

Socialist Realism as Anti-Canonical Art¹

Introduction

Soviet culture is sometimes described as a ‘text-based’ one, oriented towards regulated, or canonical texts and regulated expression (Lepik 2000). The same has been said about Socialist Realism, one of the most (in)famous phenomena of Soviet culture. In this paper, I try to argue for an alternative view, according to which Socialist realism can be described as anti-canonical – as a system that instead of asserting itself as a canon different from others, actively denies and demolishes other canons –, and outline the mechanisms that create and organize it.

What is Socialist Realism? Since the adoption of the term ‘Socialist Realism’ in 1932, literary critics, and scholars have been trying to give a positive definition or description of Socialist Realist aesthetics. While an official definition of the term was given in the Statute of the Union of Soviet Writers – which stated that Socialist Realism (for short, SR) was “the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. It demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development” – the fact that it required interpretation by a number of scholars, would make one doubt that there was any method after all.

One common – and usually quite sufficient – definition of SR states that it was an extremely simple aesthetic canon. It had to be simple, so that it could be easy to digest and adopt. It should thus be possible to summarize the main principles of SR in a few sentences

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(Sarapik 2002: 469). From this, it follows that there was no Socialist Realist literature: there were only writers who implemented the principles of SR in their works to a greater or lesser extent. After Stalin's death, there was no reason to hold on to these principles anymore, so they were simply discarded. Yet, if we take a closer look at some moments in literary history, it turns out that the situation was not quite that simple. As an example here, we can take the situation of Estonian literature following the June coup of 1940 and the Soviet annexion of Estonia. Incorporating Estonia into the Soviet Union also meant the assimilation of Estonian culture and literature. Among other things, this included demands that Estonian writers adopt the SR "method". However, while a number of writers were willing to cooperate with the new regime, the adoption of the new "artistic method" proved to be difficult. While a number of "socialist realist" texts were written, these went mostly unnoticed by the official literary criticism – the highest authority in these matters (Pern 2008). Even after the war, when many "cultural workers" (writers, painters, musicians etc), who had been evacuated to behind the Soviet lines, had gained more experience with the demands of the Soviet powers, the situation remained largely the same. Even those writers, who had spent the war in the Soviet Union, could not quite grasp the new demands and would be reproached for their "mistakes".

Towards defining Socialist Realism

It can thus be accepted that SR is not quite as simple a thing as it may seem at first sight. For an explanation of how it "worked", let us now turn next to some accounts of SR or Socialist Realist canon. The latter can have many different definitions, depending on the definition of Socialist Realism. First of all, SR can be seen as simply a set of literary works; in this case, the SR canon would be the set of "canonized" works. Secondly, it can be described as a certain literary discourse that includes both literary works and literary criticism; its canon would consist of a set of canonical rules to be followed, or "aesthetic or philosophical model set by Socialist Realism" (Gottlieb

2001: 117). A third definition would be similar to the second one, except it would include all forms of ‘Socialist Realist’ art – painting, sculpture, architecture, music, cinema and so on. Another possible definition would be a generalization of the previous one; according to this, SR is a ‘cultural type’ or cultural paradigm. In this case, the ‘canon’ would be made up of the norms that form the centre of this cultural paradigm. In the following sections, I will try and cover accounts of Socialist Realism ranging from the narrowest to the broadest sense of the term.

Socialist Realism – a literary canon?

Let us start with Katherine Clark’s *The Soviet Novel*. According to Clark, the SR canon is created by literary practice, and the essence of this canon should be searched for not in theoretical pronouncements, but in SR works. Socialist Realism

is not, first of all, a *single* doctrine [...] Even if Socialist Realism is confined to the meaning “officially sponsored Soviet literature,” it soon becomes apparent that among the various canonical accounts of it there is no *one* that is incontrovertible or in any sense comprehensive. Some official pronouncements on the theory of Socialist Realism have been important...but they are too general to have guided such a distinctive practice [...] Consequently, instead of going into the Byzantine arguments surrounding the question What is Socialist Realism?, I shall use a strictly pragmatic approach and define Soviet Socialist Realism as a canonical doctrine defined by its patristic texts (2000: 3).

