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Thirty years of exposure: notes on amateur and fine art photography in Russia

Exposure is that interval in time during which light falls through a lens onto the sensitive surface of the film. Give or take some intermissions, I have been looking at Russian life through the lens of a camera for three decades now, and in some ways I might compare myself with that sensitive surface. The reflections that follow are impressions that have been layered over the past thirty years.

Photography is my passion, my intoxication, my affliction.

Besides which, I have for several years been teaching '20th Century Russian Visual Culture' as a university course in Ireland, Finland and Scotland, in which photography occupies an significant position. And throughout these years I have been observing what has been happening in fine art photography in Russia, as well as the world of amateur photography.

I was seven years old when a camera first fell into my hands. It was a 'Smena', with plain but heavy moulded casing, and the shutter made a wonderful creaking sound. I "photographed" my father and my sister with it. In fact, I played at being a photographer. I pointed my camera, opened the shutter and pressed the button. I didn't actually take any pictures, but the feeling of the significance, the magic of the moment when you fix a picture of life – that stuck in my memory.

And then there was the magic of developing photographs. Two or three times a year, my sisters would buy the powder, which came in round cardboard

packages, and they mixed strange-smelling solutions in the kitchen. Then later, at night, with the aid of unearthly red lamplight, plus an ordinary soup plate, we developed the photographs. From that moment, photography, often thought of as the most realistic way to reflect life, became for me absolutely the opposite of realism – it was enchantment, magic, and the revelation of a different, parallel universe.

I suspect it was the same journey for many of us, both amateurs and those who became fine art photographers. I hardly know of a master-photographer who, in the 1970s, would have made his subject just everyday life with its small comedies and great tragedies. Experienced people were no doubt too wary to see things in that way: make such shots public, and you were guaranteed trouble. Self-censorship became second nature. Mainly, though, our photographers simply didn't value realism. They favoured romanticism, the desire to carry away oneself and others out of the familiar world and into a virtual or an illusory one.

By the time I finished school it seemed to me, as it did to many others who grew up in the Russian provinces in that stagnant era of socialism, that life was dull in our town, in fact that it just didn't exist there, and that real, interesting life was somewhere distant in the far north, or on the Black Sea, or generally abroad. Even Moscow and Leningrad seemed like different planets.

Looking back, had any photographer decided then, in the seventies, to look directly at life, I would regard them with genuine awe. But even now, after much of what was unknown in the past has come out into the open, I don't know of any such photographer, or photography. It is not an issue of fear, in my opinion. It was as if photography invited us to create a sham world. Even in the most artless amateur pictures people are playing a role, helping to create this illusion. Furthermore, the 'immediate' photography is far from being all photography. It is clear that it is an exaggerated form of this approach that leads to the dominance of '*chernukha*'¹, darkness and hopelessness as seen

¹ Chernukha refers to a 'black wave' in Russian popular culture which dwells especially on violence and cruelty

in the stylistics of arts of the late eighties in Russia, as well as in literature and in cinema.

What did I photograph? My schoolmates and later my fellow undergraduates, I found 'beautiful' landscapes and objects, I set up 'aesthetically pleasing still lifes'... What models were there for those of us who were interested in photography as an art-form to study? There was only one photography journal in the Soviet Union, '*Sovietskoe Foto*' ('Soviet Photo'), where technical skills were, with some exceptions, put to use for political propaganda. Only on two or three pages was any attention paid to the work of amateurs. True, it was possible to study through cinema, if you could mentally freeze the moving pictures in your mind. It is no coincidence that in English cinematography is also called 'photography'. The work of the cameramen Sergei Urusevsky ('The Cranes Are Flying'), Vadim Yusov ('Ivan's Childhood', 'Andrey Rublyov') and also Italian neo-realist films could not but leave their impression on a photographer's mind.

Towards the end of the seventies the Czechoslovakian journal '*Revue Fotografie*' became available in the Soviet Union, and it was that journal that showed us that the search for a language of photography beyond the limitations of realism was not only possible, but it was actually happening and being debated abroad. The journal came out every three months, was printed on good quality paper and was so popular that it was extremely difficult to get hold of – issues were passed around from person to person, and often in the process of this circulation the best photographs were cut out with a razor.

Many great Russian photographers considered themselves students of this journal, and still do. Among them, for example, the finest St Petersburg photographer who died before his time, Boris Smelov; Boris Savelev from Moscow; Georgiy Pinkhasov, who was invited to work at the famous 'Magnum' agency. It was through this journal that I found out about the Czech photographers Josef Sudek and Jan Saudek, and about the classics of European and American photography. And, naturally, I attempted to imitate them.

It was this Czechoslovakian journal that revealed to me a similarly wide range of wonderful photographers from the Baltic Republics, above all Lithuania, among them Antanas Sutkus, Rimantas Dihavicius, Romualdas Rakauskas, Alexandras Macijauskas. When an exhibition of Rakauskas opened in my home town showing a work from his famous series 'Flowering' I was already familiar with it. And that made the exhibition's effect on me all the more intense. It was so intense, in fact, that that very evening I wrote a review of it for the local newspaper.

