

# PADOMJZEMES MITOLOGIJA

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Latvijas Nacionālais mākslas muzejs

Muzeja raksti 1

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uzsāk krājumu sēriju **MUZEJA RAKSTI**,  
kur turpmāk publicēsīm muzejā veiktos pētījumus,  
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Latvian National Museum of Art  
Head of the ***Arsenāls*** Collections and Research Department **Elita Ansone**

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# Socialist Realism, Capitalist Realism and Documentary Photography: A Comparison of Illustrations From a Soviet Newspaper (1977) and a Global Lifestyle Magazine (2007)

By **Alise Tīfentāle**  
Chief Editor of the "Foto Kvartāls" magazine

## Ideologically Saturated Photographs in the Print Media in the 1960s and 1970s and the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The term "Socialist Realism" is mostly used to refer to painting, sculpture, literature and film, the principles of Soviet ideology and Socialist Realism are also undeniably reflected in the photography of the relevant era. This can be seen both in press photography and in representative photography, which made up the majority of photographic materials that were seen in the Soviet public space. It might be added here that the amateur photo club movement an entirely separate area of activity that received support and encouragement from the Soviet authorities, and the genre of so-called "photographic art" which emerged from this movement is also a separate topic.

The area of photography which produced most of the public images that were seen in the Western world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century related to advertising, fashion photography and photographs in so-called lifestyle magazines. This was not a dominant genre in the Soviet Union, where there was no market economy and, accordingly, no need for intensive advertising.

In accordance with the subject of this conference, my focus will be on press and representative photographs which were published in Soviet Latvia between the end of the 1950s and the end of the 1970s. I shall trace

the application of the principles of Soviet Realism in this specific area of press photography, and I will seek to offer a few parallels and comparisons between Soviet-era press photographs on the one hand and the flourishing photo genre of the capitalist world – advertising photography – on the other. My visual materials include books about the Soviet Latvian economy, press photographs, as well as the photo chronicle which was delivered to newspapers in Soviet Latvia by the LATINFORM agency under the title "Our Republic in Photographic Images".

A comparison of Soviet-era press photos to advertising photos from the capitalist world involves the similar functions assigned to these images. The duty of the Soviet photograph was to create and uphold the impression of the Soviet Union's victorious progress in the minds of "the masses". The central idea was the endless "advertising" of the Soviet state's ideals – collectivism, as well as the superiority and achievements of the proletarian power structure. In a capitalist system, the genre of advertising photography has substantially the same aims –



71.\* 1976

\* Turpmāko foto un komentāru avots: LATINFORM fotohronika "Republika fotoattēlos". TASS/Latvijas PSR Ministru Padomes Informācijas aģentūra LATINFORM.

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creating and upholding impressions about the values of capitalism. These include individualism and even egotism, the concept of private property and prosperity. This suggests that the mass media under any system of state will publish ideologically saturated photographs, very often pretending that the images are actually something else, that they represent objective, impassive and highly believable evidence that has been accumulated by mechanical means.

Here I would like to say that I am using the concept of Socialist Realism vis-à-vis press and documentary photographs so as to describe the content, message and ideological saturation of photographs from the late 1950s until the end of the 1970s. In formal terms, photography during this period borrowed various techniques of style and technique which dated back to the Russian Avant-Garde of the 1920s and 1930s, turning these into clichés and standards. (Similarly, several paintings that can be seen in the "Mythology of the Soviet Land" exhibition in Rīga are in line with Socialist Realism in terms of their content, but make use of elements of Modernism in their methods of expression.) It also seems important to note that the period that is being considered here – from the late 1950s to the late 1970s – does not include the classical period of Socialist Realism. I have chosen this period of time specifically so as to emphasise the positioning of Socialist Realism and its sustainability and durability in Soviet visual culture. The examples of the visual culture of capitalism from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century which I am presenting here are also outside of the "classical period" of advertising photography, which in the Western world would date back to the period between the late 1940s and the 1960s, when lifestyle magazines first flourished with the help of photographers such as Richard Avedon, Irving Penn and others.<sup>1</sup> These images, too, demonstrate the sustainability and durability of a set of specific techniques and clichés.

Before considering specific examples, let us take a brief detour into the theory of photography to define our terms more precisely. The issue here is that it is incorrect to believe that documentary and press photographs reflect reality and are credible documents. Photography, unlike painting, has the aura of mythological documentarism, of "authenticity". If something has been photographed, then it existed. *Mainstream photographic history offers no analyses of the effects of power on representation. In fact, it encourages the opposite understanding, instilling the belief that all forms of the photographic image are neutral and above ideology*, writes the photography theorist Richard Bolton in describing the problem of

