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European Construction between Desideratum and Realities

Freeing Socialist Literature from Ideological Narrowness

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Abstract: The fact that we have written literature today is not self-evident. It is the materialization of an oral tradition and thus a process of production. A Soviet quest straight after the Bolsheviki seized power was the revolution of art and the deconstruction of bourgeois art, leading to Socialist Realism becoming the only acceptable literary paradigm under Stalin, eventually being imported to the DPRK. However, taking away the metaphysical from the physical cannot depict reality in its totality, and thus, Socialist Realist literature is way too often mechanic, even boring. The author of this paper argues that Socialist literature has to free itself by going back to its root, the connection of orality with the written word as only in a liberal society in which everyone can discuss freely, meaningful literature is able to evolve. **Objectives** The paper shows why downgrading literature on a materialist basis is too narrow, showing the need for metaphysical openness. In particular, it shows why literature in the Soviet Union and the DPRK failed/ fails through materialist narrowness. **Prior Work** The paper recounts a small history of the “written word” embedded in a Marxist context and then shows how this Marxist context was narrowed in practice, taking two regimes (USSR/ DPRK) as example. **Approach** This research is based on qualitative characteristics going from general theory to a specific case study, showing the difficulties which arise out of the particular case to reframe theory. The question is how to free Socialist Literature from Ideological narrowness. **Results:** The Marxist theory is able to criticize the problems of a bourgeois society of the study of its historical development. Marx could not study the phenomenon of exploitation without studying history. How could the proletariat have a class consciousness, if it is not embedded in cultural life? Human beings in a Socialist understanding have to reconnect with their nature, not focusing only on the material. **Implications** The author of this paper argues that Socialist literature has to free itself by going back to its root, the connection of orality with the written word as

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only in a liberal society in which everyone can discuss freely, meaningful literature is able to evolve.

Value So far, there is no study yet which integrates the Soviet Union and the DPRK in connection to the problem of the written word, especially with the aim, not to dismiss any Socialist discourses but to widen them and embed them in a democratic framework. It bridges anthropology, philosophy and political sciences and is cross-culturally embedded in a Europe-Asia framework.

Keywords: Socialist Realism; literature; Soviet Union; DPRK; art

1. Introduction

Marxism and Materialism are strongly intertwined due to the fact that Marx proposed a Historical Materialism within his philosophy, becoming a key element of Orthodox Marxism. Therefore, traditional art in Marxist circles became the target of criticism, and eventually got under attack. To understand the main quest, we have to know what art actually is. As Raymond Williams explained: “[...] art can be said to 'reflect the real world', holding 'the mirror up to nature', but every term of such a definition has been in protracted and necessary dispute. Art can be seen as reflecting not 'mere appearances' but the 'reality' behind these: the 'inner nature' of the world, or its 'constitutive forms'. Or art is seen as reflecting not the 'lifeless world', but the world as seen in the mind of the artist” (Williams, 1977, p. 95). This cannot be satisfactory for a materialist, however, because “If the real world is material, it can indeed be seen in its constitutive forms, but these will not be metaphysical, and reflection will be necessarily of a material reality” (ibid.), which would mean that every reflection which includes metaphysical components has to be seen as a distortion preventing true reflection (ibid.). In the same way, “the 'mind of the artist' can be seen as itself materially conditioned; its reflection is then not independent but itself a material function” (ibid.). This means that art under materialist conditions does not only have to see the work but also the artist from a material perspective. This is of course important because the way, the artist perceives the world is the epitome of his crafting, both cannot be seen independently.

In Marxist literature theory, we can find an emphasis on realism, which for Western Marxists, such as (the early) Lukács is a description of the reality of society and how man is torn apart in capitalism (cp. Eagleton, 2003), while for Russian Marxists, realism was understood more and more as a writing free from metaphysics which focusses on sharpening class awareness. The latter shall be the focus of this paper. I want to demonstrate that a Soviet-style Socialist Realism ignores an important part of reality, i.e. metaphysics. As such, a materialist stance fails to fully grasp what is

behind reality, and thus the constitutive forms, while at the same time an ideological restriction of the mind of the artist cannot but lead to restricted literature.

To do so, I will first differentiate between orality and alphabetic literature to show how oral tradition became written literature in the past, and in which way vision played a crucial role. After that, I will show the initial struggle of Russian literary theory, as can be seen in the demand of Soviet Constructivism and the victory of Socialist Realism under Stalin. The most extremist form of Socialist Realism can be seen in the literary theory of the DPRK though this very theory has a metaphysical level which energizes the writer to write his materialist works.¹ In a last step, through going back to Hegel, I will show why such a Socialist Realism necessarily had and has to fail in a materialist environment. Methodologically, it is not important for me to point out particular historical events and its rivalries, but I carefully want to deduce the historical development itself as a common framework.

