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Towards Humanism and Stylistic Diversity: The "Open System" of Socialist Realism in Latvian Artwriting of the Stagnation Era

Humānisms un stilistiskā daudzveidība: sociālistiskais reālisms kā "atklāta sistēma" mākslas interpretācijās stagnācijas posma Latvijā

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Summary The aim of the article is to analyze the "open" phase of Socialist Realism in Latvian artwriting. This phase largely originated from the Russian literary scholar Dmitrij Markov's mid-1970s statements about the "historically open system of the truthful representation of life". The opposition between "open" and "closed" systems is possibly related to Austrian biologist Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy's general systems theory. Historian of aesthetics Pēteris Zeile was the most prolific writer who Latvianized this "open" phase, combining topical Soviet viewpoints with Latvian cultural examples. Other authors (art historians Rasma Lāce and Skaidrīte Cielava, painter Pēteris Postažs) also reflected on the diversity of this doctrine along with the preservation of Marxist worldview and foundations of fine arts. Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak's version of Soviet official rituals focuses on performative reproduction rather than literal meanings, thus emphasizing that unpredictable meanings lead to a system's disintegration. Soviet art theory too can be likened to such ritualized acts. Modernized thinking on art, launched by the Thaw, was tamed and integrated into the official discourse in the 1970s; the progressing openness, however, fell into ever sharper contradiction to its obligatory status, finally removed only by the collapse of the political system and its associated ideology in 1991.

Kopsavilkums Raksta mērķis ir analizēt sociālistiskā reālisma doktrīnas "atklāto" fāzi publikācijās par vizuālo mākslu Latvijā. Šo fāzi izšķiroši ietekmēja krievu literatūrzinātnieka Dmitrija Markova formulējumi 20. gadsimta 70. gadu vidū par "vēsturiski atklātu estētisko sistēmu patiesai dzīves atspoguļošanai". "Atklātu" un "slēgtu" sistēmu opozīcijas avoti, iespējams, saistīti ar austriešu biologa Karla Ludviga fon Bertalanfi vispārējo sistēmu teoriju. Estētikas vēsturnieks Pēteris Zeile bija ražīgākais šīs "atklātās" fāzes latviskotājs, sastatot PSRS aktuālos viedokļus ar latviešu kultūras piemēriem. Arī citi autori (mākslas vēsturnieces Rasma Lāce un Skaidrīte Cielava, gleznotājs Pēteris Postažs) apcerēja doktrīnas daudzveidību vienlaikus ar marksistiskā pasaules uzskata un tēlotājas mākslas pamatu saglabāšanu. Antropologa Alekseja Jurčaka versija par padomju oficiālajiem rituāliem piedāvā aizvietot to literārās nozīmes ar performatīvu atkārtojamību, ļaujot rasties jaunām, sistēmu iznīcinošām nozīmēm. Par šādiem ritualizētiem aktiem var uzskatīt arī padomju mākslas teorijas tēzes. Secināms, ka atkušņa aizsāktā mākslas izpratnes modernizācija tika 70. gados pieklusināta, to integrējot oficiālajā diskursā, bet atklātuma progresējošās pretrunas ar doktrīnas obligāto raksturu tika atceltas tikai ar politiskās sistēmas un attiecīgās ideoloģijas sabrukumu 1991. gadā.

A number of previous publications dealing with theoretical mutations of Socialist Realism in Latvia during the Soviet occupation[1] largely coincided with a gradual acceptance of mainstream Soviet artistic phenomena as legitimate research topics in the first decade of the 21st century[2]. This turn complemented the earlier rush since the 1990s to uncover primarily modernist or otherwise dissident trends and artists marginalized by the former regime.[3] The author of this article has been working on the subject of the Socialist Realist doctrine for the upcoming 6th volume of the *Art History of Latvia*[4] that will include a survey of art-theoretical developments. The present essay is based on an inquiry of local publications involved with art theory and criticism during a specific period in the process of these permutations, namely, the time of the "opening" of Socialist Realism. Who were the Latvian authors involved with propagating such ideas? What sources were they drawing upon? These are the two questions considered here. To interpret these statements from today's viewpoint, discourse analysis as provided by the USA-based Russian anthropologist Alexei Yurchak has proved useful to a certain degree. The structure of the article is chronological, first outlining the early phase of Socialist Realism, then the period of Thaw in the USSR and Latvia, and afterwards discussing the main local authors – from the most prolific to the episodic writers – who took up discussions about an "open" Socialist Realism.

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1 See: Pelše 2003; 2009; etc.

