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Engineering the Soviet artist's soul

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ENGINEERING THE SOVIET ARTIST’S SOUL

by

Margaret Julia Ross-Martin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Politics.

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I. Introduction

Art history does not look fondly upon the Stalin-era. The literature, painting, sculpture, and architecture produced during this period—broadly categorized under the umbrella of Socialist Realism—is equated entirely with its unfavorable political context. This is not surprising considering that this body of work consists primarily of heroic portraits of Lenin and Stalin, and scenes of happy and healthy industrial and agricultural laborers, working eagerly away on the construction of the new socialist state. While Socialist Realism once depicted the energy and excitement of the socialist dream, history’s hindsight is limited to this dream’s tragic failure to become a reality.

In recent years, however, a small but vocal group of art historians is calling for a reevaluation of Socialist Realism as an effort to respond directly to their skeptical colleagues. On its surface, this dispute is about whether or not Socialist Realism is “art.” The historians who reject Socialist Realism do so on the basis that it was state mandated, and therefore did not represent the will of the artists. Those who oppose this conventional reading, on the other hand, maintain that because artists collaborated in the development and execution of this new method, they were in fact autonomous. Underpinning both sides of this debate is thus an emphasis on the category of agency: proof of its absence undermines any consideration of Socialist Realism as art, and proof of its presence, on the contrary, legitimizes it as such.

Yet art historians do not go so far as to assert that the agency of the Socialist Realist artist is analogous to that of the western artist. Rather, they regard the Soviet
artist as divided into two distinct halves: one half is complicit with the rigid restraints of Socialist Realism, while the other resents and resists them. The art that falls outside the parameters of Socialist Realism, therefore, is interpreted by art historians as the Soviet artist’s efforts to resist his other half, or internalized oppression. It follows that the Socialist Realist art to which art historians are drawn is that which is, paradoxically, least Socialist Realist.

Politically progressive and ethically conscious as these restorative critiques may seem, they nonetheless pose fundamental questions about the criteria upon which their judgments are based. Socialist Realism matters, they imply, only when Soviet artists were resistant, or demonstrated a conscious willingness to collaborate with the State in developing its criteria. But I argue that this scholarship is in fact imposing a deeply western notion of the artist on the artwork and artistic practices of a radically different culture. Rather than furthering the purported goal of restoring subjecthood to Soviet artists, the historian achieves exactly the opposite effect. This thesis asks that we reframe both our understanding of the Soviet subject and our representations of that subject in our own thinking as a means of escaping from simplistic notions about agency, art, and politics.
II: Approaches to the Study of Soviet Art

In January of 1994, just over two years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first American exhibition of Soviet Socialist Realist art was curated at P.S.1 in New York City. The following is an excerpt from a review by *Time Magazine*’s art critic Richard Hughes:

Throughout his rule, Stalin had sponsored a form of state art officially known as socialist realism. Geared to a naïve, not to say brutish, mass public barely literate in artistic matters, Soviet socialist realism was the most coarsely idealistic kind of art ever foisted on a modern audience ... ¹

Hughes’ response to the exhibition at P.S.1. is hardly unique. Indeed, the disdain of art historians for Socialist Realist art is as old as Socialist Realism itself. Hughes’ analysis of Socialist Realism as “geared to a naïve ... mass public” and “coarsely idealistic” is consistent with a long tradition of dismissing Socialist Realism in art history, and echoes the sentiment of American art critic Clement Greenberg, who in 1939 published the seminal “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” This essay was instrumental in developing a dominant art historical discourse that upholds the virtues of the avant-garde tradition and relegates Soviet Socialist Realism to the lowly status of “kitsch.”²

Many art historians, critics, and curators continue to abide by Clement Greenberg’s categorization of Socialist Realism as “kitsch,” or “a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art.”³ As a testament to the contemporary relevance of Greenberg’s essay some 70 years after

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³ Ibid.
its original publication, Socialist Realism continues to be dismissed as “kitsch,” both explicitly and implicitly in the absence of scholarship on the topic. As a matter of fact, many art encyclopedias do not even include an entry for Socialist Realism, and the ones that do tend to focus on its developments preceding the Stalin-era.4

However, there are notable exceptions to the conventional contempt for Socialist Realism. C. Vaughan James’ *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory*, for instance, pioneered the field as the first in-depth account of Socialist Realist art published outside of the Soviet Union. James introduces Soviet art by recognizing, first, the dearth of documentation and research on this period in art history (this was especially true in 1974), and second, the logistical and ideological constraints facing the western scholar interested in Socialist Realism. According to James, the “westerner” is “brought up in a society that not only does not boast a widely accepted theory of the socio-political function of art but is, in the main, hostile to the very elaboration of such a theory…”5 However, for James, this fundamental ideological difference between the westerner and Soviet artist should not stand in the way of interpretation. In order for what James calls “independent judgment” to take place, the westerner invested in Soviet art must resist the urge to apply ‘universal’ criteria to the art, and instead pay significant attention to Socialist Realism’s context and history.6

