

The influence of the Vienna School of Art History on Soviet and post-Soviet historiography: Bruegel's case

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Introduction

Soviet art historiography has remained a terra incognita for Western scholars for decades. Just a few names succeeded in breaking through the Iron Curtain. Mikhail Alpatov, Boris Vipper and Viktor Lazarev were among this lucky few.¹ Although these sparks of recognition, if not sympathy, were insufficient to expose the theoretical or/and ideological underpinnings of Soviet art history.

Today's knowledge of the Soviet and post-Soviet realm is marked by deep-rooted misinterpretations and simplifications. Scholars addressing the Soviet art historical legacy deal with several tropes. Lithuanian-born American art historian Meyer Shapiro in his paper of 1936 scrutinizing 'the New Viennese School' had laid foundations for the first one that highlighted Russian/Soviet intellectual unity with the so-called New Vienna School through the personality of Mikhail Alpatov.² At

¹ Translations made during the Soviet times from Soviet scholars' works include but not limited to: Mikhail Alpatov, Nikolai Brunov *Geschichte der Altrussischen Kunst : Textband*, Augsburg: B. Filser Verl., 1932; Mikhail Alpatov, *Russian impact on art*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1950; [Trésors de l'art russe.] *Art treasures of Russia*, by M.W. Alpatov: notes on the plates by Olga Dacenko, translated by Norbert Guterman, London : Thames & Hudson, 1968; Mikhail Alpatov, Leonid Matsulevich, *Freski tserkvi Uspeniia na Volotovom Pole*, Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1977; Boris Vipper, *Baroque art in Latvia*, Riga, Valtera un Rapas, 1939; Boris Vipper, *L'art letton: essai de synthèse historique*, Riga : Izdevnieciba Tale, 1940; Viktor Lazarev, *URSS icones anciennes de Russie*, Paris: New York Graphic Society en accord avec l'UNESCO, 1958.

² Throughout the paper, I shall use two terms related to the Viennese scholars: 'The Vienna School of Art History' and the 'New Vienna School of Art History' (sometimes it is also referred to as the 'Second Vienna School'). The first notion is more inclusive and is used to designate a group of art historians connected to the Department of Art History at the University of Vienna. It encompasses several generations of scholars of different views and approaches. The second term, 'The New Vienna School', which Meyer Shapiro introduced in the paper of 1936, on the contrary, refers only to a particular branch of the School – that of Hans Sedlmayr and Otto Pächt, who championed 'Structuralist' art history. This second term I shall apply only when analysing Sedlmayr's essays on Bruegel's art, while the former will be applied more broadly. For more on the Vienna School on the different stages of its development see: Matthew Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History. Empire and the Politics of Scholarship*, University Park, 2013; Meyer Shapiro, 'The New Viennese School', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. no. 18, 1936, 258–266; Christopher S. Wood, *The Vienna School Reader: politics and art historical method in the 1930s*, New York, 2000; Richard Woodfield (ed.), *Framing Formalism: Riegl's Work*, London-New York: Routledge, 2013.

the same time, remained rather sceptical about it.³ Despite Shapiro's acclaim for the Alpatov's contribution to the famous issue of *Kunstwissenschaftliche forschungen*, readers of his review,⁴ got an impression that all the flaws of the New Vienna School were characteristic for Soviet/Russian scholars' writings and that he as a second 'scientist of art'⁵ was 'concerned with shapes or qualities which are not immediately apparent and which are rarely described in a definite manner'.⁶ Moreover, being named among the representatives of the Second Vienna School cast a shadow over Alpatov himself for the School's protagonists, Hans Sedlmayr and Otto Pächt, were accused of operating with notions like 'race, spirit, will, and idea' by Shapiro.⁷ These accusations were aggravated by the upcoming rise of the Nazi ideology in Austria.

John Bowlt, an English scholar, who wrote prolifically from 1970s onwards on the Russian avant-garde art and Soviet art history, laid the foundation for the second trope, that of a 'paradise lost and found' in his paper.⁸ He considered Russian pre-Revolutionary art history as a 'truthful' one, which was toppled by 'alien' views, the Marxist⁹ in the 1920s – 1930s.¹⁰ The Stalinist period of the 1930s –

³ Meyer Shapiro, 'The New Viennese School', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. no. 18, 1936, 258–266.

⁴ See, for example, Azatyan Vardan, 'Cold-War Twins: Mikhail Alpatov's *A Universal History of Arts* and Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art*', *Human Affairs*, vol. no. 19, 2009, 289–296. Alpatov was also charged with nationalistic rhetoric in Anatoliy Rykov, 'Mikhail Alpatov, or What is the Soviet Art History?', *Gramota*, vol. no. 12 (86), 2017, 169–174.

⁵ Here Meyer Shapiro discusses Hans Sedlmayr's concept of 'two sciences of art'. Sedlmayr introduced the concept in Hans Sedlmayr, *Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft*, Frankfurter Verlag-Anst., 1931. He associated the 'first science' with the positive documentation ('gathering and ordering the material' as Shapiro puts it) and the 'second science' (the higher one in Sedlmayr's opinion) with analysis and explanation of a work's underlying structures.

⁶ Shapiro, 'The New Viennese School', 259.

⁷ Shapiro, 'The New Viennese School', 259. Another critic of the New Vienna School and its adherence to transhistorical entities like race or *Geist* was Ernst Gombrich, who took a stand against Hegelianism and structural analysis in his famous review of Sedlmayr's *festschrift*: Ernst Gombrich, Reviewed Work: *Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttheorie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Probleme der Kunstwissenschaft, i), *Art Bulletin*, vol. 46, no. 3, 1964, 418–420.

⁸ John Bowlt (b. 1943) is an English art historian, who visited Soviet Union on numerous occasions. Now he heads Institute of Modern Russian Culture (University of Southern California). John Bowlt, 'Some Thoughts on the Condition of Soviet Art History', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 71, No. 4. (Dec., 1989), 542–550.

⁹ Here and on subsequent occasions, when Soviet art history will be labelled 'Marxist' it will be a conscious simplification. 'Marxist' in case of Soviet art historiography stands for a peculiar mix of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist methodology, which in itself can be a subject to discussion.