Now, years later, while still having the greatest respect and love for Lithuanian photography I think this admiration nonetheless distracted many serious photographers from an analytical engagement with their own universe, that is, the depths of the Russian countryside. Many turned away from their humble surroundings in search of the beauty of the remote.

How I regret now that I didn't record anything of the life of my parents' village, that village where my grandfather's house stood, where I went every summer until the very end university, either on holiday or to help in the garden or for a family wedding. But at the same time, I am grateful towards the Baltics because they immunised me against '*chernukha*', and taught me to see and understand harmony.

In the eighties, photography clubs began to gain vigour across the whole country. The most well-known were '*Novator*' ('Innovator') from Moscow, '*Zerkalo*' ('Mirror') from Leningrad, and '*Poisk*' ('Search') from Gorky [now Nizhny-Novgorod]. Exchanges of exhibitions took place, and amateur photographers began to enter photographs for international competitions, and to win them. Out of animated debates and arguments about photographic work evolved technical skills and aesthetic judgement. An art-photography elite appeared in different regions of the country, with their new classics, Andrei Yerin and Georgiy Kolosov in pictorialism, Galina Lukyanova in staged photography, Sergei Yavorsky in the photography of everyday life, Yuri Shpagin and Mikhail Ladeishchikov. Many of them left their jobs and became professional artists.

Towards the mid-eighties, when everyone had become tired of propaganda, and romanticism hadn't led anywhere, the gaze of Russian photographers began to fall more and more on everyday life, on the forgotten Russian provinces and villages. That was how – frankly and with empathy – Valery Shchekoldin, Vladimir Syomin, Rifkhat Yakupov, and a youthful Boris Mikhailov began to take pictures. Lyalya Kuznetsova made her wonderful series from the life of the steppe gypsies, and in photojournalism there was no equal of photographs published in the magazine 'Ogonyok' ('Spark'). Now there were models for amateurs to study and follow in Russia. It was at this time that I too began taking part in photographic exhibitions and competitions.

In ninety-one the economic transformation of the country began. Our former way of life was torn to pieces. Photography clubs fell apart; the premises of cultural centres, had until then housed photographic laboratories, theatre studios and dance halls, now started to be patrolled by hard men with gold chains round their necks. The dance halls were filled with fridges, the laboratories with great rolls of newspaper, and in innumerable cultural centre offices the phones rang night and day – it was the time of the initial enrichment of the new Russian bourgeoisie. Organised amateur photography disappeared. Some moved into advertising photography, some began working with new glossy magazines, some, like Boris Mikhailov, began to work in a deconstructive postmodernist style, suited to getting grants from foreign funders. Very many stopped taking photographs altogether, simply because they could no longer buy film and photographic paper.

The beginning of non-commercial photographic life began from scratch, with clean sheet of paper. Not many years had passed before new names and new aesthetic directions appeared on this sheet of paper. At some point in 1990s its lynchpin was created. It became possible to become a member of the Russian Union of Photographic Artists by competition. The Union circulated information about photography-related events. Then, in Moscow, St Petersburg and other major cities, independent photographic studios and galleries began to appear. New Russian photography journals were also

appearing, and in them new names and new perspectives, new aesthetics – Nikolai Bakharev, Evgeny Mokhorev, Andrey Chezhin.

In recent years new economic opportunities have allowed tens of thousands of young Russians to acquire digital cameras and state of the art technology. This young generation, afflicted with the photography bug, and equipped already with new cameras and with new perceptions of life, are studying on various courses and in new photography clubs. What are they going to note, and how are they going to see it? There is a danger that the new amateurs will take their inspiration from glossy magazines or be seduced by the postmodernist experiment. But that is in the big cities. It's just as hard as it ever was for photographers in the depths of rural Russia, in the provinces, in the villages. And yet there is hope that talented youth will appear there, and make itself known. And mainly, I am sure, the new generation both of amateurs and photographic artists will see more deeply and with more interest than my generation. They are not obliged to sell their work and don't have to cater to anyone else, the only censor these days is one's own taste.

Every summer I travel to St Petersburg to interview photographers, go to exhibitions, discuss photography projects, and simply take photographs. And, every time, I come back impressed by the ideas, talent and creativity of both young and mature photographers there. One of the latest revelations for me has been the work of Alexandra Demenkova, a young talent from a forgotten town of Kingisepp on the Russian-Estonian border.

I am certain that we will hear much more of her. Russian photography is in the ascendancy.

References:

Another Russia: Through the Eyes of the New Soviet Photographers by Daniela Mrazkova, Vladimir Remes, and Ian Jeffrey. Thames And Hudson, London, 1986. – One of the best albums of late Soviet photography published in the West, this includes

the work of Lyalya Kuznetsova, Boris Savelyev, Vladimir Syomin (Semin), Alexander Macijaskas, Antanas Sutkus, and other masters.

<http://www.photographer.ru/> - one of the most popular web portals dedicated to photography, with previews, galleries of well-known photographers, discussions of various photography topics (in Russian and English).

<http://www.photounion.ru/> - the official site of the Russian Union of Photographic Artists.

<http://www.mdf.ru/english/> - the site of a Moscow photography gallery (in Russian and in English).

<http://www.fotodepartament.ru/index.php> - a major new photography project in St Petersburg.