended upon "rather inventive allegories and metaphors."[12] Like those published in 1905–08, the cartoons of early 1917 represented tsarism via the symbolic trappings of the institution, or by a skeleton.[13] Gombrich employs the term "condensation" to describe the cartoonist's "telescoping of a whole chain of ideas into one pregnant image," and using the skeleton enabled artists to convey the implied comment on the inhumanity of the monarchy highly effectively.[14]

Performing Disembodiment

The modes of graphic commentary employed by most artists before 1917 were quite potent means for "capturing the images of the time," but political beliefs and ideological essences are not rendered on characters' bodily surfaces, and they do not engage in forming individual or political identities in their characterizations. Neither do they explore theatricality or other metaphors to convey messages about the synchronous existence of multiple subjectivities. They cannot, in short, really be described as performative constructions. For

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9. When he did appear, he was only very gently ridiculed, or he was pictured with his face hidden behind a newspaper—see Homunculus, "Zachityvalis," *Pulemet* (1905), no. 2."

10. Stalin, for e.g., appeared in *Krokodil* no. 47 (1925), 1, 3; no. 44 (1927), 1; no. 34 (1962), 2; and no. 35 (1989), 1.

11. For Peter as a cat, see Anonymous, *Myshi kota pogrebaiut*, c.1760, available online from the Russian National Library at https://vivaldi.nlr.ru/le000000086/details (last accessed July 21, 2017). Nicholas II was substituted for an ass in Ivan Bilibin, "Osel (Equus asinus) v 1/20 nat[ural′noi] vel[ichiny]," *Zhupel* (1905), no. 3, p. 1.

12. Oleg Minin, "Art and Politics in the Russian Satirical Press, 1905–1908" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2008), pp. 80–115.

13. For examples of tsarism as a skeleton from 1905, see Anonymous, untitled cartoon, *Ovod′* (1906), no. 1, p. 1; and Anonymous, untitled cartoon, *Pchela* (1906), no. 5. For 1917 examples, see tsarism as an empty throne (Anonymous, untitled cartoon, *Baraban* (May 1917), no. 4, 1), or a super-sized crown (Anonymous, untitled cartoons in *Bich* [April 9, 1917] no. 14, 3, and 9). Excellent analyses of the images of 1905–1908 are provided by Minin's 2008 dissertation, and King and Porter's 1983 survey.

14. E. H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse: And Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London, 1963), 130.

Butler, performativity is the generation of meaning through the verbal and non-verbal construction of individual and collective identities. This process, moreover, is "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."[15] Butler argues that social and political power, felt as regulatory social norms, work "in performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies."[16] Bodies, in other words, do not stand outside of culture or society, and the subject does not pre-exist its own performative construction; instead, corporeality and identity co-create each other. In the political cartoons from the pre-revolutionary period, however, real individuals are caricatured in fantastic scenes, and tsarism's systemic flaws are symbolized by fleshless forms—bodies that lack materiality (see figure 1).

As 1917 progressed, cartoonists began to use the bodily surfaces of the characters they drew to create performatively-constructed critiques that echoed and contributed to the political discourses accompanying events. One of the key developments in the subject matter and visual vocabulary of political cartoons in 1917 may be found in the visualization of Tsar Nicholas II himself. The Tsar's physical features had been seen in political cartoons only rarely before—cartoonists had previously been severely restricted by censorship, and Russian autocrats had until now virtually never been embodied in their own forms.[17] As Nicholas was unseated from power, however, he became more commonly and less respectfully depicted. The Tsar's abdication, on March 1, 1917, prompted artists to revise their graphic treatments—Nicholas became smaller, physically weaker, and more forlorn. This insolent efflorescence was brief, though: by October, he had faded from prominence. As Nicholas's power dwindled and his real significance in political discourse subsided, cartoon artists exerted their own authority to construct images that performed the sovereign's personal and constitutional identity.

In contrast to the graphic satire of earlier periods of protest, when artists visualized the devastating power of tsars and autocracy, the cartoons of 1917 played a role in diminishing the authority and potency of the autocrat. In numerous cartoon scenes, Nicholas is depicted as passive, usually with smiling eyes, and in a subordinate position to the Tsarina or to Rasputin (an element in street discourse and rumor that cartoonists helped to popularize). During 1917, cartoon artists such as Viktor Nikolaevich Denisov (later, better known as Deni, to become one of the USSR's most important graphic artists), adopted representative strategies that engaged in the performative construction of individual and collective political identities. Using familiar techniques from the cartoonists' armory, Russian artists constructed their critiques through distortions of scale, substitutions, and caricature of physical features. As Figure 2 shows, a cartoonist's compositional decisions and the situations in which the Tsar was placed were still vital to the communication of meaning, but the character's facial features, pose, gesture, and dress were all deployed in the artistic construction of his identity.

15. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xii.
16. Ibid.
17. As Minin shows, caricatures of Nicholas did appear in revolutionary journals in the early years of the twentieth century (See "Art and Politics," 81–90).
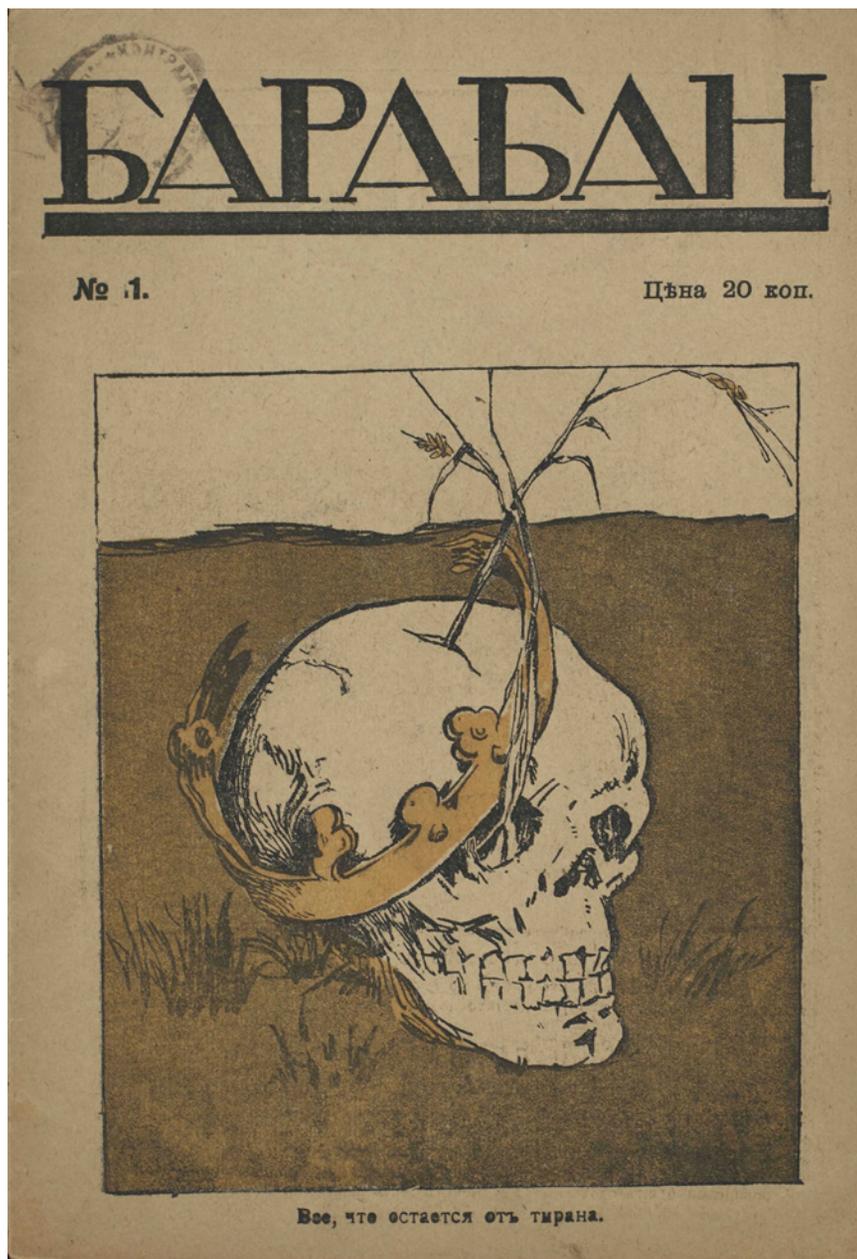
Figure 1. Anonymous, "Vse, chte ostaetsia otʹ tirana," *Baraban*, no. 1 (1917): 1.

