Workers Leaving the Studio: Looking Away from Socialist Realism

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Sali Shijaku’s Zëri i Masës and the Metaphysics of Representation in Albanian Socialist Realist Painting

1. Introduction
The innovative aspect of this painting is not that the painter invited several other people into the studio, and depicted them alongside himself. Its innovative, and national, character comes from the fact that it incorporates [class-]conscious workers, that their thoughts and their ideology are included within it. [...] The image’s novel quality stems not from any new technical innovation or display of virtuosity, but from the artist’s attitude towards the working class and towards our new reality.1

Thus did sculptor Kristaq Rama describe Sali Shijaku’s Zëri i Masës [Voice of the Masses] in a 1977 lecture devoted to images of socialist life and the positive hero in the figurative arts. Let us, for the moment, take Rama at his word, and accept that insofar as Shijaku’s painting represents an innovation, a new comportment towards artistic creation that accords itself to the ideological framework of the socialist “New Life,” it does so because at its conceptual and compositional center stands the worker. This, of course, leaves open the question that Rama’s lecture – which takes Zëri i Masës as its point of inception – never fully answers. Namely: what is the relationship between art, the working class, and “our new reality” as it actually appears in the painting?

On the one hand, we must keep in mind that this ambiguity was not only endemic to the aesthetic criticism of the socialist period in Albania, but was in fact an integral part of its function. It was just such an ambiguity that allowed the idea of ‘reality’ to remain so nebulous

and elusive, simultaneously promised by the future and embodied in the present. At the same time we must acknowledge that the socialist realist system possessed a great sense for metaphor, for the discovery of hidden associative meanings. That is, it understood the possibility that the signs of subversive, revisionist ideology could appear anywhere, at any time, and thus that a heightened hermeneutical sensitivity was always necessary, especially when encountering works of art. Thus, no matter how superficial Rama’s critical treatment of a work like Zëri i Masës must seem at first glance, this should not prevent us from approaching the work as a complex system of meanings, and from realizing that this complexity would have characterized the work in the context in which it was created and viewed.

Of course, there is a right way to view and understand the painting – that is precisely what Rama’s description gives us – but that right way is not as reductive as it might seem, for it involves understanding how the totality of the painting’s diverse threads of meaning are to be united in the correct aesthetic comportment towards the new Albanian socialist existence.

2. Producing the Image of the Production of Socialist Reality

Sali Shijaku (b. 1933) emerged as one of the most important painters of socialist realism during a crucial period of transition in the visual arts in socialist Albania (and indeed his works often occupied an aggressive formal periphery within official art of the period). Like many other Albanian artists of his time, he first attended the Jordan Misja Lyceum in Tirana, where his professors included Abdurrahim Buza and Nexhmedin Zajmi, and later the Ilya Repin Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. After completing his studies in 1962, Shijaku became one of the artists whose works epitomized the dynamic possibilities of socialist realist representation in Albania.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Albanian socialist realist art developed and diversified in a number of ways, and the first years of the 70s are typically regarded as representing a period of relative openness towards more overtly Modernist models of representation in the fine arts. The stylistic and thematic diversity of these years (which,
when it drifted too far became “eclecticism” and eventually forthrightly “bourgeois-revisionism” can, in another sense, be seen as endemic to what Katerina Clark has called socialist realism’s “modal schizophrenia, its proclivity for making sudden transitions from realistic discourse to the mythic or utopian.” Shijaku’s own paintings, which ranged from monumental depictions of partisan heroes (such as his well-known Vojo Kushi, 1969) to vibrant images of landscapes and agricultural workers, certainly embody the paradoxes of socialist realist modality. Within the artist’s oeuvre, however, and indeed among other works from this period in Albanian history, Zëri i Masës represents a particularly sophisticated aesthetic topology of the character of “our new reality.”