mistaken interpretations of photographs.<sup>2</sup> There truly is a myth about the "authenticity" of photographs, even though so-called documentary photography is based on ideological orders in the framework of any ideology. To put it briefly, we are talking about visual propaganda here, irrespective of whether we consider a press photograph from the Soviet-era, one which relates to ethnographic studies of the Middle East, Far East and Africa in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or – to choose a textbook example from Western culture – the documentary photo project which ran from 1935 until 1944 in the United States, with the US Farm Security Administration ordering up a documentation of the country's rural residents. We must remember here that nothing can be as mendacious and manipulative as a documentary photograph. No credible "certificate of authenticity" can be attached to a photograph to confirm that the image was based on something spontaneous, not something that was staged or organised to a greater or lesser degree. It is also true that a photographic image offers just a fragmentary depiction of time and space, one that has been influenced by the photographer's decisions on framing and emphasis, his or her sense of composition, ethical considerations, religious or political belief, or any other factor from an endless list of possibilities. In any ideological context, whether totalitarianism or contemporary democracy, a documentary photograph must be interpreted simultaneously as a constructed visual concept with a specific goal and message, as well as – of course – a document. It is not, however, a depiction of objective truth. The image is more likely to be a reflection of the governing ideologies and opinions of the prevailing era, one which because of its specifics appears and pretends to be convincingly true and objective as a piece of evidence. To quote James Curtis: "Historians often regard photographs as a critical form of documentary evidence that holds up a mirror to past events. Public and scholarly faith in the Realism of the photographic image is grounded in a belief that a photograph is a mechanical reproduction of reality. Susan Sontag captured the essence of that faith in her monumental reverie "On Photography", when she wrote: *Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it.*<sup>3</sup> The photography theorist and historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau, for her part, has written the following words: *Like a miniature guillotine, a camera shutter slices an image from the world into which it may or may not be subsequently launched. But if it is launched – printed, transmitted, broadcast, or reproduced – it may function as an event in its own right.*<sup>4</sup> In other words, it is an event,

a visual fact with links to that which was guillotined, i.e. photographed, which have been transformed and are by no means simple as might be thought. This figurative comparison, of course, is not a claim that can undergo academic analysis, but it does explain in metaphoric terms the need to differentiate between photography and reality. Solomon-Godeau goes further in revealing the ideology of a photographic image which is masquerading as objectivity. She has written that from the very beginning and even now, the documentary photograph is used to "naturalise domination." It strengthens and confirms the positions of the dominant, in other words.<sup>5</sup> The French art historian and philosopher Hubert Damisch agrees: *The photographic image does not belong to the natural world. It is a product of human labour, a cultural object whose being – in the phenomenological sense of the term – cannot be dissociated precisely from its historical meaning and from the necessarily datable project in which it originates.*<sup>6</sup>

That which can be perceived as empirical evidence in a photograph is encoded into the social system of meaning. The art historian and photography critic Allan Sekula has written that photographs must be interpreted as participants in discourse and the exchange of information – their form is dictated by the context of the prevailing social situation: *The most generalised terms of the photographic discourse constitute a denial of the rhetorical function and a validation of the truth value of the myriad propositions made within the system. As we have seen, and shall see again, the most general terms of the discourse are a kind of disclaimer, an assertion of neutrality; in short, the overall function of photographic discourse is to render itself transparent. But however the discourse may deny and obscure its own terms, it cannot escape them.*<sup>7</sup>

In his writings, Sekula has often opposed the aestheticisation of photographs in theory, insisting that attention should be focused instead on the public functions of photographs, specifically in the context of the exchange of goods and services in a capitalist economy: *Photography emerged and flourished as a mode of communication within the larger context of a developing capitalist world order.*<sup>8</sup> Thus Sekula completely destroys any illusions about the photograph as a universal or independent system of signs. Opposing the popular suggestion by Roland Barthes that a photograph might be a clear "designator", Sekula argues that this idea must be seen as an example of folklore, as it falsely enhances the legal status of the photograph to the level of a document, attaching a "mythic aura of

neutrality" to it.<sup>9</sup> Instead Sekula links the importance of a photograph to the reasons and goals of its having been taken: *A photographic discourse is a system within which the culture harnesses photographs to various representational tasks. (...) Every photographic image is a sign, above all, of someone's investment in the sending of a message.*<sup>10</sup> According to Sekula, a photograph is part of a complicated social discourse, one which is related to the governing ideas of the relevant period of time as to what scientific "truth" is. He believes that the *materiality or physical quality of the photograph is less significant than how the photograph functions to serve and reinforce capitalist power structures.*<sup>11</sup> A similar view has been expressed by the art historian John Tagg. In writing about the interpretation of photographs, he insists that the individual meaning of a photograph as such is repealed and replaced by institutional practice and the interests of power structures: *Every photograph is a result of specific and, in every sense, significant distortions which render its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic.*<sup>12</sup> In short, there exists the view that the documentary nature of photography is very much conditional, that when one considers a specific photograph, the most important information is found not on the surface of the image, but rather behind it – in the reasons, goals and missions which led to the its creation and publication.

The goal of creating and publishing photo images in the Soviet-era press was to support the propaganda of Soviet ideology. Seemingly documentary photographs which, in fact, were more or less staged, directed, composed and unquestionably saturated with ideology were a very common form of visual expression used by all totalitarian regimes of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to convince the masses of their ideology. Often such photographs were produced in parallel to the work of cinematographers. Between the late 1950s and late 1970s in the Soviet Union, ideological saturation had new challenges and missions, mostly in terms of maintaining a certain amount of ideological tension at times of peace, i.e. stimulating, mobilising and positively encouraging the Soviet public, as well as creating the impression that Soviet ideology was well along its victorious road toward a shining future. In pursuit of these goals, the seemingly documentary photographs that were published in the press were based on the same requirements of Socialist Realism as those which applied to painting, literature, cinema, sculpture and all other means for the dissemination of visual, textual and other types of information. The unified ideological foundations can be seen in the fact that the themes, subject matter and even composition of paintings

that can be seen in the aforementioned "Mythology of the Soviet Land" exhibition can also be found in press photographs from the same era.

