

**LONG LIVE
THE
DICTATORSHIP
OF THE
PROLETARIAT**

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COMMUNIST CONGRESS
AT THE KITCHEN
NOV. 7

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Icons of Iconoclasm

In the mind there is a blind spot that recalls the structure of the eye.... But, whereas the eye's blind spot is unimportant, the nature of the mind means the blind spot will, in itself, make more sense than the mind itself.

Georges Bataille

As I argued in chapter 1, socialist realism was more than just an art movement or a shared sensibility; it was the representation of Soviet identity, and a representation addressing a national audience that was extremely receptive. Under Stalin, due to the excessive proximity of the wakeful eye of the state, manifestations of the “optical unconscious”¹ in official Soviet painting were marked by an elevated transparency ratio. Until recently, the initiative in such manifestations belonged to the Cartesian vision (transparent, cerebral, nonsensual).² However, one should not conclude that the Cartesian visual paradigm applies exclusively to official art. The insatiability of the mental eye (nonabstention from the expansionism of vision) is a quality the counterculture sometimes shares with the powers that be. Sots art is the best illustration of this.³ Having laid the foundations of postmodernism in Russia (in the early 1970s), sots art accomplished everything it sought and everything it feared: after the abolition of the USSR, it became a sort of frozen time in a constantly changing space.

Considering that affirmative depictions are among the most corrupting of constructs, the portrait genre of the Soviet era is in a class by itself. Even though visual image and identity have never existed apart from each other, it was in the USSR that the mass circulation of authoritarian icons, which controlled social identification, reached an unprecedented level. The role of official iconography was to channel this identification in the “appropriate” direction.⁴ In other words, it was both a goal and a mediator.

An adequate understanding of the language of the authoritarian icon requires a definition of its functional dimensions: the identificatory, the utopian, and the transreferential.⁵ To avoid conflicting interpretations, I will say that in analyzing all three dimensions (especially the first one), I

will construct the discussion with a view to the “optical unconscious.” To describe the first dimension, one can paraphrase Lacan’s thesis and say that the psyche of a Soviet man was the epicenter of conflict between the authoritarian *je* and the communal *moi*, with both concepts understood in terms of identification: figurative (*je*) or specular (*moi*). The difference between these means of identification allows a distinction between Lacan’s Symbolic order and Imaginary order (the mirror stage).⁶

The mirror stage lasts between the ages of six and eighteen months. The term “Imaginary order” refers to the fact that, in the mirror stage, the child deals with an imaginary wholeness and an imaginary totality. In early childhood, *moi* (the ego) is constituted through optical identification. In everything that enters the infant’s field of vision, he recognizes his own self. The “self” here is not some external distinguishing characteristic but a certain totality of image. As for his own body—feeble and with limited mobility—he manages to see it only in part, in fragments, incompletely. According to Lacan, the mirror stage is divided into two substages. The first is characterized by ecstatic identification with the visual image, which contains within it the promise (or anticipation) of totality. Lacan refers to this “promised” totality as orthopedic (*orthos* = correct, *pais* = child). In the second phase, the joyous affirmation of bodily wholeness in a visual image gives way to alienation, arising from the tension between the imagined fullness of the iconic sign and the insurmountable partiality of corporeal experience.

Examples of historic mass identification enable us to speak of a multiple (symbiotic) *moi*, whose identification with the illusory universality of idols, leaders, and celebrities allow the communal unconscious to be treated as a baby glued to a societal mirror. Each of these images is larger than life and contrasts with the fragmentary nature of the collective body. The features of multiple subjectivity are also manifested on the level of the individual: the subject of social identification who calls himself “I” frequently acts on behalf of a “we.” Besides, the most intimate of fantasies and desires can be primordially clichéd (the same as everyone else’s).