¹⁰ 'This shift in Soviet criteria is especially evident today, for it is occurring after a long and tedious period of stagnation in Soviet art history, a period which, as a matter of fact, is now the target of outspoken criticism by art and architecture historians in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and elsewhere. The new wave of Soviet art criticism represented by individuals such as Khan-Magomedov, Kostin, Kovtun, Rakitin, Sarab'ianov, Zhadova, attempted to renounce the strictures of the Stalinist 'esthetic' and to refurbish the fine traditions of art criticism that evolved just before and after 1917, represented by Efros, Gollerbakh, Punin, Tarabukin,

1950s was followed by the Thaw that broke a rift with the orthodox Marxist-Leninist approach. The 1960s saw a gradual 'improvement' fostered by the political liberalisation, but it was the period of 1970s – 1980s when, as Bowlt puts it, 'Interpretations and elucidations of artistic subjects are now less dependent upon quotations from Marx and Lenin, although the conclusions are still, by and large, predictable'.¹¹

Both Shapiro's and Bowlt's judgments have limitations. The former addressed a paper by a Soviet scholar insofar as it was published within the volume he was interested in and the latter evaluated the works by his Soviet colleagues, who were writing about the Russian avant-garde art. Neither was concerned with giving a broad overview of intellectual exchanges between Soviet art historians and their Western colleagues, nor could they embrace the post-Soviet reality for they were written before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The third option of dealing with the Soviet 'periphery' of art historical knowledge – looking at it in the context of the national paradigm – deserves particular mention. It can be found in selections of articles touching upon 'national' art histories, heavily impacted by Soviet presence (that of the present-day Russia, Estonia, and Czech Republic to name but a few). However, even in these comprehensive edited volumes one rarely can find papers addressing Soviet/Russian scholarship.¹² Amongst the latest volumes deserve mentioning is *A Socialist Realist History? Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades* of 2019, where Soviet/Russian art historical writing is reviewed at length in the contributions of Nataliya Zlydneva and Marina Dmitrieva.¹³ Although, the period is rather limited – from the 1920s to 1960s – and, once again, excludes post-Soviet practices.

Therefore, despite recent efforts, Soviet/Russian art history remains mostly a grey zone in current scholarship and its image is still defined by the two tropes that emerged mainly from Shapiro's and Bowlt's works. Voices bringing up specific Soviet scholars and their relation to the Western European art historical narrative (such as of Zlydneva and Dmitrieva) were too feeble to provoke any noticeable paradigmatic shift in the attitude towards Socialist/Marxist writings. To enhance our understanding, I shall argue, it is worth examining Soviet art history in relation to the Vienna school, which remained much until the 1960s its closest ideological enemy and ally. And even after the introduction of the iconology to the Soviet art

Ternovets, et al.' John Bowlt, 'New Soviet Publications on Art', *The Russian Review*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1979, 348.

¹¹ John Bowlt, 'New Soviet Publications on Art', *The Russian Review*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1979, 358.

¹² For example, Ján Bakoš in *Discourses and Strategies: The Role of the Vienna School in Shaping Central European Approaches to Art History & Related Discourses* (2013) is limited to Central Europe. James Elkins examined only Soviet/Russian project of the Universal (and Stalinist) History of Art in James Elkins, *Stories of Art*, New York and London: Routledge, 2013, 89–97.

¹³ Nataliya Zlydneva, 'Rereading the 1920s. The Alternative Paths of Soviet Art History During the 1950s and 1960s' in: Krista Kodres, Kristina Jõekalda, Michaela Marek, eds., *A Socialist Realist History?: Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades*, Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2019, 130–142; Marina Dmitrieva, 'The Riddle of Modernism in the Art Historical Discourse of the Thaw' in: Krista Kodres, Kristina Jõekalda, Michaela Marek, eds., *A Socialist Realist History?: Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades*, Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2019, 143–169.

history, Viennese influences did not disappear but remained a kind of art historical unconscious.

As I shall argue the ideas and approaches of the Viennese art historians not only heavily influenced Soviet historiography from its very beginnings but also exposed the contradictory nature of the Soviet Marxist methodological paradigm.¹⁴ I shall not address, however, another important and influential domain, namely, iconology, which made its way into the Soviet art historiography mostly due to the Thaw. Its role in Soviet art historiography had recently been explored by Marina Dmitrieva.¹⁵

The exchanges with the Vienna school received attention quite sporadically and this paper aims to fill the gap via the case of Pieter Bruegel. This choice is not so arbitrary, as it might have seemed. So little is known about this painter, leaving art historians nearly without any reliable sources and a huge artistic heritage that his legacy became a testing ground for new methodological approaches of every new generation of the Viennese art historians. Pieter Bruegel was equally popular among the Soviet and post-Soviet art historians tempted by his 'humble origins' and 'realism' of his paintings.¹⁶ Therefore, mutual influences between scholars who studied this enigmatic painter were inevitable as he had not supplied art historians with any ego-narratives and let them free to interpret his works in their own manner.

It is worth also paying particular heed to translations. It comes as no surprise that before the 1970s works of the Viennese art historians were rarely translated into Russian. The only exception might be the translation of several essays of Max Dvořák's 'Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte' of 1934 (the unabridged translation was published only in 2001) and that of Hans Sedlmayr that appeared in Soviet collections of articles of 1935 and 1936.¹⁷ In the 1970s Otto Benesch's *The Art of*

¹⁴ The Soviet Marxist paradigm, if one can talk about it at all, was at the core a mixture of Pre-Revolutionary art history, which aspired to reveal the transcendental truth behind a work of art, and Leninist-Stalinist interpretation of Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's views on the functions and aims of art. It resulted in oscillation between idealistic and materialistic interpretations, which will be evident in the further analysis of Soviet works related to Pieter Bruegel's oeuvre.

¹⁵ She addressed the issue at the conference 'Iconologies: Global Unity or/and Local Diversities in Art History' (Krakow, 23 – 25 May, 2019) in a paper entitled '*Iconology in the art-historical discourse in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s: Mikhail Liebmann and Mikhail Sokolov*'.

¹⁶ Mikhail Alpatov, 'Peasant Bruegel', *Etyudy po istorii zapadnoevropeiskogo iskusstva*, Moskva-Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1939, 41-53; Nikolai Nikulin, *Nekotorye problemy tvorchestva Piter Breygelya Starshego*, Leningrad, 1954; Rostislav Klimov, *Piter Breygel Starshyi*, Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1954; Sergey L'vov, *Piter Breygel Starshyi*, Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1971.

¹⁷ Maks Dvorzhak, *Ocherki po iskusstvu Srednevekovyia*, Moskva: OGIZ, Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1934, 272; Maks Dvorzhak, *Istoriya iskusstva kak istoriya dukha*, Moscow: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2001, 336; Mikhail Alpatov, David Arkin, Nikolai Brunov, eds, *Istoriya arkhitektury v izbrannykh otryvokakh*, Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Vsesoyuznoy Akademii Arkhetiktury, 1935, 590; *Arkhiteturnoye tvorchestvo Mikel'angelo. Sbornik statey*, Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Vsesoyuznoy Akademii Arkhetiktury, 1936, 224.

the Renaissance in Northern Europe and Max Dvořák's 'Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance' had been translated into Russian.¹⁸ Hans Sedlmayr's writings had not been translated in whole until the 2000s.¹⁹ The lack of translations did not mean that the works were inaccessible to Soviet art historians, as they were usually multilingual. Perhaps, these translations were decisive in 'Nachleben' of the Vienna School in post-Soviet realm. For it seems that Max Dvořák and Otto Benesch are far more popular in the post-Soviet realm than in present-day Austria.

In my analysis, I have limited myself only to the most important Soviet authors, who wrote extensively on Bruegel throughout their careers. Others will receive only brief mention when appropriate. For the analysis of post-Soviet realm of Bruegel studies, I addressed all publications available, as there are currently no specialists in the field.

The character of interactions between the Vienna School and the Soviet scholars defined the structure of my essay: I shall start with rediscovering of Bruegel in Europe and the Soviet Union, and then I shall proceed with examining the emergence of 'Marxist Bruegel' and how it highlighted the methodological contradictions between the Vienna School and the Soviet art historians. Then I shall turn to the Soviet scholars who adopted the Viennese ideas and approaches and then conclude with remarks on the presence of the Vienna School in post-Soviet Bruegel studies.