Here, in one of the first images of the act of abdication published in Russia, Nicholas is held at bayonet-point, having already removed his crown. His head remains bowed, however, as if under the weight of a different burden. Although the throne clearly belongs to him, and the robes of state indicate that the aura of majesty has not entirely departed him, his stance is indicative of personal and political surrender. With knees slightly bent and hands
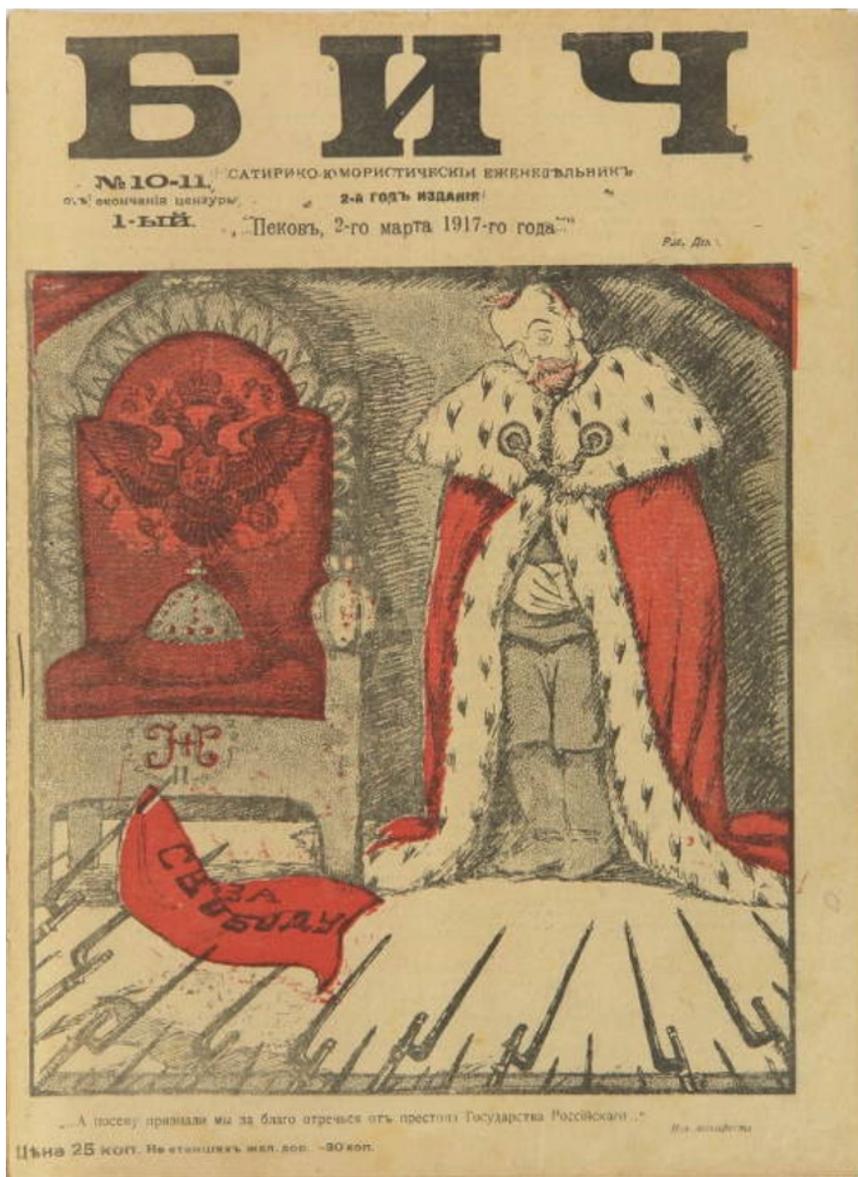
Figure 2. Viktor Deni, "Pskov, 2-go marta 1917-go goda," *Bich*, no. 10–11 (2 March 1917): 1.

clasped together, he awaits the demands of those holding the weapons. His face is gaunt and lined, as if showing the strains of inner turmoil, but here the artist does not fully exploit the potential of Nicholas's body as a surface on which to materialize the character's core.

Deni parodies images of Russian imperial power and ceremony, using and inverting the conventions of such visions. As Richard Wortman notes, the "Russian monarchy was dominated by a performative imperative," and

the contemporary viewer would have appreciated the radical incongruity of the scenes presented in these cartoons.[18] For Wortman, the visual texts of the tsarist autocracy are representations, illustrations of political intent, visions of monarchical power—a "simulacrum of a state."[19] They captured visions of imperial ceremony, and, through reproduction and distribution, made the monarch's presence felt throughout his dominion. In their subject matter, paintings relocated the monarch to "a realm of irresistible and efficacious enlightened rule," and in their multiplication they produced a "'doubling effect' that that intensified the presence of the subject of monarch."[20] Wortman's explanation of official texts visualizing tsarist pomp therefore conceptualizes ceremonial performance and artistic representation as separate acts. He uses "performance" in the theatrical sense, and he also notes that a performance might not actually correspond to its visual representation.[21] According to my performative reading of these cartoons from 1917, the image itself possesses the power to construct new political critiques. In the case of Figure 2, what is being performed here is the reversal of Wortman's "doubling effect." Nicholas literally stands aside from his throne and his crown, and the cartoon performs the decoupling of the personal figure of the tsar, whose ignoble surrender we are witnessing, from the symbols of ceremony so central to tsarist visual texts, thereby relocating Nicholas in the realm of the real Russia and its revolutionary politics. The tsarist official narrative, constructed in so many imperially-sanctioned visual texts, is unwritten and revealed as empty theatre. This cartoon thus performs the disembodiment of autocratic authority.

