

The Antinomies of Latvian Literary Realism

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This article traces the social and literary contexts of Latvian literary realism. During its rise in the nineteenth century, Latvian realism was seen as developing along the general lines of European culture that helped to foster aesthetic diversity and innovative potential. These processes are the focus of the first part of the article. The subsequent reshaping and distortion of the concept of realism during the period of Soviet occupation are then scrutinized in some detail. The investigation follows in the footsteps of the current rise of interest in realism, considering its importance in a broad spectrum of contexts, and claims that realism is an innovative aesthetic practice of great historical and contemporary relevance. However, it has also frequently been misunderstood or consciously misinterpreted by representatives of other aesthetic trends as well as misused by political regimes. The article points toward the necessity of restoring a sound interpretation of realist aspirations and their social and aesthetic contributions.

Keywords: Latvian literature / literary criticism / realism / socialist realism / the Soviet regime

This article sets out to explore the social and aesthetic contexts of the rise of realism in nineteenth-century Latvian literary culture and its initial as well as subsequent reception.¹ Considering the recent revitalization of research on realism, this is a topical scholarly issue on an international scale. Significantly, the history of realism is partly a history of response to any kind of imposed restrictions; on the other hand, realism has also been instrumentalized as a tool of imposing and legitimizing such restrictions. The investigation of realism's historical misuses may help to understand the mechanisms employed by twenty-first-century totalitarian and populist ideologies. In this article I intend to trace controversies regarding the term and its application to

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literary practices in two different periods of Latvian realism: the early debates of the 1880s and 1890s that focused on social and moral issues; and the highly biased interpretation of realism under Soviet ideological rule (in particular, in the 1950s and 1960s). In the conclusion, I link some of the research questions to the current revival of interest in literary realism.

There are many factors that caused the steady decline of interest and the subsequent recovery of the concept of realism in literary scholarship. One of the main aspects of criticism has been the predominance of formalist approaches in the humanities in the second half of the twentieth century. As Pam Morris indicates, the aesthetic legacy of realism was challenged and significantly compromised by certain trends in Structuralism, Postmodernism and Deconstruction (Morris 24–44). With this kind of theoretical interventions in mind, even scholars who considered broader social contexts had at times been working along similar lines, which explains the continuous exclusion of realist practices from their primary focus. However, the scrupulous research done by numerous scholars interested in social and historical contextualization of aesthetic trends has in the long run directly or indirectly stimulated the reappearance of studies of literary realism. If we trace just one such line of development, Naomi Schor, in her 1993 book, *George Sand and Idealism*, powerfully argued the importance of idealism within the rich texture of nineteenth-century aesthetic debates. While the relationship of Sand to her contemporaries such as Balzac was retained, the emphasis on idealism shifted the power balance away from realism. Explicitly referring to Schor's thorough investigation, Toril Moi in her 2006 monograph on the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, often associated with nineteenth-century realist and naturalist interventions, argued that it is possible to propose a new interpretation of literary history where the main tension in the second half of the nineteenth century is that between idealism and modernism, thus making the presence of realism superfluous. In his turn, Fredric Jameson, who in the 2010s continuously carried out studies of the poetics of social form, also refers to Schor's monograph; however, his 2013 book *The Antinomies of Realism* (a title on which this article also capitalizes) already provides a striking attempt to re-address the complexity of realism as a literary and art form in nineteenth-century contexts and beyond. Jameson not only emphasizes the possibility and need to evaluate the full spectrum of classical realism with its narrative power and the ability to showcase the affects of human behavior (for him, the most important of realism's productive antinomies is that

between telling and showing) but also its potential continuation and impact in later periods of literary production.

Jameson's book is one important example among many that signal the interest in realism in the first quarter of the twenty-first century being on the rise. Having for a long time been looked upon with great suspicion, literary realism recently experiences a new wave of attempts in opening its innovations and challenges that reach well beyond the classical nineteenth-century period. These trends have even been described as a "new realist turn" (Esty and Lye 276). Significantly enough, both contextual and textual arguments are important here considering the opinion that realism responds to, investigates, questions, and reconstructs the complex ways human lives are lived in specific places and different conditions. In his introduction to the volume on literary realism, significantly titled *Reclaiming Realism*, Matthew Beaumont states that it is of vital importance for national as well as international scholarship to follow realism's different trajectories and contexts tracing its "cognitive as well as imaginative access to a material, historical reality" (Beaumont 2). Postcolonial Studies, Gender Studies, Trauma Studies, and New Historicism are among scholarly approaches to the concept of realism that contextualize its importance (Balaev). At the same time, textually oriented research provides an insight into realism's aesthetic complexities.