Re-evaluation of Bruegel: common and different grounds

For a while, art historians had ignored or neglected the works by Peter Bruegel and regarded him as inferior to his Romanist colleagues. This can be explained, primarily, through the hierarchy of genres where everyday life scenes or landscapes were inferior to biblical or antique subjects, and, secondly, through the lack of his paintings on public display as museums started acquiring Bruegel's works in the late 19th century.²⁰

Two centres of Bruegel studies emerged by the beginning of the 20th century. Both of them were connected to museums that stored royal collections full of his paintings: the first one was in Brussels (Henri Hymans, Hulin de Loo, René van Bastelaer) and the second one in Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Museum).²¹ The exhibition *Flemish Primitives* held in Bruges in 1902 triggered the emergence of the

¹⁸ Otto Benesch, *Iskusstvo Severnogo Vozrozhdeniya*, Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1973, 224; Maks Dvorzhak, *Istoriya ital'yanskogo iskusstva v epokhu Vozrozhdeniya*, Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1978, 2 T.

¹⁹ Sedlmayr G. *Iskusstvo i Istina. Teoriya i metod istorii iskusstva. Klassika Iskusstvoznaniya*. Saint Petersburg: Axioma, 2000, 272; Hans Sedlmayr, *Utrata Serediny*, Moskva: Progress-Tradiziya, 2008, 640.

²⁰ Sabine Pénot, 'The Rediscovery of Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The Pioneers of Bruegel Scholarship in Belgium and Vienna', Elke Oberthaler, Sabine Pénot, Manfred Sellink et al., eds, *Bruegel*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2018, 317.

²¹ Henri Hymans, 'Pieter Bruegel le Vieux', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1 May and 1 Nov., 1890, and 1 Jan., 1891.

Belgian centre. The exhibition attracted strong public acclaim and became a manifestation of keen interest in the so-called 'national school of art' and its history, which was very typical in the time of rising of the nationalistic movements. Hulin de Loo and René van Bastelaer's catalogue published some years later (in 1907), and publications of the famous connoisseur Max Friedländer made Bruegel's corpus partly free from works of his followers and imitators and brought it back into art historians' scope.²²

The efforts of Gustav Glück, curator and director of Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, in their turn, led to substantial changes in the collection's display: in 1910, all Bruegel works that were previously dispersed among several rooms were gathered in one hall where we can see them today.²³

The Vienna School of art history emerged almost simultaneously with tectonic changes in Bruegel studies. Thus, it was not surprising that all its main scholars addressed the works of the Netherlandish painter whose star began to rise again. Alois Riegl, Max Dvořák, Hans Sedlmayr, Otto Benesch, Charles de Tolnay – they all saw in Bruegel one of the most prominent painters of the Northern Renaissance. Dvořák and his followers distinguished the 'Northern spirit' in his works as opposed to the 'Southern spirit' of the Italian Renaissance.²⁴ For Hans Sedlmayr Bruegel was a pessimist, a misanthrope with a particular artistic vision embodied in his famous '*macchia*'.²⁵

Both the Viennese 'formalists' and 'idealists' were opposed to the image of Bruegel as a rustic painter, shaped by his first biographer Karel van Mander and replicated often in the eighteenth-century connoisseurs' writings.²⁶ Viennese scholars were sure that ideas behind Bruegel's works went far beyond genre painting and everyday life practices. They were rather a kind of 'eschatological vision'.²⁷

A decade after the Vienna school and on completely different grounds the Soviet school of art history began to emerge in the 1920s and the Institute of

²² René van Bastelaer, Georges Hulin de Loo, *Peter Bruegel l'Ancien, son Œuvre et son temps: étude historique suivie des catalogues raisonnés de son Œuvre dessiné et gravé, par et d'un catalogue raisonné de son Œuvre*, Brussels: G. van Oest, 1905 - 1907, 400; Max Friedländer, *Pieter Bruegel*, Berlin: Propyläen-Verlag, 1921, 201.

²³ Sabine Pénot, 'The Rediscovery of Pieter Bruegel the Elder', 321.

²⁴ Maks Dvorzhak, *Istoriya iskusstva kak istoriya dukha*, 256.

²⁵ Hans Sedlmayr, 'Die "Macchia" Bruegels', in: *Hans Sedlmayr, Epochen und Werke*, tome 1, Munich: Mäander, 1985, 274-318.

²⁶ See for example: Cornelis de Bie, *Het gulden Cabinet vande edel vry schilder const, inhoudende den lof vande vermarste schilders, architecte, beldthowers ende plaetsnyders van dese eeuw*, Antwerp: Jan Meyssens, 1661, 89; Isaac Bullart, *Accademie des sciences et des Arts, contenant les vies etc. des hommes illustres etc.*, Amsterdam: Heritiers de Daniel Elzevier, 1682, Vol. II, 428 – 429; Jacobus Houbraken, *His Groote Schouwburg der Nederlandsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*, Den Haag, 1753, vol. I, 85.

²⁷ Maks Dvorzhak, *Istoriya iskusstva kak istoriya dukha*, 288. Otto Benesch, *The Art of the Renaissance in Northern Europe*, London: Phaidon Press, 1965, 121.

Archaeology and Art Studies was founded in 1921 in Moscow.²⁸ Marxism considered art to be a 'superstructure', secondary to economic and social developments. Therefore, the art was considered from the perspective how it reflected 'reality'. Despite new methodological approaches the Soviet art historians had never totally broken off from their foreign colleagues – they exchanged letters, read and translated the most important publications and, inevitably, criticized them.

Therefore, despite the fact that Hans Sedlmayr befriended Mikhail Alpatov, a prominent figure in Soviet art history, and proof that works by the Viennese art historians were translated and eagerly read, the first line of interactions between the Soviet and the Vienna art history schools emerged in 1930s in the form of criticism. It was not a criticism *per se*; often it showed a deep understanding and knowledge of Dvořák's or Sedlmayr's works. One can rather speak about a more profound phenomenon – the Vienna School of Art History became in Bruegel studies the academic Other for Soviet scholars. The Other which helped to showcase the recently shaped proper (Marxist) identity of Soviet scholars. The fact that it was the Vienna School that played this role highlights its prominent position among the Soviet art historians.

'Marxist' Bruegel and the Vienna School

To the best of my knowledge, Mikhail Alpatov (1902 – 1986) was the first Soviet art historian to address Bruegel's art.²⁹ He published his first research on Bruegel in

²⁸ The Institute existed until 1931, when it was liquidated along with the Russian Association of Research Institutes of the Social Sciences (RANION). Then, in 1944, The State Institute for Art Studies was founded with Igor Grabar as its head. This Institute still exists.

