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The Ugly Mirror *Avots*

A Review Essay by Anda Boluža

Aivars Kļavis, *Avota laiks* (Riga: Zvaigzne, 2021)

Avots, Neiburgs Hotel, Riga, Latvia

Keywords—*censorship, youth, graphic design, deconstruction, Soviet symbols, Aesopian language, fear, national identity, playfulness, strategic communications, strategic communication*

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Introduction

Latvia was under communist rule for almost half a century. The imposed regime brought not only deportations, imprisonments, grief, and fear, but also the pain of lost independence. The vision of the dreamland taken away, of prosperous and thriving Latvia, was kept alive through personal memories in many Latvian families. The spirit

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of Latvianness that survived under the socialist regime and a longing for essential freedom were the main driving forces of the nation that stood against the enforced communist plan.

Now, as the European Union faces threats of war, the story of regained independence offers a new perspective. It proves that the spirit of freedom does not cease to exist with the fact of occupation. Despite strict censorship and the control of communication channels in totalitarian political systems, it nevertheless finds its voice. This article looks back at the events of the 1980s that led to the restoration of independence in Latvia and investigates the role of the press, in particular the youth magazine *Avots*, paradoxically financed by the Communist Party. Could Soviet authority be undermined through artistic expression, and how could the magazine's covers subvert official ideology? Moreover, could art and design have any impact on politics and foster events to shape the future of a nation?

* * *

In the old town of Riga stands the former headquarters of the Soviet state radio broadcaster. It's an imposing building; its masonry survives, pockmarked with bullet holes lest we forget the frailty of nascent democracy. But these days it's foreign tourists who pass through these squares and narrow streets, more intent on photographing Latvia's restored Jugendstil Art Nouveau and Baltic bourgeois architecture.

Some even enjoy the chic hospitality of hotels in the area such as the boutique Neiburgs and its restaurant where the country's erstwhile independence movement has found a fresh way to garnish the culinary experience. For diners, the walls of its restaurant display the covers of *Avots*, albeit with few pretensions to being an art gallery, and more as a statement of interior design.

Avots (The Source), a magazine that flourished in the dying days of Soviet Latvia, captured an explosion of artistic, cultural, and political talent,

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particularly with its striking covers designed by some of the country's leading artists from the 1980s. In a timely book written by the former editor of *Avots*, Aivars Kļavis contemplates the challenge of writing a museum piece of publishing history—a conundrum at a historic moment in the Cold War: '30 years already, everything is already rusty, already covered—but, well, try to remove the rust of myths and still get their essence. I mean, another five years and it really couldn't be done any more.'[2] For Kļavis, meanwhile, the creative awakening of *Avots* has left the legacy of a set of values and principles which still matter today in admittedly different circumstances. However, the return of authoritarianism's reach from its geographical neighbour, against the backdrop of war in Ukraine, feels like a cold wind blowing unabated from the east.

In the late 1970s the Press Building was constructed in Riga for the specific purpose of publishing the press for the entire Soviet republic. By putting masses of publicists, reporters, and editors under the same roof—where space was also allocated to censors, KGB (Committee for State Security) agents, and printers—the Communist Party (CP) of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (the Latvian SSR) could organise the control of journalistic work in a much more effective way. On special occasions, such as the October Revolution anniversary celebration, the twenty-two-storey building was decorated with a huge banner bearing a portrait of Lenin,[3] as if to mark the unquestionably significant role of the press in conveying the idea of communism.

However, as soon as the concept of glasnost challenged the established view of a socialist press as a propaganda tool of the party, the building was turned into a symbolic battleground of opposing actions and views. Furthermore, on 5 May 1987 members of the dissident organisation Helsinki-86 gathered in front of the Press Building in order to celebrate the Day of the Press.[4] In particular, they had come to greet Jānis Britāns, editor-in-chief of *Cīņa*, the official daily press organ of the CP of the Latvian SSR. With their mouths plastered over with tape, this silent

2 Aivars Ozoliņš, 'Aivars Kļavis: Tā bija misija, nevis darbs', *Ir*, 13 December 2021.

3 Ēriks Hānbergs, *Preses nams ne mirki nav rimis* (Riga: SIA Due, 2008).

4 'Helsinku grupa viesojas pie Preses nama', *Auseklis* № 6 (1988): 37.

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yet provocative act drew the attention of all the staff in the building. While some newspapers continued to serve the interests of the CP without questioning its politics, others such as the weekly *Literatūra un Māksla* (Literature and Art) did not hesitate to take advantage of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms to shed new light on previously indisputable facts and ideas. The polarisation of society—in publishing circles in particular—was illustrated by the fact that while *Literatūra un Māksla* was subjected to public criticism, Alfrēds Rubiks, chairman of the executive committee of the Riga City soviet, raised the wages of those working for *Cīņa*. Although theoretically glasnost was activated from the top, the local leadership, by contrast, retained a conservative stance and was slow to adopt new perspectives on the operations and role of the press. As late as May 1988, Boris Pugo,[5] first secretary of the CP of the Latvian SSR, stated that 'the Soviet press is not a private shop and no one must forget it!'[6]

Avots: A New Beginning

In 1986 two rooms in the Press Building were allocated[7] to the team at *Avots*, the magazine of literature and culture for young readers. The directive to publish a new magazine was passed in Moscow by the Central Committee of the CP of the Soviet Union[8] and thus might have been interpreted as a political tool introduced from the top. In fact, such magazines were planned also in Estonia, Lithuania, and other Soviet countries in order to support reforms in general.