An important scholarly milestone is the two-volume investigation *Landscapes of Realism* recently published in the series of comparative literary histories in European languages. The first volume, *Mapping Realism*, already goes beyond the previously established limits and sets out for rereading literary realism "from both a European-language and a global comparative perspective" (Göttsche, Mucignat and Weninger 2). This is further explained in more detail:

Rethinking realism as a transformative, multi-phased and multi-stranded literary-historical dynamic that started well before the programmatic realist movements of the mid-nineteenth century reveals that nineteenth-century realism is not the result of one defining invention or one discreet origin, but rather a cumulative effect of a range of interlinking developments in which inspired authors developed new ways of writing and, step by step, also a vocabulary for describing these innovations in terms that prepared ground for later realist theory. (104)

Importantly, this multi-layered development indicates a potential discrepancy between realist theory and practice: "It is obvious that realist literary practice was epistemologically more advanced than the emerging theory of realism with its baggage of philosophical idealism." (165)

Landscapes of Realism focuses on the multiplicity and diversity of realist efforts inviting further studies of various social and cultural contexts while at the same time suggesting a useful and widely conceived interpretative pattern.

Another important trend in contemporary research is provided by the concept of worlding realism (Goodlad), with an emphasis on realism's willingness to explore the relations between individual and the world, and looking for a particular aesthetic approach. This leads to the recognition that the world is in crisis, and studies of realism might be considered as helping to understand literature's potential interventions.

In recent years, Latvian scholarship also started to contribute to the interpretation of realism in local and comparative contexts. Among other attempts there is a new history of nineteenth-century Latvian literary culture (Daija and Kalnačs, *A New History*), studies of *fin-de-siècle* literary and cultural trends (Kalnačs et al., *Fin de siècle*), research on the nineteenth-century Latvian novel (Kalnačs, "The Genesis"), re-evaluation of the literary oeuvre of the turn-of-the-century Latvian author Rūdolfs Blaumanis (Blaumanis; Füllmann; Füllmann et al.; Kalnačs, *Pavērsiens*) as well as a comparative analysis of realism in nineteenth-century Baltic literatures (Kalnačs, "The Poliphony"). In this article, I build on these investigations to trace the role and interpretation of Latvian literary realism in two periods that for different reasons can be considered turning points in the reception history and have broader implications within international research: late nineteenth century as well as twentieth-century Soviet ideological rule.

The appearance and initial reception of nineteenth-century Latvian realism

The term 'realism,' first used by the philosopher Immanuel Kant in the late eighteenth century (Dierkes-Thrun 709), had during the first half of the nineteenth century already been well established in French literary scholarship. German authors and scholars made their own use of the term, conceiving it in a somewhat modified form of so-called poetic realism that preserved the ties with idealist aspirations. In turn, English and Russian theorists also had their take. These interlinked but at the same time distinctive traditions played a significant role in the understanding of the term in nineteenth-century Latvian culture.

Realism was first mentioned in Latvian literary space in an 1882 article written by Jānis Puriņš-Zvīgulis who at the time studied mathematics

at St. Petersburg University. The author argued that there is a crucial difference between sentimental and romantic poetics, on the one, and realist literature, delving into the representation of the everyday, on the other hand (Knope 107). However, this and other articles with their emphasis on realism's critical potential and demands for a direct involvement with topical social issues cover only a fraction of nineteenth-century realist aspirations that were significantly broader in scope. It is important to recognize that, contrary to what the late arrival of the term might suggest, realism in Latvian literary practice is of much earlier origin.