2 One of the groundbreaking events that began to re-evaluate the legacy of the "darkest" Soviet period without avoiding ideologically charged works was the exhibition and the subsequent conference and bilingual collection of articles *Padomjzemes mitoloģija* (Mythology of the Soviet Land, 2008); the project was carried out by the Latvian National Museum of Art.

3 See: Lamberga 2004 (English version: Lamberga 2018); Pestova 2004; Kulakova 2012; Auziņa 2018; etc.

4 The project *Art History of Latvia for the Centenary of Latvia* was launched by the Art Academy of Latvia Institute of Art History in 2013 and supported by the State Culture Capital Foundation. Already published volumes include: *Art History of Latvia IV: Period of Neo-Romanticist Modernism. 1890–1915* (2014); *Art History of Latvia V: Period of Classical Modernism and Traditionalism. 1915–1940* (2016), *Art History of Latvia III: Period of Classicism and Romanticism. 1780–1840* (Book I), and *Period of Realism and Historicism. 1840–1890* (Book II, 2019).

Origins of Socialist Realism

Socialist Realism that was forcibly introduced in Latvia since mid-1940 when the country was occupied had emerged in the USSR during the 1930s. The new aesthetic program that crystalized in artists' and critics' statements roughly at the same time, can be interpreted as a version of the European-wide "return to order" (*rappel à l'ordre*), namely, neo-realisms and neo-classicisms that followed the turmoil of the World War I and related flourishing of avant-garde trends. Alongside the return to order, a parallel "return to nature" was equally important, signifying that art as imitation was again becoming topical. While there are certain parallels between changes in the values and functions of art in Europe and the USSR of the time, Socialist Realism and its obligatory nature is rather specific. According to Stalin's cultural commissar Andrej Zhdanov's keynote address to the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Socialist Realism needed to "depict reality in its revolutionary development" and "the mastery of the technique of writing, the critical assimilation of the literary heritage of all epochs, represents a task which you must fulfill without fail, if you wish to become engineers of human souls"[5] (Zhdanov 1992: 411–412). The doctrine was a selective synthesis of seeing art as both imitation and expression, encompassing the 19th century Realist tenets, reflection theory as articulated by the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, and Romanticism in its revolutionary vein alongside skillful imitation of nature preserved by European art academies that actually strived to imitate not so much real nature as classical examples. Which segments of that heritage (not just in literature but in other artistic fields too) became acceptable and which became refutable remained a shifting and increasingly ambiguous issue over decades to come, with choices of creative paths also determining their practitioners' real-life destinies. There is reason to argue that "on both the structural and institutional level the method disintegrated much earlier than is commonly assumed, and the very moment of the canon's crystallization coincided with its opening to dislocation and decay, well before Socialist Realism was defined as a 'historically open system'" (Lahusen 1997: 6).

The very idea of Socialist Realism as a somewhat "open" concept, even if expressed in a different terminology, can be found in local Latvian press as early as 1941. "Openness" emerges here as a lack of specific details what kind of art could or could not be acceptable in stylistic terms. For example, artist and art critic Arturs Jūrasteters, quoting the Soviet cultural official Vjacheslav Shkvarikov's praises of

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5 Joseph Stalin took over the phrase about engineers of human souls from the writer Jurij Olesha (1899–1960) who used a similar formulation in his story *Chelovecheskij material* (The Human Material) published in 1929. But the primary source of the phrase that later underwent transformations of meaning has been localized in the French decadent writer Joris-Karl Huysmans's (1848–1907) novel *À rebours* (Against the Grain). See: Fajbyshenko 2018.

artistic "mastery" and "perfect forms" needed to express grand ideas, concluded that various creative credos will coexist under the banner of Socialist Realism. This type of official art was said not to stifle artists' individualities (Jūrasteteris 1941). This, however, turned out to be wishful thinking quite common among Latvian art-writers during the first Soviet year[6]. The darkest Stalinist period, with its fiercest campaigns against formalism, was still ahead.

However, such an imprecise or, in more positive terms, broad and inclusive version of Socialist Realism was likely not specific to the Soviet regime's newly occupied territories like Latvia. For example, Estonian literary scholar Jaan Undusk has claimed that Socialist Realism has actually never been precisely defined in terms of either motifs or stylistic choices. He stated that the "party kitsch" was not invented by party ideologues but by artists themselves, looking for secure work conditions and themes suitable for exhibitions and sales (Undusks 2016: 82–83). Even if the proportion of ideologues' and artists' (who sometimes were the same people) contributions to the doctrine remains unclear and its definitions fuzzy at best, its Stalinist phase can be described as a certain synthesis of earlier traditions, like those of academic art, Romanticism and Realism, utilized for a meticulous portrayal of imagined socialist dream-worlds and their idealized heroes.