The Russian writer, literary theorist and researcher of aesthetics Yuri Borev has defined Socialist Realism as *art engaged by the Soviet bureaucracy to serve the needs of the totalitarian society in shaping "new man". In accordance with official aesthetics, this art reflected the interests of the proletariat at first and then later, the interests of the entire Socialist society. The artistic concept for Socialist Realism is that the individual is socially active and takes part in the creation of history with methods of power.*<sup>13</sup> The term "Socialist Realism" is used to describe the ideologically saturated visual arts and literature of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, largely between the 1930s and the 1950s. The principles of Socialist Realism, however, were defined at the beginning of the 1930s as the Soviet method of art, and they continued to exist and be observed at various levels well beyond the stated period of time. Press and documentary photographs published until the late 1970s were no exception to this rule.

*Socialist Realism provides for a true and historically concrete depiction of reality in accordance with the ideological goal of cultivating the working people in the spirit of Socialism.*<sup>14</sup> It has to be said that this goal can be assigned to documentary photographs in the most direct way, because they create inspirational and credible examples of what has already been achieved. The main principles of Socialist Realism were rooted in the fundamental postulates of Marxism: *The proletariat is the class which is historically called upon to lead the revolution and to transform an unjust society into a just one with violence and the dictatorship of the proletariat.*<sup>15</sup>

A true desire for a better world and better art – this, too, could be seen as the theoretical justification for Socialist Realism. In 1933, a tractate called "On Socialist Realism" was produced by the literary scholar and Communist Party functionary Anatoly Lunacharsky, who among other idealistic and utopian claims made this one: *The mighty new class, which was charged with transforming new methods to ensure mankind's superiority over nature, is tended toward Realism. (...) Socialist Realism is thoroughly targeted, it knows what is evil and what is good, it makes note of those forces which are halting movement and those which promote the anxious movement toward a great goal. (...) Socialist Realism, therefore, has its own theme, because of importance to it is exactly that which is more or less a part of the central process of our lives –*

*the battle for complete transformation on a Socialist basis. (...) Socialist Realism, to a certain extent, cannot be imagined without an element of romanticism. Here, too, it differs from an apathetic recording of events. It is Realism plus enthusiasm, Realism plus a militant mood. And yet it never brings our romanticism close to that of the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois romanticism emerged from a dissatisfaction with reality, without any programme of transformation, without any hope of overcoming reality. Bourgeois romanticism was limited to an unreachable dream. Therefore it is entirely pure art (offering peace in a world of beauty), or it represents mystical and religious flight, perhaps with the nature of a deeply painful nightmare. (...) Our art, too, is dissatisfied with reality, and that is the source of its relationship with romanticism. But while being dissatisfied with reality, our art wishes to transform it, and it knows that it is able to do so. The land which we can sometimes visit in our dreams to rest and to marshal our strength – that is the future.*<sup>16</sup> So much for Lunacharsky.

### I. CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW WORLD

Let us now turn to the depiction in photographs of the construction of the future. Such photographs had to create the impression of might and progress. They also had to reaffirm work – heavy physical work – as the key element of Soviet morality, reminding viewers that anyone who engages in such work is a courageous transformer and improver of the entire world. The caption to a photograph from 1955 reads: "The work of Soviet man embodies both romanticism and beauty." When we study such photographs, we can arrive at something of a paradox. Although these images quite literally illustrate the principles of Socialist Realism in their content, the fact is that in form, they are much indebted to the Avant-Garde graphical design of the 1920s and 1930s – Constructivism, for instance. As a result of this, we can only speak of "Socialist Realism" here in an indirect sense, applying the term to the photograph's content and message, but not to its form.

Compositions that were graphic, dynamic, constructive and inspired by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century artist Aleksander Rodchenko were used to achieve impressive decorative effects, turning the object of focus into a geometric example of op art, a rhythmically repeated set of elements. This applied to farm fields and to the interiors of industrial manufacturing facilities. The monumental depiction of these had to create the impression of orderliness along with productive and effective manufacturing.

The origins of this application of the principles of

Constructivism to photographs of this kind date back to an historically important publication, *SSSR na stroike* (Construction in the USSR), which was a propaganda magazine between 1930 and 1941 and again in 1949 in Russian, English, German and French. Aimed at a foreign audience, the magazine was of outstanding artistic quality, and it was supposed to create a positive image about the USSR in the West. Artists such as the aforementioned Rodchenko, El Lissitzky and Varvara Stepanova were involved in its creation.<sup>17</sup>

I must also discuss architecture as a symbol of Soviet victory. Photographs of new buildings, including massive apartment buildings or districts of private homes, were by no means primarily aesthetic, as is the case in real estate advertisements and publications of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in which as yet unconstructed buildings are presented to us with the help of perfect computer graphics. No, in the 1970s, black and white photographs offered a very Realistic image of new public and private buildings, in which the emphasis of function over form was neither masked nor hidden. On the contrary – buildings of the future were presented in all of their harsh cement-based roughness. Soviet ideology held buildings to be more than just physically existing residential or public spaces. They also confirmed the correctness and victory of the ideas of the Soviet state. Indeed, the presentation of individual buildings carried with it a distinct ideological purpose.

Photographers learned to shoot buildings from an angle which allowed the viewer to believe that the cement building would immediately rise into the sky from the ground itself. The building of the "Latvija" hotel, for instance, was photographed from a special angle which clearly suggested that the structure nearly reached the sky. This was achieved by the rather radical framing method of simply cutting off the upper part of the building. The presence of a Lenin monument in the overall composition fulfilled two functions – it reminded the viewer of the victorious positions of the Soviet state, and, via the dynamic pose of the sculpture, it blessed the new building, offering the status of narrative to the picture: "Look," says the paternal Lenin. "Our state shall only be built upward!"

