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Café Américain

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The Problem with Cultural Realism, Part 1 *Representations of the “Real” Are Not Closer to the Truth*

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In the 1830s, Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky identified a type of poetry which “is true to reality; it does not create life anew, but reproduces it”, in contrast to “idealistic” work which “harmonizes with feeling”. The first theorist of the concept of realism in French, art critic and novelist Champfleury, writing in the 1850s, linked realism to his praise of *sincerity*, and in various places emphasized the importance of observation of contemporary life, prioritization of observation over the imagination, simple plots without inexplicable events, inclusion of what might previously have been seen as trivial elements, succinct and precise prose, including descriptions of people, physical settings and nature, and the use of direct dialogue.

It is not difficult to see how such a movement would grow during an era which had seen not only the failure of the idealism which informed the 1848 revolutions (even though realism originated a little beforehand), but also the growth of industrialization and science. Realism went hand-in-hand with the establishment of the new discipline of sociology, which, in the hands of its founder August Comte, promised a scientific understanding of the workings of society.

Frequently realist work is linked to portrayals of the lower classes or minorities. While there is no reason why a portrayal of an *haut-bourgeois* artistic salon should be any less “real”, nonetheless a link with class is not arbitrary, as there are long cultural traditions which portray noble figures as mythical, in contrast with the more “realistic” portrayal of the lower classes.

There is certainly some sociological work past and present that seems to take an almost voyeuristic pleasure in chronicling and detailing human misery, more so than in searching for new analyses of causes, or developing policy ideas such as might alleviate such misery. Metaphors of “holding up a mirror to reality” (originating in Stendhal’s definition of a novel as “un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route”) can be so commonplace as to be banal. But do today’s concerns of “realism” adequately reflect the ideas of all socialist and communist thinkers on these matters? In 1924, Leon Trotsky gave a speech entitled “[Class and Art](#)”. It was made during a discussion at the Press Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party relating to policy on literature. Trotsky acknowledged the cultural-historical importance of verses contained within pre-revolutionary workers’ publications, newspapers and periodicals that expressed revolutionary sentiments. But he denied that this “inartistic doggerel” could be regarded as representing a new “proletarian literature” (in the specific context of the post-revolution *Proletkult* movement). On the

contrary, he saw such verses as “a political event, not a literary one”, thus emphasizing the distinction between the two. For Trotsky, what mattered was that there were new possibilities for “changing the cultural state of the working masses” in the wake of the Revolution, which would “create the real basis for a new art”.

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Trotsky was a revolutionary, not a simple realist or empiricist. He believed in radical change, and could thus find some value in such artistic movements as the Futurists (whose Russian wing, which emerged in the 1910s, did not have the same symbiotic links to fascism as the Italian movement). While he argued that Futurism constituted at least in part a “Bohemian revolutionary off-shoot of the old art”, nonetheless Trotsky saw positive ways in which it could inform a new post-revolutionary art. The extent to which he had learned from Futurists’ ideas is demonstrated in his [1924 essay on “Literature and Revolution”](#). In that text, he claimed that there could be a new dissolution of boundaries between art and nature. Trotsky made clear that he was not echoing the Romantics (he mentions Jean-Jacques Rousseau), but argued instead that “nature will become more ‘artificial’”, to the extent of cutting down and relocating mountains, or doing the same with rivers (environmental considerations did not feature in Trotsky’s thought here).

Trotsky sharply criticized the view of fellow communist Fyodor Raskolnikov, of whom he said: “in works of art he ignores that which makes them works of art”, following Raskolnikov’s judgement on Dante’s *Divina Commedia* as “valuable to us just because it enables us to understand the psychology of a certain class at a certain time”. To Trotsky, this would “transform it into a mere historical document”, whereas he held that the *Commedia* was a source of artistic perception “not because Dante was a Florentine petty bourgeois of the 13th century but, to a considerable extent, in spite of that circumstance”. As an artwork, in contrast, the poem “must speak in some way to my feelings and moods”. Thus Trotsky did not wish to paralyze the work within its time, place and milieu, but thought that the medieval Italian poem contained feelings and moods which “shall have received such broad, intense, powerful expression as to have raised them above the limitations of the life of those days”. Whilst “the product of a certain social milieu”, Dante was also “a genius”, and Trotsky defended Shakespeare, Byron, Goethe and Pushkin in similar terms. He did not deny the value of historical study of such work (nor would I), just that which overlooks its trans-historic artistic qualities. Many contemporary sociologists would respond that feelings and moods are themselves socially constituted (which I would also not deny), but this does not preclude the potential for meaning persisting within very different social environments.

