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WHY THE SOCIALIST REALISM? TEMPORALITY AND THE MODES OF PHANTASY

In this article we analyse the paradoxical phantasy mode of the socialist realism, which gave it its vitality.

Key words: socialist realism, temporality, phantasy, melodramatic mode, too late.

We have to state at once that temporality is seen here as not just time itself but the way of living it through adopted by a culture. That is to mean how people inscribe themselves into the dimension of time and how they correlate their position with the time and space of their lives, as well as its phantasy representation on the screen.

Now we should make clear why we pay so much attention to the socialist realism as an object.

That version of cinematic and/or literary phantasy has been transformed lately from a ridiculous subject of perestroika jokes into a legitimate object of research. The last dozen of years is marked by numerous international conferences followed by publications such as “The Canon of Socialist Realism” [17], “The Soviet Wealth” [15] or “The Soviet Power and the Media” [14]. It is hard to enumerate the works by V. Paperny, B. Groys, E. Dobrenko and many others.

Most recently the post-soviet TV channels were overburdened by the socialist realist heritage. One could view canonic films, apocryphal films, animated cartoons

or some concerts. The would-be “bad object” obviously left an empty space. What is its nature?

That is the most crucial question. If the social realism had expired softly, we should not bother about its poetics, its functions, virulence and vitality. But we do. The author of these pages believes that the mode of collective phantasy represented by socialist realism compensated recently the lack of an existential utopia here and now.

Unfortunately, the realism as it was interpreted by the Marxist standard – “typical characters in the typical circumstances” [10, c. 124] – never gives a subject the possibility of losing himself in the imaginary, utopian world, of rejecting his/her real circumstances of being and transcending into a different temporality. But the temporal mode of socialist realist creativity proposed exactly the difference required: “to represent the life not only in its past and present, but in its developmental trends as well, in its being aimed at the future” [7, c.337].

Let us try to compare this point with the often cited research on the modes of artistic temporality (we should stress again that temporality is not time itself but the way of living in it and living it through). Linda Williams defined the essence of cinematic melodrama in two words: “too late” [19, p.739]. To her opinion, the so called body genres correspond to the three basic Freudian phantasies interpreted by Laplanche and Pontalis [19, p.737-738; 8, c. 244-273]. They differ in their temporal modes. That is: “too soon” for horror films reflecting the latent sexuality preceding puberty, “just in time” for porn, and “too late” for melodrama.

The socialist realist phantasy looks very special against this background. It gives us not the modes of simply “too soon” or “too late” or “just in time”, but something like “too soon and always not in proper time”. That is just in between horror and melodrama.

The melodramatic phantasy mode, “the main form of cinematic narrative representation of reality” [13, c. 48], fused with the socialist realism soon after the World War II. But the fusion was not an entirely legitimate one. Melodrama may be considered one of the most realistic genres, I only we are allowed to extend the notion of realism at the explication of typical phantasies in their pure and simple

forms. After all, the fact that phantasy structures reality (at least, the access to it) is one of Lacanian axioms similar to such aphorisms as “the Woman does not exist” or “the unconscious is structured like a language”.

Let us make it clear, paying attention first of all to the self-identification of the socialist realist mode of phantasy. “The socialist realism as a method requires that the artist should represent the historical concreteness of reality in its revolutionary development”. This is the statutory definition of the method, plus “the task of transforming and educating people in the spirit of socialism” [2, c. 1471]. This definition in its turn is based on Stalin’s statement dated the year 1932: “If an artist represents our life truthfully, he cannot fail to notice in it trends leading it to socialism. That will be socialist art. That will be socialist realism”. [11, c. 570] As a matter of fact, this formula created by “the leader and teacher” does not name explicitly “the historical concreteness”, but the term is very close to “the truthfulness”. Even the “Fundamentals of Marxist-Leninist Aesthetics” printed in 1962, the year of most active destalinization, did not omit the reference to Stalin. Everybody knows that the term “socialist realism” was not the only one proposed at the year 1932. Some of the alternatives were such as “realism with the socialist content”, “proletarian realism”, “tendency realism”, “monumental realism”, “communist realism”, “revolutionary-socialist realism”. It was a search of a name for the method, not of the method itself. The essence of it was depicted in the year 1933 by A. Lunacharsky: “To reflect the things as they should be, not just as they are.” A. Lunacharsky graduated from the 1st Kyiv gym, so that he could not pass by the phrase “Sophocles depicted people as they should be, and Euripides depicted them as they are.” [1, c. 129] That is a quotation from Aristotle’s “Poetics” which leads us to the famous understanding of the socialist realism as classicism introduced by Henri Lefebvre [11, c. 584], as well as to the upper levels of the superstructure of a historical construction built by the most ambitious architect of human lives, “of all the times and peoples”. We know the name of the project, that is, “socialism in one and only country”. When the master deceased, the representation of people as they should be was replaced almost at once with their depiction “as they are”. But, the socialist realism did not transform itself into a realism of any kind.