The Thaw and its end

The late 1950s, known as the Khrushchev's Thaw, definitely brought partial liberalization and exoneration of modernism into Latvian thinking on art. After Stalin's death, the first recognitions of the artist's individuality and subjectivity as well as the diversity of styles and genres within Socialist Realism began to appear in such all-Union periodicals as *Pravda*, *Novyj Mir*, *Iskusstvo*, etc. (Kruks 2011: 79–80). Officially endorsed by the Soviet Communist Party's ideological secretary Dmitrij Shepilov at the First All-Union Artists' Congress in 1957, terms such as the "variety" of Socialist Realism and its "richness of means, handwritings and styles" (Šepilovs 1957) were used by Latvian art critics like Herberts Dubins (Dubins 1956) and Jānis Pujāts (Pujāts 1956), painters Leo Svemps (Svemps 1960) and Ojārs Ābols (Ābols 1958), and other authors. Of course, the necessity to follow realism was not challenged by anybody. However, realism was already weakly defined, starting to shift emphasis towards such elusive terms like "inner activity" as a criterion of "true" Socialist Realism.

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6 For more on this topic see: Pelše 2021.

These developments were clearly not of local Latvian origin, reflecting a wider tendency in the Soviet cultural space. For instance, in a book about Pablo Picasso published in Moscow (1960), Russian authors Igor Golomstock and Andrej Sinjavskij "claimed an 'intrinsic realism' for him, based not on the reproduction of the realistic forms, but on the inner substance of the ideal values he was depicting [..]. According to their analysis, the artist did not understand the world sensually, but intellectually" (Dmitrieva 2019: 147–148). Modernist tendencies were allowed to sneak in also by the opening up to international cultural exchanges that was an important aspect of de-Stalinisation of the USSR.[7] In broader art-theoretical terms, the Thaw-time opposition to the aforementioned "reproduction of realistic forms" can be genetically linked to numerous early 20th century Western art developments from Symbolism to Cubism whose propagators tried to find other aims for visual arts after photography had seemingly taken over the centuries-old task of representing reality. Therefore, the theory of art as representation, an important component of the Socialist Realist doctrine, had become "over-extended in a way that unhelpfully conceals what would be better seen as distinct and different (even at times conflicting) aims of art" (Hepburn 1992: 422).

However, the early 1960s came with a new tidal wave of ideological supervision and backtracking both in the centre of the Soviet empire and its peripheries. The aforementioned book on Picasso caused uproar as an attack against Socialist Realism and attempts were made to remove it from circulation, but it nevertheless "managed to reach its readership and immediately began to acquire cult status" (Dmitrieva 2019: 149). Conservative circles in the USSR were obviously scared by the widely resurgent interest in Western art. The so-called Manege Affair with the Communist Party's First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev's scandalous rant, invoking sexual deviance against modernists at the 30 Years of the Moscow Artists' Union exhibition in Moscow Manege exhibition hall (1962), began a campaign denouncing formalism that reverberated through all Soviet republics. Khrushchev's next tirade at the 8 March 1963 meeting of party officials with representatives of literature and art, musing about filthy daubing that could be created by any donkey's tail, was published in Latvian, too (Hruščovs 1963), just like the Communist Party's Secretary Leonid Ilichev's later report, criticizing the formalism, abstractionism, and decadence supported by the Soviet people's ideological enemies (Iļjičovs 1963).

The message was eagerly taken up by some local ideologues and artists too. Stage designer Arturs Lapiņš was among the most active and criticized, for example, "block-like people" with eyeless and noseless faces, lacking the qualities of alive and

7 For more information see: Reid 2012.

inspiring heroes, ideal examples of the new people (Lapiņš 1961: 3). The emergence of such criticisms even before the Manege Affair indicates that the scandal was actually an episode of a much broader tendency. Actively looking for "formalism" in the works of their colleagues were also, for example, painter Vladimirs Kozins (Kozins 1963) and graphic artist Voldemārs Valdmanis (Valdmanis 1963), who denounced the lack of ideas and professionalism leading to an abandoning of realism and emergence of the elements of abstractionism in the early 1960s. Such elements could be linked to the so-called "harsh" or "severe" style in art that has today been already conceptualized as a version of Socialist Modernism: "Cubist corners, Fauvist colors, and Expressionist deformations became integral elements of Socialist Modernism forms" (Kļaviņš 2009: 106). Regarded in the 1960s as a trend of monumentality and decorativeness, it retained ideologically charged themes but allowed to explore color, texture, rhythm, and other elements of picture form.