2. The Contrast of Orality and Alphabetic Literature

An important event in human history was the beginning of writing. We could call it “the beginning of a written history”, but in such a case, “history” does not denote the term it has today, since the understanding of the term was quite different for Ancient people then for people today. One does not need any further proof of this than to look into the work of Herodotus, whose history is not to be understood an accurate historiography, but a mythical history. Such historical writing goes back much further, as even Homer deals with history, but in a mythical context. Yet, there has also been an understanding of history in the modern way, i.e. the collection of facts and their presentation, such as through Thucydides or Sima Qian. So, the view of history as history has to be seen in a broader sense, and here especially, in understanding what it means that the oral connects with the written word, since orality predates writing. In other words: There is no writing without thought and thought requires a system in which the thought is expressed, such as language. Language and thus, communication comes first.

Thus, it is no surprise to me that Nayar puts orality in contrast to alphabetic literacy. She states: “Oral individuals may understandably be—indeed, may *by necessity* be—

¹ The fact that the DPRK’s literature theory was obviously inspired by Socialist Realism of the Stalinist era does not make the state system or the state in general Socialist or Stalinist, but just one singular aspect, i.e. that of literature. And even here, we can ask whether Socialist Realism must not necessarily be distorted if the DPRK is not a Socialist country at all, despite calling itself Socialist in its constitution.

functioning outside the epistemic arena of a decidedly literacy *produced* cohort of selves. Let us not forget that reading and writing is a *labor*, a process whereby—as Marx articulates in *Capital* (1867) — ‘man mediates, regulates and controls his material interchange with nature by means of his own activity ...’” (Nayar, 2024, p. 28). Though I shortened the Marx’ quote which Nayar gives us, this distinction is a crucial essentiality of human history. For centuries, most of human being’s history was a purely oral history. One gave one’s knowledge to the next generation to preserve the past in the present. Oral history was not an academic essay as we know it today, even being able to formally write down our thoughts is a luxury; in the past, everything had to be handed down out of the mind. The whole knowledge of the ancestors, thus, went on, which led to the effect that the further time progressed, the more obscure our ancestors became. Nietzsche observed very well that the deification of the ancestors was the result of a gratitude towards them for bringing them into the possession in which the ruling elite is now (Nietzsche, 2017, pp. 81-83). One had to be thankful to their merits, so that one now could enjoy the bright side of being above others. When writing began, indeed, it was a luxury not only to be able to read and write, but also to have the resources to create literature. Beyond time, this was of course paper, and paper was so expensive that whatever was written down, it had to be meaningful. The oral history now became written history. Thus, the glorious stories as we know through Homer were actually older than Homer himself. We know this through the Homeric formulas, i.e. a given set of key words, which appear to have occurred as orientation for passing down the stories orally, which is why these set formulas were in another dialect than the rest of the Homeric text. In the same way, what we find in the pharaonic pyramids is the glorious history of a pharao, not of its people. The common people obviously hardly played a meritous role, whose singular names it would be worth to remember; instead, only the names of a few heroes and rulers were passed down. Needless to say, there was a clear asymmetry in the number of male and female heroes, though a few female heroes existed as well. The important question is now, how to react from a Marxist perspective?

Marx himself treasured the old literature and read works in Ancient Greek as well as Shakespeare, the latter he obviously treasured the most, as we learn in Nayar’s 2024 paper. And she even goes a step further and demonstrates that Shakespeare is also a clear inspiration in Marx’s rhetorical writing: “Indeed, were I bold enough to speculate where Marx learned his skill as a dialectical rhetorician—e.g., ‘It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness’—I would say it was not from Hegel, but

from *Shakespeare*, whose plays bristle with such cunning, poetic transpositions—e.g., “What an exchange had this been without boot (money)! What a boot (profit/footwear) is here with this exchange!” (*The Winter’s Tale*, IV.iv.798-799)” (Nayar, 2024, p. 26). Now there are two ways to deal with it: First, if one tries to erase the past, then the bourgeois legacy is lost, or second, one critically analyzes the past to learn for the future. While the Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong tried to go the first way by destroying precious old relics to replace the old with new Socialist values, I rather prefer the second option. I want to go so far to state that the ancient literature is not necessarily anti-progressive, basically mathematics would be nothing today without Euclid’s *Elements*.

