TITLE: S(T)IMULATING CHIC: THE AESTHETICIZATION OF POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

AUTHOR: HELENA GOSCILO, University of Pittsburgh

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1755 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
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CONTRACTOR: University of Pittsburgh

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Helena Goscilo

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Aesthetics focuses on appearance, on how things look or "seem". In Russia, perhaps the most memorable early triumph of appearance in the political sphere belongs to Catherine the Great's favorite Grigorii Potemkin, whose persuasive display of a stage décor simulating authentic buildings and communities originated the invaluable term "Potemkin villages". Such eighteenth-century practices provided convenient models for Soviet policymakers, as Andrei Siniavksii noted in another context; indeed, the elaborate camouflage that sustained Soviet power for seventy years indisputably elevated the widespread production of Potemkin villages to a supreme art.

The ideology fueling the Soviet art of simulacra publicly valorized moral purity and civic probity, while downplaying beauty and anathematizing luxury as the immoral frivolities of a consumerist culture. Soviet distrust of beauty on any scale was materialized in the dreary, enervated horrors of its architecture, art, window displays, book and clothes design, packaging, and the majority of its products. Anyone seeking visual splendors in Russia would locate them primarily in museums and in structures and objects dating from pre-Revolutionary times.

With desovietization and the indiscriminate enthusiasm for things Western among a significant portion of its urban population, Russia in the 1990s has begun shedding its identity of virtuous self-denial for "the good life" and a "beautiful style." In the new post-Soviet aesthetics, beauty and conventionalized signs of wealth have become as inseparable as Marx and Engels in the pre-market era. Probably the most aggressive role in disseminating these twinned values, however, has been played by popular magazines. These are the "how to" primers for success cum beauty; they publicize not only an affluent way of life but also their own role as readers' initiators into that world of prosperous chic. The obsession with specific images of beauty and wealth within their pages has transformed the 1990s into the Martha Stewart decade or the Era of New Simulacra, which substitutes signs of the real for the real, dismantling the "successful layer" of contemporary Western life and reproducing it in scrupulous fascimile.

Whereas during the Soviet period "correct ideology" was the sole "product" urged upon Russians through slogans, banners, and publications, Russia's current recuperation of more traditional advertising strategies for marketing commodities is consecrated to selling opulent style. In addition to displaying gorgeous surfaces, of course, style condenses metonymies of a utopian way of life marked by boundless wealth—a wealth materialized in fetishized objects whose artful contextualization/configuration promises to transport us out of the immediate world as we know it. Russians' lengthy history of utopianism, variously founded on religious, social, and political principles, rehearsed their current passion for the production and consumption of a spectacularly
escapist style, which finds articulation in the ubiquitous word "image" (*imidzh*). Omnipotent Image severed from any "reality" other than the one it aspires to create, in fact, presides as the divinity of the 1990s.

The illusion that the hardships of everyday existence may be magically metamorphosed into a fantasy universe of bounty and beauty through the "sorcery of style" has replaced the Soviet utopia of a politically inevitable socialist paradise. Thus Russians have negotiated the transition from a simulated socialist realism to an equally simulated "capitalist realism" that affirms the "good life". In effect, they have exchanged an overt, ideologically freighted form of standardization for another that is more mediated, camouflaged, and aglow in novelty.

That Potemkin villages nonetheless remain operative on both micro and macro levels in Russia may be deduced from numerous factors. Illusion relies on distance, and much of the surface glitter does not withstand close scrutiny. Perhaps one of the most telling, if trivial, details about Russians’ priorities is the majority’s preference for makeup, cologne, and perfume over deodorant—still not an overly popular item even among self-conscious image seekers. Cover-up is favored over clean-up, as attested by the heaps of garbage strewn over sidewalks, the debris abandoned by construction workers after they complete a project, and the puddles of urine forlornly spreading in elevators of countless apartment buildings. Above all, the fad for aestheticization may provide a (psychologically understandable) retreat from the ugly facts of contemporary Russian reality, but simultaneously serves to underscore them. Simulacra of grand style compensate for, without eliminating, the knowledge that amidst commercialized modernization, the Russian economy is in shambles; life expectancy and population levels have plummeted; the overall death rate increased by 18 percent in 1993; teenage crime has escalated drastically; estimates of mafia control over businesses range from 40 to 80 percent; unemployment continues to rise; alcoholism and bootlegging have reached all-time highs, as have drug-related crimes; Russia’s abortion rate remains the highest in the world; retail prices have spiraled and the Moscow tax hike on imported foods (which account for 80 percent of the city’s food products) may push them up further; and burying the dead has become so expensive that many corpses in Moscow and St. Petersburg rot unclaimed. Even for the stalwart, such conditions must appear irreversibly bleak, hardly susceptible to improvement through individual action. Given the sweeping disillusionment with, and indifference to, politics ushered in by desovietization, a shift to consumerist narcissism offers one of the few available escape routes from the unpalatable facts of daily existence.