The socialist realist mode of phantasy *transposes the (imaginary) future into the present*. We find ourselves in the utopia fulfilled here and now, and, exactly this utopia should lead us to the brilliant future.

Is it so, really?

Karl Mannheim believed it to be so. In his celebrated work “Ideology and Utopia” (1929) he related ideology to a false conscience of ruling classes, reversed towards the past, while utopia forwards an image of a world never present in the reality but projected to the future and inherent to the conscience of lower classes who reject the status quo [9, c.40, 166-167].

Nevertheless, a different concept is possible. The utopia can be conservative (an attempt to escape any changes), retrospective (an effort at returning to the “better time”), and progressivist in various versions – liberal or egalitarian. All the versions mentioned may combine. “An utopia easily mixes most contradictory items, which fact never embarrasses its followers... its elements are liked precisely since they are borrowed from the fairy tales or from the acceptable aspects of reality” [16, c. 258-259]. The quotation is from Georges Sorel, an ex-Marxist who taught both syndicalists and Italian fascists. He also was the author of the concept of social myth. His openness is almost astonishing. Utopia really is oriented *back to the future*. The future imagined by someone for some reasons but never to be fulfilled. The secret of socialist realism lies here.

Phantasmatic appropriation of reality is obviously mediated through the representations of time and space dominating in a culture. As a matter of fact, we have to deal with the representation of *time as space*, as nobody is capable of imagining time without a space metaphor.

Time in the soviet culture was regarded as something which had already expired. The end of the pre-history of mankind and the beginning of its true history is strikingly similar to the very popular about the end of last millennium “end of history” envisaged by Francis Fukuyama. Or, it is much better to compare it to the Augustinian theology of history. The realm of temporal “here and now” was determined for a soviet citizen positively once and forever. The realm of capitalist environment marked as “there” had not any positive determination and no future at

all. That is the official point of view; but in his/her private life the same soviet citizen transposed the situation vice versa. “Here” all was still and dead, and “there” real life could be envisaged. These two points of view mirror each other but do not contradict each other. So, we propose a statement: the socialist realism is a reverse mode of melodramatic temporality, its double. And the coalescence between them was very simple after Stalin’s death.

Let us get back to the realistic aspect of melodrama and to the “reality” of socialist realism, as well as to its “real” in the Lacanian sense of the word. The realistic dimension of any artistic phantasy mode depends on its being related to the collective phantasy of the culture of the time. If the American culture of the classical Hollywood period dreamt in the mode of “too late” (too late for a family to reunite, for sexual relations to happen, etc.), we are allowed to consider the correlative mode of narration as realistic. If the soviet culture in the Stalinist USSR dreamt in the mode of “too soon” (for sexual relations or for a family idyll) but in the same time created an illusion of a paradoxical presence here and now of all the things which are too early to happen, we have a realistic creativity here, in the psychoanalytic sense. And we must say that if the post-Stalinist culture added to the mode of prematurity the mode of lateness, we obtain as the result the paradoxical “never in time”.

Let us give an example from the Stalinist era. The Lacanian “real” in the reality of the “Great terror” incarnates itself in the inmost fear of being taken tomorrow. That fear transforms into the childlike gratefulness addressed to the “father of peoples” who did not take your life, he took the life of your neighbor. And so he did you a gift of another day of life. “We are grateful to Stalin who generated us for a happy new life.” The quotation is from the “Fall of Berlin” (1950), the first part of the film, located in the pre-war time. He *generated* them. A human being so much dependent on the Great Other is not capable of any temporality except of being an everlasting newborn, living each day as the first and the last one.

Here we find the gender paradox of Stalinist cinema: the intellect is embodied in feminine heroines (those who generate), while the chaos to be tamed is represented through masculine persons. This pattern is present in the pre-war trilogy on Maxim, as well as in the “Fall of Berlin”. The man is a worker, the girl is a teacher. Both the

teachers bear the name “Nataly” (etymologically, to engender). Even more paradoxical is the fact that the socialist realism requires the edifying and ruling function from a representative of the Party – and we see such representatives everywhere starting from “Chapayev” (1934) and in the both of mentioned films as well. In the “Fall of Berlin” we see Stalin himself in this role. However, the patriarchy *breaks this rule*, at the level of the unconscious.

