

More of the big lie that “socialist realism” emerged from Soviet revolutionary art

Dream factory communism: the visual culture of the Stalin era—an exhibition at the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt

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The art form officially sanctioned by the state under Stalin has long been ridiculed in the West; but now, 50 years after the death of the dictator, and in the absence of any serious attempt to tackle the development of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, “socialist realism” has suddenly acquired a new respectability in a number of German museums in Berlin, Bonn and Frankfurt.

No one could possibly object if these exhibitions were designed to acquaint visitors with the history of this reactionary pseudo-aesthetic phenomenon and explain its function for Stalin’s bureaucracy. Such an historical analysis could contribute to the clarification of many diverse and misunderstood issues of the twentieth century. In fact, no attempt was made to address such historical questions at the recent exhibition of post-war Soviet and German art on show recently in Berlin, and the exhibition at the Schirn gallery in Frankfurt, “Dream factory communism: the visual culture of the Stalin era,” also fails miserably in this respect.

Even the selection and arrangement of the exhibits are highly arbitrary. Paintings, sculptures, films and transparencies are taken from a period spanning eight decades—from the time immediately following the Russian Revolution in the early 1920s to completely new works produced in 2003. Artworks created in the period of the revolutionary avant-garde—by the Suprematists Kasimir Malevich and Clement Redko, for example—are hung next to Stalinist kitsch, e.g., “Stakanovites on Stalin’s Road” from Alexander Deineka.

The hack works of socialist realism—which could be considered comical were they not so tragic and sinister—are repeatedly interspersed with paintings from the post-Stalin era, which regard Stalin’s hero-cult with nostalgic irony. For example, some of the “Soc-Art”-works of Komar & Melamid (“Stalin and the Muses,” “Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live”) that derive from the series “Socialist Realism Nostalgia” hang alongside paintings from the period of the thaw following Stalin’s death and depict themes of change and awakening (Tatiana Yablonskaya: “Morning,” Arkady Plastov: “Spring,” both from 1954).

The last of the exhibition’s works shows the 2003 installation by Ilia and Emilie Kabakov, “Let’s go, girls!” On the walls of the gallery hang letters complaining about the difficulties of daily life in the cramped Russian town apartments of the 1960s, contrasted with postcard shots depicting Moscow in glowing colours. The largest section of the gallery is taken up with a wooden construction supposedly depicting a railway carriage, whose interior is fitted out like a cinema with rows of seats. Yet, instead of a film, all one sees on the canvas is a kitschy, gleaming holiday photo while mythical songs from the 1940s and 1950s sound out in the background.

According to the explanatory text accompanying the piece: “The

installation attempts to reconstruct, from a critical distance, the atmosphere of Soviet times.... [T]he railway carriage refers to the ‘propaganda train’ from the period of the Russian Revolution. These carriages journeyed on railways throughout the country and traveled to the most remote villages. They were fitted out with propaganda including literature, posters and films, intended to convince the people that the Bolsheviks would bring them a ‘shining future.’”

This work, supposed to throw light upon Stalinism, is typical of the exhibition’s standpoint. It completely denies that Russian society in the period of the Revolution and Civil War was of a qualitatively different nature than the Soviet Union in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

Even the title of the exhibition, “Dream factory communism,” is a gross misrepresentation of its actual content. Stalin’s “Dream” was not to create socialism or communism as Marx, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg or Trotsky understood it. His political concept, the “construction of socialism in one country,” denied the international basis of the October Revolution as the start of the world revolution and led to the growing isolation of the first workers’ state. Instead of overcoming social inequality, his nationalist and bureaucratic policies sharpened social polarisation. Instead of creating a free state, his overwhelming party and state apparatus crushed every aspect of independent thought and creativity.

In the period immediately following the 1917 October Revolution, Soviet art flourished. Artists such as Tatlin, Malevich, El Lissitzky and Rodchenko enthusiastically placed their work at the service of the young Soviet state. Despite the difficult economic conditions of the post-revolutionary period, the workers’ state provided generously for artists because it understood that only the free growth of artistic creativity and open debate could genuinely contribute to the development of socialist consciousness.

But shortly after Lenin’s death in January 1924, the official attitude towards the avant-garde grew increasingly intolerant. Within a year, non-abstract forms of art were officially prescribed by the state, and such policies, which mercilessly prosecuted any departure from the state-instituted aesthetics of the Stalinist regime, remained in place until the 1950s.