What follows is a highly detailed survey of Soviet Socialist Realism, in which James is explicitly cautious not to interject his own opinion or analysis in order to

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6 Ibid., pp. ix-x.
provide as objective an account as possible. James continues to maintain that the hypothetical “student of the arts in the Soviet Union” is more concerned with how Party controls and statements were enacted than how they were intended. Take, for instance, how this student might react when confronted with the seeming contradiction of Lenin’s *Party Organization and Party Literature*, in which Lenin asserts that the arts are at once under Party control and “without restriction.” He or she would be more interested in the ways in which the literature and art that was a product of Lenin’s policies reveal their inadequacy than the purpose of these policies in the first place. James sets out with a different approach to the study of Socialist Realism: “Our object in this study is not to pass judgments based on Soviet policy or to criticize the premises on which that policy is based, so much as to reveal precisely what the policy is and how it was formulated.”

James’ decision to present a survey that rejects judgment is in direct response to what he identifies as the two dominant (and judgment laden) theories of Socialist Realism: “Opponents” of Socialist Realism are those who believe that Socialist Realism originated in the Stalin-era (1927-1953) as a rigid restraint foisted on Soviet artists. “Proponents,” on the other hand, understand Socialist Realism as part of a worldwide development inspired by a growing industrial proletariat, and the Stalin-era as a deviation from its Marxist-Leninist roots. In other words, proponents believe that the rigidity of the Stalin-era was a gross misapplication of

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7 Ibid.: In his introduction, James says, “I have restricted my comments to a minimum, and though my own convictions must inevitably have influenced both my selection of material and its presentation, I am confident that my reader will have little difficulty in applying any necessary corrective interpretation.”
8 Ibid., p. 16.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., p. x.
Lenin’s model for the role of the arts in the new socialist society, which advocated, above all, a press free from police, capital, and careerism.\(^{11}\)

Remarkably, the dominant theories that James identified persist in Soviet scholarship some forty years later. Of course, James’ formulation is over-simplified, but generally speaking, it still stands—art historians either dismiss Socialist Realism, or appreciate its humanist roots and reject the Stalin-era as a temporary aberration.\(^{12}\) But James positions himself differently, asserting that Stalin’s cultural policies were a logical extension from Lenin’s \emph{partiinost} (or “party-mindedness”) at the heart of Socialist Realism. \emph{Partiinost} began as an unwavering commitment to the Party, and, according to James, Stalin adapted this policy in the extreme. Citing K.P. Thompson, James asserts the consequences of \emph{partiinost}: “In such circumstances, the Soviet writer: ‘... ceases to be an intellectual, a creator of ideas, and becomes a retailer of the ideas of others ... He no longer searches for truth; he begins with the truth as revealed in the pronouncements of party leaders...’”\(^{13}\)

James’ position on Soviet art is unique in that even though he denies that the Soviet artist had autonomy over his work, he does not use this fact to justify negative aesthetic judgments or outright dismissal. Most art historians who study Russia deny that Soviet artists had any artistic autonomy, which accounts for the sheer lack of scholarship available on Socialist Realism and abundance of scholarship on equally prominent and influential Russian art traditions such as

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\(^{13}\) James, \textit{Soviet Socialist Realism}, p. 101.
Realism and Sots Art. As far as the limited scholarship that does exist on the Soviet period, “official” art is generally distinguished from “unofficial” art, and the latter is regarded as legitimate by virtue that it is not affiliated with the state and therefore must represent the Soviet individual’s agency and resistance to power.
III: The Preoccupation with Agency

In recent years, however, this “official” versus “unofficial” binary that permeates much of the literature on Soviet art has begun to dissolve as Socialist Realism is gaining increasing recognition in academic circles. Despite scholars’ various definitions and interpretative models for understanding Socialist Realism, each is concerned, albeit to varying degrees, with whether or not the Soviet artist had artistic agency.\(^\text{14}\)

The historian Anna Krylova locates this obsession with agency in Soviet studies more broadly, and traces the current preoccupation with the Soviet subject’s agency and modes of resistance back to the immediate postwar period in the United States. The emergence of the Soviet Union, she argues, represented not only a threat to our freedom but our classical liberal values—the highest of which was, and remains, the “autonomous liberal self.”\(^\text{15}\) The perceived threat that Soviet socialism posed to these values was met with a firm reassertion of classical liberalism as “the center of public, intellectual, and academic life.” This shift in emphasis was, as Krylova argues, “the central formative experience for the emerging field of Sovietology.”\(^\text{16}\)

Krylova proceeds to trace the genealogy the Stalinist subject in western literature and academic scholarship, paying particular attention to the unspoken


