



Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic

Regine Robin

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In this theoretically innovative, richly detailed study, the author presents a new view of socialist realism, situating its literature in the Russian cultural tradition, in the Soviet social environment, and in the context of contemporary literary and cultural theory. The author begins by plunging the reader into the cacophony and confusion of the First Soviet Writer's Congress of 1934, which made socialist realism an official doctrine. She analyzes the oppositions and concepts that fueled the debates: oppositions such as form versus content, pure art versus social function, idea versus artistic image; concepts such as the new hero, naturalism, modernism, and, most important, realism in all its formulations. In order to understand this obsession with realism, the author insists that one must grapple with nineteenth-century Russian literature and literary theory, particularly in the concepts of the 'useless man' and the 'positive hero'. Employing the terms and procedures of discourse analysis, she offers a reading of classical Russian literature that privileges the debate about realism. The remainder of the book focuses on the literature of the Stalin era, especially the officially sanctioned novels - their themes, techniques, and special qualities. The author traces the literary history of socialist realism, arguing that as it was formulated in the early 1930's, it diverged from naturalism and 'the old realism' because it required the judging of reality, rather than its faithful representation. She identifies a sharp turn away from realism toward idealism in 1936-37. Despite a brief renewal and fresh content during World War II, Soviet literature remained compressed in a rigid mold until the end of the Stalin cult under Khrushchev, when socialist realism finally disappeared. The author concludes that socialist realism was 'an impossible aesthetic': the goal of creating a literature open only to one interpretation could never be realized because language itself is always open to multiple interpretations.<

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