Review: ARIAN LEKA, *REALIZËM SOCIALIST NË SHQIPËRI*

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Where did Socialist Realism come from, and what was it, really? Was it a style, a movement, or something else entirely—a "method", as its proponents so often characterized it? How did it relate to modernism, that similarly ambiguous phenomenon that dominated so much of cultural discourse—in the West, and beyond—during the 20th century? Arian Leka's book *Realizëm Socialist në Shqipëri* attempts to offer answers to these questions, focusing specifically on Socialist Realism in the Albanian context, and looking primarily at poetry and literary criticism (although the book does examine visual culture as well, in its concluding chapter). The book seems aimed primarily at students and researchers for whom the

cultural production of the socialist years has been obscured by efforts to dismiss—and to forget—the experience of state socialism and dictatorship. Leka aims to challenge the trend of literary studies in Albania (and beyond) that have—as he puts it—"given up" on a profound analysis of Socialist Realist cultural production (p. 182). His book thus stands as a critique of the attitude that regards Socialist Realism as a mere aberration because it was a failure, as a phenomenon that does not merit serious study for students of the history of arts and literature. On the contrary, Leka argues, Socialist Realism must be understood against the backdrop of "realism" as a broader cultural phenomenon, and this approach allows the book to tell an expansive intellectual history of both artistic and philosophical engagements with the question of reality, and its perception and reflection.

This contextualization also helps the reader understand that Socialist Realism in Albania was not imposed *ex nihilo* in the period of socialist dictatorship, but rather emerged in part from debates surrounding various forms of realism and modernism. Leka's attention to these debates, which he extrapolates largely from cultural criticism published in periodicals (by authors writing under their own names, as well as under pseudonyms), helps debunk the notion that Socialist Realism took over in Albania because the country was somehow 'backward' in its development, lacking a forward-thinking avant-garde to guide the country towards modernism. Leka instead shows that debates on the values and definitions of realism, Romanticism, and modernism (with modernist tendencies often represented by engagements with Futurism)

were very much part of the critical discourse amongst Albanian artists in the 30s and 40s (pp. 38-53, 92-100). He looks at how different authors and critics navigated efforts to truthfully represent reality, various modernist styles, folkloric content, and nationalist ideologies in their search for a literary method that would match the demands of the times. Surveying these debates, Leka concludes that—based on their complexity—it is perfectly plausible that Albanian literary culture might have continued along a more modernist track that would have paralleled the situation elsewhere in Europe, but that the demands for realism helped lay the groundwork for Albania's subsequent embrace of Socialist Realism as the sanctioned mode of cultural production (p. 53). This genealogy is important because although Socialist Realism was a tool used by state socialist governments to enforce a particular ideological viewpoint, it also had a rich critical and artistic genesis, and that genesis was full of schisms, disagreements, and debates; in short, Socialist Realism was never simply a readymade tool that perfectly fit the uses of authoritarian governments.

Leka also points out some of the ways in which the situation in Albania was different from developments elsewhere: he notes that what is interesting in the case of Albanian culture is the speed through which Albanian art passed through several different 'stages' in the development of realism (including the emergence of naturalism, social realism, etc.): what elsewhere in Europe sometimes occurred over the course of 100 years, took place in Albania in the course of mere decades (p. 36). One wonders, of course, if the development of realism that Leka poses as characteristic of Western European

culture was really as linear as Leka's chronological exposition suggests, but the analysis he offers has the advantage of showing the plethora of subcategories and offshoots of realism (as both a philosophy and a stylistic category or genre), and in this sense *Realizëm Socialist në Shqipëri* approaches the questions raised by realism (mostly, literary realism) without shying away from the historical complexity of the phenomenon. Leka's survey of critical writings on realism, modernism, and Socialist Realism in periodicals from the 30s on through the 50s, and beyond, is illuminating not only for researchers studying the history of Albanian literature, but also because it points out the crucial distinction that Socialist Realism was primarily referred to as a "method" (as opposed to a "movement," "style," or "school") of artistic creation (pp. 80-81, 87). The emphasis on method meant that critical writings (as well as missives from Enver Hoxha) were able to seamlessly transition from the realm of aesthetic suggestions to the realm of orders: Socialist Realism was not one 'choice' among many styles—it was a way of producing art that was appropriate to the times and the society in which it was mandated, and there was no need for debate about aesthetic style (unless an artist's style appeared to embrace the decadent forms associated with modernism in some way).