\(^{16}\) Ibid.
assumptions that undergird “the Cold War view of human agency,” which interprets the Stalinist subject as the antithesis of the liberal self. She continues:

The search for remnants of liberal subjectivity and signs of resistance against anti-liberal communist Russia constituted a central, long-term agenda for American scholars. I submit that this tendency reached its logical extreme only in the present day, i.e. post-1991, post-Soviet scholarship.17

Christina Kiaer, an art historian from Northwestern University, represents this tendency definitively. In her 2005 article about the prominent Socialist Realist painter Aleksandr Denika, she is intent on proving that he had agency. Because Denika was a modernist painter who later in his career transitioned into the naturalistic and legible forms characteristic of Socialist Realism, he is typically understood as ‘bending to the prevailing wind’ of state mandates. However, Kiaer argues that his paintings, when approached as a collective whole, prove that he was in fact inspired by his own, unique vision of revolutionary art.18 In justifying this assessment of Denika, Kiaer acknowledges that the designation of “Socialist Realism” typically forecloses interpretation, and thus, “art historians have the ‘duty’ to grant a certain degree of agency—both artistic and revolutionary—to Soviet artists working in the 1930s, and therefore to think more seriously about their works than the usual cursory dismissals of the regressive forms of totalitarian art allow.”19

17 Ibid.; see also Reid’s “Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror,” p. 161: “If the emphasis in Cold War scholarship was on how Soviet state ideology was imposed on society from above, more recent Soviet cultural history has focused on how people lived ideology in everyday life, from below....”
19 Ibid.: 323.
In the remainder of her essay, Kiaer interprets a series of Denika’s paintings as evidence of his role as both a “creator and victim of Socialist Realism.” In her analysis of Denika’s 1935 *Lunchbreak at the Donbass*, for instance, Kiaer rejects “the dominant narrative [that would interpret this painting as] the demise of the avant-garde under the pressure of Socialist Realism.” She employs a scrupulous formal analysis that reveals, among other things, “painterly touches that detract from the coherent form” as a means to advance her thesis regarding Denika’s conscious participation within the development of the Socialist Realist method.

In one of Kiaer’s more recent essays, she regards the same fundamental questions about the agency of Socialist Realist artists on a more general scale. She advocates what she terms “different points of orientation” for looking at Socialist Realism, “not to whitewash the abuses of the Stalinist system, but to grant some agency to the artists who developed and worked within the system.” For Kiaer, these “different points of orientation” have their basis in psychoanalysis:

The self-conscious choice to conform—or to put it more palatably, to subordinate one’s individuality in order to participate in a shared artistic project—is so profoundly unusual in modern art that the explanation for it must exceed the bureaucratic circumstances of production. The terms for understanding it begin to emerge if we shift the pane of analysis from just the historical facts—our detailed knowledge of the coercive policies and ideological machinations behind each picture—to considering the broader psychic operations of sameness and conformity involved in Socialist Realism.

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20 Ibid.: 324.
22 Ibid., p. 185.
While this later essay does deviate from her earlier work in that it does not regard the Soviet artist as “both creator and victim of Socialist Realism,” she maintains her emphasis on the “conscious choice” of the Soviet artist to conform to Socialist Realism in order to substantiate her claim that Socialist Realist artists had agency.23

Matthew Cullerne Bown, a pioneer in the study of Socialist Realist painting, shares with Kaier an obsession with determining the extent to which Soviet artists were autonomous. In his Art Under Stalin, published shortly after the fall of the USSR, Bown points to Aleksandr Gerasimov’s 1938 Bath House series as evidence of his creative autonomy within an otherwise oppressive socialist reality.24 This series, depicting naked women bathing together, is composed of two major paintings, two large watercolors, and a series of studies. Because of Gerasimov’s elevated status as the head of the Artist’s Union, he was not punished for his overt deviation from Socialist Realism’s puritanical parameters. As Bown says, “the sensuousness of Gerasimov’s Russian Communal Bath series is unabashed: I cannot conceive that the artist’s stimulus was not primarily erotic.”25 Regarding the contradiction of Gerasimov’s role in developing Socialist Realism and then blatant disregard for its most basic principles, Bown suggests that the Bath House series illustrates Gerasimov’s internal conflict, or competing desire to both resist and submit to oppression.26

23 Ibid., pp. 183-184.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., pp. 116-177, 223: Bown’s discussion of the divided psychology of Soviet artists is not limited to Aleksandr Gerasimov. Regarding the variation in Sergi Gerasimov’s style, Bown asserts that he “best embodies the conflicts of artists felt at the time.”
Although the interpretive approach of Kaier and Bown is located squarely in the liberal framework Krylova describes, I do not equate it with the conventional disdainful reactions to Soviet art demonstrated by critics like Greenberg or Hughes. The value of these critiques that attempt to restore the Soviet artists’ subjectivity lies in the recognition that the Soviet artist is not simply an automaton working mindlessly for the regime. Instead, these scholars see Socialist Realist art as evidence of the ways in which artists both collaborated with the state and resisted its power—a power understood as internal and integral to the psychology of the Soviet subject. Indeed, Boris Groys, a Russian art theorist form New York University, uses this same logic to describe the Soviet artist in general as one who is “complicit with that which oppresses and negates him, and finds that his own inspiration and the callousness of power share some common roots.”