Thus, I believe that the old literature is an important treasure: It is the collected knowledge of our ancestors. The way they perceived the world, their visions and dreams, inherit deep wisdom, which is obvious since it was only written down as it was considered important (due to the lack of resources). So every word which we have today from the earliest times, must have a deeper meaning. Indeed, Frankfort & Frankfort showed that the mythical sphere was in no way fiction to the ancient people, the myth “is to be taken seriously, because it reveals a significant, if unverifiable, truth – we might say a metaphysical truth” (Frankfort & Frankfort, 1954, p. 15 f.). Nonetheless, the myth itself ought not to be taken literally, it already contains an artificial irrationality: “The irrational aspect of myth becomes especially clear when we remember that the ancients were not content merely to recount their myths as stories conveying information. They dramatized them, acknowledging in them a special virtue which could be activated by recital” (Frankfort & Frankfort 1954, p. 16). Another important fact is that ancient people did not see the world the way we do today. In an industrialized world, the planet is an object of exploitation, there is nothing ‘sacred’ in nature for an enlightened human being, but exactly this is the very problem why human beings treat nature so horrible today. For the ancient people, there was a clear concept of sanctity, because they did not have an It-relationship with their environment: “Any phenomenon may at any time face him, not as ‘It’, but as ‘Thou’. In this confrontation, ‘Thou’ reveals its individuality, its qualities, its will. ‘Thou’ is not contemplated with intellectual detachment; it is experienced as life confronting life, involving every faculty of man in a reciprocal relationship” (Frankfort & Frankfort, 1954, p. 14). The same goes to literature. Weinreb makes clear that literature in no way was simply a means of consumption and entertainment for the ancient people. And also Weinreb acknowledges that the mythical sphere does not need to give a truthful, historical account, and as such, he makes clear that it does not really matter whether Moses really stood at Mount Sinai,

164

one could clearly imagine that he *could* have stood at Mount Sinai to receive the commandments. As such, I argue that any materialist reading of the Pentateuch necessarily must fail because the actual epistemic message behind the text is on a visionary level, and not necessarily at a historical.

Furthermore, myths do not exist in a vacuum. And thus, the myths of different civilizations inspired the myths of other civilizations. We can find it immediately in the Creation Story of Genesis which parallels with the *Enuma Elish*, which was the creation myth of the Babylonians. Cornfeld observed: “Note the striking correspondence in details and, more significantly, the similar order of events [...]. Babylonian cosmogony and its theory of the origin of man, central Sumero-Akkadian ‘science’ or ‘wisdom’, were basic to their religion. Such traditions found their way to Israelite scribal schools – either in a direct line from Mesopotamia or indirectly through Canaanite sources” (Cornfeld, 1982, p. 6 f.). And also the name of the Garden of Eden might be borrowed from Akkadian, as *edenu* means ‘paradise’ or ‘garden’ (Cornfeld, 1982, p. 7). Even more intriguing, both the Jewish and Christian interpretation of the events in the Garden of Eden differ, though both religions take the same textual basis as ground. While Christianity interpreted it as fall of man and original sin; the idea of an original sin is completely absent in Judaism. In fact, it causes no problem that both religions have a different reading, because the text wants to be read as $\mu\tilde{\theta}\omicron\varsigma$ – as a metaphysical reality. Neither the Creation Myth nor the account of the Garden of Eden ought to be read literally. Instead, there is a deeper wisdom underneath the surface which wants to be discovered. So we can see that Nayar’s differentiation of orality and alphabetic literacy is essential, but alphabetic literacy opened a door for orality: the oral transmissions of the past could now be preserved for the future, the dreams and visions of the Ancient now were no more acting in the people’s mind alone, but they became manifest and shaped the identity and self-understanding of whole civilizations.

3. Socialist Realism in the USSR and DPRK

The October Revolution in Russia had a tremendous impact on the understanding of art as well. There were strong voices in Socialist Russia which called for a deconstruction of bourgeois art, proposing a new form of art known as constructivist art, such as was for instance proposed by anarchist Alexey Gan in his work *Konstruktivizm*, which was printed in 1922. Though this Constructivist movement in

Russia (which came up as early as 1915) inspired Dadaism – an artistic school which formed after WW I to deconstruct the formalism in art to create spontaneous art beyond laws of aesthetic and well-established artistic forms – Soviet Constructivism was placed in the service of the new society created by the Bolsheviks and left no room for spontaneity at all. Gan starts with the quote: Мы объявляем непримиримую войну искусству!” (Gan, 1922, 3) which he attributes to the First Constructivist Working Group 1920 and on the next page “Да здравствует коммунистическое выражение материальных сооружений!” (Gan, 1922, 5) which he attributes to the same group but to the year 1921. Taken both quotes together it means: “We declare an unforgiving war on art! Long live the communist expression of material structures!”. These quotes already show the radicalism which rather wishes to go the first way, the smashing of the old, instead of a critical discourse between old and new, which can also be seen in Gan’s complaint:

Ежегодно, словно мыльный пузырь, надувается Наркомпрос и лопается от чрезмерного уплотнения его сердцевины духами всех времен и народов, всеми системами, всеми „грешными“ и „безгрешными“ ценностями (!) живого и неживого. И под покровительством квази-марксистов работают черные тысячи искусствовладельцев и в наши революционные дни „духовная“ культура прошлого еще прочно стоит на ходулях реакционного идеализма. (Gan, 1922, p. 14)

Translation: Every year, like a soap bubble, the People's Commissariat of Education inflates and bursts from the excessive compaction of its core by the spirits of all times and peoples, by all "sinful" and "sinless" values (!) of the living and the inanimate. And under the patronage of quasi-Marxists, black thousands of art ministers work, and in our revolutionary days the "spiritual" culture of the past still stands firmly on the stilts of reactionary idealism.