In 1970, dictator Enver Hoxha asserted that “in the greater part of our country’s literary and artistic production … our New Man finds himself. In it, he sees the vitality of our socialist people and fatherland, he hears the fiery and beloved words of the Party, and he is filled with courage to continue onward on his ascent up the steps of life.” Shijaku’s painting attempts to represent precisely this situation of reflection wherein the New Man finds himself in art, to depict the metaphysical movement whereby art “takes its inspiration from the people and returns it to them.” To arrive at this representation, Shijaku creates an image that both explicitly establishes itself in the tradition of realist painting tout court, and treats the uniqueness of the socialist context for the production of works of art.

Put plainly: Zëri i Masës depicts a system that encompasses the creation and reception of works of Albanian socialist realism. It describes a visual (and conceptual) hierarchy of the materialization of ideas as well as of modes of perception and contemplation. In the depiction of this system, it engages with certain well-known tropes from the history of painting (the representation of the interior of the artist’s studio, of the creative process, of the absorbed reception of art, and of the blank back of the canvas, for example). Despite this clear reference to traditions of picture-making, however, Shijaku has not merely changed certain thematic elements to make the painting at home in its contemporary political-historical context, but has in fact attempted
to introduce a new structure. This structure is not wholly innovative or without precedent, but it is true that endemic to this structure is the production and sustenance of the new reality. The work makes this structure apparent by playing upon the same kinds of ambiguity that characterize Rama’s critical appraisal of the painting, by revealing the origin and reception of its reality without ever actually attempting to reflect or depict the reality itself. In this way, the work is perhaps one of the most honest works of Albanian socialist realism (a description that I will qualify below, for it certainly demands qualification). It is also one of the most successful, in that it understands the reality of socialist realism to be, as Evgeny Dobrenko puts it, the image of production of socialist reality itself. In other words, the painting is a machine that produces socialist reality by showing the inner workings of the production of socialist reality.

3. The Shape of Zëri i Masës
At the center of the painting stands the worker – but at first we need merely note that the painting has a center, that all the elements and implied movements that make up the work as a whole take up their places around this center (which is, however, not necessarily the only ‘center’ of the work in a phenomenological sense). Let us also note, following Kujtim Buza, that the worker is the only figure really moving, and it is his motion that puts into play all the surrounding figures. But for the moment we set aside the worker, caught mid-sentence, hands raised in the midst of explication, not because his role in the painting is merely formal (necessitated, for example, by the aesthetic demand for centrality in socialist realism) but because we will not fully understand his role until we examine the other elements of the painting.

If the worker is the source of motion in the image, we can identify two major movements that stem from his vitality. The first is a kind of ebb and flow that centers on his gesticulation, both reflecting his own oratory back at him and spinning it out into the small groups of onlookers – and even into the depicted canvas itself, seen only from the back. The second movement is the more quintessentially metaphysical one, the one that moves from the top of the canvas to the bottom and
that, at first glance, seems to represent the movement from abstract ideas to concrete materializations of socialist reality. This movement is tripartite: from the wall behind the group, to the central gathering of figures, to the worker at lower right and the back of the canvas, which seem most convincingly to join our space. (Although the movement is spatial, there is also an element of the flow from the past to the present.) Both movements pass through the worker, and as such he functions as the medium through which they become tangible and comprehensible to the viewer. However, both also ultimately draw the viewer’s attention down to the lower left of the painting, to the back of the canvas that the onlookers are gathered to contemplate and discuss. Since the front of the canvas remains a mystery, it is left to the viewer to (re)construct the content of the work from the reactions and attitudes of the depicted viewers.

The unseen painting within the painting thus functions as a second center, absorbing the viewer into its ambiguous space (since it occupies roughly a quarter of the work) and then redirecting her attention back to the various modes of attention modeled by the onlookers in the studio. These onlookers – a group that contains several recognizable types, including both villagers and workers – display various levels of engagement with both the painting and the worker-orator at center. Two on the right (one of whom – possibly a reporter – has a copy of Drita, the weekly publication of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists, shoved in his back pocket, revealing a literary and ideological preparation to engage with works of art) gaze raptly back towards the worker who is speaking. Some of those to the left seem absorbed in their own activity, such as the man lighting a cigarette, while others either look to the worker, to the canvas at lower left, or – in case of one of the women – stare directly out of the painting.