Unfortunately, Leka rarely lingers on the content or style of the works of literature and art that are supposedly emblematic of specific movements, styles, or methods. This is particularly true as he begins to discuss Socialist Realism itself, which he ultimately characterizes as a "deformation of realism" that eventually became an "irrealism" that served to transform

the reality of socialist life into an "un-reality" (p. 100). This avoidance of directly addressing works of art is one of the book's key weaknesses. We may certainly agree that these works of art, or of literary propaganda, conform to certain recognizable paradigms. What does it mean, artistically, for these works to be "infected" by socialist ideology, as Leka puts it (p. 37)? Is any explicit intrusion of ideology into works of art enough to 'infect' realism? Were these works free of ideology before the socialist period (a dubious notion), or were they simply free of a certain set of references and themes? Is it the fact that the ideology corresponds to the demands of the state that makes this process corruptive? Does the 'infective' influence of ideology have any formal aspects? All of these are questions that Leka does not address, although in some ways these omissions become understandable in light of one of the book's other, undeniably positive methodological aspects: its effort to understand Socialist Realism in Albania largely through the voices of critics and political figures (chiefly Enver Hoxha) who expounded it, with an admirable wealth of examples from the Albanian context.

Leka's attention to written criticism in socialist culture is important, and welcome. I have argued elsewhere for the importance of looking at art criticism as a key aspect in the development of Socialist Realism in Albania,[1] and I applaud

[1] Raino Isto, "'Criticism Should Open Up Horizons for the Future': The Albanian Union of Writers and Artists and the Status of Art Criticism in the People's Republic of Albania", *ARTMargins Online*, October 2020: https://artmargins.com/criticism-should-open-up-horizons-for-the-future-the-albanian-union-of-writers-and-artists-and-the-status-of-art-criticism-in-the-peoples-republic-of-albania/.

that Leka takes seriously these writings (as opposed to simply dismissing them as efforts to jockey for power in the Union of Writers and Artists, as empty propagandistic texts written in bad faith). However, this approach has the disadvantage of reproducing, to a certain degree, the shortcomings of that same body of critical writing. Leka himself notes that writers within Socialist Realism raised precisely this issue: that their colleagues failed to look closely at works themselves when producing criticism. He cites Dhimitër Shuteriqi, for example, arguing that in a drafted history of Albanian Socialist Realist literature (compiled in 1956) "nothing is said about the work[s] as art. And not a single word is said about the language the authors use" (Shuteriqi, qtd. by Leka, p. 155). We can read, in Shuteriqi's protest, a frustration with the vagueness (and thus also capriciousness) of Socialist Realist criticism, a vagueness that could allow authors to be criticized for reactionary, decadent, or fascist elements without ever being specific about what in their writing supported or advanced those ideologies (p. 154). And yet a similar approach also characterizes Leka's book: it favors typologies over concrete engagement with specific aesthetic phenomena, only rarely delving into particular passages from poems or images. The book emphasizes theoretical discourses and the formal logics of different philosophical definitions of realism, while also giving less attention to the historical contingencies that shaped cultural policy in Albania (although this is not to say that historical events are completely ignored).

If individual analyses of particular emblematic works of Socialist Realism are not the aim of Leka's book, one might

imagine that he instead emphasizes certain artists, looking at their careers or backgrounds. However, the book also here follows, in a way, the very movement it analyzes. Leka interprets realism as a genre that "attempted not only to reduce the role of the 'creative subject', of the 'mind' or of 'creative consciousness', but also to 'eliminate' it" (p. 56). Socialist Realism took this a step further, treating "the masses" as the author. But, I would argue that this is not really a continuation of an effort to *eliminate* the creative subject as much as it is an effort to radically *transform* the creative subject into a collective that would eventually (in a utopian sense) include all of communist society. Certainly, as Leka describes, it was an effort to reject and dismantle the Romanticist focus on the individual creator, but Leka's reading of both realism and Socialist Realism as trying to remove the entire idea of the creative subject—as opposed to trying to create a *complexly communal* creative subject, in keeping with the transformation of socialist society—feels reductive.