Performing Seeing

The performativity of the political cartoon was also manifested in 1917 in the artistic exploration of theatrical and ocular graphic metaphors to "perform seeing" and reveal otherwise hidden truths. While many cartoons presented readers with realistic situations whose veracity was at least plausible (being neither objectively truthful nor possible to disprove), numerous images were fantasies designed to encourage readers to adopt a more skeptical vision. In these images, the reader is instructed on the unreliability of outward appearance as a guide to inner psychology. The cartoon thus performs the function of a kind of x-ray vision, assisting the reader's interpretation of meaning. These self-reflexively graphic texts heightened readers' self-consciousness about the act of seeing. This was achieved in 1917, as in later years, in cartoons that conducted explorations of the theatricality of politics, using costumes and masks as metaphors.

18. Richard Wortman, *Visual Texts, Ceremonial Texts, Texts of Exploration: Collected Articles on the Representation of Russian Monarchy* (Boston, 2014), 369.
19. Ibid., xviii.
20. Ibid., xvii and xix.
21. For examples of the use of "performance" as a noun, see Wortman, *Visual Texts*, 239. For Wortman's note about the possible divergences between ceremony and representation, see Richard Wortman, *Russian Monarchy: Representation and Rule*, (Boston, 2013), xxi.

Figure 3. V. Svarog, "Kto pravil Rossiei?" *Krasnyi smekh*, **no. 1 (April 1917): 1.**

In Svarog's "Who ruled Russia?" (see Figure 3), the familiar suggestion that Tsar Nicholas was a puppet ruler was reprised via the use of the masquerade. Figurative language is thus visualized in a cartoon that argues that Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and Grigorii Rasputin are the real rulers of Russia, and that their subterfuge has been concealed behind masks of the Romanov family. The image derives its critique from another ironic repurposing of Russian heraldry and the conventions of official portraiture, but its real force lies in the
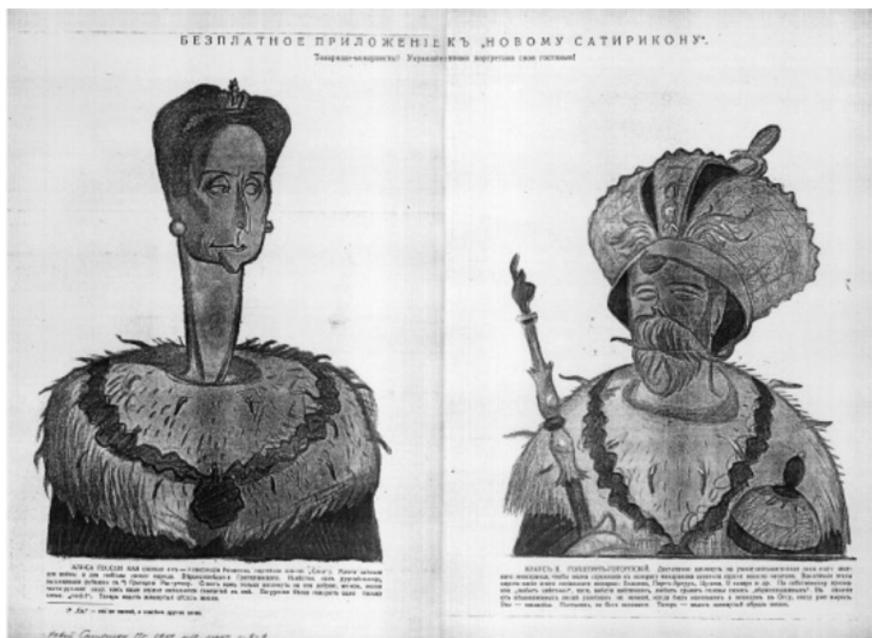
Figure 4. Anonymous, "Besplatnoe prilozhenie k 'Novomu satirikonu,'" *Novyi satirikon*, **no. 12 (March 1917): 8–9.**

implication that a satirical vision enables a viewer to look behind the façade of imperial power and understand who really pulls the strings.

