



Alison Rowley. *Putin Kitsch in America*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. 208 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7735-5901-1.

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The Uncertain Purpose of Putin Kitsch

Putin Kitsch in America is a lively and entertaining book dedicated, as its title suggests, to chronicling the rather astonishing array of English-language kitsch available online that centers on the figure of Russian leader Vladimir Putin. The abundance of Putin-related products that author Alison Rowley has unearthed range from refrigerator magnets to hand puppets to video games to porn. Her account of them all is motivated, she says, by her interest in the ways that Putin's image "functions as a political talisman far outside the borders of Russia" (p. 3).

Ultimately, however, this sentence is a bit of a misnomer. The word "talisman" is generally used to refer to a revered object thought to bestow protection, bring good fortune, and carry magical powers. And while some of the artifacts Rowley describes do truly appear to celebrate aspects of the Russian leader (whether real or imagined), many others carry an element of mockery, whimsy, or disgust. Some seem to be crafted toward consumer tastes and made to sell, others to entertain or appall by breaking conventional taboos.

What, exactly, these different forms of kitsch signify—both individually and as a whole—is a question Rowley struggles to answer. As a result, the strength of her book lies in its thick description,

peppered with amusing asides. Any number of deft, eclectic, and engaging analytical tidbits are interwoven throughout Rowley's chapters, as the author dips into scholarship on commodification, protest, satire, masculinity, homoerotic fantasy, internet economics, and social media. The history of the T-shirt is discussed on one page, that of the French Revolution on another. This is not exactly cotton candy for the masses. Nevertheless, it does still feel like a bit of a guilty pleasure for readers who may ultimately be left to wonder what exactly it all means.

Warning: This sense of guilt could intensify once the reader hits the middle chapters, which concentrate on sexualized kitsch—such as a BDSM-filled *Putin F*cks Trump* adult coloring book—and pornographic fiction, often involving imaginary encounters between Putin and his US counterpart, Donald Trump (p. 64). In one chapter, Rowley analyzes eleven online slash stories, and while she fully acknowledges the bathroom humor that informs much of her material, she takes her examination of that humor seriously. This leads to such things as a scholarly assessment of what Rowley calls the omnipresent trope of "Putin's magic penis" (p. 118). Extensive coverage is given to works that Rowley admits are neither well writ-

ten nor widely read. These include “Mission F@ck Putin”—a piece Rowley notes is “full of grammatical errors”—that depicts former senator Hillary Clinton urinating into Putin’s mouth before sodomizing him with a dildo, and “Back-Door Politics,” which features carnivalesque acts of debauchery throughout the White House (pp. 102 and 105). At a state dinner for Putin, just to take one example, Trump’s son Eric urinates in another guest’s water glass, and Trump loses control of his bowels while dancing a tango with the Russian leader (p. 129).

Sex scenes can, without doubt, serve as vehicles for grassroots commentary on relations of power and control, and it is certainly interesting to encounter some of the ways that modern political disaffection has been expressed through porn. But even so, readers may at times question the intellectual merits of so much elaborate detail.

Throughout, Rowley argues that “Putin kitsch is a form of contemporary political discourse” (p. 21). She sees the production and consumption of the items she describes as part of a democratic, mass participatory, and nontraditional process, as well as one that represents a “loss of control on the part of political elites,” who likely would prefer to be represented in very different, far more respectful fashion (p. 52). This may all be true, although Rowley’s insistence that these small-scale acts of creation and commodification collectively function as a “positive force for change” is more open to debate (p. 30).

The further Rowley goes in her argument, the shakier her claims become. First of all, Rowley assumes that any item that pokes fun of Putin (or of his bromance buddy, Trump) is, in some way, a critique that signifies “deep and sustained engagement with the political realm” (p. 62). While she repeats the word “engagement” multiple times, she never clarifies exactly how this abstract condition concretely relates to the established order of things, although she asserts that she is tracking “something new” that is “changing the nature of

politics” (p. 63). The phenomenon of people “actively and creatively responding to the world of ‘fake news’” in the Putin/Trump era by making and selling kitsch online is the equivalent, she says, of “traditional behaviours like volunteering to canvass door to door for candidates [or] attending a political rally” in earlier decades (pp. 62, 63). The objects of material culture she catalogues are, she contends, shifting political discourse, and she footnotes, in support of this argument, a 2019 volume edited by Hinda Mandell entitled *Crafting Dissent: Handicraft as Protest from the American Revolution to the Pussyhats*.

Maybe some people agree. But all I know is that I have a funny Putin magnet on my fridge, and it serves neither as a “talisman” nor as a handcrafted signifier of dissent. I also have a postcard of Bill and Hillary Clinton, both with shaved heads, that reads “Budget Cut,” and a container of breath-freshening candies with a picture of George W. Bush on the top labeled “National Embarrassmints.” I personally deeply admire Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, and yet I treasure a doctored image of him with a tear running down his face, reading: “It’s my Party, and I’ll cry if I want to.”