²⁹ Mikhail Alpatov (1902 – 1986) was a Soviet theorist and historian of art. In 1919 – 1921 he studied at the Moscow State University (MSU) under Boris Vipper and Aleksandr Gabrichevskiy. In 1925, he defended the thesis on the art of ancient Rus. Later he moved towards the history of European art. Hence, his doctoral thesis successfully submitted in 1940 on Italian art in the age of Dante and Giotto. Three years after he headed the Department of history of Russian art at the MSU. Alpatov's academic career was rather ambiguous. On the one hand, he held important positions and published extensively even in the times of Stalinist persecutions. On the other hand, he fell victim to the so-called campaign against 'cosmopolitanism' and was forced to leave the University in 1944. Elena Murina, an art historian herself and wife to another art historian Dmitriy Sarabianov, who studied at the MSU during the aforementioned campaign, recalled in her memoirs that Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov (1900 – 1969) inspired the persecution of Alpatov. Fedorov-Davydov, after all, took over the Department after Alpatov left (and after a three-year period when Department was headed by Igor Grabar). Once quitted the MSU Alpatov had started teaching at the Surikov Art Institute in Moscow, where he remained until his death in 1986. In 1954, Alpatov became a member of the USSR Academy of Art and in 1958 he was titled an honoured worker of arts of The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. And in 1974 he won The USSR State Prize. Mikhail Alpatov is known for having a very particular style of art historical writing. Anatoly Rykov, a Russian art and political theorist, remarked Alpatov's anti-intellectualism and subjectivism embodied in his essays and the so-called 'études'. Rykov name the nineteenth century connoisseurs' writings (Eugène Fromantin, Pavel Muratov) and Wilhelm Worringer's methodology among the main sources of inspiration for

1930 from the perspective of so-called 'vulgar sociology'.³⁰ In the essay, he juxtaposed the painter's social background with his artistic aspirations. Alpatov, though, took a more sophisticated approach nine years later in two essays, which he himself called 'études'. In the footnote to the first étude titled 'Peasant Bruegel' ('Брейгель Мужичкий'), Alpatov gave a brief review of all previous publications on Bruegel.³¹ While analysing works of the Viennese colleagues he tried to stay if not neutral, but not combative. I shall return to Alpatov later within a very different context, for he contributed not only to the emergence of the 'Marxist' Bruegel but also to the later debates around Bruegel's personality and his artistic method.

The first large-scale critique of the Vienna school can be found in the PhD thesis by Nikolai Nikulin, written in the post-war decade and presented in 1954 in Saint Petersburg.³² Not only did he continue with criticism of the Vienna School expressed earlier by Ivan Matza in his introduction to the translations of Dvořák's essays³³ but he also brought up previously incoherent reviews together and synthesized them in a complete Marxist vision of Vienna School ideas.

Nikulin began his review of the Vienna school from Max Dvořák, to whom he paid a great deal of attention. His criticism fell mainly on Dvořák's interpretation of Bruegel as an embodiment of the Mannerism.³⁴ Nikulin argued that 'the spirit of the time' dictated Bruegel's style: 'However, Dvořák's work initiated a distortion of Bruegel's art. It was the natural result of the spiritualist method, by means of which Dvořák viewed the art. In contrast with Bastelaer, Hulin de Loo and others who explained Bruegel's art through categories of 'milieu' and 'native ground', art for Dvořák was a reflection of history spirit's evolution' (*Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*).³⁵ Nikulin fiercely rejected Dvořák's statement that Bruegel's

Alpatov. See more in: Anatolii Rykov, Mikhail Alpatov ili chto takoe Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie, *Manuscript*, 2017, 169-174. Memoirs of Elene Murina can be accessed here: http://sias.ru/upload/isk/616-632_Murina_Sarabyanov%20top.pdf

³⁰ Vulgar sociology (or sociologism) was a dogmatic simplification of Marxism, which manifested itself in 1920s in the works on theory and history of art, literary criticism, aesthetics etc. As Vladimir Bystrov and Aleksandr Kamenev succinctly put it, within a vulgar sociological approach: '...any work of art turns into a ciphered message behind which the interest of a certain class or group hides. The critic has to solve this code and define its sociological equivalent.' Vladimir Bystrov, Aleksandr Kamenev, 'Vulgar Sociologism: The History of the Concept', *Russian Sociological Review*, 2019, vol. 18, No. 3, 286-308.

³¹ Mikhail Alpatov, References to 'Peasant Bruegel', 1939, 233.

³² The copy of the thesis is preserved in the archive of the State Hermitage Museum. I am grateful to Mila Frolova for scanning it for me. Nikolai Nikulin, *Nekotorye problemy tvorchestva Piter Breygelya Starshego*, Leningrad, 1954, 325.

³³ Ivan Matza, 'M. Dvorzhak i istoriya feodalnogo iskusstva', in Maks Dvorzhak, *Ocherki po iskusstvu srednevekovyia*, Leningrad: Izogiz, 1934, 5-33. In this introduction, Matza mainly criticized Dvořák's 'militant idealism', which led to his detachment from economic and social circumstances and errors in evaluation of styles.

³⁴ Maks Dvorzhak, 'Piter Breygel' Starshyi', in Maks Dvorzhak, *Ocherki po iskusstvu srednevekovyia*, Leningrad: Izogiz, 1934, 256-257.

³⁵ Nikolai Nikulin, *Nekotorye problemy tvorchestva Piter Breygelya Starshego*, 12.

paintings especially the late ones are Mannerist, which now sounds like a truism, as it was completely unacceptable for a Marxist art historian. Within the Marxist paradigm, realism was regarded as a democratic and progressive mode of representation, conforming to the spirit of the peasantry. Mannerism was deeply rooted in the aristocratic and clerical milieu, with 'forces of reaction' so to say, to whose interests Bruegel was by no means close.

Bruegel had to remain a painter close 'to the people'.³⁶ This belief even led to a curious incident. Mikhail Alpatov in his essay on Bruegel of 1939 wrote about the painter's peasant descent, closely following van Mander's words: 'His descent' – stated Alpatov, – 'made him much more sensitive to the rustic scenes'.³⁷ This proved to be false as Bruegel's behaviour, the circle of communication and erudition unequivocally exposed his urban origin. Therefore, when Alpatov published the essay for the second time in 1963 he had to edit the paragraph. He limited himself to the statement that Bruegel just knew better than others 'the life of the Netherlandish village, which he immortalized in his paintings'.³⁸

After criticizing Dvořák, Nikolai Nikulin focused on Charles de Tolnay, who studied under Julius von Schlosser and Max Dvořák. As Nikulin stated: 'Tolnay continued the distortion of Bruegel's image, which was forged in Dvořák's paper'.³⁹ He also argued 'Tolnay treats Bruegel's symbols and allegories in a metaphysical way, depriving them of social sharpness and satirical force'.⁴⁰ Nikulin was consistent in his criticism of the idealistic approach to Bruegel's art given that reminding the reader of the satirical implications and political bias of Bruegel's paintings was one of the tasks of his thesis.⁴¹ He was also right to remark the closeness between Dvořák's and Tolnay's views.⁴²

However, it was Hans Sedlmayr, and his concept of '*macchia*', who became the main target for Nikulin's criticism. It went as follows: 'The way of interpreting of Bruegel's works adopted by contemporary reactionary art history often resulted in a blatant distortion of his art. Hans Sedlmayr's paper 'Macchia Bruegels' is a notable example'.⁴³ Moreover, Nikulin accused Sedlmayr of violating the principle of historicism, in his opinion one of the most important in Art History: 'Sedlmayr considers *macchia* – the coloured blot, that constitutes the painter's primary distant impression from the object or the image he depicts to be the most important in Bruegel's paintings. It's all about 'the atoms of painting', in 'the flat, motley spots'

³⁶ Nikolai Nikulin, *Nekotorye problemy tvorchestva Piter Breygelya Starshego*, 27.

