

## Conference Paper

# Grand Exhibitions of the 2010s in Russia: Affirming the National Project Through Realist Art

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## Abstract

Since the early 2010s, large exhibitions of Russian realist art have enjoyed significant, nationwide success. This article explores the concept of Russian realism, relating it to the concept of culture as heritage, actively exploited in state rhetoric. The popularity of Russian realism is analyzed in the context of the conservative turn in Russian art. The analysis relies on curators' texts, press-releases, comments and feedback of museum visitors, and articles written by art critics. The article sheds light on the ideological resources of art in its traditional formats and compares the three versions of realist discourse: critical realism of the nineteenth century, socialist realism of the mid-twentieth century and contemporary realism. This work demonstrates that the contemporary discourse of realism appropriates the symbolic capital of the Russian classical heritage by emphasizing the continuity of the realist tradition in contemporary art, which unreflectively uses traditional forms. Thus, realist art provides a way to conceal the clashes and ruptures in Russian national history and to maintain and to invigorate the illusion of national unity.

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## 1. Introduction

What truly stands out in the trend of various 'returns', 'revivals' and 'reconstructions of national heritage' in contemporary Russia is that large-scale exhibitions of Russian art actively exploit the 'realist' rhetoric. The 'return' or 'revival' of realism allegedly began in the autumn of 2015, which Anna Matveeva shrewdly described as the season of figurative and primarily realist painting on the art scene: in October and November four large exhibitions were opened in two Russian capitals – *Russian Realism. Twenty-First Centur'* at Moscow Museum of Modern Art and the analogous exhibition *Russia. Realism. Twenty-First Century* at the Russian Museum in St.Petersburg; *Romantic Realism* at the Manege in Moscow; and *Painting Beyond Painting* at the Museum of the Russian Academy of Fine Arts in St.Petersburg. All four large exhibitions were supposed to

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display contemporary realism. There were also thirty exhibitions held in five big Russian cities under the name 'Romantics of Realism' and involving about a hundred artists. Another contribution to this trend was the opening of a large private museum of Russian socialist art by businessman Alexander Ananyev in 2011 in Moscow. The museum was manifestly called the Institute of Russian Realist Art. As Anna Matveeva says, "... never before have the largest exhibition halls of the two capital cities on their own accord simultaneously started massively bombarding the public with the same art missiles" [1].

The analysis of curators' texts, press-releases, feedback and comments from the visitors shows that the concept of realism in these projects is imbued with ideological, cultural and political meanings. The ideological message inherent in these exhibitions, even though not always clearly and rationally manifested, causes a serious clash of opinions, even a conflict, between specialists (art critics and art historians), who are generally skeptical about these events, and the overwhelmingly enthusiastic public. The preliminary conclusion that can be made at this point is that these conflicting receptions stem not from the differences in tastes – the taste of the masses and elitist taste – but from a certain tendency in Russian culture. Taking into account the fact that there have always existed discrepancies between the professional expert opinion and the mass taste in modern societies and that such discrepancies have been accepted as a norm in art history, it is impossible not to notice that in this situation we are dealing with a new problem or, to be more precise, with a new configuration of aesthetic taste and politics.

The polarization within the community of experts, art critics, and curators is also a new development, which revealed the lack of consensus about what should be considered as contemporary art and how realism and its history should be interpreted. Interestingly enough, this consensus existed until recently, despite heated debates in the academic milieu and public controversies.

Professional debates around the 2010s exhibitions were accompanied by accusations of incompetence, both ethical and aesthetic, targeted against their curators and organizers. What seems particularly perplexing in this respect is that these ambitious projects were initiated by the most respectable institutions on the Russian art scene, whose level of expertise guaranteed high quality. As Anna Matveeva puts it:

however surprising the assault of 'realisms' turned out to be at first glance, it seems to have become the scandal of the autumn, stealing the scene from the most sophisticated art projects. Even radical performances of Petr Pavlensky did not manage to trigger such an overwhelming response among the professionals: at least art critics more or less agree on their opinions on

Pavlensky's art. These art exhibitions brought to light much more controversial, even sensitive questions – sensitive due to their controversial nature, due to the fact that in dealing with these questions, only few actually know where they stand and that these questions leave no room for expert or simply human consensus. However ridiculous it may seem, figurative art turned out to be our weak spot... We are not quite sure what to do with it or what to expect from it. The most frightening thing is that our expectations will not be disappointed. This painting holds massive potential for conveying an articulate message and this potential stems directly from the current state of society [1].