Realism without shores Another widely debated but more theoretical topic that served as a negative example from which Socialist Realism had to be distinguished was the French Communist author Roger Garaudy's book *Realism without Shores* (1963)[8]. Criticism of it was part of the reaction against what many interpreted as the Thaw-time excesses. The book's main tenets, especially from today's viewpoint, do not look very radical at all. Garaudy largely stated that the art of today should not be assessed according to criteria derived from older art, holding that "being a realist does not mean imitating the images of reality but its activity; it means not to convey casts or exact copies of things, events and people but to participate in the act of the creation of a world that is in the process of becoming, to find its inner rhythm" (Garodi 1966: 197). As has been observed, "for Garaudy, searching for the essence defines realism at its core. Indeed, the French philosopher refrains from defining realism in terms of aesthetics, searching instead for images, aspirations and processes that capture the spirit of an era in art and literature. Unfortunately, Garaudy does not specify what this spirit of the epoch is supposed to be; he only observes that it should correspond to the Marxist understanding of progress and change" (Ronge 2019: 84). This stance seems to largely match the general tendency in the Soviet space to overcome the earlier Stalinist phase of the Socialist Realist doctrine during the Thaw, even if the "process of becoming" strangely resonates with Andrei Zhdanov's statement about depicting "reality in its revolutionary

8 The book was even placed on the blacklist by the Communist Party (more on this see: Reid 2012: 261). This work by Roger Garaudy (1913–2012) has been most discussed in the context of visual arts. His other books (over 70 in total) dealt mainly with Marxism and religions, while his conversion to Islam and denial of Holocaust turned the author into a very controversial figure.

development". However, Garaudy's embracing of paradigmatic modernist phenomena, like Pablo Picasso or Franz Kafka, probably was going too far for many.

As the Russian edition was published only in 1966, it remains an open question how many local commentators had read the book itself or just relied on authoritative remarks from the ideological "center."[9] Opinions were largely critical; for example, according to literary critic Kārlis Krauliņš, Garaudy had gone into "extremes" and made an error by removing any aesthetic "shores" from realism, allowing it to merge with modernism. At the same time, Socialist Realism was said to allow stylization and symbols but one condition had to be observed: "Everything has to serve the revelation of the truth of life" (Krauliņš 1965: 115). How exactly this "truth" could be detected apart from purely subjective[10] judgments remains unclear. Mentions of Garaudy's "revisionism" in a negative sense continued to crop up in various Latvian authors' texts in art theory and criticism during the next decades as well, with the aforementioned "aesthetic" component as a potentially significant aspect distinguishing the "true" Socialist Realism from its distortions.

However, in the following era with Leonid Brezhnev at the helm of the USSR (1964–1982), neither art nor artwriting could be returned to the earlier, largely neo-academic Stalinist phase. Acceptance of a broader spectrum of formal means and at least some pre-Soviet traditions of Latvian art had already taken root, and the task to subsume an ever wider selection of phenomena under the obligatory "umbrella" of realism remained topical. Art critics tried to maneuver between objections against the bygone naturalism and against formal innovations potentially too radical. Interest in the issues of "spiritual depth" and "inner activity" (Dubins 1966), allowing for a formally varied good art, carried on the processes launched by the Thaw, which also deemed "associative imagery" suitable for the expression of Communist ideals.

Last definition of Socialist Realism Theoretically more elaborated ideas about Socialist Realism as an "open" and "dynamic" system emerged in the USSR during the early 1970s, codified in the Soviet literary scholar Dmitrij Markov's publication *Theoretical Problems of Socialist Realism* (1975)[11]. The author proposed

9 Discussions going on in the USSR about Garaudy's book were reported many times in local periodicals: [Anon] 1965; [Anon] 1967; u. c.

10 "Subjective" is used here in the sense of existing only for a subject as opposed to anything having real existence while subject means someone who is conscious of something, that something being the object. (See: Vesey and Foulkes 1990: 209, 277.)

11 See: Markov 1975. Dmitrij Markov (1913–1990) authored several books about Bulgarian literature as well as numerous articles and books about Socialist Realism.

