

‘Severe style’ in the Context of Soviet Studies

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The article addresses problems that emerge in the interpretation of the role and the art historical signification of the ‘severe style’ in the Estonian context. This phenomenon, which marked an important art innovation in the late 1950s, but which later acquired the status of official art in the Khrushchev period, reveals the need for more dynamic models of analysis than offered by the opposition of official and unofficial culture. Examining the ‘severe style’ in the wider context of Soviet studies, the problem of the artists’ agency is raised. Supported by the theoretical scheme offered by the researcher of late socialism Alexei Yurchak, the article describes, based on the example of Leili Muuga’s painting ‘Sceptics’ (1957), the position and role of the ‘severe style’ in the changes in the Soviet discourse.

The ‘severe style’, which emerged in the late 1950s, proved to be the last phase in Soviet Estonian art that can be referred to as being a part of the all-Soviet Union synchronicity. While in its time it marked an important break-through – a departure from restrictions of the dogmas of the Stalinist socialist realism and the restoration of both sincerity and the aesthetic dimension to art – today this style carries the responsibility of the official art of the Khrushchev period and it is, as a rule, not significantly distinguished from the art of the preceding period.¹ At the same time, the ‘severe style’ lacks the alibi of being a curiosity that has ensured Western researchers’ and curators’ attention to socialist realism.

On the local level, the marginalisation of this style was undoubtedly caused by political reasons as well. Although the ‘severe style’ emerged at different art centres in the Soviet Union at relatively the same time, and the role of artists of the Baltic states in its development was not insignificant², the ‘original’ set of characteristics of the style was formed on the basis of the Russian paintings³ that served as a comparison for art works from other areas of the Soviet Union,

1 See, e.g., (Non)conform: Russian and Soviet Art 1958–1995. The Ludwig Collection. Ed. B. Thiemann. Peter und Irene Ludwig Stiftung. München: Prestel, 2007.

2 The earliest school of the ‘severe style’ seems to have developed in Latvia. The exhibition of thematic paintings of the Baltic states and the accompanying conference, held in Tallinn in 1959, triggered the wider spread of the new direction to Estonia as well. It is thought that the term was coined by the art historian and critic Boris Bernstein, who had been residing in Estonia since 1951, and who had used the expression ‘severe dramatic style’ when discussing, in his exhibition review, the painting ‘Men are Returning’ by the Latvian artist Edgars Iltners. The exhibition review was simultaneously published in Estonian and Russian. See Б. М. Бернштейн, Успехи, трудности, перспективы. – Искусство 1960, no. 2, p. 8; B. Bernštein, Loomingulistest otsingutest rikas näitus. – Kunst 1960, no. 2, p. 7.

3 An important contribution was made by the Moscow art critic Alexander Kamenski. See А. Каменский, Реальность метафоры. – Творчество 1969, no. 8, pp. 13–15.

which were described as having been influenced by the Russian 'severe style'. In the Estonians' cultural consciousness, however, any hint of such an influence evoked traumatic memories of the training in socialist realism imposed upon artists by central art authorities, which had taken an extremely violent form by the turn of the 1940s and 1950s. This fact largely explains the reasons for avoiding the 'severe style'.

The Lithuanian art historian and critic Skaidra Trilupaityte has written about problems that accompany the use of the model, based on the opposition of official and unofficial culture, in the Baltic states, where examples of underground art were very rare. She observes that when this model is used in writing art history, the result is even now still determined mostly by political categories and moralistic interpretations. According to Trilupaityte, the exclusion of everything connected with the Soviet time from art history is the most important aspect of art history in the Baltic states, and she calls it 'the national purification from Russian socialism'.⁴ Estonian treatments of the 'severe style' can be eloquent examples of this tendency. The number of articles discussing the 'severe style' is noticeably small, and even in these texts it is marginalised into only a short phase in art history. Examining the empirical material, we have to agree that, among the artists of the 'severe style', the number of those for whom it was a marginal episode in their work was much larger than those who found their personal handwriting either within this style or in its developments, although there were forty such artists. Temporally, the 'severe style' lasted from 1957, when one of the

first works foretelling its arrival – Muuga's 'Sceptics' – was created, into the 1970s, when Ilmar Torn, Avo Keerend and Heldur Laretei still used it in several engravings. The choice of words used by art critics is dominated by diminutive images, such as 'naivety', 'simple-minded openness' and 'teenager-like', casting doubt on the artists' agency.⁵ Should we not see, besides 'political parrying', also a rehabilitating moment behind the dismissal of the style? Considering the fact that in our cultural space the word 'Soviet' carries negative connotations, we can interpret the emphasising of the temporal limits of this phenomenon and the minimalisation of the artists' agency as an attempt to liberate the artists from the responsibility of sharing the values of the regime.

The question of agency can be considered as one of the central problems of the discipline of Soviet studies. Perhaps the most appropriate definition of the critical platform of Soviet studies originates from the younger generation expert of Soviet studies Jochen Hellbeck, who has noted that the Soviet experience is still being analysed using models that treat the Soviet subject as absolutely alienated from the social and political environment, and that grant individuals their subjectivity only when their activities seem to be in opposition to the interests and values of the regime.⁶ In this context, the 'severe style' proves to be an expressive example that helps to examine and perhaps even to undermine the foundations of

5 See K. Altoa, S. Helme, Ühe kümnendivahetusse kunstist. – *Kunst* 1984, no. 3, pp. 42–45; T. Luuk, Läbimurre ja läbimurdjad eesti 1960-ndate aastate graafikas. – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 7. Tallinn: Kunst, 1994, pp. 209–225.

