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Marko Dumančić. ***Men Out of Focus: The Soviet Masculinity Crisis in the Long Sixties.*** Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 344 pp. $75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4875-0525-7.

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"Are Soviet men facing a crisis?" asks Marco Dumančić at the very beginning of his book, rhetorically replaying the concern that was first expressed in 1968 by the demographer Boris Urlanis in a newspaper article that spurred a heated public debate regarding gender roles and destinies. Concern with the state of men that surfaced in the mid-1960s was not a Soviet issue per se, but one instance of a bigger phenomenon. A couple of decades after WWII, an anthropological shift became visible if not worldwide, then in the "developed" world, where "real men" were more and more difficult to come by. That existential lack was registered both in cultural production and social sciences, and from those debates and searches the concept of "multiple masculinities" eventually emerged in Western sociology and gender studies.[1] Dumančić, though, proceeds from an idea that Soviet masculinity could not exist without Stalin, who created that role, language, and discourse, so an appearance of a (intellectually or in terms of character or in some other ways) "strong" man in a post-Stalin film makes him think of "Stalinist connections" as the explanatory framework, and sometimes it seems that the author is picking up evidence to sustain a preconceived notion. I will return to this point further down.

The book, Dumančić explains in the introduction and chapter 1, focuses on the Soviet cinematic version of men's malaise to argue that the idea that Soviet men had entered a crisis mode began in the early 1950s (just to remind: Stalin died in early 1953) and was hidden in plain sight on the nation's movie screens. At the same time, he puts Soviet movies from "the long sixties" (between 1953 to 1968, a year when Warsaw Pact armies entered Czechoslovakia to curtail the Prague Spring, which was perceived as the end of an era) into a larger cultural context of the New Wave that flourished in Italy, Britain, France, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere. Dumančić treats Soviet "Thaw cinema" as a part of a global New Wave movement: influenced by Italian neorealism, it encompassed not only new substantive agenda, but new esthetics as well. He argues that the ethos of the 1960s required less censorship and more autonomy for filmmakers, many of whom belonged to the WWII generation, and the experience at the front had reshaped their worldviews. Both filmmakers and audiences expected a different level of sincerity and a different way of representing reality.

Dumančić selects films with "explicit gender politics" that questioned the accepted social norms

and revealed anxiety about men's standing or, to rephrase, about changing gender structure and normativity. Recent scholarship has recognized that the Cold War was largely a contest between the "first" and the "second" worlds over deeply gendered values and ways of life,[2] and at some point Nikita Khrushchev declared that the Soviet goal was "to catch up and overcome America." Thus, Dumančić argues, in the post-Stalinist period Soviet leadership "began pushing for a modernity defined by mass consumerism, (sub)urbanization, technological revolution, and the democratization of the public space" (p. 9). The Soviet masculinity crisis was rooted in those changes, as they caused a shift to interpersonal relations and altered expectations of normative masculinity, and filmmakers were contemplating new notions of "what it meant to be a man" in a scientifically complex, predominantly urban, mass-consumerist society. Dumančić sees post-Stalinist modernization as one case of a broader European experience, with not only everyday practices being similar, but the issues addressed by film directors as well. In this context, it might make sense to mention one important difference: a provider's role was not as central to Soviet manhood as was the case in the West, as Soviet women had been integrated into labor force much earlier and in greater numbers, and that resulted in different gender dynamics in the first place.

Examining Soviet debates on masculinity via films and sometimes caricatures, Dumančić builds his case analyzing eighty-three of the most popular movies of the period that both demonstrated filmmakers' own anxiety and evoked strong responses from the audience. Taking into account an enormous number of yearly cinema visits at the time (counted in millions) and the fact that the Soviet audience was exposed to, besides national cinematic production, imports from Europe, Hollywood, and the developing world, those movie-generated debates can be seen as a forum for examining the "masculine condition." Dumančić explores moviegoers' reaction by tracking ticket sales and letter-writing campaigns, as well as opinion polls in the ***Soviet Screen*** (***Sovetskii ekran,*** 1925-98***)***, a popular Soviet illustrated magazine devoted to the cinematic arts. The book also draws from extensive scholarship that details the foundational alteration of Soviet life after 1953, when modern consumer society, a middle class, and youth countercultures were emerging.