It should be noted that the description of the situation as 'sensitive' betrays that there is an inherent problem, a hidden cause for anxiety and unease, although the root of this problem is not accounted for.

Yet another factor which makes this situation new is that it was the first time in a long while when state authorities and large business – the two major stakeholders with vast resources to influence public opinion – paid attention to art exhibitions. Figurative art does not have as much persuasive power as cinema. Moreover, in the post-Soviet period, figurative art lost its former significance as a means of communicating social ideas and this role started to be performed by other artistic practices and other institutions of contemporary art.

The 'return' of realism, which is not only and quite understandably a bottom-up but also a top-down trend, that is, initiated by the professional community of museum officials and organizers, surprised the majority of intellectuals, who have long seemed to have reached an agreement regarding the general scheme of formats and boundaries of art in the modern world. One of the dominant factors in this scheme is the skepticism based on post-modernist perspective that art is able to represent some kind of 'objective' reality.

In the early twenty-first century, the social and political concerns associated with realism were felt acutely: it "encroaches from all sides and oozes from every chink and crack – to museums, exhibition halls, private collections and galleries" [2]. In the light of this problem, the following questions arise: what is the current meaning of the concept of 'realist art'? what makes this concept so attractive in the current cultural and ideological situation? What is the difference between the concept of realism (the quality of being realistic), widely used in exhibition projects, and the well-established traditional concept of realism, which originated in the nineteenth century? What trends in the cultural policy are related to the revitalization of this concept in the professional community and what

are the reasons behind its popularity with the mass public? We need to look into the causes of the 'public demand for realism' and its constitutive elements: the ideological element (related to the new era of cooperation between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church); social element (related to the search for national identity); and art (related to the influence of the dominant cultural communities).

## 2. Materials and Methods

In order to address the questions outlined above, we are going to follow the research procedure, which includes, first, the analysis of curators' texts and visitors' comments and feedback in order to identify the most frequently used concepts and semantic clusters around the concept of realism. We use discourse analysis methods to specify the concept of realism in order to trace back the historical transformations of its semantic core.

Second, we will analyze these semantic clusters in the context of retro-orientation in contemporary Russian culture. We will explore the links between 'realism', conservatism and nation-building, in other words, we intend to pinpoint the cultural and political dimensions in what seems to be a perfectly traditional format of an art exhibition.

And third, we are going to compare the three main discourses of realism (critical realism of the mid-nineteenth century, socialist realism and realism of the 2010s) in the history of Russian culture in order to describe the contemporary version of the concept of realism and the elements of its past versions actualized in the current context.

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1. Discourses of the historical versions of realist art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: critical and socialist realism

Historically, the appearance of realism in art coincided with the early period in the development of modern society. Realism reached its peak in the mid-nineteenth century – the period characterized by firm belief in objective reality and in empirical cognizability of the world. Capitalist economy, positivism in education, philosophy and science, democratization of the socio-cultural sphere – all these factors enhanced the interest in the driving forces of history. To be a realist meant to be interested in analyzing and transforming the real world, it meant to live in history and society. The world is governed by the intelligible forces and can, therefore, be transformed through the collective human

effort. Realist artists focused on the social facts, relations and processes which were seen as objective, therefore, what came to the fore was the present-day reality familiar to everybody and thus leaving no room for speculative fantasies or historical events verified by reliable sources – documents and contemporary evidence. In this respect it is important to consider the two varieties of realism in the nineteenth century – social realism and critical realism. Both are closely connected with each other: the social realism refers to the driving forces and foundations of reality while the critical realism, to the way of relating to it. Rational and objective cognition is guaranteed by the critical (analytical) approach.