6 J. Hellbeck, *Speaking Out: Languages of Affirmation and Dissent in Stalinist Russia*. – *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2000, vol. 1 (1), pp. 73–74.

4 S. Trilupaityte, *Totalitarianism and the Problem of Soviet Art Evaluation: The Lithuanian Case*. – *Studies of the East-European Thought* 2007, vol. 59, pp. 261–280.

current value judgements. This points out the need to use more dynamic models to interpret the phenomena of the Soviet era which do not proceed from the analysis of the artists' ideological attitudes but, rather, from the role of the artists/art works as agents and reflectors of social processes.

Although Soviet studies are, primarily, dominated by the scholars of Stalinism, a number of serious analyses of the later decades have been published as well. Probably the most influential theoretical study of late socialism is Alexei Yurchak's book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, whose main arguments seem to support the explanation of the story of the 'severe style'. Yurchak describes the changing of Soviet discourse in the late 1950s through the notion of 'performative turn'. He argues that the Soviet ideological regime was based on the paradox that although its ideological goal was the liberation of individuals and society, this goal was carried out through repressive methods and under the total control of the Communist Party. In order to hide this paradox, it was necessary to establish a Master (Stalin) outside of the system, who held the power of truth to ensure the revolutionary correctness of the state and to legitimise the use of repression. Stalin's death initiated a peculiar process in society, where the truth was transferred to political rituals in which the meaning was no longer carried by the message, but by the participation in these rituals and in the reproduction of official conventions. The more rigid the performative plane became, the more varied, rich and meaningful, paradoxically, the 'normal' everyday life in society became.

Yurchak's scheme offers a good interpretative framework for understanding both the dismissal

mechanisms of the 'severe style' and changes in its art historical role. The problem of the 'severe style' seems to lie largely in the fact that it remained in the gap between the sociological descriptions of the period, the discourse of totalitarianism, and the national narrative, and it did not rightfully belong to any of the current 'systems'. Attempts to insert 'the specific reflection of Khrushchev's public values'⁷, the producers of which can be treated as co-creators of these values rather than as their passive recipients or even fighters against them, into such a scheme would cause confusion and, in order to clarify it, images that refer to irresponsibility are used. In discussions of the Khrushchev thaw, it is often clear that the occasional expressions of democracy and promises of freedom first raised the expectations of historians and cultural historians, and then caused disappointment when they remained unfulfilled. There is also the feeling that the art of the thaw period deceived people by promising changes, but did not carry them out (at least from a retrospective view) in a sufficiently convincing way. If we proceed from Yurchak's scheme, we can consider the second half of the 1950s and the early 1960s, when the first generation of the artists of the thaw period came into prominence, as a transition period when the ideological metadiscourse faded away and the performative plane started to take shape. While the 'severe style' was born as an art innovation and an attempt to freshen up the artists' position as subjects, helping them to withdraw gradually from the rhetoric of the regime, it soon fell into another discourse and became a part of performative rituals that offered a

7 M. C. Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1998.

background for the flourishing of entirely different art practices in the 1960s.

Although Yurchak's model seems to primarily favour the explanation of the 'large picture'; it also offers a fresh perspective on a smaller scale, at the level of the individual artwork. From the ideological perspective, we have to admit that works executed in the 'severe style' largely reflect spheres of life with a strong propagandist dimension, through the motifs of routine work of fishermen, agriculture or industrialisation. However, we should note that, as a rule, the pictures were structured in such a way that in the foreground we can see people coming and going, talking or taking a break from their work. The ideological aspect, (in the context of the Khrushchev period, it was primarily work), was reduced to the background and presented as a ritual gesture rather than as a meaning-creating element. A vivid example is Leili Muuga's painting 'Sceptics' (1957), which can be classified as a proto-example of the 'severe style', but which is nevertheless a very convincing description of the ritualisation processes of the ideological plane.

However, Muuga's painting is quite exceptional for its era, treating a politically strong subject: the events of June 1940. The painting contains intrigues that do not allow for interpreting it through the artist's ideological attitude. Although the subject of this work is purely Soviet, the artist presented the historical theme, which has the highest position in the genre hierarchy of Soviet art, in the form of a café view, and reduced the political demonstration to the background as a hazy view through a café window. At the same time, people sitting in the café – 'sceptics' – are presented as vivid psychological characters. Through this type of composition, the artist creates

a situation that locates the onlookers and the sceptics automatically on the same side in this divided world. This eliminates the possibility of taking the picture at its face value as support for the regime. Although in the case of 'Sceptics', painted in 1957, the June demonstration still participates in the creation of the meaning of the work, with the mature works of the 'severe style', ideological elements have been reduced to the role of performative ritual gesture, making room for human values.

As the 'severe style' emerged in the relatively liberal atmosphere of the thaw period and it was, rather, the artists' initiative, not so much the product formed by the orders given by the higher-ups, we cannot analyse it using a totalitarian model. The artists of the 'severe style' not only reflected changes in Soviet discourse, but also amplified them by raising humans to the foreground (by using, at first, still quite propagandist motifs). Although the 'severe style' is described as only an episode among other changes in art, it was temporally much longer, even though its content was noteworthy for only a few years. However, the severe form of depiction persisted in exhibitions up to the mid-1960s and even longer and, in the course of time, the works in the 'severe style' became participants in a kind of performative ritual, thus 'spoiling' the image of the style.