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Regardless of one’s views today on Trotsky’s overall thought (and I personally feel much less sympathetic to it than I might have done 15-20 years ago), the contrast

between his outlook and that commonly found today amongst identity synthesis (“woke”) activists is striking. Trotsky believed that “one cannot approach art as one can politics”, because art “has its own laws of development”, with a major role for subconscious processes. To him, there was no question of attaching any necessary value to art just because of the class position of the artist (the same argument could be adapted today to identity groups). Similarly, in a manner consistent with classical Marxism, but sharply at odds with the thoroughgoing distortion which was Maoism, Trotsky—unlike Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and other pre-revolutionary Russian artists and intellectuals—did not lionize the peasantry (far bigger than the proletariat in the Soviet Union at the time), believing them to be a class which could become hostile to the proletariat. He also had little time for a concomitant romanticization of “peasant-singing”, thus taking a position completely at odds with a common type of pre-industrial nostalgia from some ethnomusicologists, as in the [work](#) of Henry Stobard on music amongst Bolivian potato farmers.

Trotsky was not alone amongst communist figures in the Soviet Union in his convictions. Publisher and critic Aleksander Voronsky, associated with Trotsky’s “Left Opposition”, wrote mockingly about simplistic views whereby “petty-bourgeois literature is admissible only to the extent that it draws closely toward proletarian literature and serves as an auxiliary detachment”, a “primitive vulgarizing” of Marx’s ideas. On the contrary, Voronsky believed that the reorganization of society required that one “master the cultural heritage in science, art and other fields” and expressed enthusiasm for the evidence of workers now entering universities and workers’ programmes to fight illiteracy. Negative sides to past culture were less important than the proletariat’s lack of access to it, and Voronsky took a harsh view of the futurist calls to “throw Pushkin overboard from the ship of modernity” (alluding directly to [Vladimir Mayakovsky’s 1917 essay ‘A Slap in the Face of Public Taste’](#)), and argued that such sentiments were motivated by an awareness that Pushkin and others remained vivid for contemporary readers. Voronsky dismissed the idea that new proletarian culture, at least in the 1920s, could yet reach the heights of bourgeois or aristocratic art which rest on “centuries of culture”. Proletarian writers “must work on the basis and level of the artistic discoveries and achievement made previously”, and to approach the level of such works, one “must know Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and others”. Whilst his position was milder than that of the hardline formalist critics who came into their own in the 1910s (such as Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Boris Tomashevsk and Yuri Tynyanov), Voronsky nonetheless thought “the scorn on the part of our revolutionary circles toward questions of form” actually served to legitimize some of these formalists’ work.

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Georgi Plekhanov, who was a strong critic of the idea of *l’art pour l’art* and of Nietzschean thought, and argued that these were a form of bourgeois revolt which would never jettison bourgeois culture, nonetheless allowed that there was some objective chance of “judging whether a given artistic design has been well executed or not”. As an example of the latter, he displayed a canvas on which stereometric figures were thickly or crudely tinted with blue colour.

But Plekhanov's view, even though it may seem to avoid reducing aesthetics to ideology, is nonetheless still a form of artistic realism. Something claiming the mantle of realism, specifically "socialist realism", would indeed become the dominant aesthetic view in the Soviet Union and later in satellite countries in Eastern Europe.

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This was anything but "real", requiring instead a wholly idealized and unfailingly positive view of life in those countries and their traditions. This demand was sometimes rigidly enforced, especially during the time of the Stalinist purges and the post-war decrees of Andrei Zhdanov, with the denunciatory term "formalism" used in blanket manner to condemn any work seen to deviate, not least that which exhibited any form of abstraction or concern for the aesthetic form for its own sake.