Leka also rightly notes the intercession of the state as the new consumer for all forms of art under Socialist Realism: the state replaces the individual consumer, and creates a demand that it then satisfies by commissioning artists. But these created works cannot simply be photographic documentations of socialist life (here, the difficulty of writing a book on representation in Socialist Realism without considering the visual arts, and especially photography, becomes apparent). They must result from prolonged synthesis of experience: the artist, as Enver Hoxha asserted, "must do as 'the engineers of dams'" do, "must 'work with the people, study the location and

the environment, make preliminary plans, check them with the people there,'" and so forth (Enver Hoxha, qtd. by Leka, p. 59). In this sense, Socialist Realism still needed the author to interpret socialist life, to bring its disparate parts together in unified works of expression. Yes, these works needed to correspond to official propagandistic goals—but is that truly all that artists saw them doing? Is this really all that readers and viewers saw in them? These are more questions that Leka's survey of the trajectory of literary styles—arriving at Socialist Realism—does not really raise. Although admirable in its efforts to show the complexity of the style in relation to other literary movements, Leka's analysis still seems to land on a fairly traditional division between art and propaganda, and places Socialist Realism in the latter category. For some readers, this will be perfectly logical; for others, it will seem old-fashioned.

Leka is more interested in the philosophical ideas about realism and reality that Socialist Realism (as a historical event and a method of production) prompts, and his analysis of these phenomena is quite close to that offered by Evgeny Dobrenko (an author Leka cites several times, alongside Boris Groys and Katerina Clark) in his book *Political Economy of Socialist Realism.*[2] Following Dobrenko (who in turn followed Derrida and especially Baudrillard), Leka characterizes Socialist Realism as a system that is so deeply aestheticized that reality as we might typically construe it simply disappears, replaced by a simulacrum that perpetuates itself as a form of hyper (ir-

[2] Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007.

)reality (p. 139). In this new, aestheticized condition, works of Socialist Realism "have no more need of the original, just as they no longer have need of reality", as Leka puts it (p. 139). This effectively eliminates the need for Socialist Realism to reference anything like empirical reality—they become self-referential, and self-justifying. This is a compelling narrative, but one might present much the same critique of Leka that Petre Petrov has (convincingly, I believe) offered of Dobrenko's Baudrillardian reading of Stalinism[3]: namely, that despite arguing that Socialist Realism became its own, self-sustaining reality, these analyses (Leka's and Dobrenko's) nonetheless *do* clearly continue to posit that there was 'another', more primal reality, against which works of Socialist Realism can be juxtaposed as 'ideology', as 'propaganda', as mere fabrications. For Leka, it is still possible to refer to Socialist Realism as an "irrealism", that produced an "un-reality", despite having argued that it had also in fact displaced the need for reality (p. 100). If the 'unreality' of Socialist Realism is only something we see in hindsight, then how did it ever come to fail? If it clashed with some deeper, more immediately experienced 'original' reality (let us imagine, the reality of gulags, bread lines, isolation, political oppression, and so forth), then had it really eliminated the need for all reference to that original reality?

These are difficult quandaries to answer, and it is certainly not the role of Leka's book to solve them, although it could do a good deal more to make them explicit as quandaries

[3] Petre Petrov, "The Industry of Truing: Socialist Realism, Reality, Realization, *Slavic Review* vol. 70, no. 4, Winter 2011, pp. 875-879.

facing our interpretations of Socialist Realism (in Albania and elsewhere). Posing these questions as unfinished would precisely justify the *need* (that Leka clearly feels and wishes to put forward) for Albanian literary studies and art history to more deeply address Socialist Realist culture. One way of getting at these complexities, and the need to understand the sometimes conflicting modalities of Socialist Realist representation, would be to examine how the method differed across various genres and media, to compare the written word (in poetry, in novels, in journalism), to the visual image (in painting, sculpture, and photography), to the performative (in dance, theater, and music, for example). This too is a tall order, but in a book that purports to be a general study of the phenomenon, some degree of such comparison and attention to differences is necessary.