³⁷ Mikhail Alpatov, 'Peasant Bruegel', *Etyudy po istorii zapadnoevropeiskogo iskusstva*, Moskva-Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1939, 43.

³⁸ Mikhail Alpatov, 'Peasant Bruegel', *Etyudy po istorii zapadnoevropeiskogo iskusstva*, Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Khudozhestv, 1963, 164.

³⁹ Nikolai Nikulin, *Nekotorye problemy tvorchestva Piter Breygelya Starshego*, 14-15.

⁴⁰ Nikolai Nikulin, *Nekotorye problemy tvorchestva Piter Breygelya Starshego*, 15.

⁴¹ Nikolai Nikulin, *Nekotorye problemy tvorchestva Piter Breygelya Starshego*, 28.

⁴² See for more on similar and dissimilar in Dvořák's and Tolnay's positions Bertram Kaschek, 'Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Religion: A Historiographical Introduction', in Bertram Kaschek, Jürgen Müller, Jessica Buskirk (ed.) *Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Religion*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, 6-13.

⁴³ Nikolai Nikulin, *Nekotorye problemy tvorchestva Piter Breygelya Starshego*, 17.

etc. One can say that the core of the painting lies not in its sense, but in the general impression that makes the viewer feel 'astonishment and estrangement'. (...) Thus, he makes Bruegel's art fit in the formulae and categories of the contemporary, reactionary, formalistic Art History. A historical perspective of the subject is completely lost'.⁴⁴ Once again, Nikulin is opposing interpretations that go beyond a Marxist understanding of Bruegel's art as a reflection and evaluation of reality. Sedlmayr's '*macchia*', given the ongoing battle between Marxism and formalism in art and literature, was considered to be even worse than the idealism of Dvořák and Tolnay.⁴⁵

A small book by Rostislav Klimov⁴⁶ on Bruegel published in 1954 synchronically with Nikulin's thesis was not aimed at conceptual or methodological novelty but followed the canons of popular biographical narratives.⁴⁷ However, in this book, one can notice how the Marxist image of Bruegel and his art was fixed and popularized. Implicitly it continued the critique of Bruegel's image championed by Hans Sedlmayr and partly by Mikhail Alpatov. Klimov argued that Bruegel was by no means a pessimist and misanthrope (as stated by Sedlmayr), but an optimist, a man of conscious of community life and revolution, whose spiritual crises, too obvious in his late works to ignore, he explained through Bruegel's disappointment in the revolutionary movement and through his closeness to the bourgeoisie.⁴⁸ The following statement is typical for Klimov as it constructs a coherent image of the Marxist Bruegel: 'We appreciate Bruegel's art for his love of common folk, for the social awareness, omnipresent in the master's best works; for his love for the Motherland, which becomes visible as in glorification of its sublime beauty so in the heroic pathos of its sons, their inexhaustible force, their striking love of life'.⁴⁹

Another popular Soviet book on Bruegel is also worth mentioning. Sergei L'vov's work published in 1971 was written in a more sophisticated style than Klimov's. Nevertheless, it emphasised the superiority of historical context for understanding Bruegel and repeated the Marxist clichés concerning the painter's love for common people. For example, L'vov commented on Bruegel's 'The Pie on the Gallows': 'In this tough year (1568), which was destined to become the penultimate year in the Bruegel's life, he went to the countryside in his quest not for amusement (though he did see everything that was amusing) (...) oh no, he went there in search for a new internal support, a new hope'.⁵⁰ This simplified vision of Bruegel's art 'sealed' his 'Marxist' image.

⁴⁴ Nikolai Nikulin, *Nekotorye problemy tvorchestva Piter Breygelya Starshego*, 18-19.

⁴⁵ See more on the subject in Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History – Doctrine*, The Hague-Paris-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2012, 99-117.

⁴⁶ Rostislav Klimov (1928 – 2000) was an art historian, who studied at the Moscow State University under the supervision of Boris Vipper. He worked as scientific editor in the leading publisher of the creative arts *Iskusstvo* and wrote a number of papers, where championed the theory of stageness in the evolution of art. See Rostislav Klimov, *Teoriya stadialnogo razvitiya iskusstva*, Moskva: OGI, 2002.

⁴⁷ Rostislav Klimov, *Piter Breygel Starshyi*, Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1954.

⁴⁸ Nikolai Nikulin, *Nekotorye problemy tvorchestva Piter Breygelya Starshego*, 17.

⁴⁹ Rostislav Klimov, *Piter Breygel Starshyi*, Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1954, 51.

⁵⁰ Sergey L'vov, *Piter Breygel Starshyi*, Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1971, 285-286.

Thus, in this 'Marxist' period, Soviet scholars created an image of Bruegel as spokesperson of people's interests and burdens. All his oeuvre was regarded as a social satire and criticism of bourgeoisie. As Nikulin, Klimov and L'vov argued, Bruegel's paintings are a mere reflection of popular sentiments towards social injustice, and, even though he was not a peasant himself (which was widely known by the 1950s), Bruegel deeply sympathised with villagers and found inspiration amongst them. The 'Marxist' interpretation rejected any possibility of the disguised symbolism or philosophical bias behind Bruegel's works suggested by Max Dvořák or Tolnay. The style also mattered: a 'Marxist' Bruegel was an early representative of Dutch Realism, meanwhile, Dvořák and his followers associated the artist with Mannerism. Thus, the form was inseparable from the meaning.

'Sneaking in' formalism in Soviet art history: Hans Sedlmayr and Mikhail Alpatov

In addition to the critique meant to underline their own Marxist identity opposed to 'idealism', Soviet art historians accepted and reassessed ideas of the Vienna school. Sometimes, foreign ideas even defined their own methodology. Two art historians – Mikhail Alpatov and Nataliia Gershenson-Chegodavaeva – represent this second line of interactions between the two schools. I shall briefly reveal the views and approaches of the Viennese colleagues especially close to them.

Friendship and mutual respect between Hans Sedlmayr and Mikhail Alpatov are known and have been studied. Stepan Vaneyan and Vyacheslav Shestakov elaborated extensively on this subject.⁵¹ Alpatov and Sedlmayr met for the first time in 1929 in Vienna.⁵² The exchange of letters and works followed. As Shestakov stated, there had been fourteen letters from Hans Sedlmayr written between 1960 and 1978 in Alpatov's archive (now in the archive of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow). One can get several important points from reading this correspondence. Firstly, Alpatov's works were not accessible to Sedlmayr in entirety, but in the rare translations made by Sedlmayr's students.⁵³ Secondly, even though Sedlmayr named Alpatov among the new Vienna school members and considered him to be a structuralist, he judged hastily, somehow overestimating his own influence. Perhaps, it was partly due to the inaccurate

⁵¹ Stepan Vaneyan, *Pustuyuschchiy tron. Kriticheskoye iskusstvoznaniye Hans Sedlmayra*. Moskva: progress-Tradizyia, 2004, 51; Vyacheslav Shestakov, 'Mikhail Alpatov i Gans Sedlmayr. Iz istorii Venskoy shkoly istorii iskusstvoznaniya', *International Journal of Cultural Research*, no. 1(6), 2012, 98–100.

