



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* by Borenstein, Eliot.

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femininity created what Kaganovsky describes as a 'heterosexual panic' that pervades Stalinist fiction: an ambivalence about the heterosexual husband and wife dyad, and the always present third party in every Soviet marriage: comrade Stalin. A deeply militarized culture circled anxiously around the homosocial 'male unions' that pervaded plotlines in the late 1930s and through the 1940s. Nevertheless, when wounded or disabled, woman's role was clear enough: she was 'called upon to eroticize the castrated male body' (p. 139), to soothe the traumatized heroic man.

As a psychoanalytic reading of the Stalinist canon, this is an intriguing guide to a major facet of the troubled psyche and body of the fictionalized Soviet male. If occasionally one wants to argue that sometimes an amputation is just an amputation, one can nevertheless appreciate the many insights Kaganovsky skilfully produces using the theory. Historians will be frustrated, however, with her lack of engagement with recent social and cultural histories of masculinity, sexuality, suicide, of Pavlik Morozov and much else. Mikhail Heller's twenty-year-old *Cogs in the Wheel* appears far too often in the footnotes to reference subjects that have long since been better handled by specialists. It is a shame, for had Kaganovsky mined those histories her arguments would have had much more persuasive thrust beyond the core readership of film studies scholars.

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Borenstein, Eliot. *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture*. Culture and Society after Socialism. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY and London, 2008. xvii + 265 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$21.95; £10.95 (paperback).

AGAINST the turbulent backdrop of 1990s Russia, popular culture — in print and on screen — reflected widespread concern and confusion about Russia's then-current situation and its future. *Overkill*, according to Eliot Borenstein, aptly characterizes the extreme strategy employed by post-Soviet popular culture; namely, 'an insistence on patently excessive details of collapse, rooted in doubts about any example's capacity to be truly exemplary' (p. 6). Borenstein uses this phenomenon to his benefit as he draws from a wide variety of popular media and in several chapters supplies a convincing literary and cultural genealogy for the texts of the 1990s under analysis.

The more recent roots of an overkill approach may be found in *chemukha*, whose post-Soviet incarnation differs from its perestroika-era identity in its tendency towards 'overexposure' rather than exposure as a means of truth-seeking (p. 17). *Chemukha's* eventual development into an 'umbrella term for sex and violence' coincided with the simultaneous increase of interest in both subjects during the 1990s (p. 19). Borenstein's analysis does not, however, assume the immediate manifestation of overkill with respect to both sex and

violence. As he shows in his first chapter, the television talk show programme *About That* at once examined and circumvented sex, in keeping with the Russian tradition of discussing sex in oblique or indirect terms. Borenstein analyses various uses of sex as metaphor, including the paradox of making the private public and ubiquitous, as illustrated by the wildly popular newspaper *SPID-Info* (p. 37) and, significantly, the verbal deployment of sex by Viktor Erofeev and others to address the crisis of masculinity in both personal and collective terms.

If the texts discussed in chapter one are intended for an implied male reader, and a connection between sex and politics is repeatedly posited, a subsequent link between pornography and politics is easily made in the second chapter; indeed, Borenstein highlights the ‘conspiratorial epistemology’ prevalent in Russian culture that perpetually has ascribed a deeper interpretive meaning even to pornographic texts (p. 54). If the proliferation of pornography following the fall of the Soviet Union resulted in part from a misapplied ideology that equated ‘sexual expression with democracy’, the magazine *Andrei* significantly eschewed the West in its attempt to supply a bolstering model for men by emphasizing its Russianness (p. 65). This type of nationalistic approach was parodied in the newspaper *Eshche*, the eventual target of pornography charges and an unfortunate exemplar of the selective crackdown on works and writers, such as Vladimir Sorokin, perceived as unacceptable.