Carefully and self-consciously performing the act of seeing skeptically, this cartoon was a more reliable guide to understanding political power than judgements based on outward appearances. Images such as this discredited Romanov rule, as much as they justified revolutionary change. They also visualized the act of seeing beyond impediments, and performed acts of revelation designed to encourage in the reader a kind of skeptical vision. This performative capacity of the cartoon endured beyond 1917, and became an important element in Soviet satire, since, as *Krokodil* shows us, it had great potential as a critical device. Although the mask is understood to represent simply the most superficial identity performance, the space behind the mask is populated by other identities. Obscuring identities and unmasking the truth became something of an obsession in *Krokodil*, even though carnivalesque masquerade does not necessarily conceal counter-cultural forces. This interest, however, invites the question of whether any visage represents the true face of the actor, and whether any mask matches the identity of the actor as he appears. The presence of the performative mask, which "is the very image of ambiguity, the variety and flux of identities that otherwise, unmasked, are conceived as single and fixed," is unsettling for the viewer because it indicates the duality of existence, and the deceptiveness of appearances.[22]

22. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 304.

Theatrical metaphors used to imply a critique of dishonest behavior. Employed adeptly by later Soviet cartoonists, they were developed during 1917 (see Figure 4). While the Tsar and Tsarina are caricatured rather gently, the artist's political critique lies in his construction of the relationship between the royal bodies and their clothing. Here, the Tsar's regalia and crown fits extremely poorly—the impression is one of a ruler who is unfit for the role. This obvious political comment contains an important element closely related to the performance metaphor explored in this image. Contemporary viewers of images of Tsar Nicholas II were familiar with the use of his dress to legitimize his political power. Indeed, his dress is subsumed into the construction of his symbolic identity—the costume becomes part of the body it obscures and even lends it authority. In drawing attention to the inappropriateness of the costume, however, this artist raises his reader's awareness of the presence of the costume, creating an unsettling consciousness of the boundary between real (the body) and unreal (the costume). The external signs of power, then, are revealed to be as transitory and superficial as costume items.

This metaphor was frequently deployed in Soviet graphic satire, but its reverse was also used to construct characters' psychological conditions, as well as assumed identities, in numerous cartoons that performed various ideological critiques. Characters were created with different surface-level features, with clothing that might perform the function (more or less completely) of hiding an individual's bodily form. The fat capitalist's pot-bellied physique was conventionally costumed in a pinstriped suit and top hat. This attire marked the character as a capitalist, but it also assumed an independent performative agency that extended the graphic construction of ideological critique. Soviet cartoonists also derived techniques for investigating the divergences, and the boundaries, between reality and façade, and these frequently depended upon the exploration of the nature of vision, and of seeing satirically. In a 1960 cartoon, for example, the bureaucratic report ("*Otchet*") is imagined as a sort of distorting eye glass.[23] When the viewer looks through the glass, a perfect scene is visible. A smooth road and well-built bridge, comically well-fed animals, well-maintained buildings, including a House of Culture and a satisfied-looking milkmaid, are all present in this report. This "Optical Illusion" is both real and unreal. It is real in the sense that the image has been performatively created in this cartoon. This image, of course, parodies some of the affirmative treatments of idyllic rural life to be found in other media. Moreover, such falsified reports were published: the text at the top of the cartoon informs us of actual reports that have been exaggerated. It is unreal, however, because the viewer can perfectly see an alternative vision outside the scope of the report. In this "outside" world, swampy roads and collapsed bridges, undernourished animals and incomplete buildings exist. These problems, of course, were all separate subjects for other *Krokodil* cartoons, and as such, they represent the subject of an alternative official discourse on life in the USSR. This cartoon, then, presents the reader with a paradoxical and troubling view of Soviet reality. This vision, however, is accessible only to readers skilled enough to interpret *Krokodil*'s performative visual language.

23. Iulii Ganf, "Opticheskii obman," *Krokodil*, no. 6 (1960): 5.

A shift occurred in Russian political cartoons in 1917 as visual satirists, inspired and emboldened by revolutionary politics, experimented with new techniques for expressing their critiques. Deriving an analytical method for understanding how cartoonists construct characters and how artists draw their readers' attention to their own acts of seeing, this essay highlights the way political cartoons from 1917 and the Soviet period may be better understood as a kind of visual discourse with performative power. This performative facility in political cartoons, which was anyway significant because of Soviet socialist realism's demand that an artwork must activate its viewer, assumes new significance in light of twenty-first century cartoon crises, and sheds new light on the impact of the political change that occurred in 1917.