Other artistic forms were Suprematism and Socialist Realism. Socialist Realism goes back to Nikolay Chernyshevsky who “was defending the view that life and nature itself are beautiful and the understanding of fine sense of the Marxist ideology” (Onen, 2021). The latter one became the only legitimate style in art and literature: “Since 1934, Social Realism has been officially recognized as the only trend in Soviet art. Artistic, social and cultural areas were now under the control of the party and the state. With the pressure of the totalitarian regime, the artists fulfilled the task of guiding the daily life of the society by describing the daily life of the society in a happy enthusiastic way through art” (Onen, 2021). It is noteworthy that Gan became a victim of Stalinism, he was executed in 1942.

Literature, in Socialist realism, has to depict the reality of a society and show its complex relationships. Taking in mind what was said before about oral traditions and mythology, realism does not leave any space for religion effectively, creating an alienation between the writer and the writer's environment. He has to narrow his perspective and is not allowed to broaden his mind to the metaphysical. He has to engage in a rationalist intellectual atmosphere, there is no space for subjective experience and divine encounters. And needless to say, literature becomes mechanically and worthless, if it gives no space for the visions of the writer and creates room for him to entangle with his dreams and mythical encounters. And this is actually a problem which is quite real: The DPRK also used to promote literary realism which led to the fact that North Korean literature simply became too boring, too mechanical, for Kim Jong-il who wrote a book on how to create good literature. Kim makes clear that "to fulfil their mission, writers and artists must first have an understanding of the inherent character of literature and art and create truly revolutionary works which meet the requirements of a socialist and communist society" (Kim, 1986, p. 4). And while some writers create brilliant literature "describing the beautiful and noble lives of the people of the new era" (ibid.), others "present neither brilliant lives nor the pulse of real people" (ibid.). He does not attribute these 'failures' to a bad talent, but to a wrong understanding of what literature ought to create (ibid.). Kim explains straightforward that "Literature belongs to the domain of humanics. The essential characteristic of literature as a humanics consists of describing real people and serving man" (Kim, 1986, p. 5). Thus, like Soviet Socialist Realism, Kim leaves no room for the divine or supernatural, but instead literature has to solely focus on the human being and its destiny. The latter term is a quite Jucheist *terminus technicus*, as Juche teaches that every human being is the master of one's own destiny and as he inherits independence, creativity and consciousness, he has to use these three interrelated traits to transform his society. Or to put it in Kim Song-kwon's words: "The Juche idea scientifically elucidated that man is a social being with independence, creativity and consciousness and discovered the absolute truth that man is the master of his destiny and has the ability to shape his destiny" (Kim, 2014, p. 2). However, there is a practical problem which we already find in Kim Il-sung's 1972 work *Duties of Literature and Arts in Our Revolution*. As David-West summarizes:

"For Kim Il Sung, literature is a domain that must be subjected to total control under the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). Central to his ideas is what he describes as the subject (juche) of the revolution, namely, the "Korean revolution" (Chosŏn hyŏngmyŏng) itself and not 'any other country's revolution,' as he says in the anti-

Soviet reformism Juche speech of 1955 (Kim 1972, p. 19; Kim 1960, p. 326). Predominant themes Kim assigns to literary art consist of ideological indoctrination, constructing a national 'socialist' culture¹, and cultivating patriotic attitudes. According to him, there is 'nothing extraordinary about literature and art' and some 'clumsiness does not matter' in its state-controlled production (Kim 1972, p. 113)" (2009, p. 6).

Obviously, Kim Il-sung's son had a different perspective on it. The very surprising thing, however, is that despite Kim Jong-il's criticism in producing worthless literature, he does not really teach a new innovative approach, but keeps hold on realist literature.

"When foreign literature was indiscriminately prohibited in North Korea in 1970, for example, Kim Jong Il admonished against extreme anti-foreignism (Kim 1995, 48), yet he also railed against North Korean writers who complained that the domestic socialist realist narratives were not worth reading. Kim effectively told those who doubted North Korean socialist realism to shut up and read the authorized national literature (Kim 1995, p. 204). A subsequent episode in 1987 had him denouncing as 'flunkeyist' and 'dogmatist' writers whose offense was 'showing an overabundance of curiosity of foreign works or copying them' (Kim 1997, p. 63)" (David-West, 2009, p. 26).