This argument, while it does well to refute the grounds upon which Socialist Realism is typically rejected, does share with the negative critics an emphasis on the category of agency. For the negative critics, it is the absence of agency that discredits Soviet art, and for the critics who advocate for Socialist Realism’s acceptance into the canon, it is presence of agency, evident through an interpretive approach that regards the Soviet artists’ psychology as divided, that legitimizes Socialist Realism.

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IV. Speaking for the Soviet Subaltern

The theme of the divided psychology of the Socialist Realist artist in art historical scholarship cannot be overemphasized. The recurrence of this idea, though not unfounded, rests on the presumption that the two halves of the Soviet artist—he who works towards the collective goals of the socialist dream and he who resists them—are necessarily trapped in a contradiction. The implications of this presumption bring us to the primacy of liberal humanism in Soviet studies, as the half of the artist who is always preferred is the half who represents liberal humanism’s commitment to agency and resists the oppression of socialism.

The commitment to liberal humanism is not particular to Soviet studies. It is a symptom of a much larger problem in western scholarship, as post-colonial theorists have made clear over the last generation. Of course, the focus of post-colonial discourse has not generally been on Russia but rather on the former colonies of European powers. Consider, for instance, the following passage from Rosalind O’Hanlon’s essay on the obsession with recovering the subjectivity of colonial subject in South Asia, in which her critique of the interpretive frameworks employed by what she calls the “Subaltern project” brings our concerns regarding art history’s treatment of the Soviet subject into relief:

My main concern ... is with the nature of the reconstruction attempted in the Subaltern project. At the very moment of this assault upon western historicism, the classic figure of western humanism—the self-originating, self-determining individual, who is at once a subject in his possession of a sovereign consciousness whose defining quality is reason, and an agent in his power of freedom—is admitted through
the back door in the figure of the subaltern himself, as he is restored to history in the reconstructions of the Subaltern project.28

Anna Krylova speaks to O’Hanlon’s concern as it relates more specifically to Soviet studies. In tracing the field’s longstanding commitment to liberal subjectivity, Krylova’s project ends with an exploration of American scholarship in the 1990s. This decade in Soviet scholarship is of particular interest and concern for Krylova as the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union marked “the triumph of the resisting human spirit,” when the liberal humanity of the Soviet subject ceased to be a mere dream of western scholars and authors, and proved instead to be a forceful reality.29 This political development legitimated the claims scholars had been making for decades regarding the Soviet man’s innate liberalism, and ensuing scholarship emphasized the liberal humanity of the Soviet subject more assertively than ever before.30

Corresponding to this shift in the emphasis on liberal humanity, Krylova identifies a “transference of liberal moralism from the historian to his/her historical subject.”31 The significance of this shift, she maintains, is that it imposed contemporary and western notions of agency onto the Soviet subject, enabling historians to interpret “manipulation and pursuit of self-interest as resistance,” effectively refashioning the Stalinist subject as one who is morally grounded in liberal humanist values.32 Much like O’Hanlon’s classic figure of western humanism who is, in the Subaltern project, “readmitted through the back door in the figure of

29 Krylova, “The Tenacious Liberal Subject.” 22.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.: 23.
32 Ibid.
the subaltern himself,” this same western humanist figure is, in post-1991 Soviet studies, grafted seamlessly onto the Stalinist subject.

For both Krylova and O’Hanlon, western hegemony is the framework to which the Soviet subject and Subaltern necessarily conform. The question, then, is what sort of presence this subject might take if not in our own self-image? Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how the Soviet artist’s presence might be configured if neither as an automaton, nor a divided subject who is both complicit and resistant in his oppression. It is at this impasse where O’Hanlon interjects: “the notion of the restoration of an original presence suggests … the means by which it is to be done … essentially recuperation of the subaltern as conscious human subject-agent.”33 In other words, our concern for the authentic presence of the Soviet subaltern is predicated on the liberal values that we are attempting to transcend.