Two different kinds of SR meet in Clark’s account. The first of these is the “historical reality” with many different paradigms and authors craving official recognition; the other one is a “construction set” created in 1932–34, from the pieces or conventions of which a writer can compose a socialist realist work (ib. 35). The most conventional was the Soviet novel. The sources of the clichés used were not, however, theoretical writings on Socialist Realism, but official “exemplars” or model novels. The core of this canon was not always constant, but it generally consisted of Maxim Gorky’s *Mother* and *Klim Sangin*, Dmitri Furmanov’s *Chapaev*, Nikolai Ostrovsky’s *How*

the Steel Was Tempered, Mikhail Sholokhov's *Quiet Flows the Don* and *Virgin Soil Upturned*, and a series of other novels, from which not only isolated tropes and characters were copied, but the entire plot structures of SR novels were based on those of exemplary novels (ib. 4). According to Clark, starting from the mid-1930s, most novels followed the same "master plot" that controls the beginning, climax, and ending of the novel (ib. 5). The majority of Soviet novels follow this master plot to a greater or lesser extent. Many of these novels belonging to the SR "tradition" have, however, a dual identity according to Clark. On one hand, they contain elements that are copied by later novels; on the other hand, however, many of their features were ignored in SR:

In each novel, there is much the author intended to be an important contribution to the quest for the kind of writing adequate to the new age, but the "contribution" was never adopted for Socialist Realism. When these novels were pronounced exemplars, the number of possible features a model Soviet novel might have become more finite, and in each novel those aspects not envisaged in the canon became incidental, not germane to its quality of being Socialist Realist (ib. 30).

While Clark tries, and to some extent manages to demonstrate the existence of a common plot in many Soviet novels, she never really attempts to find a canonical core common to all Soviet literature; indeed, she admits that "Socialist Realism is essentially *a name* [emphasis mine – T.P.] applied to Soviet culture's literary system rather than to a way of writing that is particularly "socialist" or "realist"." (Ib. 9) But while the name 'Socialist Realism' remained constant, it should not be taken for granted that the plot of the Soviet (or SR) novel remained the same, or that the same aspects of the "exemplary" novels were always actualized in later SR novels.

It is also difficult to agree with Clark's proposition that literary theoretical or critical pronouncements did little to guide SR. A different position is held by Hans Gunther, who sees SR as a canon of self-description. The SR canon is defined by norms belonging to

different levels. Thus, Gunther distinguishes between four different discursive levels in the SR canon: 1) the level of general ideological discourse, or the level of Marxist-Leninist ideology; 2) literary political discourse, which contains certain ideological postulates, such as party-mindedness (*partiinost'*), idea-mindedness (*ideinost'*), typicality, revolutionary romanticism, etc.; 3) meta-literary discourse, primarily literary criticism, which concretizes the “artistic method” of SR, applying it to literary texts; 4) literary discourse, formulating the stylistic norms and regulations (2000: 281). “Correct” texts were, thus, not created spontaneously, but their creation was guided by different levels of norms. Furthermore, SR texts were Socialist Realist not by themselves, but only in relation to the different levels of the SR canon. Chronologically, Gunther distinguishes between following stages in the evolution of the canon: 1) Proto-canon, the preparatory stage of the real canon and its reservoir of texts; 2) the stage of canonization, during which the canon is formulated as a more or less systematic whole compared to other traditions; 3) mature canon, complete expression of its mechanisms; 4) decanonization, during which the canon expands and loses its obligatory status; 5) post-canonical stage following its collapse (2000: 281–282).

While Gunther’s theory of Socialist Realist canon is different from Clark’s, the criticisms that can be made here are quite similar. Finding and completely describing a “mature” canon of SR proves to be quite difficult, if not impossible, as the demands keep shifting. For instance, different ideological postulates were activated at different times, sometimes contradicting each other (for instance, “class-mindedness” with “Soviet patriotism”)².

Socialist Realism – a cultural canon?

