

# Sots Art as Deconstruction of Socialist Realism

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## Introduction

THIS PAPER is mainly concerned with two Soviet paintings, and in this context we will also consider some Western examples which have influenced these in one way or another. The two Soviet pictures deal with the myth of Stalin, but in two very different ways and with different intentions.

The first picture was painted during High Stalinism and represents official art. In addition to the motif in this picture, we shall concentrate on its compositional aspects, in which we find some revealing details that serve to create the myth of the leader. One such example is the Baroque diagonal, which is used in this painting as well as many other paintings from the period of the cult of personality. The application of the diagonal, which became a well-established strategy during High Stalinism, was developed in the French and Italian art academies during the 16th and 17th centuries.

The second Soviet example belongs to the so-called *sots-art* movement which opposed official culture, and thus represents non-official culture. Here I shall dwell in particular upon the motif in the painting, as well as the historical context. As we shall see in some other examples, the Western tradition and history of art have been an important influence in this picture as well.

In my discussion I shall use the concept of *myth*, and I wish to stress that there is a difference in the ways the notion of myth is applied in the analysis and reinterpretation of the two Soviet pictures.

When we speak of the myth of Stalin in the first picture, myth means *a guiding principle* and *collective wishful thinking*, while myth in the sots-art picture works rather as a narrative.

### **The terra 'socialist realism'**

There is an anecdote about how the term *socialist realism* first arose, which also represents a famous *myth of origin*. The anecdote, rendered by James (1973, 86), recounts that in October 1932, Stalin and some others spent an evening at Maksim Gor'kij's apartment, where they discussed how the state should create a new program for culture. Stalin had been quiet, merely listening to the others, when he suddenly interrupted and said: 'If the artist is going to depict our life correctly, he cannot fail to observe and point out what is leading it towards socialism. So this will be socialist art. It will be socialist realism'. Information about when the term was introduced is contradictory, but it is likely that it first appeared in an article the very same year. It was not until 1934, however, that the guiding principles, both artistic and theoretical, were drawn up.

For the visual arts this meant a return to a stylistic model which had developed during the 19th century and was applied particularly among the *peredvizniki* painters. There were other impulses from the history of art, however. Artists were advised to 'learn from the classics' and the art of socialist realism thus became a highly academic style. The aesthetics of socialist realism encouraged the belief that the image should be an uncompromising and faithful copy of reality.

### High Stalinism and Western influences In Honour of the Great Stalin

#### ***In Honour of the Great Stalin!***

(Fig 1) is a so-called brigade painting, which means that there was a team of painters behind the work of art. Cullerne Bown (1991, 182) describes how brigade paintings had become custom towards the end of the 1930s and peaked at the end of



Fig i. Ju. Kugač; V. Cyplakov; V. Nečičajlo (1950): *In Honour of the Great Stalin!*

the 1940s. The picture was painted primarily by Jurij Kugač (but also by Viktor Cyplakov and Vasilij Nečičajlo). It dates from 1950—a crucial time in the policy of nationality, which is also an important subject in the painting. I will return to this later.

Let us first take a look at the compositional aspects. Some fundamental dialectical ideas are manifested in this picture, as seen in the way light is contrasted to dark, warm colours are contrasted to cool, and verticality is contrasted to horizontals and diagonals. In this way the painting depicts servile homage to Stalin, who becomes a part of the vertical elements, while the others are gathered in the horizontal and diagonal lines. These structural elements are not there by chance, but are rather part of a conscious aesthetic and can therefore be easily understood in their political and historical context.

The painting is divided into two large rectangles, demarcated by a horizontal. The upper part of the picture is characterized by verticality through the architectural elements: the door, the blind arcade, the pillars at the landing, the lamps, and the columns we can see vaguely in the inner room. These straight lines are broken up by the round arch in the window which we see to the left, and even by the round formation of the blind arcades. The verticality in the upper

part stands in contrast to the lower part, which is characterized by the horizontal lines of the stairs and those diagonals which are formed by the two balustrades, as well as by the angle of the heads and hands in the crowd.

