

# Tradition and AVANT-GARDE in the Cultural Proposal of Socialist Realism

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**Abstract:** *The conformation of the cultural proposal of socialist realism corresponds to the articulation of the representative symbology of international socialism. For this it is necessary to determine the artistic principles on which the project is structured. The antecedent cultural tradition constitutes a carrier heritage of the socially recognized codes, in turn it is the representation of the social form that is intended to be denied with the revolution. For its part, the artistic avant-garde of the 20th century constitutes a proposal that is formally revolutionary and representative of contemporary society. From the confluence of these forms within the Russian revolution arises socialist realism. Taking into account this conflictive reality of the process of construction of the cultural project of socialist realism, this paper proposes to establish general lines regarding how it deals with the relationship between tradition and artistic avant-garde.*

**KEY WORDS** - Socialist realism, art, artistic avant-garde, tradition, ideology

## I. INTRODUCTION

The 20th century emerged as a moment of rupture with the formal codes established by the Academy. This meant the use of all creative abilities in order to legitimize the new forms of artistic representation. Which brought with it the avant-garde movements of the beginning of the century, which implied a reconceptualization of the place of art in society. Without failing to take into account the role historically played by art in representing the interests of a certain politically dominant class. The art of the beginning of the century can be considered, by its nature, as a revolutionary attempt to artistically understand reality and translate it into new forms of language.

The Russian revolution, as a scenario for the transformation of reality, led to the orientation of different artistic groups towards it. This brought with it that the Russian avant-garde sought in the revolution the space to reorient its work, even declaring itself the indisputable product of this process. The main figures of art and literature were linked to it, under the idea of a revolution both social and formal (in the artistic sense). The first years of the revolution, as a space where a multiplicity of trends converged, achieved important works, which can be erected as a synthesis of the process that was taking place, expressed in an avant-garde language. The cultural institutionalization of the Russian revolution brought with it the establishment of socialist realism as a cultural proposal for socialism. Its fundamental problem in terms of style lies in how to produce a type of art that represents socialism, starting from a dialectical negation of the antecedent tradition and inserting itself into the dynamics of the artistic avant-garde of the 20th century. All this without losing its political conditioning and articulating the symbology of the revolution. At the same time, the elaboration of a proposal from the collective is proposed, in which individual interests find reality only in society.

The objective of this work is to explain how the cultural proposal of socialist realism contradictorily assumes its relationship with the artistic tradition that preceded it and the avant-garde of the 20th century. For which a characterization of the main artistic and aesthetic antecedents of socialist realism is carried out, in order to establish a generalization in the relationship that it establishes with the tradition of the 19th century and the avant-garde of the 20th. All this transversalized by the role of artistic production in the process of symbolic conformation of the Russian revolution at the beginning of the 20th century. This also allows establishing a definition of socialist realism taking into account the cultural principles in which it is inserted. For this, the postulates of authors involved in the very conception of socialist realism, as well as researchers related to the field of contemporary aesthetics and culture, are taken as a reference.

## **II. AESTHETIC-ARTISTIC BACKGROUND OF SOCIALIST REALISM**

Modernity broke into history with both scientific-technical, cultural and political revolutions. Which brought with it a search in the previous tradition for the elements that would allow it to legitimize itself and establish the capitalist system of production relations as universal. This meant an appropriation of aesthetic codes typical of the Western tradition resignified towards the interests of the bourgeoisie. In this process, the role of art stands out, since with social changes the concept of art also changes. (1)

In this context of symbolic conformation of "the modern capitalist reality" the predominant artistic style is classicism, which had different expressions and affected the various sectors of artistic production. This deals with building the elements that identify the new bourgeois ideal: the individual, flying the banner of reason and freedom. It is established from a clear and "objective" way, in which there is no room for subjectivity. The style is conceived from the principles of sobriety, balance and harmony. It is expressed in its academic form, predominant at the end of the 18th century and during the 19th century, with special development in the Russian tradition of the end of the 19th century.

Each style has different characteristics, but classicism tends more than any other to stereotyped expressions, to pedantically comply with certain norms and to maintain traditional forms. It is one of the most rigid styles. Only at the moment of its appearance does it provide new elements; later, on the contrary, he uses only patterns and rejects all novelty in terms of form, also avoiding both the experimental and the original. (2)

Classicism and its variants are opposed to romanticism, developed in the early nineteenth century. This deals with highlighting the role of subjectivity, the role of the individual in the face of rigid objectivity. As well as highlighting the idealized moment of reality. It leaves aside the articulation from the principles of reality itself to be structured in the logic of possibility. It establishes the possible developments of the individual in history in contrast to the evolution of capitalism at the beginning of the 19th century. It is a revolutionary moment in the construction of art, and, from the exacerbation of the emotional, it constitutes the criticism of the monarchical restoration and political absolutism.