Some theories of SR try to find its origins and its canonical core in the rules of a general cultural paradigm. One (and perhaps the best known) such account of SR is Boris Groys’ study of “Stalin-style” (Groys 1998). What Groys attempts to prove there is that SR was a

² For a discussion of these postulates and the function they fulfilled at a specific moment, see, for instance, Balina 2000 and Powelstock 2006.

child of the Russian avant-garde. Even though a deep chasm separates them on the level of stylistic norms and restrictions, the utopian pathos of creating a “new man” in SR comes from the avant-garde paradigm, according to Groys. Thus, the avant-garde is a part of the SR “proto-canon”. Furthermore, he claims that the avant-garde could have just as well been instituted as the “official art, as SR was just as foreign to the masses as Malevich’s famous “Black Square”:

the taste preferences of the masses without a doubt tended...towards anything else but Socialist Realism, which was called to educate the masses and by this alone intimidated them with its schoolmaster tone, lack of entertainment, and a complete detachment from real life that in its radicality was a match for Malevich’s “Black Square [...] There is no doubt that whatever Stalin had said at the time, it would have been received with the same enthusiasm, even if it be phonetic *zaum*-poetry in the spirit of Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh. (Groys 1998: 423)

Groys’ theory has later been expanded by Irina Gutkin, who finds that Groys was right in principle: the aesthetics of SR comes from the avant-garde. The latter term does not, however, signify only the “left art” of the 1920s, but a whole period in Russian culture; not just radical artistic experiments, but experiments guided by ideological ambitions. Namely these ambitions were the common denominator for the artistic and political (Bolshevik) avant-garde (Gutkin 1999: 12).

The main principles of Socialist Realist aesthetics were born in the revolutionary period between the 1890s and 1930s, which was the climax in the Russian intelligentsia’s search for a real understanding and organization of life (ib. 8). This meant searching for a new everyday life, a new man, and a new love as the means for realizing the ideal of a future world (ib. 15); These three principles later became important in SR: the futurological character of aesthetic ambitions and “ultrarealism” became the demand to represent “life in its revolutionary development”; the artist as the creator of a new man became an “engineer of the human soul” (Gutkin 1994: 195).

It is difficult to agree with Groys' position that anything, including *zaum*-poetry and Malevich's "Black Square" could have been institutionalized as official Soviet art. The similarities between SR and avant-garde literature (in the broader sense) should not, however, be ignored; let us not forget that many of the SR "exemplars" that Katherine Clark talks about belong to this era.

The cultural theory of SR is also represented in the works of Evgeny Dobrenko. He shows in his works how the canonized "high Socialist Realism" was only a fraction of the vast sea of literature and the well-known SR authors only a part of the "army of authors" (Dobrenko 1999). SR texts no longer express the individuality of the author, but are anonymous; their only real author is power (Dobrenko 1993: 35).

SR is seen here as the core of Soviet culture and expanded to the whole cultural space, for instance, in the formula "Socialist Realism is real Socialism"; it becomes a metaphor for the whole Soviet culture and society. Stalinist or SR art is the materialization of Soviet ideology. For this reason, Malevich's "Black Square" could never have fulfilled the role of SR:

Avant-garde aesthetics was unacceptable in the Stalinist culture not only because of complete ignorance of mass tastes, but also because the "black square" is an embodiment of conventionality, whereas Socialist Realism demonstrates Socialism not as conventional but namely as reality. (Dobrenko 2007: 38)

SR, then, is the "institution for producing Socialism". This includes not only literature and cinema, but also Soviet advertising, biological doctrines, etc. All this imitated art, fulfilled the social role of art (ib. 6). In the case of SR, its primary function was an aesthetic, not propagandistic one: it produced reality through aestheticizing it. SR was the only reality in Socialism; without it, there would not have been real Socialism:

Whatever Soviet reality was [...] it demanded art to turn *this* reality into Socialism. It is namely in art – through Socialist Realism – that

Soviet reality is transformed and turned into Socialism [...] Socialist Realism must thus be seen as not only the production of certain symbols, but also the production of visual and verbal representations. That is why the function of Socialist Realism in the politico-aesthetical project of “real Socialism” is to fill the space of “Socialism” with images of reality (ib. 30).

One important thing that Dobrenko demonstrates in his works is the importance of political power. The “principle of power” remains true even when ideological doctrines are transformed or changed for new ones that are cardinally different from old ones, like happened during and after the war (Dobrenko 1999: 128). Soviet culture as a whole still represents the “voice of the power“. “Power” does not stand for any particular leader (be it Stalin, Lenin, or Zhdanov), but an abstraction of power, a principle.