The nineteenth century was significant in the emergence of Latvian romantic nationalism that, relying on similar ideas and developments in other parts of Europe, brought with it ideas of the possibility of creating an elite culture (Ijabs). While opposing the Baltic German political hegemony, the Latvians at the same time were indebted to the main intellectual trends developed in the Baltic German cultural environment. From this perspective, the most important nineteenth-century move was marked by turning away from the so-called popular enlightenment with its aim to guide and advise the ethnically different and lower social class of Latvian peasants (Grudule; Daija, *Literary*). Instead, a conscious appropriation of the ideas of the most highly valued representatives of German Enlightenment as well as important later poets became a declared aim of the New Latvian movement that "created the contents for the concept of national identity, alongside language and literature, incorporating also an interpretation of national history and a positive self-image of the Latvian nation" (Mintaurs 107).

In an addition to these intellectually charged efforts, another significant trend was the realist turn toward the inclusion of everyday situations and personal experience. The formation of realism was a logical step in the development of nineteenth-century Latvian literature. Early traces of this process can be observed in the emergence of the Latvian language newspapers leading to the creation of the public space and the rise of secular literature (Šemeta). The gradual growth of self-consciousness, stimulated by the spread of national romanticism across different parts of Europe, encouraged ethnic Latvians to aspire to their agency, and the logical consequence of this development was a more careful attention to the living conditions of the population. Nineteenth-century Latvian realism relied on the experience received from various trends in German literature, including popular culture and so-called *Heimatliteratur*, roughly translatable

as homeland literature, as well as poetical realism. Those different strands were fused together by Latvian authors consciously searching to attract broader audiences while at the same time remaining faithful to their poetic goals. Realist practices were already well developed before the term realism was first used in criticism in the 1880s (Kalnačs, "Walking"). Even if putting emphasis on shorter forms such as novellas instead of the traditional impact of nineteenth-century novels (Buzard; Moretti; Watt), the efforts of Latvian authors matched other European literatures striving towards a complex representation of ordinary living conditions, with those not only providing mere background, but creating "a source of action in its own right and a main factor that causes, defines and helps" to form individual characters and to organize the plot (Pavel and Tihanov 46). The innovative potential of realist aesthetics also becomes evident in the tensions between idealism and realism in the Latvian press (Kalnačs, "Beauty"). This juxtaposition was somewhat later followed by a productive dialogue between realism and early modernism. Late nineteenth-century Latvian realism thus responded to the development of both society and culture, and manifested itself in constant interaction with other literary and art trends.

The main objections to realism from the early 1880s on came from two sides, those arguing for heightened requests regarding literary quality, on the one hand, as well as from critics with a staunch idealist persuasion, on the other. The latter ones had already made their point when objecting to the first novel by ethnic Latvian authors, the brothers Reinis and Matīss Kaudzīte, "Mērnīeku laiki" ("The Surveyors' Times"), in 1879. As formulated by the first reviewers, their negative response was mainly due to missing ideals, the authors being accused of getting too sceptical in the depiction of their Latvian compatriots. One of the reviewers, whose opinion was closely echoed by other critics, resolutely stated that "the author of a novel always has an obligation to idealise life, to show it more beautiful and chaste than it in fact is" (Haralds 87). Another important topic of this kind of moral criticism was the representation of women that were still considered by many as mainly capable to carry out only domestic activities.

From the perspective of the quality demands, the contributions of Janis Jansons from the early 1890s are characteristic and important (Jansons). However, the critical stance of the supporters of realism was also characterized by considerable simplifications. One aspect of this was the link to the tradition of Russian literature as juxtaposed to the German impact as well as that of other European literatures. The early

theorists of Latvian realism were keen to turn away from the so-called poetical realism of German literature, bordering on aesthetic idealism, and look for Russian examples, in their eyes creating a true testimony of the existential hardships of the lower social classes. This early perspective with a particular emphasis on the importance of Russian literature turned out to be symptomatic for the later reception of realism during the Soviet era.