In the Latvian SSR, two versions of the magazine were launched as the content had to be available in both Latvian (*Avots*) and Russian (*Rodnik*).[9]

5 Boris Pugo continued his career in Moscow as the minister of the interior of the USSR until 1991, when he committed suicide after the failure of the August Putsch.

6 Boriss Pugo, 'Padziļināt demokratizāciju, audzināt patriotus', *Padomju Jaunatne* № 88 (1988): 1–3 (p. 3).

7 Aivars Kļavis, *Avota laiks* (Riga: Zvaigzne, 2021), p. 38.

8 Ibid., p. 17.

9 Latvia's ethnic demography in 1989: Latvians 52 per cent (1,387,757); Russians 34 per cent (905,515).

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The main purpose of the monthly, namely, to serve the young, originated in the policy of the leadership encapsulated in the title of Gorbachev's speech 'Youth Is the Creative Force of Revolutionary Renewal' at the XX Congress of the Komsomol in April 1987. According to Hilary Pilkington, youth became one of the central issues of political debate in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.[10] The author introduces two paradigms specific to Soviet ideology: youth-as-constructors-of-communism and youth-as-victims-of-Western-influence. The tension between these two poles constituted the seemingly never-ending debate on the role and tasks of Soviet youth. If hitherto popular opinion had held that 'every ounce of energy used on the dance-floor was energy which could, and should, have been invested in building a hydroelectric power station',[11] then in the days of perestroika other ways of how to spend leisure time became legitimised. Rock music, previously regarded as a weapon in the psychological armoury of America, was officially accepted. Thus, even if *Avots* was intended as a tool to manipulate Soviet youth, the limits of openness and liberalisation appeared to have been loosened due to the unprecedented speed and scale of change in the principles of the USSR.

In times of such uncertainty, *Avots* nevertheless found its unique character. However, the story behind the cover of its first issue reveals the difficulties the editor-in-chief, Aivars Kļavis, and his team encountered. The cover (see p. 236) was designed by the young artist Andris Breže. His exhibition created with Ojārs Pētersons and Juris Putrāms in the Gustavs Šķilters Museum in Riga had been banned by the Ministry of Culture of the Latvian SSR in 1984.[12] For *Avots* magazine his concept had been to use the motif of a nib for the cover designs for the entire year of publication. The nib was turned into a Christmas tree in December and in August it was transformed into a sundial. However, the design of the first cover was changed by Kļavis at the last minute at the printers, without the knowledge of the artist. The printers were instructed to stop the printing process until the cover illustration drawing was reworked.

10 Hilary Pilkington, *Russia's Youth and Its Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 118.

11 Ibid., p. 69.

12 The formal reason for the closure was stated as the inflammability of one of the exhibits. Mark Allen Svede, 'Many Easels, Some Abandoned' in *Art of the Baltics,* Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (eds), (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), pp. 185–274 (p. 251).

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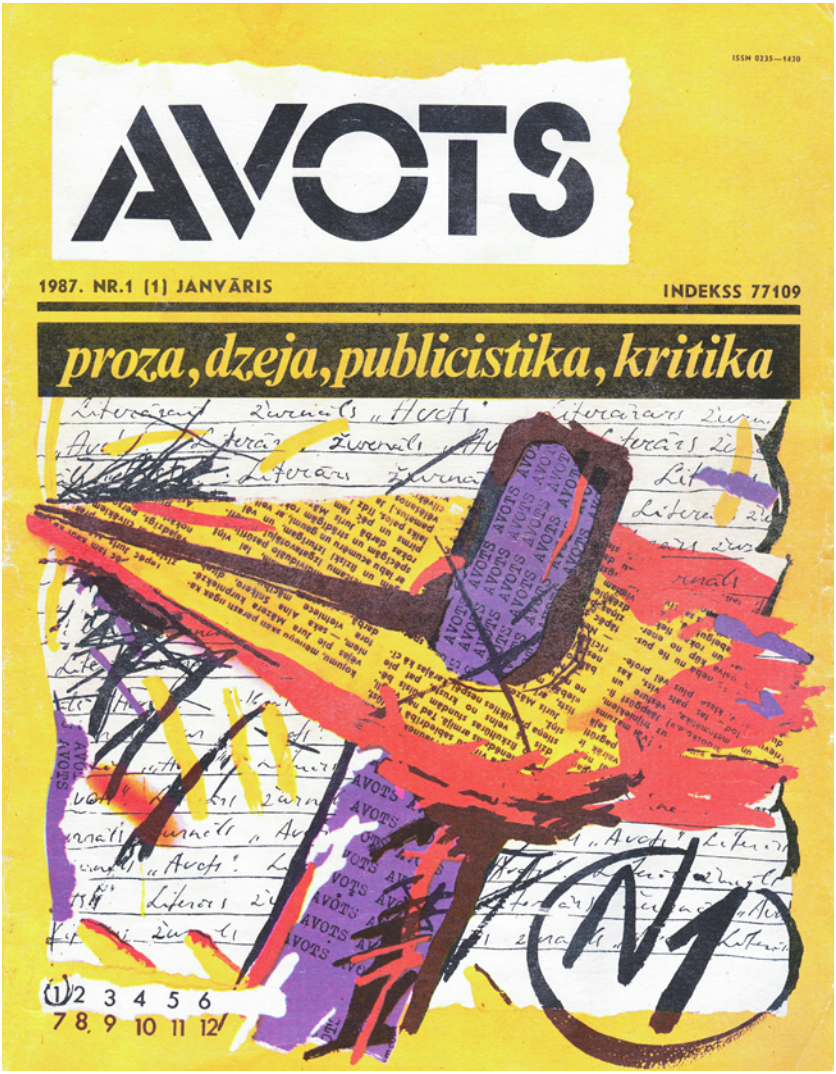

Avots, 1987, no. 1. Cover design by Andris Breže.

