

# Stripping the Nation Bare

RUSSIAN PORNOGRAPHY AND THE  
INSISTENCE ON MEANING



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## Khrushchev Does Stalin

A Soviet primal scene for post-Soviet times:  
Stalin moaned.

Khrushchev carefully unbuttoned his pants, pulled down his semi-transparent black shorts, freeing the leader's swarthy, straining phallus. Spitting on his fingers, the count [Khrushchev] began to tug tenderly at Stalin's nipple and moved his lips down the leader's body—to his blood-engorged phallus.

[...]

"Give me your ass, my sweet boy," Khrushchev commanded him softly, gripping Stalin firmly by the balls.

[...]

Khrushchev unbuttoned his own pants and took out his long, uneven penis with its bumpy head, its shiny skin tattooed with a pentacle. The count spat in his palm, lubricated Stalin's anus with his saliva, and, falling upon him from behind, started to thrust his penis softly into the leader.

[...]

The count's member went all the way into Stalin's anus. Squeezing the leader's balls with his left hand, the count took hold of his penis with his right hand and started to masturbate him slowly.

"You . . . what are . . . you . . ." Stalin lowed. "What's the nice man doing to the boy?"

"The nice man is fucking the boy in the ass," Khrushchev whispered hotly.

Vladimir Sorokin, *Goluboe salo*<sup>1</sup>

Although it is impossible to know just how many readers have found themselves sexually aroused by Vladimir Sorokin's description of oral and anal intercourse between Soviet leaders, his novel *Blue Lard (Goluboe salo)*<sup>2</sup> has managed to elicit the other response so often provoked by so-called pornography:<sup>3</sup> outrage and prosecution. In July 2002 a nationalist, pro-Putin youth group called "Moving Together" filed a criminal complaint with the Moscow prosecutor against both the author and his publisher and also organized a public demonstration that culminated in flushing copies of the novel down a mock toilet. At press time the case was still unresolved, leaving open the politically unlikely, but legally plausible, prospect of the author's two-year imprisonment on pornography charges.<sup>4</sup>

Even a cursory examination of the facts reveals complications and contradictions, suggesting that the case is more a question of politics than morals. *Blue Lard* had been published to some fanfare in 1999, almost three years before Moving Together took action: why wait so long for a spontaneous manifestation of moral outrage? Although there are laws against pornography on the books and repeated calls for a clamp-down, the Russian porn consumer can find products catering to the standard varieties of hetero- and homoerotic taste on paper and video, expending minimal effort if not minimal cash.<sup>5</sup> Why target Sorokin, an avant-garde author with "high art" pretensions, rather than magazines and newspapers such as *Miss X*, *Andrei* (a "men's magazine"),<sup>6</sup> or *Strip*? If pornography has such a negative impact on the morality of an entire nation's youth, why pin the blame on such a difficult novel? The impatient thrill-seeker has to wade through over 250 pages peppered with obscure Chinese borrowings and futuristic cyber-slang before getting to the famous Kremlin buggery scene; one suspects that, if Stalin's anus were as impenetrable as Sorokin's prose, the author probably would not be facing criminal charges. Moreover, Sorokin seems to revel in putting explicit sex scenes in contexts that would ordinarily defy eroticism, beginning with the novel's name. Even in a country where pork fat is considered a perfectly acceptable sandwich ingredient, *Blue Lard* hardly seems like a title designed to arouse passions and stir the blood.<sup>7</sup>

If *Blue Lard* is unabashedly explicit, the Sorokin Affair itself is suggestive and evocative: its meaning must be teased out. The campaign against Sorokin can only be understood in the context of the flowering of pornographic expression that marked the first post-Soviet decade and in light of the culture's nervous attempts to assimilate or reject it (or even, paradoxically, to do both at the same time). Politically, the Sorokin Affair looks like a step backward for a country that has only recently emerged from a self-proclaimed dictatorship; from a Western point of view charging a novelist with pornography seems almost quaint. In a multimedia age, who cares what novelists are doing? But it is this very quaintness that immediately suggests one lesson to be drawn from the outcry over *Blue Lard*: in Russia pornography is still a category of meaning and content, rather than simply form

and function. If the West has to be reminded by scholars that pornography grew out of satire during the European Enlightenment, Russia needs no such encouragement to make the connection between pornography and ideas. In Russia pornography *is* an idea.<sup>8</sup>

### Pornography as Knowledge

In contemporary Russia pornography enjoys a peculiar status in that it is doubly ubiquitous: not only has the first post-Soviet decade been marked by a proliferation of pornographic texts and images on newsstands, televisions, and even shopping bags throughout the Russian Federation, but pornography seems all the more pervasive in that it is featured prominently in the standard litany of woes afflicting postcommunist society. Pornography in Russia cannot be accepted as a simple, straightforward phenomenon of supply and demand, or stimulus and response. Its widespread dissemination after years of prohibition automatically means that it will call attention to itself, becoming a topic of political and cultural debates. Yet the significance of Russian pornography should not be attributed to novelty alone; after ten years pornography has already become normalized, to the extent that it simultaneously occupies a discrete, commodified niche (stroke literature aimed primarily at heterosexual men), and has expanded to encompass nearly all aspects of cultural life (the pervasiveness of graphic sexual content in film, television, and popular fiction after years of puritanism suggests a culture that is being “pornographized” nearly to saturation). Both the proponents and opponents of pornography in Russia agree on one thing: pornography has meaning. This essay focuses on the way in which this meaning is constructed, by its critics as well as its practitioners.

Russian culture has traditionally privileged a conspiratorial epistemology (hoarding and restricting information) that leads to a dogged insistence on hidden meaning, symbolism, and interpretation; it is perhaps no accident that the discipline of semiotics was developed in a culture that is so self-consciously semioticized. Russian pornography partakes of this same model of knowledge, creating a system of signs that points to more than just sexual desire. To some extent Russian pornography shows a stronger connection to the classical porn of the Enlightenment era, in that it is overtly political and often can be linked to the satirical tradition. I argue, however, that Russian pornography’s explicit engagement with ideology, which in part stems from the nation’s own repressed pornographic tradition, is the result of particular post-Soviet anxieties. Pornography distills the ideological features that characterize contemporary Russian sexual discourse as a whole: oscillating between the extremes of utopian libertinism and crypto-fascist nationalism, Russian pornography allegorizes the culture’s obsession with embattled masculinity, wounded national pride, and the country’s perennially fraught relations with the West. It replicates and recapitulates the evolution of popular political attitudes from the heady days of the Soviet collapse to the disenchantment ten years after: early post-Soviet pornography explicitly aligned itself with liberal-democratic aspirations and a project of post-totalitarian liberation, but, more recently, porno-

graphic/erotic publications have retrenched behind a reflexive nationalist discourse, often verging on crypto-fascism. And yet it is members of the “Right” and “Center Right” in Russia who also typically seek to repress pornography, and the few instances of selective prosecution have consistently targeted “liberal” authors and publications hostile to a nationalist ideology (hence, the Sorokin Affair). One cannot help but wonder: why should pornography be a battleground for Russia’s soul?

Although pornography in Russia undeniably has a history reaching back hundreds of years, the Soviet era amounted to enough of a great break in porn tradition that the category of pornography has been largely reinvented in the perestroika and post-perestroika eras. This reinvention has hardly been from scratch, and, on the surface, Western models (from glossy magazines to grainy films) are clearly the most immediate source of inspiration,<sup>9</sup> and thus the Russian reader and viewer of pornography can be struck by a simultaneous shock of the new (explicit sexual representation had recently been almost unheard of) as well as a lingering sense of the second-hand (the first examples of post-Soviet pornography tended to look foreign/Western, even when they were not imported). Scholars in the West have long recognized that porn can provide unique insights about the specters that haunt a given culture. Laura Kipnis writes that “[a] culture’s pornography becomes . . . a very precise map of that culture’s borders,” establishing “a detailed blueprint of the culture’s anxieties, investments, contradictions.”<sup>10</sup> Or, as Feona Attwood argues, pornography “functions as a ‘melodrama’ or ‘allegory’ for a given culture.”<sup>11</sup> If pornography is routinely seen as a challenge to established norms even in times of stability, how much more threatening does it become to a country in a state of political, cultural, and economic upheaval? What is true for the West is even truer for Russia, where these anxieties are never far from the surface of the pornographic text: Russian pornography, whether its definition is limited to low-cultural men’s magazines and films or stretched to include sexually explicit high art, is surprisingly self-conscious in its preoccupation with Russia’s status as a nation and a culture. Indeed, I would argue that national concerns are part and parcel of Russian pornography *by definition*: the pleasure (and the danger) of Russian porn derives from the fact that eroticism and nationalism are offered up for consumption in a single package.