Altogether, however, in the late nineteenth century the decisive factors in Latvian literary culture were creative liveliness and aesthetic diversity. The vitality of late nineteenth-century realism benefited from ongoing discussions in literary circles. It was due to this fruitful exchange that realism was able to respond to the challenges of modernity and retained its role alongside modernist innovations. One testimony to this were the first novels dealing with the experience of the lower social classes in the city also emerging toward the end of the century, prominent among them Augusts Deglavs's *Zeltenīte* in 1896. Other authors such as Apsīšu Jēkabs, Rūdolfs Blaumanis, and Andrievs Niedra were scrupulous in their investigations of daily conditions in the countryside. Under such conditions, even the highly subjective and somewhat restricted views of Andrejs Upīts, one of the most ardent and polemical supporters of realism, were relevant as valuable contributions to literary debates (Upīts, *Latviešu*). The representation of individual experience and existential reflection were among the characteristic features of literature in the turn-of-the-century period.

This trend continued into the interwar decades following the establishment of an independent state in 1918, with prose writers Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš, Kārlis Zariņš, and Pāvils Rozītis being among those who insightfully reflected on the war experience and postwar conditions in Latvian society. One of the most important modernist poets of the 1920s and 1930s, Aleksandrs Čaks, opined that the uniqueness of an artwork can only be achieved by observing two main principles, the use of appropriate poetic means and close observation of the conditions of everyday life (Kalniņa 186). Realist trends thus continued to live alongside modernist aspirations in an atmosphere of constant innovation and aesthetic change.

During the subsequent period of Soviet communist rule, the climate of free exchange of opinions changed completely. By imposing strict ideological rules, realism was canonized, thus leading to an ideological distortion of its meaning. For decades to come, literary realism under the Soviet regime lost a great deal of its aesthetic appeal.

Literary realism within the constraints of Soviet ideology

The initial phase of Soviet rule in the aftermath of the 1940 occupation of Latvia was marked by an almost total neglect of earlier traditions. Gradual changes in the overall atmosphere only started to emerge after the death of the Soviet Communist party leader Iosif Stalin. In 1956, the first volume of a collection of articles of Latvian literary criticism comprising the period between 1874 and 1904 appeared. However, despite providing more complex insights into Latvian cultural history in comparison to the 1940s and early 1950s, the edition mirrored the ideological trends of the Soviet regime.

A crucial role in the implementation of strict ideological guidelines was played by the application of the term 'socialist realism' that referred to the ideological demands imposed by communist ideology. To grasp the process of implementation of the ideas of socialist realism we need to take a step back because the main ideological battles had already been fought in the early decades of the history of the Soviet Union. In the turbulent 1920s, avant-garde artists still had a considerable impact on different branches of culture, especially in cinema, theatre, and visual arts. However, the Soviet ideological conversion of the early 1930s with the declaration of socialist realism as the main principle of representation turned the initial climate of vital experimentation into its direct opposite, starting long-term dominance of ideologically prescribed art.

The rise of European realism was linked to the Enlightenment, when "for the first time the authority of metaphysical and divine came under challenge from a secular form of knowledge that claimed to reveal the truth of the material physical world" (Morris 3). The idea of socialist realism was a direct opposite suggesting an imaginary kind of revolutionary development of society. It fostered the opinion that it is "not enough to represent life as it is; it is necessary to show where it is going, and that is toward the inevitable future of the communist society. In short, what is introduced here is a quasi-philosophical, quasi-religious theological doctrine" (Becker 21–22).

Such an approach was not reality grounded, and there was never any clarity as to what exactly socialist realism means. This was a convenient situation for the authorities as they could turn against any artistic creation on the simple grounds of it not being adjusted to 'socialist realist' principles.

The ways the transfer of knowledge was supposed to work is exem-

plified by the First Congress of Soviet Latvian writers that took place in Riga in June, 1941, a year after the Soviet occupation, and a week before the intervention of Nazi Germany. Instead of earlier ways of acquiring knowledge through individual experience, the Soviet authors were requested to follow objectives declared by the guest delegates representing different republics with the whole process being orchestrated from Moscow, or the fourth Rome in Soviet leaders' self-perception (Clark).