⁵² Although, in an interview of 1988, Ernst Gombrich mentioned to Richard Woodfield Sedlmayr's visit to Soviet Russia (it could have taken place in the 1920s), when Sedlmayr was 'rather, very, left wing if not communist Marxist' (here I am quoting Gombrich's words). Thus, he could have met Alpatov even before Vienna. The traces of this possible visit could have been later eliminated because of Sedlmayr's Nazi background. I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Richard Woodfield for drawing my attention to this curious fact and sharing with me the part of the unpublished interview.

⁵³ Vyacheslav Shestakov, 'Mikhail Alpatov i Gans Sedlmayr', 98–99.

translations. However, one cannot ignore appreciation expressed in a letter to Alpatov dated November 7, 1963: 'You were, you are and you will be for me an art historian, who enshrines for me the true Art History'.⁵⁴

Sedlmayr's influence on Alpatov is often stated but rarely elaborated. Vaneyan mentioned briefly the friendship of two scholars and stated that some of Alpatov's 'études' were written under the influence of Sedlmayr without going in detail.⁵⁵ Shestakov limited himself to stating that Alpatov cited Sedlmayr in his works but never commented on these citations, probably out of fear that someone would discover his friendship with a former Nazi officer, who spent part of his service during the war of 1939 – 1945 in Ukraine.⁵⁶ Perhaps, for the same reasons, Alpatov did not mention Sedlmayr in his memoirs.

In order to grasp Sedlmayr's influence on Alpatov, I shall compare two editions of Alpatov's essay on Bruegel's 'Blinds' (1568). The first one was published in 1939 (here Alpatov cited only Sedlmayr's 'Macchia') and the second, considerably altered of 1963, after Alpatov had read Sedlmayr's 'Der Sturz der Blinden: Paradigma einer Strukturanalyse' (1957).⁵⁷

The painting 'Blinds' is dated 1568 and is, therefore, one of the latest executed by Pieter Bruegel. It is a fragile '*Tüchlein*' painting (tempera on glue-sized canvas), which is characteristic for the last period of the artist's life. Six blind men are filing in the foreground, holding to one stick. Their path is about to finish into the ditch: blinds' lead has already fallen and others are to follow him within few instants. A peaceful village landscape can be seen in the background. The tension between the horizontal line of that landscape and the diagonal of blinds creates a dramatic effect, which almost no scholars could disregard. Similarly, they could not but to comment on the village church, which can be seen in the glimpse between the already fallen blinds and their unsuspecting companions.

Alpatov started off in his earlier essay by rehearsing the historical context of the painting. He stated that images of the crippled were widely spread after the Peasant War in Germany and the Netherlands and that they also illustrated the biblical text: 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides [of the blind]. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit' (Matt. 15:13-14).

Then he proceeded with an analysis of earlier works touching upon the same subject and concluded with Bruegel's 'Blinds'. Its most remarkable and elaborated feature was his chromatic analysis, where he used Sedlmayr's term '*macchia*'. Sedlmayr borrowed the concept of '*macchia*' from Benedetto Croce and designated it as a structure of coloured blots or patches that constituted the beholder's primary visual experience of the painting. For Sedlmayr '*macchia*' connoted the isolation and

⁵⁴ Letter from 7 November 1963. Cited from: Vyacheslav Shestakov, 'Mikhail Alpatov i Gans Sedlmayr', 99. Access to the originals stored in The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow remains quite limited.

⁵⁵ Stepan Vaneyan, *Pustuyuschchiy tron*, 58.

⁵⁶ Vyacheslav Shestakov, 'Mikhail Alpatov i Gans Sedlmayr', 98–100.

⁵⁷ Hans Sedlmayr, *Pieter Bruegel: Der Sturz der Blinden: Paradigma einer Strukturanalyse*, Kunsthistor. Seminar d. Univ. München; Hueber in Komm, 1957.

estrangement of coloured surfaces that he also transposed to relations between personalities. As we can see in the following lines, Alpatov unequivocally adopted this vision: '...it is easy to distinguish the blots that disintegrate the whole composition and particular figures. Clothes of blinds with their broken folds constitute triangles, rhombuses, weirdly shaped trapeziums. (...) Bruegel operates with these angular, sharply isolated patches and breaks the human figure into pieces, deprives it of silhouette'.⁵⁸ Curiously, Alpatov had not cited nor referred to Sedlmayr while clearly using his approach. Only in the footnotes to his very first and general essay on Bruegel ('Peasant Bruegel' of 1939) did he mention Sedlmayr: 'Sedlmayr fairly pointed out the peculiarity of Bruegel's visual perception ('Entfremdung' – alienation, and 'macchia' – the blot). However, while associating his artistic system with his worldview Sedlmayr paradoxically stated the primacy of perception of colours and, in this way, modernized the painter'.⁵⁹



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind* (1568), Tempera on canvas, 86 x 154 cm, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples. Wikipedia Commons

His comments on coloured surfaces in 'Blinds' contradicted the general line of criticism he tried to stick to and that was so evident in the conclusion to the étude of 1939. With the pathos so typical for early Soviet art history, Alpatov stated that Bruegel had been the first painter to see in a miserable cripple a rightful member of society and this was the key to unravelling the striking effect of the painting.⁶⁰ Therefore, after structuralist treatment of colours' composition, of Bruegel's macchia, Alpatov chose a socially 'progressive' interpretation and looked at the painter as a

⁵⁸ Mikhail Alpatov, 'Slepye', *Etyudy po istorii zapadnoevropeiskogo iskusstva*, Moskva-Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1939, 59.

⁵⁹ Mikhail Alpatov, References to 'Peasant Bruegel', 1939, 233.

⁶⁰ Mikhail Alpatov, 'Slepye', 1939, 61.

sympathetic champion of blinds. Everything changed when Alpatov had read Sedlmayr's essay 'Der Sturz der Blinden'.