However, if the very attempt to envision another form for the Soviet subaltern is in itself a product of western humanism, how can we move forward? The first step, I believe, is precisely in this recognition of our position and investment in the Soviet subject. The liberal subject is a seductive one, and our desire to recover this subject is the product of entrenched political and historical precedent. Interrogating this subject, according to O’Hanlon, is a liberating endeavor as it “illuminates the repressive strategy of power implicit in the insistence that all of us are free.”34

In other words, while the ostensible project to restore Soviet artists’ subjectivity appears progressive, it in fact assimilates Socialist Realism into

33 O’Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject:” 196.
34 Ibid.: 197.
hegemonic art historical discourse. Thus, the supposed commitment to Soviet artists is in fact a commitment to the preservation of artistic autonomy as central to liberal, modernist notions of not only what it means to be an artist, but more importantly, what defines art. In the act of interpreting Socialist Realist art as evidence of artistic agency in Soviet society, the critic usurps the artist’s mastery over is his work and claims it as her own.

Interrogating the commitment to the subject-agent, therefore, is a difficult yet necessary task for the Soviet art historian concerned with the ethics of her analysis. It provides a clearer picture of not only our historically and politically constituted position as historians, but the strength of the ideological forces behind the impulse to recover the Soviet artist's agency. Moreover, this recognition opens a space in which potential alternative histories and narratives might surface, not as truths free of their own ideology, but challenges to our narrow conceptions of Soviet subjectivity.
V. The Ideological and Conceptual Bases of Soviet Socialist Realism

The writings of Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), whose philosophy is fundamental to Socialist Realist thought, provides one such counterpoint to the dominant assessment of the Soviet subject as divided by the contradictory interests of the self and the state. Through the writings of Gorky, and particularly his notion of “complex individualism,” I propose that these interests are not, as most Soviet art historians understand, in competition with one another, but congruous.

Gorky takes a central role in the accounts of Soviet scholars, who tend to credit him as the “Father of Socialist Realism.” But any further reading on Gorky reveals that despite his canonical status as Socialist Realism’s founder, he is in fact a more complicated character. An early supporter of the Bolsheviks, Gorky quickly became one of their harshest critics after the 1917 Revolution. Most of his criticism was in the form of articles published for New Life magazine, which Lenin shut down quickly for fear that Gorky would stir “intelligentsia pessimism.” In response to Lenin’s disapproval, Gorky tried to seek reconciliation and for the next three years was an active supporter of the Bolshevik cause. Although Gorky’s support for the Party was inconsistent, he nevertheless formed the basis for Socialist Realist thought.35

In his introduction to a collection of articles Gorky published in New Life, Mark Steinberg introduces Gorky’s philosophy of what he terms “complex individualism.” According to Steinberg, Gorky subscribed to a traditional ethics that

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35 Mark Steinberg “Introduction” to Maxim Gorky, Untimely Thoughts: Essays on Revolution, Culture, and the Bolsheviks, 1917-1918 (New York: P.S. Eriksson, 1968), p. xxii; James, Soviet Socialist Realism,” p. 94. Vaughan asserts that Gorky's The Mother was deeply influential for Lenin, who thought it was a good example of the way in which socialist realism should develop the social consciousness of man.
prioritized “first and foremost ... the individual.”\textsuperscript{36} This was consistent with a long pre-revolutionary tradition in Russian philosophy and culture to “promote models of autonomous moral choice and individual achievement.”\textsuperscript{37} Critically, however, this individualism is not synonymous with that which is born of the liberal tradition. While Gorky emphasized the centrality of the individual, he also believed that the “ethics of individual worth and rights were interwoven—not always neatly, to be sure, but persistently—with notions of society and humanity.”\textsuperscript{38} The simultaneous commitment to individual autonomy and collective humanity appear at first glance to be at odds with one another, but are, according to the fundamentals of Socialist Realist philosophy, in fact harmonious.

For instance, consider Socialist Realist writer Mikhail Sholokhov’s declaration at the Second Writers’ Congress in 1954:

Our furious enemies in other countries say that we Soviet authors write according to the dictates of the Party. But the fact of the matter is a little different. Each of us writes according to the dictates of his heart, but all out hearts belong to the Party and to the people, whom we serve with our art.\textsuperscript{39}

If we are to take Sholokhov’s pronouncement seriously, it should become all the more clear that the interests of the artist—or “dictates of his heart”—are the interests of the Party in the spirit of service. Thus, Sholokhov, like Gorky, saw no contradiction between the individual and the collective. This realization illuminates the misguided approach of those scholars, who, failing to account for the fact that

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\textsuperscript{36} Steinberg, “Introduction,” p. xiv.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. xv.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Mikhail Sholokhov, \textit{Speech to the Second All Union Congress of Soviet Writers.} Moscow, 1954.
\end{flushright}
artistic autonomy is a western ideological construct and not a universal ideal, assume that the interests of the artist and those of the state are at fundamental odds.

What if, however, Sholokhov was saying what he had to say in order to appease the party and avoid persecution? My point is not to deny this as a possibility, rather, it is to caution against attempting to determine Sholokhov’s real feelings with any conviction. We know what Sholokhov said at the Second Writer’s Congress, but we must accept that we cannot know what he meant. Supposing that we do know denies Sholokhov the authority to determine the intention of his own speech, and allows us to disregard it on the basis that it is presumed to be false.