"a double dissociation" from the proletarian revolutionary currents and the bourgeois aesthetics, attempting to "stand aloof from both the 'dogmatic' heritage and foreign contamination", and Markov's famous formulation of the "historically open aesthetic system of the truthful representation of life" became the last official definition of the term in Soviet history (Lahusen 1997: 6). It has also been noticed that the humanist conception of man, namely, "socialist humanism" as clearly distinct from bourgeois trends like existentialism or structuralism can be seen, according to Markov, as a boundary that "determines the limits of the artistic cognition of the world" (Lahusen 1997: 7). "Closedness" would therefore point towards strict normativity and schematic approach, while "openness" would allow for more contemporary trends. This roughly corresponds to the definition by the founder of general systems theory, Austrian biologist Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy. He stated that closed systems are "isolated from their environment" while "an open system is defined as a system in exchange of matter with its environment, presenting import and export; building up and breaking down of its material components" (Bertalanffy 1968: 39; 141). As Bertalanffy's ideas were translated in Russian in the late 1960s, they could have influenced the emergence of the concept of "open" Socialist Realism.[12]

Although there were objections towards the theory of the "open system," for example, claiming that this stance shows "a fundamental lack of faith in the realist method" (Lahusen 1997: 8), the tendency of openness was officially supported by Leonid Brezhnev's speech at the conference of European Communist parties (1976) where he stated that "socialist states are not 'closed societies.' Our doors are open to everything that is truthful and honest, and we are ready to widen contacts as far as possible, using the favorable conditions provided by reduced tensions" (Brežņevs 1976). After claiming that much more English or French authors' books are published or Western films shown in the USSR than Soviet books or films distributed correspondingly in the West, Brezhnev, however, emphasized that this openness did not include opening up to propagandists of war or any kind of anti-Soviet agenda. Defining what exactly constitutes such agenda remained as elusive, obscure, and open to subjective interpretations as in other cases dealing with Socialist Realism.

Humanist synthesis In Latvian artwriting of the 1970s, most publications similarly tended to embrace constant development, diversity, and change in socialist art, claiming that the principles of Socialist Realism should not be seen as a

12 See: Bertalanfi 1969a; 1969b.

restrictive code of regulations. Especially prolific in dealing with the topic was writer, literary critic, and historian of aesthetics **Pēteris Zeile** (1928–2020) with his book *Socialist Realism* (Zeile 1981) and numerous other publications in various periodicals. As one of the leading promoters of the Soviet ideology, he nevertheless managed to leave that chapter behind and to take up meticulous cultural and historical research of his native region of Latgale (Eastern Latvia) after 1991.[13] This shift in outlook may seem puzzling at first, but it may also indicate the dependence of authors' views on the official doctrine, discarded quickly as soon as it was gone, together with the regime that maintained it.

The diversity, openness, and dynamism of the doctrine were particularly emphasized. For example: "The principles of the Socialist Realist method aim at creating artworks whose artistic value results from a synthesis, is diverse and able to perform multi-functional tasks" (Zeile 1981: 25). Zeile criticized the interpretation of Socialist Realism typical of the 1940s and 1950s as one-sided, mechanical and schematic, calling art "a dynamic system that exists in transformation and development" (Zeile 1981: 27). Trying to distinguish his "system approach" from structuralism, Zeile claimed that the latter was static and formal while the dialectic systemic method treated its elements "in mutual relations, interactions, subordination and dynamics" (Zeile 1981: 28). The fact that he mentions the Soviet philosopher and culturologist Moisej Kagan's works[14] points towards one of the sources of Zeile's thought.

In the chapter most related to the local Latvian context, he was largely positive about the realistic directness, monumentality, romanticism of youth of the "severe style." At the same time, Socialist Realism was said to be not content with the predominance of some particular style or trend. Therefore, the 1970s had brought "differentiation and branching": "Intellectual and analytic, associatively symbolic, metaphorically poetic, romanticist, monumentally decorative, journalistic and other trends and stylistic turns complement each other, intersect, and often get synthesized" (Zeile 1981: 215).

The topic of this article is most directly interpreted in the chapter titled "Socialist Realism – Historically Open, Dynamic System." One of the publications Zeile discusses in detail here is the book *Socialist Realism* by the Soviet literary scholar Sergej Petrov (Petrov 1977). The method of Socialist Realism, according to Petrov, has gone through

13 See: Zeile 2006; 2009; 2010; etc.

14 Moisej Kagan's (1921–2006) research once focused on art history and theory, but since the 1980s has focused on history and theory of culture. He was particularly interested in systems analysis, a loosely defined problem-solving technique related to systems theory. See, for example: Kagan 1974; etc.