In part this results from the unusually compressed time frame of post-Soviet porn’s development. Brian McNair has argued that the past two decades in the West have seen a “pornographication of the mainstream,” in which imagery and themes that would once have been exclusively pornographic have trickled up into everyday culture,<sup>12</sup> but in Russia this process has been simultaneous with the (re)appearance of pornography as a distinct category. There is no time lag between the arrival of porn and the pornographication of the culture at large, rendering pornography a privileged locus for anxieties about cultural change. Pornography as a genre is distinguished from the rest of the mainstream not by its dogged focus on all things genital but by its unwavering focus on the sexually explicit as both an integral part of the nation’s culture and as an allegory for it. It is this conflation of the sexual with the national that provides the true logic behind the selective campaigns against so-called pornography in the works of certain high-cultural figures:

where the antiporn crusaders at first look obtuse, they prove actually to be highly perceptive. Even if books such as *Blue Lard* have an entirely different readership from Russian *Playboy* clones, they are all constituent parts of the unique discourse that falls under the rubric of post-Soviet Russian "pornography": the depiction of sexualized bodies to explore a national idea.<sup>13</sup>

### Russian Pornography before Perestroika

Only recently has pornography become an even vaguely legitimate object of study for Russianists, who have largely replicated the culture's own reticence on the subject. But something paradoxical happens to Russian pornography when it falls into academics' far-from-sweaty hands: the more it is studied, the more it recedes from view. While there is no doubt that sexual and scatological material has existed in Russia for centuries, recent studies have tended either to interpret pornography so broadly that the term threatens to lose all meaning or to frame it so narrowly as to virtually define it out of existence. Marcus Levitt and Andrei Toporkov's 1999 collection *Eros and Pornography in Russian Culture*, which contained the fruits of the first international conference on the subject, finds pornography in medieval folk woodcuts, nineteenth-century incantations, eighteenth-century bawdy songs, turn-of-the-century philosophy, and recent avant-garde fiction. In its admirable impulse toward eclecticism, the collection sees any text that deals with sexuality or uses foul language as fair game.<sup>14</sup> The very first contemporary scholarly study of pornography in Russia, a 1977 doctoral dissertation by William Hopkins, implicitly identifies one of the problems with discussing Russian pornography: so little of it appears to be designed for erotic appeal.<sup>15</sup> Rather, the early modern texts he discusses fall into the purview of pornography because of their use of forbidden language: it is as much the words as the actions described that are obscene. Thus, Hopkins eschews the term *pornography*, instead referring to the "genital semantic function," a phrase that accurately reflects the defining characteristics of the genre but which has problems of its own.<sup>16</sup> *Genital semantic function* takes the anerotic character of early modern Russian pornography to its extreme: resting awkwardly between philology and urology, the phrase seems designed to immunize the reader against any possible arousal. The pornographic texts in question are authored largely by reputable men of letters (Pushkin included), surrounding them with a literary aura that makes any attack on them seem tantamount to philistinism. Czarist-era censorship saw the struggle against pornography in moral and religious terms, conflating sexually explicit writings with blasphemy and godlessness.<sup>17</sup> As in much of Europe, pornography was a subset of obscenity.

In the West pornography as a category diverges from obscenity per se when it abandons literary and artistic pretensions and when blasphemy is no longer a relevant issue. In the United States pornography benefits from First Amendment protections and arguments based on artistic freedom, but it has been a long time since the public failed to distinguish between "highbrow" fiction with strong sexual content and mass-market stroke literature. In the visual arts it is another matter,

but that is in part because prose is no longer the primary battleground for the souls of impressionable youth. In Russia a separate, "pornographic" sphere was only beginning to grow in the first decades before the Russian Revolution,<sup>18</sup> but the Soviet regime quickly drove pornography underground. Thus, in Soviet times pornography was at best a theoretical concept (the sort of thing found only in the decadent West) or, in a throwback to the previous century, a charge leveled at writers who broke with accepted standards of decorum (in terms of both content and lexicon). Either there was no pornography at all, or the lack of an approved place for pornography meant that any text with strong sexual content could be seen as pornographic.

With the onset of perestroika in the late 1980s and the concomitant wholesale lifting of taboos, sexual and lexical license became an integral, if unintended, part of glasnost. The term *pornography* was usually applied to a set of related, but discrete, phenomena: images of naked women (and occasionally men); soft-core, and later hardcore, films on videotape and broadcast television; sex scenes of varying degrees of explicitness in novels, stories, and newspapers; and the use of previously unprintable "obscene" language, or *mat* (forbidden words describing the human anatomy, sexual activity, and the rest of the physiological functions that Bakhtin so eloquently ascribes to the "lower bodily stratum"). Although conservative critics of the late 1980s and early 1990s often failed to distinguish between "literary" or "artistic" erotic representation and mass-market pornography, the phenomena that the word *pornography* was used to describe rather quickly sorted themselves out across the cultural spectrum. It was writers such as Sorokin and Viktor Erofeyev who first broke the taboos by using foul language and describing explicit sex in stories published in the highbrow journals, and a general softening of the linguistic etiquette eventually followed.<sup>19</sup> But fiction that has little or no artistic pretensions (in particular, the incredibly popular mystery and police novels), fiction that is oriented toward the mass reader, tends to avoid the extremes of Russian foul language—as does Russian mass-market pornography itself: when the contents of *Miss X* or *Andrei* are compared to those of their Western counterparts, the tameness of the language is striking.<sup>20</sup> Andrei Zorin notes that the avant-garde writers who broke linguistic taboos were motivated by an urge to be provocative and links this type of language with a kind of aggression.<sup>21</sup> Zorin's conclusion can be broadened: in Russian the most extremely obscene words (the equivalents of *fuck*, *cock*, and *cunt*, and all their endless Russian derivatives) belong to the performative category of sexualized aggression rather than sexuality per se. Moreover, the sheer ingenuity of Russian *mat*, which exploits every opportunity availed by the flexibility of a highly inflected language (several Russian jokes suggest that *mat* comes close to being a full-fledged part of speech), makes it appealing to avant-garde and postmodern writers interested in playing with linguistic potential. But, outside of the rarified heights of elite prose and the lower depths of street speech and locker rooms, obscene language can seem out of place. Even pornography designed to appeal to Russian men (who are presumed to be the most comfortable with *mat*) avoids these words entirely, since they apparently fall outside the category of the erotic altogether. No one fucks in Russian porn; they have sex, they

"make love" (*zanimat'sia liubov'iu*, a hideous *calque* that puts sex on an equal syntactical footing with homework and business), or, when, desire completely overwhelms all lexical restraint, they screw (*trakhat'sia*).<sup>22</sup>

Both the postmodernists' overindulgence in obscene vocabulary and the pornographers' prim celebrations of sex are understandable and predictable consequences of the sudden relaxation of social controls in the last years of the 1980s. It was only fifteen years ago that a participant in a much-ballyhooed joint Soviet-American media event issued the famous (and famously misinterpreted) pronouncement that in the USSR "we have no sex."<sup>23</sup> The phrase became a veritable call to arms in the subsequent "sexual revolution" of the perestroika and Yeltsin eras, as if the entire culture industry were engaged in a nonstop, Stakhanovite effort to prove it wrong. Indeed, one of the unintended consequences of Gorbachev's policy of glasnost was that "openness" came to mean paying dogged attention to precisely those aspects of Soviet life that had previously been suppressed, and in the realm of culture that quickly came to mean sex and violence. There was no shortage of critics assailing the sexualization of Russian culture, but many of them were identified with the struggle against change in general, and in any case they were overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of erotic production.<sup>24</sup> After little more than a decade it is easy to forget how political and polemical this seemingly random sexual frankness was: to an even greater extent than during the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s in the West, sexual openness was an explicit sign of personal and political freedom. The only thing more naked than the women plastered on so many publications and advertisements was the ideology behind it: a naive, largely masculine "liberation sexology" that identified sexual expression with democracy.

