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Eliot Borenstein. *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. xv + 265 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4583-5; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-7403-3.

Reviewed by Susanne M. Cohen (Temple University)

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Making Sense of Excess in 1990s Russian Popular Culture

Eliot Borenstein's *Overkill* provides an immensely entertaining as well as intellectually provocative window into some of the most salacious aspects of post-Soviet Russian popular culture. The book focuses on the explosion of public discourse about sex and violence in Russia in the post-Soviet period, with a particular emphasis on the nineties aesthetic that Borenstein calls "overkill," an approach to representation that glories in depicting shocking details about post-Soviet life in a repetitive, excessive manner that lacks any sense of restraint. *Overkill* is a version of *chernukha*, the darkly pessimistic, naturalistic style of fiction, film, and journalism that first emerged during glasnost. Yet, as Borenstein describes, while the initial forays into *chernukha* existed in a clear moral context, unveiling a disturbing reality in order to reveal the "truth" masked by Soviet official discourse and, thereby, inspire social action, the world-weary overkill of the 1990s had lost any sense of moral mission. Driven by a deep anxiety about the state of the nation, it could only follow a tireless logic of indulgence and fear: "Let us see once again what horrifies us every day" (p. 18). Borenstein, a scholar of Slavic studies, takes a mainly literary approach, delving into the print world of nineties pulp fiction, pornographic magazines, and tabloid newspapers, with an occasional glance at film, television, and related high literature. However, there is also much here of interest to anthropologists of postsocialism, especially those concerned with gender, nationalism, and the mass media, as well as the general contours of postsocialist change.

It is hard to do justice to the varied, intriguing, and often strange terrain that Borenstein covers, which encompasses, to name only a few examples, a mass-market paperback entitled *You're Just a Slut, My Dear!* (1999), a pornographic spread of half-dressed models in SS-uniforms posing in front of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, and a controversial excerpt from novelist Vladimir Sorokin that features Nikita Khrushchev and Joseph Stalin mutually engaged in an intimate act. Borenstein also introduces us to countless fictional and nonfictional settings of runaway criminality, where blood-soaked beatings, profit-seeking bandits, crooked policemen, and sadistic sexual assaults are all a matter of course. Rather than dismissing such phenomena as mere entertainment or as the inevitable result of lifting Soviet-era repression, however, Borenstein seeks meaning in excess, suggesting that nineties popular culture was a particularly privileged site for defining the Russian nation in a decade of crisis, anxiety, and uncertainty, when the country's fall from superpower status was widely felt. While many Russians at the time viewed the obsessive focus on sex and violence in itself as a sign of the country's decline, Borenstein argues, representations of sex and violence in popular culture were also a way of coming to terms with the nation's fate, thus providing "a symbolic vocabulary for the expression of fundamental anxieties about national pride, cultural collapse, and the frightening new moral landscape of [Boris] Yeltsin's Russia" (p. 23).

The book is divided along the main axes of sex and

violence. The first half begins by considering the emergence of aggressive public representations of sexuality in a country in which a talk show audience member speaking to American host Phil Donahue once famously proclaimed, “We have no sex!” Borenstein charts the sometimes hesitant, sometimes highly energetic “transformation of sex into discourse” in the late socialist and early postsocialist periods in such forums as the television show *About That* (which could only refer to its subject matter elusively) and the best-selling newspaper *SPID-Info* (which quickly moved from an ostensive goal of preventing sexually transmitted disease to sex-positive philosophy) (p. 33). However, Borenstein is most concerned here with the realm of the symbolic. He describes how sex, masculinity, and globalization became intimately intertwined in the 1990s popular imagination. In this context, he argues, much of the sexual imagery told a narrative of sexual humiliation at the hands of the West. Often the focus was the female body, a stand-in for Russia itself, which offered a possibly redemptive vision of national purity that, at the same time, was frequently said to have already been sold to the highest bidder in the new capitalist marketplace. This is particularly brought out by a chapter on the post-Soviet prostitute, who, Borenstein suggests, was a key symbol of the country’s national humiliation. Yet despite popular culture’s relentless focus on female bodies, Borenstein argues that the larger context here was a crisis of masculinity, in which Russian men had seemingly lost much of their essential manliness by surrendering some of their country’s most valuable resources (including Russian women) to the West. The flip side of this was that masculinity itself became increasingly important, particularly in a new super-potent nationalist form that was eminently Russian in character. In his chapter on pornography, Borenstein charts a significant shift from early nineties’ views that generally equated sexual expression with democracy to later, nationalist approaches that presented sex (for men in particular) as the ultimate cure for both national and sexual humiliation.