The artist himself stands unmoving just to the right of the speaking worker, his gaze fixed on the work that he has either just completed or is still in the process of creating. His lowered hands, one holding his palette and the other his brushes, offer a counterpoint to the expressive gesture of the worker’s hands, and together the two suggest a definite parallelism: there is expression to be found in the work of
the hands of both the artist and the laborer, both produce the kind of meaning that ecstatically pours forth (through the mysterious concealed image and through the worker’s narration) by means of gesture. This emphasis on the emphatic and expressive gesture of the hand is predicted in the sketch for Vojo Kushi hanging behind the gathering, where the figure’s aggressive heroism is concentrated in the one hand prying open the tank and the other preparing to hurl the grenade. On another level, the very materiality of the work – of Shijaku’s signature painterliness and effective use of impasto passages – reinforces the connections between the work of the artist’s hands and the production of socialist reality that the worker undertakes.

Finally, the worker at the lower right – presumably a painter by his dress and the bucket next to him – sits, seemingly wholly absorbed in the contemplation of the canvas, his face cradled by a hand in turn braced upon his knee in an undeniably classical pose. There is a sort of triangle formed by the central worker (the orator), the second worker (the contemplator) and the looming back of the canvas. In a certain sense, the canvas works as a second center to the painting. It not only

Gustave Courbet, The Painter’s Studio, Real Allegory Determining a Phase of Seven Years in My Artistic and Moral Life, oil on canvas, 361 x 598 cm, 1855.

Gustave Courbet, Studioja e piktorit, alegori e vërtetë që përcakton një fazë shtatë-vjeçare në jetën time artistike dhe morale, vaj në kanavacë, 361 x 598 cm, 1855.
conceptually anchors the gathering of figures in Zëri i Masës; it also visually holds sway over all other elements present, drawing the eye to its broad brown swath, even occluding part of the central worker’s body with its corner. Above all, the blank back of the canvas creates an air of mystery that pervades the experience of the painting: one wonders what is depicted on its surface. The final version of one of the sketches found on the wall behind the figures? Some other scene entirely? Perhaps even a depiction of the very people present in the room? – for one possibility is that the hidden canvas is a double of the work we are in the process of viewing, creating an infinite loop of viewing that includes both the viewer and all those present in the scene…in fact, all of reality.

In both theme and the ambition of its meta-pictorial commentary,
the clearest realist predecessor to Zëri i Masës is Gustave Courbet’s massive *The Painter’s Studio, Real Allegory Determining a Phase of Seven Years in My Artistic and Moral Life* of 1854-55. In Courbet’s image, the artist sits at the center of the composition, engaged in painting a landscape, surrounded by a collection of viewers (a naked muse, a cat, a young peasant, several of the artist’s friends and intellectual champions, and a collection of general types). Courbet’s iconic painting depicts the central role of the artist in synthesizing and representing the whole of reality, even as – in the title’s assertion that the work is a *real allegory* – it broaches the complex and contradictory character of the relationship between the act of painting and the real. Shijaku does not, however, borrow Courbet’s compositional schema. The more direct reference goes back two centuries more, to Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* of 1656. It is deeply significant that Shijaku would turn to the Baroque – and in particular, to an image like *Las Meninas* – as a paradigm for the painting of socialist reality.

Michel Foucault most famously analyzed Velázquez’s painting as a representation of a whole system of (Classical) representation, a representation in which the subject-viewer “has been elided” – leaving behind an “essential void.” Shijaku’s painting is certainly the representation of representation itself – specifically, of the production of the representation of socialist representation. But it is perhaps easier to read the image along the lines of Svetlana Alpers’s interpretation of *Las Meninas*, as an image that straddles two systems of representation: one in which the artist looks out at the world and one in which the world projects itself onto a surface. For Alpers, the tension between these two systems – seeing and being seen – is fundamentally unresolvable in Velázquez’s painting, and the lack of resolution is the key to the work’s poignancy. A similar point could be made regarding Zëri i Masës, though the movement of reflection has perhaps been heightened even though Shijaku replaces the mirror of *Las Meninas* with the sketches covering the back wall of the studio. Here, the tension is one endemic to socialist realist art, as outlined in Enver Hoxha’s statement above: that between the artist observing the New Life and depicting it, and the New Life projecting itself in its dynamism. In ei-
ther case, Zëri i Masës raises the question of our access to the New Life in art, and part of the key to its elaboration of this tension is the back of the canvas shown in the image. It would benefit us, however, to return to a careful spatial analysis of the painting.