### Pornopolitics: Sexing the Nation

In the post-Soviet years the proliferation of the naked female form in advertisements can certainly be seen as the function of the market; after all, nothing sells like sex. But, at least in the early years of new sexual freedoms, the market is not a sufficiently strong mechanism to explain the power of the nude. When small, short-lived publications such as *Baltia*, a Russian-language tabloid from the late 1980s championing the cause of independence for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, put a photo of a spread-eagled naked woman on its back cover (rather than on the front), the editors were making a clear connection between the "freedom" of sexual exposure and freedom from foreign domination. In the post-Soviet years similar images of supine female nudes could function as part of a discourse of national humiliation rather than pride, but *Baltia*'s pin-up is doubly provocative, a declaration of independence on the part of the men who displayed her.<sup>25</sup> Not surprisingly, in most of the examples we will look at in this essay, the naked female form is a weapon of power in male hands; only the weapon's target will change over time.

The ties between sexual freedoms and political liberalization proved to be a marriage of convenience and a rather short-lived one at that. By the time the first issue of the Russian edition of *Playboy* appeared in 1995, its rhetoric of sexual

revolution seemed decidedly dated. The editors wanted to have it both ways: to show that *Playboy* was more than a Johnny-come-lately, that it had always had a connection to Russia, but also to argue that *Playboy*'s Russian edition would further the cause of sexual liberation through its very existence. *Playboy*, we are told, was always a presence in the Soviet Union, at least in the lives of the Party elite: in an interview entitled "PLAYBOY in My Luggage" the personal translator to four Soviet leaders admits that he always brought copies of the magazine back with him from his foreign travels.<sup>26</sup> Artem Troitskii, the editor of the Russian edition, discusses the connection between Russia and *Playboy* as it unfolded over the decades, paying special attention to the representation of Russia on the magazine's pages. Troitskii begins his article by noting that Hugh Hefner began *Playboy* in 1953, the same year that Stalin died; elsewhere in the same issue Vasilii Aksenov states the connection more boldly: "The new age of the Twentieth Century proclaimed: 'The tyrant is dead, long live PLAYBOY!'"<sup>27</sup> Obliquely, *Playboy* takes credit for the relaxation of Russian mores, constantly insisting that the *Playboy* ethic of sexual freedom is the natural ally in the struggle against totalitarianism. Even as *Playboy* offers its reader the best that Western sex has to offer (including nude pictures of Ursula Andress, Bo Derek, Cindy Crawford, and Kim Basinger), it asserts its Russian pedigree. The parade of nude Western actresses is finally interrupted by a picture of Natalia Negoda, whom the magazine calls the "symbol of the Soviet 'sexual revolution'" because Negoda posed for the American *Playboy* back in 1989.<sup>28</sup>

In reality Russian pornography had already been staking its particular claims to sexual revolution, trying to strike a delicate balance between the needs for free expression and the demands of "good taste." Even liberal publications such as *Ogonek*, which, before the late 1990s, could normally be counted on to support any attempts at free expression, devoted a cover story in September 1995 to the dismal state of post-Soviet erotica, which had descended into vulgarity and violence.<sup>29</sup> When the first "Russian men's magazine," *Andrei*, appeared in 1991, the opening editorial argued for a "renaissance" of the long-suppressed Russian erotic tradition, which was so closely intertwined with "literature and art" and "high ideals": "*Andrei* . . . will fight against the psychology of 'slavish' sexuality—harsh, rude, hypocritical, blind." In other words, *Andrei* was arguing for an eroticism based on liberation, beauty, and morality, of which the intelligentsia could be proud: "The sexual revolution in our country is at a decisive stage. And *Andrei*'s mission is to stand against this 'revolutionary' vulgarity, which has started to appear on the newsstands as calendars, key chains, and postcards. If this elemental trend is not directed toward professionalism, toward beauty, under our conditions it can in the years to come become a monster the likes of which is undreamt of in the West."<sup>30</sup> By the time the eighth issue appeared, in 1997, the magazine's publisher, Aleksei Veitsler, had taken a more pessimistic view of the sexual revolution: "Our magazine began as a political action. It was the sexual revolution. The whole intelligentsia was with us—Aksenov, Nagibin, Voinovich. The best journalists and artists. But the sexual revolution ended; it was short and stormy, like the beauty of Russian women. Then came the fall. Then came the winter, with its orthodox tendencies.

medieval hysteria. Some sort of fundamentalism. Not only here, but throughout the world. And now there's another struggle ahead."<sup>31</sup> The change in the ideological climate becomes clear when he is asked to describe his potential allies in this struggle: "All honest people. The miners, the army, the militia, and Cuba are with us. All the people who think progressively, but not those screw-ups who could create communism like they were supposed to, and who are now ruining capitalism."<sup>32</sup>

Clearly, something has changed in the politics and ideology of post-Soviet porn. Even *Andrei*, the most liberal of the men's magazines, has adopted a rhetoric of Russian boosterism that, while always present from the beginning, is now impossible to ignore. Certainly, the overall disenchantment with the West in general and the United States in particular that followed the early days of post-Soviet Russia explains a great deal. But pornography in general and men's magazines specifically proved to be a particularly sensitive barometer for the country's flagging enthusiasm for liberalism and growing infatuation with the discourse of nationalism, primarily because the question of national pride and humiliation in contemporary Russia is so thoroughly gendered. Without a doubt even a cursory glance at Russian porn confirms the almost ritualistic objectification and subordination of women, but, when the men who produce these words and images reflect on their work, it is the Russian male whom they present as weak and embattled. In the textual and visual two-dimensional world of the Russian pornographic magazine, Russian men see themselves as fighting back against national and sexual humiliation.

Magazines such as *Makhaon* and especially *Andrei* represent themselves as the veritable "rear-guard" of Russian manhood. From its very inception *Andrei* has staked out a specific territory on the map of Russian manhood. In its first issue in 1991 the editors write: "The first Russian journal for men . . . is essential today, for it is precisely men who need liberation from stressful aggression and lack of satisfaction more than anything. Their psychological freedom is a prerequisite for the emancipation of society from the crushing complexes of a distorted era."<sup>33</sup> *Andrei* has suffered more than its share of difficulties in the past decade and even ceased publication temporarily after most of its staff deserted for the now-defunct Russian edition of *Penthouse*; by the summer of 1997 it was only on its seventh issue, but its determination to fight for Russia's embattled masculinity has not wavered since its initial manifesto. Each issue contains articles detailing new aspects of the threat to Russian masculinity, printed under the rubric "The Rights of Men." Although the authors vary from issue to issue, the structure remains more or less constant: first, the writer decries the excesses of the "culture wars" in the West, then he exposes similar problems he sees in Russia. In 1995, in the sixth issue of *Andrei*, Viktor Erofeev wrote an essay for this section, under the name "The Flight of the Cloud in Trousers." The essay would be central to Erofeev's 1997 slim volume of essays called *Men*, supplying most of the material for the book's rather polemical blurb.<sup>34</sup> When printed in *Andrei*, Erofeev's article is preceded by a garish illustration of a monstrous female head with a woman's symbol hanging from her ear and a long, serpentine tongue sticking out of her mouth; the tongue is curled around the small, rigid figure of a faceless man, the helpless victim about to be

swallowed up by this ravenous she-demon. The man's rigid pose could in itself almost be phallic, but the context deprives him of any of the prerogatives of traditional male power; not only does he look like a pawn from a chessboard, but, given that he seems to be staring directly into the eyes of the fishlike woman, he resembles the paralyzed victim of the gaze of the Gorgon.

