

book is designed to sample and promote, have produced a brilliantly conceived, innovative, exciting, compelling and sustained argument for the value and utility of using 'the eye' in the study of history.

The editors' cogent and engaging introduction places the fifty short essays that follow in their historiographical, conceptual and methodological contexts. The selection of visual media and material objects then treated in the case studies is irresistibly eclectic, including architecture, jewellery, clothing, painting, posters, prints, film, and photography, as well as artefacts that transcend a single representative genre, such as decorated distaffs, painted porcelain, portrait carpets, illustrated record album covers, graphic book design, maps, and banknotes. Many of these sources, such as painting or photography, themselves present evidence of the visual culture of the past, for example of ritual spectacle, dress or fashion.

The essays, presented chronologically, illustrate how visual culture has been variously exploited at times to project the leader's self-image and the state's values, at times to subvert official norms. Many chapters also demonstrate how visual culture frequently resists or precludes any fixity or closure of meaning. As Douglas Northrop writes in a perceptive essay on photographs of early Soviet Central Asia: 'unwanted ambiguities trickled through into the images, muddying the intended picture of a grateful population and its bright Soviet future' (p. 167). In view of the methodological complexity of 'reading' visual evidence, many of the essays are explicitly concerned with problems of interpreting such material and deploying it as historical evidence. Some authors evince a degree of ambivalence regarding the potential of the visual to proffer the historian new insights and open new perspectives. For a few, there is perhaps too much unconstrained subjectivity in the analysis of visual materials, too few definitive boundaries to impose limits on the free play of the scholar's imagination. These vacillating voices, however, do nothing to weaken the integrity of the volume. On the contrary, they serve better to demonstrate the wide spectrum of current historiographical engagement with the visual and the range of interpretative challenges and possibilities.

As well as conveying a sense of the breadth, depth and sheer diversity of Russian visual culture over ten centuries, and illuminating the historical contexts in which the images presented here were produced, the volume serves as a valuable introduction to the variegated, provocative but often richly productive field of visual studies. It is to be strongly recommended to specialists searching for insight or inspiration, to teachers requiring compact, accessible case studies to stimulate and bring into focus their students' visual imaginations, and to general readers interested in glimpsing Russia in its self-images and understanding a new, vibrant dimension of Russian historical studies. Yale University Press should also be commended for having produced an elegantly designed and beautifully illustrated book befitting its subject matter.

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Overkill. Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture. By ELIOT BORENSTEIN. Pp. xv–268. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2008. £10.95. ISBN 978 0 8014 45835.

Eliot Borenstein's book takes us into the alternately torrid and turgid, body-littered realm of pop culture from 1990s' Russia: pornographic and 'gentlemen's' magazines; real crime TV shows; procedurals with smart, professional police and action novels with Rambo-type thugs as unexpected culture heroes. Informative, thoughtful, well-written, occasionally hilarious, Borenstein's book gives those of us bewildered by the vast shelves of *boeviks* and *detektivy*, clueless about who or what to read, a kind of *Puteshestvie po (ne)sviatym mestam* of recent Russian print and visual media. Copious in its provision of plot summary and telling detail, the book goes beyond merely cataloguing the sudden eruption of 'sex and violence' in 1990s' Russia. Borenstein is ever present as a thoughtful commentator and astute guide, raising

the right questions, providing historical context and observations on the relationship between cultural psyche and narrative form. Caveats about what the book *isn't* about are worth noting from the start: this is not a book about actual criminality, or the relationship between sociologists' statistics (on crime, prostitution, or restaurant sales) and cultural production. Instead, what Borenstein tracks are the imaginative structures that we use to 'understand our lives and surroundings' (p. 3) — stories and images that are about death, violence, and sex, but also about national identity, gender roles, and authority. The book is, then, an engaging guide to the national psyche, a journey into the Russia of the imagination, in which anxieties and nightmares get rendered as just-in-the-nick-of-time deliverance, or wholesale catastrophe and loss.

The book's chapters describe a variety of genres and media devoted to representing sex and violence. The account begins with *chernukha*, whose rhetoric of denunciation Borenstein links to long-standing didactic traditions of *oblicheenie* in Russian literature. An initial link between liberalism and satirical uses of pornography quickly cedes to more nationalist discourses, with men's magazines honing to a conservative vision of national culture. Borenstein goes on to explore the link between national identity and nationalist rhetoric in images of the prostitute (which he grounds in a broader consideration of the redemptive prostitute in nineteenth-century writing). Scenarios of 'humiliation and betrayal' serve here as allegories for national trauma, with the prostitute's ultimate faithfulness to Russian men signalling her redemptive function.

In his discussion of a variety of crime genres (the *detektiv* practised by Marinina, Dashkova and Dontsova; the *boevik* of the 'Mad Dog' series; *Bandit Petersburg*), Borenstein addresses issues of gender (the *detektiv* has become associated with women readers, the *boevik* is a men's genre), but also speculates on complex relationships between serial genres and the Soviet 'master plot'. Is the temporality and world view of serial fiction — with its endlessly deferred ending, its avoidance of death's finality — somehow alien to Russia? The incredible popularity of serial genres in 1990s' Russia suggests the opposite; the forms of narrative structuring that these fictions provide have been seemingly essential to living with the chaos (the *bespredel* of one of Borenstein's chapters) that followed the collapse of the grand narrative of Soviet communism.

Borenstein's conclusion moves us beyond the implosions and collapses of the 1990s towards Putin's Russia, and a shift towards quieter, more domestic productions in popular culture. Domesticity, creature comfort and family sagas seem to be winning out over the chaos and murderous excesses of the 1990s. Borenstein's examples here include Boris Akunin and Maks Frai, whose fantasy novels are minimally 'criminalized' (with frameworks of the police procedural) and heavily invested in depictions of lavish dining and lush domestic interiors. Here, as throughout the book, Borenstein doesn't grapple with whether such a representational shift is related to actual improvement in the safety and well-being of Russia's citizens. Borenstein himself seems uncertain about just how much popular culture has changed: at one point he claims that 'the discourse of Russian life has become considerably calmer' (p. 228), but concludes by noting that 'Russian popular culture has not changed radically since the end of the Yeltsin era' (p. 238). The uncertainty may be related to conflicting trends within Russian culture itself, and to a genuinely diversifying realm of popular imagination: feel-good movies and vice-squad chaos may both find a place on Russian TV. This uncertainty about just how to conclude is not unrelated, I think, to the temporal uncertainties of Borenstein's title: the book claims to be about *contemporary* Russian popular culture, but its focus is in fact a period that is now almost ten years gone. Have murder and mayhem given way to the pleasures of middle-class domesticity? However we might answer that question, Borenstein's rich and thought-provoking study convinces us that the bards of popular imagination will help us think it through.