The depiction of private buildings and massive apartment building complexes was geometric and regular, and with the help of accompanying texts, these images emphasised the number of individual housing units that were being offered. The idea was that there would be "enough for everyone", that the construction process was sufficiently thorough to make sure that no one would lack anything. These photographs often included

status symbols from the relevant era – a Lada or Volga automobile, for instance. That is a technique which is far more reminiscent of the advertising ethics of the capitalist world, where symbols of status and wealth are commonly used to attach special value to the product that is being advertised.

Work was the primary element of morality in Socialist Realism. Dictatorship of the proletariat meant that working people were held up in society as those who deserved the greatest respect. Their presentation in Soviet press photographs was truly extensive, and we can focus only on a few of the primary motifs – those which were seen most often.

Agriculture was a major form of employment for working people in the Soviet state. There were endless reports in the press and on television news programmes about the latest achievements in dairy yields, in the number of hectares ploughed more quickly than had been planned, etc. The presentation of agricultural achievements against the background of a mighty landscape – this was a great way for photographers to show and recall the constant progress and development of the Soviet state.

The mightiness was achieved by angles from above (if the focus in the image was on a field after the gathering of the harvest) or from below (if the mightiness of harvested grains or modern equipment had to be shown. There were literally thousands of photographs during the Soviet-era which asked us to peek through stalks of grain at a row of farm combines stretching off to the very horizon. Another fundamental element and ideological weapon was the presentation of the latest farm equipment. This showed that science and technology were actively helping to ease the daily burdens of the working class. Photographers used flattering angles and compositional solutions to show that Soviet equipment was mighty, progressive, modern and all-powerful.

A second very common motif was industry. Photographers achieved the impression of massive and extraordinarily productive manufacturing by using angles which presented the oppressive and entirely boring industrial environment as one which was vast and very promising. Paradoxically enough, the depiction of the industrial environment has once again become modern and in high demand in the photography of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, although these days the emphasis has mostly been on the aesthetic qualities of industrial landscapes and interiors. In other cases, the focus has been on a critical evaluation of these from an ecological or political perspective. The distinguished photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher began to produce extensive collections of

60 ЛЕТ  
ОКТАБРЯ

„Социализм — это динамично развивающееся общество. Ни дня мы не стоим на месте, мы все время идем вперед“.

Л. И. Брежнев



73. TEKST UZ ATTĒLA: Nākotnes cēlējs. Oktobrim – 60. “Sociālisms – tā ir dinamiskā attīstībā esoša sabiedrība. Ne dienu mēs nestāvam uz vietas, mēs nepārtraukti ejam uz priekšu.” L. I. Brežņevs. 1977.

\* Mūsu republikas darbaļaudis, tāpat kā visa padomju tauta, gatavojas cienīgi sagaidīt Lielā Oktobra 60. gadadienu – pirms termiņa izpildīt desmitās piecgades otrā gada uzdevumus, izlaist vairāk augstvērtīgas rūpniecības produkcijas un tehnikas laukiem, vairāk un labākas kvalitātes masu pieprasījuma preču iedzīvotājiem, labi sagatavoties pavasara lauku dabiem. Visos darba kolektīvos aizvien plašāk izvērsas patriotiskā kustība ar devīzi – „Strādāt labāk, paaugstināt efektivitāti un kvalitāti”, kuras pamatā ir prasības, kas izriet no partijas un valdības lēmumiem par Vissavienības sociālistisko sacensību un par masu pieprasījuma preču ražošanas attīstīšanu, kā arī no PSKP Centrālās Komitejas vēstules lauksaimniecības darbiniekiem, visiem mūsu zemes darbaļaudīm.

TEXT ON PHOTOGRAPH: “Builder of the future. 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday of October. ‘Socialism is a society moving forward dynamically. We never stay in place, we are always moving forward’ – Leonid Brezhnev” 1977

\* Working people in our republic joined the entire nation of the Soviet Union in preparing for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great October Revolution. Everyone promised to fulfil the goals of the second year in the 10<sup>th</sup> Soviet five-year plan ahead of schedule, to produce more mass market goods at a higher level of quality, and to prepare properly for agricultural work in the springtime. Throughout labour collectives, the patriotic slogan of “working better, enhancing effectiveness and quality” became widespread. The requirements were based on decisions which had been taken by the Communist Party and the government in the context of the All-Soviet Socialist competition and the development of the production of mass market goods. Also of importance was a letter sent by the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party to all agricultural workers and all working people in our republic.

photographs in 1957 under headings such as "Water Towers", "Silos", etc. Their photographs were utterly impassive, without any additional imagery such as the use of a cloudy day to ensure a uniformly gray sky, or the composition of the image as that of a monumental structure. Some similar examples can be found in Soviet press photography, albeit with a different informational purpose.

The dominant attitude in Soviet press photography, however, was a different one. Soviet ideology interpreted industrial development exclusively in positive ways, and documentary and press photographs focused mostly on aspects of the relevant achievements, not on aesthetics. This was faultlessly in line with a central tenet of Socialist Realism – that "art for art's sake" was a typical invention of the bourgeoisie, one which should not be allowed to infect the minds of Soviet workers.