three developmental stages, transforming along with the reality itself, the third stage being that of "developed socialism" (Zeile 1981: 226). Each period has enriched the aesthetic, cognitive, and educational functions of art. Petrov, according to Zeile, does not use the term "open system," apparently fearing its expansion to the aforementioned "realism without shores" and, subsequently, modernism. However, Zeile insists that these are somehow essentially different trends and, therefore, the "openness" can be accepted – with certain caveats. Proceeding to Dmitrij Markov's views in an attempt to define the "shores" of Socialist Realism and to avoid the merge of its openness with the still despicable modernism, Zeile quotes Markov who clearly referenced Garaudy's *Realism without Shores*: "Therefore, not openness to all the winds, not ideological and aesthetic diffuseness without shores but precisely the exact outlines of the socialist worldview and socialist humanism secure the new method's inexhaustible resources" (Zeile 1981: 229). Once again, is there any further explanation how exactly these "exact outlines of the socialist worldview and socialist humanism" had to be detected? In another chapter dedicated to "socialist humanism", Zeile states that "human being is the highest value in the society" (Zeile 1981: 111); "the essence of Socialist humanism is expressed in the growing ability of socialism to secure individual's active participation in all main fields of human activity" (Zeile 1981: 117); "a truly humanist artwork cannot be imagined without that inner excitement that can only be created by real artistic value and truthfulness" (Zeile 1981: 123). Contemporary readers may find it hard to see these passages as anything but obscure musings. The best clue seems to emerge from the opposition between the "socialist humanism" and existentialism, the former extolling the necessity of "intellectually, spiritually intense contacts among people" while the latter propagating alienation and isolation (Zeile 1981: 123).

In general, the author extolled Socialist Realism as an unprecedented project of synthesis that has absorbed "sublime ideas, emotions and thoughts" from stylistically diverse historical heritage, overcoming "one-sidedness and isolation in terms of stylistics and forms of artistic generalization" (Zeile 1981: 129). Specifically in visual arts, Zeile emphasizes "metaphysical one-sidedness" in the way various trends, such as Impressionism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Fauvism and Cubism, supplanted each other: "[O]ften rather relative artistic discoveries were followed by concrete artistic losses [..] [P]revious artistic achievements were dismissed in the name of new gains." Socialist Realism, on the contrary, was said not to refute anything, including Classicism, Romanticism, Critical Realism, Impressionism, or Expressionism, but only "to approach them with a selective measure, based on the principle of intentional historicity" (Zeile 1981: 239) and to utilize all "rational" elements accumulated by art in the forms of its particular trends. Zeile's cumulative attitude aimed at some ideal

of humanist stylistic diversity emerging from his statements can be still seen as a distant derivate of Andrej Zhdanov's formulation back in 1934. At the same time, the aforementioned "selective measure" retains its indeterminate character that can be weaponized against any artistic manifestations exceeding the limit of "rationality" in someone's view.

Zeile deserves to be seen as the main figure who Latvianized the late phase of the doctrine of Socialist Realism, namely, translated and retold its main tenets with added examples from Latvian literature, music, theatre and visual arts as well. He deftly compiled ideas of various Soviet authors, not just those voiced by the aforementioned Dmitrij Markov but those by many others too[15]. For example, he agreed with German Nedoshivin's statement about the complexity of the method of Socialist Realism, not confined to either formal, stylistic terms or a particular work of a painter or sculptor, as each work was said to acquire its historical artistic sense only in the context of the artist's entire oeuvre (Zeile 1981: 161). But Markov's conception can be seen as most significant in shaping Zeile's views, elucidated in numerous quotes, for example, that style is "unity, a certain conception. A lack of such conception essentially means the lack of a style. Each element of a style is linked to other elements – here relationships among elements, their functional interaction are important" (Zeile 1981: 140). Zeile can be seen as an original contributor to the doctrine as far as he has applied it to Latvian phenomena, stating that conclusions of numerous Soviet authors have been useful as "reference points" in attempts to "link general regularities with the developmental issues of Latvian progressive and socialist culture" (Zeile 1981: 34).

