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CONSTRUCTING FEMALE IDENTITY IN SOVIET ART IN THE 1930s. A CASE STUDY: VERA MUKHINA'S SCULPTURE

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Abstract: *The current paper is interested in how female identity is artificially constructed through Soviet propaganda, particularly through a new visual language and symbolism, exemplified through the most famous Soviet sculpture, 'Worker and Collective Farm Woman (Labourer)" (Robochii i kolkhoznitsa) by Vera Mukhina (1889-1953), presented in Paris at the International Exhibition in 1937, as opposed to German and French architectural achievements. The sculpture summarizes an entire Soviet 'canon' (Zhdanov's Socialist Realism), the concept used both in its religious and aesthetic understanding, connecting a new artificial identity to a typical Stalinist imagery and a new visual mythology. The paper studies the female identity as a construct emerging from the connection of all these elements and how its attributes and dimensions are radically changed to adjust the Soviet political discourse.*

Keywords: *female identity, construction of identity, Soviet art, Vera Mukhina, sculpture.*

1. Introduction

The attributes of the female presence in the Soviet art of the 1930s are shaped by two important policies: the first emerged from the Leninist background, was oriented (at least at the level of discourse) towards the emancipation of women, become equal 'comrades', while, the second, the construction of 'typical' identities (the 'worker', the 'collective farm woman – *kolkhoznitsa"* and so on) trough political discourse and particularly visual propaganda. An interesting phenomenon here is the transfer of mythological and religious forms, elements and figures to new Soviet art, a process which was deeply related to this artificial or "mechanical construction" of identities (see Morar-Vulcu, 74), transforming art not only at the aesthetic level, but also at the level of its symbolism. The new female identity as a construct, reunites all these elements (political, aesthetic, symbolical, religious), becoming a very significant embodiment of what the "New World" and "New Person" wanted to appear like, as it happened in the case of most famous Soviet sculpture, 'Worker and Collective Farm Woman (Labourer)" (*Robochii i kolkhoznitsa)* by Vera Mukhina (1889-1953), presented in Paris at the International Exhibition in 1937. The current paper is therefore interested in how

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female identity is artificially constructed through Soviet propaganda, particularly through a new visual language and symbolism, exemplified through Vera Mukhina's world-famous sculpture, as opposed to German and French architectural achievements. The sculpture summarizes an entire Soviet 'canon' (Zhdanov's Socialist Realism), the concept used both in its religious and aesthetic understanding, connecting a new artificial identity to a typical Stalinist imagery and a new visual mythology. At a larger scale, the paper also studies the female identity as a construct emerging from the connection of all these elements and how its attributes and dimensions are radically changed to adjust the Soviet political discourse.

2. Constructing Identities

The Soviet art, based on a straight-laced political discourse (involving as a powerful weapon the visual propaganda, conducted on specific rules – those of Socialist Realism - as a new, well-established visual language) was focused not on presenting a reality (in sculpture, painting and so on), but a future, ideal person or society, with the intention of inducing it to the viewers and implicitly shaping the existing identities and people to adapt the *new* 'standards' (*new* were, in this type of discourse, the world, the person, the aims, in a word everything, *new* standing in fact for Soviet). "Socialist Realism, established at the Writers' Union Congress in 1934 as the sole method of Soviet cultural production, was defined by Andrei Zhdanov, newly appointed Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, as the representation of "reality in its revolutionary development. Zhdanov, protector of Stalinist cultural orthodoxy from 1934 to 1948, required that Socialist Realism should offer an educational glimpse of the future perfected socialist world, designed to operate as an aspirational model for the consuming masses. Newspapers - whatever their specialist theme - were explicitly positioned as propaganda sites which offered ideologically correct models to their mass readers, through carefully contrived juxtapositions of texts and image. Newspaper photographs were vehicles of Socialist Realism as much as any poster, painting or *monumental sculpture* [emphasis added]**".** (Simpson, 2)

An important phenomenon, as we noted at the beginning of our study is the construction of identities or social typologies, art being the most useful instrument as its visual impact was very powerful, without effort, especially when speaking of monumental sculptures. There are actually two levels here to discuss. The first one refers to the policy of 'constructing identities' and the second to the actual process of artistic typicalisation. Starting with the policy, we can notice that it meant creating a social complex matrix and its transmission, through language (visual communication included) in order to re-create the existing identities and individuals. "First of all – Călin Morar-Vulcu, one of the scholars who have studied the phenomenon - the identity is not essential, but *constructed*. […] The construction is radical. […] Secondly, not only the nation, but all group identities, cultural, professional, political identities and so on (classes, age groups) are *imagined* [emphasis added]. […] Thirdly, a fundamental role in constructing the identity is held by narration or by the discourse. […] *All* discursive actors have necessarily been invented." (Morar-Vulcu, 99-100).