Sholokhov’s simultaneous commitment to both his own self-interest and the state is reminiscent of Gorky’s speech to the First All Union Congress of Soviet Writers:

> Socialist Realism maintains that being is acting, creative work whose aim is to constantly develop man’s precious individual abilities ... for the sake of the great happiness of living on earth which he, in accordance with his growing needs, wants to cultivate and to make it all into a beautiful home for humankind united into one family.\(^{40}\)

To a large degree, this harmony between the individual and the collective stemmed from Gorky’s perception of the process of artistic representation, or “acting,” as the means by which the artist realizes his complex individualism—that is, his own self in the service of others.\(^{41}\) Needless to say, the artist’s role in Soviet society was a deeply political one, and Socialist Realism, with its emphasis on accessible subject matter and technical skill, was understood by Soviet officials to be the most

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\(^{40}\) Maxim Gorky, The First All Union Congress of Soviet Writers, verbatim report, Moscow, 1937.

\(^{41}\) Steinberg, “Introduction,” p. xviii.
appropriate method for “engineering the human soul,” as Stalin’s social commissioner Andrei Zhdanov put it in a celebrated formulation.\textsuperscript{42}

It is also important to place Gorky in the larger political and cultural context of his time. Significantly, in 1932, after over a decade of heated debates about the role of art most appropriate for furthering the socialist cause, the Soviet state intervened, and mandated that all existing art groups be disbanded, and artists unified under a single, monolithic union.\textsuperscript{43} Two years later, in 1934, Socialist Realism was codified as the only legitimate art form in the USSR.\textsuperscript{44} From this point on, all artists were required to practice Socialist Realism, loosely defined as “realistic in form and socialist in content.”\textsuperscript{45} This vague formulation is made more explicit in the official \textit{Bases of Marxist-Leninist Aesthetics}:

The relationship between art and reality is twofold: reality is reflected in art, but art also exerts an active effect upon that reality. Socialist Realism demands a profound and true perception of reality and reflection of its chief and most progressive tendencies; but it is itself a powerful weapon for changing reality. In both content and form, it has the same fundamental aims – to assist the people and the Communist Party to create a new society, a better man and a more perfect world. The principles of true reflection of reality and ideological education of the masses are aspects of the same thing, since artistic truth facilitate the development of communist awareness, and education in the spirit of communism is possible only through a true reflection of life. Therefore a true reflection of reality subsumes the expression of communist ideals.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} Central Committee of All-Union Communist Party: “Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations,” in \textit{Art In Theory},” p. 417.
\textsuperscript{44} Zhdanov, “Speech to the Congress of Soviet Writers,” p. 427.
This relationship between art and reality was, moreover, firmly rooted in the writings of nineteenth-century Realist philosopher Nikolai Chernyshevsky, particularly *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality*. Chernyshevsky’s philosophy, which prioritized the accessibility of art, lent itself well to revolutionary art because, according to the *Bases of Marxist-Leninist Aesthetics*, “the principles of true reflection of reality and ideological education of the masses are aspects of the same thing....” Art should not convey hidden messages or meanings, but render the beauty of the socialist dream accessible to the masses.47

Soviet-born art theorist Gleb Prokhorov refers to this emphasis on accessible subject matter as part of what makes Socialist Realism a sort of “witchcraft.” This characterization of Soviet art helps enhance our understanding of the unique theoretical basis of Socialist Realism. For instance, Prokhorov argues that the very act of painting is a sacred undertaking, in which the artist fulfills his duties to the state and to the people in rendering the socialist dream legible. Furthermore, the sacredness of the act of painting is not diminished in the process of reproduction: “Be it a great canvas or a small postcard,” Prokhorov says, “be it displayed in a museum or printed on a newspaper sheet, it had the same significance, and [it’s ‘sacral character’] was inviolable.”48

In the modern, western tradition, technological reproduction performs the exact opposite effect on the art object. In his seminal, “Work of Art in the Age of

Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin describes the way in which the process of technological reproduction does not preserve the “sacredness,” or, in Benjamin’s terms, “aura,” of the art object, but diminishes it. Furthermore, as this aura is diminished, artwork loses its ritual significance, which Benjamin locates in its uniqueness and authenticity. However, as Prokhorov suggests, the ritual significance of Soviet art is not diminished but enhanced in the process of technological reproduction. Illustrating this point, Prokhorov regards instances in which Soviet citizens were persecuted for destroying reproductions of portraits of their leaders, “as the existence of their image was understood as the continuation of their lives.”

As Prokhorov makes clear, the Soviet context is an exception to Benjamin’s assertion that the uniqueness and authenticity of the art object is what withers in the age of mechanical reproduction. Correspondingly, as the writings of Gorky illuminate, Socialist Realist philosophy is incompatible with liberal tradition’s emphasis on the uniqueness and individuality of the artist himself.