**II. PROSPERITY**

Moving along on the subject of building a new Soviet life, we can say that one result of this process was supposed to be prosperity – not just the collective prosperity of the entire Soviet state, but also the individual prosperity of individual citizens. In this sense, photographs that were created within the style of Socialist Realism were often quite similar to our modern-day ideas about prosperity, no matter how paradoxical that might seem. In depicting the prosperity of Soviet citizens, documentary photography was closest to the visual language of capitalism. Documentary photographs introduced viewers to the symbols of social status of the era – a private home, an automobile, a nice garden, a summer cottage, etc. To be sure, there were far fewer images of this type in the Soviet press than was the case in the capitalist world, but the content and form of the images were not different from those that we see in the press today. The impression of general prosperity was upheld by photographs of Soviet-era department stores complete with satisfied Soviet shoppers.

A separate genre in photography during this period of time was the depiction of various goods and products. To a certain sense this can be described as advertising photography, although the images were inevitably used as press photographs to accompany an article about the relevant product. Examples from the mid-1970s suggest that photographers educated themselves by paging through available foreign press publications which, of course, had no shortage of advertising photographs. The ideas of Soviet photographers as to what advertising photography should be were clearly absorbed from these

press publications. This applies to visual techniques such as a smiling girl holding the object of attention. At the same time, however, there was absolutely no theoretical concept of what advertising photography is and what its functions might be. That is only logical, given that these photographs did not serve the same functions as did advertising photos in the West. It was not all that necessary to focus attention on a product which would have to conquer its place in public consciousness. The very existence of the product was more than enough. The result of this is a series of fairly absurd photographs which are little different, in a sense, from the cult of the object in capitalist Realism.

If we review a few advertisements that are typical of our modern world of capitalism, then we see that in visual terms, there is unquestionable similarity in terms of the composition and structure of the image – an artificial situation in which all attention is focused on the product. The difference is that during the Soviet-era, the object was presented in documentary style to present it as it was. In the culture of capitalism, by comparison, the already aesthetic appearance of the product is mythologized and abstracted from reality. A pair of shoes, for instance, is turned into a majestic object of design. Although the messages are different, there are certainly analogies in terms of the structure of the image.

The depiction of public interiors in photographs did not differ much from the visual language of capitalism at that time – presentation of new restaurants or cafés, for instance. Such photographs, it seems, could not include any additional ideological meaning. Tasteful interiors which were in line with the style of the age, beautiful waitresses, satisfied clients sitting at their tables – this is a scene which could have been photographed both in the USSR and in the West.

The aestheticised environment in the public arena led to the production of photographs which presented that space – nice parks and leisure facilities, as well as cinemas and theatres whose monumental design emphasised the educational nature of such institutions. There were other photographs which showed how fortunate the people of the USSR were. We can see images of campsites and beaches, with propaganda related to a healthy lifestyle which could be ensured at such locations and which the working people of the Soviet Union deserved. Most of these images went beyond the ideological boundaries of Socialist Realism, instead speaking to universal values which are familiar to everyone – the desire for comfort, relaxation and a good feeling. Such images appeared in the mass media to an increasing extent from the mid-



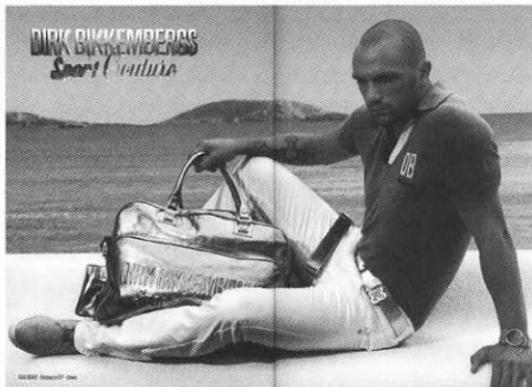
74. Inženiere tehnoloģe T. Erdmane ar konditorejas fabrikas "Uzvara" jauno produkciju. 1977

\* 1978. jūlijs – profesionālo svētku mēnesis. Šajā mēnesī atzīmēsim jūras un upju flotes darbinieku dienu, zvejnieku dienu, metalurgu dienu, tirdzniecības darbinieku dienu un jūras kara flotes dienu. Katras šīs nozares speciālisti gaida savas profesijas svētkus ar teicamiem panākumiem darbā. Šī fotoinformācija stāsta par mūsu republikas tautas saimniecības darbiniekiem un viņu atpūtu.

Engineering and technologist T. Erdmane shows the latest products from the "Uzvara" confectionery factory. 1977

\* 1978. July: The month for professional celebrations. This month we will have the Day of Maritime and River Fleet Employees, Fishermen's Day, Metallurgists' Day, Retail Workers' Day, and Navy Day. Specialists in each of these areas welcome these celebrations with commendable achievements at work. This photo presentation shows employees of our republic's people's economy and their leisure.

faktiem, nereti ignorējot estētiku. Tas arī nevainojami saskan ar sociālistiskā reālisma priekšstatiem par to, ka "mākslu mākslai" ir tipisks buržuāzijas izgudrojums, kam nevajadzētu saindēt darbaļaužu prātus.



75. Reklāma no žurnāla *Esquire*  
An advertisement from *Esquire*  
2007, Nr. 2

preses izdevumus, kuros netrūka reklāmas foto. Padomju fotogrāfu priekšstats par to, kādai jābūt reklāmas fotogrāfijai, ir acīmredzami formāli pārņemts no šiem preses izdevumiem – pārņemts kā vizuālu paņēmieni grupa (piemēram, smaidoša meitene, kas demonstrē precī) bez teorētiska pamatojuma, kas vispār ir reklāmas fotogrāfija un kādas funkcijas tai būtu jāpilda. Tas arī ir loģiski, jo, kā jau minēts, šīs fotogrāfijas nepildīja tās pašas funkcijas, ko Rietumos praktizēta reklāma – precei nebija par katru cenu jāpiesaista uzmanība un jāizcīna sava vieta patērētāja apziņā, jo bija pietiekams pats preces eksistences fakts. Tāpēc tapuši arī vairāki kuriozi kadri ar absurdu kompozīciju, kuri salīdzinājumā

1970s to the early 1980s.