It is one thing when an individual perceives himself as a composite (“the composite image of the masses,” etc.); it is another when the masses see themselves embodied in a single individual’s image. There is, of course, nothing new about this: suffice it to recall Aleksei Khomiakov’s notion of *sobornost*’ (ecclesiastical communality), Vladimir Solov’ev’s idea of “Godmanhood,” and Lev Karsavin’s “all-embracing subjectivity.”⁷ What is of interest here is not the verbal but the visual inventory of the identification of the particular with the whole and of the whole with the particular. As an example, it is worth mentioning El Lissitzky’s photomontage of Lenin



(ca. 1930), in which the head of the leader is stuffed with little human figures. The same idea is used by Gustav Klutsis in his poster *Let's Fulfill the Plan of the Great Projects* (1930) (fig. 4.1) and by John Heartfield in *Every Fist Becomes One Clenched Fist* (1934). In each of these pictures, *the political* is quaintly combined with *the corporeal*: the “masses” are either written onto the body of the sovereign or restrained into the form imposed upon them: a hand raised to vote (Klutsis) or a clenched fist (Heartfield). An example of the opposite is Sergei Sen'kin's design for the magazine *Herald of Labor* (1925) (fig. 4.2). In this photomontage, the worker's figure is constructed out of the leaders' portraits, which enables us to observe not only the king's celestial body (as did Ernst Kantorowicz in 1957)⁸ but also the “body” of the proletariat.

Getting back to the visual arts in Russian culture, it is important to emphasize that the tasks of the socialist realists and the Soviet media included the steady delivery to the public of iconic imagery with which the masses were encouraged to identify. Thanks to these efforts, people had nowhere to hide from images of fellow citizens whose conduct they were supposed to emulate and whose feelings they were supposed to reexperience. One must consider, too, that communal vision is equipped with a cathartic optic necessary to reduce the distance between viewer and character, as well as to overcome the alienation that arises from the impossibility of sharing in the hero's condition immediately, on the spot.⁹ This applies primarily to cases in which the hero is shown as having obtained his *objet petit a* (object of desire).¹⁰ Ideally, the cathartic optic is in essence the vision of St. Francis of Assisi, that is, a magical vision.

Here we must draw a line between Freud and Lacan—between identification with the father (the “phallic signifier”) and identification in the name of the father. Like “real” gods, Soviet leaders rarely encouraged people to look or behave like themselves. Instead, they sanctioned the identification of the communal subject with the appropriate experiences or characters depicted in film, photographs, sculptural compositions, posters, paintings, and periodicals. The portraits of leaders that filled the streets and the media functioned as mirrors (or antennae) that directed the waves of the identificatory efforts of *moi* so that they would bypass the Symbolic register and “return” to the Imaginary. As reflectors rather than targets of identification, the icons of leaders were “in charge” of redirecting these waves from some images to others; that is, they functioned *de facto* as instruments of synchronicity (the synchronic system of the signifier).

The structure of identification described in the preceding paragraph represents a three-pointed geometric figure. The first point is *moi*: from here, the stream of identification goes toward the authoritarian icon (the



4.2

Sergei Sen'kin, *Sixth Congress of Trade Unions*, page from the magazine *Herald of Labor*, no. 1, 1925.

second point), which sends it to the proper address—point number 3. The appropriation of the image is followed by the return to the mirror stage, or, more precisely, to one of its substages. Hence, there are two roads back, two prospects of repatriation, the first of which promises unpunished possession of the totality, while the second is darkened by alienation.¹¹ The former is associated with the cathartic paradigm of the Soviet model, characteristic of communal identification with visual images; the latter, with the bourgeois model of relationship to the image (the glorification of the signifier, commodity fetishism, etc.).

