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Melodramatic Masculinity, National Identity, and the Stalinist Past in Postsoviet Cinema

Susan Larsen

University of California at San Diego

In the winter of 1996-97, Liubov' Arkus, the editor of the film journal *Seans*, convened a panel of prominent Russian critics and posed the following question:

Why is it that our national cinema, ten years after the lifting of all prohibitions, has yet to offer a treatment of the Stalin theme comparable to the treatment of this theme in literature, and why are all such attempts doomed to varying degrees of failure? Why was this theme developed first in genre films, while "auteurs" addressed it only after having armed themselves with the irony for which they are notorious, never forgetting to bare the conventionality of the device? (96)

For the purposes of this essay, the answers to this question are less significant than the assumptions underlying it, assumptions shared by the assembled experts. In the ensuing discussion, all of the critics approached the question as having primarily to do with the need to achieve an "accurate" cinematic portrait of the Stalinist past that might equal the literary accomplishments of authors like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlaam Shalamov. Such a goal, these critics assumed, necessarily excludes the genre film as a medium. As Sergei Dobrotvorskii insisted, "Genre elements are not only incompatible with historical accuracy, they are inimical to it" (Arkus et al. 100). Most of the critics agreed that the Stalinist past is no longer interesting or relevant to contemporary Russian film audiences, and all of them ignored the ways in which "historically inaccurate" genre films on Stalinist themes might, in fact, reflect contemporary Russian dilemmas.¹

These critics' dismissal of contemporary films on Stalinist themes as irrelevant, inadequate, and insignificant because of their "generic" plots is understandable in the Russian context, in which "genre film" is usually a pejorative term connoting lowbrow tastes and commercial ambitions. Contemporary Russian film critics also like to argue that Russian filmmakers are almost congenitally incapable of making a decent genre film, since Soviet-era taboos on "bourgeois" genres like melodrama, horror, and gangster films discouraged them from working in these forms.² They also cite the long, prestigious tradition of Russian "art cinema" as a factor in many talented Russian directors' reluctance to make genre films. While Postsoviet critics now argue for the necessity of making genre films in order to return Russian audiences to the movie theaters, most of them remain convinced that popularity is incompatible with seriousness. For all of these reasons, Russian critics have tended to ignore the question that this essay takes as its subject: why have Postsoviet filmmakers so frequently chosen the convoluted narrative strategies and stylistic excesses of melodrama when they turned to Stalinist themes? Rather than dismissing melodrama as irrelevant, I propose to take it seriously.³

In what follows I argue that Postsoviet melodramas set in the Stalin period, despite their alleged artistic inadequacies and historical inaccuracies, articulate a powerful version of contemporary Russian culture's troubled relationship to its past, precisely because melodramatic conventions enable the expression of anxieties and ambitions that more "realistic" narratives cannot encompass. Melodramatic films on Stalinist themes are not simply commercial attempts to capitalize on sensational material or uneven attempts to demonstrate the filmmaker's mastery of postmodern pastiche and irony. Rather, these films' exploitation of melodramatic conventions is driven by the quest for moral clarity that Peter Brooks has identified as the originary moment of the "melodramatic imagination" in the late eighteenth century. Melodrama, in fact, makes perfect sense as the Postsoviet form of choice for exploring the cultural and psychological legacies of the Stalin era.⁴

Brooks's discussion of the emergence of melodrama during the cataclysmic social changes accompanying the French Revolution offers a useful analogy for the emergence of Postsoviet melodrama during similar changes accompanying the collapse of communism. For Brooks, "Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety

brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. . . . It demonstrates over and over that the signs of ethical forces can be discovered and can be made legible" (20). "Classical" melodrama, in Brooks's description, relies on the polarization of ethical opposites in order to achieve a "remarkable, public, spectacular homage to virtue, a demonstration of its power and effect" (25). He argues that melodrama's characteristic resort to stylistic, emotional, and narrative "excess" is driven by a compulsion to confirm and restore the values of "the old society of innocence" (32).

Late Soviet and Postsoviet melodramas on Stalinist themes are similarly obsessed with the need to make ethical forces legible, but this project is complicated by their historical and cultural situation, which denies the possibility of depicting the Stalin era as either "innocent" or "virtuous," while it yearns for the unequivocally heroic myths and role models of this now discredited past. Such contradictory impulses often underlie the convoluted plots and extravagant *mises-en-scène* of melodrama, in which, as Christine Gledhill observes, "an ideological meets a psychic need, needs that are not necessarily identical" (29). The conflict between the "restorative" impulse of melodrama and the political imperative to renounce the Stalinist past as the most patently "evil" moment in Soviet history often leads to strained and historically improbable delineations of virtue and vice in Postsoviet cinema along the lines of sexual, rather than political, difference.

Brooks has argued that melodrama tends to "personalize" good and evil, but many Postsoviet melodramas on Stalinist themes not only personalize moral qualities, they *sexualize* them in often unwieldy attempts to construct both a Postsoviet history and a Postsoviet cinema that can rival the grandeurs of the Stalinist past, while renouncing its political legacy. Melodrama, as many critics have argued, is bound to the past by its "search for something lost, inadmissible, repressed" (Gledhill 32). In the case of Postsoviet historical melodrama, the repressed lament for the loss of a "formerly" heroic past is displaced into plots that mourn the loss of men's honor, moral authority, and, in many instances, sexual potency. For this reason, the persecuted innocents in most of these films are male, but their virtue almost never triumphs. Thus such films typically end with the death—by suicide or execution—of their male heroes.

This transformation of the victimized, and therefore virtuous, melodramatic heroine into the victimized, and therefore virtuous, melodramatic hero is a response to the identity crisis in which Russia finds itself after the collapse of Communist rule. This crisis derives in large part from the difficulty of separating what it means to be Russian from what it meant to be Soviet and, therefore, implicated in what are now regarded as the crimes of the Soviet regime. The other former Soviet republics and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe can more easily disavow the legacy of communist rule as imposed from "outside." Russia, as one scholar noted recently, "does not enjoy this luxury" (Urban 733). For this reason, many recent Russian critiques of Postsoviet society invoke sexual difference as a metaphor that displaces and sometimes replaces other, more slippery distinctions, such as that between "Russian" and "Soviet," for example, or "victim" and "villain." Most Russians, regardless of their sex, class, or political affiliation, regard sexual difference as biologically determined and thus both "natural" and fixed, rather than constructed and, therefore, both "unnatural" and unstable. In a period of tremendous political and social upheaval the perceived fixity of sexual difference makes it a comforting and convenient surrogate for other, less immediately apparent—and therefore, less suitably melodramatic—distinctions.⁵

Such claims may appear preposterous given the historical exclusion of Russian women from positions of power in Soviet politics and culture, but Postsoviet melodramas set in the Stalin era are, almost inevitably, far less concerned with historical accuracy than with recasting the visual evidence of that history in forms that respond to the psychosocial imperatives of the present.⁶ A substantial chunk of that visual evidence is cinematic: Soviet films from the 1930s and 1940s remain popular with Postsoviet audiences, as the impassioned viewer response to a series of televised screenings of Stalinist film classics in 1992 attests.⁷ Many of the most popular older films present compelling portraits of women as model Soviet citizens, models that contemporary films on historical themes often invoke as products of fact, rather than fiction.⁸

The still familiar repertoire of Stalinist iconography and popular song also offers rich material for film melodrama, which typically relies on music and *mise-en-scène* to intensify emotion and to serve as a surrogate for psychic material that cannot be expressed directly in the dialogue or actions of the characters (Nowell-Smith

73). The visual and musical symbols of the Stalin era retain a rhetorical power that invite melodramatization because they are simultaneously so familiar and so very *spectacular*. The excesses of the Stalin era—from its monumental architecture, public festivals, and musical film extravaganzas to its show trials and mass arrests—are ideal material for the requirements of a film genre often defined precisely in terms of its stylistic and emotional excess (Williams 703).