Let us now turn to material culture. Excitement about progress and achievement is aimed at an endless cult of positivism, one which excludes any doubts, sensible criticism, rational analysis, relativism, individualism, or anything else which would inevitably lead to the collapse of a consolidated team and to antisocial behaviour. Press photographs were used to popularise not just the achievements of working people as an amorphous mass, but also the excellent and comfortable environment which people could expect at the end of their working day. These symbols of the good fortune of Soviet citizens were not really much different from those which tempt members of the current consumer society.

In this genre, differences between Soviet-era photographs and advertising photographs from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century are small and nuanced. In formal terms, these images are very similar. They use the same story lines and compositions ("a group of happy people at the table at a summer café"; "a self-confident citizen stands by his automobile and looks at his new summer home"; "the family relaxes at a campsite"; "the family shops at a supermarket", etc.). The main difference in comparison to advertising photographs in the capitalist press was that the construction of a new supermarket in the Soviet Union was always presented as an example of how the Communist Party was fulfilling its plans ahead of schedule. In the present-day press, images of a new supermarket are supplemented with information about discounts, a particularly extensive selection of products, etc.

A general statement about the depiction of prosperity in the press photographs of the Soviet-era is that such images showed tasteful supermarkets, idyllic collective farms, Volga and Lada automobiles, well deserved holidays at the seaside, as well as waitresses serving clients at fancy restaurants and cafés. In fact, those waitresses bore a suspicious resemblance to the heroines of James Bond movies from the same era. Equally sugary illusions and icy lies are presented in the reality which has been constructed by the mass media of the capitalist world in which we live today.

### III. THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COLLECTIVE

**The individual.** Soviet press photographs which were produced between the late 1950s and the 1970s were possessed of a very clear and fundamental visual principle that was part of the theory of Socialist Realism – the image had to present growth, development, the direct path toward the victory of Communism, and the ever new achievements which were being made in the area



76. Rūpnīcas "Straume" TKN kontroliere Lilija Ledņika pārbauda elektrisko galas maļamo mašīnu – vienu no izstrādājumiem, ko ražo rūpnīca. 1978

\* Mūsu republikā atzīmēja priecīgu un svarīgu notikumu – sava jaunā pamatlikuma pieņemšanu. Visi Padomju Latvijas darbaļaudis – strādnieki, kolhoznieki un inteliģence – aktīvi piedalījās tā projekta apspriešanā. Ne tikai vārdos, bet ar triecien darbu viņi apstiprināja jaunās Latvijas PSR Konstitūcijas pamattēzes. Šīs tēzes objektīvi atspoguļo panākumus, ko pēdējos gados guvusi mūsu republika.

Lilija Ledņika, an inspector at the "Straume" factory, inspects an electric meat grinder – one of the machines produced at the factory. 1978

\* Our republic was preparing for a happy and important event – the adoption of a new fundamental law. All of the working people of Soviet Latvia, whether factory employees, collective farm employees or members of the intelligentsia, took part in the discussion. They confirmed the basic theses of the new Soviet Latvian Constitution not just in words, but also by working very hard. The theses objectively reflected the great achievements of our republic.

of industrial capacity. Growth in this context was best symbolised by the working person, and particularly the person who did hard, physical work. These were men who built mighty buildings, who worked with complicated and impressive technologies. They were joined by women who worked equally hard at milking the cows, weaving the cloth, or painting the walls.

Here we find the very specific version of "feminism" which prevailed in the Soviet Union – the idea that women had the equal right to work at physically difficult and dangerous jobs, thus becoming heroines of labour. These principles coincide with the fundamental idea of Socialist Realism: *The art and literature of Socialist Realism created a new and positive image of the hero – the fighter, the builder, the leader. Through him the*

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77. Reklāma no žurnāla *Esquire*  
An advertisement from *Esquire*  
2008, Nr. 4

historical optimism of Socialist Realism was laid bare most emphatically: The hero confirmed the victory of Communist ideas.<sup>18</sup> One of the creators of the theory of Socialist Realism, the writer Maxim Gorky, had this to say at the first all-Soviet congress of writers in 1934: "Socialist Realism confirms existence as activity, as creativity with the aim of constantly developing the most valuable abilities of the individual so as to ensure humankind's victory over the forces of nature, to ensure human health and long life."

In the official Soviet press, as in the capitalist press, the individual was often presented as an example for others. In the Soviet-era, however, this applied not to specific excellence, talent or some other aspect of the modern era's "celebrity" culture, but rather to heroic work. Work was the primary moral duty of Soviet people, the primary pillar and foundation for the Soviet state – this was a fundamental tenet of Soviet ideology. In the world of capitalism, everyone can be famous for five minutes (or fifteen, if we recall the legendary claim by Andy Warhol), and this can be achieved through shamelessness and pushiness. Soviet ideology, for its part, provided for the public honouring of outstanding workers, particularly from the area of physical labour.

A traditional genre of photography in this regard was the "tableau of honour" style – representative portraits that were put up on walls, published in the press and in books, and presented on postcards in series such as "Soviet Latvian Writers", etc. In such portraits, individuals were expected to look as serious and honourable as possible, while at the same time presenting their achievements as best they could. The most common way of doing this was to pin various awards and prizes to one's lapel. There was absolutely no flirtation in these photographs, which were aimed at presenting the individual's worthy achievements on behalf of society and the development of the whole Soviet state. Working class individuals were expected to look respectable. Musicians, actors, writers and others from the world of culture had to appear inspired, and this meant that they were photographed while gazing off into the distance. These images were meant to create a certain sense of drama so that working people might never think that art in the Soviet Union was meant to be entertaining.