The other two dimensions of authoritarian imagery (the utopian and the transreferential) are related directly to the Symbolic order¹² and indirectly to the Imaginary order. The only connection to the mirror stage is the attempt to give authenticity to the myth of the completeness and wholeness of the images involved in identification. This is true primarily of the icon of the leader (the “dispatcher”) and the icon of the hero, which must possess, besides completeness and wholeness, capaciousness of meaning, extensity in time and space, and continuity. This lineup of properties refers not to the Imaginary order as such, but to the untranscended (residual) forms of its presence in the psyche of the individual who has long outgrown the mirror stage but returns to it in those instances when he is forced to behave like a communal subject. In general, the transreferential and utopian functions ensure the transfer of the image from one context to another, from one visual narrative to the next. They either narrow the boundaries of the narrative or expand them to infinity, in which case the iconic sign is viewed in relation to other signs, giving it a past, a future, a history, and a myth. The aforementioned functions also establish connections between these concepts in their interaction with unconscious representations, or *imagoes*.

The authoritarian portrait is the sphere in which the utopian dimension reveals itself in the most uncompromising (and at the same time the most infantile) manner. Those in power—and they were usually the ones whom artists painted—believed that having their portraits made could extend their life on earth and make them semi-immortal. The portrait is a zombie, a nightmare that pursues the children after the parent dies. In each portrait, the identificatory function is captured at the moment of mortal agony. This eternal agony is the imaginary immortality granted to the signifier on the basis of its resemblance to the referent—the future as a triumph of mimesis. Nothing else can explain the predilection for portraying the dead Father of the Country as a living man. In America, it is George Washington; in China, it is Mao Zedong; in Russia, it is Lenin, whose mummy can be seen as the place where the identificatory and

utopian dimensions meet. The context of this meeting—in its most basic form, reduced to the state of *eidos*—is the mausoleum (the transreferential dimension). Its construction, along with the act of mummification, “was intended to overcome the thought of death, to de-eschatologize the consciousness of Soviet people.”¹³

In the mausoleum, the second dimension is united with the third. However, it’s at the level of the interaction of different temporal and spatial contexts that the third (transreferential) function fully manifests itself. In socialist realist works created in Stalin’s lifetime, the transreferential dimension was required to accommodate the tyrant’s desire to project himself into a “historical” context and to correlate his life with the lives of his worshippers. In short, the transreferential function dominates where Lenin, Stalin, and Brezhnev (or lesser gods) are shown addressing ecstatic audiences, kissing children, inspecting construction sites, or directing military action.

The early seventeenth century in Russia was the era of the False Dimitrii (the Impostor). Sots art emerged 370 years later, in the early 1970s, as a bastard child of socialist realism, its self-styled heir or, in Adorno’s terminology, the “secret telos” of its visual identity. Sots art is a hole in this identity, a gap that makes possible contact with *le réel*—the third region (register) of psychic experience. Unlike the communal *moi*, whose perception of authoritarian imagery never goes beyond identification and cathartic bonding, sots art declares its right to separation. Sots artworks do not attract but repel the waves of the identificatory efforts of the *moi*. At the same time, sots art is not at all the Impostor of identification. It is only a “shifter”—a road sign of transition from one register to another, from the Imaginary to the Symbolic order, where figurative rather than specular identification dominates. To the question, “What is the relationship between sots art and socialist realism?” one may reply that they diverge as much as the optic of *je* differs from the optic of *moi*. Moreover, sots art is a way of reading a text addressed to *moi* through the eyes of *je*. If socialist realism appealed to the communal perception of images, sots art decommunalized perception (i.e., made it more individualized). The loss of cathartic vision, or “decatharsization,” characteristic of sots art is due to the fact that these artists thrive on alienation. And since overcoming alienation is one of the principal forms of socialist realism, we see that yet another insurmountable precipice divides it from sots art.

When foreign guests saw Leonid Brezhnev’s portrait, *Soviet Cosmos* (1977) (fig. 4.3), in Eric Bulatov’s Moscow studio, they could not understand why an unofficial artist would recreate in his own home a poster from a public place. But Bulatov displaced the work from the sphere of

4.3

Erik Bulatov, *Soviet Cosmos*,
1977.



affirmative perception to that of alienated optics: having wound up in the studio of an “alienated” artist, Brezhnev’s portrait became a work of alienated art; and, in a sense, Brezhnev was alienated from himself. As a result, a positively anxious image turned into a negatively anxious picture.¹⁴ In the end, anxiety—regardless of its role reversal—remained intact, as if reaffirming itself as an inalienable part of the Russian cultural tradition, visual or literary.