The “problem” with Postsoviet spectacles of the Stalin era is the near-impossibility of separating the heroic claims of that era’s cultural mythologies from the monstrosity of its crimes against its citizens. For all its alleged historical “inaccuracies,” Postsoviet cinema’s melodramatic accounts of Stalinist history offer remarkably consistent psychological portraits of a deeply conflicted contemporary nostalgia for the vanished glories of the past. This nostalgia is compounded by equally powerful anxieties about the diminished significance of Russian political and cultural authority in the present. The tension between the ideological compulsion to shatter the old icons and the psychic need to retain, if not restore, their grandeur is one reason that so many recent films tend to view the Stalinist past in terms of sexual rather than political plots and identities. The films discussed below all deploy radically different stylistic registers, but their common obsession with the trials and tribulations of Stalinist masculinity indicates the pervasive influence of something like castration anxiety as a powerful, if repressed, undercurrent in contemporary Russian debates about national identity. In characterizing these films as melodramas, I am not arguing that they are simply emotionally overwrought, moralistic fables about the Stalin era, crude variations on a single theme. Rather, they are the product of a distinctively Postsoviet melodramatic imagination that has emerged in response to the historical and social conundrums of Postsoviet culture.

The remainder of this essay explores the intersections of national, historical, and sexual identities in three distinctive Russian films from the 1990s, each enlisting melodramatic conventions to identify heroic Russian masculinity as the principal victim of Stalinist evil. These three very different films—Petr Todorovskii’s *Ankor, eshche ankor!* (*Encore, Again, Encore!*, 1992), Ivan Dykhovichnyi’s *Prorva* (*Moscow Parade*, 1992), and Sergei Livnev’s *Serp i molot* (*Hammer and Sickle*, 1994)—are further

linked by their consistent figuration of women as the principal agents and symbolic representatives of Stalinist power.⁹

These three films are significant indicators of the broad appeal of the melodramatic imagination in contemporary Russian culture in part because they represent the work of directors from three different generations: Todorovskii was born in 1922, Dykhovichnyi in 1947, and Livnev in 1964. They also rank among the most celebrated films of the Postsoviet period. In 1992 *Encore, Again, Encore!* was named Best Film of the Year at both the Sochi Film Festival, the most important Russian competition, and the Nika Awards (the Russian "Oscars"). That same year, *Moscow Parade* won the Nika for Best Cinematography, and the Russian Guild of Film Critics voted it "Best Film of the Year" and the "Film That Defined the Film Style of the Year." *Hammer and Sickle* won prizes from juries of Russian film distributors at both the 1994 Kino-Shock and 1995 Sochi Film Festivals, as well as prizes for Best Director, Best Actor, and a special mention for the composer at Kino-Shock.

Encore, Again, Encore!¹⁰

Todorovskii's film takes its title from a famous painting by Pavel Fedotov (1815-1852) that depicts a disheveled officer training a pet dog, to whom the words "encore, again, encore!" are presumably addressed. As one critic notes, the standard Soviet interpretation of this painting is that it reflects the "moral degradation of the [tsarist] Russian military" (Lavrent'ev 20). On the one hand, the title seems apt, since the film is set on a snow-covered army base just after the end of World War II. On the other hand, the phrase "encore, again, encore!" would not be out of place in either the choir rehearsals that frame the film or the bedroom scenes that punctuate it.

The title also signals the repetitive quality of the film's narrative, which continually rehearses variations on a single theme, the "moral degradation" not of army life, but of sexual entanglements. Moreover, in literally *melodramatic* fashion, these entanglements are set in motion by the introduction of women into the local military choir. This innovation has disastrous consequences for the film's heroes, each of whom runs afoul of the Soviet authorities as the result of some woman's sexual treachery. What sets this film's portrait of faithless women and helpless men apart, however, is its association of female characters with the most unsavory aspects of

Soviet power. The link between women and Stalinism is made explicit in the first meeting between the base commander, Colonel Vinogradov, and the choir's accompanist, young Lieutenant Poletaev, who has come to request permission for the women on the base to join the choir. Poletaev explains to Vinogradov:

When the choir gets to the line: "The people compose wonderful songs about Stalin so wise, beloved, and dear," you have to understand that the people, that's not just men, but women, too, and so it turns out that we only have half the people singing, not the whole people.¹¹

Poletaev breaks into song as he gets to the line about Stalin, but only in order to demonstrate the need for women's voices to hit the high notes that men's voices can't reach, thus justifying his claim that, "Without [women], the song about Comrade Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin sounds all wrong." "Without them," replies Vinogradov, "nothing in life sounds right." Something else sounds wrong in this scene, however. The only time Stalin is mentioned in the film is here and at the end of the first "co-ed" rehearsal, when the conductor shouts out in ecstasy at the song's conclusion, "Glory to Great Stalin!" In fact, the film never shows the choir singing the one verse of this song that mentions Stalin.¹² With this emphatic and contrived link between Stalin and the choir's female members, the film nudges its audience to make the connection between feminine and Stalinist "nature." (See Fig. III.1.)

Encore is quintessentially melodramatic in its radical "polarization" of the conflict between good and evil along the lines of victimized men and oversexed women. The only remotely positive female characters in the film are two betrayed wives, both portrayed primarily as mothers and, therefore, emphatically *not* sexual. The film insists that motherhood is an alternative to—not a consequence of—sexual activity. The split is clearest in Colonel Vinogradov's torn loyalties to his two "wives": the voluptuous Lieutenant Liuba Antipova, who shares his quarters and whom the entire base calls his wife, and the homely Tamara, his long-suffering legal wife, who lives *incognito* in a rundown barracks with their two daughters. A secondary character, Major Dovgilo, bounces between the bed of his subordinate's wife, the nefarious Mrs. Kriukov, and the embraces of his own childlike and very pregnant wife, whose name, "Vera," means "Faith."



Fig. III.1. *Encore, Again, Encore!*—choir rehearsal with Lieut. Poletaev (Evgenii Mironov) on the accordion. Mrs. Kriukov (Elena Iakovleva) stands behind him on the left, and Liuba (Irina Rozanova) on the right.

Apart from Vera and Tamara, all the other women in the film pose threats of some sort to their husbands' and lovers' respective lives, liberties, and happiness. The film is not subtle in its implementation of this formula: the chief villainess of the piece, Mrs. Kriukov, bears a name derived from the Russian word "*kriuk*" 'hook,' while the film's most "innocent" victim is Sergeant Serebrianni, or "Sergeant Silver." As Brooks notes, melodramas strive towards a "clear nomination of the moral universe" (17), and this film insists at every turn on the intrinsic evil of women and the helpless virtue of its men. Young Sergeant Serebrianni, for example, is a lyric tenor, devoted son, and loyal officer. When a lecherous typist from the division of the secret police known as SMERSH (abbreviation for "Smert' shpionam" 'Death to spies') orders him to spend the night with her "or else," Serebrianni not only ignores her threat, but unwisely writes a letter mocking her as a "ratface" and claiming that she "raped" him one night when he was blind drunk. The homely typist, of course, intercepts the letter and weeps crocodile tears as she reads it; in the next scene a SMERSH unit arrests Serebrianni on charges of "anti-Soviet activities." Colonel Vinogradov protests, but Serebrianni is convicted and condemned to eight years in prison.