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According to Kļavis, the motif of the nib on the cover was interpreted by the higher authorities as a phallus penetrating a vagina symbolising the Soviet press.[13] Kļavis, accused of cowardice by his staff, commented:

> The true heroic deed was to make sure the first issue was printed and the magazine was still published afterwards. Had *Avots* been published with that cover, it would have been its first and last issue—there would be nothing after that. Because the attitude towards *Avots* was absolutely unambiguous—what kind of people has Kļavis gathered there: extremists, anti-Marxists, apolitical types and generally dangerous individuals. *Avots* is explosive material, that much is clear; therefore it has to be extinguished while there's still time and everything has not yet gone up in flames.[14]

Although at the time of its launch the weight of censorship was slowly diminishing, both the layout and content of every issue of *Avots* still had to be approved by the censors. Censorship was carried out primarily by the local branch of the Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs of the USSR in collaboration with the Administration of Propaganda and Agitation of the Central Committee of the CP of the Latvian SSR and the KGB. The institution was renamed regularly. However, in everyday parlance the body of censors was most often referred to as Glavlit, from its Russian title, *Glavnoye upravleniye po delam literatury i izdatel'stv*. The pages of newspapers show that censors were still able to regulate the press as late as 1989,[15] until eventually the censorship agency in Latvia was liquidated by a decree the new government passed on 10 August 1990.

13 Kļavis, *Avota laiks*, p. 99.

14 Aivars Kļavis, '... Mani atpakaļ realitātē vienmēr noliek dzīve', *Latvju Teksti* № 10 (2012): 6–10 (p. 9).

15 On 6 March 1989 the newspaper *Atmoda* published a short comment on its pages that the material had been cut by Glavlit.

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While the ruling regime maintained various ways of controlling the public's voice, this task largely rested upon editors. Should criticism and reprimands fail to discourage any editor from publishing views opposing those of the state, the common practice was to fire the scapegoat and assign their post to another candidate, thus intensifying the process of self-censorship. Sandra Kalniete, one of the leaders of the Latvian Popular Front, describes this aspect:

> Even after the Congress [the founding congress of the Latvian Popular front in 1988] each of us still had a tenacious internal censor within ourselves. This censor worked automatically, and independently of our own will. Time had to pass before our first reaction would no longer be 'no, I cannot say this; no, I cannot do this'. I don't remember the first time I met this subconscious self-imposed objection with a counter-question—'why not?' In any case, the answer to this question was the start of the dismantling of the time-tested restraint mechanism.[16]

Secrecy surrounding the body of censorship led to a situation where authors actually did not know who had made editorial changes, since 'Glavlit's existence was, of course, an open secret.'[17] Taking into account the responsibility laid upon editors, any changes imposed on texts might just as well have resulted from an editor's caution and unwillingness to take a risk, and this aspect further complicated the relationship between Kļavis and his team.

The Central Committee of the CP of the Latvian SSR also maintained control over the media through regulation of paper supplies and printing facilities. When publishing *Avots*, regulation was referred to by Andra

16 Sandra Kalniete, *Es lauzu, tu lauzi, mēs lauzām, viņi lūza* (Riga: Jumava, 2000), p. 90.

17 Joseph Gibbs, *Gorbachev's Glasnost* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1999), p. 6.

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Neiburga, the magazine's art director, in the pages of the magazine in 1987:

> First, an answer to those many readers who express militant disgust about the small amount of colourful images in this magazine. You express a suspicion that this is due to the 'hackwork' or 'stinginess' (?) of the editor. Therefore I am informing you that each publication has a strictly controlled number of pages which can be in full colour, two colours, and black and white. Our magazine has the following: 16 pages in colour, 32 pages in two colours, and the rest are supposed to be in black and white. We are only allowed to choose one spot colour for each issue. We have chosen the colour yellow for this and also a number of future issues.[18]

Even if the range of colours accessible to the magazine was dictated from above, the designers turned the ascetic colouring into a visual trait specific to *Avots*. Yellow was used in black-and-white layouts to create sharp contrasts and expressive rhythms of graphic elements.

Another barrier the creative team of *Avots* had to overcome was the reaction of readers. The design of the magazine seemed so radical that the editorial board received not only positive comments, but also complaints from subscribers who were not used to such rough aesthetics. A letter from a traumatised reader was published in the issue of May 1987:

> The design of the new magazine shocked me so much, that I couldn't sleep for several nights. I have never seen an uglier magazine in my life. Looking at this magazine, I was taken over by horror. Was it necessary to study for many years

18 A. Neiburga, 'Lasītāju vēstuļu apskats', *Avots* № 5 (1987): 80.

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> at the Academy of Art, in order to smear some black and yellow stains, draw some crosses (like an illiterate person) and add some finger prints (like in a criminal case)?[19]

Other readers expressed similar comments, such as 'Do these lines require five years at the Academy of Art? I, a worker, could draw them in two minutes' and 'I am surprised the artistic editor—a woman, to boot—was capable of allowing something this ugly and appalling.' Neiburga, the art director, replied, 'Do not be ashamed of your ignorance (probably, you are not responsible ??? for that), but do not make the ignorance the measure of knowledge,'[20] and resigned her position. The design and layout of *Avots* was nevertheless retained when Neiburga's post was taken over by Sarmīte Māliņa.