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"British art historian, Toby Clark, coined the term 'political physiology' to denote political constructs of bodily form that accorded with, and could be used to symbolize, what was currently required from the citizen by Soviet ideology. These constructs related directly to an abstractly defined, heroic ideal of a future, perfected genus of humankind, the New Soviet Person, which would combine the physical characteristics of health, strength, and beauty, with the mental and moral powers to achieve the highest levels of patriotism and *partiinost*' (party-mindedness) […] The arts were expected to provide descriptions and visualizations of this ideal." (Simpson, 3). The term "ideal" is mentioned when speaking about this typologies promoted so agressively and another variant circulating in literature with respect tot the topic is "fictional" (Simpson, 2) identities or "imagined" as we already mentioned – yet, taken not as such but treated as roles which were imperative to fill.

Identity is therefore given, even imposed consciously and unconsciously (in a subliminal manner) and not assumed, built within the political discourse, in a very organized, systemised manner, even hierarchies being established within these identities –(Morar-Vulcu, 101). Among them, gender identity was one very much studied after 1989, one major conclusion being that one could observe "a fundamental tension between the imperativeness of women's emancipation […] and a political practice oriented in a totally different direction than gender role reformation" (78). The woman is therefore imposed a new pattern, her identity was artificially and somehow aggressively changed, still she was not offered the premises to embody this identity pattern, instead being forced to struggle to perform multiple (and sometimes contrasting) roles.

The second level mentioned, the way in which this construction of identity takes place in art through building Socialist Realism typologies, occupies actually the main section of the current paper, and is exemplified through Mukhina's work. But first, when discussing typologies, we have to mention the ideological background: "In analytic discussions of political art in the early 1930s, tremendous attention was devoted to the issue of *tipazh*. […] *tipazh* acquired central importance in discussions of posters because established images of class categories had disappeared. In the Soviet lexicon, the term *tipazh* implied a correct rendering of a particular social category. The essence of *tipazh* was not typicality, but typecasting or *typicalization*. [emphasis added]" (Bonnell).

The social typologies to be presented in art were actually the ones projected at the political level, the people the Soviet state wanted to have through a sort of rebirth, a process actually embodied by this *typicalization* and the new visual language. Anatolii Lunacharskii "explained in 1931 that the artist's task was not to describe what existed in the present but to disclose 'the inner essence of life, which comes out of proletarian goals and principles.' Like the concept of socialist realism then taking form, this prescription for artists involved a fundamental shift to a new mode of visual representation which presented only the future, the future in the guise of the present." (Bonnell)

3. New Mythology, Religion - New Heroes

We above mentioned the fact that the constructed artificial identity was created as a sort of *ideal* pattern for the Soviet

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people, men and women, to fill. Beyond the invention or fiction of identity, it was also invested with a sort of supernatural or religious features. More than new standards, the pattern (or "mechanically created" identities, "imposed through public communication", Morar-Vulcu, 74) transmitted powerful symbols, meant to be religiously adopted and not questioned.

The problem of communicating a new artistic imagery, correlated to new social typologies, as forms of a new political mythology or religion, has various levels of interpretation. One of them was Zhdanov's code of rules to be applied in arts, a sort of new 'religious' canon, similar to those orthodox religious painting imposed – establishing new attributes, new dimensions, new figures (heroes) to be described.



Fig. 1. '*Worker and Collective Farm Woman (Robochii i kolkhoznitsa) by Vera Mukhina (1889-1953)*

Especially through sculpture, due to its possible dimensions and public exposure - and here we refer to public monuments, such as the most famous Soviet sculpture, Vera Mukhina's 'Worker and Collective Farm Woman (Labourer)" (*Robochii i kolkhoznitsa),* 1937 (fig.1) – the idea of heroes or gigantic mythical figures could be best transmitted: "The statues, as Maurice Agulhon has remarked, involve an entire ceremonial" (Pintilescu, 67). Therefore, the proletarian heroes of the day (workers, peasants and so on) were represented, next to the fathers of Communism, Lenin, Marx or Engels, as impressive giants, supernatural figures yet with an extremely prominent proletarian feature (the sickle and so on). Pat Simpson speaks of "mythologisation of the female New Soviet Person" (Simpson, 2): "there were, of course many "positive" images of women "heroes", including representations of women occupying traditionally male spaces – tractor-driving, engineering and political speaking. The function of these images was to illustrate the benefits of emancipation within the Soviet state, and the legal equality of rights" (Simpson, 7).