Alpatov drastically revised his interpretation of 'Blinds' for the second edition of his 'Études on the West European Art' published in 1963.⁶¹ He toned down his remarks on Bruegel's adherence to revolutionary ideals and other Marxist-Leninist paradigms. By that time Stalin had been already dead and writers' survival did not depend any more on proving their loyalty in every written line. Moreover, Alpatov ventured to rewrite his conclusions. In the analysis of 'Blinds' he followed both interpretations of Sedlmayr and Axel Romdahl (1905).⁶² From Romdahl he borrowed the relief metaphor applied to the group of blinds in the foreground.⁶³ Then he replicated his colour analysis dwelling upon '*macchia*' and came to conclusions contrasting those registered in his 1939 edition. Sedlmayr in his essay on 'Blinds' had chosen the eschatological meaning, ascribed to Bruegel's painting by Dvořák.⁶⁴ Dvořák regarded 'Blinds' as a precursor of the Last Judgment and compared it to Michelangelo's fresco.⁶⁵

Alpatov not only adopted Dvořák's and Sedlmayr's outlooks but also added his own touches. For him, it was not the Last Judgment that was the most important, but the ability of the painter to raise the importance of a single instance to a cosmic scale. He went as follows: 'We see an ordinary accident that is instilled with a fatal inevitability. With only one of the blinds tumbled the others undoubtedly will follow. All this ultimately means that the misfortune of the six blinds epitomises the tragic fate of the mankind'.⁶⁶ Alpatov managed to combine the structural analysis of Sedlmayr with 'Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte' of Dvořák, deviating, in fact, from the Marxist approach, rather alien to him. Remarkably, he did not mention any 'national constants' that Bruegel's art must have embodied, even when he addressed social and national 'contradictions' in Netherlandish sixteenth-century society. It highlights his interest in a formal analysis in the context of the history of human spirit and alienation from the methods of social art history.

Sedlmayr's Bruegel after Alpatov: Nataliia Gershenson-Chegodavaeva

The presence of the Vienna School in Soviet Bruegel studies was strengthened in the 1970s – 1980s after the translation of Otto Benesch's 'Northern Renaissance' was published. Together with Dvořák and Charles de Tolnay Benesch was essential to

⁶¹ Mikhail Alpatov, 'Slepye', *Etyudy po istorii zapadnoevropeiskogo iskusstva*, Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Khudozhestv, 1963, 174 – 181.

⁶² Axel L. Romdahl, 'Pieter Bruegel der Ältere und sein Kunstschaffen', *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1905, 12–169.

⁶³ Axel L. Romdahl, 'Pieter Bruegel der Ältere und sein Kunstschaffen', 130.

⁶⁴ Hans Sedlmayr, 'Nizverzheniye slepykh', *Logos*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2015, 40.

⁶⁵ Maks Dvorzhak, *Istoriya iskusstva kak istoriya dukha*, 288.

⁶⁶ Mikhail Alpatov, 'Slepye', *Etyudy po istorii zapadnoevropeiskogo iskusstva*, Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Khudozhestv, 1963, 181.

Soviet and post-Soviet scholarship and, perhaps, paved the way for the reception of iconology in the 1980s – 1990s.

Nataliia Gershenson-Chegodava (1907 – 1977), a renowned Soviet art historian, also experienced the impact of Hans Sedlmayr's vision of colours.⁶⁷ She adopted certain aspects of his methodology while rejecting others. However, for the first time, it was not a severe Marxist critique of 'reactionary' art historians, nor a 'sneaking in' of forbidden approaches. She openly criticized Sedlmayr as an art historian in the monograph on Bruegel published, however, only in 1983, i.e. posthumously. Presumably, the text had been written back in the late 60s and 70s. The fact that it had been published only in 1983 might also indicate that the publication process took a long time and censorship may not have passed it earlier.⁶⁸

Gershenson-Chegodava stated that Sedlmayr's essay on 'Blinds' bore a more profound and coherent background than any of his earlier works ever had, but one can argue with Sedlmayr's reflections on the colouristic composition of the painting as he raised again the question of '*macchia*'.⁶⁹ For he asserted that the surfaces of colour were flat, which was not true, objected Gershenson-Chegodava. Bodies and clothes of blinds were carefully moulded by the treatment of the light and shade on the surfaces of colour. Bruegel's skilful treatment of fabric textures created a total illusion of reality.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, her elaboration on colours was deeply rooted in Sedlmayr's 'Der Sturz der Blinden'. Gershenson-Chegodava agreed with the other statement of Sedlmayr concerning the interaction between the real and speculative elements in the painting's colouring. In her opinion, it was not preconceived (as '*macchia*'), but based on his empirical observations.⁷¹ It is important to emphasise that Gershenson-Chegodava began analysing the colouring of the painting and arguing with Sedlmayr only after she stated that she had visited the Capodimonte Museum in Naples and had seen the painting herself.

Partly the absence of such empirical observations explains the 'flatness' of criticism produced by Soviet art historians, who so often seemed to be obsessed only with an ideological background. Most of them had never seen any of Bruegel's paintings, absent even from the biggest Soviet museum collections; they saw only coloured or even black and white reproductions. Thus, they were unable to explore

⁶⁷ Nataliya Gershenson-Chegodava studied art history at the Lomonosov State University of Moscow and wrote her thesis under the supervision of Igor Grabar. She wrote extensively on the art of the Old Masters (Lucas Cranach the Elder, Jan van Eyck, Peter Paul Rubens etc.). After a short period of work for The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, she was invited by her supervisor Grabar to join the Institute of Art History, which he headed.

⁶⁸ In the case of art historical research, sometimes it is hard to grasp how the works were censored and who was responsible for it. Historian Aron Gurevich in his memoirs described several types of censorship: the self-censorship driven by fear; the censorship done by the censor in the publishing houses; and the other type, which one may call a 'postponing' censorship, when the publication of the submitted work was repeatedly postponed until the later date. Aron Gurevich, *Istoriya Istorika*, Moscow: Rosspen, 2004, 96 – 98.

⁶⁹ Nataliya Gershenson-Chegodava, *Bruegel*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1989, 256.

⁷⁰ Nataliya Gershenson-Chegodava, *Bruegel*, 256.

⁷¹ Nataliya Gershenson-Chegodava, *Bruegel*, 256.

the colouring and often followed or elaborated on Sedlmayr's interpretation without citing him or criticising his concepts from the Marxist-Leninist perspective. They had to criticize him but they could not just pass by his works, as sometimes it was the only way to include a proper formal analysis. Therefore, we can speak about the astonishing influence of the Vienna school in a time when its ideas were clearly in contradiction with the dominant ideology.

Post-Soviet Bruegel: search for a method

The Soviet Union collapsed almost 30 years ago. Since then no major or methodologically innovative work on Bruegel has emerged. It says a lot about the post-modern science with its 'histoire en miettes' ('the history in pieces') state. Therefore, I shall comment on occasional works published in the Russian Federation as no significant study on Bruegel took place in Ukraine or Belarus.

Aleksandr Stepanov, who studied at the Saint Petersburg State Academic Institute of Painting Sculpture and Architecture Ilya Repin under the supervision of Nikolai Nikulin, dedicated to Bruegel a part of his book on the Northern Renaissance in the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, England, and France.⁷² Even from the book's title, we can get that Bruegel was by no means Stepanov's protagonist. Nevertheless, he spotted several important tendencies in post-Soviet Bruegel studies. Firstly, despite Stepanov's obvious familiarity with Anglo-American historiography and his own closeness to Panofsky's iconology, he focused on interpretations of the Viennese scholars – Sedlmayr, Dvořák, Benesch, Tolnay. Secondly, one can notice that the reception of the Viennese ideas is undertaken via both original works and works by the Soviet art historians who commented extensively on ideas of their colleagues (mainly Alpatov, Nikulin, Gershenson-Chegodaeva).