However, not only its design contrasted radically with established Soviet standards, but also its content. If previously Soviet press organs were obliged to praise the political system and its leader, celebrate achievements of the working class, and stress society's solidarity on its way towards communism, on its way to glasnost publications gradually exchanged optimistic views for openly critical comments of the system and fragments of previously forbidden texts. *Avots* published not only works by Latvian authors from the times of independent Latvia banned during the Soviet era, but also an interview with Joseph Brodsky (expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972) and his text on tyranny; George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945); and Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1952)—to name a few.

Moreover, *Avots* had the nerve to be the first to breach the limits. Oļegs Mihaļevičs, one of the *Rodnik* editors, remembers: 'Our articles were followed thoroughly by journalists of other publications. In journalism, there existed what could be called a law of precedent: if it got into the new issue without repression, it meant we could do it as well.'[21] Nellija

19 Ibid. (translated by Marianna Auliciema for *Dizaina Studija* № 24 (2010), published by Neputns).
20 Ibid.
21 Kļavis, *Avota laiks*, p. 225.

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Janaus from the Central Committee of the CP of the Latvian SSR now admits, 'We, at the committee, were afraid of *Avots*, since we did not know ourselves what was allowed and what was not.'[22] Access to previously unavailable information made the magazine attractive to a wide audience. In 1987 the circulation of *Avots* was 100,000 copies, yet this had reached 145,000 by 1990. During these years, the circulation of the Russian version, *Rodnik*, increased more than threefold as it gained popularity in the rest of the Soviet Union.

The steps taken by *Avots* are notable when looking back at the formation process of authoritative discourse. Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak writes:

> Party speeches and documents written in the [Central Committee] were increasingly subjected to endless editing, behind closed doors, to produce texts that minimized the subjective stamp of the author and were preferably identical in style and structure to texts previously written by others; this led to a progressive uniformity, anonymity, and predictability of authoritative language.[23]

At the same time, Yyurchak stresses a profound shift within Soviet culture during the late period, opening up spaces of indeterminacy, creativity, and unanticipated meanings in the context of strictly formulaic ideological forms.[24] Indeed, as shocking as *Avots* may seem, it in fact shows the internal shift of paradigms that had been taking place for decades behind the frozen exterior of the official parade.

Avots was launched at the time when the creative energy generated by artists and writers in the course of the 1970s and early 1980s was eventually released during the Gorbachev era. Political and social reforms the leader introduced profoundly accelerated the liberalisation

22 Ibid., p. 127.

23 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 74.

24 Ibid.

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of the artistic scene. Art historian Mark Allen Svede uses the term 'renaissance' to describe processes in those days: 'Despite some ominous eleventh-hour bureaucratic retrenchment and the lingering possibility of reprisals, glasnost did animate Latvia's art communities. Painting and print-work entered something of a renaissance in the mid-1980s.'[25] Moreover, the designer and art critic Jānis Borgs, writing in 2010, characterises this particular period as 'a state-funded paradise in the creative sense'.[26] Different experimental shows took place, sometimes held in less well-known exhibition halls or cafes, and performances were carried out publicly on the streets (for instance, the 'Bronze Man' in 1987 by Miervaldis Polis, who was pictured on the cover of *Avot*s in August 1990). In this context, the creative team of *Avots* was formed of like-minded intellectuals.

The covers of *Avots* were designed by Breže in 1987, Māliņa in collaboration with Sergejs Davidovs in 1988, Ojārs Pētersons in 1989, and Kristaps Ģelzis in 1990.[27] The artists collaborating knew each other personally and often worked together for other art projects and exhibitions as well. 'The work was connected with people with whom one wanted to associate; that was the most important thing. If I had had to design the cover for the magazine *Zvaigzne*, for example, it would have felt like a state commission,' recalled Ģelzis.[28] This liberated atmosphere of *svoi* (from Russian, meaning a circle of close and trusted friends), young artists and designers, served also as a springboard for disrupting the stagnated visual structures of authoritative discourse.

Deconstruction of symbols was most evident on the cover of the October 1987 issue designed by Breže (see p. 243). Clearly, the designer—like all art directors working in the Soviet republics at the time—was required to refer to the seventieth anniversary of the Great October Revolution

25 Svede, 'Many Easels', p. 262.

26 Jānis Borgs, 'The Soros Era' in *Nineties*, Ieva Astahovska (ed.), (Riga: Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2010), pp. 43–59 (p. 44).

27 The tradition of collaboration with a single artist in order to produce cover designs for the entire year ended in 1991, and thus *Avots* lost its unique and coherent visual character just before it was finally shut down.