In the final chapter of the book, "Socialist Realism in Secular Icons", Leka finally turns his attention to visual culture, focusing on postage stamps created during Albania's socialist period. The topic is a fascinating one, promising to finally unite Leka's analysis of Socialist Realism with a close socioeconomic consideration of the artistic method and, at least potentially, some discussion of its everyday reception and use, all while examining a phenomenon (stamps) that remains relatively marginal in histories of visual culture. However, this final section of Leka's book ultimately proves the most frustrating: the sudden shift to dealing directly with visual material is still not accompanied by any illustrations, nor does Leka try to account for the methodological shift that has taken place—from reading words to reading images together with words. Also

unfortunately, engagements with the work of other scholars on postage stamps play only a minor role in Leka's analysis—the work of Stanley D. Brunn, who has written several studies of stamp imagery, is not even mentioned. This omission is particularly problematic, since one particular article by Pauliina Raento and Brunn looks at postage stamps precisely as "messengers that implement the state's official outlook in the everyday life of ordinary citizens", serving as efficient "state-building" tools.[4] A comparison with this case study (or other studies by Brunn) might have alleviated a central concern about Leka's approach, which treats postage stamps in socialist Albania as if they represented a concentrated expression of state ideology *because* they were produced as part of Socialist Realist culture. It is much more likely that postage stamps serve as tools of state propaganda—as Raento and Brunn suggest, though they do not label it propaganda—in most nation-states, regardless of whether they are socialist or democratic; the stamp is precisely a form of messaging that corresponds to the communicative needs of the *state* to propagate a constantly circulating image of itself among citizens, not necessarily the *socialist* state. Leka's approach risks treating stamps in Albania as if they were inherently 'more' propagandistic than state-produced stamps elsewhere, an argument that assumes a narrow and unhelpful definition of what kinds of images state apparatuses produce as propaganda for their aims and ideologies.

[4] Pauliina Raento and Stanley D. Brunn, "Visualizing Finland: Postage Stamps as Political Messengers", *Geografiska Annaler*, Series B, vol. 87, no. 2, 2005, p. 145.

The chapter advances the argument that postage stamps served as the central visual element of a secular religious cult, representing a highly circulatable form of state-controlled propaganda wherein all that appeared within the world of the stamp was presented as sacred. The postage stamp as a 'secular icon' is certainly an interesting concept, although it immediately raises questions about what practices and social rituals were demanded by these images (since to complete the metaphor with religious icon paintings, the stamps would presumably engender certain practices and responses that would in turn solidify the relationship between the divine sphere and the material world). Leka does explore this aspect, discussing the emotions and infrastructure activated by the movement of postcards within and across borders and geographies (also mentioning their depictions of tourism, a topic that certainly deserves further exploration) (p. 240). However, it is strange that Leka does not link this discussion to the writings of other Albanian scholars on the religious aspects of socialist cultural practice (Egin Ceka's analysis of the Skanderbeg Museum as an element of civil religion during socialism and Gëzim Qëndro's book on the Kinostudio building come immediately to mind[5]).

Numerous specific examples of postage stamps appear in the discussions in this chapter, but without illustrations, it becomes rather dry to follow the text; if nothing else, this section illustrates the necessity of publishing images in

[5] Egin Ceka, "Muzeu Kombëtar dhe Muzeu i Skënderbeut si institucione të religjionit civil shqiptar të komunizmit", *Përpjekja* no. 21, 2005, pp. 121–147; Gëzim Qëndro, *Kinostudioja "Shqipëria e vjetër" (ose aventura seminale e gjurmës)*, Tirana: Onufri, 2016.

academic texts that purport to analyze art and visual culture. Just as disappointing, however, is the fact that Leka does not delve into the possibility of analyzing the function and reception of postage stamps during the regime by actually *looking at the kinds of letters and documents they were put on*. Of course, this kind of close reading could quickly become truistic: since any letter requires a stamp, and only certain stamps were being printed at a particular time, there presumably was not much intentional creative freedom exercised in deciding what stamps to use to send which materials. But nonetheless it would be interesting to know what stamps were placed on a letter home from a teacher placed in a remote village school, from a youth at university to their parents, from one colleague to another, used to send official Party documents to the various local headquarters, and so forth.