All of these lines, together with the people standing with raised hands on the stairs, strengthen the diagonals in the painting and also express an evident hierarchy, where the leader is separated from the others partly by the focus of the light, but also by the vacant space surrounding him.

The perspective of the spectator, like that of most of the subjects, is from below. This custom of placing the leaders on a raised level surrounded by vertical lines, together with light colours such as white and blue, indicates their proximity to a heavenly sphere. This compositional pattern was applied in Mannerism and especially during the Baroque period. According to Lind-wall (1968, 344), pictures that follow this construction correspond to classical theatre and its intent to stage situations full of drama.



Fig 2. J. S. van Calcar: frontispiece to A. Vesalius' *De humani*

*Corporis fabrica* Basileæ 1543.

## Western examples

An example of a divided picture is a wood engraving from the mid-16th century (Fig 2). It is the frontispiece to Andreas Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem* (1543; often just *Fabrica*) by Jan Stephan van Calcar. In this picture, as in the Soviet example, there is a strong tension between the lower part, which is crowded, and the upper part, which is serene and peaceful. Yet another detail characteristic of this period and style should be mentioned in this context: the artist had one person in the crowd gaze at the viewer. The intention of this was to strengthen the viewer's illusion of witnessing a crucial moment in history. In this picture it is the scientist himself, Andreas Vesalius, who is gazing at us (Weimarck 1996). In the Stalin picture there is one man—the black man gesturing in the same way—who looks at us. In Baroque paintings it was often a person of importance, in most cases the artist himself, but we don't know much about this particular person in the Stalin picture. If we return to *In Honour of the Great Stalin!* we can suppose that the decisive moment in this particular picture is the unification of the ethnic groups just in front of Stalin.

Once again we confront the theme of power in an etching from the Baroque period, *Les misères et les malheurs de la guerre : la distribution des récompenses* by Jacques Callot, 1633 (Fig 3). Just as with *In Honour of the Great Stalin!*, we are dealing with a divided

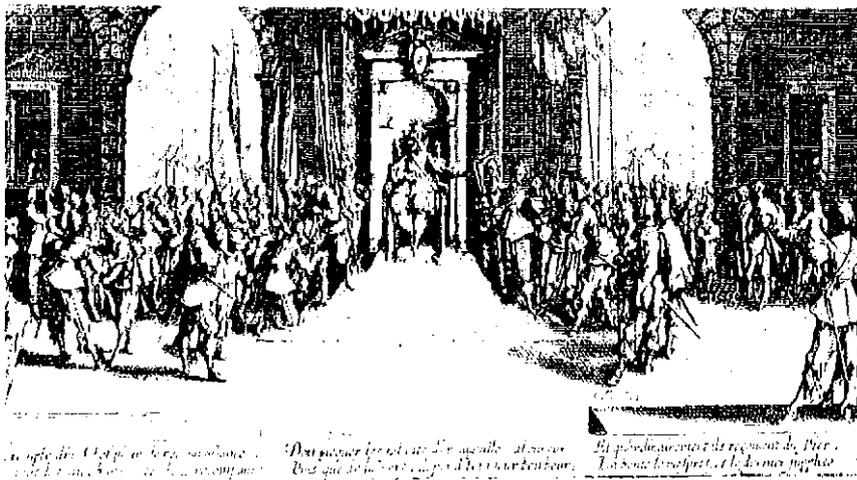


Fig 3. J. Callot (1633), *Les misères et les malheurs de la guerre : la distribution des récompenses*

from 1633 (Fig 3). Just as with *In Honour of the Great Stalin!*, we are dealing with a divided

picture in which the sovereign receives homage from his subjects. In both pictures the leaders are elevated and, in a way, screened off from the crowds. This was a common device in Baroque art as well as in High Stalinism, i.e. having the side figures direct their total attention to the central figure or a central act. The viewer ends up in the same position as the side figures and thereby participates in the picture. This creates something of a double reaction for the viewer: on the one hand there is his own gaze, and on the other hand there are the reactions of the others, such as the wonder, joy and respect which emanate from the spectators.