The understanding of realism in art in Russia was quite similar to European although Russian realism had some specific characteristics of its own. The development of European nations was to a great extent determined by literature, which enjoyed the status of national classics. In France, for example, this role was played by classicism. The 'golden age' of Russian literature in the nineteenth century was primarily associated with realism, which dominated in all kinds of art. The artistic and critical discourse of realism coexisted with the emergent discourse of Russian nationhood. This coincidence, however, did not lead to the creation of the cult of realism and, until the 1930s, realism in art had existed in the public consciousness separately from the main national tradition.

The epoch of modernism, extending from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, involved a serious and consistent criticism of positivism and realism and discovery of multiple subjective world views. The concept of universally shared and cognizable reality seemed to have disappeared. The meaning of the notion of 'real' as such radically changed in such cultural phenomena as psychoanalysis, neo-positivism, surrealism and existentialism. In Russia in the early twentieth century and later in the USSR in the 1920s, the realist tradition in painting and literature lost its public appeal. In the whole world realism was considered either as a cultural legacy or as something deeply provincial.

Starting from the 1930s and practically until the fall of the Soviet Union, the new understanding of realism developed within the doctrine of socialist realism. In the USSR, despite the debates about the specific features of the new method, nobody challenged the fundamental primacy of realism. The value of realism was from the very beginning seen as self-evident. A contribution to the 'rehabilitation' of realism in art was made by the Marxists, primarily G.Lukács and M.Lifshitz, creators of Marxist-Leninist aesthetics centered around the principle of the unity of social progress and the progress in art. The logic of Soviet aesthetics can be best illustrated by the famous debate of Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs [3–2]. It should be noted that this controversy unfolded within the Marxist philosophical debates: Lukacs contended that realism is the only form of

art that is not destructive for the mind and that only the aesthetics of continuity and life imitation (mimesis) may correspond to rationalism in the positive sense of the word. Since, in the Marxist view, alienation is the main problem of social reality, then socialism is a social order which enables the humanity to overcome alienation and, therefore, art should represent the world without alienation, avoiding any deformations. To this Brecht responded by pointing out that “realistic means discovering the causal complexes of society, unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power” [cit.ex: 3], which renders the task of creating lifelike representations of reality irrelevant. If the main task of realist art is to combat alienation, then realism is no longer the problem of the form. According to Lukacs, however, any art that strives to explore the ruptures and surfaces of relations, reproducing them, is a ‘willful act of destruction’. Bloch, in his turn, attacked Lukacs for his vision of reality as ‘closed and integrated’, which turned the expressionist experiments with discontinuities into an exercise in futility – “an empty jeu d’esprit” [4]. What if the reality that Lukacs defends – that of continuous and infinitely interconnected totality – is not as objective as he believes it to be? What if true realism is, among other things, the description of discontinuity? Both Brecht and Bloch saw the connection between socialism and modernist art as acceptable and justified.

The arguments of Western Marxists were rejected, and, in the end, the Soviet aesthetic theory prevailed. The Soviet version of Marxist aesthetics entertained the view that socialist society, while being more advanced than capitalist society, in a natural way calls to life realist art forms since modernism is an expression of the reactionary trend celebrating the past and expresses the degradation of bourgeois culture, which has no future. Thus, it is through its relation to social innovation that realism established its position in Soviet society as an art of the future. Apart from this argument, the realist elements in the world art of the previous epochs, in particular Russian critical realism of the nineteenth century, were reinterpreted as a historical foundation for socialist realism and, therefore, were ‘museumified’ and academized.