At the uppermost level, the level of the artist’s sketches mounted on the wall, is the realm of ideas. The world of ideas is largely indistinct – devoid of color except in the case of the brilliant red and black of Vojo Kushi – and amorphous. Several different scenes form the white register, as if this ideal realm was coterminous with the artist’s mind. However, since the artist is not the central figure, it seems unlikely that the upper register of the painting merely offers a psychological snapshot, an inventory of creative ideas present for the artist, waiting to be (more) fully realized. Instead, I think that the upper level of the painting is meant to represent the metaphysical primacy of the images portrayed, and it is significant for this primacy that they are linked to the past. Images of war heroes, of the mountainous terrain of Albania itself: these images form part of a realm of primordial myth that both acts as the foundation for and is transformed by “our new reality.” This transformation occurs through the artist, but his action alone is not sufficient to establish the full significance of the new reality – his bringing it to vision does not suffice to make it a part of the New Life. This, I think, is one reason why we do not, and need not, see whether or not the images the artist has sketched find themselves realized on the canvas. The New Life projects itself, but at the same time this projection exceeds the need for re-presentation. If we are somehow blocked from the space of Zëri i Masës by the canvas, if the dialogue between the spaces it depicts seems self-contained, then the painting functions by producing an unrepresentable excess, the impossibility of showing reality even as it shows the production of reality.

Below the realm of myths and ideas is the space of the painter’s studio, where the motley group described above are gathered. In some cases (such as the man at far left) the transition between the sheet with the artist’s sketches and the figures present in the studio seems sufficiently ambiguous to warrant the assumption that there is an intentional and significant spatial bridge between the two; certain
figures seem to occupy both spaces, or to be emerging from the upper space into the middle space (whose ambiguous flatness also suggests its continuity with the paper hung on the wall behind). It is in this middle space that the worker first enters the painting (and with him, Rama argues, his ideology and worldview, giving the work its revolutionary quality). Even the centrality of the worker who is explicating the canvas before him, however, cannot compete with the movement that draws the viewer’s attention down to the back of the canvas and, at the same time, over and down to the worker who silently contemplates this canvas.

The vast expanse of the back of the canvas, placed so far forward in the scene, serves in some way to block off the space depicted within the work from the space of the viewer, but in doing so also employs the well-worn strategy of drawing the viewer into the work by just such an impediment. At the same time, the placement of the canvas (nearly, but not quite, reaching to the bottom of the painting) contributes to the hierarchical arrangement of space mentioned above, which maps the flow from ideas to their concrete materialization along the axis from the top of the painting to its bottom edge, which in turn suggests the transition to our space. What is closest to us is most “real” – although there is also the suggestion that it is meant to be more “real” than us. Since we cannot see what is depicted on the canvas, we must default not only to the worker-orator at center, but also to the worker (the painter) seated at lower right. In fact, if anything, we are more directly tied to this worker, since he models, in his rapt contemplation, the comportment towards the canvas that – presumably – we are meant to hold toward Zëri i Masës.

4. Voice of the Masses, Words of the Party
If the worker at lower right (who is also the final point of a sweeping diagonal beginning from the floating bust of the man at upper left), is meant to model our own engagement with the work (with a work of socialist realism in general), it is also important to note that his absorption in the work is not merely visual. After all, the very title of the painting – Voice of the Masses – reminds us that Shijaku’s painting is
also about *listening*. Here again, through the figure of the worker gazing at the canvas we cannot see, Shijaku references a rich tradition in painting and sculpture of people *absorbed* in listening (to music, to speech). At the same time, he creates an inner world for the worker who gazes at the canvas. This inner world is not one already populated with ideas and emotions; instead it is a world that exists only in relation to the prior two levels (the realm of ideas and the realm of the studio). (Here, we might observe, is the production of the space of the socialist subject, who can then be filled in with the ideological substance of the more metaphysically primary levels. At the same time, this filling-in is a paradoxically reflective process, in which the worker’s reality is created for him, but shown to him as if it had existed before, in him.)