In official art, the identificatory dimension was, of course, dominant. The same is true of sots art, simultaneously despite and due to its rivalry with socialist realism. Socialist realism and sots art cannot be regarded as mutually exclusive concepts: their relationship is one of dialogue, not antagonism. That is why one can say that the mutual presence of the authoritarian icons and of their doubles, the icons of iconoclasm, in the works of sots art has a carnival motivation. In 1994, Komar and Melamid noted: “Sots art could never have been invented by one artist. Only two drinking buddies such as Komar and Melamid could, over many days of talking while decorating a Young Pioneer summer camp, have decided to paint their parents in the style of a poster, and themselves as Lenin and Stalin (fig. 4.4). Sots art emerged only because it was a communal kitchen, a conversation between two people.”¹⁵

The hunting instincts of Komar and Melamid are focused on the visual clichés of the socialist realist canon. Their “omnivorousness” spreads to all three functional dimensions of authoritarian iconography. When, for instance, they show Lenin cutting his nails or carrying a skeleton on his back, one can see an attempt to carnivalize the utopian dimension, a desire to shorten infinity. By “reconciling” the incorporeal icon of the leader with his corporeality, with his worldly cares, and therefore with the concepts of life and death, the artists expose the seamy side of utopian rhetoric. Also noticeable here is the influence of the transreferential function, thanks to which the godlike image is placed into an unbiased context. As a result of this debasement, the icon of the leader becomes an icon of iconoclasm. However, events can also develop in the opposite direction: there have been instances in which the debasement of the leader’s image has led to its elevation, immediate or delayed. As Claude Lefort has written, “it is the natural body [of the leader] which, because it is combined with the supernatural body, exercises the charm that delights the people.”¹⁶ This corporeal image of power can properly be called “the daemonic body,” in the sense that the daemonic—an intermediate stage between the human and the divine—turns out to be a means of unconscious mediation between the two.

Unlike socialist realism, sots art breaks the taboo against identification with the leaders. In sots art, leaders turned from gods into heroes, and



4.4
Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr
Melamid, *Double Self-Portrait*,
1973.



4.5

Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr
Melamid, *The Origin of Socialist
Realism*, 1982–1983.

4.6

Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, *Ancestral Portraits: Plateosaurus*, 1980. Photo eeva-inkeri.



therefore became accessible for direct identification. *Double Self-Portrait* (1973) (fig. 4.4) is one proof of the modification of the identificatory function. In this piece, Komar and Melamid depicted themselves in the manner of stereotyped mosaic representations of Lenin and Stalin. These authoritarian icons were essentially impersonal, vacant, “eidetic.” The most important thing about them was the exhortation to identify regardless of any specific identificatory project. The same is true of *The Origin of Socialist Realism* (1982–1983) (fig. 4.5). In this painting, Stalin is depicted alongside a Muse who is sketching his profile on the wall. The association with the tyrant turns the identificatory function into an imperative: the interest taken by immortals in the leader’s image obliges the mortals to imitate their heroes. On the other hand, Stalin’s transposition into the context of Greek mythology is an obvious travesty of the transreferential function.

In the fall of 1982, Komar and Melamid’s series of paintings done in a deliberately traditional, academic manner were exhibited at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York. The moniker “nostalgic socialist realism” fully reflects the artists’ state of mind at the time. The ways in which sots art has changed in emigration are most vividly illustrated by their painting *Thirty Years Ago 1953* (1982–1983). The painting captures a moment of intimate contact between two lovers, transposed—by means of the transreferential function—into a genre scene. All this unfolds against the background of a portrait of Stalin hanging on the wall and by its very presence, as it were, sanctioning the viewer’s identification with the event. This portrait on the wall can be regarded as a rudiment or remnant of the identificatory function.¹⁷ Thus, the identificatory icon undergoes a sort of retreat (a displacement to the background), becoming a painting within a painting.