The chapters on violence are more concerned with issues of literary genre. Depictions of violent crime in popular culture were generally serialized, resulting in a narrative structure that differed greatly from socialist realist depictions of mythical heroes with a single path to consciousness and an inevitable and predetermined “happy future.” Borenstein provides thoughtful meditation on the implications of serial narrative for portrayals of violence, giving it a significance that goes beyond conventional mass media approaches that view form as a trans-

parent vehicle for presenting meaning.[1] For Borenstein, serial narrative mirrored and reinforced discursive messages of totalizing social breakdown, iconically establishing violence as “a cyclical, never-ending phenomenon that establishes the contours of the post-Soviet world” (p. 99). Borenstein mainly divides violent serial narratives by gender, devoting a chapter each to the predominately feminine *detektiv* (detective story) and the male *boevik* (action story). These genres, he suggests, work differently in accordance with the presumed subject positions of their readers. While the masculine *boevik* offers “fantasies of compensatory masculinity” that enable men to take control of a violent world through their own violent action, women’s *detektivy* offer women a way of making violence safe without engaging it directly, skirting the particularly feminine danger of victimhood as well as any signs of over-masculinity that would disrupt reigning gender conventions (p. 162). The final chapter of this section turns to *bespredel*, a complicated and multifaceted term that generally connotes boundless, disordered, and sensationalist violence. Borenstein describes how *bespredel*, originally associated with criminals who broke the highly regimented codes of conduct established by thieves, symbolically threatened to take over Russia itself, particularly through the graphic, sensationalist, and nightmarishly repetitive depictions of violence in the daily news and related nonfictional and fictional portrayals of “true crime.”

From an anthropological perspective, one of the most significant contributions of *Overkill* is its nuanced approach to the complex discursive transformations that were characteristic of the first postsocialist decade not only in the context of popular culture, but also in many other areas of social life. What we see in Borenstein’s analysis is neither a whole-scale embrace of Western forms nor a full-scale rejection of the new, fueled by a lingering socialist moral economy, but a rather complex and contradictory range of positions that included appropriations and transformations of globally circulating genres and various types of continuity with the past, as well as deep anxieties about change. We see how celebrations of the liberating potential of unleashing new and shocking content could stand alongside a dark pessimism about the moral status of such ventures, and how sex and violence could simultaneously seem to be at the root of Russia’s crisis and provide a venue for working through many of the tensions that their public representations unleashed. This complexity, unfortunately, is somewhat undercut by Borenstein’s theoretical apparatus, which relies on an all-encompassing, homogenized

notion of culture that can be accessed through mass market texts. Where Olga Shevchenko has suggested in *Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow* (2009) that notions of “crisis” in 1990s Russian media had much to do with the particular circumstances of various substrata of a Russian intelligentsia that had lost its historic social role, Borenstein does not endeavor to speculate on the positionality of the producers of the texts he analyzes, speaking instead of an undifferentiated “Russian culture” that struggles to represent itself. His model of reception is equally limited, involving a fairly uniform public, divided by gender but not by social position, that unproblematically embraces the messages transmitted by popular culture, often by psychological identification with the

heroes of films and novels. Still, the vast variety and idiosyncrasy of the material in Borenstein’s study resists any attempt to channel and limit it in this way. As the Russian nineties are receding further into the past, becoming a decade with a distinct and delimited cultural identity that separates them from the more (though not entirely) stable present, *Overkill* is an important book for anyone who wishes to understand these troubled years in all of their messy, scandalous, and fraught complexity.

Note

[1]. Debra Spitulnik, “Anthropology and Mass Media,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22, no. 1 (1993): 293-315.

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