

The Socialist Surrealism of Sasha Gentsis

The long Soviet history of the interaction of the terms which Sasha Gentsis chose for the title of his project may seem to confirm that they are in opposition to each other, but it was the boundary of their collision that piqued his interest and became a source of inspiration.

What is socialist surrealism for the contemporary viewer? What is the interest behind this grotesque combination of two very different concepts and why might this become a defining theme in contemporary artistic practice? These questions, like many others, are more complex than they seem at first glance and require detailed examination.

Sasha Gentsis's project is based on the fundamental contradiction between the conceptual utopia of socialism and lived experience. This conflict is a result of the classical conflict between the reality of creative fantasy and objective reality. Socialism as a product of the visionary convictions of its political ideologues did not reflect contemporary social and economic reality. In fact, it aimed to actively distort reality in order to build a new, more 'perfect' society. The attempt to put this concept into practice resulted in something no less surreal than the work of the artists of the time.

To paraphrase a well-known saying, socialism did not love surrealism because it was essentially the same thing. The political atmosphere of the 1930s gave birth to a very particular artistic method, socialist realism, which can still be considered the high point of ideologically-engaged art. Comprising a complex set of requirements developed at the state level, socialist realism was a method rather than an artistic style, and described only the formal characteristics of the artwork. This method was called on to provide creative support, through the use of a wide range of means of expression, to a single ideological concept. For this reason, socialist realism denied all other methods of understanding social reality. Simultaneously, the mechanism behind the ideological influence of socialist realism frequently assimilated contemporaneous creative concepts, transforming them from potential opponents into subordinate, if hidden, allies. Paradoxical though it may seem, socialist realist works were no less surrealist than those by classical surrealist artists. They were called upon to demonstrate to a wide audience, inside and outside the country, the results of socialist construction, many of which were still at the planning stage.

In this respect, surrealism as a style which visualised the fantastic combination of images within the human subconscious was more realistic than socialist realism. At the very least, works by surrealist artists demonstrated their authors' emotional experiences. More important is the fact that these feelings were a product of subjective perception of social reality, its illusory refraction and not a true reflection. Unlike socialist realist artists, the surrealists did not attempt to present the creative reality of their works as true.

In Gentsis's works, surrealism and socialism collide and form a unified whole. The project is based on industrial buildings, which were conceived or completed during the socialist epoch. The interiors and buildings depicted in these photographs were not simply the products but often the essence of Soviet production's efforts. Gigantic workshops, products of heavy industry with compulsory Soviet symbols, machines designed to create the instruments of labour from raw materials — all of this was intended to transform reality as part of a grandiose project to artificially alter the course of human history. At the same time, Gentsis's project is focused not

so much on the buildings themselves as on their fate in today's world, where the grandiose socialist experiment has transformed into a memory of the past. The realism of socialism in Gentsis's works is surrealistic, presenting fantastic combinations of the remnants of the Soviet past, the ruins of which continue to be actively eroded by western European democratic ideas. This is not simply the surrealism of the industrial past combined with post-industrial modernity but that of the defeat of the future-focused ideological utopia by utilitarian, consumer-oriented reality.

Sasha Gentsis's *Socialist Surrealism* series is also surrealistic in that it poses questions to the viewer on several quantitative levels. These are not simply issues regarding the Soviet socialist past or the preservation of material evidence of them. There exists a whole set of questions about the future of the country which showed socialism to the world but, in the end, rejected the socialist experiment. The ruins of socialism in Gentsis's photographs are more than factory workshops due to be demolished, uncompleted frames of government limousines, rusting details of fantastic mechanisms or industrial waste dumps. His works show the conceptual vacuum of the post-Soviet present, empty efforts and disappointment in the ideal of the 'bright future'. In this respect, Gentsis's socialist surrealism relates to the socialist realism of his forebears in the same way that the realistic anti-utopia relates to the illusion of an ideological utopia. Regardless, the artist leaves space for the viewer's opinion.

It is no accident that Gentsis chose photography as his instrument of artistic expression. The medium itself incorporates the fundamental contradiction between that which is photographed and the reality of the result, which makes photography one of the most surrealistic technologies of expression. With its indestructible link to reality, photography can create images which surpass human perception of the everyday, both in terms of recording detail and stopping time. Photography can be used not only to create realistic images of objects but also to show them in combinations which can appear unrealistic. As a result of contemporary technologies for producing photographic images, the boundary between the real and the illusory is being eroded, forming a surrealistic whole. It is impossible to tell where reality ends and subjective impressions begin, where an object appears natural and where artificial, where the colour palette is genuine and where it has been manipulated. In the end this is not so important, as Gentsis's works are not intended to create a visual model of reality. They show the surreal reality of the fantastic combination of forms, ideologies, the artist's experiences and subjective emotions based on these and many other factors, which in the final analysis distinguish a work of art from documentary proof.

What exactly is the socialist surrealism of Sasha Gentsis? It is a kaleidoscopic mix of official portraits of Soviet leaders and heroes of labour with cheap posters of Western stars of show business and sport. It is a phenomenal attempt at productivity against a background of unhealthy habits. It is a hymn to the monumental Soviet star with a gaping emptiness at its centre. It is evidence of politics and history in a cartoon-like frame on the scrapheap of everyday life. It is grandiose conveyers of successes unachieved and endless corridors leading to a bright future. It is a utilitarian aesthetic of industrial ruins and the bright colours of dull industrial routine.

Gentsis succeeded in recording for future generations a memoir of the last days of the workshops at Moscow's legendary ZIL factory. Thanks to *Socialist Surrealism*, the viewer has a unique opportunity to make a visual connection with the overwhelming might and paradoxical

attractiveness of the Soviet period, which recedes further into the realm of legends with every passing year. *Socialist Surrealism* plays a special role in this process. Rather than documenting, it mythologises Soviet history from the point of view of a contemporary rethinking of socialism's heritage. Gentsis's works do more than record disappearing structures and typical Soviet objects. They are intended to express the emotional atmosphere of the complex socialist past, which today has left the stage of realism behind and attained a completely new quantitative level, the level of surrealism.

Artem Loginov

(Curator of the exhibition "Socialist Surrealism" at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in September 2018 and at the V Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art)