Lacan’s notion that “the father [or the ancestor] is an embodiment of the function of symbolic identification”¹⁸ is visually paraphrased by Komar and Melamid in their series *Ancestral Portraits: Plateosaurus* (1980) (fig. 4.4), where dinosaurs are represented as ancestors. In these “portraits,” the transfer metaphor is reduced to the level of the absurd: the transreferential function plunges us into the deep recesses of the identificatory dimension. The phallic appearance of the ancestors (“I’m Adonis, here’s my penis,” wrote the poet Genrikh Sapgir)¹⁹ is in accord with the Lacanian definition of the phallus as the “repressed signifier,” which nonetheless “spurs on” all of our identificatory efforts.

As soon as the *moi* → *je* shifter works, the identificatory dimension turns into a palimpsest of identifications. Thus, in one of Eduard Gorokhovskii’s 1989 paintings, six images of Lenin can be discerned through the image of Stalin, as if surfacing from the “bottom” of repre-

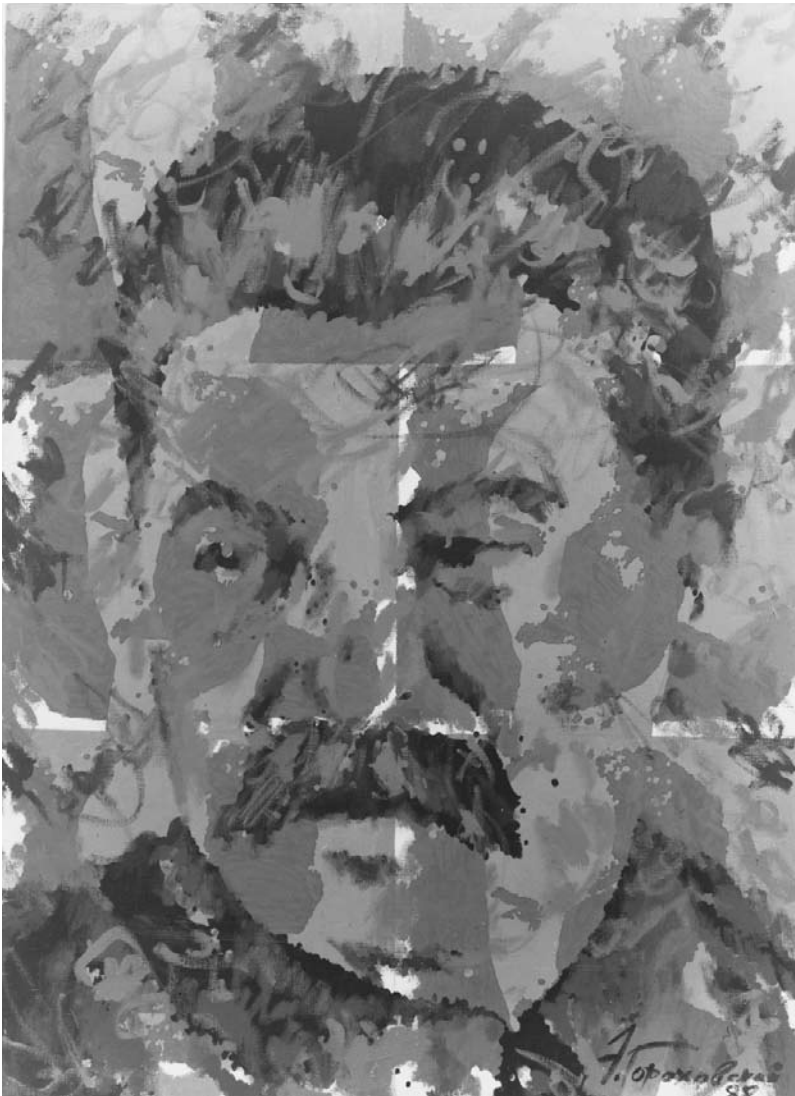
sensation (fig. 4.7). Thanks to this technique, the interworking of identificatory mechanisms becomes visible.