The typist's grotesquely lascivious pursuit of Sergeant Serebrianni and its drastic consequences are but one variation on the film's patterning of predatory female desire as the source of its heroes' misfortunes. Another young officer, Lieutenant Poletaev, is pursued by Colonel Vinogradov's common-law wife, Liuba, who outranks Poletaev and addresses him as "Lieutenant" even when they roll around in bed together. Ultimately, Poletaev volunteers for duty in a Siberian camp for German prisoners-of-war in order to escape Liuba's importunate embraces, which, he fears, will lead to reprisals from Colonel Vinogradov. (See Fig. III.2.)

The chief victim of female plotting is actually the Colonel, who by film's end finds himself in an impossible situation: his mistress has betrayed him with the feckless Poletaev; his unloved and unlovely wife has reinstalled herself in his quarters; the vicious Mrs. Kriukov is blackmailing him to promote her undeserving husband; and he has failed to protect Sergeant Serebrianni from an unjust prison sentence. The film presents Vinogradov as a war hero and a principled, caring superior officer, but on the domestic front he loses every battle. Each of the film's narrative lines elaborates a sexual plot, all of which intertwine at the end to bind Vinogradov in a



Fig. III.2. *Encore, Again, Encore!*—Lieut. Poletaev (Evgenii Mironov) has a man-to-man talk with Col. Vinogradov (Valentin Gaft).

position that has no honorable escape. Vinogradov puts his "affairs" in order in the only way left him: drunk and in civilian clothing, he roars through the army base, settling scores with each of his enemies, then takes a long shower, polishes his shoes, puts on his dress uniform, pins on a chestful of medals . . . and shoots himself.

As the shot echoes through Vinogradov's empty house, the film cuts away to a close-up of a painted globe with a hammer and sickle superimposed over the territory of the USSR. The camera pulls back to reveal the army choir surrounding this emblem of the state and singing the words with which the film began: "Where in the world can you find a country more beautiful than my motherland?" As the song continues ("Everywhere my land is blossoming, its fields are infinite"), the film offers concluding shots of each major character: Liuba weeping as she leaves the base; a drunken Poletaev pounding on the door of an empty house and shouting Liuba's name; the SMERSH typist leering at yet another young sergeant; and Vinogradov's wife weeping in a dark room. Just as the choir arrives at the phrase, "O free Russia, wonderful country, my Soviet land," the film cuts to a shot of the hugely pregnant Vera admiring her naked belly in the mirror. At the words "my Soviet land," the camera moves in to fill the frame with a close-up of Vera's belly. This scene mirrors the shot of the (equally spherical) globe with which this sequence opened, creating an equivalence between the pregnant Vera and that "wonderful Soviet land" exalted in the choir's song. With the first lines of the next stanza ("The enemies shall not overpower us") the film cuts away from this Soviet Madonna to a domestic brawl between Captain Kriukov and his wife, shouting and chasing each other through the snow in their underwear.¹³ This sequence of images heightens the contrast between the song's proud rhetoric of military might and the domestic humiliations of peacetime. In contrast to the choir's swelling harmonies, these are images of discord.

The film's musical frame, as well as its title, emphasizes the circularity of its central motifs, one of which is an equation of the eternal feminine with the eternally and essentially deceitful. This version of female "nature" allows us to view sergeants like young "Silver" and colonels like Vinogradov as comparatively "innocent" victims of women like the SMERSH typist or the unprincipled Mrs. Kriukov. Left to their own devices, the film insists, its heroes would behave honorably. All their troubles start when they get tangled up with women, whose role in Todorovskii's army is that of Eve in the

biblical garden of Eden. Each of the film's male heroes—Vinogradov, Serebrianni, and Poletaev—is, in effect, “cast out” of the army as the result of some woman's sexual treachery: Vinogradov kills himself, Serebrianni is imprisoned, and Poletaev is discharged, with Vinogradov's assistance, in order to marry Liuba, but she leaves the base without him.

The film's narrative logic thus assigns responsibility for the crimes of the Stalinist past by transforming the sins of the helpless fathers and defenseless sons into those of the bad mothers and unfaithful wives. Todorovskii implicitly purifies—or purges—his male military heroes of the taint of their proximity to Soviet power in the Stalinist past by insisting on the primacy of sexual, rather than political, crimes and differences.

Moscow Parade

While *Moscow Parade* differs stylistically from *Encore* in almost every way, it, too, construes the essence of Stalinism as inherently female, but in ways more complex than seen in *Encore*, which straightforwardly presents women as mistresses of the mechanisms of Stalinist state authority. Visually, the two films could hardly be more dissimilar. *Encore* is shot in what Todorovskii calls “my own style—traditionally, without fancy tricks” (Smirnova 14), with clearly delineated causal, temporal, and spatial relationships. The critic Maia Turovskaia has described it, not unfairly, as “socialist realism with sex organs” (1993). *Moscow Parade*, in marked contrast, leaps abruptly from one convoluted narrative thread to another and revels in the visual, often anachronistic excess of Stalinist monuments and public spectacles as recreated in the virtuoso camera work of Vadim Iusov (former head of cinematography for films by Andrei Tarkovskii and Sergei Bondarchuk).¹⁴

Moscow Parade is widely regarded as having broken new ground in Postsoviet depictions of the Stalinist era. In 1995 Oleg Kovalov, a prominent film critic and *avant-garde* director, called *Moscow Parade* “the best and most talented film ever made about Stalinism” (86). Most of the numerous critics who agree with him (Liubarskaia, Plakhov 1992, Trofimenkov, Zorkaia, and Timofeevskii et al.) would resist my characterization of this film as melodramatic. For them, as for Dykhovichnyi, the film is too “big” in its aesthetic and historical ambitions to be reduced to the status of a genre film. Such is not my intention here. Rather, I am arguing

the upcoming presidential election]” (“Zhirinovsky ‘Like a Virgin’ ”).²² By conflating his personal “wedding” ceremony with the more public ritual of the election, Zhirinovsky underscored the election’s role as a “life cycle” rite for the body politic, at the same time mocking the solemnity of the event through his typically outlandish declarations.²³ The wedding ceremony, like all carnivals, inverted standard binary oppositions: now the political leaders are the blushing brides, while the population is male. But Zhirinovsky made it clear that this was only a temporary state of affairs, a necessary ritual for the renewal of the “great power”: after the election, he declared, the wives of Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Zhirinovsky himself would have to be sent “to a convent . . . [s]o they don’t interfere with their husbands’ running of the country” (“Zhirinovsky Throws Wedding”).²⁴

Sleeping with the Enemy

While deflecting attention away from rival political programs by creating a more positive (if unabashedly absurd) iconography, Zhirinovsky resorts to one of the most ubiquitous symbols of a wayward Postsoviet Russia in order to attack his enemies: the prostitute. As numerous critics have pointed out, the prostitute, the woman who cheapens a high ideal by according it a monetary value, represents the profound anxieties sparked by the introduction of a market economy. The prostitute has most notably been incarnated in Viktor Kunin’s novel and Petr Todorovskii’s film *Intergirl*, which tells the melodramatic tale of Tania, a nurse’s aid by day and foreign-currency prostitute by night. This wildly successful potboiler simply begs for a political reading. Lynne Attwood’s discussion of Todorovskii’s film has argued convincingly that the prostitute is a symbol of Soviet society as a whole: “everybody is forced, metaphorically, into prostitution” (Attwood, “Sex” 72). Katerina Clark offers a more provocative interpretation of the perestroika prostitute: such works as *Intergirl* highlight the intelligentsia’s anxiety over the fate of culture in the era of the international marketplace (Clark 1993). As Goscilo correctly observes, “The dominant lexicon of *Intergirl* is that of economics (not sex)” (Goscilo “Speaking” 144). Of course, crucial to all these readings of *Intergirl* is the fact that Tania is a *foreign-currency* prostitute, one who disdains mere rubles in her quest for dollars and Deutschmarks. In light of the frequent recourse to female symbols to represent Russia, Tania’s

melodramatic tale becomes a transparent allegory of Russia's relationship with the West: rich in natural beauty, Russia sells herself to foreign suitors, only to be overcome by nostalgia and regret.²⁵

