Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture

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    Eliot Borenstein. Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture. Series: Culture and Society after Socialism. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2007. Index, xv + 288 pp. $69.95 (cloth); $21.95 (paper).

    Eliot Borenstein has written a remarkably good book. Overkill covers the period of the 1990s: the void and chaos of the Yeltsin years that saw the liberation of Russian (post-Soviet) popular culture from the constraints of Socialist Realist morality; the import of Western desire in the form of sex and violence; the unimaginable fears engendered by the disintegration of political structures; the loss of national identity; and the import/export of sexuality that somehow managed to signify Russian inadequacy before Western prowess. If the perestroika years started out as relatively optimistic, they were quickly replaced by a deep-seated pessimism about societal and moral collapse, a state made most clear by the dominant artistic paradigm of chernukha, in which, as Borenstein puts it, "everyone lives unhappily ever after" (17).

    Borenstein begins the book with the case of the imported "phallus": "Walk into any sex shop in Moscow, and with enough cash or the right credit card, you can buy a perfect plastic replica of international porn star Jeff Stryker's erect penis." Stryker's member, Borenstein argues, "is to the Russian sex industry as Snickers is to snack foods." While both guarantee "satisfaction," the organ is a naked demonstration of post-Soviet Russia's humiliating status as a "weakened, passive importer" of prepackaged commodities (24). Overkill is divided between sex and violence as two categories (sometimes separate, often mixed) by which popular culture of the Yeltsin nineties might best be understood. The first three chapters address themselves to the newly emergent discourse on sexuality, first made manifest by the popular late night television show "About That" [Pro eto] and its race-bending hostess, Elena Khanga. As Borenstein suggests, wearing a blond wig in order to tone down the shock of her black skin, Khanga was "foreign sex in Russian drag," bringing the new discourse of sexuality to a country that "had no sex" (26, 28). Here, Borenstein looks at pornography, the lowbrow or "gutter" press of AIDS education and sex manuals (marked by the change from SPID-info to SPEED); popular films that dealt with the new class of the "hard currency prostitute," the crisis of masculinity produced through the perceived "feminization" of Russia; and the strange conflation of sexuality and nationalism that characterized the new pornographic discourse.

    The second half of the book discusses violence and bespredel (a limitlessness, both moral and geographic) -- novels about sexual slavery and illegal organ harvesting (Sergei Pugachev's You 're Just a Slut, My Dear! [Ty prosto shliukha, dorogaia.']); books featuring a Chechen-fighting sex addict (Dmitrii Shcherbakov's Nympho trilogy); and the "Mad Dog" and Antikiller series of books and films recounting, respectively, the exploits of the Russian Rambo and an assassin killing in the name of justice. In this section, Borenstein also talks about serialization and the rise of women's detective fiction, such as Aleksandra Marinina's extremely popular Nastia Kamenskaia series, and the place of women (both authors and characters) in this world of men. Pornography, detective fiction, and gangster films -- all of these disparate genres address themselves to the notion of a shattered national identity, a loss of country and with it, a loss of self. For Borenstein, sex and violence together provide post-Soviet culture with a "symbolic vocabulary" for the expression of fundamental anxieties about national pride, cultural collapse, and "the frightening new moral landscape of Yeltsin's Russia" (23).

    Whether speaking about lowbrow literature or better known (and perhaps better made) works, such as Petr Todorovsky's 1989 film Intergirl [Interdevochka], or Aleksei Balabanov's Brother [Brat, 1997], Borenstein is a careful reader of popular culture as "symptom," as a visible manifestation of social dis-ease. If in his first book, Men Without Women (Duke UP, 2000), Borenstein gave us a nuanced account of gender and masculinity in the well-known works of the twenties (Babel's Red Cavalry, Olesha's Envy, Platonov's Chevengur), in Overkill Borenstein produces a reading of schlock fiction that is just as careful, compelling, and attentive to detail (to gender, to sexuality, to politics, to race). The predominance of sex and violence during the Yeltsin years is more easily understood when framed by the new discourse on sexuality as consumerism, production and consumption, as the by-product of the newly emergent market and the consequences of "free trade." This discourse spills over into the serialization of violence, the market-driven anxiety over ever new takes on old standbys, the ease with which narratives are produced and consumed.

    What is perhaps most remarkable about Overkill is not its subject matter, but its tone: the book is smart and funny. I do not say this lightly, and this review cannot properly convey the ease with which Borenstein handles his material, the fluidity of his language, his ability to pun, to play with words and terms, to mix theory with analysis, to see (and to use) humor to speak about the cultural underbelly, the perverse, and the debased. This book is written in exactly the right tone for its content; it is at ease with the material it handles, and because of this, is able to handle it lightly (which is not to say superficially), with pleasure and with care. The nineties were, as Borenstein makes clear, a time of great cultural anxiety, political unrest, and economic instability. But they were also a time, in contrast to the Putin years, of experiment, of pleasures taken and enjoyed (some violent, some unsavory, others merely new), and of the possibility of national and personal indeterminacy. Russian cultural production of the 1990s -- TV, pornography, movies and books -- made visible many of the anxieties of the Yeltsin era, with its collapsing economy, open borders, and the import/export of sex and violence that functioned as a way of "shocking" the new Russia out of its Soviet stagnation. With renewed censorship, aggressive state control of the media, petrodollar-infused nationalism, and an imaginary need for "someone like Putin," the Putin era managed to ease the anxieties over a free market economy and the movements of goods and people -- the anxiety over freedom, in other words -- through new "cosier" forms of policing desire.

ADDED MATERIAL
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Bottom of Form