

## HEGEMONY AS A VISUAL RHETORICAL SIGNIFICATION IN SOVIET ESTONIA PHOTOJOURNALISM\*

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Visual rhetoric, which has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, attempts to apply the instruments of rhetoric to the analysis of visual images, and as such encompasses a wide variety of objects, from architecture to the presentation of interiors and public spaces<sup>1</sup>. Some scholars seem to consider visual elements only in relation to expressing quantitative relations in charts and graphs, other concentrated solely on the ubiquity of visual elements on Internet, which are important only in online communication.<sup>2</sup> Much of the more culturally oriented work based on art theory using the term visual rhetoric to refer to artistic image exclusively<sup>3</sup>.

This paper tackles questions that can be briefly formulated as follows: 1) how to visualise power or hegemonic relationships? and 2) does rhetoric have anything to offer to research on the visualisation processes of hegemony? One of the instruments through which power relations are established in society is photography. The following paper discusses the relationship between the

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<sup>1</sup> S. Foss, *Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Towards a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory*, [in:] *Defining Visual Rhetoric*, ed. M. Helmers, Ch. A. Hill, Mahwah – New York – London 2004, pp. 303–311; R. Twigg, *Aestheticizing The Home: Textual Strategies of Taste, Self-Identity, and Bourgeois Hegemony in America's „Gilded Age”*, „Text and Performance Quarterly”, 1992, vol. 12, pp. 1–20; B. Stafford, *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting*, Cambridge 1999.

<sup>2</sup> M. Helmers, Ch.A. Hill, *Preface*, [in:] *Defining Visual Rhetoric*, red. eid., Mahwah 2004, p. IX.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

theory of hegemony as elaborated by Ernesto Laclau and the semiotics of culture of Yuri Lotman. The ground for believing this incorporation to be successful is the very apparent theoretical congeniality between them. They both belong to the Saussurean ontological terrain. From the point of view of cultural semiotics and the Essex School's theory of hegemony, the creation of meaningful totality (text, discourse) can only be figural or tropological construction – not a literal recognition or not only through one language. For Laclau especially important role play here Paul de Man's concept of generalized rhetoric. Latter, "which necessarily includes within itself performative dimension – transcends all regional boundaries and becomes conterminous with the structuration social life itself"<sup>4</sup>.

Using as an example the photo of the Singing Festival (1950) in the main Soviet Estonian newspaper *Rahva Hääl* I will try to show the hegemonic signification process and how the concept of rhetoric may help to clarify this process.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In June 1940, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were occupied by the Soviet troops. In the public-political discourse it was presented as the institution of the power of the people. On August 6<sup>th</sup>, the Republic of Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union, which, was in turn, termed as "joining the USSR on a voluntary basis". The German invasion into the Soviet Union over the summer of 1941 replaced Soviet occupation with German occupation for three years. From the autumn of 1944, when German troops were crushed by the Red Army, but especially after World War II a new Soviet occupation took place in Estonia.

During the Second World War and later, a certain ideological shift became crystallized that had its beginnings in the Soviet Union in the middle of the 1930<sup>s</sup>. The waning of revolutionary fervour into nationalist bolshevism and the pathos of a "peaceful build-up" both express an ideological turnaround and indicate the localization of the concept of world revolution – as "socialism in a single country". The recent occupation of previously independent countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) further deepened the problem of translating different cultural-ideological meanings. The determining factors of the public ideological discourse in the pre-War Republic of Estonia (1918–1940) were

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<sup>4</sup> E. Laclau, *Rhetoric of Politics*, [in:] *Material Events. Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, ed. T. Cohen, B. Cohen, J. Hillis Miller, A. Warminski, Minnesota 2001, p. 229.

the valuing of fatherland and family, the participation in patriotic unions, the celebration of national anniversaries.<sup>5</sup> Sacral status was ascribed to ancient times and the Lembitu (half-mythological-literary figures from the Estonian past), Pats (the first president of the pre-war Republic of Estonia) and Jakobson (one of the major cultural leaders during first Estonian awakening of 1860–1890), the war of independence (between the Estonian Republic and Soviet Russia 1918–1920) and Johannes Laidoner, who was the most popular general in this war, patriotic poetry and folklore, which all together shaped the essence of the national whole.