A different structure of thinking was what determined these different characteristics of the Soviet hero. The typical hero in press and advertising photographs today is smiling; he or she simply radiates good health and wealth. A broad and energetic smile is particularly typical of capitalism – after all, the world knows of the concept of

the "American smile". A big grin shows the best possible physical condition – physical satisfaction, a sense of well-being and health, a good mood, and unquestioning optimism. Even more, such a smile presents all of these good things without any humility at all. Even until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was hardly any art in which anyone save for the grotesque representatives of the lower social orders bared his or her teeth. Certainly no respectable citizen would demonstrate any such grimace, and a well-controlled and hardly visible smile was traditionally the permitted maximum. A big grin with bared teeth would have been considered a presentation of victory of a capitalist sort in the Soviet Union.

Socialist Realism in particular upheld classical values. All positive images, whether heroes of Socialist labour, Soviet People's artists, writers, actors or anyone else, were presented in a respectful and composed way. People in these images were full of concentration and seriousness. Paradoxically enough, these Soviet-era portraits can, to a certain extent, be compared to present-day advertising photography. Anonymous models in advertising photographs are similarly dramatised, aestheticised and superhuman, and their inspired gaze must create the impression that the advertised product has aspects to it which are special and cannot be stated in words. The genre is essentially the same, although its functions are radically different in the two different worlds.

The difference between the artificial aestheticisation of capitalism and the artificial dramatisation of Socialism can be found in these functions. In Socialist Realism, the serious portraits led the public to understand the achievements and victories of Communism and the people's labour. In capitalist Realism, by contrast, aestheticised and dramatised portraits provoke yearning and envy in the viewer. The viewer wishes to be comparable to the person in the image, and this can be achieved by purchasing the product that is being advertised. One and the same resources have been used in pursuit of these two goals.

**The individual portrait and the professional portrait.**

If we consider portraits of people from various professions which are taken in the style of reportage, then we see that the most important factor here is that the picture must clearly and unmistakably present the profession which is represented by the person who is in the image. This meant that working people were usually photographed at work, and the images usually featured work uniforms, tools, as well as mighty industrial or public buildings in the background.

The angle, geometric elements and dynamic composition



78. Reklāma no žurnāla *Esquire* / An advertisement from *Esquire*  
2008, No. 4



79.\* Rīgas Jūras tirdzniecības ostas specializētā konteineru brigāde, ko vada I. Smirnovs  
 A specialised container brigade from the Riga Maritime Trade Port, directed by Smirnov  
 1975

of these images, as we have seen already, offer an additional layer of information for each image. Up front are work and the related materials and tools. The worker as such becomes a secondary element. One author has claimed that *from the perspective of materialism, history and public regularities do not exist apart from human will and behaviour,*<sup>19</sup> but the fact is that the principles of Socialist Realism meant that even if an individual transformed the world and built up an entirely new life, he or she as such did not have to be emphasised. In the Soviet Union, every individual represented a larger collective – in this case, a profession. Most portraits of working people, therefore, were portraits of their profession. Most of the image was typically taken up by equipment, once again showing the mightiness and power of the Soviet state, calling upon the viewer to understand how powerful, massive and stable was the country's industrial system – a system which in and of itself was a symbol of progress, achievement and output.

The combination of individuals and technologies is also popular in present-day advertising photograph, but the difference in comparison to the Soviet emphasis on profession, labour and production is that in modern photographs, technologies are almost inevitably presented in the context of free time, hobbies and entertainment.

The visual stereotypes and photographic motifs that were inspired by the theory of Socialist Realism can be described as the "culture of victors." Each image depicted

achievements, positive growth and progress – things which were absolutely positive values in and of themselves during the Soviet-era. Today, when ours is a world of the widest diversity of cultural theories and philosophical worldviews, everything has become relative. Words such as "progress" and "progressive" are applied with seriousness to such areas of human activity as medicine, space exploration and computer technologies – and not always in any positive way, either. The concept of the "victor over the forces of nature" has not disappeared, it might be added. Today, however, that victor does not have any universal goal which stands above everyday activity, he no longer represents a common and massive struggle in pursuit of a unified mission. Today he is far more likely to be shown in the latest four-wheel-drive vehicle, which allows him to conquer virgin nature in pursuit of his own egotistical need for enjoyment.

**The collective.** It was as late as in 1984 that the Soviet journal "Sovetskiye Foto" was publishing a serious theoretical tractate about how the image of the hero was to be constructed properly: "Humankind relates the hope of averting a catastrophe of cosmic proportions only to the Socialist society. It is only with the world's most progressive movement – the international Communist Avant-Garde – that there can be any hope of the victory of civilisation and a new and truly human way of life. That is why true activation of the social functions of art

(and, accordingly, all of its other functions) is impossible without a presentation of the eager work of Soviet people on behalf of Communism, their struggle to reorder the world, the efforts of all people of good will to maintain the safety of the nations and to prevent war. (...) For this reason, photographers must uphold an even greater sense of responsibility in depicting surrounding reality in relation to its main tendencies and regularities, evaluating all phenomena from a strictly Marxist position. The most useful resource in this regard has always been and continues to be the positive hero who embodies everything that is valuable, everything that has been overcome and achieved along the difficult path of creating a new world and the new individual. It is toward this that we are urged by the plenary session of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party of June 1983. The committee calls upon us to *display vividly the character and image of the builder of our new society, the true hero of our age.* (...) *Thanks to its specifics, photography is perhaps the most functional style of art.*<sup>20</sup>

The impression of dynamic development and the creation of a new world and a new person in photography can be achieved quite well by making use of a motif that was quite popular in the Soviet-era – photographing an individual while he or she was energetically striding forward. Historically, the origins of this kind of image can be found in propaganda materials – reports about victory celebrations and military parades, and these motifs could often be found in the Soviet press.