After a rather typical diatribe against feminism and the controversy over sexual harassment in the West (which, Erofeev says, may culminate in the executions of former "fun-loving womanizers" for their past "crimes," "like former Trotskyites were shot in our country"), the author informs us that "man's fate in Russia looks different, but is no less dramatic." The Russian man is not merely embattled but has ceased to exist altogether: "That is, the concept has been retained in the language by inertia, out of mental laziness, but essentially, it's a phantom, a chimera, a specter, a myth." Erofeev's explanation centers around the idea that unites his work with the editorial missions of *Andrei* and *Makhaon*: "First and foremost, it's a question of consciousness." Although Erofeev is engaging in deliberate *épatage*, he is also arguing, in a sense, for men's consciousness-raising: "A man is a man when he thinks of himself as a man." Thanks to Soviet power (which Erofeev himself admits was instituted by male Russians), the Russian man has lost the honor and freedom that are the hallmarks of true manhood. Instead, the Russian man has been replaced by a "layer cake" made up of *chelovek* (person), *muzhik* (guy), and *muzh* (husband), all of which represent circumscribed, ultimately unfulfilling roles for the potential real man.<sup>35</sup>

Strictly speaking, there is nothing pornographic about Erofeev's essay. The topic and the argument are hardly new, as the burgeoning literature on the supposedly pathetic state of post-Soviet manhood attests. Erofeev's work is directed at his own contemporaries, middle-aged men who, with just the right amount of consciousness-raising, may be able to rise to the challenge of this chimerical model of male dignity. The choice of a forum for Erofeev's argument is, therefore, hardly accidental: what better way to get the attention of adult heterosexual men than by publishing one's works between pictures of airbrushed nudes with gravity-defying breasts? In the foreword to his story "The Life and Experience of Vova V." Vladimir Voinovich provides a similar justification for men's magazines and, perhaps, for his decision to publish in one: "*Andrei* is a magazine for men. All such magazines attract the reader with pictures of naked butts and pussies, race-cars and brand-name cigarettes. But the best of them sometimes alternate these pictures with rather serious texts."<sup>36</sup>

A similar claim is made by editor L. Kononov in his opening editorial to the first 1997 issue of *Makhaon*; in part of his ongoing battle against the Russian government's attempts to limit the distribution of pornography, he rejects the "erotic" label for his magazine: "the arts and current-affairs magazine *Makhaon* is not an erotic publication." Instead, he writes, "the path of *Makhaon* lies in the affirmation of a sense of male self-worth."<sup>37</sup> Although the same essay also rejects sexual violence and sadism, some of the more vivid attempts at "affirming male self-worth" in *Makhaon* consist of articles and photomontages about masochistic women receiving the punishment they crave at the hands (indeed, at the feet) of

potbellied, middle-aged men. *Makhaon*'s path to masculine pride seems to consist of a combination of female sexual submissiveness and extended rants on the evils of Russian "pseudo-democracy"; perhaps nowhere is this strategy better exemplified than by a full-page, color cartoon of a leather-clad Anatoly Chubais whipping a blindfolded blonde whose tattoo of a two-headed eagle and white, blue, and red sash suggest that she symbolizes Russia; with gritted teeth, handcuffed wrists, and pierced nipples, this woman turns her rear to the viewer as hundred dollar bills fall from her vagina into a box marked "Xerox," apparently in response to Chubais's not-so-tender mercies.<sup>38</sup>

Although *Makhaon* sees its greatest enemies among the leaders of Russia, it clearly has no love for the West. One article in the fourth issue (1995) blames the United States for the Chernobyl disaster, while Aleksandr Braterskii's piece "The Last Virgin in the USSR" describes the collapse of the Soviet Union in terms of seduction and rape, comparing the iron curtain to a hymen: "the people who deflowered the USSR wanted proof of her innocence—they wanted BLOOD."<sup>39</sup> In its disdain for both Russian democrats and Western culture, *Makhaon* is nothing if not consistent. *Andrei*'s attitude to the West is far more complicated, as the editors find themselves embracing certain Western values (consumerism and sexual freedom) while raging against Western competition. Erofeev's article hints at the specter that haunts Russian pornography: the specter of Western culture and Western men. If the Russian man is a thing of the past, the Russian woman is entirely real: "Woman consists of necessity. In Russia we have necessity by the ton. That is why Russia is feminine."<sup>40</sup> And, because she is aware that there are no men in Russia, she is so willing to leave the country and find real men abroad. Once again, this sexual threat is inextricably caught up with an economic one: the Russian man posited by *Andrei* laments the competition with Western men, while *Andrei* itself is haunted both by Russia's competition with American pop culture and by the magazine's own attempts to maintain its market share against the threat of men's magazines imported from the United States, particularly the Russian-language edition of *Playboy*, whose contents differ from the American version only slightly. When *Andrei* calls itself a "Russian magazine for men," the accent is on both "for men" and "Russian," in what seems to be a deliberate slap in the face to the Russian *Playboy*.

Even before *Playboy* appeared, *Andrei* had already begun to stress the Russianness of both its models and their settings. In the introduction to the fifth issue, in 1994, the editors lament that Russia has become a lawless, third-world country that is unable to withstand the onslaught of cheap foreign imports such as Snickers and Pepsi-Cola: "Upset? So are we. And that's why we work without days off, and that's why you have before you a new issue of the first Russian magazine for men, one of the few domestic products that isn't 'for export' and which is not an embarrassment."<sup>41</sup> In an editorial in the seventh issue the writers claim that, unlike the competition, their magazine is more respectful of Russian women: "*Andrei* puts our woman on a pedestal of admiration; unlike invader magazines, of which there are more and more in the kiosks, it does not present her in an unflattering and biased fashion next to foreign women in order 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 is ready for anything."<sup>42</sup> Not only does the magazine that once identified itself with the allegedly Western values of freedom and democracy now take on an overtly nationalistic tone, but its vocabulary deliberately evokes the rhetoric of war: Western magazines, like Western armies, are "invaders" on a hostile mission of conquest.<sup>43</sup>

Although the pictures, stories, and ads in *Andrei* portray a free-spending, luxurious lifestyle available only to the wealthiest of "New Russians," the magazine's implicit nationalism makes itself known throughout. If the letters to the editor are to be believed, 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 wrote to *Andrei* in 1995 in the sixth issue, thanking the magazine for mentioning the three hundredth anniversary of the Russian fleet: "You really are our magazine. Even our national pride, to some extent. Although we've been places and seen many different men's magazines, *Andrei* is nicer and closer to the heart of our Soviet man."<sup>44</sup> The officers' letter is so full of patriotic fervor that it would be easy to forget that they are writing about 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.

The officers' nationalistic enthusiasm for an erotic magazine seems excessive only when removed from context; the issue that prompted their letter (no. 5 [1994]) featured a special photospread dedicated to the three hundredth anniversary of the Russian navy. "The Battleship Marina" consists of pictures of a female model wearing only a sailor's cap (with the word *Andrei* on it) as she writhes against the heavy artillery of a gunboat. Aleksei Veitsler's photos and text deliberately invoke Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, only here the film's agitprop message and homoerotic aesthetics are replaced by the none-too-subtle conventions of the heterosexual pin-up: whereas Eisenstein's camera lingers on the bodies of Russian sailors, Veitsler's camera interposes a naked woman between the handsome, semi-nude men. Alluding to the incident that sparks the uprising in Eisenstein's film, Veitsler describes the tense scene on a ship in 1905, when the shipmen of the *Potemkin* are ready to kill one another over rotten meat: "But here we'd be better off with Professor Freud instead of the student Ulianov [Lenin]." If only, Veitsler writes, the model Marina Pavlova were on that ship, she would have shouted, "Who wants to try some of my meat?!"<sup>45</sup> Veitsler's fantasy montage climaxes in an imitation of early Soviet propaganda, with a picture of a fully clothed Pavlova, on the shoulders of three of the sailors, raising the Russian flag rather than the banner of revolution. The text makes the utopianism of this scene explicit:

And everything turned topsy-turvy, like in a fairy tale.  
And the screen was lit in color.  
And it's as if a wave washed off the red from the flag over the ship.