We could call this newly born pantheon a statuary mythology, filled with strong, impressive figures, whose authors (as well as the people exposed to the works) were perfectly aware of this religious charge, as becomes apparent in the following example on colour interpretation in (this time) an image: "The woman tractor driver, who is brimming with confidence and authority, is depicted entirely in red. A red person on a red tractor was scarcely a realistic rendering of the rural scene. *But viewers knew how to interpret the color red and to appreciate its positive connotation, since red was a privileged color in both religious and Bolshevik art. It*

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conferred sacred status on a person or object. [emphasis added]". (Bonnell)

Going back to Mukhina's sculpture, the main work on which the current study focuses, it is probably one of the most eloquent (if not the most) for this religious investment in Soviet sculpture. "The monumental sculpture 'Worker and Collective Farm Woman (*Robochii i kolkhoznitsa)* by Vera Mukhina (1889-1953). Probably the best-known piece of Soviet Art in the World, it was designed for the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exhibition. Rising above the neighbouring exhibits in the heart of the *old world,* against the background of the Eiffel tower, the pavilion embodied Soviet achievements. *Rivalry between the two worlds* was of essence; Mukhina noted that the Statue of liberty in New York took eleven years to build, as opposed to six months for her sculpture."[1](Hughes, 191).



Fig. 2. *International Exhibition, Paris, 1937*

The religious charge was obtained through various elements, starting with the titanic dimensions of the *heroes* (24.5 metres), their union in a sort of primordial couple (still recognizable for their proletarian tools), to the manner in which they are interpreted and placed vertically, with the clothes blown by wind and therefore suggesting wings or flying and of course, through their placement in an architectural complex, vertically oriented in the manner of churches. "Now, though the building appeared as a pedestal for her gigantic monument, its cuboid structure accelerated upwards and forwards and with the sculpture formed a *pyramidal, spire-like tower. The charged, monumental conception of this new world cathedral* faced and challenged the German pavilion (fig.2) […] Mukhina's figures stride aerodynamically forward, profiling the socialist faith. They look straight ahead, specimens of serious, youthful, focused intent and decision. Hair and clothes swept back by the wind, the smith and agricultural woman, man and woman, express gender equality and specificity in archetypal rhythmic balance and unison. […] *They are not simply heroes, they are winged angels of Soviet victory. The Worker and Collective Farm Labourer is definitive: Mukhina had created the ultimate piece of Stalinist propaganda art* [emphasis added]" (Howard, 191) and, we could add, it was a deeply religious one, in the Soviet creed.

4. The Soviet Woman, new Attributes. The *Kolhoznitsa*

Eventually, "*Worker and Collective Farm Labourer* (fig.1) was to be recognized as *the* symbol of the Soviet Union". (Howard, 189) Mukhina's sculpture was therefore world-wide famous, due to its presentation at the Exhibition in Paris, but especially because it embodied all that Soviet art was required to offer: a credible, yet ideal identity pattern. "It was reproduced in more media than any other work of the Soviet era, as the 'most vivid achievement of Socialist

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Realism in our figurative art'. From 1947 it provided the opening image for movies made by Mosfilm studios." (Hughes, 191).

There are two interesting elements in relation to this construction of identity, especially when focusing on the female figure in the sculpture: one is the idea of women's emancipation in communism, as "the authority of both statues bears witness to identifiable changes in the status of women across the centuries, in terms of both *gender iconography* and the respective creative roles of Collot and Mukhina. [emphasis added]" (Howard, 189). Although the main perspective is that the pair in Mukhina's work is equal and expresses an evolution and an emancipation of women, there are still some perspectives that consider the figure (symbol for woman and peasantry) as subordinate: Another hint of women's perceived subordinacy was embodied in the gendering of symbolic representations of the two basic Soviet political classes, the proletariat and the peasantry in the 1930s.The proletariat, positioned as the more advanced of the two classes, was commonly represented by a male image, while the peasantry was symbolized by a female figure. Perhaps the most powerful example of this approach is provided by Vera Mukhina's giant sculpture, *The Industrial Worker and the Collective Farm Girl*, that surmounted the Soviet pavilion at the Paris exhibition in 1937 [Fig.7]. While the interlocking, upraised hammer and sickle imply the unity and solidarity of the two classes, the figure of the peasant girl is smaller than that of the proletarian, and her stride does not reach quite so far forward." (Simpson, 9).