Readers looking for this kind of close consideration of specific objects from everyday socialist life (and bureaucracy) will be disappointed, as what Leka offers instead is a typology of the kinds of images (and texts, including an interesting though inconclusive analysis of grammatical variation) that appeared in socialist-era stamp design. This approach helps flesh out a secondary and more implicit argument that Leka offers in the chapter (and indeed this one is more compelling than his effort to characterize stamps as secular icons): that Albanian Studies as a discipline has much to gain from the study of postage stamps, despite their apparently minor character as cultural artifacts. Leka makes this explicit when he insists that Albanology could learn a great deal about language forms from examining stamp slogans as evidence (pp. 234–

238), but the final chapter of the book suggests a much broader point: that researchers might extrapolate a good deal about socialist culture in general from examining what might first appear to be marginal artifacts with little importance or impact. This is a welcome observation, although the reader wishes it had been paired with a more nuanced examination of how images on stamps were different from other kinds of images (and texts), and how those differences might reflect the differing modalities of the various cultural media that the Albanian state attempted to corral under the umbrella of "Socialist Realism".

This is perhaps the most interesting challenge to the future study of Albanian Socialist Realism that Leka's book raises (though it does so implicitly, often through its own failure to grapple with precisely this issue): what did it mean for the "method" of Socialist Realism to be applied in so many different forms of cultural production, especially when the inherited intellectual tradition (so closely tied to the trajectory of both "realism" and "modernism" in literature, and—in sometimes different ways—the visual arts) did not provide a clear model for this broad application? This question is even more important when we recognize that the once-broadly-accepted narratives about the linear cultural movement towards aesthetic modernism in Western Europe and America are not generalizable, and indeed are not even necessarily accurate or helpful in characterizing the history of culture in those geographies. What did it mean, in a country like Albania, for the Socialist Realist method to be applied to literature, to poetry, to painting, to monumental sculpture, to illustration, to

journalism, to photography, to architecture, to theater, to music, and so forth? Such an effort at totalization could not fail to produce schisms, ambiguities, diversity, and multiplicity, even with all the state's efforts to continuously monitor and control it. These divergences help us understand what some art (and artists) can do in some mediums that they cannot do in others, what the institutionalization of some cultural practices can accomplish, and what that institutionalization cannot accomplish when applied to other fields of cultural production. In these divergences we will find some definition of all the things that Socialist Realism could have been and was.

We will also find the ways that Socialist Realism can still speak to us now, today, as capitalist consumer culture in the era of global neoliberalism seems to be producing a similarly totalized form of culture that nonetheless evidences significant diversity in its concrete products. Socialist Realism is assuredly a cautionary tale, but it is also the expression of an alternative model of cultural production, one that seems, three decades after the symbolic 'end' of the project to construct global communism, to still offer a profound critique of capitalist society—and culture.

Leka's *Realizëm Socialist në Shqipëri* is a powerful effort to understand an artistic phenomenon that still baffles as much as its Cold War other—modernism—does. The book is detailed, and attempts to build a broad intellectual foundation for its findings, drawing on disciplines from philosophy to history to literary studies and art history. There are some minor stylistic and editorial flaws that must be mentioned, simply because they mar what would otherwise feel a much more

finalized and profound book. Citations are sometimes scattershot: in some cases, Leka's citing of sources in meticulous; in other cases, he quotes and makes general references to authors and ideas without footnoting them, leaving the reader to assume that they come from works included in the expansive bibliography. The book is badly in need of an index (which would help readers find some of the references to both specific artists and secondary sources that are sometimes hard to pull out of the text). In several cases there are inconsistent spellings of the names of authors (sometimes on the same page, between text and footnote). These might be minor issues, but they also affect the book's readability, and would have been easily corrected.

Ultimately, however, *Realizëm Socialist në Shqipëri* is a necessary book, one that the reader hopes will engender not only further sustained, book-length engagements with Socialist Realism in the Albanian context, but also articles and studies focused on particular artists, specific mediums, and particularly consequential historic shifts in the culture of Albania's socialist years. *Realizëm Socialist në Shqipëri* is far from the first step in that literature, but it is a welcome addition to a growing body of research on what remains an understudied historical element of 20th-century art history.