All parts of the Soviet cultural system maintained this orientation towards realism: the demand for realism on the part of the state (socialism as a way to overcome all forms of alienation); the demand for realism on the part of the educated public (realism as national classics); and the demand for realism on the part of the masses audiences (realism as imitation of life) [5]. In terms of cultural policy, the new discourse of realism performed a number of important social functions: it contributed to the country’s separation from the Western world, art and modernities; it was used in the struggle against the modernist and avant-garde movements inside the country; and it helped eliminate the differences between utopia as a way of projecting the future and post-utopia. The latter allowed

those in power to represent the current state of things as if the vision of the 'bright future' had already been attained. The program of building socialism thus mandated realist art a new function, which means that realism could no longer rely on the traditions of critical social analysis of the nineteenth-century Russian realism that shared with science its commitment to the search of a certain 'objective truth' about the social and individual world. Semantics of the concept of realism shifted from epistemology to pragmatics. Realism came to be understood as a way of putting ideas into practices, their 'materialization' and 'fulfilment', which to a great extent explains the open synthesis of ideology and aesthetics of mimesis, impossible for critical realism of the nineteenth century. Images of socialist realism in their most convincing lifelike form were supposed to settle the problem of the discrepancy between the imagined and desired future, on the one hand, and the bleak reality, which could be observed and documented, on the other.

In the period of late socialism and in post-Soviet Russia, the discourse of realism transformed radically, giving way to different versions of avant-garde and post-avant-garde art, modernism and post-modernism. Realist aesthetics became at best one of the many others offered by the global art market. This situation stemmed from the prevalence of the discourse of pluralism in the 1990s and the skepticism about the possibility of a single vision of the world and, therefore, of the dominant way to depict it.

### 3.2. Discourse of realism in the 2010s

In our analysis of the texts written by the curators of the art exhibitions we mentioned earlier we can discover the following pairs of semantic oppositions: the first characterizes the temporal aspect of the discourse of realism in the early twenty-first century. The phrases used most frequently in interviews, curators' texts and press-releases to explain the significance and popularity of 'realism' in contemporary Russian culture are 'motives of eternity', 'fundamental questions of existence', and 'eschewing poignant questions of the day'. They correlate with the subject matter of most paintings, whose authors avoid including any details or mundane objects associated with transient modern life – modern gadgets or social problems alike. Landscapes prevail since nature follows the seasonal cycles and thus is less vulnerable to irrecoverable losses than history. Contemplation of natural landscapes creates a feeling of security and stability, contrasted with the liquid, unstable and unpredictable social reality. This tendency comes to the fore in urban landscapes, in which artists choose spatial segments containing fragments of

the past, such as churches, buildings of those architectural styles that are associated with the 'glorious' past (classicism, Baroque, art nouveau, Stalinist Empire), and old Russian wooden country houses.

We thus get an impression of 'time standing still', and not only due to such selective treatment of the depicted object. The language of this art remains unchanged, which is easy to see if we conduct the following thought experiment: covering the year when this or that picture was painted, compare the style and manner of painting with any of its counterparts of the same genre from the period between the mid-1930s and the mid-1980s. There is scarcely any noticeable difference. It can therefore be concluded that the language of realism is interpreted as being entirely determined by the subject matter rather than by the author; the author's subjectivity, in its turn, is interpreted through intimate and emotional aspects of compassion rather than through his background or his culturally determined language.

Similar to the binary opposition 'transitory/eternal', in which the priority is given to the latter, in the next semantic pair – 'secular/religious' – 'Christian' predominates. In his interview, A. Ananiev, the founder of the Institute of Russian Realist Art, based on his collection of the 1930s–2010s art, said: "This art is not religious but secular; it is, nevertheless, deeply Christian in terms of its message, ideas, meaning and emotions" [6].

In the next opposition – 'avant-garde/traditional' – realism is quite logically associated with tradition, which in this case increases the authority and symbolic capital of figurative painting. 'Traditional', in its turn, is widely seen as related to 'national'. The word 'Russian' comes up especially frequently in relation to realism. As one of the visitors of the Institute of Russian Realist Art put it, 'the Russian spirit and the national character were vividly expressed by many works'. In the eyes of the mass audience, the tradition of Russian realist painting is 'unique', which makes it 'valuable all over the world'.