The second implication is related to the real figures it was supposed to represent or at least inspire. Vera Mukhina was contesting the ideal (therefore imagined, fictional character of the figures). "It represented the 'real people', she said "she did not have to invent the pair: such young people were all around her, bold and confident in their task and of their victory" (Hughes, 191), marked by the "cheerful and powerful impetus that characterizes our country"(Mukhina qtd. in Hughes, 191). It would be interested to focus on the actual features of such a real woman, the so-called *kolkhoznitsa,* as a central figure in the Soviet female imagery and therefore represented in the most *typical* or most canonical sculpture.

"Youth, strength, health and beauty worthy of our great days" (Simpson, 2) are just a few of the clichés around the female typology: she must be, especially in the 1930s (with the collectivization) artistic representations androgynous, powerful, athletic (showing "beauty through strength", Howard, 188). The female image is through these features closer than ever to that of the male, fact present in visual representations and which is also supported in the written discourse by the structures of the Russian language: "while visualizations of the New Person could be either male or female, the construct of the New Soviet Person used masculine linguistic forms (*novyi sovetskii chelovek*) to signify ostensible gender-neutrality" (Simpson, 6).

In this phase, "the emphasis […] was on women's participation in agricultural labor. The attributes of youth, agility, and fitness were directly linked to the labor function. *The new image of the peasant woman focused attention on production, not reproduction.* [emphasis added]" (Bonnell).

But who actually was the *kolkhoznitsa* and why was she presented as a symbolic image (even a Soviet symbol in Mukhina's 1937 work)? First of all, it was a recently invented identity pattern and this makes

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the "mythologisation" process the more interesting. Ten years before, the same Mukhina had represented *The peasant woman* in a totally different manner, the so-called *baba* as opposed to the new *kolkhoznitsa.* The latter was therefore an invention of the 1930s and emerged from the phenomenon of collectivization, becoming very successful within media, a real "star" of the propaganda posters, paintings, sculptures and cinema (as she actually was "invented" by the movies, appearing for the first time in Sergei Eisenstein's film *Staroe i novoe* (*Old and New*, or *The General Line*), released in October 1929)[2].

While peasant women had been before depicted as mature, maternal figures, *kolkhoznitsa* was associated with a totally new vision, which placed her closer the worker's functions and the idea of paid labour, production and plan (due to collectivisation). Therefore she was no longer associated to maternity or fecundity, but was depicted as younger, slimmer, cheerful and energetic. The imagery involves also differences in the setting, as " the new visual language that was becoming established. Young, trim women are shown in the act of working; the old class marker, the sickle, has disappeared (the tractor will take its place). Each woman wears a red kerchief tied behind her head, in the style of women workers, rather than under the chin, as was formerly conventional in the representation of peasant women. Details of appearance, such as the style of the kerchief, conveyed the message to viewers that the *kolkhoznitsa* was different from the *baba* of the past; she belonged to a new breed of *Homo sovieticus* in the countryside" (Bonnell).

Two essential elements related to this imagery (invented in the1930s) should be added. The *kolkhoznitsa* not only was presented as an effective labourer (building Socialism together with the factory workers and raising it "Higher and Higher", if we quote Serafima Ryiangina's "canonic" painting), but was associated with a powerful political role, based on a real necessity in the countryside, where people could have been (and were) reluctant to collectivization. Therefore, the propaganda posters, artistic works and films depicted her as determined figure fighting for the *kolkhoz,* as a form of progress for the entire community. (see Bonnell). Even more (and this is the second element we mentioned), when becoming a *kolkhoznitsa* the dimensions change together with the features of the peasant women. "Rural women […] were also represented in the *larger-than-life* format previously reserved only for workers and Red Army heroes. The magnification device had been used during the Civil War but had receded from visual propaganda in the 1920s. Its reintroduction in the early 1930s accentuated the importance, once again, of *superhuman Bolshevik heroes* whose deeds made them giants among the 'masses.' In the system of signification of political posters, perspectival distortions served to identify heroic figures. Thus, the *kolkhoznitsa* was now sometimes represented as a giant figure, towering over enemies and the landscape around her.[…] The formidable peasant woman *heroically* resisting 'class enemies' in the countryside became a stock figure in visual propaganda of the early 1930s. *Never before had the peasant woman been represented with this kind of perspectival distortion, which previously had been applied exclusively to the two unambiguous heroes of the revolution.* [emphasis added]" (Bonnell).