Another interesting account of SR as a cultural type is Vladimir Paperny’s *Culture Two*. Paperny sees the whole cultural history of Russia as a recurrent alternation of two “cultures”, which he calls, aptly enough, Culture One and Culture Two. Whereas Culture One can be related to the avant-garde of the 1920s, the model of Culture Two is built on the material of Stalinist architecture. They are described through a number of binary oppositions: horizontal-vertical, egalitarian-hierarchical, collective-individual, improvisation-notes, rational-artistic, and so on. The main focus of Paperny’s study is on the processes that took place in Soviet architecture in late 1920s-early 1930s. Yet what he ventures to prove is that similar processes are also at work in the whole culture. Thus, for instance, the whole period called Culture Two is characterized by logocentricity. A peculiar hierarchy of arts is formed, based on their verbal capabilities. The first place in this hierarchy is taken by literature, but architecture, music, cinema, and other arts also strive towards creating works that can be unequivocally narrated in words (2006: 222). In this respect, Culture Two is directly opposed to avant-garde culture, which stressed the autonomy of each form and the individuality of their languages (ib. 217).

An interesting aspect of Culture Two is its so-called mythological character (ib. 230). Mythological character of the culture is related to

the status of the (either spoken or written) word: a word stands for something that can be perceived, yet not spoken; not an object, a quality, a relation, or an action, but a combination of all of these – the name of the object determines its qualities, the relations with it, and the actions to be taken. The meaning of a text does not, in this case, depend on the meaning of its component signs, but is derived from the level of “collective mythological conceptions” (ib.). The term ‘Socialist Realism’ can be seen as having similar character: it does not stand for a particular object or quality, yet everyone “knows” it the moment they see it.

While Paperny’s thesis of two cultures has been often criticized, at least some of the aspects of his work have found further development and verification in the works of Dmitrii Hmelnitsky. Hmelnitsky’s account of Soviet architecture in the 1930s shows that the processes that took place there were quite similar to what happened in Soviet literature. In the 1920s, different schools fought for the title of “proletarian” architecture, but in the end, none of them could claim the position of the “true” Soviet style. Instead, a new “official style” was declared – “realist architecture”. And while the architecture of antiquity was found to be the most “realistic” in history, copying it – or any other style – as a formal system in itself, not just as a collection of stylistic elements, was considered a deadly sin (Hmelnitsky 2007b: 139). Stylistic elements had to be used “creatively”, yet the main thesis of SR – “creative use of the classical heritage” – offered no working recipes or methods. It only defined the extent of stylistic loans and architects’ artistic interests; in practical work, example had to be taken from exemplary buildings, which became the embodiment of “Socialist Realism” in architecture, after they had been approved by the authorities (Hmelnitski 2007a: 211). The loss of a right for serious artistic thought was “compensated” with the right to infinitely play with and combine the elements that fell within the approved borders (ib. 285).

Anti-canoncity: Socialist Realism as a discursively constructed object

Socialist Realism as an 'empty signifier'

I find that the “mythological” aspect of SR – that there were no real working recipes offered, yet everyone “knew” it when they saw it – can be described through the concept of *empty signifier* coined by the Essex school of discourse analysis. Use of concepts originating from political theory is justified here, since, as we have seen, SR could be considered a problem of literary politics, rather than literary criticism. An empty signifier is, in a certain sense, an impossible object, like a unicorn: “An empty signifier is, strictly speaking, a signifier without a signified” (Laclau 1996: 36). Such signifiers can only exist thanks to the existence of a system that supports them: “[T]here can be empty signifiers within the field of signification because any system of signification is structured around an empty place resulting from the impossibility of producing an object which, none the less, is required by the systematicity of the system.” (Ib. 40) Socialist Realism, then, can be described as an empty place, around which a certain picture or model of what “Socialist Realism” is, is constructed. Such constructions, as we have seen, can be of different kinds: either “Socialist Realist” novels, or literary critical texts, or other works of art, like works of architecture. This relation can be called a *hegemonic relationship* (ib. 42)

We can then agree here with Clark when she says that SR is a name applied to a mode of writing that is neither Socialist nor Realist. The relation between the empty signifier and the discourse it represents is not a conceptual relation; it does not represent a common core in the discourse – the hegemonic relationship is the relationship between a name and an object (Ventsel, Selg 2008: 175). It is not, however, a *mere* name – according to Laclau, the unity of the object is the result of naming it; objects are created through naming (ib.). Thus, we can argue that no “canonical” common core existed in SR – SR only gained its existence through the act of naming.