Let us focus once again on the painting of Stalin. As in many other pictures from the same period, dynamic perspective painting is used here to create suggestive effects of depth with the intention of establishing communication. For the Soviet artist, it was important to evoke recognition on the part of the viewer. Wolfgang Holz (1993, 77) calls this device 'dream theatre', which means that the artist should create and reveal a reality other than the present one, but this kind of representation had also evolved in 16th- and 17th-century academic art. These methods became custom in Soviet art, with the purpose of bridging the gap between the viewer and the artefact. In order to do this, the application of the central perspective became especially crucial.

The vanishing point in the centre of the picture produces a hierarchical structure, an artistic device suitable for societies in which human beings are ranked according to their value. Arnheim (1974, 292) describes how it is even more striking to move the vanishing point away from the centre of the picture, because this asymmetry strengthens the effect of depth in the picture, as we can see in *In Honour of the Great Stalin!* Here the effect is created by the three formations of people together with the diagonals from the balustrades which lead us to the right, where Stalin is placed. This means that the vanishing point is not in the man in profile and glasses (Berija); rather, the focus is just to the right of the picture, which means Stalin. In addition to this technical treatment of the lines, we must also consider the naturalistically depicted people and the huge size of the picture, even if this is not so obvious for us here.

If we follow the direction of the light and the visual direction in this painting, we see that this pattern corresponds to the arts of the Baroque in its strategy of creating illusory rooms. The intention was

to abolish the barrier between the pictorial space and the viewer's space. The purpose of this strategy was to seduce and persuade, and in the last resort to repress the viewer. These artistic devices became important for an establishment of the guiding myth of Stalin.

### Non-official art—'sots art'

At first glance, the painting *The Origin of Socialist Realism*, by Vitalij Komar and Aleksandr Melamid (Fig 4), could be perceived as a work of art from the days of the personality cult. It was painted 1982-1983, however, by artists who belonged to oppositional artistic groups and whose art was not allowed to be exhibited.

In this painting we see how Stalin is depicted beside the muse of art. In the nocturnal light his profile throws a shadow on the wall.

This shadow is also the essence of the picture. The painting alludes to a famous theme in the history of Western art: the origin of the visual arts, which is also considered to be a myth of origin. In "Western history this myth is called the *myth of Dibutades*, and it tells us about the birth of the visual arts, which is also an act of love.



Fig 4. V. Komar & A. Melamid (1982-83): *The Origin of Socialist Realism*

This story, recounted in Stoichita (1997, n), is about a young girl called Dibutade from a village in Corinth. The young man she is in love with has to leave her to go to war. In her despair she finds a way to immortalize him. She traces the shadow of his face thrown by the lamp on the wall. Her father, a potter named Butade, helps his daughter by pressing clay on the sketch to make a relief. The shadow is the motif that helps her capture the visual picture, but it is only the face, or rather the profile, that is depicted. Two vital functions of the surrogate image are thus brought together: similarity and perpetuation. However, there is another



Fig 5. E. Daege (1832): *The Invention of Painting*

story about the birth of the visual arts which differs in some crucial aspects from the famous story about Dibutade. In this story it is a shepherd who, in the sunlight, suddenly sees his own shadow and quickly depicts himself with his crook. While in the story of the shepherd *daylight* represents the ephemeral, the story of Dibutade (which also is the most famous) is about creating in nocturnal light. In this context, to create in *nocturnal* light means to let the moment become absorbed by timelessness —to let time, or history, cease. I will return to this shortly. There are a number of paintings in the history of art which have the myth

of Dibutades as their motif. In *The Invention of Painting* from 1832, by Eduard Daege (Fig 5), we find the direct model for the Soviet example. In this painting we have all the components of the myth and there is only a minimum of modifications in the Soviet example.