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50 Prokhorov, *Art under Socialist Realism,* p. 74.
VI: Interrogating Hermeneutics

I have attempted to show through my analysis of the ideological and cultural basis of Soviet Socialist Realism that it is misleading and over-determined to approach the arts of this period as evidence of the Soviet artist’s internal conflict. This interpretative approach, or hermeneutic, is so fundamentally grounded in the primacy of the liberal subject that it presents him as universal, and demands that the art critic undertake an elaborate rescue mission to excavate him from the depths of his oppressed and divided existence.

Returning to Mark Steinberg’s introduction to Gorky’s writings, the extent to which this hermeneutic is entrenched in Soviet studies becomes clear. Considering that Steinberg acknowledges that Gorky’s conception of the individual and artist’s role in society is fundamentally different from that of the western tradition—he coins the very term “complex individualism”—it is all the more remarkable that he nevertheless adheres to the conventional hermeneutic that interprets Gorky as internally conflicted.

Granted, it is true that Gorky’s early criticisms of Lenin and subsequent support of Stalin are ideologically inconsistent, but there is little textual evidence to support Steinberg’s claim—historians continue to deliberate about whether Gorky remained privately committed to the values that initially inspired his critique of Bolshevism, or had left them behind in exchange for political power. Although both of these explanations seem logical, Steinberg proposes instead that “perhaps, more
complexly, he tried to be useful, and in so trying ‘stood on the throat of [his] own song’ as the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who also tried, said of himself.”

While Steinberg presents his interpretation of Gorky as a divided subject as a revelation, it is in fact something of a cliché—no different from the way in which Kaier interprets Denika, Bown interprets Gerasimov, or Groys interprets the Soviet artist in general. In attempting to prove that Gorky was torn between his own self-interest and the interest of the state, Steinberg instead proves that scholars must do more than simply recognize alternative conceptions of Soviet subjectivity. Gorky’s lessons on socialist individualism, however salient they may be, are worth nothing if we cannot turn the same lens we use to inspect them inward, and regard our own values and biases with an equally critical eye.

In his essay on hermeneutics and the ethics of art criticism, Tim Dean illuminates the ways in which these biases become tangled in the very structure of interpretive methods. Critically, Dean argues that the conventions of art history conceive of art as a symptom of the culture from which it originates. For the art historian who denies her historically and politically constituted position relative to Soviet art, the conventional hermeneutic model—which understands Socialist Realist art as a symptom of either the oppression or resistance of the Soviet artist—presents itself as natural. Thus, the critic is in the role of the “hermeneut with a particular relation to the world—a relation of suspicion and punitive mastery.”

51 Steinberg, “Introduction,” p. xxv.
She reserves the right to identify, through the distorting lens of the classic liberal paradigm, the Socialist Realist art that resists the oppression of the Soviet state.

In undertaking an interpretative analysis of Soviet art, this same historian who accepts her role as the demystifying critic further reinforces and naturalizes this critical approach in her own analysis by mere virtue of contributing yet another conventionally hermeneutic model to the authoritative discourse. The critic’s denial of her position, in other words, obscures both her investment in and promotion of a historical narrative that glorifies artistic agency and the hermeneutical mode of interpretation that serves to strengthen that narrative and shut out any alternatives.

Dean looks to psychoanalysis, and specifically Lacan, to propose an alternative to the conventional hermeneutic framework: “What is essential is that [the subject] should see, beyond this signification, to what signifier—to what irreducible, traumatic, non-meaning—he is, as a subject, subjected.” Recognizing the paradox of interpreting towards “non-meaning,” Dean believes that the critical contribution of Lacanian psychoanalysis to cultural criticism is that “Rather than making sense of trauma, psychoanalytic interpretation draws attention to its resistance to sense.”

According to Dean, art criticism could learn from this psychoanalytic approach insofar as the art object, like the unconscious, defies meaning, sense, and interpretation. But before going so far as to suggest art cannot be interpreted and

54 Dean, "Art as Symptom:" 34.
must be simply “appreciated,” Dean clarifies that the art object both defies and invites interpretation.

Identifying the enigmatic quality of art with the psychology's enigmatic signifier, Dean turns to Freud's method of free association to suggest a more appropriate mode of interpretation. Unlike conventional hermeneutics' impulse to synthesize information and master the art object, or enigmatic signifier, free association disperses information, and accepts the enigmatic signifier as enigmatic. Thus, free association erodes the conventional hermeneutic model through accepting cognitive and epistemological limits and acknowledging the enigmatic nature of the signifier, or its resistance to meaning and bottomless interpretation.