History is littered with similar examples testifying to the fact that humor, even satire, does not necessarily correlate with opposition. Citizens can support a leader, yet still laugh at his or her foibles, or at aspects of his or her public persona. (Many supporters of Senator Bernie Sanders’s 2020 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, for example, found comedian Larry Davis’s imitations of their candidate on *Saturday Night Live* uproariously funny, even when Davis mocked such things as Sanders’s purported disdain for modern forms of technology or his alleged fondness for Fidel Castro.)

Furthermore, studies of humor during the era of Soviet leader Josef Stalin such as Jonathan Waterlow’s *It’s Only a Joke, Comrade!* (2018) suggest that humor often plays a complex role inside even dictatorships governed by strict censorship laws.

No one disputes that political jokes illustrate an awareness of imperfection, either in the figure of the leader or in his or her policies—or in the system that those policies have created, or in the character of various ordinary people that participate within it. But even the most cutting jokes often convey more of a sense of acceptance than of rebellion. They may make their listeners more aware of hypocrisy and human failings and, in so doing, create at least a fleeting sense of solidarity among those who laugh at such things together. However, they do not typically rally citizens for regime change.

Often, as the abundance of state-sanctioned late Soviet satire suggests, political humor can serve as a tool of pacification, an outlet that allows citizens to let off steam by critiquing something small in exchange for accepting something big. Mocking the widespread conformity that accompanied the equally widespread corruption of late 1970s Soviet society, Moldavian author Ion Drutse wrote, “we lived well, quietly drinking, quietly stealing.”[1] I am reminded of that quote when Rowley, in the space of a sentence, calls Putin kitsch both subversive and secure, noting that it “offers a kind of safe space for people to express their displeasure with the political status quo” (p. 61). Is “subversion” that is confined to “safe spaces” truly an indication of the active “engagement” that Rowley so valorizes, or, alternatively, does it reflect disengagement, a degree of ironic apathy, and a willingness to retreat from public into private life?

It is also possible to argue that sometimes the most seemingly subversive political humor can work to reinforce official propaganda by underscoring certain crucial aspects of a leader’s public persona, albeit in grotesque or garish ways. For example, Kremlin-funded media outlet RT routinely makes fun of what it characterizes as a US “Russo-phobia” so extreme that Americans are prone to automatically blame Russia for any signs of US social dysfunction. But the network’s vehement de-

nials of Russian involvement in US domestic affairs nevertheless reinforce a sense of Russian power, particularly by highlighting the extent of US fears. Similarly, a Russian-language television program, *Comedy Club*, often shows skits featuring conversations between mock Trump and Putin figures, in which Putin is portrayed as a devilish, mysterious archvillain. Yet like much of the Trump/Putin paraphernalia that Rowley describes, such malevolent depictions emphasize, in whatever crude or amusing way, the greater strength of the Russian leader and his ability to stoke fear and confusion in his US rival.

Rowley’s book also requires a deeper analysis of the role of the market in the world of Putin kitsch. People who want to sell things, online or otherwise, can be absolutely indifferent to politics, yet see an opportunity to make money by tapping into various forms of countercultural discourse—offering a palette of options to appeal to different constituencies, rather than shaping a “line” of products that all reflect a seller’s own views. Conversely, it is important to know if people are creating objects and posting them online without the expectation of profit (or, in the case of porn, possibly without even the expectation that their stories will be read by anyone other than a small “inside circle”). We do not know much about who these sellers are, what they are trying to achieve, and how they approach internet commerce. Rowley says she limited her investigation into these entrepreneurs, in part to protect their privacy. But leaving both sellers and consumers largely out of the story means that Rowley is left with little way to develop many of her claims.

To whom are these English-language products directed? Is there a profusion of Putin kitsch in other languages? Are there Putin dolls for sale, say, on the German-language Amazon, or self-published German-language fan fiction focused on the imaginary sexual encounters of the Russian leader with long-suffering chancellor Angela Merkel? What about Russian-language kitsch? What does it signi-

fy if far more Americans have Putin magnets on their refrigerators than do Russians (besides, perhaps, the lower popularity of refrigerator magnets generally)? And how do these objects of material culture compare to other types of political humor found online but not for sale, in the form of, say, tweets or Youtube videos?

At the end of the day, this book offers a fun, quick read, in which one senses that Rowley is definitely on to something. But what that something is may be different from what the author argues. In particular, this book seems to be, really, as much if not more about Trump than Putin. Early on, Rowley calls her kitsch “a kind of direct attack on the perceived political status quo in America,” and it may, indeed, testify to the different approaches people are taking to living under a leader who is changing global perceptions of US power (p. 34). Rowley should develop that point. Then again, maybe even such a claim, however heartfelt, is overstated, as the Clinton, Bush, and Barack Obama presidencies have all, in turn, served up masses of fodder for the comedic world. What, exactly, is special about the satire of this time or about the contemporary intersection of top-down propaganda with unscripted grassroots humor and internet-based microeconomic actions still remains to be explored.

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Note

[1]. Ion Drutse, “Ideological Problems of Perestroika: Roundtable Meeting,” *Kommunist* 7 (May 1988): 11

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