Russia's drama of international prostitution is thus always played out on a number of levels simultaneously: empirically, we witness the unchecked growth of highly paid call girls serving New Russians and foreign businessmen, the boom in Russian "mail-order brides," and the notorious trafficking in women from the ex-USSR throughout the world; allegorically, the export of Russian women is inevitably compared with the short-sighted marketing of the country's oil reserves for Western consumption; and, psychologically and sexually, foreign-currency prostitution contributes to a growing complex of inferiority and insecurity among Russian men, amply demonstrated by numerous publications and broadcasts aimed primarily at male consumers. The very existence of "men's magazines" and soft-core pornography in Russia is a response to the threat of foreign competition, just as sexually oriented broadcasts like *About That* contain traces of Russian culture's conflicted attitude toward the West: strive as they might for uniqueness, male heterosexual erotica and pornography in Russia betray their foreign origins.²⁶

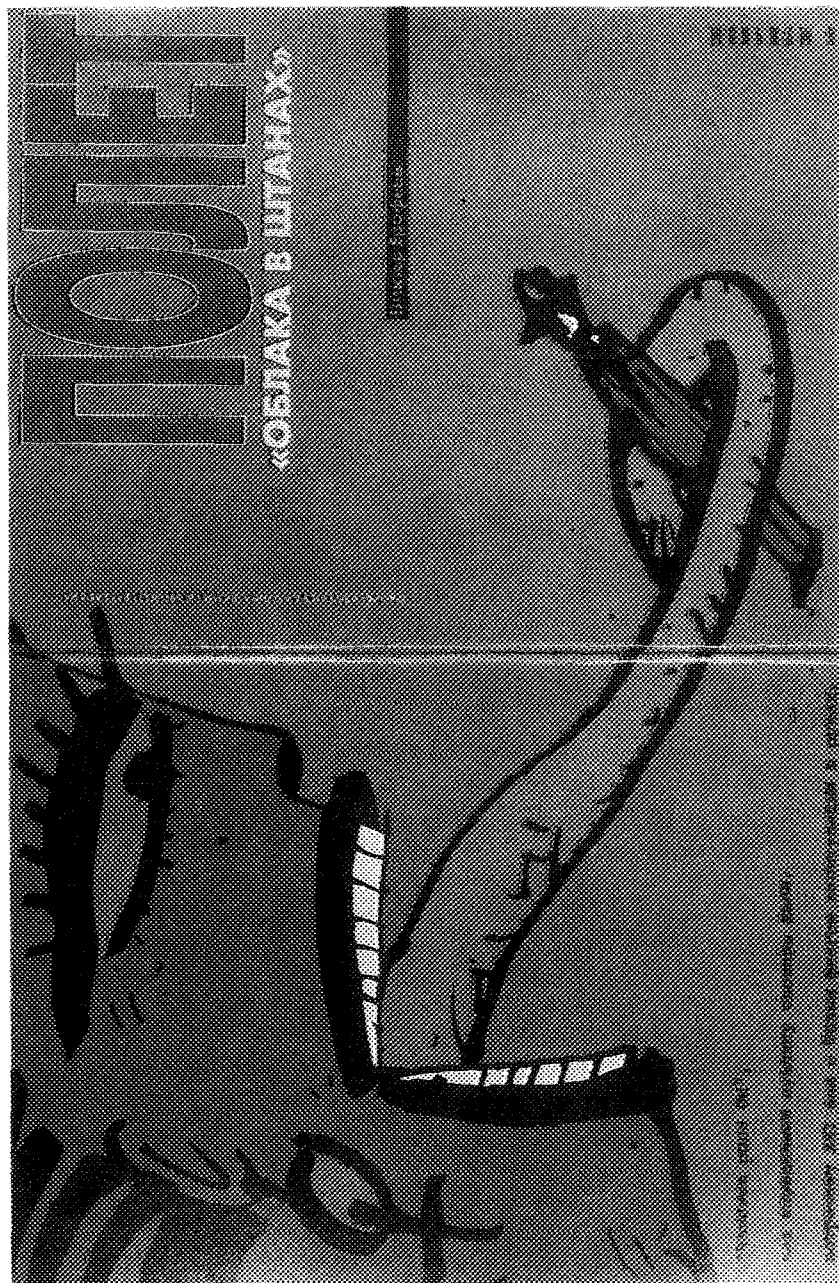
Such publications rhapsodize over the virtues of Russian women, repeating the male mantra that women in Russia are the most beautiful in the world; but they also reinforce the threat that these women will attract the attention of foreign men (through associated projects such as *Andrei's* website). Ironically, these publications, which shamelessly borrowed from Western models such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, eventually found themselves retreating behind national chauvinism when *Playboy* and *Penthouse* began publishing their own Russian editions. Magazines such as *Andrei* experienced the same anxieties as their Russian male readers when faced with foreign competition.

Each issue of *Andrei* contains articles detailing new aspects of the threat to Russian masculinity, printed under the rubric "Prava muzhchin" 'The Rights of Men.' The sixth issue of *Andrei* (1995) contains Viktor Yerofeev's essay for this section, titled "Polet oblaka v shtanakh" 'The Flight of the Cloud in Trousers.'²⁷ This article would be central to Yerofeev's 1997 slim volume of essays, *Muzhchiny (Men)* supplying most of the material for the book's rather polemical blurb.²⁸ After a typical diatribe against feminism

and the controversy over sexual harassment in the West, "The Flight of the Cloud in Trousers" informs us that "Man's fate in Russia looks different, but is no less dramatic," since the Russian man is not merely embattled, but has ceased to exist altogether. Thanks to Soviet power (instituted, as Yerofeev himself admits, by males), the Russian man has lost the honor and freedom that are the hallmarks of true manhood. Though the Russian man is still a "chelovek" 'human being,' still a "muzhik" 'guy,' and still a "muzh" 'husband,' these terms all represent circumscribed, ultimately unfulfilling roles for the potential "real" man. (See Fig. II.3.)

Yerofeev's essay hints at the specter haunting Russian pornography—that of Western culture and Western men. Whereas the Russian man is a thing of the past, the Russian woman is entirely real: "Woman consists of necessity. In Russia 'neobkhodimosti khot' valiai' " 'we have necessity by the ton!' That is why Russia is feminine. Realizing that there are no men in Russia, she is prepared to leave the country and find real men abroad. Once again, the sexual threat is entangled with an economic one: the Russian man posited by *Andrei* laments the competition with Western men, while *Andrei* itself fears competition with American pop culture and the threat of "men's magazines" imported from the United States, particularly the Russian-language edition of *Playboy*, whose contents only slightly differ from the American version. As a "Russkii zhurnal dlia muzhchin" 'Russian magazine for men,' *Andrei* originally accented both "for men" and "Russian." Once *Playboy* appeared, *Andrei* began to emphasize the Russianness of both its models and their settings. An editorial in the seventh issue claims: "*Andrei* puts our woman on a pedestal to be admired; unlike invader magazines ['zhurnalami interventam'], of which there are more and more in the kiosks, it doesn't present her in an unadvantageous and biased fashion next to foreign women so that the 'house' model be MORE sexual and feminine. The invaders' task is simple: to prove that everything Western is better, more expensive, stronger—and also to turn our women into a cheap export that's ready for anything." Not only does the magazine that once identified itself with the allegedly Western values of freedom and democracy now assume an overtly nationalistic tone, but its vocabulary deliberately evokes the rhetoric of war and invasion: Western magazines, like Western armies, are "invaders" on a hostile mission of conquest.²⁹

Though the pictures, stories, and ads in *Andrei* portray a free-spending, luxurious lifestyle available only to the wealthiest of New

Fig. II.3. Flight of that Trousered Cloud . . . : *Andrei* No. 6, 1995.