In fact, nearly all of the figures in *Zëri i Masës* appear absorbed in listening – including the artist, whose gaze appears to be one not of visual concentration but of immersion in listening to the ideas expressed by the worker speaking. The worker-orator and the work whose image we cannot see *function together* to synthesize, clarify, and expound the truth of socialist Albanian life. To encounter a work of socialist realism – and thus to encounter socialist reality – the worker at lower right shows us, is both to look *and to listen*, to be shown *and to be told*. As Enver Hoxha asserted, in the work of socialist realism, one not only sees the vision of the New Life but also “*hears* the fiery and beloved words of the Party.” One need only consider the role played by radio and television, by *speeches*, in the life of citizens of socialist Albania to understand the phenomenological situation that Shijaku has translated into a strictly visual medium. The oration of socialist Albania – the one transmitted through radio and television, written in newspapers and books – has been theorized as, fundamentally, a form of totalitarian monologue. While it is true that some aspect of this monologic quality is to be found in *Zëri i Masës* (for no one but the worker speaks, and his speech is decisive), I think that reading the image too strongly along these lines is reductive. For Shijaku’s painting is importantly about the *dialogue* between voice and image: their mutual reinforcement and, I now wish to argue, their irreconcilable
schism in the space of representation.

As Mladen Dolar writes, the voice has long been associated with the metaphysics of presence, conceptualized as “the privileged point of auto-affection, self-transparency, [and] the hold in presence.” The voice of the worker in Zëri i Masës would seem to perform precisely this function: it indicates the absolute self-presence of the workers’ ideology and thought, the coincidence of the new reality with itself. And yet, in pairing the representation of speech with the impossibility of representing socialist reality (the canvas with its back to us), Shijaku has in fact drawn attention to the difficulty of representing “our new reality” as a condition of self-presence. Just as the worker’s voice both is and is not the words of the Party (which exist through him, but also before him), so the painting of Albanian socialist realism both is and is not the production of reality. The way to show this paradox, as Shijaku has done, is to draw attention to the constitutive discontinuities in the metaphysics of representation. The artist alone does not shape the image of reality, the worker also shapes it. The image alone does not define reality, it is also expressed and understood through absorption in the voice. The image of socialist reality is not simply its own picture, it is also the meta-picture of its production. This is Shijaku’s realism.

5. Conclusion
Allow me to restate some of the principal points outlined above, and hopefully to clarify my thesis about how Shijaku’s painting works as a paradigm of socialist realism. Put simply, and perhaps too bluntly, the painting shows that to understand reality is both to contemplate it and to listen to the explanation of what reality is. It is to understand reality as something that can never be represented as the product of a completed synthesis, for our contemplation, our narration, is always already part of the production of reality. The image depicted upon the canvas is not just a mystery to us – insofar as we viewers imagine it is some recognizable scene of socialist life or national history – but it is also superfluous in an important sense to the process Shijaku is depicting. This is what is most radical about Zëri i Masës: in this innovative example of socialist realism the artist has shown the futility of
comparing art to reality, as if we could hold reality and art as objects alongside each other, examining the canvas with an eye towards its correspondence to some element of lived experience. Such an encounter with the image would be futile not because no such correspondence exists, but because we would learn little about “our new reality” from such an encounter. The artist has chosen instead to show the new reality as a reality of mechanisms, the mechanisms of the metaphysics of aesthetic creation, interpretation, and representation. The reality of the painting is that it depicts the artistic process – both practical, in the sense of the physical production of the artwork in the space of the studio, and metaphysical, in the sense of the relationship between nascent ideas and myths and their materialization in the artwork – that gives rise to works of socialist realism. This artistic process is both visual and auditory, and it is both conceptual and ideological in addition to its aesthetic aspects. It is not individual, but fundamentally collective. The outcome of this process is not simply the work of art depicted in the image but, by metaphorical extension, the whole “new reality” occupied by we the viewers.