The most important task carried out by the new art form, so-called socialist realism, beginning in the 1930s, was the falsification of real relations in Soviet society and the creation of the legend that Stalin was Lenin’s legitimate heir following in his political footsteps. Precisely because the new reality—the usurpation of workers’ power by the Stalinist bureaucracy and the complete negation of Leninist internationalism—had to be covered up at all costs, the new art form had to appear as “true to life” as a photograph. Down with avant-gardist abstractions!

Trotsky explained in 1938: “The style of present-day official Soviet painting is called ‘socialist realism.’... [T]he ‘socialist’ character apparently consists in representing, in the manner of pretentious photography, events which never took place. It is impossible to read Soviet verse and prose without physical disgust, mixed with horror, or to look at reproductions of paintings and sculpture in which functionaries armed with pens, brushes, and scissors, under the supervision of functionaries armed with Mausers, glorify the ‘great’ and ‘brilliant’ leaders, actually devoid of the least spark of genius or greatness. The art of the Stalinist period will remain as the frankest expression of the profound decline of the proletarian revolution.” (Leon Trotsky, “Art and Politics in Our Epoch”)

The curators of the exhibition, Boris Groys and Selfira Tregulova, take up the argument outlined in Groys’s book, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, that there is an unbroken line of development from the Russian avant-garde after the revolution to Stalinist socialist realism. In fact, such a line of argument merely transfers the gross historical falsification that Stalinism directly and necessarily developed out of Bolshevism from the realm of politics to that of art history.

The catalogue for the Frankfurt exhibition explains that socialist realism set itself a different goal than that of Western capitalism—i.e., to make “new people” out of the masses: “The culture of Stalinist socialist realism belongs to the period in which present day mass popular culture made its historical breakthrough and acquired the prime function which it continues to carry out up to the present day. While western commercial mass culture continues to be dominated and is defined, however, by market mechanisms Stalinist mass culture functioned in the absence of the market. Instead of attempting to please the masses, the goal of the latter was to reeducate the masses to become ‘new people.’”

This portrayal is completely absurd. Stalin and his artistic vassals were concerned neither with “new people” nor socialism. This is clear, for example, from the painting “Collective farm workers greeting a tank” by Katerina Sernova. The painting’s depiction of a group of three men, two women and a child happily waving their caps and greeting a tank with garlands of flowers, stands in complete contrast to historical reality, and its function can only be genuinely understood in the context of the completely devastation of Russian agriculture. The beginning of forced collectivisation in the early 1930s was carried through with unprecedented brutality and resulted in unimaginable hardships for the countryside.

The large commissioned work by Vassili Yefanov, “J.V. Stalin, K.E. Voroschilov and V.M. Molotov at [Maxim] Gorky’s Sick Bed,” dating from the period 1940-44, is a particularly cynical and odious work. The well-known writer died in 1936, but the rumour immediately circulated that he had been murdered on Stalin’s orders. In the 1937 Moscow Show Trials, former secret police chief Henry Yagoda, along with four accused doctors, confessed to having procured the poison that killed the author. Yagoda could only have carried this out on Stalin’s orders.

Another work of conscious falsification, rewarded with the Stalin Prize, is Yefanov’s completely servile “Unforgettable Encounter,” in which Stalin smilingly greets an ordinary Soviet woman offering him flowers. Both are depicted to be of equal height in order to demonstrate Stalin’s closeness to the people. It was painted at the high point of the purges, 1936-37, a period in which the father of the young woman portrayed in the painting himself fell victim to the purges. Certainly, she could not have forgotten the “Encounter.”

An entire group of paintings clearly does not fit into the exhibitor’s project of demonstrating that that socialist realism developed seamlessly out of the artistic work of the post-revolution Russian avant-garde. It includes, for example, Clement Redko’s “Rebellion,” an avant-garde work from 1924-25. Redko’s work depicts a flaming, red-black square that stands on edge, and from which streets with barricades in each corner radiate. Lenin stands at its center, the largest figure in the pose of a

conductor. Next to Lenin, extending in rows and in diminishing size, one recognises other Bolshevik leaders, with Trotsky prominently present. The entire picture, painted shortly after and influenced by Lenin’s recent death, conveys, contrary to the picture’s title, a melancholy dream.

