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CRITICAL FORUM: ENCODING THE STATE—ON THE BUREAUCRATIC GRAPHOSPHERE

Introduction: Specters of (Un)Seeing

Angus Russell

King's College, University of Cambridge, UK
Email: ajmr5@cam.ac.uk

In their 1993 installation at the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, entitled *Bol'shoi arkhiv* (Big Archive), the (once) Moscow conceptualists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov offered a parodic critique of Soviet bureaucracy. Each room in the labyrinthine archive contained a new, or ostensibly new, institutional experience: booths, barriers, and closed doors all compelled attendees to submit their information to the authorities' "control." As with their earlier works—notably *16 verevok* (16 Ropes, 1984) and *Chelovek, kotoryi nikogda nichego ne vybrasyval* (The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away, 1988)—*Bol'shoi arkhiv* attended to the Kabakovs' recurring concern with what it means to label, collect, and sift, overlain with what it means when it is the *state* that labels, collects, and sifts.[1] One of the small cards in the installation embodies this repeated overconcern: "ATTENTION [*VNIMANIE*]! Certificates and accompanying documents will be accepted only when accompanied by a legible signature [*razborchivaia podpis'*] and stamp!" Running diagonally across the text is a strip of red proclaiming its own categorization as an "EXTRACT FROM THE RULES" (*VYPISKA IZ PRAVIL*). Yet if *Bol'shoi arkhiv* uses the visual to skewer categories of information so beloved of bureaucracy—deed turned to word—searching for details of the exhibition reflects that claim to the archival process back on itself. The "exhibition catalogue," a manila folder masquerading as an archival document, must be unwrapped to read this "EXTRACT FROM THE RULES," but is available in very few libraries: the self-archive of *Bol'shoi arkhiv* is limited to those with the means and knowledge to access it.[2] Such are the conditions of what may be seen or unseen: the archive must privilege, must gather together, but need not reveal the secret.[3]

At the limits of the seen, the archive hence encounters and flees the *razborchivyi*—what can be made out, but also what can be (literally) examined, discerned, and discriminated—and in so doing also encounters and flees the graphosphere, as understood by Simon Franklin as the "space of the visible word."[4] Here, there is space to see, space to write,

[1] Ilya Kabakov, *Installations 1983–2000: Catalogue raisonné, vol 1, 1983–1993*, ed. Toni Stooss (Düsseldorf, 2003), 1:66–71, 174–81, 430–37; Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 196n9.

[2] Ilya Kabakov, *Bol'shoi arkhiv: Installiatsiia/Het grote archief: Installatie/The Big Archive: Installation* (Amsterdam, 1993), [unpaginated]. For English translations of some (but not all) of the "documents": Kabakov, *Installations*, 1:432–37.

[3] Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive: une impression freudienne* (Paris, 1995), 13.

[4] Simon Franklin, *The Russian Graphosphere, 1450–1850* (Cambridge, UK, 2019), 1; Franklin, "Graphosphaera/Graphosphere/Graphosphère/Grafosfera/графосфера: Words, Concepts, Approaches,"

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and between them the space where writing might be seen. From these deceptively simple premises, Franklin's graphosphere aims to conceptually resolve dichotomies often associated with the history of writing: it is real—a *thing*—not a theory, however much it might spawn theoretical attitudes; it is likewise non-hierarchical, however much it attends to the social and technological hierarchies inherent in its creation. What the graphosphere is not, at first glance, is political. Indeed, however diverse Franklin's sources—from Bibles and Fedor Dostoevskii's novels to shop signs and coins—the graphosphere remains a "cultural space," a "phenomenon of culture," confronting an assumption that documents like blank forms are "the emblem of bureaucracy, the very opposite of culture."[5] Together, *bureaucracy* and *graphosphere* risk creating not only a neologism from a neologism, but a contradiction in terms. From the state's perspective, the core difficulty mirrors the archive's: the *visible* is equal parts opportunity and threat. Political centers rely on the seen to inculcate legitimacy, both as explicit "propaganda" or spectacle, and as less overt recurrences that presume to foster notions of belonging, in recent centuries the "banal nationalism" of both literal and metaphorical flags.[6] At the same time, certain facets of the state must be kept hidden from view, either for the sake of that legitimacy—as expressed by the Victorian constitutional theorist Walter Bagehot, that "we cannot let daylight in upon [the] magic" of monarchy—or, more frequently, to prevent its subjects discovering what their rulers "really" think.[7]