Dumančić distills four themes that stand out in public discourse on changing men's roles. Thus, chapter 2 ("Being a Dad is Not for Sissies") uncovers the transformations that fatherhood underwent throughout the period. Films ushered in a discussion of social problems that had been impossible to even name within the old, "hardcore" moral ethos. Starting in the early 1950s, movie plots touched on such sensitive topics as single mothers, abortion, and runaway fathers and eventually arrived at the moral "normalization" of out-of-wedlock pregnancy. At the same time, protagonists were becoming psychologically complex: their romantic fulfillment, as Dumančić notes wryly, could not be "replaced with meeting production quotas" (p. 72). The runaway husband and father, who in earlier periods would choose abandoning his immediate family to "save the world" and deal with the matters of state/regional importance, was now focused on taking care of his own children; in this new world, fatherhood served as a "civilizing" institution, and marital life was a stabilizing social force. The ultimate takeaway from that discourse was a recognition that paternity could be a choice, because men can have a "caring function," too; a man without a family was incomplete, and fatherhood/parental duties were a part of men's identity.

Chapter 3, "Fathers versus Sons, or the Great Soviet Family in Trouble," deals with the "destalinization" of Soviet society, as a new generation that was coming into public life often questioned (or mocked) outdated practices, views, and beliefs of older, ironclad bureaucrats. The chapter's focus is, among some others, on the signature film of the 1960s: Marlen Khutsiev's ***Lenin's Guard (Zastava***

Il'icha, 1964*).* It is a complex oeuvre, at the center of which are three men in their early twenties trying to make sense of their lives and searching for larger meaning; the film, Dumančić believes, testifies to the emergence of Hamletism*:* “the Soviet scene is possessed *by* a virtual Hamlet fever” of self-conscious reflection on life’s meaning (p. 138).

Chapter 4, titled “The Trouble with Women,” has in its focus the “battle of the sexes” that was arising in the context of postwar consumer culture (both in the socialist and capitalist worlds). As urban life was creating new traps for city folks, many of them first-generations urbanites, Soviet society especially was encountering the dangers of consumerism for the first time in its history. 1960s consumerism was often gendered female, and modern women were seen as consumerist and a threat: full of desire for status symbols, they often dominated their male partners, who could feel alienated and helpless.

Another (if unexpected) threat to masculinity could lie in scientific pursuits, Dumančić argues in chapter 5 (“Our Friend the Atom? Science as a Threat to Masculinity”), which encompasses several films that problematize the positivist view of science and even the very notion of progress. Their protagonists, mostly scientists and engineers, were poised at contemplating (though not necessarily resolving) some key issues of developed industrial societies: science (e.g., nuclear energy) as a dangerous force and, especially, contradictions between scientific and ethical standards, between two ways of approaching the world, a scientific and an emotional one.

Making keen observations and insights throughout the book, Dumančić at the same time is so immersed in his “Stalinist framework” that sometimes it affects his take on the material. The following example shows the nature of these misinterpretations: in the sci-fi comedy ***Man from Nowhere (Chelovek niotkuda,*** 1961***),*** a Soviet scientist talking to a rediscovered “savage” mentions labor, and in his commentary Dumančić invokes the infamous phrase “hard labour” (p. 251). The reference, however, is not to the Gulag, but to the Marxist view of the role of labor (which spurs mind development) in creating humans as a “species being.” A starting point of Marxist theory and popularized in Friedrich Engels’s book ***The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man*** (1876), the idea was encapsulated in a popular, and often used ironically, Soviet idiom, “labor turned an ape into a man,” which was invoked in a conversation with a “prehistoric savage” on his way to becoming a ***homo sapiens***.

It is in chapter 6 (“De-Heroization and the Pan-European Masculinity Crisis*”*) that misreadings seem really problematic. Focusing on Soviet films about WWII and its aftermath (compared with Polish, British, or Italian ones with similar topics), it seeks to demonstrate that reformist filmmakers not only rejected idealization and kitsch typical of Stalin’s era, but also, it seems, sought to “deconstruct” Soviet pride in its victory over fascism (such trends emerged only in the 1990s). One of the signature movies of that period was ***The Fate of a Man*** (***Sud'ba cheloveka***, 1959) based on a story of resilience and overcoming by Nobel laureate Mikhail Sholokhov. The protagonist is a working man turned WWII soldier who goes through hell as a POW. He remains true to himself in a concentration camp, killing a traitor who is going to turn in a young Soviet officer and trying to rescue a fellow prisoner who is mentally and physically exhausted; he then tries to escape and meets unbelievable ordeals. As the war ends, he returns home to the Russian heartland to discover that his house and family have been bombed. Dumančić reads concentration camp episodes as the breaking of monumental masculinity, which, he argues, “destabilizes” the mythical Russian hero of the past: a medieval ***bogatyr*** (knight). While it is impossible to understand how this can be the case (does the main character of Richard Aldington's WWI classic ***Death of a Hero*** [1929] deconstruct mighty Beowulf—or do they just belong to different genres, one being a realistic character and the

other an epic one?), this reading twists the movie's message.