The same technique was used to present a group of representatives from a specific profession, showing all of them marching dynamically toward the camera. Such photographs confirmed development, but also strengthened the spirit of collectivism. Purposeful group movement in a photograph clearly creates a more convincing and monumental impression than does a static portrait of an individual. When presented in this way, people were not the mass of working people. They were a vector, a force moving toward a single goal. This was the essence of the aforementioned “historical optimism”.

The same technique is often used in advertising

photographs, where we see an energetically marching group of people who represent “capitalist optimism”, prosperity and dynamism in pursuit of individual well-being. We can conclude that similar mechanisms are used in the creation of any ideologically saturated photograph – the Soviet press photograph, which unquestionably represented propaganda of the Soviet system, as well as the advertising photograph of the modern capitalist age, which equally propagandises the consumer culture and capitalism.

These seemingly documentary photographs that are attributed to the style of Socialist Realism and the advertising photographs of the capitalist age often used one and the same techniques in constructing the image – dynamic compositions, presentation of groups of people, fairly classical compositions in the case of individual portraits, as well as graphically rhythmic compositions in the presentation of architecture and interiors, creating the impression of volume by using angles from above to create a broad perspective. The other techniques which have been reviewed in this paper have also been applied.

In the visual culture of Socialist Realism and capitalist Realism alike, the hero who was “victorious over the forces of nature” was often idealised to the point of grotesqueness. In Soviet black-and-white photographs, the maximum effect was achieved with dynamic angles, monumental compositions and presentation of purposeful and collective movement. In advertising photography today, similar effects are achieved by a compositional emphasis on the individual and his egotistical enjoyment. Computer processing makes it possible to use a sentimental palette of colour, with the primary emphasis placed on the social status of the product that is being sold. The resources are the same, and it is only the goals which differ. Soviet photographs speak to the achievements of the collective, the entire Soviet state. Modern advertising photographs and portraits speak to the achievements, successes and victories of the individual.

1974. The Kazakh SSR. Harvesting the crop in accordance with the group method at the “Storm Bird” collective farm – the largest grain operation in the republic.



72.\* Kazahijas PSR. Ražas novākšana pēc grupveida metodes sovhozā "Vētrasputns" – republikas lielākajā graudkopības saimniecībā

The Kazakh SSR. Harvesting the crop in accordance with the group method at the "Storm Bird" collective farm – the largest grain operation in the republic

1974

- <sup>1</sup> Sobieszek, R.A. *The Art of Persuasion: A History of Advertising Photography*. New York: Harry N. Abrams (1988).
- <sup>2</sup> Bolton, R. (ed.). *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Cambridge: MIT Press (1992), p. xlii.
- <sup>3</sup> Curtis, J. „Making Sense of Documentary Photography”. In *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Photos/>, June 2003.
- <sup>4</sup> Solomon-Godeau, A. “On the Image Wars”, *Artforum International*, No. 10, 2004.
- <sup>5</sup> Solomon-Godeau, A. *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1994), p. xxxiv.
- <sup>6</sup> Damisch, H. “Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image”. In Trachtenberg, A. (ed.). *Classic Essays on Photography*. Leetes Island Books (1981), p. 288.
- <sup>7</sup> Sekula, A. “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning”. In Burgin, V. (ed.). *Thinking Photography*. London: Macmillan (1982), p. 87.
- <sup>8</sup> Sekula, A. “The Traffic in Photographs”. In *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983*. Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1984), p. 8.
- <sup>9</sup> Sekula, A. “The Invention of Photographic Meaning”. In *Photography Against...*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5–6.
- <sup>11</sup> Kriebel, S. T. “Theories of Photography”. In Elkins, J. (ed.). *Photography Theory*. New York and London: Routledge (2007), pp. 28–31.
- <sup>12</sup> Tagg, J. *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press (1988), p. 2.
- <sup>13</sup> Боров Ю. Эстетика. – Москва, 2002.
- <sup>14</sup> Руднев В. *Словарь культуры XX в.* – Москва, 1999.
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- <sup>16</sup> Lunačarskis, A. “Par sociālistisko reālismu” (On Socialist Realism), *Literatūra un Māksla*, No. 47 (1097), 20 November 1965, p. 5.
- <sup>17</sup> See Wolf, E. “When Photographs Speak, To Whom Do They Talk? The Origins and Audience of SSSR *na stroike*”, *Left History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1999.
- <sup>18</sup> Литературный энциклопедический словарь. – Москва, 1987.
- <sup>19</sup> Šcerbina, V. “Mūsdienu māksla marksistiskās un buržuāziskās estētikas vērtējumā” (Contemporary Art From the Perspective of Marxist and Bourgeois Aesthetics), *Literatūra un Māksla*, No. 36 (1086), 4 September 1965, p. 6.
- <sup>20</sup> Владимиров Н. Воспитательный потенциал снимка / Советское Фото, 1984, №3.