28 Kristaps Ģelzis, personal conversation, 29 January 2010.

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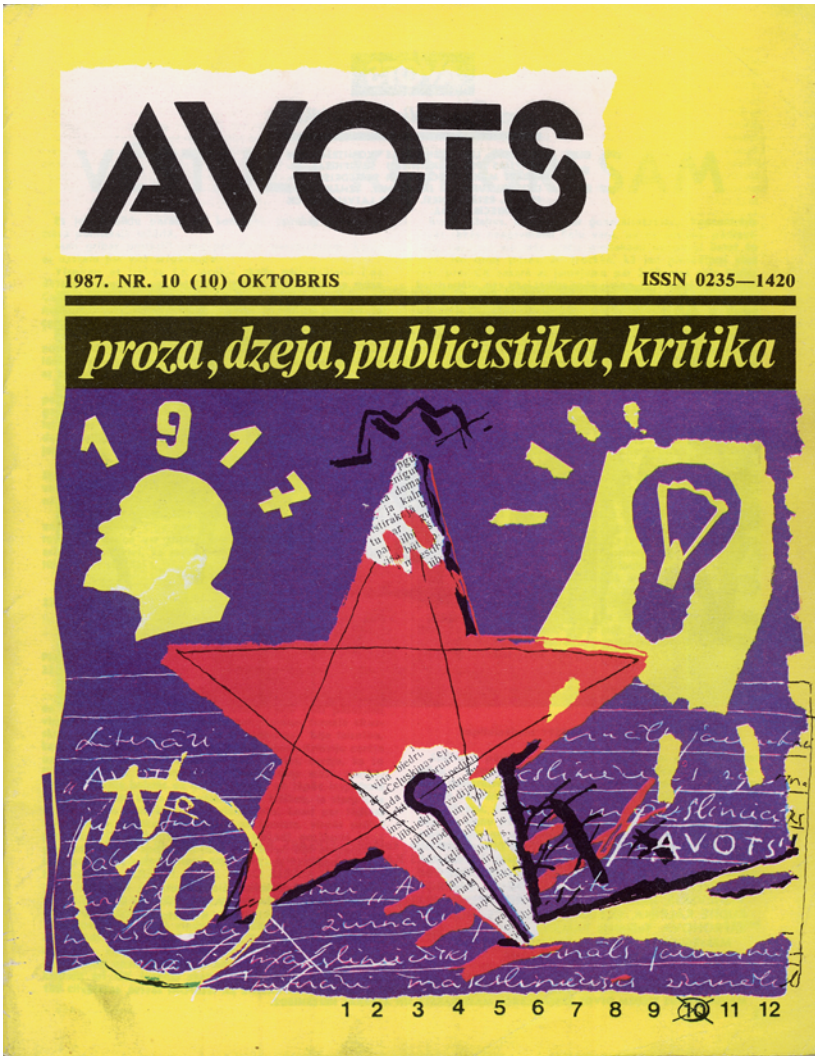

Avots, 1987, no. 10. Cover design by Andris Breže.

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Avots, 1988, no. 3. Cover design by Sarmīte Māliņa.

of 1917. According to his design concept, one of the points of the red star, the traditional symbol of communism, was rendered as a nib and drained of colour by the act of writing. Ironically, a hybrid combination of nib and red star seems a perfect illustration of Soviet ideology and propaganda as an authoritarian diktat of the CP. Moreover, the star, standing on two points, one of which was colourless, looked as if it had gone lame. Furthermore, the cover features an unorthodox portrait of Lenin, a figure whose representation formed an entire canon in the Soviet Union. As Yurchak writes, artists used certain prototypes in order to produce visual representations of the leader. The author emphasises that 'Lenin's death mask and head cast were not ordinary ideological images, but semiotic "indexes" that pointed to one of the key organizing concepts of Soviet ideology, its master signifier "Lenin".'[29] However, Breže did not follow official stylistic and established traditions in his design, ignoring the principle of hierarchy by approaching the subject in an informal manner. Rendering the Old Bolshevik in silhouette, the artist reproduced only the most characteristic features such as Lenin's beard in his sketchy drawing. The significance of modifying what hitherto could not be altered—a 'sacred' symbol in Soviet iconography—has to be underlined. In fact, Breže's work foreshadowed a later debate on the legacy of Lenin. Graeme Gill, in his book *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*, writes that in the following years historians depicted Lenin 'in a new light, as a much less kindly and gentle leader than he had formerly been portrayed'.[30]

Even if Breže's version was a less typical image of Lenin than was usual in official periodicals, it was still based on an existing graphic canon. However, another artist contributing to *Avots*, Juris Urtāns, took a much more radical step. In 1989 his surrealistic drawing published on the back cover of *Rodnik*, the Russian version of *Avots*, depicted a man's head crushed in a mousetrap. However, the face bore too much resemblance to Lenin. As a result, the image came to be seen as scandalous, and the

29 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 56.

30 Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 259.

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editorial team had to respond to numerous calls and letters from worried Soviet readers.