The names of the two large exhibition projects – *Romantics of Realism* and *Romantic Realism* – connect the concept of realism with the ultimately indefinable and therefore semantically blurred predicates such as 'sublime patriotic sentiment', 'poetic mood', and 'musicality'. [7] The texts insistently emphasize various meanings of sublimity and grandeur, which shows that the alignment of realism with romanticism was intentional. The aesthetics of romanticism is seen as an assertion of the non-utilitarian purpose of art, in this case the artists' rejection of the so-called 'conjuncture' – refusal to adopt to the current situation and depict it or, in other words, to 'go with the flow':



“fortunately, romantic realism was ignored by party ideologues, for about a century it was the only movement in Russian visual arts which managed to preserve painting as it is, painting as high art, which steered clear of ideology, politics, commerce and vanity”; “realistic in its form and romantic in its content, the aesthetics of romantic realism celebrates the divine beauty of the world and is free from any ‘mundane concerns’ associated with social reality. Romantic realism does not criticize or preach and, therefore, does not have to engage in any explanations of the ‘depths of its meaning’ or in description of its ‘pioneering techniques.’” [8]

The last sentence reveals a deep distrust of the analytical and critical capabilities of art and shows a somewhat hostile attitude towards any forms of innovation in realism. It is interesting to trace the transition within this sentence from the negative connotation of ‘social significance’ to the rejection of critical attitude in art. The fact that this transition happened rapidly, and that no rational justification was provided shows that social criticism is identified with criticism in art and reveals the same negative bias towards both of these phenomena. In the list of factors which obstruct the realist approach such as ‘ideology, politics, commerce and vanity’ one can observe the equation of all elements alien to ‘high art’ and their denigration, which is emphasized by the final qualification here – ‘vanity’. Beauty as a pure and positive aesthetic value untainted by mundane reality is chosen as the only one out of the whole range of social and cultural values for realist art to focus on: “Romantic realist paintings give us back the true understanding of art, which was lost in the muddle of atheistic art criticism. In this understanding, the primary purpose of art is to serve beauty”. [8]

The semantic cluster of words around the concept of ‘realism’ includes a variety of abstract and positive characteristics with complementary and mutually reinforcing meaning: patriotic sentiments are tautologically identified with beauty, poetry, spirituality and loyalty to tradition.

Such interpretation of realism makes it impossible to distinguish between different historical versions of figurative art and different ways of its functioning in socio-political contexts, which leads organizers to place within one exhibition space the works of the late Stalinist period and of the *pochvenniki* and ‘men of the sixties’ (*shestidesyatniki*), nationalist-etatists of the early twenty-first century, and contemporary artists of far-right views. This leads the curators to make some arbitrary choices resulting in bizarre mixes such as, for example, the idea of Zelfira Tregubova, the Director of the State Tretyakov Gallery, and producer Eduard Boyakov to use an exhibition of Stalinist art propaganda as an ‘appendage’ to the exhibition ‘Orthodox Rus’ at the Manege. The

conflicts and breakages in the real space of culture (for example, official vs. non-conformist art) are ignored, the differences in the aesthetic and social views of artists are blurred within the ambiguous concept of national heritage. The most ambiguous but at the same time convenient for appropriating the symbolic capital of the past is, however, the concept 'Russian realism'. Anna Matveeva comments on the exhibition 'Russia. Realism. Twenty-First Century' held at the Russian Museum in this passage: "curators of the exhibitions ignore the stylistic stance of artists in the same way as they ignore the political standpoints the works convey: the exhibition in the Russian Museum unscrupulously combines quasi-fascist works of Alexey Belyaev-Gintovt, absolutely individualistic works of Petr Shvetsov, Dmitry Gretsky and Evgenia Kats or salon painting, plain and simple" [1].

As the above-described texts show, the concept of realism is now taken out of the context of art analysis and cultural reflection and is reduced to some abstract form of mimesis. Realism is thus no more than an empty signifier referring to only one unquestionable value – the greatness of the national tradition (it can be illustrated by the following comment of a museum visitor: 'The country had a difficult but heroic life'). Since this form is inaccessible for reflexive historicization it can be used to incorporate any ideological message: imperial, patriotic, religious, Marxist, right conservative or even make it devoid of any ideological meaning, in which case 'realism' is turned into a kind of commercially viable contemporary salon art.

