INTRODUCTION: “SOCIALIST REALISM AS GENEALOGY OF AN ERA”

The subject of socialist realism has fascinated postmodern critics ever since the demise of Communism and even before, during perestroika of the 1980s, when it ceased to be the official “dominant method” in Soviet art and culture. The first aesthetic group to focus on socialist realism as an object of study were the Russian Conceptualist artists, from Ilya Kabakov to Khomar and Melamid. The Conceptualists ‘deconstructed’ socialist realism by re-cycling it in keeping with a postmodern poetics, in which the medium was the message and form and content formed a non-totalising totality. The socialist realist idiom was also used as material by Vladimir Sorokin and by the post-perestroika Russian cinema, where the citations of socialist realist mythemes overtly served parody in a displaced (new) context.

These post-perestroika and post-Communist revaluations of socialist realism receive a new – transcultural – dimension in the present Special Issue. The illumination of socialist realism through and in contiguity with the problem of nationalism, national identity – or subjectivity tout court - is a procedure which goes beyond the parodic mode, into the serious territory of political analysis, critique of nation building and identity construction in the contemporary post-communist global world. The hybridity of the uses of socialist realism directs the critical gaze at the most diverse cultural material, examined in this volume: musical, verbal and cinematic art, journalism, history, politics, and public discourse, especially with reference to the uses of language.

The contribution by Adrian Jones (History, Latrobe U), on “A Petrine Day of Display: 21 December1709” is an illustrated exposition and critical interpretation of the function of military processions in the reign of Peter Great of Russia. The symbolism of parading the defeated Swedish Army and Swedish generals before a cheering and adulating Russian crowd, with Peter I and his retinue also in attendance on horseback (Peter drunk and shouting) was the stuff of 18th century ‘nationalism’ and statesmanship. It is unsurpassable testimony to the craft of nation building in what is the beginning of Russia’s modernity. Closer to the present, Jan Pakulski’s article on “Putin’s Elite and the Legacies of Soviet Quasi-Modernisation in Contemporary Russia” inflects the issue of nationalism in the ideological register of contemporary post-Soviet capitalism. The paper by Anna Taitslin on “Russian ‘Liberal’ Opposition: the Divide between ‘Radicals’ and ‘Moderates’?” problematises what is the new post-Soviet monolith of capitalism and a new form of nationalist totalitarianism. Rene Provis’ paper on “Perceptions of Corruption in Post-
Soviet Kyrgyzstan: Neoliberalism and Contested Morality” attempts a critique of an imported ideology and the failure to construct a new morality that could be used as a tool in fighting corruption in public life. Still in the domain of public discourse, Ludmilla A’Beckett’s contribution on “The Joan of Arc Figures in Russian Discourse: Gender Prejudice against Women in Public Life” shows how the Russian nationalist (right-wing) press uses value-loaded language and historical stereotyping to thwart the emergence of women leaders in contemporary Russian and Ukrainian public life. Also concentrating on public discourse, Zhao Yonghua describes the positive role the media played in support of the “colour revolutions” in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzia (2005). While these revolutions represented a severe blow to the ideological system of Russia and the CIS countries, they also offer a valuable lesson to China about “soft power” which is grounded in the transformation of value and the evocation of the attractiveness Western political systems.

Identity problems in the context of socialist realism and nationalism are tackled in two opposite perspectives. One approach critiques the construction of socialist realist or nationalist identity in different artistic discourses; another validates the phenomenological subject as the guarantee of freedom of individuality, which goes beyond the national, the local and the fixed. Both approaches affirm the transcultural subject, directly or indirectly.

Focusing on the verbal and cinematic mediums, Vladiv-Glover offers a comparative analysis of Tarkovsky and Zamyatin as two approaches to utopia, with a paper entitled “Belief in Zamyatin’s We and Tarkovsky’s Stalker: Critique Versus Legitimation of Utopia through Art.” Vladiv-Glover finds that Zamyatin’s novel constructs a split subject who resists ideological indoctrination, while the subjectivity which emerges in Tarkovsky’s film is problematic and could be read as leaning towards a utopian transcendentalism.

The three contributions on socialist realism in music approach their subject in terms of the displacement of the “dominant method” from its historical context and the resulting construction of a new trans-national aesthetics. One looks at socialist realist music in Britain, where it is outside its (Soviet) social matrix; another looks at contemporary uses of socialist realist composers as an index of public opinion in post-Soviet Romania; and the third looks at how socialist realism becomes ‘oppositional’ in a postmodern context.

Julie Waters (Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music, Monash U) gives a critical exposition on the activities of the British self-declared Socialist Realist composer, Alan Bush and the impact of the 1948 Prague Composers’ Congress on the British Composers’ Guild, which was organised and facilitated by Bush. Waters makes the radical inference that Bush may have been on a quest for an authentic “folk aesthetics” or populism in music, without nationalist or middle class connotations. The paper by Joel Crotty (Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music, Monash U) addresses the contemporary paradox of historical Socialist Realism in Romanian music in the current European climate. It claims that Communist cultural artefacts are currently displayed in Romania for a variety of purposes, from the pedagogical to the kitsch but that there is a reluctance to treat Socialist Realist music seriously in the academic context, where it is relegated to a passing reference in the literature. Andrew Padgett’s paper on