The Stalinist utopia tried to change the symbolic unconscious dependent on a long-time tradition into a social one constructed in the present. As if one could make all the soviet citizens daughters and sons of the “Father of peoples” who turns into a fairy-tale giver for all the brides and combines in his person the obscene pervert pleasure with the “name of Father”. But the Father should be dead, according to Lacan (and the figure of Lenin played this role at the time).

I.Zherebkina in her book “Stalin does not exist” tried to show that Stalinism contains so much of totalitarian as it contains of feminine (or hysterical). Both of them are based on the principle “You have to guess my desire” which could be eventually rejected by the leader who always has the possibility to say: “That is not it...” [6, c. 8] For example, Stalin during a month did not speak to his wife after their child (Vasyly) was born. He expected her to address him as the 2nd person singular now, and she told him a respectful “you” [6, c.13].

In the social life as a whole we obtain the paradoxical situation when “every gesture of the Stalinist subjectivity witnesses that he/she never wanted the things she/he demands so obstinately” [6, c. 38]. In the artistic world it means the radical extension of the socialist realism formula by B. Groys. “We speak here about visual implementation of the Party prescripts not formulated yet... or, more exactly, about the capability of guessing Stalin’s will in his quality of a real creator of reality” [4, c. 73]. But what is more important, one can never be sure that the guess would not be rejected by the Leader as not the Leader’s own desire. Since every hysteric changes his desire simply on the pretext that another one (not the Great Other but an empirical human being) could guess it.

Things change after the year 1953. The excessive productivity of the early 5-year plans which equaled to the replacement of consumption with the productivity as

such plus the socialist realist art product [5, c. 119] was replaced in its turn by a mediocre biopolitical analogue of the welfare “social state” [4, c. 9 – 32]. So, nobody had to guess the leader’s will. Regardless of the wayward type of Khrushchov’s intrusions into the life of art, the socialist realism from a “Great style” became an ordinary melodrama.

We prefer to speak about cinema, though the Stalinist culture was literary centered. The cinema depended on the literature as well. But the difference between the Stalinists masterpieces and such post-Stalinist items as “the Big Family” (1954) or “the Road” (1955) lies exactly in the passage from the “greatened” main heroes (as Gorky said) to something commensurable to an average him or he.

But, phantasy did not stop itself.

The art of painting was the first to develop a socialist realist standard, due to the canonization of the image of Lenin in the mid-1920th [18, c. 288 – 305]. The standard was enhanced through the iconography of Stalin [10] and oscillated then between the Russian realist heritage and post-vanguard experiments. The famous article by Clement Greenberg “Avant-garde and kitsch” dated by the year 1939 witnesses the populist nature of socialist realism. The same things were said by E. Dobrenko in the mid-1990th. Cinema, as well as literature, was aimed at the ordinary people, not at some intellectuals. That was the result of the discussion on cinema poetry or cinema prose (1935). That is to say, socialist realism is not only a product of a powerful impact from above. It was a result of a complicated interaction between the power and the people. It is precisely the Hollywood style.

The soviet cinema censored sexuality similarly to the classical Hollywood as well, accordingly to the Hays Code. It was impossible to see even an elliptic representation of sexuality until the year 1968 (Natanson).

But the art of painting allowed itself to expose naked bodies. The socialist realist erotic phantasies are collected in an album “Soviet Venus” [3], starting from the famous A. Samokhvalov. That collection witnesses the abovementioned fusion of the modes, in the case, of pre-puberty “too soon” and pornographic “just in time”. And the development in time from 1920th to 1980th shows us an explicit childlike nature of soviet erotic images.

The soviet people went more and more childlike from a year to the next year, from a leader to the next leader. The slogan “we thank Stalin for our happy childhood” transformed in Brezhnev’s time into “all the best for children” corresponding to a pre-puberty fixation and will to never grow up.

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ЧОМУ СОЦРЕАЛІЗМ? ТЕМПОРАЛЬНІСТЬ І МОДУС ФАНТАЗУВАННЯ

У статті розглянуто парадоксальний модус фантазування соцреалізму, що визначає його живучість та привабливість для наступних поколінь.

Ключові слова: соцреалізм, темпоральність, фантазування, мелодрама, запізнення.