On the rhetorical, but also legal and institutional level there was established a way of uniting the material carriers of historical heritage with the new socialist structure of culture, and to make them function in the interests of the state. Put simply, it is summarised by the pragmatic dogma: “socialist in content, national in form”, which legitimised the attempts by the Soviet powers to integrate the diverse artistic heritage of all the Soviet Republics into the single soviet model of culture (which, it should be noted, often proceeded with relative difficulty), and thereby to aid in creating a new unity, the mentality of the new international *Homo soveticus*. A pseudo-ethnographic national form was allowed, but most of national heritage, as well as all references to western art were forbidden<sup>6</sup>.

This axiologically-polarized ideological *Weltanschauung*<sup>7</sup> is clearly at odds with the clarity of scientific discourse, which was the main characteristic of self-description and excludes the latter in principle. “The Marxist-Leninist theory is the science of societal development, the science of the workers’ movement, the science of proletarian revolution, the science of building a communist society” (The History of the Union-wide Communist (bolshevist) Party: A Crash-Course<sup>8</sup>). To explain this ideological contradiction, but still meaningful contradiction, I use the concept of hegemonic signification by Laclau and Lotman the

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<sup>5</sup> L. Ots, *Kultuuri uurimine ja kultuuri opetamine [Analysing culture and teaching culture]*, [in:] *Kultuur ja analuus [Culture and analysis]*, ed. M. Lohmus, Tartu 1998, pp. 64–75.

<sup>6</sup> J. Kangilaski, *Okupeeritud Eesti kunstiajaloo periodiseerimine*, Ajalooline Ajakiri, 1,27, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> About Soviet totalitarian language vide: N.A. Kupina, *Тоталитарный язык: словарь и реакция на него [Totalitarian Language: dictionary and speech reaction]*, Ekaterinburg 1995; A. Ventsel, *The role of political rhetoric in the development of Soviet totalitarian language*, „Russian Journal of Communication”, 2009, vol. 2, no. 1–2, 9–26; id., *Towards semiotic theory of hegemony*, Dissertations Semioticae Tartuensis, Tartu 2009, pp. 591–610.

<sup>8</sup> *In Estonian: Lühikursus=Üleliidulise kommunistliku (bolševike) partei ajalugu: Lühikursus [The History of the union-Wide Communist (bolshevist) Party: A Crash-Course]*, Tallinn 1951 [1938], p. 321.

concept of rhetorical troop and try to explicit function from this kind of signification in the field of politics<sup>9</sup>.

#### SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO HEGEMONY<sup>10</sup>

The following I try to sketch very shortly the relationship between the theory of hegemony as elaborated by Ernesto Laclau and the semiotics of culture of Yuri Lotman and the possibilities to use rhetoric to describe the above mentioned tendencies in visual representations.

For Laclau, hegemony is to be understood only on the terrain of discourse: a hegemonic relation is a certain articulation of meanings. This articulation requires that a particular difference loses its particularity and becomes a universal representative of the signifying system as a whole. That way a *closure* for that system is provided. Since every system of signification is essentially *differential*, its *closure* is the precondition of signification being possible *at all*. According to Laclau, the role of something like an anchor point is attributed to *some* components of the equivalence in the process of constructing the “socialist in content, national in form”, which will then differentiate them from one another. These anchor points – “empty signifiers” – that will begin to signify the chain of equivalence as unity and whole. The field of signification of the concept of discourse is not, for Laclau, limited to writing or speech, but refers to any complex of elements where relationships play a constitutive role – “this means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it”<sup>11</sup>.