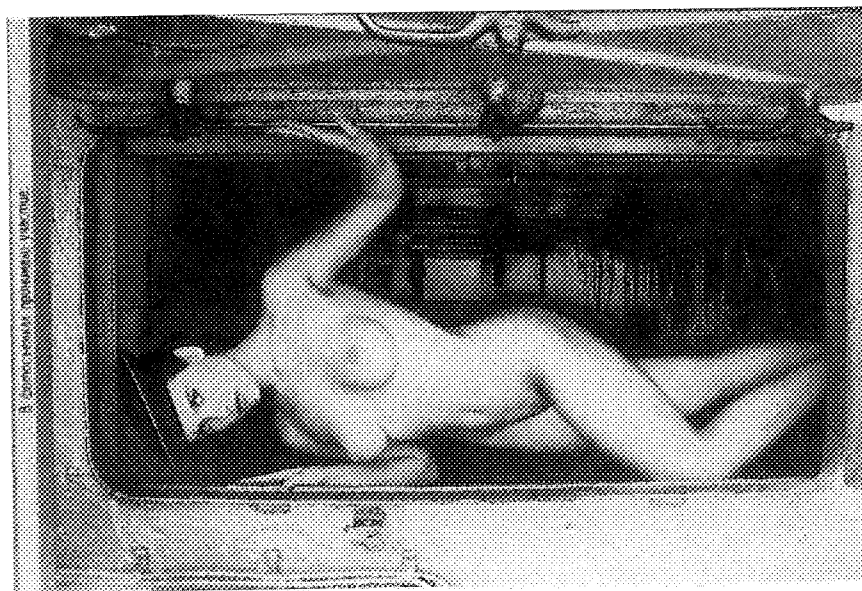
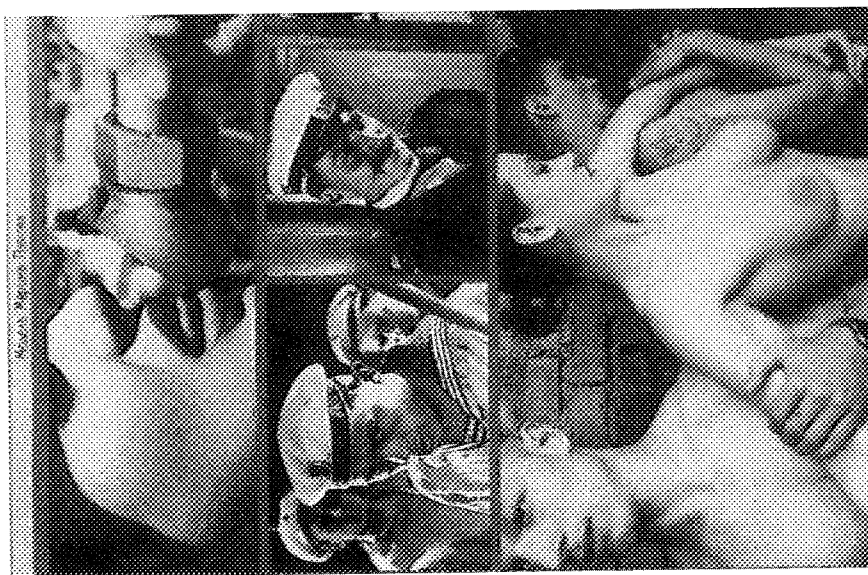
Russians, the magazine's implicit nationalism persistently comes through. If one may believe the letters to the editor, the readership has responded to *Andrei's* pro-Russian boosterism. In the best tradition of Soviet-era collective letters, a group of officers from the Baltic Fleet in Tallinn writing to *Andrei* (1995, No. 6) thanked the magazine for mentioning the 300th anniversary of the Russian fleet: "You really are our magazine. Even our national pride, to some extent. Although we've been around and seen many different men's magazines, *Andrei's* nicer and closer to the heart of our Soviet man." The letter's patriotic fervor makes it easy to forget that the subject is a pornographic magazine rather than, say, the launching of a space shuttle; the anachronistic reference to "our Soviet man" by a group of Russian military personnel based in newly independent Estonia only heightens the identification of *Andrei* with a nostalgia for Russian greatness. (See Fig. II.4.)

Even the photospreads exemplify a distinct concern for Russian identity *vis-à-vis* the West. A six-page feature in the sixth issue shows supposedly American porn models surrounded by props from the Russian/Soviet space program; in this fashion, the magazine compensates for "importing" exotic American beauties by spotlighting accomplishments in one of the few areas of Russian industry that could still be the source of unequivocal pride.³⁰ Indeed, the English-speaking models are quoted as uttering only one Russian word throughout the shoot: "Jessica, Kelly, and Christie responded to the idea of a spaceflight enthusiastically. 'Ga-ga-rin!' they laughed, stretching the costumes of Soviet superheroes onto their American breasts." (See Fig. II.5.)

Magazines like *Andrei*, whose economic task is to sell sexual images of Russian women to Russian men, ultimately return to some of the basic questions of sexual discourse in Russia today: how may one reconcile sex and the marketplace? If sexual metaphors characterize the free exchange of goods and ideas between Russia and the West (the source of the marketplace and of the very genres that inspired *SPID-Info* or *About That*), how can Russian anxieties provoked by the commercialization of sex (the incursions on privacy, the threat of foreign wealth and potency) be allayed? (See Fig. II.6.)

Andrei points the way by thematizing the anxieties themselves, continually revisiting them in a light-hearted manner. The seventh issue of *Andrei* includes a feature that incorporates exotic locales while turning the threat of the "export" of Russian women into the

Fig. II.4 Commemorating the 300-Year Anniversary of the Russian Navy: The Male Fleet Protecting Its Equipment: *Andrei* No. 5, 1994.