Certainly, East Slavic history is no stranger to interpretations of rule that foreground the visible. The late Soviet semiotic boom intimately vested ritual, ceremony, and imagery with the power of *display*, where meaning could be—indeed, had to be—understood as part of a bounded cultural system that transcended generic distinctions under the all-encompassing "sign" (*znak*).[8] In the past two decades, those principles, modulated through interrogations of strict semiotics, have underlain a rich seam of research into how dynastic and imperial expansions were fashioned visually in early Rus′ and Muscovy.[9] But if Richard Wortman was correct to see tsarist monarchy as a "symbolic system," uniting performance and authority, there is an odd tension in how the *seen* word figures in that matrix.[10] Semiotics, at least as practiced at Tartu and Moscow, exploded the "text" beyond the written, while retaining its sensory vocabulary: in Boris Uspenskii's terms, a "text is read [*chitatetsia*] by society [*sotsium*]," but there is—visually at least—*nothing to read*.[11] Words, the matter of written

Graphosphaera 1 (2021): 13; for a broader working definition, as "all forms of depiction": Franklin, "Mapping the Graphosphere: Cultures of Writing in Early 19th-Century Russia (and Before)," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 531.

[5] Franklin, *Russian Graphosphere*, 271; Franklin, "Information in Plain Sight: The Formation of the Public Graphosphere," in Franklin and Katherine Bowers, eds., *Information and Empire: Mechanisms of Communication in Russia, 1600–1850* (Cambridge, UK, 2017), 341; Franklin, "Printing and Social Control in Russia 3: Blank Forms," *Russian History* 42, no. 1 (February 2015): 134.

[6] Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London, 1995), esp. 93–127.

[7] Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* [1867], ed. Paul Smith (Oxford, 2001), 50.

[8] Iurii Lotman, "Znakovyi mekhanizm kul′tury" [1973], in his *Istoriia i tipologiia russkoi kul′tury* (St. Petersburg, 2002), 63–66; Boris Uspenskii and V.M. Zhivov, "Tsar′ i Bog. Semioticheskie aspekty sakralizatsii monarkha v Rossii" [1987], in Uspenskii, *Izbrannye trudy* (Moscow, 1994–97), 1:110–218.

[9] Notably by several contributors to this forum: Valerie Kivelson, *Cartographies of Tsardom: The Land and its Meanings in Seventeenth-Century Russia* (Ithaca, 2006); Michael S. Flier, "Seeing is Believing: The Semiotics of Dynasty and Destiny in Muscovite Rus′," in Nicholas Howe, ed., *Ceremonial Culture in Pre-Modern Europe* (Notre Dame, 2007), 63–88; on representations of Russia in other parts of Europe: Nancy S. Kollmann, *Visualizing Russia in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, UK, 2024).

[10] Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy* (Princeton, 1995–2000), 2:4.

[11] Uspenskii, "Historia sub specie semioticae" [1976], in *Izbrannye trudy*, 1:50. On the Moscow–Tartu school's "linguistic" loyalty to Ferdinand de Saussure, against Charles Sanders Peirce's "logical" semiotics and its allowance for the "*material* qualities of the sign" (Peirce's emphasis): Uspenskii, "K probleme genezisa tartusko-moskovskoi

language, instead become a kind of flight into the symbolic, their materiality struggling uselessly against the dictates of signifying idealism.

To return to the graphosphere, this tension becomes notably acute as the valences of writing—its status as artefact, either public or private—are refracted through social and technological change. Franklin explicitly contrasts his graphosphere with the schema expounded by the French theorist Régis Debray, for whom the "graphosphere" is one among three "mediaspheres," a stepping-stone from a pre-Gutenberg "logosphere" to a post-1968 "videosphere"; these spheres map neatly on to traditional divisions of western history, in which the "received truth" of logospheric writing was superseded by the graphospheric author as a "guarantor of truth," the printed text foisting "its rationality [*rationalité*] on the entire symbolic environment."[12] Certainly, Franklin's graphosphere is temporally inflected, but not as "the space of the visible word," which has existed, and will continue to exist, as long as humans write in ways that can be seen. Rather, the graphosphere *itself* changes through time: the world of monastic manuscripts and handwritten *prikaz* documents, typical of Muscovite elite writing under Ivan III ("the Great," 1462–1505), gave way only slowly to printed material, culminating in an edict from Peter I ("the Great," 1682–1725) of March 1714 that all imperial decrees were to be distributed in print. While Peter himself was convinced that this shift reflected his imperial project *par excellence*, its evolution was characterized just as much by "non-Gutenberg moments," of points where print was not adopted; in other words, the Russian use of print did not fulfil the technological teleologies assumed for knowledge production in western Europe.[13]