The painted sculptures of Leonid Sokov (fig. 4.8) and Boris Orlov can also be “read” in light of the issues discussed here. In a number of Orlov’s works, the narcissism of the identificatory function reaches supreme expressiveness. Everything about them, including the excessive decorations on the front of the sculpture, attests to self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency (fig. 4.9). For Lacan, it is *i(a)* or *moi idéal*, i.e., the result of the imaginary doubling of the ego in the mirror stage.²⁰ Other examples of the representation of the narcissistic *moi* are found in the staged photographs of Aleksander Kosolapov (*Untitled*, 1981) (fig. 4.10) and in Komar and Melamid’s *Double Self-Portrait*.

Bulatov’s *Brezhnev in Crimea* (1981–1985) is an uncompromising embodiment of the identificatory function. The same can be said of his painting *Krasikov Street* (1976), in which we see Muscovites walking toward a billboard that displays a figure of Lenin who seems to be walking toward them. In terms of the earlier discussion, the billboard is a giant reflector, a regulator of identificatory streams that are received and reflected in the direction of appropriate images, appropriate deeds, appropriate values.

If the iconoclastic explosion staged by Oleg Vasil’ev in the painting *Ogonek* (1980) (see fig. 2.8) is seen as a refusal to obey the imperative of identification, in his *Perspective* (1983) a similar effect is achieved without the interference of emotion. In this work, the portrait of the leader is partially hidden by a similar portrait of smaller size, in front of which is yet another smaller portrait, in front of which is an even smaller one—and so on, until the row of pictures is reduced to a dot. The search for resemblance to an actual person turns out to be fruitless. In part, the “recognition” doesn’t happen because what the painting depicts is not a specific person with whom the viewer is meant to identify multiple times, but the process of multiple identification itself.

Before concluding, I will point out that the contact between authoritarian portraiture and the communal subject is not limited to unconscious impulses only. This chapter focuses on such impulses, rather than on mechanisms of conscious identification, for two reasons. The first has to do with the fact that an adequate reaction to the authoritarian icon (Soviet-style) is possible only under the conditions of communal interaction with it. Therefore, to make a responsible theoretical diagnosis of the cultural legacy of socialist realism, it is necessary to reconstruct its perceptions. The second reason involves my reluctance to deal with iden-



4.7
Eduard Gorokhovskii, *Stalin with
Six Lenins*, 1988.

4.8

Leonid Sokov, *Twentieth-Century Leaders*, 1985.





4.9
Boris Orlov, *Bouquet in Triumphal
Style*, 1988.



4.10

Aleksandr Kosolapov, *Untitled*,
1981.

tity as a purely mental construct: this issue has already been sufficiently appreciated in the philosophical and sociological texts of many authors.

Most often, we are dealing either with the elemental yearning for identification (identification at any cost) or with the exploitation of this yearning by the “power structures,” by market forces, and by other mechanisms that give this unconscious process its conscious shape. The conscious shape, which appears before us fully armed with categories and definitions, internal and external characteristics, criteria and limitations, is what constitutes *identity* (as understood by Adorno and others of the Frankfurt School).²¹ Its objectification by those identitarian thinkers and power brokers who might be called the switchmen of identification is far from being the only source of evil.²² The will to identification that we all have plays a fairly significant part, and until that desire has run dry, identity will remain a “universal mechanism of coercion.”²³ This applies, above all, to visual images, which are vacant for identification and which, starting with the mirror stage, possess an unlimited power over our psyche. If an anachronism like visual art is to survive for long, it can do so thanks only to another anachronism: unconscious nostalgia for the mirror stage (fig. 4.11).

Icons of Iconoclasm

4.11

Kazimir Passion banner displayed outside The Kitchen during the performance of *The 28th Party Congress of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*, November 7, 1982.



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RAZING PASSION
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