And there was no decades-long gale.  
 And the Crimea is ours.  
 And the fleet is Russian.  
 Only the riveted battleship has a new name.<sup>46</sup>

Such declarations could not have come at a more politically sensitive time. The much-trumpeted anniversary of the Russian navy took place against the backdrop of heightened tensions between Russia and Ukraine over the status of the Black Sea Fleet and potential Russian claims on the Crimean Peninsula. If the 1994 *Andrei* was in part a special issue for Russian sailors, it neatly combined sexual and political fantasy, one in which the all-male world of the battleship is mediated by the willing body of a desirable woman and the coveted Crimea need not be shared with anyone.

Magazines such as *Andrei*, whose basic economic task is to sell sexual images of Russian women to Russian men, ultimately return to some of the fundamental questions of sexual discourse in Russia today: how are sex and the marketplace to be reconciled? If sexual metaphors characterize the "free exchange of goods and ideas" between Russia and the West (the source of both the marketplace in general and the very genres of pornography and soft-core titillation such as the monthly newspaper *SPID-Info*), how can the anxieties provoked by the commercialization of sex (the incursions on privacy, the threat of foreign wealth and potency) be allayed? *Andrei* points the way by thematizing the anxieties themselves, continually revisiting them in a lighthearted 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 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 "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 friend in Tashkent. Will they get there?").<sup>47</sup> The photo spread depends on a sense of mutual 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 "backwards" camel and the "progressive" tractor is a cliché of Soviet Socialist Realist tales of the struggle to civilize the nomads of Central Asia, but, whereas 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."<sup>48</sup> The Eastern locale allows Russia to take on a missionary role familiar from the days of communist internationalism, at the same time displacing 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.

The implicit ideological agenda of *Andrei* is to compensate for the trauma of the nation's fall from the status of a world power, especially to the extent that

this humiliation might be felt by the individual Russian man. The demons of the recent past are to be exorcised through sex. Hence, a two-page spread in the seventh issue features semi-nude women in SS costumes against the backdrop of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, thus reinterpreting a national tragedy in terms of sadomasochistic games. The cover feature for the third issue, from 1992, is a woman holding an automatic assault weapon and a grenade as she poses clad in nothing but an army helmet and dog tags; this section, entitled "Conversion," addresses the shock and dislocation entailed by the process of refitting the country's huge military-industrial complex for a new market economy. Aleksei Veitsler, the section's author, supplies the reader with photographs of the naked and busty Natalia Sergeeva, purported to be an officer in the Russian army. A life in the army has not prevented her from retaining the "traits of a real woman." Unequaled with both the rifle and the frying pan, Natalia realizes that it is time for her to leave the army. Her decision combines the personal and the political in that she recognizes the exigencies of a post-Cold War world while heeding the sound of her biological clock ("I want to have a family").<sup>49</sup> In the final photo Natalia stands on the beach with her back turned to the camera. The text reads: "Sergeant of the Guard Natasha emerges from the boiling iron of war like Aphrodite from the foam. . . . Transfigured and waiting for happiness. Keep her photograph, like they keep souvenirs made from the shells of intercontinental missiles. As a memento of conversion."<sup>50</sup> Here conversion becomes something beautiful and divine, involving both transfiguration and the birth of new life. At the same time, the attributes of military might (guns, camouflage fatigues, and army boots) are transformed into sexual paraphernalia. In the new world the military yields to the pornographic.

A similar process takes place in a truly bizarre section of the seventh issue, published under the title "Chechnia: What the Soldiers Aren't Saying." Here pictures of Russian soldiers fighting, eating, and sleeping in Chechnya are framed by the erotic images of their fantasies, such as Eastern women in leather fetish garb, wielding whips. A pimply faced Russian soldier stares vacantly at his food, and the photograph is surrounded by images of naked women caressing phallic-shaped breads. The photos are accompanied by a prose poem about the unexpressed desires of the Russian soldier; in the final two pages the men are shown firing weapons, while the poem describes their eventual return to their "next-door girls with their firm behinds, whom they will have this way and that way, without extraneous words, upon their return; then [these girls] will bear them children."<sup>51</sup> The naked woman whose picture accompanies this text is now far less threatening than the previous models; her expression and her demeanor really do suggest the "girl next door," while the gun she holds is merely a plastic toy. The Russian soldier is thus shown to be dreaming of returning to a world in which war is the stuff of fantasy, while women are the reality, even as the magazine's reader has both war and sex offered up to him as erotic stimulant.

*Andrei*'s world of male power and Russian pride thus manages to transfigure the site of the country's greatest post-Soviet humiliation into a source of ultimately reassuring erotic fantasy: in what might be considered a postmodern reinterpretation of the biblical injunction on swords and plowshares, the phallic

rifle wielded by the young Russian soldier with such uncertainty is transformed into a long, pink, plastic sex toy caressed by a nubile Russian beauty. Although the Chechen is perceived as an internal enemy, the implicit connection made by *Andrei* between men at war and men's erotic magazines suggests the specific function that such journals hope to perform in the post-Soviet imaginary: to rally the flagging spirits of Russian men, who are surrounded by hostile forces on all sides.

### Screwing with Russian Culture

The initial flirtation between pornography and liberalism, replaced by a much stronger union between pornography and nationalism, has resulted in ever stranger bedfellows, with the country's most prominent "erotic" publications staking out a paradoxical position in the post-Soviet culture wars: the rhetoric, imagery, and ideology are strongly reminiscent of the cultural conservatives who so routinely condemn them. Just as Russian pornography eschews the vulgarity of *mat* in favor of high-flown language and appeals to the sublime, it has assumed the mantle of guardian of the Russian cultural heritage. Although its pervasive *bricolage* and mixing of genres make contemporary Russian pornography a postmodern phenomenon, its ideology is postmodernism's polar opposite. The contrast between the ethos of postmodernism and the long-standing Russian cult of culture could not be more pronounced, and practitioners of postmodernism are often portrayed by their ideological opponents as amoral cynics who revel in the decline of everything that made Russia great. Whereas Russian pornography joins the cultural conservatives in continuing to put the national cultural heritage on a pedestal, the postmodernists continually undercut any reverential attitude toward art, literature, or the Russian "national idea." Thus, in Russia, the term *postmodernist* is used as often to describe a particular artist's or writer's attitude toward culture as to characterize his or her artistic technique.

This cultural divide is crucial to any understanding of the highly selective campaigns against pornography in the post-Gorbachev era. After Yeltsin's government used military force to remove the opposition from the country's legislature in October 1993, the Press Ministry closed down several newspapers that allegedly advocated "fascism" but admitted that one of the publications targeted was guilty of something entirely different: a Latvian-based, Russian-language newspaper called *Eshche*:

As concerns the newspaper *Eshche*, which was in no way involved in the violence in early October, it was openly seeking to deprive its readers of any moral footing. Activity of this kind and calls for the destruction of any morals and morality are deemed to be no less dangerous for society than the calls for restoring the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Aggressive amorality with its degrading influence is no less a danger to society than fascism, and we intend to carry on a consistent and tough struggle against it.<sup>52</sup>

The story of *Eshche* is particularly instructive, for it illustrates the way in which post-Soviet Russia has treated pornography as both a political and cultural threat. The publisher of *Eshche*, Aleksei Kostin, was arrested on 6 October 1993 on pornography charges, only to be released three days later. The prosecutor then proceeded to accumulate further evidence against Kostin and the paper, arresting the publisher once again on 4 February 1994.<sup>53</sup> The newspaper was subjected to several assessments by "experts," who determined that *Eshche* was indeed pornographic (as opposed to erotic). The case foundered in legal limbo for over a year (as did the publisher—he remained in prison the whole time, in violation of Russian procedural law), never resulting in prosecution. The newspaper itself emerged none the worse for wear, garnering the support of many outspoken liberals and even upgrading its production values to include color photos as well as black-and-white.