4. Is North Korean Literature Theory Worthless?

Just for completeness' sake, this does not mean that North Korean literature theory has nothing to offer. Kim Jong-il introduces the term *jongja* which could best be translated as "seed" and which does actually not inherit a strict materialist notion here, but the *jongja* is a highly metaphysical term: "The Jongja is not just a topic but a thematic 'seed' that energizes the creative process to reflect society's needs" (Schmitz, 2024). Thus, the *jongja* is more than a *Leitmotiv*, it carries through the whole story and frames it, so that the reader identifies strongly with the plot. Actually, there are some brilliant movies, which use this powerful mindset of *jongja*,

1 David-West's usage of this term is of course a bit tricky. The term National Socialism refers to the ideology of Adolf Hitler who was not a Socialist but a fascist who was responsible for the most gruesome chapter of world history. To avoid any confusion with intellectuals who propose an interconnection of nationalism and socialism, the term "National Communism" is sometimes used, even if the movement itself does not actively promote to go beyond the stage of Socialism. Thus, one could say that Kim Il-sung promoted a form of National Communism, since his ideology hardly could be compared with that of fascist National Socialism.

though I hardly doubt that any of the following examples were really inspired by North Korean literary theory. *Gossip Girl* for instance turns the whole plot about this mysterious person called ‘gossip girl’ which takes the viewer through the whole plot and all actions are somehow interrelated. There is no moment where the ‘gossip girl’ is not even in a passive way present. The movie *Titanic* has its magic through the ship which sets the frame: the people cannot escape from the ship, their fate becomes one and the story is spun around it. In the same way, the ROK movie *A Millionaire’s First Love*, where the fate of the millionaire and the fate of Choi Ŭn-hwan are settled, her fate becomes inescapable and the viewer knows at the half of the movie that she will not survive. And it is evident that there is no *deus ex machina*: no one who will come to save her. Finally, the US Farsi language movie *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* hits the nail as it all turns around an unnamed girl, most of her identity is concealed until the end, but still the young woman catches the viewer. He feels for her and he is on her side. All these are examples, where the movies turn excessively around a certain theme, but “excessively” is not meant in a negative way here, the very seed energizes the plot, and there is not any moment where one could get a distant view of the scene: an emotional viewer must be naturally caught, because the viewer identifies with the plot. The viewer wants to know who is that ‘gossip girl’; the viewer wants to rescue the millionaire’s first love but knows that it is impossible; the viewer sees how the girl in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* longs for freedom but is caught in misery in a soulless city. This is beyond science fiction and surrealism; all these plots focus in some way on the human being and human problems and life in a *realistic* way (even if in an exaggerated form, as the girl in the last example can turn into a vampire, which should be understood as a stylistic device: the inner vampire which seeks to overcome alienation with a ‘dead’ society).¹

So are the above mentioned examples the proof that a realism is indeed possible, if the writer is not caught in an authoritarian regime, such as the DPRK? Classically, the genre of realism wants to depict reality in an objective way. But such an objectivity has to fail through the fact that every human being has one’s own perception and thus an own sense of objectivity. Furthermore, the above-mentioned examples are strictly spoken not realistic, because they show highly subjective perspectives, and this is actually the reason, why these stories are so appealing. The seed of the story is not an objective description, but one feels with the characters,

¹ Books which could be taken into consideration which might take such a literary form are for example the 1987 novel *Norwegian Wood* and the 1992 novel *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, both written by Haruki Murakami.

because one is able to dive into the hero's subjective position. Especially Socialist Realism tries to strip of all forms of aesthetic and 'magic' from the text, and thus, one is left not in a humane space, but a highly inhumane one, which necessarily has to fail to depict a truthful reality. It is the luxury position to write things in letters, disconnecting from the oral. In other words: Traditional realism fails to depict reality because it narrows the discourse on the socio-political and socio-economic being as well as his societal interconnectedness, but – if strictly practiced in a Socialist tradition – leaves no room for the metaphysical, and thus, for human questions about the divine.¹ Some stories become so human, because they deal with questions such as 'is there a God or heaven?' and their picturing of visions and hopes concerning an afterlife. These are very human questions, and I guess that these important questions will not vanish, even in a Socialist society. One might imagine a seriously ill person in a hospital who knows that life is coming to an end and one can imagine way too well that this person asks questions about her last journey in the immanent world and whether there is something beyond and thereafter. We would be ignorant to reduce such a person to her socio-economic situation. One would be quite ignorant to focus on the luck of receiving free health care in a Socialist state in the first place, while postponing her personal fate and her humanity in her struggle. Thus, the boundaries of a Socialist Realist writing are too obvious. I hope that through adding the practical example of the Stalinist era and the modern DPRK, one might see how realism can be object to failure.