Much as these zigzagging evolutions disrupt Debray's assumed identity of "print" and "rationality," so they also challenge theories of bureaucratic change that devolve towards Max Weber in their understanding of how writing modulates power: of desacralized, "rationally trained," *rational geschulte*, experts pursuing their role among and through "written documents (the 'files')... ."[14] In this vein, the disruptive capacity of the graphosphere finds ready parallels in other periods, regions, and disciplines. For the medieval west, it offers a way to bridge the gap between functions of literacy, what words *did*, and semiotically charged concerns with what graphic inscriptions—both writing and not writing—*meant* in the Middle Ages;[15] likewise in Reformation and Enlightenment Europe, to study the graphosphere might entail acknowledging Gutenberg not as a single, uniform shift with uniform political consequences, but as a more contingent element in "early modernity."[16] Yet graphospheric affinities also emerge beyond this binary comparison between Russia and Europe, however much it underlay Peter I's imperial ambitions. In his study of bureaucratic practice in contemporary Pakistan, for instance, the anthropologist Matthew Hull treats state documents precisely as objects in themselves—to look "*at* rather than *through*

semioticheskoi shkoly," in A.D. Koshelev, ed., *Iu. M. Lotman i tartusko-moskovskaia semioticheskaia shkola* (Moscow, 1994), 273; Charles S. Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" [1868], in Nathan Houser and Christian J. W. Kloesel, eds., *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington, 1992–98), 1:40.

[12] Régis Debray, *Cours de médiologie générale* (Paris, 1991), 533; Debray, *Manifestes médiologiques* (Paris, 1994), 40.

[13] Franklin, *Russian Graphosphere*, 38, 230–31.

[14] Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen, 1922), 651, 662; Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, 1978), 2:957, 975.

[15] Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge, UK, 1989); Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak, *When Ego Was Imago: Signs of Identity in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, Netherlands, 2011); Peter Rück, "Beiträge zur diplomatischen Semiotik," in Rück, ed., *Graphische Symbole in mittelalterlichen Urkunden: Beiträge zur diplomatischen Semiotik* (Sigmaringen, Germany, 1996), 13–47.

[16] See, for example, the debate around the "impersonal" implications of print: Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, "An Unacknowledged Revolution Revisited" and Adrian Johns, "How to Acknowledge a Revolution" in *AHR* Forum: How to Acknowledge a Revolution, a special issue of *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2002): 87–105, 106–25.

them"—to pursue their social and affective mediations as much as their instrumental function.[17] This at/through distinction serves the graphosphere well, underlining the cultural and technological specificities of the visible word across history. At the same time, unlike Hull—whose living interlocutors could guide his looking *at*—for the past, above all the distant past, we are ordinarily reliant on those same documents to study anything, including the graphosphere. It is a space both past and, in our own viewing, eternally present.

Where, then, does this leave the "bureaucratic graphosphere"? The contributions to this forum—which emerge from and continue conversations begun at the *Graphospheres* symposium held at Trinity College, Cambridge, in April 2024—do not cleave to a single interpretation of what a graphospheric approach to the state might entail. At one end sit those for whom documents have to be seen to be believed. As Valerie Kivelson shows, depictions of documents in the *Litsevoi letopisnyi svod*—the illustrated chronicle compiled for Ivan IV ("the Terrible," 1533–84)—offered an increasingly visible route to legitimize bureaucratic hierarchies, not least as Muscovite assumptions encountered the discrete practices of steppe diplomacy. Even when bureaucratic objects did not publicly project a particular idea of rule, however, the graphosphere was never far away. Despite Peter I's efforts to standardize official documents, Alison Smith's essay charts how divergent and messy expectations of handwriting necessarily troubled such top-down ambition; in a similar vein, Nancy S. Kollmann explores how bureaucrats' multifaceted signatory forms could disrupt supposedly unified institutional forms across the Russian Empire. Indeed, as Michael Flier argues, signatures—while rare—could unsettle otherwise fixed aesthetic forms: for the seventeenth-century icon painter Simon Ushakov (1626–86), writing his name *within* icons bolstered his claims over creativity, bureaucratic control, and memory in spheres orbiting the Muscovite court.