The enigmatic signifier is applicable to art criticism because “as soon as one conceives of alterity in symbolic terms, one sees that ... otherness is a property of discourse, and the enigmas of otherness are exacerbated by art.”55 Conversely, when historians approach Soviet art as a symptom of its context, it ceases to be enigmatic, and instead conforms to western liberal hegemony. Art historians, therefore, are in a position of enormous influence insofar as their interpretive approach has the power to either reinforce hegemonic ideology, or challenge that ideology by resisting the urge to reduce Socialist Realism to a mere symptom of its context, thereby admitting its fundamental otherness.

In sum, the critical contribution of Dean’s essay to Socialist Realist art criticism is that it exposes the biases in art historian’s very structure of interpretation. As Steinberg demonstrates, this is necessary to acknowledge if we

55 Ibid.: 38.
wish to allow alternative histories like that of Maxim Gorky to challenge and enhance our perspective.

How, then, should we approach the study of Soviet art? Recognizing our bias towards the self-constituting liberal subject is the clear point of departure as the consequences of these biases are severe—circumscribing the very framework we employ to interpret Soviet art, so that even when alternative subjectivities surface they are absorbed into western hegemony. It seems, as Dean suggests, that this framework requires renovation. According to Dean, the best way to do this is to acknowledge the relative autonomy of art, and accept that it is not reducible to its context. But, as C. Vaughn James argues in his conclusion to *Origins and Theory*, an understanding of the political context of Socialist Realist art allows use to “really understand” the art itself:

If art is placed in the center of the stage and the momentous social and political events of the period recede into a hazy background, then the fate of the modernist movements of the first century must indeed seem arbitrary and cruel ... but it seems to me that this is an unreal vision, more acceptable, perhaps, than harsh reality, but rather less fruitful if our aim is really to understand. Whether or not we approve is another matter. \(^{56}\)

James’ interpretive approach sits in diametric opposition to the one Dean advocates insofar as he understands Socialist Realism as a symptom of its political context.

Furthermore, James seems to suggest that understanding Socialist Realism’s context is the necessary prerequisite for any type of aesthetic judgment, or “approval.” If we divorce art from its context, James argues, placing it “in the center of the stage” and allowing “the momentous social and political events of the period to recede into a

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\(^{56}\) James, Soviet *Socialist Realism*, p. 102.
hazy background,” we can neither understand nor approve. Of course, I agree that a misunderstanding of Socialist Realism’s context accounts for the dearth of scholarship on the Stalin-era. However, as I’ve argued, a better understanding of Socialist Realism’s context is only half of the equation.

Scholars like Igor Golomstock, for instance, have a meticulous and nuanced understanding of Socialist Realism’s context, yet blatantly disregard their own. In Problems of the Study of Stalinist Culture, Golomstock articulates a position similar to James in that he identifies a better understanding of the Soviet context as the foremost challenge for art historians: “The elucidation of [Socialist Realism’s] context is perhaps the most serious problem facing the historian of Stalinist culture. Only then can the monuments of that epoch acquire their own semantics and aesthetic meaning.”57

However, I maintain that the most serious problem for historians of Socialist Realism is not, as James and Golomstock have argued, a simple misunderstanding of Socialist Realism’s context. Rather, it is a resistance on the part of those historians to reflect on their own context, and the way in which it influences both their investment and interpretive approach towards Socialist Realism. Further, it is precisely this obsession with minute details that further obscures, rather than elucidates, Socialist Realist art. This irony is perhaps best illustrated by Golomstock’s detailed list delineating the qualifiers of totalitarianism, in which his

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57 Golomstock, “Problems in the Study of Stalinist Culture,” p. 120.
first citation is “the primary role of ideology.” Unsurprisingly, Golomstock is entirely unconcerned with the primary role of ideology in his own analysis.

58 Ibid.
VII. Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined the ways in which the small current of scholarship on Soviet Socialist Realism points to larger questions in the history of politics and subjectivity. The persistence of the humanist liberal subject, in particular, makes it extremely difficult for us to grasp the role of the arts in political regimes and ideological contexts fundamentally different from our own. Indeed, it even becomes difficult to understand the self—the artist’s self—in such a radically different context.

While there may be multiple ways to extricate ourselves from this dilemma, I have argued that emphasizing the cultural and ideological conditions under which Socialist Realism developed is most fruitful when we simultaneously interrogate the cultural and ideological conditions under which our very interest in Soviet art developed. Secondly, it is critical to stress the complexity of hermeneutics or interpretation itself. This point, while less obvious, is essential considering the conventional hermeneutic model for interpreting Soviet art is inextricably linked to our politically and historically constructed predispositions as critics.

We must, therefore, stop thinking about Socialist Realist artists without a firmer grasp of both the context in which they worked and the way in which our own scholarly investment and position colors that context. The history of the Soviet artist remains, as it should, somewhat elusive. And in constructing a better politics for approaching him, our subjecthood comes into focus as his becomes ever more complex.
Works Cited


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