## 4. Conclusions

All agents of the art scene – exhibition organizers, governmental agencies in charge of cultural policy, the public – turn to critical realism of the nineteenth century as something to fall back on – the achievement of the past whose value is unquestionable, the symbolic capital of the national classics. The discourse of showcasing the legacy of the realist tradition in contemporary Russian visual arts and omitting the Russian avant-garde, interprets realism of the 2010s as the only heir to this national tradition and the guarantor of its continuity. No other type of art, except for realism in the wide sense, appears to be up to this task, which now has grown into a mission. In general, such strategy fits well into the understanding of culture as heritage. This understanding is reflected in the official document *Basics of State Cultural Policy, 2014* [9]. The Ministry of Culture defines culture as "a historically established system of values and norms of behaviour embedded in material and non-material cultural and historical heritage...it is *culture* in this sense that acts as a unifying foundation for Russian society" [cit. ex: 10].

This approach completely ignores the semantics of critical realism, which includes the pursuit of objective truth, priority given to the truth rather than beauty, interest in social issues, modernity and its driving forces, and the generally critical attitude towards timeless abstractions.

The contemporary concept of realism has much more in common with socialist realism and cultural policy, which cultivates the demand for it, than with classical Russian realism. The similarities become obvious if we look at the following characteristics: aesthetics of life imitation (mimesis) is combined with ideology; the difference between the past, present and future is neglected; realism is contrasted with other versions of modernity and languages of its representation; realism becomes separated from the world's artistic development, in particular, Western trends, resulting in a growing insulation of the artistic field, its encapsulation within the controlled territory.

Reductionism in terms of content affected socialist realism less than nineteenth century realism. Yet, instead of clarity and consistency of its ideological message, one can observe in socialist realism the eclecticism of ideas, glorification of Russian culture and emphasis on its exclusivity and distinctiveness from the Western culture. While in socialist realism the emphasis was placed on envisioning the future as a social innovation project, the contemporary Russian discourse of realism is primarily oriented towards the past.

This trend was shown by I.Kalinin in his analysis of the changing rhetoric about culture. The Decree of the President of Russia signed in 2013 stated that the Year of Culture (2014) was intended to “attract public attention to the questions of the development of culture, conservation of cultural and historical heritage and the role of Russian culture in the world” [10]. The major turn towards ‘traditional values’ and the increased usage of such ambiguous and vague but effective concepts as ‘national tradition’, ‘heritage of the past’, ‘shared memory’, ‘historical experience’, and ‘cultural code’, according to I.Kalinin, is a sign of “Russia becoming separated from the global capital market and global tech industry and, consequently, having to draw from its own internal resources such as hydrocarbons...and cultural heritage” [10]. This, in turn, means that “there will be a growing need for a more active cultural policy (technologies of appropriating and using cultural heritage), which the Russian political elite is becoming increasingly aware of, and for the cultural institutions engaged with the state” [10]. The features that such understanding of culture shares with the Stalinist cultural policy can be found in the definition that reduces culture to the heritage of the past. In other words, “culture is not a set of mechanisms for the production of meanings, values and practices but a

diversity of ways of conservation and reproduction of a certain historical mental matrix” [10].

I. Kalinin further points to the normative character of the concept of culture underlying the specific measures and policies for administering it:

This normativity is grounded in the idea of nation and in the need to consolidate the nation seen as the main value. While the idea of nation is a particular form of totality, an instrument of reconciling the specific and the universal, culture is considered as a horizon for justifying national unity: the shared past and the shared historical destiny render differences irrelevant, turning the political, social, confessional, and stylistic diversity into a fermenting agent for the nation’s cultural unity. [10]

At first sight, the idea of normativity is the opposite to the aesthetics and values of realism, which evolved as a reaction against the aesthetic and ideological canons of the Academy of Art. The realist credo requires to depict the reality in all its facticity and fluidity instead of following the established conventions and rules. After a while it was discovered that realism can create its own norms, the most important of which is to hide the differences between fact and fiction, that is, to conceal the fact that what realist art creates is but an illusion of life. The realist form is particularly suitable for the invocation of the addressee’s trust and is capable of creating illusions on a grand scale. In our case, the illusion of a united nation.

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