Sarmīte Māliņa also referenced the image of the Soviet leader. She designed the March 1988 issue cover (see p. 244), depicting the statue of Lenin that stood in Riga city centre. Such statues were mandatory elements in public spaces in numerous socialist cities. However, the proportions and arrangement of visual elements in her design signified that the relevance of the statue and, in fact, the leader was diminishing. In Māliņa's drawing the statue was overshadowed by a tall white building bearing the name 'Latvija' (Latvia). Such a building did indeed stand next to the statue on the central street in Riga, yet in this depiction it was deprived of any architectural qualities in order to embody the idea of Latvia as a state. Eventually, not only artists but also political activists used various methods to undermine Lenin's role. Kalniete writes about a mass demonstration organised on 18 November 1989: 'This time the front had the courage to cover Lenin's profile attached above the stand with a cloth of unbleached linen.'[31]

'It was only when Lenin was undermined as a master signifier, in the late 1980s, that the Soviet socialist system quickly collapsed,' declares Yurchak.[32] Although the Soviet system's metanarrative was based on Lenin as a master signifier, the state's ideological mechanisms employed other symbols too. One that stood for the achievements of communist rule was an electric light bulb. In everyday conversation it was often referred to as 'Ilyich's lamp', since Lenin had made a considerable political and economic investment in total electrification of the country. It was his plan, the GOELRO, initiated in 1920 that served as a prototype for the five-year plans underlying centralised Soviet economics. However, the shifting perception of socialism also affected this symbol. While Breže played around with it on the cover of the previously mentioned October 1987 issue, Māris Ārgalis drew two surrealistic versions of the bulb where a standard filament was replaced by an animal's skull and a pig's tail.

31 Kalniete, *Es lauzu*, p. 278

32 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 74.

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His illustrations accompanied the publication of Orwell's *Animal Farm* in *Avots* in 1988. Even if these graphic interpretations did not constitute explicit political protest, the imperfection and instability of the system was nevertheless declared directly through the image's grotesque nature.

Sirje Helme, Estonian art historian, writes on the Soviet period that irony and the grotesque were 'a vehicle for expressing dissent, contrasting with the demanded atmosphere of overall optimism. Irony and the grotesque spoke of the opposite: skepticism, lack of trust, and entrapment. The grotesque was considered a manifestation of distrust in the accepted norms.' [33] Ramona Umblija, art historian and editor of the book *Posters in Latvia*, underlines similar methods of conveying alternative views. She writes that 'in the arts of the Soviet era, the allegory plays a most significant role. Hidden meanings, direct or indirect visual, literary and acoustic hints, metaphoric imagery, poetic language and hyperbole are particularly favoured.'[34] In her view it was a common understanding that permeated society at that time and that permitted everyone, regardless of their specific understanding of the language of art, to perceive the information coded by the artists. In this respect Svetlana Boym talked about 'the counter-memory'. She wrote that

> while there are vast differences between the USSR and Eastern and Central Europe, one could speak about one common feature of the alternative intellectual life in these countries from the 1960s to the 1980s: a development of 'counter-memory' that laid a foundation of democratic resistance and arguably was a prototype of a public sphere that already had emerged under the Communist regime. Counter-memory was for the most part an oral memory transmitted between close friends

33 Sirje Helme, 'Nationalism and Dissent' in *Art of the Baltics*, Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (eds), (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), pp. 6–16 (p. 14).

34 Ramona Umblija, 'The Event 1984: Measuring Time with Asides' in *Daba. Vide. Cilvēks. 1984–2004*, Inese Baranovska (ed.), (Riga: Artists' Union of Latvia, 2004), pp. 45–72 (p. 53).

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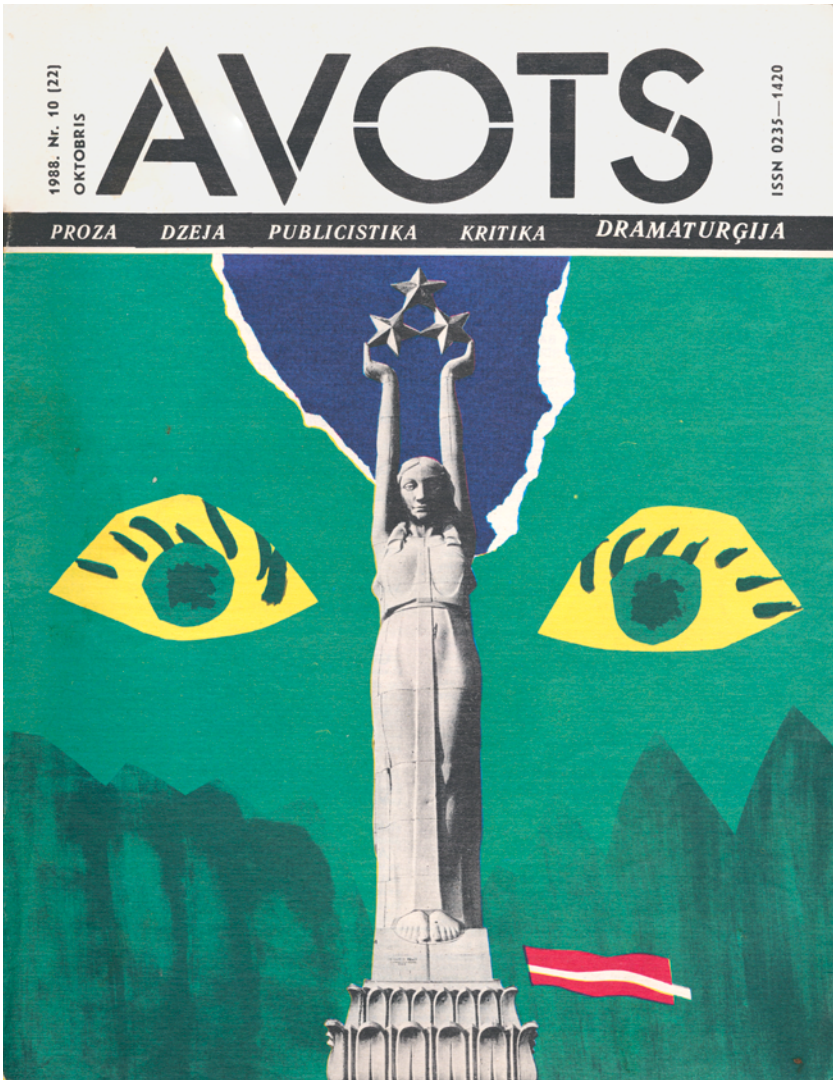

Avots, 1988, no. 10. Cover design by Sarmīte Māliņa.