5. Socialist Literature in a Non-Materialist Context – is it Possible?

Next, could Socialist literature flourish if applied in a non-materialist context, such as taking advantage of the metaphysical seed? The *jongja*, in which the writer transcends the social interconnectedness as a societal whole, but focusses on the fate of one or several specific people and how they are related to one another, creating a plot around a main hero who is always present in some way, even if not actively present in that very scene, the person or motive is also not absent, but has a passive presence or a passive function. And it is no surprise that many of these heart-catching movies are dramas or take elements from a drama, as already the Ancient Greek people knew how to set a focus in a play. Think for instance of Antigone: The whole

¹ This problem was corrected by Neorealism in Europe and Realism in Latin America, where a transcendent reality was not necessarily conflicting an immanent reality: here, religious motives, could also be used to depict parts of reality. This clearly shows the contrast between realism in authoritarian regimes compared to realism in liberal countries.

story is set around her and she is always present in some way. That which makes Antigone so real and graspable in the drama is the fact that she is caught between divine duty and state authority. Once again, it is the fatalistic notion, which we also find in *Titanic* and *A Millionaire's First Love* in which forces stronger than human technology (a serious illness; the iceberg) define the fate and make human beings incapable of escaping the very situation in which they are in the very moment. Socialist realism would fail to bring forth such stories, even in case of using a *jongja*, as the *jongja* in Socialist realism has to take an objective position in which the humane, that which makes people people, has to vanish for the big picture and ideological mission.

Indeed, an interesting symbiosis was the combination of stories turning around heroes in a historical novel meeting realism, such as Oleg Kuvaev's *Teppumopua*, which is based on real events.¹ *Teppumopua* has a lot to offer: The setting is in Chukotka, the native land of the Chuckchi ethnicity in Russia's Far East – a land which is renown for its beautiful nature (wide forest, wild rivers), it is a place predestined for a heroic novel in which strong characters fighting nature evolve. However, Wolfgang Kasack has a devastating verdict on this book:

„Ein jüngerer Autor, Oleg Kuvaev, wollte in *Territorija* (d. *Goldsucher*, 1974) die »wissenschaftlich-technische Revolution« beim Goldschürfen in Sibirien propagieren, aber es reichen weder Phantasie zur romanhaften Neuschöpfung noch sprachliche Begabung, um dem Ganzen oder den Teilen (beispielsweise den Dialogen) innere Logik zu verleihen“. (Kasack, 1980, p. 44)

Translation: “A younger author, Oleg Kuvaev, wanted to propagate the ‘scientific and technological revolution’ in gold mining in Siberia in *Territoriya* (German title: *Goldsucher*, 1974), but neither the imagination for novelistic re-creation nor the linguistic talent to give the whole or the parts (for example the dialogues) an internal logic are sufficient.”

1 In fact, Soviet literature gave quite a space for autobiographies and historical novels. Chatterjee and Patrone argue that “Soviet power ... gave common people an uncommon opportunity to reflect on themselves and to constitute their identities and a sense of subjectivity” (quoted after Kim 2012, p. 74). Furthermore Kim Cheehyung points out that the Soviet cinema played a crucial role in transforming the accidental crowd into a self-conscious, purposeful crowd, in which at least the potential of acting out of one's own destiny is given (ibid.): “Perhaps the ideal species here was the labor hero, an ordinary being who becomes the universal, imitable subject by transforming the self in the face of difficulty” (ibid.). I think that *Teppumopua* is such an example where individual people become the heroes in showing their physical strength to go beyond all borders and transform all limits, with the intention to encourage its readers (or viewers in the cinemas) to imitate that behavior to give everything for the fatherland, even if it means to sacrifice one's life.

The very problem is the distance which realism creates. One wants to share the thrill with the main character, one wants to see how the characters develop, how they evolve during their mission. In fact, this is why a realist author has to draw to a *jongja*: there has to be a line, an omnipresence of the main subject or main theme, which intermingles different scenes into a coherence, to make the hero an actual hero. But allowing a *jongja* to draw in, already presumes an overcoming of a materialist world outlook: it means to put experience into words. Realism disconnects with the past, with the orality. As such, Socialist Realism, especially in its Soviet style, is an ideological luxury.

6. Understanding that which is Real. Or: Do we need to Reconnect?

Hegel describes that the novel serves as bourgeois *ἐποποιία* in which the rich diversity of interests, characters, living conditions and the broad background of a total world as well as an epic drawing of conditions come back (Hegel, 1977, p. 42). However, a novel lacks the original poetic *Weltzustand*, from which the epic originally comes from (ibid.). The modern novel thus presumes an ordered reality to prose which in taking the liveliness of the conditions into account as well as the fate of the individuals, gives poetry her lost right back (Hegel, 1977, p. 42 f.). Hegel is aware of the spiritual connection of human beings. Hegel grasps human life as a totality because it all unfolds in the spirit, which is not immanent, but spirit for Hegel refers to the divine. Poetry is a way to comprehend the spiritual world: “poetry presents the developed totality of the spiritual world to our imagination” (quoted after Speight, 2010, p. 25). He can call poetry an art of totality, since for Hegel, the spirit and thus the spiritual makes up our actual Being and thus, everything which unfolds unfolds through the spirit. As Hegel explains, Homer “has spoken as one at home in his world, and where others are at home, we are too, for there we contemplate truth, the spirit living and possessing *itself* in its world, and we are well and cheerfully disposed because the poet is there too with his whole mind and spirit” (quoted after Speight, 2010, p. 25).