The *kolkhoznitsa* – as portrayed in Mukhina's famous work and therefore

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present in the most significant Soviet sculpture, "Worker and Collective Farm Woman (Labourer)" (*Robochii i kolkhoznitsa)* - contained all the elements typical to the phenomenon of constructing, inventing artificial identities and social typologies. One explanation is perhaps its late emergence, on the politically charged ground of collectivisation. Therefore, this new invention in matters of imagery embodied both the construction of "fictional" identity patterns (by change of features) and the phenomenon of "mythologisation", of transformation of these social types in new religious figures (by change of dimensions).

Finally, we should mention one more factor related to the emergence of this figure and the construction of female identity in Soviet art and this is the presence of female artist themselves as partial creators of this imagery. Bonnell also mentions that "the emergence of a new iconography can only be explained by a combination of circumstances; no single factor will suffice to account for such a shift in the basic pattern of visual representation. At the outset, it is worth noting that female poster artists achieved prominence for the first time in the early 1930s, many of them concentrating particularly on the theme of collectivization. As we have seen, some of the most memorable posters on this theme with large printings came from *female artists* such as Korableva. The presence of female artists certainly deserves attention, but it cannot account for the prevalence and consistency of the new imagery. Many collectivization posters were created by male artists, who far outnumbered the women in the profession. [emphasis added]"(Bonnell).

In relation to the idea of women taking part in the artificial creation of female identity patterns we can mention on the one hand their significant number (not only as Bonnell mentioned when speaking about collectivisation posters) – we already focused on Vera Mukhina (who was assisted in the making of the famous sculpture again by two women Nina Zelenskaya and Zinaida Ivanova; we also mentioned Serafima Ryiangina's "canonic" painting and the list can continue). Even if the construction of these symbolic patterns was not exclusively performed by women, they were given their share of participation and some of them became 'heroes' like their representations. ("Mukhina – for instance – […] was elevated into the canon of Great World Artists. The Grand Hall of Shtiglits Museum in St. Petersburg, has a frieze installed in the 1950s, in which Mukhina's relief portrait sits alongside plaques to sculptors as world renown such as Michelangelo and Donatello", (Hughes, 191).

On the other hand and more importantly, we should mention the interesting phenomenon of women involved in this political "game" of constructing fictional (unnatural, "mechanical") identities. The political involvement is obvious – explicitly, women were taking part in a common effort and it was most natural, at the ideological level, for them to be present. Actually, it happened many times during communism for women to be present statistically in political activities in order to justify and illustrate the idea/ideal of women's emancipation by communism. On the other hand, it was a game in which these real female-artists, female-creators were involved and this was a game of a pseudo-self-projection or self-creation. The new Realist Socialism 'canon' was imposing patterns both on viewers and the art creators, in a double change/shaping of identity.

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5. Conclusions

The policy of building artificial identities and "new" social typologies, in other words imposing an artificial personality and standards on something that was organic, alive, was very present in the USSR during the 1930s, decade on which we focused, especially through Vera Mukhina's sculpture and analysis of the figure of *kolkhoznitsa.* As Simpson notes, „the broad requirement, reinforced in 1934, was for the creation of an array of fictional "types" standing for ideological constructs connected with age, sex, class and occupation, that responded to shifting state concerns and Party policies" (3-4).

The female identity is one of the major issues in this process of creating 'fictional' identities especially because the idea of women's emancipation was one of the advantages of Communism, as political propaganda never forget to mention.

The *kolkhoznitsa,* a creation of the 1930s and especially of the collectivisation process, is one of the most relevant images in this new iconography, its representation being one of the most "canonical" in Socialist Realism. As becomes obvious in Mukhina's gigantic sculpture, 'Worker and Collective Farm Woman (Labourer)" (*Robochii i kolkhoznitsa),* 1937, the *kolkhoznitsa*, the collective farm woman, has heroic and even religious or mythological attributes in addition to her proletarian features, offering the model requested in order to shape real women's identity and thus becoming one of the most relevant examples (if not the most relevant) for this ideologically based process of constructing artificial identities, partly by the means of art (as a subject itself to an ideological canon) and particularly images and (monument) sculpture, on the basis of its strong visual impact.

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Notes

[1]The difference in duration, showed by Mukhina actually stood for something more: she implied the Soviet type of proletarian attitude: the nine tons of steel turned into the 24.5 metres statue were worked in three or four shifts (see Hughes, 191)

[2] The centerpiece of the film is a determined young peasant woman who helps to establish a collective farm, or *kolkhoz*; the villagers resisting collectivization ridicule her efforts and label her a *baba*. After much difficulty, she obtains a tractor for the farm. In the final scene of the film as originally edited by Elsenstein, she is pictured triumphantly at the wheel of the tractor." – symbol of progress, of the „new world"(Bonnell)

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