Lotman defines rhetorical text as a structural unity of two (or more) subtexts encoded with the help of several, mutually untranslatable codes<sup>12</sup>. These subtexts may be conceptualised as local subsystems and must be read with the help of different languages<sup>13</sup>. On the most general level, one is based on the principle of the discrete, the other on the principle of continuity. While both systems are immanently independent and translating one system perfectly into the language of the other is impossible, there is nevertheless a constant exchange of texts and

<sup>9</sup> Vide also: A. Ventsel, *The role of political rhetoric...*; id., *Towards semiotic theory...*

<sup>10</sup> About semiotic theory of hegemony more detailed vide: *ibid.*; id. *The role of political rhetoric...*; P. Selg, A. Ventsel, *An Outline for semiotic theory of hegemony*, „Semiotica”, 2010, 182[1/4], pp. 443–473.

<sup>11</sup> E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London – New York 2005, p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> J. Lotman, *Iconic rhetoric*, [in:] id., *Universe of Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, London 2001, p. 57.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

information between them in the form of semantic translation<sup>14</sup>. In practical terms this means that at this stage features inherent to a verbal text are ascribed to the non-verbal, that is pictorial text<sup>15</sup>. For Lotman, the primary mechanism of translation is indicated by the concept of trope – a pair of units of signification that are non-connectable in principle, but that are nevertheless related as adequate within a particular context<sup>16</sup>. But what is more important, this kind of rhetorical structure lies not in the domain of expression but in the domain of content<sup>17</sup>. This means, in its own turn, that a change in the domain of expression will always bring about a change in the domain of content. Laclau claims similarly that the relationship between the empty signifier and the discourse as a meaningful *totality* is the relationship between a *name* and an object<sup>18</sup>. The unity or identity of the object is the result of *naming* it. Objects are (so to speak) *created* through naming.

This again means that discourse never closes completely and thus there are no absolute and ultimate meanings. At the same time, this closure, even if temporary, is nevertheless inevitable, as otherwise there would be no process of signification and thus no meaning at the first place. Consequently, the creation of this unity can only be a figural or tropological construction<sup>19</sup>. “In that case, the rhetorical devices themselves – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, catachresis – become instruments of an expanded social rationality, and we are no longer able to dismiss an ideological interpellation as *merely* rhetorical”<sup>20</sup>.

#### VISUALIZING “SOCIALIST IN CONTENT, NATIONAL IN FORM”

In what follows I will focus on certain strategies of visual representation, using the slogan “Socialist in content, national in form” we encountered earlier. As you may know, this slogan perfectly summarises the entire Stalinist response to the issue of nationality under the conditions of socialism. In the photo we see the Singing Festival of 1947. As one of the local leaders of the communist party at the time, Nikolai Karotamm, said in his opening speech for the song festival:

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<sup>14</sup> Id., *PuopHKa [Rhetoric]*, [in:] id., *Обуцкыцмёе [On art]*, Sankt-Peterburg 2005 [1981], p. 406.

<sup>15</sup> Id., *Iconic...*, p. 55.

<sup>16</sup> Id., *PuopHKa...*, pp. 406–407.

<sup>17</sup> Id., *Iconic...*, p. 57.

<sup>18</sup> E. Laclau, *Ideology and Post-Marxism*, „Journal of Political Ideologies”, 2006, no. 11(2), p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103–114.

<sup>20</sup> Id., *On Populist...*, p. 12.

“For the life of our people under Soviet power, the Song Festivals will develop into grand, solemn events that are national in form and socialist in content. The song festivals will assuredly develop into important contributions to the socialist national culture of Estonia, especially to cornucopia of our musical culture”<sup>21</sup>. In the photo (figure 1) we see the Singing Festival of 1950, which was dedicated to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Soviet Estonia. I give two other examples from these days. First, a letter that was sent to comrade Stalin from the Estonian people<sup>22</sup>: “The Soviet power provided a powerful impetus for the development of literature and the arts, establishing a wide open path for the true development of Estonian culture that is socialist in content, national in form”<sup>23</sup>. As we can see, “socialist in content, national in form” remains one of the Party’s main guidelines for organizing national policy. This is also asserted by a second example, a speech by Johannes Kabin (Estonian Communist Party secretary of the Central Committee) for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Soviet Estonia: “It was only with Soviet power that true Estonian national culture got an opportunity for widespread development, and access to it was opened to the wide masses. Next to the old, well-known writers, composers, artists and actors, who have, in the years of Soviet power, turned to the path of Soviet realism, there has grown up a number of young writers, composers, artists and other figures of the *national socialist* (author’s emphasis) culture of Estonia”<sup>24</sup>.