During the 19th century, artistic movements evolved in correspondence with the capitalist system, and to the extent that they legitimized bourgeois reality, they developed criticism of reality itself. Realism, as a movement and artistic style, developed in the second half of the 19th century and corresponds to the period of consolidation of capitalism in Europe. It is established on the principles of the return to the objective representation of reality, denying the subjective moment of romanticism. It is characterized by the simple representation of the elements of everyday life at the time.

For its part, socialist realism, corresponding to the period of consolidation of socialist society in the 20th century, deals with the search for an objective language that would respond to a political commitment on the part of the artist in the new society, away from the subjectivism of the individual. This caused socialist realism

to seek and declare its fundamental antecedents in nineteenth-century<sup>1</sup> critical realism and Marxist theory. It intended to be a synthesis of both: taking from the first its realistic aesthetic discourse, overcoming its bourgeois essence, and taking from the second its materialist vision of the world and its political commitment to the proletariat.

With respect to critical realism, socialist realism is conceived as its most complete expression. While the former is perceived as an expression of the decadence of a system, the latter is seen as the expression of a new society under construction, of a new system of human values: the communists.

I apply the concept of realism to a common trend from Homer to Gorky that was not a trend of expressive techniques, style, etc., but an intention referred to the real, fundamental essence of humanity that is in continuous process. Understanding the social need for a style is not the same as aesthetically valuing the artistic consequences of that style. (3)

In the context of the symbolic conformation of the socialist revolution, the return to the realistic form of representation implied a return to the precepts of the Russian academy of the 19th century, reoriented from the interests of socialism. Only, this return supposes a closer return to the absolutizing principles of classicism, legitimizing the bourgeois state in its formation process; than to the moment of criticism that is implicit in the realism of the nineteenth century.

Socialist realism is, judging by its hero, its spirit, and its content, much closer to the eighteenth century than to the nineteenth. Without realizing it, we have skipped the tradition of our parents and resumed that of our grandparents. The 18th century had much in common with us: the idea of the integrity of the State, the feeling of one's own superiority and the clear awareness that "God is with us". (2)

In an initial moment of the revolution, the atmosphere of controversy prevails, of collective construction, of stylistic diversity. The ideal is produced from the real. Different styles converge in the representation of the new society, where the nascent artistic avant-gardes stand out, finding in the revolution the ideal space for the development of their revolutionary spirit. The avant-gardes propose a break with the schematic forms of representation of the revolution, in correspondence with their denial of academic methods. The spirit of romanticism, of the idealization of future construction, predominates at this time.

Romanticism is closely linked with the period of struggle in Soviet literature, the first five years of the Revolution, at a time when life and art were dominated by unbridled passions. In that the ardent longing for a happy future and the revolutionary impetus were not yet subject to the political Precepts of the Government. Romanticism represents our past, our youth whose loss we mourn. (2)

The general way in which Soviet artistic production is conceived proposes a synthesis in which elements of both classicism, romanticism and realism are combined. From classicism he takes exacerbated objectivity, rationality, reality told from power. From romanticism the idea of the future, the individual illusion, the collective projection of the future construction of communism. From realism, in turn, he takes the everyday space, common life as a moment to represent reality. The question was: how to represent the new reality through art, from the illusion of the future expressing the contradiction of the present moment.

### **III. THE PROBLEM OF TRADITION IN SHAPING CULTURE IN SOCIALISM**

In this setting of conformation of art for the socialist revolution, part of the relationship that must exist with the antecedent tradition. Hence the split between "proletarian art" and "bourgeois art". "Bourgeois art" constitutes the result of the aesthetic and representative evolution of humanity, and with this it is an expression of the class interests of the bourgeoisie, insofar as it represents the aesthetic form in which it has been expressed. In turn, as

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<sup>1</sup> In the congress of 1934, critical realism was spoken of as the antecedent of socialist realism, but it is an idea that was developed later, in the sixties, specifically in the work of Lukacs Aesthetics and current significance of critical realism.

a product of a contradictory reality and capable of expressing the contradictions of the different times, it contains in itself the tools for the revolutionary struggle. This means that a negation of bourgeois art must be carried out in a dialectical sense, that is, denying its class character and assuming the progressive elements that compose it, to give rise to an art that overcomes this contradictory essence and is capable of expressing the interests of a socialist society. The task consists of appropriating the entire cultural heritage of humanity and directing it towards the new context of social relations.