To explain, let me allude to the paradigmatic story of a warrior coming home: that of Odysseus. Is Odysseus "weak," is his "monumental masculinity" broken? After all, he was subjugated, for some time, by Circe the goddess; his comrades perished, and so on. If one takes these episodes separately, it might seem so; within a bigger narrative, however, he is a winner who overcomes all calamities, outwits his enemies and, upon return, chases out his wife's suitors and restores his home from potential ruin. In *The Fate of a Man*, the protagonist, who behaved nobly throughout his ordeals, comes back as a soldier of the *victorious* army that defeated fascism; amidst the postwar devastation, he adopts a homeless orphan, saying: "I am your dad, I found you!" The film ends with the man rising to life and overcoming the tragedy and trauma of WWII with the power of his spirit. At the time of the film's release, the protagonist was read as a symbol of scarred, but powerful and humanistic (Soviet) masculinity. The audience of the period viewed the movie as one about the tragedy of WWII, but at the same time about Soviet victory and overcoming, not just about defeat and deconstruction; the protagonist went to war to defend his homeland, not Stalin.

Questions about the author's interpretations pile up with the analysis of *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (S*emnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*, 1974), a spy movie series and a late Soviet classic. The protagonist, Stierlitz (not Shtirlits, as Dumančić transliterates the name) is a Soviet intelligence officer inside SS intelligence who, according to the plot, in the winter and spring of 1945 tries to prevent some separatist negotiations between Nazi commanders and Americans. He communicates with Moscow headquarters with the help of a female radio operator (whom he later rescues). For some unimaginable reason, Dumančić believes that Stierlitz communicates with Stalin himself (!), becomes his obedient "favourite son" (!!), and thus symbolizes conformity. He does not let emotions govern his life, as personal life is secondary to him (he never indulges in sexual escapades, the author mentions), and thus the whole thing "re-establishes Stalin as the ultimate example of Soviet masculinity" (p. 261).

While it seems absurd to suggest that (imaginary) Stalin was on the other end of radio transmissions (do le Carré characters discuss their moves with Queen Elizabeth?), the analysis disregards the film's genre. *Seventeen Moments* is a spy movie, and according to that genre's logic, men leave "women and children" to act in some homosocial environment, putting aside their "personal life" to protect those very "women and children": throughout the film, Stierlitz longs for his abandoned home and his wife. It is also worth mentioning that Stierlitz (a subject of a huge number of jokes, as Dumančić mentions correctly) was not viewed as an "obedient son" at all. In the film, he outwits the SS intelligence machine with the power of his intellect and character, and one popular interpretation of the movie, among others, was that he was an allegory of the Soviet intelligentsia "outwitting" the communist establishment.

It is also hardly possible to say, as Dumančić does, that "superfluous" men disappeared from Soviet screens in the 1970s (p. 263): the period is famous for bringing to life a number of paradigmatically undecisive and "lost" male characters (usually urban intellectual types) in *Flights in Dreams and in Reality* (*Polety vo sne i naiavu,* 1982), *The Autumn Marathon* (*Osenniii marafon*, 1979); several films by Andrei Tarkovsky, and others. I also find it is difficult to agree that the causes of low male life expectancy these days (which dropped abysmally in the 1990s) "remain the same as they were in 1968" (p. 265). This can be true in terms of "immediate" physical causes, not social ones, but discussing this would take us into some faraway lands, while factual aberrations and misreadings in this book that otherwise has a lot to offer make me think of another great male

character, Sherlock Holmes. He used to say, “It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.” I cannot say it any better.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Tim Carrigan, R. W. Connel, and John Lee, “Toward a new sociology of masculinity,” ***Theory and Society*** 14, no. 5 (September 1985): 551–604.

[2]. Alexis Peri, “New ***Soviet Woman***: The Post-World War II Feminine Ideal at Home and Abroad,” ***Russian Review*** 77, no. 4 (2018): 621-44.

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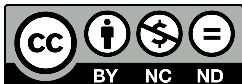

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