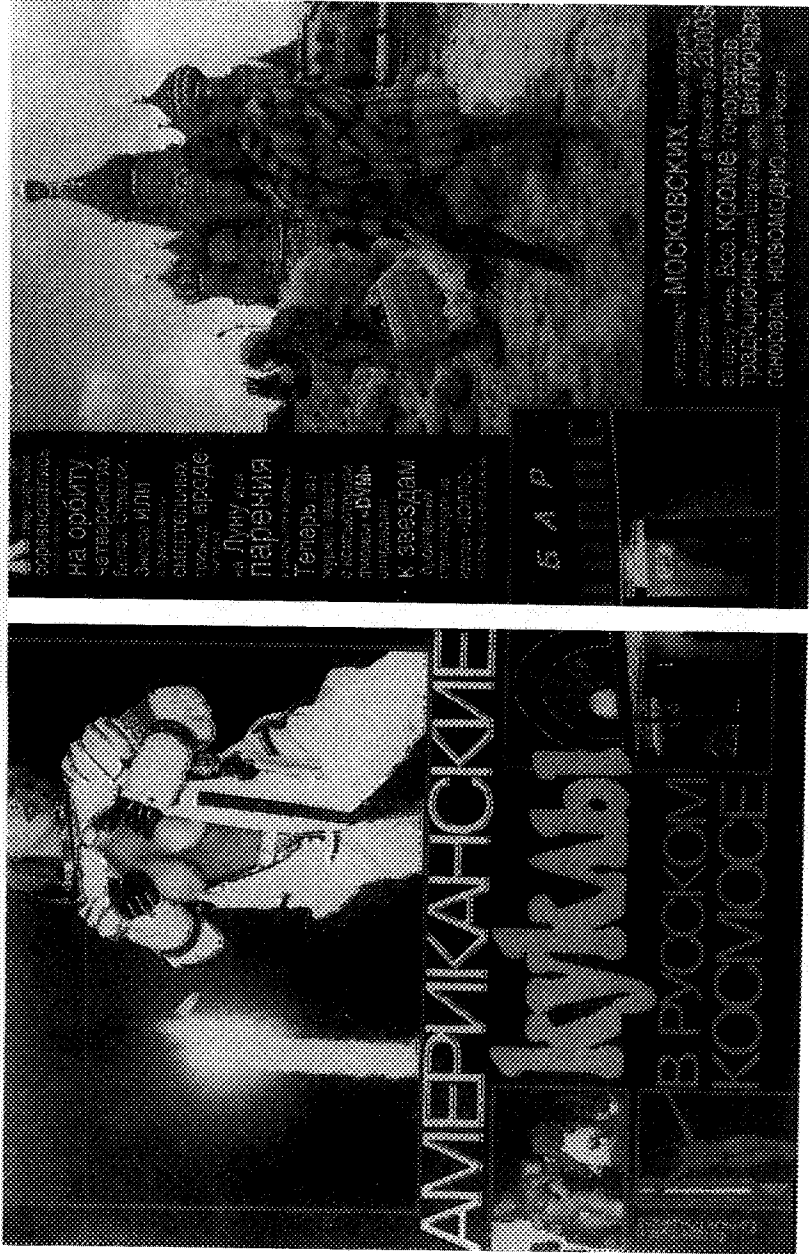


Fig. II.5 The Cosmos and Other Spheres: Andrei, No. 6, 1995.

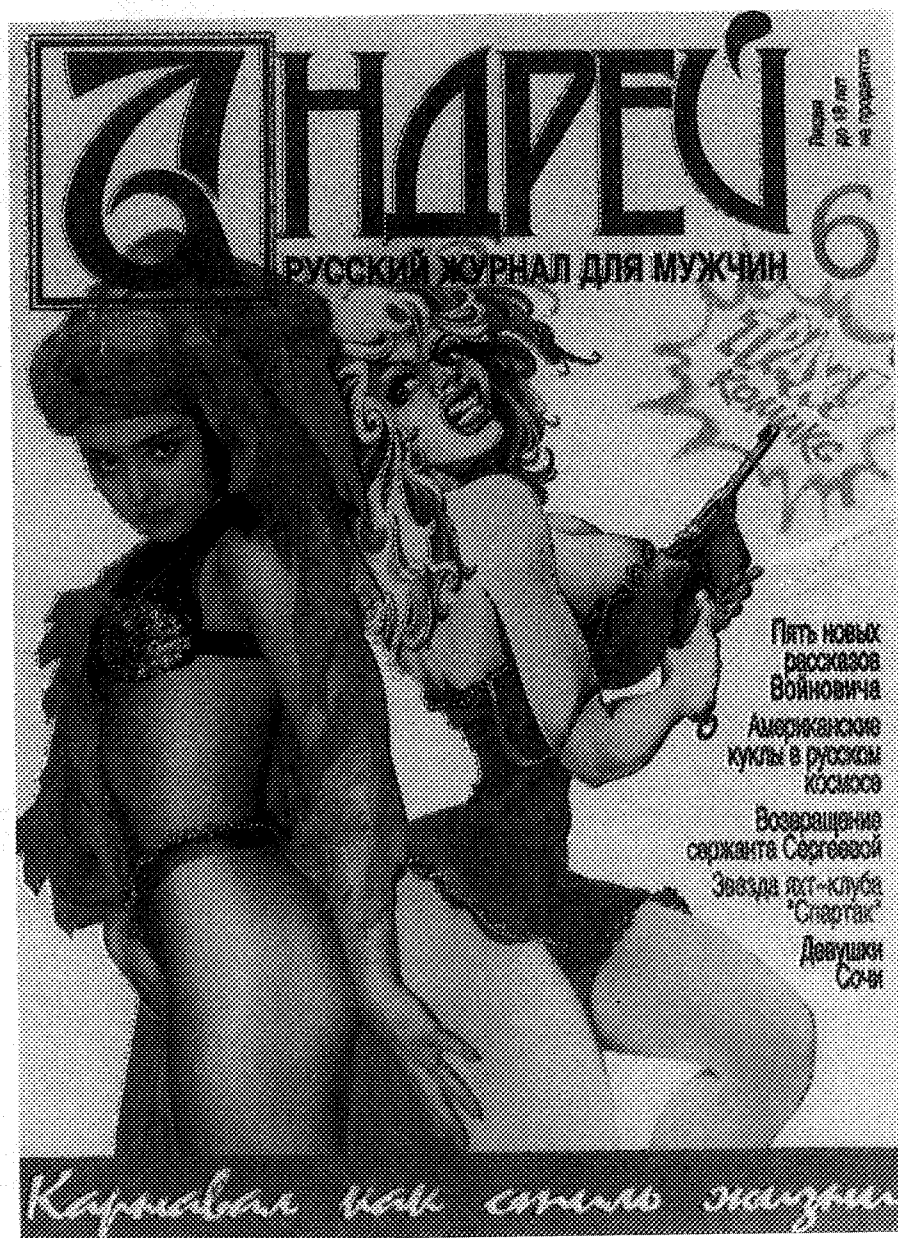


Fig. II.6 The Magazine for Men [Sic]: Cover of *Andrei*, No. 6, 1995.

stuff of comedy: a blonde model is photographed in various locales (and various stages of undress) in Cairo and the Egyptian desert, under the heading “Sto verbludov za russkuiu baryshniu” ‘One hundred camels for a Russian girl.’ Capitalist exchange is replaced by Eastern barter, and the Russians girl’s price, for once, is anything but practical (“We sent . . . the camels on their way to a friend in Tashkent. Will they get there?”). The photospread depends on a sense of two-way exoticism, as well as a broad parody of cross-cultural kitsch; in the corner of a full-page photo of the naked Russian woman on a camel is a fully clothed Arab woman on a tractor. The contrast between the “retrograde” camel and the “progressive” tractor is a cliché of Soviet Socialist Realist tales of the struggle to civilize the nomads of Central Asia, but where the USSR brought communism, *Andrei* pretends to bring the example of sexual liberation. The caption reads: “The magazine for men was welcomed by a few emancipated women of the East. Out of solidarity with our struggle for the beauty of the body, one of them even climbed up onto a tractor—the symbol of progress.” The Eastern locale allows Russia to take on a missionary role familiar from the days of communist internationalism, while displacing and defusing cross-cultural anxieties by turning Russia into the source of sexual “export.” Here Russia gets to be the West, raising the sexual question in a mysterious, repressed East. Sex, it seems, can wear a Russian face with pride and confidence, after all, if only in a situation when it assumes cultural superiority.

Notes

1. Khanga is the author of a memoir about her life as a “black Russian,” titled *Soul to Soul*. For more on Soviet attitudes toward Africa and African Americans, see Blakely (Chapters 7-9).