For its part, "proletarian art" must contain within itself the interests and aspirations of the proletarians as a new class in power, which, unlike the artistic manifestations that preceded it, represents a social majority. It must be capable of transforming and creating together with the socialist revolution. In the construction of the ideology of the revolution. In its definition there are positions that present it as totally new, as an absolute negation of the entire bourgeois cultural tradition. These positions are defended by the representatives of the Proletkult, against which V.I. Lenin addresses himself specifically against the followers of Mach, to whom he ends by saying:

We demand from everyone a concrete and clear response to the covert approach of the philosophical struggle against Marxism on the platform. In reality, all the phrases about proletarian culture cover up precisely the struggle against Marxism. The originality of the new group consists in the fact that it has brought philosophy to the platform of the party, without saying frankly which philosophical tendency it defends. (4)

The art that is produced within the revolution is oriented towards the construction of a new man, who represents the values of the new society under construction. Only, for the complete conformation of that man in socialism, his education in the achievements of the bourgeois tradition is necessary. The education of both technical issues and elements of universal culture. This artistic production presupposes, in turn, the existence of artists who are capable of massively communicating the principles of the new society. This implies the political commitment of the artists and its consequence with the circumstances in which their work takes place. Only, as Umberto Eco would say, these relations between the artist and his work and his time are not always explicit. Therefore, forcing it represents a risk for the cultural proposal in general.

A work of art or a system of ideas is born from a complex web of influences, most of which develop at the specific level of which the work or system is a part; the inner world of a poet is as much and perhaps more influenced and shaped by the stylistic tradition of the poets who preceded him, than by the historical occasions with which his ideology is connected and, through stylistic influences, he assimilates, under the way of forming, a way of seeing the world. The work he produces may have very subtle connections with his historical moment, it may express a successive phase of the general development of the context or it may express deep levels of the phase in which he lives that do not appear so clear in the eyes of his contemporaries.(5)

This brought with it the division between "bourgeois culture" and "proletarian culture" in the environment of construction of socialism. (6)The issue of culture becomes, in the words of Lenin himself, a point on which the process of building Socialism must be built, since the transformation of production is not effective without the respective changes in the ideological superstructure, hence the need to clarify the specificities of culture in the new society. (7)

At this point, the return to the assumption or not of the codes coming from the cultural tradition of the 19th century takes place. Although there are differences in objective and sector towards which it is oriented; "bourgeois culture" is destined for the consumption of the minority that possesses power, while "socialist culture" is oriented to the great masses, both employ similar production and circulation mechanisms. Hence Lenin's defense of building a different culture based on the cultural development achieved by capitalist society, since from that heritage it is possible to build a communist society, since in it are found the contradictions that give rise to the proletarian revolution.

Proletarian culture must be the logical development of the wealth of knowledge conquered by humanity under the yoke of capitalist society, landlord society, bureaucratic society. All these paths and paths have led and continue to lead to proletarian culture, in the same way that political economy, transformed by Marx, has shown us the way to the class struggle, at the beginning of the proletarian revolution. (8)

The socialist revolution negates, by its nature, bourgeois society, but this negation is carried out in the dialectical sense of negating maintaining and surpassing the best of the antecedent tradition. Leaving out the cultural heritage achieved by class societies is an ideological position in which the absurdity of not recognizing the values that gave rise to the very development of socialism is reached. These ruptures are impossible due to the natural dialectical movement that reality possesses. Following this logic, the task is to determine which elements are going to distinguish one social system from another. At this point Terry Eagleton comments: "The discriminatory norm in question is that we should enhance only those particular faculties that allow an individual to realize himself through and in the midst of the equivalent free realization of others. It is this, above all, that distinguishes socialism from liberalism." (9)

The cultural proposal of socialism, therefore, starts from the distinction of the elements that contribute to the consolidation and diffusion of the new social ideal in the bourgeois tradition, to be built from there. The splits between tradition and socialism, placing them as formal and non-dialectical opposites, leads to the ideological construction of fallacies. Tradition is the basis on which socialist culture is built, without failing to appropriate the cultural elements that are contemporary to it.

