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Changes of Visual Narratives within the Popular Illustrated Mass Media Published in Latvia during the 1950's and 1960's

Although cultural heritage of the Soviet era in Latvia during the years after the country regained its independence in 1991 have been reflected from different perspectives, the subject is still broad and manifold. There are certain thematic and stylistic features which enable us to recognize socialist art, yet the definition of socialist realism itself remains unclear and too general.

Author's dissertation project is dealing with changes of visual narratives within illustrated mass media in Latvia during the Soviet regime. For the context of socialist realism visual examples given by some of the popular illustrated mass media are representative and thereby suitable to investigate more thoroughly. They reveal certain aspects of visual culture during the first years after the principles of socialist realism were imposed onto Latvian art and culture in general, but their transformation during the period under review provide an overview of thematic and stylistic features as well as references to the political life, indicating when the regime was more repressive and when it became more liberal.

Describing changes of visual narratives within popular illustrated mass media during 1950's and 1960's, corresponds to the author's interest in both the fine art and cultural heritage of the Soviet period as well as visual culture in the broader sense. Changes of narratives of the visual message was chosen as the characteristic feature of the period, taking into account the great shift in the political life and subsequently in the art and culture in general. Since the beginning of the 1950's belongs to the so called classical Socialist realism period, but subsequent to Stalin's death in 1953 changes in political as well as cultural life occurred.

The basis of the research material consists of the some of the most popular illustrated magazines of the period. Author examined not only first covers of each issue, but also compared other dominant images within the visual content of the magazine published on the

second, third, fourth pages of the cover. The main emphasis though is upon the design of the front covers which according to the content analysis of the printed media is considered the most important element of magazines visual content, while, for example small scale, black and white images published on the last page of the issue would be considered as less important.

Analyzing the design of the magazine covers, the author applied a quantitative approach, while trying to determine most common themes depicted. In particular, the original intention was to track individual lines of visual themes, the ways they were reflected and their changes over the period, mainly focusing on the nuances of composition and style. However, the conclusion was that the themes that emerged as dominant in the early 1950's, such as reflection of industrial and agricultural development, at the end of the decade are depicted rarely or appear in such an altered form that it is problematic to talk about the continuity of the same theme. Therefore the quantitative approach and classifying images according to the subject depicted is accompanied with the detailed analysis of each individual image taking into account different aspects such as composition, scale, mood and artistic expression of the picture in general.

If during the 1950's the story told by the cover image in general is very clear, during the 1960's such characteristic ways of telling visual stories dissolve and the visual message of the magazine covers is rather unclear. The cover and the content of the magazine very often are like two separate entities, and while the socialist reality reflected within the mass media was more or less the same as in previous decade, the cover design from ideological point of view is neutral.