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> and family members and spread to the wider society through unofficial networks.[35]

Boym describes it as 'not merely a collection of alternative facts and texts but also an alternative way of reading by using ambiguity, irony, doublespeak, or private intonation that challenged the official bureaucratic and political discourse.'[36]

Grotesque drawings and collages published on *Avots* covers did indeed declare the imperfections of the system. However, they cannot be interpreted as dissident since the leadership of the CP itself initiated a public discussion of the distortions of Soviet discourse at that time. As Umblija wrote on 26 August 1988 in *Literatūra un Māksla*, 'not so long ago, this distinctive "Aesopian language" was essentially the only way a poster artist could openly express his or her opinion. Now, it seems, code is no longer compulsory.'

In contrast to Breže's drawings, the cover Māliņa designed for the October 1988 issue (see p. 248) did not challenge the meaning of established Soviet symbols, but represented completely different political symbols. Instead of signs typical of communist ideology, the artist portrayed the Latvian national flag, censored during the Soviet period, yet often carried during political demonstrations at the time, and the statuette of Liberty which, having been the main sculptural element of the Freedom Monument, was in the process of becoming the representation of an independent Latvia. Yet again, although such a composition comprising symbols of Latvian statehood might seem exceptional and provocative, by the end of 1988 the majority of local publications embraced the issue of national identity.

What makes the contribution of *Avots* exceptional is the fact that *Avots* approached the subject of national identity in a playful manner. On the cover by Māliņa, the photographic silhouette of Liberty is combined with

35 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 61.
36 Ibid., p. 63.

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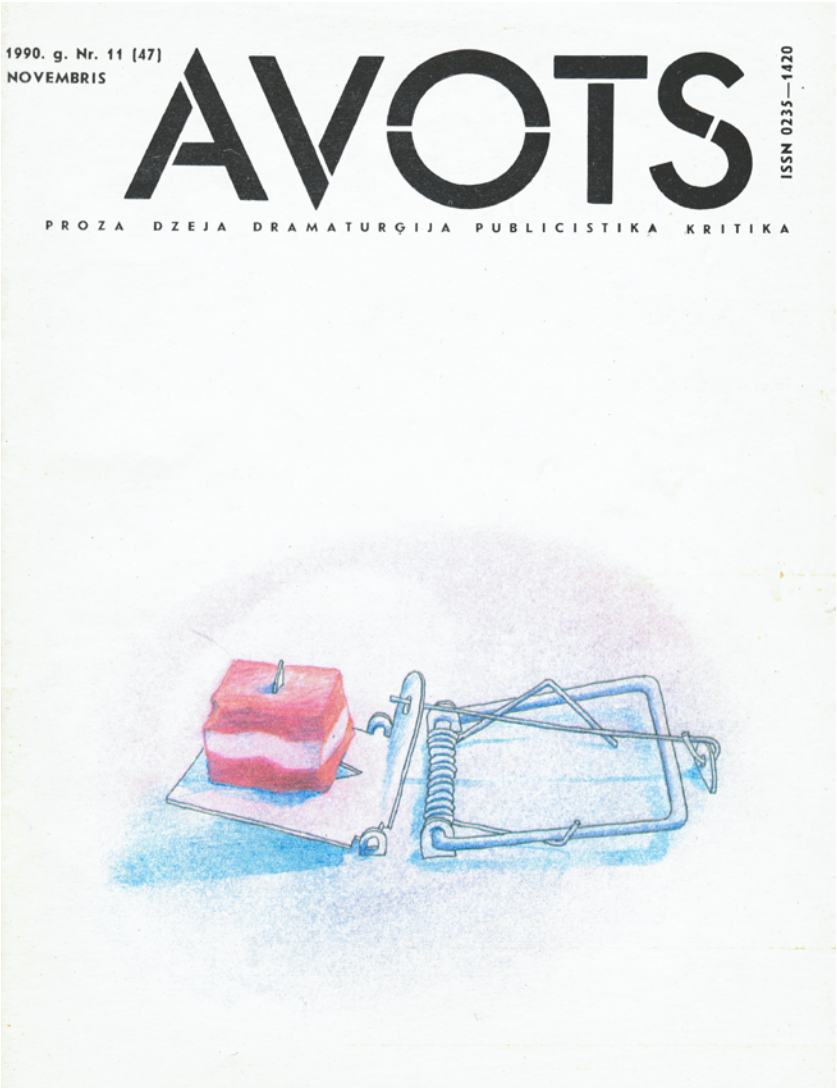

Avots, 1990, no. 11. Cover design (front) by Kristaps Ģelzis.