We can argue that the late Lukács materializes this Idealist thought, rationalizing out totality as a societal totality in form of a socialist totality. This might have been the result out of Socialist practice in the Eastern bloc, yet, it misses the point of life. Hegel states: “We find in the Homeric poems for the first time a world hovering beautifully between the foundations of life in the ethical order of family, state and religious belief, and the individual personal character; between spirit and nature in

their beautiful equipoise; between intended action and external outcome; between the national ground of undertakings and the intentions and deeds of individuals” (quoted after Speight, 2010, p. 27). Tan Malaka already showed the difficult dichotomy of the world when referring to his mystical logics (*Logika Mistika*) as 6,000-8,000 years ago, Egypt was ruled by the pharaohs while Ra was considered the highest god, indicating that Ra existed before the world came into being, creating everything through the word *ptah* (which reminds me nonetheless of the Biblical account, where God creates no less through expressing his will in language), which in turn means that spirit existed before matter and matter was the result of the spirited.¹ In contrast, modern science takes the opposite turn: it regards forces to be characteristics of matter. Tan Malaka (1943) uses biology (and here explicitly the Evolutionary Theory of Darwin) and mechanics (such as The Law of Conservation of Force) as example. Rudolf Mrázek summarizes: “As he [i.e. Tan Malaka] put it, *Madilog* was a new way of thinking; it was a *pusaka*, an heirloom ‘acquired from the West’ (from the rationalist, logical, Marxist-Leninist West, as he saw it) which he invited his Indonesian readers to study ‘humbly as openminded and honest pupils.’ The *Madilog* way of thinking was proposed by Tan Malaka as a weapon against what he defined, in *Madilog* as well as in earlier writings, as the old, mystical, idealistic Oriental way of thinking (*ketimuran*), still dominant, not merely in Indonesia, but in the whole of Asia too.” (Mrázek, 1972, p. 17) Obviously, mystical logic and modern science comes into conflict, yet it is the contestation of two contradictions which seek for further development, or to think in Hegelian terms *thesis-antithesis-synthesis*. A contestation and de-contestation of a bourgeois order is the very goal of a Marxist, the dialectical relationship manages to create a higher stage; yet, the realist totality is indeed – to use Nayar’s words from her paper’s headline – a lost totality. While Homer draws on the oral and puts the past into the present, giving the Greek people an identity, while both Western and Soviet Marxists tended to erase their identity through abolishing metaphysics, in hope to replace it with a new identity (in case of the USSR, the Soviet-kind of “enlightened”

1 This is the paraphrization of the Indonesian passage: “Negara-kuno, yang kita kenal paling tua dan paling unggul, ialah Negara Egypte, yang sekarang juga dinamai Mesir. 6000-8000 tahun dahulu penduduk Mesir sudah tersusun di bawah pemerintahnya Pharaoh, yang juga menguasai hidup dan mati rakyatnya. Maha Dewa Rah yakni Dewa Matahari, ialah Dewa yang berkuasa di antara beberapa dewa. [...] Rah adalah Dewa Matahari, ialah Rohani, yang lebih dahulu adanya dari pada dunia, bumi, dan bintang dan langit. Maha Dewa Rah tentulah sempurna, yakni Maha Terkuasa, asal dari pada semua benda yang ada di dunia ini. Dengan Firman yang berbunyi Ptah saja Bumi, Langit, Bintang, beribu juta, sungai nil dan gurun Pasir bisa timbul. Timbulnya itu adalah pada satu saat saja, sesudah perkataan Ptah tadi difirmankan. Jadi rohanilah yang pertama, zatlah yang kedua. Zat ini berasal dari Rohani. Bukan sebaliknya, yakni rohani yang berasal dari zat.” (Tan Malaka, 1943)