I said at the outset that Shijaku’s painting was one of the most honest examples of socialist realism. I hope it has become clearer what I mean by this: that the work frankly depicts the production of a reality, its imposition and ideological strengthening, its genesis through different levels of metaphysical and ideological clarity to arrive in the world, together with its discontinuities and fundamental irreconcilabilities. The truth of Zëri i Masës is that the image of Albanian socialist reality is the image of image production. To reflect this reality is not to reflect a finished object, but to reflect the mechanisms by which a viewer (and an artist) is created who knows the right way to encounter the world, to understand the ideological production of the world as reality.

1. “Aspekti novator i kësaj tabloje nuk qëndron në faktin që autori futi disa njerëz në studio dhe i piktoroi ata bashkë me piktorin. Tingullimi novator dhe kombëtar i kësaj tabloje qëndron në faktin që këtu u futën punëtorët e ndërgjegjshëm, u fut medimi i tyre, ideologjia e tyre. [...] Aspekti i ri i kësaj tabloje nuk qëndron në ndonjë shpikje të re teknike, apo në ndonjë farë virtuoizmi të të pikturetarit, por në qëndrimin që mban artisti ndaj klasës punëtore, ndaj realitetit tonë të ri.”


5. It is interesting, for example, to consider the reception of Edisson Gjergjo’s 1971 painting Epika e Yjeve të Mëngjesit [Epic of the Morning Stars], another important image of oration and listening from the same period. In 1971, critic and art historian Andon Kuqali called it “expressive, but also eclectic.” (See Kuqali, “Shprehëse, por edhe Eklektike,” Drita, December 19, 1971.) A few years later, Gjergjo was imprisoned on the basis of his artistic production.


7. “Në pjesëm më të madhe të krijimtarisë sonë letraro-artistik […] njeriu yëni i ri gjen vetëveten, shëh vizualitetin e popullit dhe tëatdhëttonë socialist, dëgjon fjalën e dashur e të zjarre të Partisë dhe mbushet me kurajë dhe guxim për t’i ngritur kurdoherë e më lartë shkallët e jetës.” Enver Hoxha, “Përshtendetje e Komitetit Qendror të PPSH dhe Artistëve me Rastin e 25-vjetorit të Themelimit të Lidhjes së Shkrimtarëve dhe të Artistëve të Shqiptarës,” in Mbi Letërsinë dhe Artin (Tirana: 8 Nëntori, 1977), 314. 8. “[…] Iromizimet i merr nga populli dhe ia kthen ato prapë atij […].” Ibid., 315.


11. The identity of this worker as a painter suggests a further parallel to consider the reception and the voice of the Party and the speech of the enthralled viewer of the canvas, as if her were both its most enlightened critic of the mage and the most receptive to the reflection of his reality in the image.

12. Although if – as I argue – Shijaku’s composition is fundamentally tripartite, then it bears comparison to Courbet’s tripartite painting.

13. I am certainly not the first to note the influence of Velázquez and Courbet on Shijaku’s painting. This has been done by Ermir Hoxha, in his article “Studio e Artistit, Krahasim mes Velasikes, Kurbesë dhe Sali Shijakut,” Shekulli, 17 March, 2008, 14-15 (available from: http://www.arkivalajmeve.com/Studio-e-Aristtit.27308/, accessed 5 March, 2015). Hoxha’s analysis is perceptive, especially in his discussion of the relationship established between the face of the partisan on the wall behind the group, who gazes directly at a canvas we cannot see. However, he does not explore the full significance of the fact that we cannot see the painting being discussed, and thus does not arrive at as nuanced an analysis of the relation between artistic representation and socialist reality as I aim to provide here.


18. In an important way, but one beyond the scope of the current discussion, Shijaku’s painting can be read in terms of Dolar’s distinction between the word and the voice – and thus between the writing of the Party and the speech of workers (pictured in Zëri i Masës in the interesting juxtaposition of the newspaper Drita and the speech of the central orator).
Exhibition view.

Pamje ekspozite.