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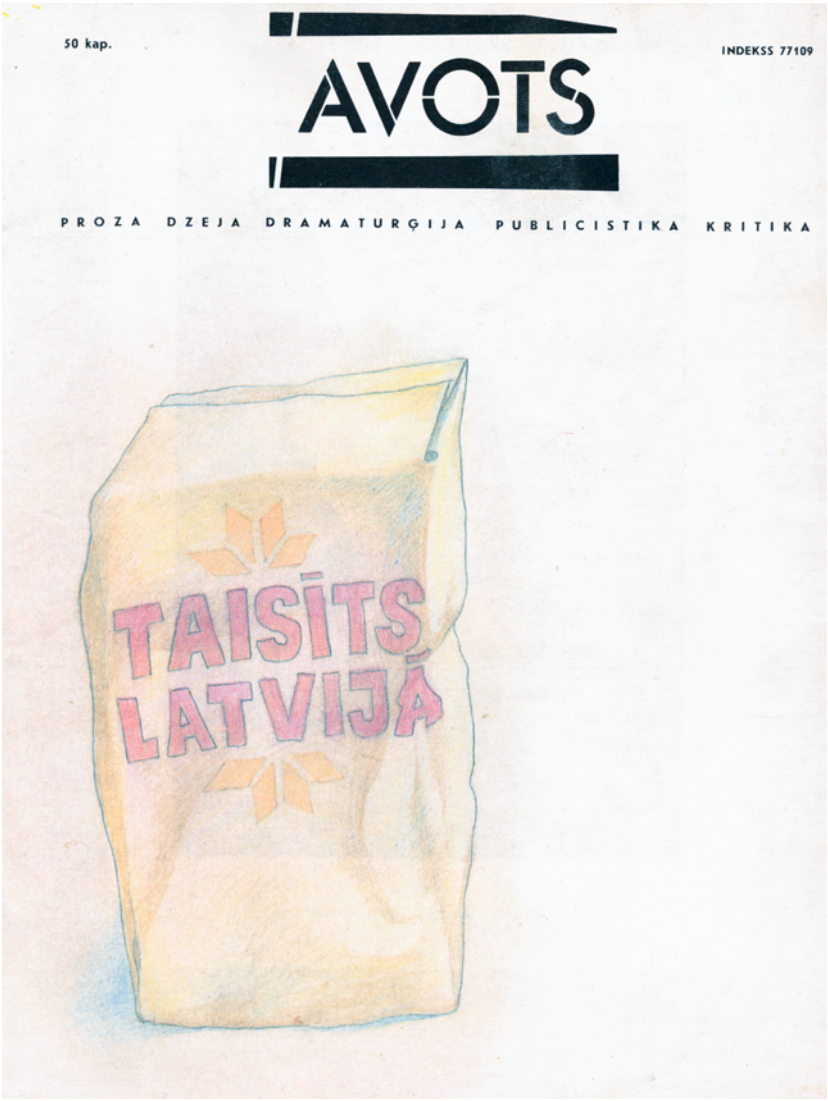

Avots, 1990, no. 11. Cover design (back) by Kristaps Ģelzis.

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a motif of a pair of eyes, as if signifying that the nation was animated and alive. This corresponds to the statement by Gill on the glasnost period: 'Henceforth society would not only respond to the rulers in the form of a reflexive mirror, but would begin to shape symbols and their meaning openly in a form that was markedly different from that projected from the top.'[37]

The motif of the Latvian national flag was also used by Ģelzis, on the front cover of the November 1990 issue of *Avots* (see p. 250). He had drawn a mousetrap in a realistic manner, yet instead of cheese the national flag was depicted as the bait. Therefore, in terms of Latvian–Russian relations one might argue that the author had illustrated Latvia as a tasty morsel, which had unexpectedly led to a trap. The back cover of the issue (p. 251) features a drawing of a bag of sugar with large letters forming the title 'produced in Latvia', though in those days Latvia was part of the Eastern bloc and therefore known as the Latvian SSR. In an interview, Ģelzis admitted

> this 'dynamically agitated product' [the cover] was not beautiful and lovable; it had to be aggressive in a positive way. I think that all of us who have worked on it have been patriotically humane in our choice, meaning—we have been thinking about people. There was only as much politics as we had hopes for nationalism.[38]

Helme agrees, noting that 'artists did not need to think in terms of political categories; their interests were mostly related to the exploration of art's various expressive forms. Yet inevitably each step that was taken against the prescribed canons was also a political decision.'[39] Even if it was not so much a deliberate and well-planned protest against the system, the playfulness and ease with which the artist had approached the question

37 Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy*, p. 223.

38 Anda Boluža, '*Avots*: The Source of Eternal Youth and Vigour', *Dizaina Studija* № 24 (2010): 53–55 (p. 54).

39 Helme, 'Nationalism and Dissent', p. 14.

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of identity demonstrated the actual liberation that could not be found, for example, in the rigid and strict design of dissident publications such as *Auseklis*, produced by the dissident organisation Helsinki-86.

Paradoxically, *Avots* was shut down in 1992 due to lack of finances after Latvia had gained its independence. It was a product of glasnost that in the hands of writers and artists was turned into a mirror reflecting the ugly and shocking truth of the Soviet system, yet at the same time mirroring the sincere dream of Latvia as a free and liberated nation. It demonstrates that art and design can have a powerful role in decisive historic moments and that artistic expression is inseparable from political processes even if this is unintended. In fact, although many years have passed since its heyday, the phenomenon of *Avots* is still widely discussed and acclaimed through articles and other publications, proving that the story behind it is both timeless and relevant.