Let us now return to *The Origin of Socialist Realism*. Here Stalin, in his white uniform, has replaced the beloved young man and is framed by architectural elements in a Neoclassical style, instead of the garden. In the history of art it has been a common method to use a distorting shadow in a variety of ways to demonstrate a negative personality. Though the shadow in this picture is not distorted, there is still a tone of the uncanny. From an ideological perspective there is another detail and difference from the Western models: the muse is drawing with her left hand. This use of the left hand signifies, in a Soviet context, that while creating something, one is sceptical and feels that the work is aesthetically worthless. Thus, the left hand in this painting is one of the signs which indicate that this picture is not a servile homage to Stalin. However, using one's left hand also signifies, in a wider Western context, the aim to reveal the true order of things.

The name *sots art* derives from the first syllable of the Russian word for 'socialist', *socialističeskij*, and the second part of the word 'pop art' (Cholmogorova 1994; Andreeva 1994). The sots-art movement could be said to represent a Soviet interpretation of Western postmodernism, but I would argue that the term post-utopian is probably more suitable. There are similarities between sots art and postmodernism, such as eclecticism and the artist's play with signs and stylistics. For the sots-artists, Western postmodernism became an important impulse and some of them also became acquainted with French theory, such as that of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, among others. The sots-art movement turned its attention to Soviet symbols and myths, both from daily life and ceremonial occasions, and these motifs were transformed by means of grotesque and satirical jokes, and even pastiches on American pop art.

In particular, the artists Vitalij Komar and Aleksandr Melamid focused on the myth of Stalin in their art, and from the late 1970s throughout most of the 1980s, Stalin became the motif in almost all their works of art. The method was to transform, or interlace, the myth of Stalin into universal myths, as the example here shows.

The sots-artists were primarily opposed to the imposed socialist realism and, according to the historian Groys (1992, 76f) their art was also a reaction to the retrospective view which had become common among intellectuals and artists in the 1970s and 1980s. Ideas

from the Slavophiles flourished, and writers — especially Solženicyn—set the tone for this undercurrent. There were also the village writers, who tried to revive the memory of old Russian values. These ideals occurred frequently in both literature and the visual arts. Thus, we can say that much of culture adopted a position that was characterized by retrospection and the status quo. Some of the Neoslavophiles opposed technical progress and the aimless and never-ending struggle for technological innovations that characterizes Western ideology. Similar to the idea, formed in socialist realism, that history could stagnate once the goal was achieved, we find the notion that history can also cease. There is a difference among the Neoslavophiles, however, which is their resignation and lost faith.

In this context I want to focus on the shadow in the painting, since it is the essence of the painting and reveals some important ideas. If we return to Daege's picture *The Invention of Painting*, we see strong sunlight shining over the young couple. In the Soviet example, however, this is replaced by an artificial light, by which we understand that this immortalizing act happens at night. As we saw earlier, through this detail the painting moulds, in an ironic way, the idea that time can disappear or be stopped. Indeed, one of the artists, Vitalij Komar, has said that 'the common goal of all revolutions', political or cultural, is 'to stop time' (Groys 1992, 93).

Another detail in the sots-art picture is the title. If we return to the anecdote about the first time the term 'socialist realism' is said to have been used, we get the impression that it is an invention of Stalin himself. In their painting, Komar and Melamid have turned it into a ironical joke, borrowing the title from older examples and replacing the invention of painting with the words 'socialist realism'.

Finally, I want to draw a connection to the title of this paper. As we have seen, the myth of Stalin was established by means of compositional aspects. The sots-artists in general, and especially Komar and Melamid, were well aware of this use of structural conception and adopted and developed this strategy. In a way they employed the same artistic devices used by socialist-realist artists, but with the in-

tention of interlacing it with signs from other semiotic systems. Sots art was opposed to socialist realism, and their intention was to reveal the inner logic in the art of Stalin and to do this, the sots-artists had to give the art a renewed narrative with the help of an allegorical style—in other words, they had to use other myths. In so doing they also elucidated the mythologizing tendency in Stalinist art.

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