As noted earlier, works of Kasimir Malevich are also exhibited, including three paintings: “Three Girls” (1928-32), “Three Women on a Road” (1930) and “Female Harvesters” (1928-29). These works fall completely outside the exhibitor’s framework of socialist realism. No one would be a more unlikely court painter to a privileged bureaucracy than Malevich, the founder of “Suprematism.” Malevich became known through his pure abstractions such as a square or a circle. He placed, for example, his “Red Square” provocatively on the site of a religious icon. The name “Suprematism” was derived from the Latin *supremus*, “the highest,” signifying for him, the surmounting of every “Lie in the world of will and representation” through abstractions. Malevich, who contributed actively in the building of new structures of art and culture in the young Soviet state, fell into disfavour under Stalin because of his “formalism,” was arrested for a time, contracted cancer, and died in isolation in 1935.

The exhibition’s notes hardly refer to the bitter conflict between the major artists and the Stalinist bureaucracy. Instead, in the case of Malevich, for example, it states: “In the late 1920s many of the Russian avant-garde artists began a gradual transition to pictorial portrayal of people—above all the longed for ‘new men.’ This involved the transition from the early avant-garde abstractions to figuratives and the photographic character of ‘socialist realism.’”

However, when Malevich in his later works again turned to painting, his work in no way represented a transition to socialist realism. So the depiction in the exhibition of strapping “Female Harvesters” with their flared skirts and blouses set in a sunny landscape appears rather as an ironically distant reference to a no-longer-existing idyll.

Despite its false and misleading premises, a visit to the exhibition remains worthwhile if only because some of the works portrayed retain considerable historical value and have never appeared before in the West. Included are paintings showing former Marxists of the revolutionary period. These works were prevented from being shown by the Stalinists and were locked away, sharing the fate of the persons portrayed, who were expelled from the party, banished, and killed.

One example is “At the coffin of the leader” (1925) by Isaac Brodsky, which depicts the funeral of Lenin and includes portraits of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, etc., all of whom were to become victims of later purges. Such paintings—even though conventionally drawn—remain documents of great historical interest in stark contrast to the ungainly works of socialist realism.

The most important of such paintings is the depiction of the second Comintern congress of 1920, by Isaac Brodsky, completed four years later. Some 218 delegates from 67 communist parties and workers’ organisations participated in the congress. Brodsky completed 125 portraits of the delegates, 47 of which, signed by the sitters, are contained in the exhibition. The artist has combined these into one giant picture displaying the opening of the congress. Each individual delegate can clearly be recognised, including Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Bukharin, together with many known members of the international revolutionary movement. This picture naturally also fell into disfavour. For 50 years—from 1938 to 1988—it was locked up in “special custody” and unavailable for display. Luckily, it was not destroyed and can once again be viewed.

Among the 47 single portraits of the delegates on show in Frankfurt are to be found those of Angelica Balabanova, Amadeo Bordiga, Nikolai Bukharin, Mikhail Kalinin, Lenin, Paul Levi, Ernst Meyer, Willy Münzenberg, Sylvia Pankhurst, Karl Radek, John Reed, Alfred Rosmer, Manabendra Roy and Klara Zetkin. Many of these revolutionaries later

fell victim to the Stalinist terror. Naturally, these drawings were also hidden from public view for 50 years.

Works from another Lenin exhibition were likewise hidden for decades, including two paintings by Emil-Anton-Josef Wisel, “Portrait of V.I. Lenin” and “V. I. Lenin in Emigration 1905-1907,” both of which date from the 1920s. In the first picture, Zinoviev and Kamenev can be seen next to Lenin.

Another portrait of Lenin, painted by Isaac Brodsky, was not locked away but was severely criticised by the Stalinist leaders because it did not sufficiently correspond to “the demands made for the depiction of the personality of the leader of the international proletariat.” It showed “V. I. Lenin in Smolny” and was painted in 1930 based on a sketch that Brodsky drew with Lenin’s consent in 1921 during the Third Congress of the Comintern.

The painting portrays Lenin during the October Revolution in 1917 in his provisional office in Smolny, the revolutionary headquarters. He is sitting on one of two white cloth-covered chairs, one leg crossed over the other. The second chair is vacant. He has papers on his lap on which he is writing with a fountain pen. The table next to him is covered with newspapers. The walls and the floor are bare; the entire scene has a sense of the transitory. Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s widow, is reported to have described the painting as “the best to reflect the spirit of Lenin during his lifetime,” a comment that no doubt helped to make the picture well known all over the world and prevent its disappearance into a Stalinist cellar.

A visit to the exhibition leaves a bad taste in the mouth. What is so troubling is not that it addresses the question of so-called “socialist realism,” but that it treats the latter in a thoroughly inadmissible manner as a legitimate tendency in art rather than principally an ideological justification for the bureaucracy’s crimes. To equate Stalinist falsification with the real achievements of Soviet art only serves to sow confusion for many visitors to the exhibition.



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