The Singing Festival has had a sacral signification in the development of Estonian national identity. The background of the song festival goes back to 1869 when the tradition of song festivals in Estonia was initiated. The first Baltic-German song festivals were held in 1857 in Tallinn and in 1861 in Riga. These were guiding examples for the first song festivals of the Estonians. The roots of the first song festivals could be traced back to the clerical songs of the Swiss-German origin. A text originating from aesthetic-religious language is translated into a manifestation of the cultural unity of a nation. And it is important that the original sacral moment was transmitted to the tradition of Estonian song festivals as one of the cornerstones of Estonian nationality. As time went along and in addition to cultural self-expression the need for political self-expression emerged, the tradition of song festivals was recoded into political

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<sup>21</sup> N. Karotamm, *Elagu XII üldlaulupidu – võidulaulupidu, eestlaste üldrahvalik pidupäev*, „Rahva Hääl”, no. 150, 29 July 1947, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> “The people’s letters to comrade Stalin and the Soviet government” were a particular way of addressing in the public space of communication. Their purpose was to demonstrate the loyalty of the people to the foreign power. In truth, such letters were written by newspaper editors under the guidelines of government censorship.

<sup>23</sup> *Letter from the Estonian people to Stalin*, „Rahva Hääl”, no. 172, 21 July 1950, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> J. Kabin, *Anniversary Speech*, „Rahva Haal”, no. 172, 21 July 1950, p. 3.

language. The national consciousness during the Soviet period and especially the 1980-s was informed by an idealized image of monolingual and mono-ethnic nation state<sup>25</sup>. This is also indicated by the national costumes that are worn (“national in form”, so to speak).

In order to be brief, let’s take a look at two types of trope: *metaphor* – a semantic replacement of a seme based on similarity or analogy; *metonymy* – a replacement based on vicinity, associativity, or cause (different authors emphasize different types of connection). One could also add the *synecdoche* – a replacement by means of participation, inclusion, partiality, or representation of the whole through a part<sup>26</sup>. However, as most researchers consider the latter as the primary figure and other as a special case of metonymy<sup>27</sup>, I will not focus my attention on it right now.

On this photograph, however, we can see the rhetorical device of “text within text”, where Stalin’s portrait is enthroned at the top of the singing stage, thereby drawing the masses into a unity – into the people. Here, in this photo, which is a text with a total meaning, Stalin’s portrait represents the socialist content that has been connected to the category of nationalism. The effect of the trope is not created by a unitary seme, but rather by the association of semes into “unsuitable” semantic spaces and by the level of mutual alienation or estrangement between the uniting semes<sup>28</sup>. The latter develops by means of the aspects of untranslatability of different replacers into the things replaced, such as, for example, in the relations between the uni-dimensional and the multi-dimensional, discrete and continuous, material and ideal, sensuous and supra-sensuous, etc. All these characteristics can be seen as a relation between Stalin’s portrait and its socialist content, which is what it represents in the photo: a portrait of a concrete person as real single material sign replaces the total Marxist-Leninist theory of society and the philosophical principle of human history. Stalin’s portrait as a particular signifier is emptied of its original content and is turned into a metaphoric replacement element. Of course, a Stalin portrait as a visual image also refers to a concrete individual – to Stalin, but only in the second order. Because, in practice no signifier can lose its particular and differential

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<sup>25</sup> A. Aarelaid, *Ikka kultuurilise mdelde [Still pondering on culture]*, Tallinn 1998; id., *Topeltmõtlemise kujunemine sovetiajal [The development of double-thinking during the Soviet time]*, „Akadeemia”, 2000, no. 4, pp. 755–773; K. Kotov, *Kultuur, identiteet ja enesekirjeldus [Culture, identity, and self-description]*, [in:] *Acta Semiotica Estica II*, ed. S. Saluste and E. Sutiste, Tartu 2005, pp. 184–192; L. Ots, op.cit., etc.