At the other end are those who attend to how the state and its actors might restrict the visible word. Stephen Lovell tracks voting methods—some secret, others less so—in local elections across the pre-revolutionary *longue durée*, highlighting how the process for choosing representatives had to be balanced against the risk of encouraging more expansive notions of democratic government. Gregory Afinogenov, meanwhile, proposes a microhistorical view of imperial censors in Riga under Paul I (1796–1801), with their role intimately concerned not just with *visibility*, but with those kinds of *legibility* that might undermine the tsarist state. Moving ahead to the twentieth century, Simon Dixon's article equally undercuts any culturally hermetic notion of the "Russian" graphosphere; detailing the efforts of imperial and Soviet authorities to control equine movements domestically and internationally, he establishes how ever more globally oriented graphospheres were nonetheless delimited by *who* could see them. Benjamin Peters then brings this tension into dialogue with the stakes of contemporary media theory, not least in highlighting how the digital realm—a site no less "graphospheric" than print or manuscript in making words visible—can be instrumentalized both for and against the regimes of Aliaksandar Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin. Indeed, even at this latter apogee of cultural essentialism lies a pseudo-ironic porousness in the state's view of the "Russian" graphosphere, as in one of the totemic symbols of Russian military aggression against Ukraine: the *Latin* letter Z, formed either from the orange-and-black ribbon of St. George, or replacing the Cyrillic *z* in phrases like *za pobedu!* ("for victory!").[18]

[17] Matthew S. Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (Berkeley, 2012), 13. I am grateful to Timothy Cooper for drawing this work to my attention.

[18] For the doubly ironic twist of Soviet cartoons depicting Nazi cruisers boasting the letter Z: Vera Tolz and Stephen Hutchings, "Truth with a Z: Disinformation, War in Ukraine, and Russia's Contradictory Discourse of Imperial Identity," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39, no. 5 (April 2023): 360.

In beginning with the Kabakovs' archive and ending with Kremlin propaganda, I am conscious of the risk that the bureaucratic graphosphere might appear as a series of simple dichotomies: of documents either public or private, files either open or closed, words either seen or unseen. Against such divisions, this forum instead seeks to explore those moments where the very "space of the visible word" might be negotiated: where the state was confronted with technologies that modulated how it exercised power, and where the boundaries it sought to police came under strain from new kinds of writing and new kinds of seeing. To return to Franklin's graphosphere—the definition of which he teases out and apart in his concluding contribution to this forum—its status as *object* unsettles the notion that it must be "encompassed and explained," that it must be understood solely with reference to deterministic causalities that use forms of writing to explain history.[19]

In closing, I am reminded of one of Walter Benjamin's recollections in his unfinished *Passagen-Werk* (Arcades Project). The memory revolves around a poster for a brand of salt, "a poster that, if things had their due in this world, would have found its admirers, historians, exegetes, and copyists just as surely as any great poem or painting ... [which] it was both at the same time." Years later, Benjamin sees a signboard advertising the same salt in the window of a café: "it contained nothing else besides these words, but around these written characters [*Schriftzeichen*] there was suddenly and effortlessly configured [the] desert landscape of the poster." The salt in the desert forms the name of the brand, a "tightly orchestrated predestination," "an image [*Gleichnis*] for things that no one in this mortal life has yet experienced."[20] In its immediate concern with the resolutely public space of mercantile capitalism, Benjamin's reminiscence obviates the state; yet in the power of its visible words, it speaks to the possibilities of the graphosphere as an encoding and encoded object of words, documents, manuscripts, archives, files, posters, books, and signs. The contributions to this forum grapple with how the state—which, like any machinery of power, is all too often convinced of its own predestination—engaged with these specters of (un)seeing, and how we, in their specificity, might return them their due.

Angus Russell is a research fellow at King's College, Cambridge, where he works on the history of medieval and early modern Eurasia. His primary interests lie in the relationship between the Mongols and Muscovy, and in the global modalities of East Slavic history; his first book, currently in preparation, explores political and cultural entanglements between Rus′, the Black Sea, and Iran after the Mongol conquests.

[19] Franklin, *Russian Graphosphere*, 274.

[20] Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt, 1972–1989), 5:235–36; Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 173–74. *Gleichnis* can also denote "allegory," "parable," or "simile."