Diversity with moderate experiments While Zeile was probably the most productive author who speculated about the openness of Socialist Realism, others deserve mention as well. One of the most prominent art critics and art historians of Soviet Latvia was **Rasma Lāce** (1923–2008) who also used rather similar language in her exhibition reviews and more theoretical essays. In the early 1960s, she criticized the "severe style" modernization as often threatening "the freshness in the perception of life," inhibiting the psychological expression of images, introducing "dismissal of individuality" and "ideological passivity" (Lāce 1962: 29; 40; 42). Even as the increasing openness and diversity of Socialist Realism became more and more accepted, it still should not be confused with modernism and their similarities were said to be only superficial: "[E]lements reduced to absurdity are taken over

15 See, for example: Petrov 1970; Sidorov, Jakimenko 1977; etc.

from modernism but they are purified of the modernism's reactionary structure and end-in-itself status, now revealed as means of expression rooted in the earlier realist system of fine arts" (Lāce 1972). Nature and the ever-changing life were declared to liberate the artist from slavish subservience to any canon of a narrow manner, style, or trend. Lāce continued in another article that "style is not only unity but also diversity. Several stylistic systems (which are not antagonistic) can develop on the same ideological basis. The art of Socialist Realism is an example of such a variety of styles or stylistic diversity" (Lāce 1979). The 1970s, on the one hand, were characterized by the "polyphonic synthesis-type painting," also deemed "associative style" that had abandoned the boundaries between genres and become more abstracted, speaking about great ideological values. On the other hand, there was the "analytical"[16] trend that focused on in-depth studies of some particular phenomena. The high quality of style, according to Lāce, is secured by "significant social and ideological satiation" threatened by the "passivity of thought" and "reluctance to give up one's favorite manner and coloring to benefit the work's content" (Lāce 1979).

Lāce continued to defend the creative method of Socialist Realism as late as in the 1980s, describing it as an open and constantly developing system, able "to actively shape the evolution of life and reveal harsh truths in the name of improved ethical ideals" (Lāce 1988: 19). Young artists were said to be enthused by protest, experiments, and modernist trends which could be useful to a degree but, according to Lāce, one should not "destroy the foundations" (Lāce 1988: 19). The boundary separating fine arts from the world of objects, installations, actions, and performances that surged in Latvia in the course of the 1980s was apparently the last bastion beyond which no more appropriate "heritage of all epochs" could be found for the critical assimilation propagated by Andrej Zhdanov back in 1934.

Another acclaimed art historian of the time, **Skaidrīte Cielava** (1920–2005), used to speculate about the unhealthy prevalence of "associative," "metaphoric" expression in the fine arts, bordering on the specificity of decorative arts. Agreeing that Socialist Realism is "a system of artistic forms and it is constantly enriched," she too mentioned Roger Garaudy's *Realism without Shores*, objecting to the author's claim that "today art does not develop in the direct forms of reality but only with the help of metaphor" (Cielava 1974). Cielava asserted that the practices of socialist art and Soviet art history have proven the opposite, namely, that the object-centered or "analytical" expression and metaphorical, associative, or symbolic depiction were equally valid and necessary to keep the diversity of art from sliding into some

16 Local, time-specific term for scrupulous mimetic realism, especially echoes of Hyperrealist tendencies.

narrow, one-sided, repetitive version of contemporariness. In an essay about transformations of genres in Soviet Latvian painting, Cielava interpreted them as inevitable and acceptable to a degree, at the same time attempting to delineate some "shores" of Socialist Realism as well. First of all, art should not become too "decorative" or otherwise experimental. Although the artist has to be given the right of experiment, "it is important to preserve the harmonious type of finished easel painting, expressing the wholeness of the human worldview, his union with nature and society, his moral integrity, as the human being is and remains the shaper and guardian of the worldview" (Cielava 1978: 116). Wondering what was actually meant by this "harmonious type" of painting, one can turn to more recent studies – for example, the notion of "harmonious formalism" in interwar Latvian art, defined by art historian Eduards Kļaviņš as "an element which was not artificially searched for but naturally accepted on some, perhaps, deeper psychological grounds" (Kļaviņš 2000: 121). Possibly Cielava's prescriptive model of what art should look like was to a great extent derived from existing art – namely, from what it had become in the 1970s, holding on to moderate formal values that somewhat continued the avoidance of the most extreme trends in the 1920s and 1930s.