The heritage of the Soviet interpretation of the Vienna School creates a peculiar historiographical discourse. Its main feature is an inevitable distortion in favour of the Vienna School. When writing a paper, a monograph or even coursework on Bruegel, one has to cite the Viennese and to state a view on the approaches of Max Dvořák, Otto Benesch and, to a lesser extent, Hans Sedlmayr, sometimes too complicated and obscure for researchers.⁷³ In the worst-case scenario, we will encounter an epigone work rooted in a superficial reading of Dvořák's 'Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte' and with the trope 'Bruegel-philosopher' or 'Bruegel-misanthrope'. Papers by Leonid Raigorodsky, the professor at Saint-

⁷² Aleksandr Stepanov, *Iskusstvo epokhi Vozrozhdeniya. Niderlandy. Germaniya. Frantsiya. Ispaniya. Angliya*, Saint-Petersburg: Azbuka-Klassika, 2009, 194–226.

⁷³ As Meyer Shapiro pointed out, Sedlmayr tended to depart from 'scientific rigour' he had championed and made aphoristic statements without giving enough arguments. See Meyer Shapiro, 'The New Viennese School', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. no. 18, 1936, 259. It made his structural analysis hard to replicate and complicated the further application of his method.

Petersburg State University, and Boris Sokolov perfectly illustrate this tendency. In their works, emotional interpretations replace rational arguments.⁷⁴

Maxim Kostyria, another art historian who works at the Saint-Petersburg University, also sporadically turned to Bruegel.⁷⁵ One of his recent papers scrutinized Bruegel's series of paintings 'The Months' (2014). He started by naming the most prominent art historians who had researched the subject and unsurprisingly there were mainly Viennese among them: Dvořák, Tolnay, Benesch. He also mentioned his colleague Alexandr Stepanov. In the paper, Kostyria suggested that the time of day played a significant role and defined their sequence. Thus, the paper was aimed at filling the gap.

Conclusions and points for discussion

Through Bruegel studies, it is evident that the Soviet Marxist art history was far from homogenous. From the very beginning, it had been multi-layered and full of contradictions. First attempts of the 1920s – 1930s to break free from Russian formalist traditions resulted in so-called vulgar sociology, which evolved over the next decades in methodologically orthodox and inevitably secondary art historical writings aimed at a wider audience.

From the same place of rejection of formalism stemmed another branch of Marxist scholarship, that intended to conceive a new 'socialist' art history paradigm. Deeply critical and analytical it cannot be accused of a superficial knowledge of the artworks or contemporary Western scholarship. Among representatives of this second branch was Nikolay Nikulin, a Soviet art historian, who made up a purely 'Marxist Bruegel' and inscribed him in a wider context of Dutch art and a paradigm of Western art. Nikulin depicted Bruegel even if not as a peasant but as a man of the people, a patriot disappointed in the bourgeoisie too absorbed with the primary accumulation of the capital. Of course, they saw him as a realist painter, a precursor of 17th-century Dutch realism. The Vienna School did not disappear from the Marxist writings but was subjected to severe criticism.

Another layer of the Soviet art historical discourse constituted Mikhail Alpatov's approach. His peculiar synthesis of formalism and rather straightforward and simplified Marxism of the late 1920s and 1930s developed during the Stalinist era into 'Strukturanalyse' of the Vienna School under the influence of Hans Sedlmayr. His attention to particular works comparable with exemplary interpretations of Sedlmayr's and preoccupation with 'national' are well known. However, I would want to draw attention to the implicit intention behind his writing, which was even closer in spirit to Sedlmayr than formal analysis. Alpatov sought to evoke semi-religious feelings in his readers, to make them experience an

⁷⁴ Aleksandr Stepanov commented on Sokolov's writing: 'I am not against a subjective experience and understanding of a painting unless it substitutes the documentary [i.e. historical – S.D.] meaning. Here you find a prime example of such a substitution'in: Aleksandr Stepanov, *Iskusstvo epokhi Vozrozhdeniya*, 546.

⁷⁵ Maxim Kostyria, 'Cikl Pitera Brejgelia Starshego "Vremena goda": novoe prochtenie', *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta*, 2014, Series 2, Issue 4, 101 – 106.

artwork as an existential situation. Thus, religion oppressed by ostentatious Soviet materialism made its flashbacks through art historical writings. The fervent Post-War Catholicism of Hans Sedlmayr was consonant with Alpatov's attempts to bring the spiritual back into Soviet intellectual life. Hence, their almost similar endings in analyses of Bruegel's 'Blinds' inherited directly from Dvořák. Nevertheless, Sedlmayr's Nazi background forced Alpatov to hide these affinities in the second edition of the 'Études'.

Alpatov had a special place within Soviet scholarship being at the same time a black sheep and an acclaimed scholar, who was free to publish even during the most challenging years of Stalin's rule. Thus, despite conflicts with colleagues and their critics, his influence on further generations of scholars is indisputable. In Bruegel's case, he set up first points of reference to the Vienna School.

Soviet Bruegel studies reached their climax in 1983 with the publication of Nataliia Gershenson-Chegodava's monograph. She reassessed all of the historiography available at that moment and in particular, the works by the Viennese scholars. Gershenson-Chegodava reserved a significant place for discussion rather than for criticism. She chose a middle way and synthesised Marxism, iconology, Sedlmayr's structuralism and *Geistesgeschichte* of Dvořák and Benesch. Her undisguised methodological heterogeneity, which was equally distant from the anti-intellectualism of Mikhail Alpatov or strict Marxism of Boris Vipper, marked a significant turn in Soviet art historical scholarship.

However, this heterogeneity has its own flaws. Occasional borrowings from Viennese scholars' writings for interpretation of the separate works replaced interest in their paradigms. This tendency is even more evident in Bruegel studies in present-day Russia. Moreover, the influence of the Vienna school impacted a rather old-fashioned way of working on Bruegel in the post-Soviet countries following the Neo-Platonist interpretations by Benesch or explanations through Dvořák. Thus, the positive and liberating effect at times tended to be confining, as is every dogmatism.

Loss of an ideological background in post-Soviet Bruegel studies curiously provoked the loss of the methodological innovation. It seems that interest in theory was deeply rooted in the Marxist methodology. Apart from the paradigm of universal history of art, which had its end with socialist realist art, the dominance of Marxism-Leninism triggered the 'sneaking in' of Vienna school 'spiritualism' and 'formalism' in art historical writing, the development of the Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics and infatuation with iconology of Erwin Panofsky and then Aby Warburg. Thus, in the absence of the dominant methodological paradigm the interest in other options became much more limited and reserved for the theorists of art.

Deprived of its Marxist pivot the post-Soviet art history literally fell apart. Most important, however, was the rift between theoretical and 'applied' art history. Scholars like the aforementioned Shestakov or Vaneyan are focused on the historiographical and theoretical issues, while others are exploring paintings or artists' activities without going too much into theory. Recent but dispersed efforts in post-Soviet historiography to review the ideas of the Viennese scholars or those of the adherents of iconology stand apart and have little influence outside the field of art theory.

Rejection of theory for purely practical case studies, often resulted in epigone or insignificant works, deprived of strong arguments or novelty. Therefore, only by overcoming the outlined pattern that had become evident after 1991, and finding a new identity free from political indoctrination, is capable of creating a tectonic shift in the dynamics in Bruegel studies in particular and in art history writing in general.

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