In order to promote Soviet ideals, some well-known Latvian authors were mobilized and accepted the ascribed tasks. The most prominent example was that of Andrejs Upīts, born in 1877, who had been one of the most prolific Latvian writers and a staunch supporter of realism and naturalism throughout his literary career. In the introduction to his book *Reālisms literatūrā* (*Realism in Literature*) in 1951, Upīts declared that in the Soviet state realism had become the one and only possible aesthetic method (Upīts, *Reālisms* 3). However, a truthful depiction of different milieus, situations and characters, that was at the core of realist aesthetics, turned out to be incompatible with the ideological prescriptions given to the term 'socialist realism' by its founding fathers.

The historical rootedness in ideology was already characteristic of nineteenth-century Russian criticism that took literary realism as a weapon to promote social struggle (Göttsche, Mucignat and Weninger 151). Largely for this reason the tsarist rule considered realism as threatening the very foundations of class society. Paradoxically enough, while following along the same lines and indicating the representation of the battle of social classes as the primary target of realism, the Soviet regime overemphasized and instrumentalized its impact to a considerable extent stripping realism of its critical potential and aesthetic diversity.

In the orthodox take on the concept of socialist realism, it implied and even promoted the representation of everyday conditions, while at the same time this representation was never expected to be open to criticism and discussion. The long search for regaining art's potential of poetic complexity was twofold; it either meant turning away from 'realism' altogether, or implied an attempt to get rid of the label 'socialist' voluntarily attached to it. In the post-Stalinist period, there were two principal avenues for an authentic expression of the artist. Either authors tried to look for alternatives to 'realism,' a trend blurred in their eyes with the socialist connotation; or they started to rub off the 'socialist' marker from realism and tried to come closer to the descrip-

tion of everyday experience. These processes are extremely rewarding to observe while literary practices gradually overcame ideological restrictions. The first post-Stalinist years brought some debates into the literary field which, however, remained rather tame (Gūtmane 223–262). The courage and ability to express bolder criticism was lacking as nobody knew exactly how far one would be allowed to go. From the second half of the 1950s onward, however, there was a slow but unstoppable move towards a more open approach in literary texts as well as in critical debates. In Soviet Latvia, the first steps of re-vitalizing culture were linked to the return of a more detailed display of individual experience, especially by young authors such as Visvaldis Lāms, Zigmunds Skujiņš, and Regīna Ezera born in the 1920s who started to enter the literary scene in the late 1950s.

One of the most characteristic cases was that of the prose writer Ēvalds Vilks. His example shows that even writers initially not fully antithetic to the Soviet regime faced insurmountable difficulties as soon as they started to express critical opinions. Vilks, born in 1923, worked for the Soviet press, and started to publish his short stories in the late 1950s. His choice of genre already marked an attempt to turn away from the officially promoted Soviet monumental novel, exemplified in Latvian literature by the efforts of Andrejs Upīts and Vilis Lācis that glorified the socialist regime. Instead, Vilks focused on the description of minor details that were hardly compatible with the heroic success narrative promoted by the Soviet authorities. These early efforts were already met with sharp criticism. The most crucial case became that of Vilks's short story *Divpadsmit kilometri* (*Twelve kilometres*, 1963). While working on this text, in a private letter Vilks stated: "In this story, I try to find an answer, how had it been possible for the personality cult to occur. This important question cannot be avoided." (Vilks 430) The plot is saturated by a meeting of three former classmates who in their conversations reflect on the last twenty years, thus bringing together the period of the first Soviet occupation with the early 1960s. The role of each of the three characters in earlier events, their potential guilt as well as the disillusionment about Soviet realities are the main points provided by Vilks's narrative. To an extent, the author still respected official policies of the period that allowed certain criticism of individual actors as long as the very principles of the Soviet regime were not questioned. After rounding up the first version of his text, as the manuscript shows, he added some more explicitly critical remarks before the story was printed in the literary magazine *Karogs*. This publication was met with severe criticism of the author apparently having

doubted the 'socialist' foundations of society. Vilks's prose did not fit the demands of the time exactly, while he was moving closer to more sincere and truthful 'realist' observations. For the subsequent printing in a short story collection in 1968, the author was forced to make several cuts that diminished the power of the message. This second publication of *Twelve Kilometres* almost directly coincided with the Soviet imperialist intervention in Prague.