proletarian as archetype).¹ Indeed, alphabetical literacy made this alienation possible, and how can someone be in favor for the proletariat, if one neglects the past? Sadly, the brilliant Tan Malaka due to being committed to Historical Materialism did not see the necessity of religion; instead, he considered “religion in general as a primitive or ‘feudal’ ideology, which would be shed as humanity progressed into more advanced modes of production” (Crawford, 2018, p. 25). The Marxist theory is able to criticize the problems of a bourgeois society of the study of its historical development. Marx could not study the phenomenon of exploitation without studying history. How could the proletariat have a class consciousness, if it is not embedded in cultural life? Thus, I argue that a materialist totality will not be sufficient: it might want to be encouraging for the proletariat, but it must fail practically, since it narrows the discourse in defining an untot total, though totality ought not to be understood here as totality in the sense of Lukács, but rather as absolute as Soviet politics later *de facto* (!) apprehended it: as a total control of society (esp. under Stalin). We can see with the example of the DPRK how a total control of literal totality, how the total control of the written word, alienates the intellectual from the masses.² One cannot reach the masses because one is caught in the frame set by the authoritarian state which decides about what the society should bother about and what not. In such a situation, literature is not an exchange anymore, an exchange between the writer’s work and the reader. Naturally, the reader builds up a *literary intimacy*, as Schmitz proposed in a poet talk with Lisa Tomey in 2021. He stated that the reader connects with the work of the writer, he reflects himself within it. If the writer has nothing meaningful to say, a text is just useful for

1 It should therefore not be a surprise that Tan Malaka, despite using a Marxist terminology focusses primarily on reason than on class struggle: “Throughout Tan Malaka’s writings, in spite of the Marxist-Leninist terminology used, it is the power of ideas to stimulate social progress that is repeatedly stressed, rather than the dynamic force of class struggle” (Mrázek, 1972, p. 18). I argue that reason is an expression of the metaphysical through Platonic-Hegelian notion: it reveals the *Geist* and as such, the world is grasped through the *ideas*. For completeness’ sake: Of course, materialists will reject my view of explanation and see reason as a result of purely material processes. It is the good old cleavage of idealism and materialism.

2 In fact, Kim Cheehyung made a very interesting observation of Juche (as Juche is the ideology which fills all areas of the life of the people in the DPRK and therefore also has the demand of totality, as nothing in the DPRK can exist independent from Juche): “the moment of totality is also the moment of dissolution of the coherent subject” (Kim, 2012, p. 71). This is even more a problem, insofar, as Juche means *subject*; the whole ideology turns around the *subject*. If one wants to have total control, there is nothing worse than a fragmented subjectivity, especially as the DPRK’s slogan *Ilsim Tangyŏl* suggests that every citizen shall make one heart and one mind with the leader. Thus, any incoherent totality must be a broken totality. As Hannah Arendt already noted: “total domination (strives) to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all humanity were just one individual” (quoted after Kim, 2012, p. 73).

consumption, and the reader will not be able to transcend consumption (Schmitz, 2022). In the same way, if the reader is not interested in looking for a deeper meaning, then the text will not be able to unfold (Schmitz, 2022). In a state of full control, one can only establish literary intimacy, if one is really reading a work out of one's deep conviction and not because there is no alternative. In times of mass consumption, who is willing to read the Bible and reflect upon it in meditation? Many people do not do it, because they simply have no time – life is becoming too busy and rushing. I personally believe that disconnection is one of the major reasons for societal antagonism today. A society alienates because one does not talk to each other anymore, one does not communicate with people who have other worldviews anymore, one only consumes one's preferred media which repeats one's own views that one shares from one's own bubble.

Next, Socialist realism does not solve alienation but actually creates alienation. I believe that the Socialist cause cannot be enforced on societies through violence. There have been many bloody revolutions and way too many ended up in despotism. Instead, I think that consensus has to be found in a deliberative space, such as Jürgen Habermas proposed for instance, in which the people decide together about their future and to avoid a colonization of the *Lebenswelt*. (And of course, the people should decide over the system, not the system over the people – the latter phenomenon is the epitome of the colonization of the *Lebenswelt*.) In such a space, reason is key (and through Tan Malaka we can see here that reason predominates class struggle.) However, one should know one's class standpoint to be able to articulate one's interests in the best possible way, which leads to overcoming barriers (and thus, the *Geist* unfolds himself in a democratic arena). If a society fragments into different milieus which exist disconnected from each other, then reason is not able to reach the masses anymore – the rational steps back for the irrational. We end up in a post-metaphysical “mystical logic”, though the ancient myths in my point of view are anything but irrational: they demand to be analyzed and interpreted. Thus, the irrational momentum on the surface only covers the rational which lies underneath it. In the same way, I think this goes to literature. If writer and reader cannot connect, they alienate with each other. Literature then becomes a tool purely for ideological propaganda and not as a means to connect anymore. Discourses, then, are only able to continue in clandestine orality in spaces which are out of the state's control (or through exile literature). And *Spread the word* suddenly receives a completely different connotation. Marxists want to establish equal freedom for everyone, but restrictive literature just causes another unequal classism. And some –

such as Alexey Gan – who wanted to purge counterrevolutionary art, later became targets of purges themselves. The accuser became the accused himself.

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