<sup>26</sup> J. Lotman, *PuopHKa...*, p. 409.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 410–411.

meaning altogether<sup>29</sup>. Yet at the same time it assembles an ever greater chain of equivalence between different dimensions that are constitutive of the society, such as socialism, the Soviet national politics, cultural self-expression, being an Estonian.

A similar metaphoric relation of replacement empties out nationality into a pure form. We also see here the emptying of Stalin as a particular, as it gathers together an increasingly large chain of equivalence. Through a metaphoric replacement, the photograph with its depiction of Stalin's image and the participants of the song festival, all dressed in national costumes, is in a referential relationship with one of the basic ideological statements of the political discourse of the era: 'Socialist in content, national in form'. The affinity here is conditional, approximate and presumptive and does not contain a mere shift in meaning, but creates a principally new and paradoxical semantic situation. This was indeed Stalin's national socialism, and the portrait of someone else would have provided an entirely different meaning.

Another, metaphoric effect, much stronger but similar in principle, has been described by Jan Plamper in his "The Alchemy of Power: The Stalin Cult in Painting". He provides us with an example where Stalin was not replaced by portraits or photos, but by his works, around which the reading masses were assembled. In Estonia, there are plenty of examples from other fields of culture: e.g. the ceiling piece at Estonia, the national opera house (authors: Elmar Kits, Richard Sagrits, Evald Okas, 1947) or various scenes from the first Soviet Estonian films "Elu tsitadellis" (*Life in the citadel*, 1947) and "Valgus Koordis" (*Light in Koordi*, 1951) (both directed by Gerbert Rappaport).

While with metaphor it should be obvious that these explanations are valid, with metonymy it may initially seem that, since the replacement takes place within the same series of signs, the replacer and the thing replaced are homogenous. Lotman, however, disagrees with it. For Lotman, metaphor and metonymy are isofunctional in this respect, and appear simultaneously in a trope. Their purpose is not to convey, by means of a particular semantic replacement, something that can also be conveyed by different means, but to transmit information that would otherwise be completely inexpressible<sup>30</sup>.

Let's return once more to our example. The portrait of the leader, which substituted for the socialist social order and provided nationalism with an entirely new dimension was itself subordinated to a metonymic series that

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<sup>29</sup> E. Laclau, *The death and resurrection of the theory of ideology*, „Journal of Political Ideologies”, 1996, vol. 1(3), pp. 201–220.

<sup>30</sup> J. Lotman, *PuopHKa...*, pp. 410–411.



consisted of very strict rules for depicting Stalin. From this series, this particular picture represents one possible choice, a metonymic replacement. In Stalin's Soviet Union, the newspaper "Pravda" and pictures of Stalin that were published there was the most important public medium that canonised "the only true" way of depicting The Leader. The photos published in "Pravda" were in fact already canonised by being allowed into mass communication circulation only after passing Stalin's personal censorship. In late 1930<sup>s</sup>, however, it became official practice that photos of Stalin published in "Pravda" were then sent to artists who took them as the basis for visualizing Stalin<sup>31</sup>. Later, beginning from 1937, when the first feature film about Stalin was released, cinematography became the second place where the canon of visualising the leader was developed and fixed<sup>32</sup>.

Thus tropes are not mere decorations for the plane of expression, but a way of constructing significance that is inexpressible in principle within the confines of a single language<sup>33</sup>. Tropes are figures that is generated at the point of intersection between two languages – that of metonymic-discrete and metaphorical-continuous – and is thus isostructural with creative mechanisms of thought<sup>34</sup>. We can perceive certain tendencies in processes of signification, where either one or the other way of coding is prevalent, but never the presence of just one of them in these processes.