2. NTV Executive Producer Leonid Parfyonov was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying “A Russian black girl has never been seen on television. . . . I believe in cosmopolitanism—showing that not all Russians are blue-eyed and blond.” But when the show was in rehearsal, a stylist fitted her for a blond wig and blue contact lenses; Khanga agreed to the wig but balked at the lenses. Parfyonov’s response: “We didn’t want to go with an Angela Davis, Afro-American Style. We had to make concessions to the viewers” (Stanley, “On Russian TV”).

3. Igor Kon cites a 1989 survey of high-school senior girls in Riga and Leningrad claiming that foreign-currency prostitution "had become one of the top ten most prestigious professions, as well as a survey in which prostitutes ranked higher than journalists, diplomats, and academics among prestigious and lucrative professions admired by Moscow schoolchildren" (Kon 223). Survey results in the former USSR are notoriously unreliable, and should be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism; nevertheless, the appearance of such survey results in the Russian mass media has been important in defining the role of the prostitute in contemporary Russian sexual discourse; at the very least, the surveys have created the *impression* that prostitution is considered a desirable profession.

4. Lesbianism in Russia has long had the dubious distinction of being legally and socially invisible; there have never been any laws in Russia forbidding female same-sex activity. Article 121.1 of the criminal code, which made male homosexual relations an offense punishable by imprisonment, was repealed on May 29, 1993. For an overview of the status of gays and lesbians in contemporary Russia, see Gessen, *Rights of Lesbians* (passim), Kon (239-64), and Tuller (passim).

5. On the spread of pornography in Russia today, see Goscilo (*Dehexing* 135-63).

6. Helena Goscilo explores the bizarre juxtapositions of "high" and "low" cultures in the first wave of contemporary Russian pornography, in which "the Venus de Milo is likely to rub elbows (*only metaphorically speaking*) with a *Playboy* centerfold, their sole common denominator being their gendered nudity" (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 146; emphasis in the original).

7. The prologue ends with a rhymed couplet, the last line of which is "The name / of this theme / is . . ." ("Imia / etoi / teme / . . ."); the missing word ("liubov") is made all the more obvious in that it is meant to rhyme with the Russian "lbov" ("foreheads") (Maiakovskii 176). The forbidden character of the speaker's love is reinforced by the title of the section immediately following it, "The Ballad of Reading Gao!"; though Maiakovskii's passion in the poem is explicitly heterosexual, the reference to Oscar Wilde's poem written during the author's years in prison for sodomy suggests that homosexuality is not the only love that "dare not speak its name."

In the early years of Soviet power, particularly during the Russian Civil War, love was seen by many revolutionary romantics as a theme too "bourgeois" for the "new world" they envisioned. In particular, the poets associated with the Proletarian Culture movement tended to relegate women, femininity, and love to the dustbin of history (See Naiman Chapter One, and Borenstein, *Men Without Women*, Chapter One). Even writers as distant from revolutionary ideology as the formalist Viktor Shklovskii, for reasons of their own, would treat love as a matter for coy

circumlocution; his 1923 novel *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love*, composed of personal letters between a man and a woman, is structured on the woman's prohibition on writing about love ("Don't write to me about love. Don't. I'm very tired.") (Shklovskii 177).

8. See, for example, the title of M. Rezin's article about the lack of shame among contemporary Russian students: "In Latin, it's sex, but what is it in Russian?" (Rezin). As the subject of *seks* grows less foreign, so too does the pronunciation of the word itself; one hears a palatalized "s" more and more frequently.

9. See, for example, Attwood, "Sex" (66), Gessen, "We Have No Sex" (passim), and Kon (1).

10. This is not to say that Russia plays no role in the Western sexual imaginary; quite to the contrary, Russia has often functioned as the source of "passion" in various Western narratives and fantasies, from Freud's metaphorical connections between Russia and the unconscious (Rice, Etkind, *Eros* 132) to Sacher-Masoch's use of Russian material in his most famous works (Etkind, *Sodom* 12-30). Elsewhere I argue that Western scholars' and journalists' interest in Russian sexuality is also erotic in character ("Slavophilia" 146-47).

11. Ironically, if one wishes to find obscene language in Russian texts and films, one must look up rather than down: it is "high" culture that has availed itself of the linguistic opportunities afforded by the easing of censorship. Writers such as Viktor Yerofeev, Vladimir Sorokin, and Valeriia Narbikova enlist such words in their experimental fictions, availing themselves of their residual taboo value the better to shock a complacent readership. For a discussion of the function of explicit anatomical vocabulary in contemporary Russian fiction, see Goscilo, "Body Talk" (passim). Andrei Zorin argues that "taboo words play a sort of provocative role in the new context [of contemporary Russian poetry], as if they liberate the reader, allowing him to reveal his subconscious aggression" (139).

12. Finally, one must not forget the cultural critics in both Russia and the West who examine these phenomena. The first post-Brezhnev decade has seen an impressive constellation of scholarly works on sexuality and gender in Russia: cultural historians have examined the social construction of sexuality from the middle ages (Levin) to the *fin-de-siècle* (Engelstein) to the Soviet period (Kon), while literary scholars such as Helena Goscilo, Olga Matich, Eric Naiman, and Mikhail Zolotonosov have looked at the interplay between sex and ideology during NEP and the renewed "physiologism" of recent Russian fiction. Three collections of articles on sex in Russian culture have appeared in the United States in recent years (Costlow, et. al.; Kon and Riordan; Berry), one in Switzerland (Heller), and a special issue of *Literaturnoe obozrenie* on "erotica" in Russian lit-

erature was published in 1992 (Prokhorova et al.). This does not include the spate of books published in the past several years on Russian women's studies and gender issues, which are beyond the scope of the present article.

13. Of course, the tendency to view sexuality in terms of metaphysics has a long history in Russia, embracing both pro- and ant-sexual points of view (Solov'ev, Fedorov, Berdiaev). It is noteworthy, however, that in Russia the simultaneous renewal of interest in both sexual issues and Russian religious philosophy means that works of certain Russian scholars attribute to sexuality a moral or metaphysical dimension (see, for example, Mikhail Epshtein's "serious parodies" of Vladimir Solov'ev's erotic philosophy [Epstein]). Thus homosexuality, for example, is viewed as a sign of necrophilia and a disdain for the family in Boris Paramonov's "Chevengur i okrestnosti," while Oleg Dark argues that "Homosexuality is always a vow, . . . a rejection of the norm. . . . The beauty of homosexuality is its unnaturalness" (Dark 251). In his critique of both Paramonov and Dark, Sergei Tikhomirov notes that, in their treatment of homosexuality, "the most consistent defenders of democratic choice also sometimes get caught up in frankly mythological sequences of thought" (Tikhomirov 5).

14. As Masha Gessen writes, "Though *SPID-Info* contained less AIDS information than *Tema* [an early gay newspaper], which ran safer-sex guidelines in every issue, and its provocative covers featured such topics as fetishes and prostitution, *SPID-Info* carried the morally upstanding cachet of being an AIDS information publication. No one had to be embarrassed about reading it. So everyone read it" (Gessen, "Sex" 220-21).

15. Gessen notes that after its first few issues, *SPID-Info* "ceased providing AIDS-related information" altogether (Gessen, "Sex" 222).

16. Here I must agree with Igor Kon and David Tuller that Western observers at times have made too much of the fact that the Russian language lacks a single word corresponding to the English "privacy." As Kon notes, French also has no such term, and yet no one draws any grand conclusions from this lexicological accident (Kon 80-81). Tuller speculates that "the lack of one specific word has helped to protect the very idea of privacy. For to name it would be to define it, to circumscribe it—and ultimately to debase and destroy it" (Tuller 250). While Tuller's musings are hardly sound from a linguistic point of view, his discussion of Russian strategies for preserving the inviolability of private life has a great deal of merit, especially when he contrasts it with the recent American tendency to extol the virtue of privacy even while turning the most intimate details of private life into fodder for television shows and confessional biographies.