Commodification, particularly that of the female body, remains at the centre of the next chapter, an examination of the motif of the Russian prostitute. While the perestroika-era novel and film *Interdevochka* remains the model, Borenstein argues that Dmitrii Shcherbakov’s ‘Nymphomaniac’ trilogy effectively places a post-Soviet spin on this symbolically rich figure who stands in for suffering, redeeming, violated Russia herself.

The monograph shifts in its fourth chapter from an explicit focus on sex to an exploration of violence, in particular violent crime as represented and serialized in the post-Soviet period. Borenstein notes that crime narratives during and since the 1990s are gendered according to authors and intended readers, and the next two chapters focus primarily on the female-authored *detektiv* and the male *boevik*. As Borenstein sees it, texts of the first type (authored most notably by Aleksandra Marinina and Dar’ia Dontsova) have a special literary function in that they ‘[make] violence safe for women’ (p. 128). The *boevik* appears to function similarly by ‘[providing] a systematic, and ultimately reassuring, approach to chaotic, post-Soviet reality’ (p. 161) and enabling the active (if vicarious) participation of the male reader in combating overkill, as shown variously in Viktor Dotsenko’s ‘Beshenyi’ (‘Mad Dog’) series and Aleksei Balabanov’s film *Brother*. In such texts, Borenstein argues, ‘chernukha [...] is not random and pointless but rather a metaphysical evil to be kept at bay by the noble warrior’ (p. 194).

In the pulp fiction discussed in the seventh chapter, *chernukha* erupts into *bespredel*, an ‘evolving concept’ with a complex genealogy involving prison camps, the mafia, and eventually the print media. Fundamentally gratuitous (as exemplified by the articles collected in the now-defunct *eXile’s* ‘Death

Porn' column), it is the embodiment of overkill and has become culturally omnipresent.

While *bespredel* indicated the lack of control and perpetual chaos emblematic of the 1990s, the Putin era devalued sex and violence and privileged domesticism, neo-sentimentalism and 'coziness', as evidenced by the recent works of Maks Frai, Dontsova, Boris Akunin and Marinina. Though Borenstein completed his text before the end of Putin's second term as president, the cultural phenomena identified and analysed within the volume remain relevant. In short, this compelling volume effectively analyses a body of popular media and texts and may serve as a key to understanding the first decade of the post-Soviet period.

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Mazierska, Ewa. *Masculinities in Polish, Czech, and Slovak Cinema: Black Peters and Men in Marble*. Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2008. ix + 249 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. £45.00.

EWA MAZIERSKA has set herself an ambitious task with this her new well researched book. First of all she approaches the subject of East European Cinema (or Central, or Central Eastern, or East-Central; I have lost track of where currently the debate about the area's correct terminology is), from a comparative perspective, an undertaking that is not often tackled and therefore particularly welcome. Mazierska's study excels in the breadth of its comparison of Czech and Polish films. This not only contributes to an understanding of the difference in character of each nation and how it is conveyed on screen, but also to the discovery of mutual influences that each cinematography (in the sense of national cinema) has had on the other. These influences are perhaps greater than normally assumed, or at least often discussed. It is this book's strength and should encourage more thematic and technical comparative approaches to the region's cinemas.

More comparisons, though, between Czech and Slovak cinema could have been made, and especially Slovak and Polish cinema, since the study seems to be predominantly a 'dialogue' between Czech and Polish cinema. Although Mazierska's analysis of key Slovak films is perceptive — for example, Uher's *Slnko v sieti* (*Sunshine in the Net*, 1962) (pp. 156–58) — analysis of Uher's other work, along with that of Dušan Hanak, in particular *322* (1969), as well as Juraj Jakubisko's films from the 1970s and 1980s, any of Peter Solan's films or Martin Šulík's *Zahrada* (*The Garden*, 1995) is missing. All contain good examples of male characters, and would have been useful in pursuing the study's ambitious aim.

Mazierska uses another unusual and highly original methodology, that of 'gender studies', unusual because the author applies 'gender studies' not in the 'immediately associated [sense of] studies of women' (p. 1), but to 'studies of men'. The female perspective has already been applied to the study of the