#### CONCLUSION

It is my hope that I managed to demonstrate briefly how categories of rhetoric can be used in an analysis of visual presentations, and how they can be used to shape the presentation of hegemonic relationships. We may see in case of these example that hegemonic signification appear in different ways.

First, the hegemonic chain of equivalence between particular elements has been taken to the extreme – it unites both voluntarism and economic determinism; both nationalism as well as the principle of class struggle! It is for this reason that different tropical images are well capable of grasping such heterogeneity. Metaphorical replacement signified totality of society – Stalin represents the whole social order and the national politics of these days. Photos with other

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<sup>31</sup> J. Plamper, *Alhimia vlasti. Kult Stalina v isobrpasitelnom isskustve. [Alchemia of power. Stalin's cult in Painting]*, Moskva 2010, pp. 57–59.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>33</sup> J. Lotman, *PuopHKa...*, p. 413.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

leaders of the party (for example: Lenin's portrait) could represent entirely different social order.

Second, in every social regime that produces images, a hierarchy for constructing visual representations will develop. In the present case, the metaphoric substitution (the concrete portrait of Stalin) that signifies socialist content is located in a metonymic sequence in accordance with the established position in the visual language of Soviet, Stalinist era. The Leader and other members of the party cannot be depicted arbitrarily, and for this reason the prevalence of certain ways of depiction and the exclusion of others most likely indicates the character of established power relations and the aesthetics of representation more widely. Since according to cultural semiotics organized information is the primary foundation for any kind of communication and cultural existence<sup>35</sup>, this sort of a hierarchy points to the positive function of exclusion, since this generates inter-cultural order. This form of exclusion is what Chantal Mouffe calls 'hegemonic practices' and every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, i.e. "practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony"<sup>36</sup>. Putting in vocabulary of semiotics of culture we may say that every (dis)articulating process is process of translation, and it depends on nature of this process within cultural context is it becoming a hegemonic status or not.

And finally, such tropes begin to embody the primary events of history in the social regime of picture production. The concept of "iconic photographs" refers to those photographs that, within a particular society (culture): 1) are recognised by everyone (they have acquired iconic status); 2) are understood to be representations of historically significant events; 3) are the objects of emotional identification for the members of the society and 4) are regularly reproduced and republished by the media<sup>37</sup>. In principle, these photographs establish a hegemonic relationship for constructing and representing historical events. This means that that those images, words, and so on through which they are recognized, which give successive concrete contents a sense of temporal conti-

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<sup>35</sup> V. Ivanov, V. Toporov, A. Pjatigorskij, J. Lotman, B. Uspenskij, *Theses on the semiotic study of cultures (as applied to the Slavic texts)*, „Tartu Semiotics Library”, (1998) [1973], no. 1, p. 35 – thesis 1.1.1.

<sup>36</sup> Ch. Mouffe, *On the political*, London – New York 2005, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> R. Hariman, J. Lucaites, *Dissent and Emotional Management in a Liberal-Democratic Society: The Kent State Iconic Photograph*, „Rhetoric Society Quarterly”, 2001, no. 31, pp. 5–31; Id., *Visual Rhetoric, Photojournalism and Democratic Public Culture*, „Rhetoric Review”, 2001, no. 20, pp. 37–42.

nuity, function exactly as what Laclau has called empty signifiers<sup>38</sup>. It is through them that the discourse of “historical reality” is constructed, where some points of view, presented by means of photographs<sup>39</sup>.



Figure 1. Song Festival 1950. *Rahva Hää*, no 172, 21 July 1950, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> E. Laclau, *On Populist...*, p. 76.

<sup>39</sup> For “visual naming” in Soviet Estonia vide: A. Ventsel, *Visualization of „people” in Soviet Estonian public photos of Stalinist era*, „Social Semiotics”, vol. 20, no. 5, November 2010.