#### **IV. FROM THE ARTISTIC AVANT-GARDE TO SOCIALIST REALISM**

The 20th century brought with it, in addition to the Socialist Revolution, a formal revolution in the field of culture. The new spaces for artistic diffusion, the scientific-technical advances, the new social reality, resized the expressive forms of art. In this environment, the well-known artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century developed. As part of this new spiritual conformation of society, the role of art stands out in the formation of aesthetic referents, as well as in the symbolic conformation of the new reality. This makes it one of the most efficient mechanisms in the ideological diffusion of the interests of the ruling class. In the production of cultural goods: the offer offers an effect of symbolic imposition: a specific cultural product; it is a constituted taste. (10)

In this context, the Russian revolution takes place, which, as part of its own contradictory nature, has different positions regarding artistic production, and the determination of the type of art to represent the socialist revolution. As part of this process of symbolic conformation, it is necessary to take into account the existence in Russia, at the beginning of the revolution, of a strong artistic avant-garde movement, which identified in the revolution the ideal scenario to break with established academic forms.

[...] In Russia almost all avant-garde writers and artists sided with the revolution: Suprematists, constructivists, futurists. // [...] Side by side with writers and artists of realist training, who had developed in the tradition of the Russian 19th century, were artists and writers who came from formalist and avant-garde positions of all kinds, men nourished by restlessness: men that in the fire of the revolution they saw the destruction of a hated past and the possibility of changing their existence, of finding a foothold for their future. (11)

The Russian avant-garde is organized into several groups: the constructivists, the productivists, the LEF (Left Front in the arts), which from their manifestos stated their interest in participating in the ideological consolidation of the revolution and the construction of socialism<sup>2</sup>. They were interested in establishing an

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<sup>2</sup> Some ideas of the Program of the Productivist group, 1920, p.491:

"The task of the productivist group is the communist expression of materialist constructive work. "

- Synthesize the ideological and formal aspect in practical activity.
- Base on historical materialism.

orientation towards bringing art closer to the revolution, to the socialist ideal. Ideas that transcended the declaration of its main representatives and materialized in works of art aimed at the process of symbolic construction of the socialist revolution. They projected themselves towards the representation of the new class in power: the working and peasant masses of Russia. They promoted the explicit link between art and politics, an idea that was going to be assumed by Stalin's direction and transformed into the logic of art directed from the State.

The consolidation of the revolution and its ideological circulation mechanisms brought with it that relations with the artistic avant-garde varied and diminished. After the death of Lenin, a movement of ideologization of the revolutionary reality from art, controlled by the establishment of policies for cultural control from the seizure of power by Stalin, is brewing. Art becomes the official spokesperson for the ideology of the Communist Party, accentuating its pamphleteering character. The objective was the dissemination of the principles of the new society and the formation of a social conscience in accordance with the interests of the new class in power. The opposite doctrine, which emphasizes the effects of art, either as a stimulus or as a sedative, could take hold as a pharmacological interpretation. (12) At this point there is a denial of the formal proposals of the artistic avant-garde and a return to the representative forms of the 19th century, essentially towards realism, although as has been exposed in this work it corresponds to the principles of 18th century classicism. (11) This return to the 19th century academy implied a return to the artistic power of enlightened elites that had been overcome by the avant-garde (13), which in turn implied a displacement of these forms of revolutionary art and the restoration of the Russian academy.

This new artistic proposal begins to take shape under what is known as socialist realism, which they declare constitutes the most complete expression of realism. Among its principles is the conformation of the ideal of the new socialist man, establishing Lenin as a model (13). In turn, there is the principle of political partisanship of the artist and his work, established on ideas enunciated by Lenin and the proposal made by the avant-garde of the relationship between art and politics. The objective of socialist realism as a cultural proposal was in the idealized representation of socialist reality, from there to ideologically legitimize the new model of society. At the same time, it is oriented towards the massive dissemination of art, declaring a return to realism as a mechanism for direct communication with the great masses. Currently, among us the theory is in vogue according to which the art of the so-called avant-garde is "difficult art", which requires highly specialized preparation, and realism, accessible to the masses, is only useful for civilizing purposes. (14)

Socialist realism was conceived as an overcoming of the bourgeois styles prior to the revolution, becoming official state policy in 1932 when Iósif Stalin promulgated the decree of Reconstruction of literary and artistic organizations. It is stylistically conceived as a new expression of realism, recontextualized in the Soviet context. In addition, it is declared as the official method of artistic representation of the revolution from its definition in the Congress of Writers of 1934. Its consolidation takes place between 1946 and 1948 with the Resolutions of the Central Committee of the CPSU, "On artistic questions and literary", the latter known as the Zhdánov Decree.

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- Move from the abstract to the real, like the soviets.
  - Construction of a communist culture.

The collective art of the present is the constructive life!