From the beginning *Eshche* was an odd choice for pornography charges, since dozens of graphic, hard-core publications were already circulating throughout the Russian Federation without resistance. On the other hand, the prosecutors clearly recognized that *Eshche* was different from most of its competition, and it was this difference that rendered the newspaper so odious. If the mainstream men's magazines peddle an amalgam of eroticism and nationalism, *Eshche*, which its defenders, such as Zugar Gareev, call a "postmodern phenomenon,"<sup>54</sup> counters with a parodic, nostalgic transnationalism, comically proclaiming that the former USSR is a "Common Erotic Space" (a parody of then-current phrases such as a "Common Cultural Space" or a "Common Ruble Space"). Yet even as it has little use for discussions of Russian national identity, *Eshche* is far from cosmopolitan in its outlook; instead, it defines its audience in terms of mentality and shared experience rather than ethnic or national makeup. *Eshche* presents a sexual vision as seen through an entirely (post-)Soviet lens. Its erotic adventurers are truck drivers and collective farm workers, and its stories about sexual experimentation in other countries are told from the point of view of the bemused former Soviet sex tourist. Dmitrii Stakhov sees the newspaper as a catalog of a "dying breed": the "Soviet people." He writes: "*Eshche* is a mirror for Soviet man. 'Both you and your intimate manifestations are open to the gaze of another. Look at yourself!' *Eshche* seems to be calling. 'You are still Soviet in a no-longer-Soviet world.'"<sup>55</sup> Stakhov's interpretation of the newspaper has an added appeal, one that Stakhov himself does not make explicit: the very title of *Eshche* (which could mean both "still" and "more") would then combine Stakhov's idea of the Soviet who is "still Soviet" with the more obvious sexual connotation of "more" (i.e., one can never get enough).

*Eshche* hardly fits in with the leaden seriousness of the other publications targeted immediately after the 1993 October events (such as the national chauvinist mouthpiece *Den'* (the *Day*), which was quickly reborn with a bit of temporal sleight-of-hand as *Zavtra* (Tomorrow), but its not-yet-fashionable nostalgia for Soviet kitsch did lend it some superficial resemblance to "Red-Brown" publications. The evaluations made by the "experts" point to a different reason for the official hostility to *Eshche*: it had a distinct "cleverness and subtleness" that they found



troublesome.<sup>56</sup> As the committee of experts noted repeatedly, *Eshche* includes a surprisingly wide range of materials, “artistic works with explicit bedroom scenes,” letters from readers. “pornographic” photographs (“when the camera records the minute details of the sexual act or the sexual organs prepared for the sexual act”), and explicit advertisements for sex toys. The experts were concerned about the “consistency” of the publication’s “cultural level.” As one of the experts noted, popular newspapers such as *Mister Iks* were “simple” pornographic works, never attempting to rise from a “low” cultural level, while *Eshche* used pornographic pictures to illustrate artistic texts.<sup>57</sup> Goldschmidt is quick to point out the absurdity of such an evaluation: “*Playboy* would be prosecutable because it could be argued that the text was a trick to get people to open up the centerfold . . . but a book describing itself openly as a guidebook to child molestation would not be actionable because it did not attempt to hide its intentions.”<sup>58</sup> I would argue, however, that the absurdity of the experts’ evaluation is quite revealing and is, in fact, in tune with the anxieties that certain forms of pornography provoke in Russia today. *Eshche* violates the established boundaries between high and low, and therefore is as potentially disruptive to the reigning cultural discourse as the overtly fascist *Den*, if for different reasons. The men’s magazines also mix genres and bring together high and low, but they compensate for their *bricolage* by ensuring that even their centerfolds are put in the service of patriotism and traditional cultural values. *Eshche* lures the reader with explicit sexual photographs, only to undermine his value system with its playful postmodernism and unflinching irreverence.

In today’s Russia sexually explicit materials that are easily identifiable as pornography or erotica tend to reinforce the cultural hierarchy, attempting to instill a sense of national pride as well as sexual arousal. Moreover, their artistic pretenses may be an attempt to raise the publications from the gutter, but in the final analysis these men’s magazines know their place: their appeal to cultural traditions does not contaminate high culture because these publications are so clearly “low.” A cultural conservative who consumes Russian pornography may be “lowering himself,” but, if he does open up the magazine, he sees his own worldview largely confirmed. Indeed, the fetishization of the classics in Russian glossy men’s magazines creates the illusion that the hegemony of high culture remains intact in the post-Soviet era: pornography may be a social evil, but at least the pornographers are still quoting Pushkin. Far more threatening, then, is “high art” that refuses to accept the boundaries between high and low and that sees the indulgence in sexually explicit material as part of an artistic agenda and therefore potentially admissible into the cultural canon. High culture elevates porn while remaining unscathed, but pornography, it seems, can leave high culture permanently stained.

By 2002, when *Moving Together* began its crusade for Russian literary purity, Sorokin had been merrily flouting cultural strictures for two decades, with stories of sadomasochism and the entire bouquet of “phillias,” from necro- to pedo-, more often than not involving figures who were supposed to command respect (e.g., Party members, Komsomol leaders, and government officials). If that were not enough, Sorokin routinely compares literature to a “narcotic,” something habit forming and presumably harmful, rather than uplifting and redemptive. When *Blue*

*Lard* appeared in 1999, it attracted a fair amount of attention and mixed reviews, but nothing the novel contained could come as a surprise to anyone familiar with his work. It was, however, his first full-length novel in several years, which meant that, unlike his previous, Soviet-era works, it was initially released to the mass market, rather than printed in a journal, published in an obscure collection, or left to languish in samizdat. With the benefit of hindsight, the publication of *Blue Lard* now looks like the last gasp of the Yeltsin era, when the outcry against such a novel would have come largely from marginalized extremists. Since then, some of these extremists are no longer marginalized: Alexander Prokhanov, editor of the notoriously racist and anti-Semitic newspaper *Zavtra*, is now an award-winning novelist with at least some veneer of respectability,<sup>59</sup> while Yeltsin’s replacement by Vladimir Putin has given cultural conservatives a figure to rally around *within* the government, rather than outside it. Putin himself has remained largely above the fray, but his firm, quasi-authoritarian attitude has made him an attractive figure for what the West would call the “radical Right.” When seen as a text for the nascent Putin era (a reading that would be perversely anachronistic were it not for the current anti-Sorokin campaign), *Blue Lard* appears far more transgressive than it did when it was first published. Putin’s harsher rhetoric, KGB past, and overall firm demeanor have clearly been a balm to those in Russia longing for the “firm hand” of a true leader, but the firmest hand in *Blue Lard* is busy tickling the leader’s testicles rather than bringing order to the country. As Gary Shteyngart points out, perhaps the biggest offense to nostalgic nationalists is that Stalin is a Bottom rather than a Top.<sup>60</sup>

Sorokin’s approach to culture and politics is antithetical to the unrelenting earnestness of *Moving Together*, a group that looks back wistfully to the days when the Communist Youth League provided the nation’s young people with both a set of clear and unwavering values and an array of wholesome activities to occupy their time. By contrast, Sorokin is not satisfied with merely tipping over the culture’s sacred cows; he has to violate their every orifice. For *Moving Together* it is a matter of saving the country’s youth from a dangerous infection. As their leader, Vasily Yakimenko, puts it: “Out of fifteen words, here are nine profanities. In Russia, literature has always given people answers that they can’t find in everyday life. When a young person is just discovering literature and they read Sorokin’s vulgarity, it’s like showing them a porno film. After Sorokin, they’ll think Chekhov is boring and uninteresting.”<sup>61</sup> Yakimenko is ascribing to all Russian literature a pedagogical role that Sorokin explicitly rejects (and perhaps it is no accident that so many of the teachers in Sorokin’s works turn pedagogy into pederasty—both moralists and pedophiles make a fetish of children). Thus, *Blue Lard* is actually more harmful to children than a hard-core sex film, since young people are presumably not likely to see *The Cherry Orchard* and *Debbie Does Dallas* as equivalent works of culture consumption. The urge to protect children from contamination is expressed even more forcefully by the proverbial “man on the street” at an anti-Sorokin rally in June 2002: “We would like Sorokin’s books in [the] future to be recognized as containing pornography and sold only in plastic covers, like pornographic magazines, in special establishments. We would like the culture minister finally to take some kind of measures against writers like this. . . . Finally, we do

not want the kind of society that tolerates this kind of thing."<sup>62</sup> What he wants, of course, is entirely utopian, since it presumes that contemporary Russia really does enforce rules on pornography's distribution and keep sexually explicit materials wrapped safely in plastic.