Artists commonly did not engage much in such theoretical speculations, but some exceptions can be found. One example was the painter **Pēteris Postažs**, an adherent of largely realistic motifs laced with certain modernist influences who presented a paper at the Second Soviet Latvian Culture Seminar in Turku, Finland (1976). It was published in the newspaper *Dzimtenes Balss*, formally issued by the Committee "For Return to One's Homeland" but actually supervised by the KGB and addressed to Latvians in exile. According to the memoirs of Imants Lešinskis, editor of *Dzimtenes Balss* and a double agent for the Latvian KGB and the CIA who defected to the USA in 1978, Postažs was among the most active members of the Art Section at the Latvian Committee for Compatriots Abroad (Lešinskis 2017: 174, 187, 255). Although Lešinskis's statements are now difficult or even impossible to verify, this task of presenting theoretical problems of Latvian art in Finland seems to corroborate this description. Postažs apparently borrowed, paraphrased and quoted ideas from the aforementioned Pēteris Zeile's publications, stating that narrow requirements in terms of either content or form would stifle Socialist Realism and hamper new artistic discoveries: "Creative principles of Socialist Realism are not a code of regulations but the most effective means of mastering and revealing the dynamics of the objective historical reality as well as the beauty and contradictions of life [..]. The criterion of the artwork's value is not the formal adequacy to this or that norm, but the truth of life and art embodied in it" (Postažs 1977). This criterion was described as being "socialistically true," mentioning the "depth and originality of the ideological and aesthetic

generalizations" (Postažs 1977) and adding that a great artist never simply uses once-acquired principles but always complements them with something new. However, deformations in modernism and realism were said not to be the same. To be acceptable, deformation could be even "daring" and "striking," but it needed to be internally connected with the Marxist worldview (Postažs 1977). However, the contemporary reader is left puzzled how exactly to substantiate the presence or absence of this socialist truth or Marxist worldview. Perhaps one should simply rely on feeling or intuition, which does not comply very well with the propagated scientific, objective nature of the doctrine in general.

These and similar questions pile up in attempts to interpret the legacy of these bygone ideological constructs, in terms of how they once functioned and what was their role in the development of art and its theory under the Soviet rule. Russian scholar Ljudmila Budagova, in her article dedicated to the 100th birthday of Dmitrij Markov, emphasized that his "open" conception did not save Socialist Realism but only literature itself or, more broadly, the creative arts, allowing them to develop ever more freely, maybe even against the will of those who promoted this conception (Budagova 2013). There could be indeed this element of "helping" the arts to some degree; at the same time, one can notice that by the 1970s and even the 1980s the idea of "open" Socialist Realism was largely upheld by authors with a high, secure status in the Soviet system and in no way willing to doubt or challenge it too far. Shortly, the "open" conception thus can be largely seen as the adaptation of a theory to a transformed practice.

Even trickier is the question of whether authors themselves could have believed it was practically possible to distinguish between "true" Socialist Realism and seemingly similar but ideologically alien works. Some clues can be glimpsed from Alexei Yurchak's well-known study *Everything was Forever until it Was no More*, in which he interprets the late Soviet period from the viewpoint of discourse analysis. According to him, the literal meaning of what was said in Soviet-period votes, speeches, reports, slogans, meetings, parades, elections, etc. did not matter much: "It became increasingly more important to participate in the reproduction of the form of these ritualized acts of authoritative discourse than to engage with their constative meanings." At the same time, "the performative reproduction of the form of rituals and speech acts actually *enabled* the emergence of diverse, multiple, and unpredictable meanings" (Yurchak 2005) that ultimately led to the system's disintegration. What was declared by Soviet art theory could also be just a ritualized act to be interpreted in ways that had little in common with its literal meanings.

This progressing vagueness of the "shores" of Socialist Realism fell into ever sharper contradiction to its obligatory status, finally removed only by the *perestroika*

years, the national awakening and, finally, the collapse of the political system and its associated ideology, concluding with the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991.

Conclusions

Latvian authors who wrote about the late phase of Socialist Realism did not develop any completely original concepts or theories, largely applying statements from Soviet Russian art historians', critics' and theoreticians' works to the Latvian cultural scene. Pēteris Zeile, heavily influenced by the Russian scholar Dmitrij Markov, was the leading figure among Latvian authors in theorizing about the "open" Socialist Realism. The idea of the doctrine's "openness," in opposition to "closedness," could have been influenced by the general systems theory as formulated by Karl Ludvig von Bertalanffy.

In attempts to define the "shores" of Socialist Realism within French author Roger Garaudy's conception, an important criterion, apart from those most elusive terms of either "socialist truth" or "Marxist worldview," was a certain restraint and moderation regarding artistic experiments, especially for writers examining the visual arts. Preservation of some harmonious, aesthetic qualities of traditional fine arts, whatever the authors' specific conceptions of them might be, emerge as a significant agenda in the Latvian context.

It is also possible to conclude that the 1970s were a period during which the modernization of thinking on art, launched by the Thaw, was tamed and suppressed to a certain extent in Latvia. At the same time, these inevitable transformations that deviated from the Stalinist epoch were also institutionalized as an official discourse in the form of "open" Socialist Realism. Literal meanings of its explanations, however, could be less significant than their function as purely ritualized acts.

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