LEF Manifesto, Mayakovski, 1923, p. 494-498:

- Defend the construction of the socialist state in the new Soviet Republic.
- "The LEF will agitate the masses with our art and draw from them their own organizing force."
- Complete fusion with the revolution.
- "proletarian art: a part of the writers has become official and oppresses with a bureaucratic language, repetition of political a, b, c.

De Micheli, Mario: *The artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century*, Editorial Felix Varela, Havana,

The most exact definition of socialist realism is found in the statutes of the Soviet Union of Writers. "Socialist realism is the fundamental method of Soviet Literature and literary criticism. It demands from the artist a true and concrete interpretation of reality in its revolutionary development. And its objective is to collaborate in the ideological transformation of the workers by educating them in the spirit of socialism." \*(First Soviet Congress of Writers, 1934, Moscow, 1934.) (2)

Socialist realism is defined by Máximo Gorky at the 1934 Writers' Congress as "the truly new art, the great communist art, which would create a form in correspondence with its content". Gorky legitimizes it as the "new method of creation", establishing the idea of the revolutionary artist as an engineer of souls (15). Prevailing the idea of the idealized representation of reality from the defense of the principles of socialist society. He establishes in this way the principles that should govern Soviet literature from the form of socialist realism:

The main theme of the literature of the entire Soviet Union is to show that the aversion to misery is being transformed into an aversion to property. This theme entails a host of other themes for truly revolutionary literature; it contains the material for the creation of a "positive" type of character and contains all the "historical truth" of the time: the revolutionary purpose of the energy of the proletariat, aimed at transforming the world for the sake of the free development of the creative forces of the world. working people. (16)

Stalin approved and proclaimed the slogan of realism as mandatory for all Soviet art. It was, first of all, about literature, and for the first time the method of socialist realism was formulated and definitively approved in the Congress of Writers, in 1934, and later, to other branches of art[...], oriented not to what is specific to this or that kind of artistic practice, but to its "socialist content" [...] The Stalinist era realized the fundamental demand of the avant-garde that art pass from the representation of life to the transformation of it with the methods of the total aesthetic-political project.(13)

From here the precept of art being a "reflection" of reality is established, which led to the stylistic relationship with realism. In the Soviet tradition: The notion of "style" was redefined: "style" was interpreted as an unconscious reflection of the ideology of a class. (17) This determination of an artistic style is not based only on the formal representation, but is expressed in the essence of the elements that define the style. Realism is not limited to the representation of reality, but implies the universality of that moment. According to Lukács, art should be evaluated for its capacity for objectivity, the representation of realism goes beyond photographing reality, but involves capturing and expressing the contradictory nature of the present moment.

Lukács is forced to discover in art that concrete totality that does not seem to come from the hands of a society of labor camps. It is for this reason that he promulgates his celebrated doctrine of realism as a kind of dialectical version of the romantic ideology of the symbol. In the complete and harmonious polyhedral totality of the realist work, the individual parts are completely mediated by the structure of the whole, subordinated to the "typical" or the universal without detriment to their material specificity. (9)

Only, socialist realism, structured from the State and not from art itself, does not represent the contradictory content of socialist society. That is why, faithful to its ideological determination, this new form of realism hyperbolizes the positive aspects of socialist society and omits criticism of it; which leads to its mythification. Beyond this external imposition of art, reality found a way to be represented, and in this process socialist realism built the typical symbology of international socialism.

## V. CONCLUSION

The articulation of the cultural proposal of socialist realism contains in itself the contradiction of human spiritual activity. Inside, tradition and avant-garde converge dialectically. From tradition it takes the representative form, based on realism, articulated on the stylistic precepts of classicism and projected from the idealization of romanticism. Although he declares himself an explicit follower of the critical realism of the 19th

century, all these moments come together. In turn, from the avant-garde it takes the direct relationship between art and politics, as well as the re-dimensioning of the social place of art. These stylistic confluences correspond to the principles of circulation of contemporary art, oriented towards the massification of culture and the consolidation of totalitarian government proposals.

Socialist realism contributes to the symbolic conformation of the socialist revolution, and with it international socialism. This brought with it that in addition to the stylistic diversity, different political forces converged that exerted their influence on the determination of the cultural proposal and the type of art to represent socialism.

The establishment of socialist realism corresponds to the moment of ideological consolidation of socialism. Therefore, the elements that formally constitute it are determined by the content to be expressed in its products. The form is subordinated to the content to be represented, but an external form is placed on this content. The representation of social reality and the contradictions inherent to the construction of a new society, suppose the appropriation of all the forms in which it is expressed. The content finds its own form and from there you can communicate more efficiently. The problem with socialist realism is that placing form above content distorts aesthetic production and art's own ability to influence social subjectivity.

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