Indeed, even most of Sorokin's defenders are careful to dissociate themselves from his work, repeating the mantra that they dislike *Blue Lard* but defend the author's right to publish. Oleg Mironov, Russia's human rights ombudsman, spoke out against Sorokin's prosecution but was critical of "foul language and pornography in the arts: "Writers should speak of the reasonable and the eternal instead of cursing and describing improper scenes."<sup>63</sup> In other words, they should behave more like the publishers of *Andre, Makhaon*, and even *Playboy*, whose conservative cultural program and persistent nationalism are far more palatable than the disruptive pornographic imagination of Vladimir Sorokin or the irreverence and irony of *Eshche*. Post-Soviet Russia is remarkably comfortable with the conflation of the sexual and the national, with the unspoken notion that Russia's current dilemma and ultimate fate can be conceptualized in sexual terms, but only when both sexuality and the "Russian idea" are taken seriously, when each remains on its pedestal. When seen in this light, Russian pornography displays a distinct resemblance to political propaganda, a phenomenon the country has had far more time to assimilate: the target audience must be provoked to the proper response (sexual arousal and ideological agitation, respectively). The dominant, nationalist pornography in contemporary Russia attempts to combine these two goals, to produce the very phenomenon that postmodernists would so easily ridicule: excitement that is both sexual and ideological, a proud and patriotic erection.

#### Notes

1. Vladimir Sorokin, *Goluboe salo: Roman* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1999), 257–258. All translations from this and all other Russian texts are my own, unless otherwise noted.
2. The particular word for "blue" in Sorokin's title (*goluboi*) is also a slang term for "gay man." Western press reports also cite the novel's title as *Gay Lard*, *Blue Fat*, *Blue Back-Fat*, *Sky-Blue Bacon* and *Sky-Blue Pork Fat*.
3. Setting aside the lively scholarly and political debates on the nature of "pornography" (and its even more enigmatic cousin, the "erotic"), I will use the term to describe audiovisual and textual materials foregrounding explicit sexual content. More to the point, I will apply the term *pornography* to the texts that tend to be referred to as such by Russian polemicists: for the purposes of the present study it is pornography if enough Russians call it pornography. No value judgment is implied. Hence, Sorokin's works are discussed in this essay not because I feel they should be considered pornography but because enough powerful and influential people *call* it pornography. The Sorokin Affair is creating and altering the discourse of and about Russian pornography, regardless of whether or not Sorokin's novels and stories are pornographic.
4. For a detailed, English-language overview of the Sorokin Affair, see Jamey Gambrell, "Russia's New Vigilantes," *New York Review of Books*, 16 January 2003, 40–43.
5. Although prices have fluctuated greatly over the years, a pornographic videocassette tends to cost at least as much as a monthly subway pass and possibly much more. The

- cheapest of the erotic newspapers cost little more than their mainstream counterparts (the equivalent of a loaf or two of bread), while a single issue of a glossy "men's magazine" costs the equivalent of two or three hardback books.
6. Although the Russian terms *muzhskoi zhurnal* and *zhurnal dlia muzhchin* (men's magazine) can designate general "men's interest" magazines such as the Russian editions of *Men's Health* and *Soldier of Fortune*, they are also often used to designate upscale, soft-core pornography.
  7. With characteristic bluntness Sorokin has made this very argument in the press: "Pornography is a concrete genre. Its chief goal is to cause a reader's erection. I have never pursued that goal" ("Russian Writer Blasts Pro-Kremlin Critics," United Press International, 29 June 2002).
  8. Indeed, one prominent Russian literary figure, Kornei Chukovsky, would even assert at the turn of the twentieth century that the connection between pornography and ideas was unique to Russia: "Russian pornography is not plain pornography such as the French or Germans produce, but pornography with ideas" (as cited in Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992], 386). Chukovsky made this claim in his review of one of prerevolutionary Russia's most notorious pornographic novels, Mikhail Artsybashev's *Sanin*, a work that shocked its readers with its presentation of cynical, sex- and death-obsessed young provincials rather than with any explicit sexual descriptions.
  9. There has also been a resurgence in interest in prerevolutionary pornography and erotica, as evidence by Andrei Balabanov's award-winning 1999 film *Freaks and Men*, a cinematically beautiful reconstruction of a late-nineteenth-century pornographic photography studio.
  10. Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 164.
  11. Feona Attwood, "Reading Porn: The Paradigm Shift in Pornography Research," *Sexualities* 5, no. 1 (2002): 91–105.
  12. Brian McNair, *Mediated Sex: Pornography and Postmodern Culture* (London: Arnold, 1996), 24.
  13. The question of a "national idea" has been a vexing issue for both the government and the media since the Soviet collapse. According to a popular school of thought based on readings and misreadings of Nikolai Berdyaev's 1946 *The Russian Idea* (Herndon, Va.: Lindisfarne, 1992), Russia has always been guided by some form of a dominant "idea" that both unites the nation and defines its mission. After the October Revolution, Bolshevism filled this role, but, with Soviet ideology largely discredited, many in Russia now feel that the country needs a new "idea" or "ideology" to replace it. Although an ideological void might seem like a less pressing matter than unemployment or rampant crime, the need for a national idea figures prominently in the post-Soviet press and in opinion polls. In 1996 Boris Yeltsin even put together a government commission to develop a new national idea, although the commission's findings were greeted lukewarmly (Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory during the Yeltsin Era* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002], 158–172).
  14. M. Levitt and A. Toporkov, eds., *Eros and Pornography in Russian Culture* (Moscow: Ladimir, 1999). In the interests of full disclosure I should note that I was one of the book's contributors.
  15. William Hopkins, "The Development of Pornographic Literature in Eighteenth- and Early-Nineteenth-Century Russia" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1977).