The construction of "Socialist Realism"

The unity of an object is created through antagonistic exclusion: "You have to exclude 'them' radically or antagonistically in order to fully form 'us' as a coherent system." (Ventsel, Selg forthcoming) The same is true for SR; its canonicity is in fact anti-canonicity, as it needs to actively antagonize other canons in order to prove its own coherence. We saw this above in the example brought by Hmelnitsky; yet the same kind of "creative use of the classical heritage" is also common to Socialist Realist literature. Anti-canonicity in this sense does not allow one "correct" mode of writing or style to dominate. We can agree here with Hmelnitsky, who sees behind this situation a need to create an atmosphere of uncertainty:

It was important for Stalin to create an atmosphere of uncertainty in the professional sphere... No one, not even an architect with the highest position could feel themselves safe, neither could any director or writer. This attitude was characteristic to the whole state. This kind of atmosphere was stimulated by the lack of canonized models and the impossibility to predict for certain the reaction of the authorities (2007a: 169)

This uncertainty can be seen at work, for instance, in an article by Soviet Estonian People's Commissar of Education, Johannes Semper, where he reproaches writers for not giving enough attention to "current" themes in their plans for the future and sticking to the "past":

Only one novel would depict our oil shale industry. Three would deal with problems related to land reform. Books dealing with the past are meanwhile more abundant. Thus, writers are interested in the era of serfdom, life in old Tallinn at the end of the 18th century, underground life under the bourgeoisie, country life at the turn of the century ... the Patriotic War ... the life of workers at the beginning of the century and during the bourgeois republic ... No matter how well and how correctly these topics are discussed, the themes our writers use still remain a bit poor and one-sided. (Semper 1946: 788)

Naming is, however, but one hegemonic relationship. Another important hegemonic operation is *translation*. We can refer here back to Paperny's concept of the mythological character of Culture Two. The term 'Socialist Realism' can be seen as having mythological character: it does not stand for a particular object or quality, yet everyone "knows" it the moment they see it. The same is true of hegemonic translation: "In the political discourse there prevails the non-discrete strategy of translation. It means that discrete and clearly differentiated signs are translated into non-discrete totality." (Selg & Ventsel 2008: 178) We can thus say that individual texts that may have very little in common with each other are "translated" into a single discourse – SR literature or its canon – through the concept of SR, assigning them a similarity that may not be as clear or as primary outside this discourse – as we saw earlier in Katherine Clark's discussion of SR "tradition". And vice-versa: SR could be "perceived" through these texts:

[I]f Socialist Realism had not been created in the early thirties, many of the official paradigms from the twenties would always have been seen as representing rival modes of writing [...] Once the tradition of the Socialist Realist novel was "created" in the thirties, then ... it could be "perceived" in the official precursors because the tradition *was* these works (Clark 2000: 29).

We can agree, then, with Gunther, that SR is a discursively constructed object. As such, SR can always be re-created, renewed. But in order that such "renewal" could take place, there can be no canonical core, which would at some point inevitably become incompatible with new demands, like it would have happened if a strict class-mindedness had collided with "Soviet patriotism". SR as a symbol (in Paperny's terms) or an empty signifier (Laclau), however, allows these to be translated into a single, non-discrete totality.

Conclusion: “Socialist Realism” and literary history

The name Socialist Realism not only represents a certain subset of the whole domain of Soviet literature, but *becomes* Soviet literature, with all non-SR works and authors being labelled as non-Soviet or anti-Soviet, and read and studied as independent of the Soviet system. All SR texts can equally represent the non-literary or non-artistic nature of Socialist Realism. In this respect, these texts are opposed to the artistic texts of non-Soviet (or anti-Soviet) literature. If we want to specify, what these texts have in common, the broader the area we try to cover, the more distinguishing features of each of the texts will have to be dropped in order to keep alive what these texts attempt to express. In this way, SR as a theoretical concept has continued to lose its particularity, signifying an ever broadening range of phenomena. The longer the equivalential chain, the less concrete the “Socialist Realist” nature of its links becomes. In the end, SR as a totality can only exist as a horizon that fuses together different practices that are called “Socialist Realist”.

From the point of view of literary history it would perhaps be fruitful to pay less attention to what “Socialist Realist” works have in common and more attention to how all these rather dissimilar texts were “homologized” and assimilated into SR. This, however, is the subject of a further study.

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