Despite the significant setbacks and harsh criticism, Vilks's career path shows in a nutshell how approaches to Soviet reality gradually started to change. First, there was an adaptation to the existing conditions which in terms of Postcolonial Studies can be labelled mimicry. Secondly, some of the efforts displayed the phenomenon of hybridity, with more authentic elements already coming to the fore. And finally, in the discussion of the Soviet occupation and the restrictions imposed by the regime, the authors moved towards transculturation to express their thoughts more directly and freely, and from their own point of view. This was an attempt to revitalize realist aesthetics developed by early generations of Latvian writers, especially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, Vilks's case is symptomatic for the Soviet period as even a relatively modest attempt of 'realist' representation could not escape the claws of rigorous 'socialist' critique with the author coming under direct ideological pressure.

Conclusion: The temporalities of Latvian literary realism

The above timeline indicates that there have been several turns in understanding and practicing realism in Latvian literature and criticism. Nineteenth-century realist aspirations were closely related to more general European trends. Realist aesthetics gradually established itself in Latvian literature, reaching considerable maturity by the 1890s. The polemics of the period were productive and helped authors to sharpen their ideas and poetic tools. There was certainly an appeal of realist representations to the reading public that was preserved throughout the independence period of the 1920s and 1930s, when realist art could freely develop alongside other aesthetic trends.

The Soviet period, even if on the surface promoting realist representations, in fact imposed considerable restrictions on the implementation of realist aesthetics, for which the term 'socialist realism' was invented. While the socialist component implied the utopian nature of the project, attempts at more detailed and truthful representation

of the everyday were strictly censored. This ideological heritage left its mark on the literary scene at the turn of the twenty-first century when radical experiments tended to prevail, while realism was considered old-fashioned and outdated even from the perspective of literary history. Subsequently, a gradual re-evaluation of the possibilities of realist aesthetics took place in literary practice. This was also the case with literary scholarship providing new readings of realist texts and reformulating theoretical issues.

The twenty-first-century reception of the history of Latvian realism is inextricably linked to the heightened awareness of realism's potential in international scholarship. Certainly, a significant aspect is the demand for reality effects (Morris 97–118). The historical importance of realist authors is also determined by their willingness and effort to communicate with readers touching on the most painful experiences of human lives. The diversity and openness of contemporary criticism allows for a return to productive discussions of the particularities of realist aesthetics with contrasting opinions still sharing a common ground of recognizing the importance of the reality quest in literature.

In his book, *Literary Studies in Reconstruction*, Marko Juvan points toward the need to contextualize and locate every scholarly opinion:

Due to various histories of literary theorists' personal socialization and their placement within the social-ideological heteroglossia, their metalanguages of literary phenomena are 'contaminated' with unconscious motives, shadows of cultural prejudices, ideas of the goals and purposes of scholarly activity, imaginary identifications, political opposition and so on. (Juvan 27)

All of that is certainly true regarding the study of literary realisms of different periods and cultures. It is also obvious that there are some general trends that cross the borders, bringing areas of research with an international relevance to the fore. One such phenomenon is the current spotlight on realism in literature.

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Antinomije latvijskega literarnega realizma

Ključne besede: latvijska književnost / literarna kritika / realizem / socialistični realizem / sovjetski režim

Razprava preučuje družbene in literarne kontekste latvijskega literarnega realizma. Latvijski realizem se je med svojim vzponom v 19. stoletju razvijal v skladu s splošnimi smernicami evropske kulture, ki so pripomogle k estetski raznolikosti in inovativnemu potencialu. Tem procesom je posvečen prvi del članka. Nato so podrobneje obravnavani poznejše preoblikovanje in izkrivljanje pojma realizma v obdobju sovjetske okupacije. Raziskava sledi trenutnemu porastu zanimanja za realizem, upošteva njegov pomen v širokem spektru kontekstov in pokaže, da je realizem inovativna estetska praksa, ki ima velik zgodovinski, pa tudi sodobni pomen. Vendar so ga predstavniki drugih estetskih smeri pogosto napačno razumeli ali zavestno napačno interpretirali, prav tako pa so ga zlorabljali politični režimi. Članek opozarja na nujnost ponovne zdrave interpretacije realističnih teženj ter njihovih družbenih in estetskih prispevkov.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article

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