17. See, for example, Kon (1-7, 129-273), and Riordan (passim).

18. Susan Larsen argues that two ideas lie behind the conception of gender circulated by the Russian mass media: "first of all, normative axioms about the biological, and therefore 'natural' basis of the predetermination and life's purpose of women, and second, the conviction that seventy years of Soviet power have thoroughly deformed the 'natural' essence of women in all aspects of life—be they sexual, family, economic, or political" (Larsen 178). Larsen echoes Lynne Attwood's 1990 study, *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex-Role Socialization in the USSR*, which observes the country's growing concern over the perceived blurring of "natural" gender roles, the "feminization" of men and the "masculinization" of women (also noted by Goscilo, *Dehexing* 10-11). That concern recently has acquired a new form of expression. Headlines such as "Bureaucrats have taken everything away from men" (Proshina) continue the old line of complaint, but now coexist with calls to action and bold assertions of "natural" truths. See the headline for an article by sexologist Sergei Golod in the St. Petersburg paper *Chas-Pik (Rush Hour)* titled, "Despite everything, male sexuality is still different from female sexuality. And that's good" (Golod).

19. Hence the relatively minor role played by sex scandals in the Russian popular imagination. Russia, like much of Europe, has followed American coverage of the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky story with a combination of bemusement and disgust. Though the daily *Moskovskii komsomolets* described Lewinsky's semen-stained dress in lavish detail (Bershidsky), the consensus in Russia holds that this private affair should never have been made public (Bershidsky; Reeves; Shargodska; "Russia Would Prefer Sex Scandal" 1998). For Valentin Zorin of the USA and Canada Institute, the Lewinsky story shows that "an element of sanctimoniousness . . . characterizes Americans" (Ustiuzhanin). The American media have noted that, when polled, Russians see Clinton's alleged affairs as a sign that he is a "real man," unlike the old and ailing Yeltsin (Reeves; Shargodska; Howard and Gajilan).

The rare attempts by Russian journalists to stir up a sex scandal have failed to hit the mark. In June 1997, the popular muckraking weekly *Sovershenno Sekretno (Top Secret)* published photos of Russia's Justice Minister, Valentin Kovalev, relaxing with three naked women in a Moscow bathhouse reputed to be a Mafia hangout. Voices from across the political spectrum, including Yeltsin's spokesman, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, the popular reformer Boris Nemtsov, and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, condemned the violation of Kovalev's privacy (Franchetti; Stanley). *Top Secret's* editor, Artem Borovik, took pride in breaking new ground, as though coverage of sex scandals were a sign of political maturity: "We are absolutely delighted. This is the first scandal of its kind" (Franchetti). For *Top Secret*, the Kovalev story seemed to mark a subtle change of course; the very title of the paper embodies the informational paradox that characterizes

the Postsoviet media. The words "Top Secret" customarily cover government documents not meant for publication, but the stories that appear in the newspaper of the same name have achieved the widest possible distribution. Since the paper's inception, its editors have devoted themselves to violating a long-standing taboo; the paper is predicated on a political, rather than sexual, fetishizing of information. The Kovalev story was an attempt to redirect this fetish to a new object.

20. Such a relationship between Russia and "her" leaders has religious overtones, as well, harking back to the Christian allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs as the story of Christ and the church. The scriptural precedent is the inverse of the contemporary metaphorical situation: in the first case, a frankly erotic love poem is purged of its sexual character and transposed to the realm of bodiless, spiritual love; in the situation described below, sexual imagery is used to describe (and comment upon) a relationship not usually considered erotic.

21. Zhirinovskiy is unique among Russian politicians for both his frequent appellation to sexual imagery and his radical stance on a number of sexual issues. As with most of his political views, Zhirinovskiy's statements on sex can hardly be considered a coherent political program. In March 1998, he attended a St. Petersburg gay club and expressed his support of "sexual minorities" ("Zhirinovskiy Courts"). When the Lewinsky scandal broke in January 1998, Zhirinovskiy noted that if Clinton were impeached, "Bill will have more freedom and I will be able to meet him more often . . . We will together recall our sexual experiences" ("Zhirinovskiy to Clinton"). One of his more notorious moments occurred during an interview with Jennifer Gould for the American edition of *Playboy* (March 1995), when he proposed that Gould, her interpreter, and one of his bodyguards engage in group sex (Gould 248-49). In the same interview, Zhirinovskiy boasts of having "had more than two hundred women, and with every woman I've had it several times. And if you add masturbation, I've climaxed probably ten thousand times." He concludes that he has therefore achieved orgasm 3,500 times in his life (Gould 249).

22. The desire for such political purity was also parodically embodied by the short-lived All-Russian Virgin Party, an organization whose twelve members held their first public meeting in a Moscow nightclub in August 1997 (Beeston).

23. This was not the first time that Zhirinovskiy portrayed voting in sexual terms. Before the 1993 election, he declared, "Political impotence is finished! . . . Today is the beginning of orgasm. The whole nation, I promise you, will have an orgasm next year!" (from the *Washington Post*, December 17, 1993, as quoted in Tuller 197).

24. Wording adjusted, so as to clarify sense of the original Russian (HG).

25. Withholding sexual favors from foreign men therefore becomes a sign of national strength. In April 1997, the local Crimean newspaper *Krymskoe vremia* reported that prostitutes in this largely Russian enclave in independent Ukraine had announced that, as a protest against NATO expansion, they would not service NATO sailors scheduled to take part in exercises off the Crimean coast that summer (Lodge, "Crimean"; Philips "NATO's sailors").

26. *Andrei* makes such anxieties crystal clear in a cartoon in its very first issue: two prostitutes display their wares on a Moscow street; the first, a Russian woman standing under the "M" of the metro sign, looks on in horror at a black woman leaning against the "M" of a McDonald's sign.

27. Once again, the point of reference is the work of Vladimir Maiakovskii. His 1915 poem "The Cloud in Trousers" takes its title from a phrase that the speaker uses in the prologue: "if you want— / I will be irreproachably tender / not a man, but a cloud in trousers!" Yefeev uses the term to suggest that Russian men have retreated from their natural masculinity.

The long-dead Maiakovskii, whose verses celebrated both sexual passion and Soviet patriotism, haunts contemporary Russian sexual discourse. Two possible explanations for the centrality of Maiakovskii to the Russian erotic imagination are first, his poetic persona—on the surface, aggressively masculine, but ultimately revealed as androgynous and conflicted; beneath the macho posturing is a vulnerable, emotional side conventionally deemed "feminine." Second, perhaps more pertinently, Maiakovskii's canonization as a revolutionary writer ensured the availability of his entire oeuvre to generations of Soviet readers, including erotically charged works such as "The Cloud in Trousers" and "About That." By default, Maiakovskii was the "sexiest" writer in the official Soviet school curriculum; when the producers of erotic and pornographic materials began to seek legitimacy in the late perestroika era, Maiakovskii was the most obvious "high-culture" icon to hide behind.

28. Other essays were originally printed in *Playboy*, where Yefeev started publishing not long after his work in *Andrei* appeared.

29. Yefeev also uses such military rhetoric throughout his article in issue No. 6; for example, when he explains that the successful wife gives her husband the illusion of conquest, she herself will be the true victor: "Then it will end up like fifty years ago: the USSR wins, but it's Germany that celebrates."

30. The rather obvious connection between the launch of a phallic rocket and male sexual response is made in an ad by Upjohn in the following issue: an injectible medicine for impotence is advertised with a picture of a syringe-like rocket blasting off into space.

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