16. Hopkins, "Development of Pornographic Literature," ix.
17. Paul W. Goldschmidt, *Pornography and Democratization: Legislating Obscenity in Post-Communist Russia* (Boulder: Westview, 1999), 90–91.
18. Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 359–386.
19. For a discussion of the function of explicit anatomical vocabulary in contemporary Russian fiction, see Helena Goscilo, "Body Talk in Current Fiction: Speaking Parts and (W)holes," in *Russian Culture in Transition: Selected Papers of the Working Group for the Study of Contemporary Russian Culture, 1990–1991*, ed. Gregory Freidin, Stanford Slavic Studies 7 (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993), 145–177.
20. Helena Goscilo notes the "slippage into euphemism and periphrasis" in hard-core pornographic publications, an approach to language she calls "canonical rhetoric within soft porn." Goscilo advances a number of convincing explanations for the alternation between coy evasion and clinical vocabulary in Russian pornography, including the need to educate unenlightened readers about anatomy and sexual function (Goscilo, *Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood during and after Glasnost* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996], 157).
21. Andrei Zorin, "Legalizatsiia obstsennoi leksiki i ee kul'turnye posledstviia," in Freidin, *Russian Culture in Transition*, 139.
22. For a more extended discussion of linguistic reticence in contemporary Russian discourse, see Eliot Borenstein, "About That: Deploying and Deploring Sex in Postsoviet Russia," *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 24, no. 1 (2000): 52–62.
23. Because of the ambiguity of the Russian word *seks*, this phrase can be read somewhat more sympathetically than it usually is (Borenstein, "About That," 53–54).
24. It is worth noting that pornography in particular and overt sexuality in general were usually prominent features in a standard conservative laundry list of social ills, signifying the total breakdown of social standards. As the perestroika era receded, jeremiads on the decline of morality could be found in publications and broadcasts throughout the political spectrum. In 1993 the liberal *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* (Independent Newspaper) printed an op-ed piece by Valentin Aleksandrov, complaining that "plaster casts of reproductive organs are displayed for sale on Novyi Arbat and the central squares right under the nose of the Moscow mayor's office" (8). Setting aside the Freudian and Gogolian implications of his words, Aleksandrov's screed seems to suggest that the problem is almost carnivalesque in its reversal of the metaphorical bodily hierarchy: penises, whether they are human, plastic, or symbolic, must be kept far from the centers of power (phallic though these institutions may be).
25. Even after the Soviet collapse, the Baltics would still serve as a foreign (but not too foreign) locus for the pornographic. *Eshche*, an erotic publication that was singled out for particular harsh sanctions by the Russian authorities in the early 1990s, is published in Latvia, where pornography is subject to less regulation.
26. Aleksandr Lipnitskii, "Viktor Sukhodrev: PLAYBOY v moem bagazhe," *Playboy* 1 (1995): 97.
27. A. K. Troitskii, "Rossiia v pleiboiskom prishchure," *Playboy* 1 (1995): 94; Vasili Aksenov, "Matushka-Rus' i igriye synochki," *Playboy* 1 (1995): 56.
28. Troitskii, "Rossiia v pleiboiskom prishchure," 33.
29. *Ogonek* 39 (September 1995): 41.
30. *Andrei* 1 (1991): 4.
31. *Andrei* 8 (1997), 39.
32. *Andrei* 8 (1997): 39.
33. *Andrei* 1 (1991): 3.
34. Other essays were originally printed in *Playboy*, in which Erofeev started publishing his essays not long after his work in *Andrei* appeared.
35. Viktor Erofeev, "Polet oblaka v shtanakh," *Andrei* 6 (1995): 46.
36. Vladimir Voinovich, "Zhizn' i perezhivaniia Vovy V," *Andrei* 6 (1995): 22.
37. L. Konvalov, "Ot redaktsii," *Makhaon* 1 (1997): 1.
38. *Makhaon* 8 (1997): 4.
39. Aleksandr Bratersky, "Poslednii devstvennik SSSR," *Makhaon* 4 (1995): 24.
40. Erofeev, "Polet oblaka v shtanakh," 46.
41. "Intermediia," *Andrei* 5 (1994): 2.
42. *Andrei* 7 (1997): 2.
43. Such military rhetoric is also used by Erofeev throughout his article in issue 6; for example, when he explains that the successful wife gives his husband the illusion of conquest, she herself will be the true victor: "Then it will end up like 50 years ago: the USSR wins, but it's Germany that celebrates" (Erofeev, "Polet oblaka v shtanakh," 46).
44. "Natsional'naia gordost'," *Andrei* 6 (1995): 4.
45. Aleksei Veitsler, "Bronenosets Marina," *Andrei* 5 (1994): 6.
46. Veitsler, "Bronenosets," 15.
47. Aleksei Veitsler, "Sto verbludov za russkuiu baryshnui," *Andrei* 7 (1995): 50.
48. Veitsler, "Sto verbludov za russkuiu baryshnui," 49.
49. Aleksei Veitsler, "Konversiiia," *Andrei* 3 (1992): 82.
50. Veitsler, "Konversiiia," 89.
51. Aleksandr Anin et al., "Chechnia: o chem molchat soldaty," *Andrei* 7 (1995): 92.
52. Itar Tass, 14 October 1993, in FBIS-SOV-93-198, 15 October 1993, 30, as qtd. in Goldschmidt, *Pornography and Democratization*, 145.
53. My presentation of the facts of the *Eshche* case is based on Goldschmidt, *Pornography and Democratization*, 178–182. Goldschmidt notes that the arrest of the publisher rather than the editor was an unusual move and was contrary to Russia's press law. But the editor, Aleksandr Linderman, lived in Riga and had no intention of traveling to Moscow to be arrested. Kostin's detention was apparently intended to force Linderman to turn himself in (178).
54. "Erotika i vlast': kto kogo...," *Ogonek*, 17–18 May 1994, 13.
55. "Erotika i vlast': kto kogo...," *Ogonek*, 14.
56. Goldschmidt, *Pornography and Democratization*, 179.
57. Goldschmidt, *Pornography and Democratization*, 180–181.
58. Goldschmidt, *Pornography and Democratization*, 182.
59. He also shares a publisher with Sorokin: both his novels *Gospodin Geksogen* and *Blue Lard* were printed by Ad Marginem. Among the many conspiracy theories advanced to explain the Sorokin Affair (from a cheap publicity ploy to sell more books to a plot by Putin's enemies to make him look bad) is the hypothesis that the Kremlin is using Moving Together's anti-Sorokin campaign as a way to punish Ad Marginem for publishing *Gospodin Geksogen*, which asserted that the 1999 Moscow apartment bombings were all part of a plot to bring Putin to power (Mikhail Zolotonosov, "Kul'tura: Drova izdatel'skoi topki," *Moskovskie Novosti*, 12 March 2003, 26).
60. Gary Shteyngart, "Letter from Russia--Teen Spirit: On the Rise of Post-Soviet Youth," *New Yorker*, 10 March 2003, 46.
61. Lawrence Sheets and John Ydstie, "Dispute in Russia over a Book by Vladimir Sorokin

- and Whether or Not It Is the Dissemination of Pornography," "All Things Considered," National Public Radio, 8 August 2002.
62. "Pro-Putin Youth Group Takes Stand against 'Pornographic' Modern Russian Novel," BBC Worldwide Monitoring, Ekho Mosvy Radio, 27 June 2002.
63. Steve Gutterman, "Russian Police Investigate Prominent Writer on Pornography Charge," Associated Press, 11 July 2002.

# Walking on the Wild Side

SHEMALE INTERNET PORNOGRAPHY



JOHN PHILLIPS

Academic interest in representations of sex in film, television, and print media now has a relatively long history and, indeed, has attained a measure of respectability that it may not have possessed as recently as the early 1990s. Numerous studies have been published to date, many by gay and feminist scholars, on the nature and effects of such representations particularly in so-called pornography. Very little attention, however, has been focused by scholars on the Internet, perhaps because it is still a relatively new medium but, above all, I think, because, in spite of the recent expansion of cultural studies in universities and the readiness of researchers in that area to analyze any and all social and cultural objects, including those from popular culture, the Internet remains an unordered and chaotic space, Internet material defying definition, challenging conventional categories of authorship, genre, and form. Such a space can appear daunting, its contents lacking the specificity required for critical investigation. Internet sites have increasingly appeared in the bibliographies of our students, despite warnings that most of their content is unauthoritative and unreliable. It is understandable, then, that many in the academic community would seek to avoid any contact with the Internet, even as an object of study in itself. The view is often heard expressed among colleagues—and in many respects it is a legitimate one—that Internet material is unoriginal and unexciting in both form and content and thus unworthy of critical interest. What little attention has been devoted to Internet pornography concentrates on images of men and/or women who can, broadly speaking, be described as “straight” or gay, engaged in activities associated with these binary sexual identities. The few who have turned their critical gaze to Internet porn have shown little if any interest in Internet sites representing transsexuals.<sup>1</sup> As far as I know, the only critic to date to have devoted any serious effort to the subject of transgender in pornography is Laura Kipnis