To suggest that the potentially lemming-like rush toward image is the only venturesome "act in town," however, would be inaccurate. A small but visible percentage of the younger generation of Russians comprise less flamboyant seekers of financial security who have chosen to build stable careers through hard work. Largely in their twenties, they have founded their own businesses or joined slowly developing enterprises that give every indication of success. These people, in business,
industry, culture, academic institutions, and government offices have faith in the old ethic of unglamorous, tireless effort as a viable means not only of achieving personal well-being but also of rebuilding a traumatized society. While probably not impervious to the lure of "image", this segment of Russia's population seems to have escaped the hypnosis of the "quick fix" Potemkin village gesture popularized by the mass media. It provides a vital counterbalance to what Baudrillard gloomily characterizes as a situation of "inoperable inertia, in which nothing can challenge or upset the system of interchangeable simulacra".

In a culture that for seven decades radically politicized the good, the bad, and the ugly according to puritanical criteria equating beauty with moral turpitude, the pleasures of aestheticization must be irresistibly seductive. Succumbing to the allure of "looking good" does not necessarily doom one forever to a surface, fantasy existence. As Peter the Great's dream of a "Venice of the North" bore out, wild flights of the imagination may translate into tangible reality. Baudrillard's lugubrious scenario of signs obliterating or substituting for experience notwithstanding, Potemkin villages did not eliminate the possibility of the rise of bona fide rural communities.
Photography gave substance to the idea that images could be the conclusive expression of reality on the one hand, and exist autonomous of that reality on the other.

Stuart Ewen

Beauty for some provides escape, Who gain a happiness in eyeing The gorgeous buttocks of an ape Or Autumn sunsets exquisitely dying.

Aldous Huxley

Potemkin Villages: Before and After

Platonism and platitudes (such as "beautiful inside and out" and "handsome is as handsome does") aside, aesthetics focuses on appearance, on how things look or "seem." While the course of Western civilization testifies simultaneously to the profound psychological human need for beauty and the ever-changing notions of what constitutes it, few would deny its historical implication in surface and simulacra. In Russia, perhaps the most memorable early triumph of appearance in the political sphere belongs to Catherine the Great's favorite Grigorii Potemkin: his persuasive display of a stage décor simulating authentic buildings and communities originated the invaluable term "Potemkin villages." Such eighteenth-century practices provided convenient models for Soviet policymakers, as Andrei Siniavskii noted in another context; indeed, the elaborate camouflage that sustained Soviet power for seventy years indisputably elevated the widespread production of Potemkin villages to a supreme art.

The ideology fueling the Soviet art of simulacra publicly valorized moral purity and civic probity, while downplaying beauty and anathematizing luxury as the immoral frivolities of a consumerist culture. According to this binary formula, whereas degenerate Western capitalists exploited the toiling masses so as to wallow in superfluous goods, official Soviet values followed the Tolstoyan path of material minimalism and an aesthetics of "natural simplicity" that in practice ranged from plain to unsightly. Absence and ugliness acquired tremendous significance, moralized by a rhetoric that made a virtue out of need. Paradoxically, scarcity or "nothing" appeared as "everything"--that is, everything profound, for beauty and abundance offered visible confirmation of corrupt values. Exposed plumbing, leaking rusty toilets, cardboard shoes, sacklike dresses, and cheap shapeless ties testified not to manufacturing inadequacies, but to the boundless "Russian soul."
In that sense, aesthetics and ethics became mutually exclusive categories. Accordingly, Raisa Gorbacheva aroused widespread suspicion and resentment not by her political attitudes, but by her insistence on dressing with noticeable taste and style. Her preoccupation with chic appearance compromised her spiritual credentials, for it implied a "kowtowing" to vulgar Western priorities.

Soviet distrust of beauty on any scale was materialized in the dreary, enervated horrors of its architecture, art, window displays, book and clothes design, packaging, and the majority of its products. Anyone seeking visual splendors in Russia would locate them primarily in museums and in structures and objects dating from pre-Revolutionary times. Scorning the Horatian synthesis of *utile et dulce* that dominates American values, the Soviet system touted the functional (*utile*), yet achieved neither. Failure on both pragmatic and aesthetic counts, however, vouchsafed peculiar benefits: ugliness, uniformity, drabness, and lack carried a moral weight, advertising not only Russia's "deprivational democracy" (*uravnilovka*) but also its ascetic devotion to profoundly spiritual categories of human experience. That proclaimed idealism--dubbed "hypocritical puritanism" by some (Androunas 110)--complacently underscored the philistine West's shallow dedication to surface and fads. Thus Soviet shortages fulfilled an inestimable ideological function, serving as a moral rebuke above all to the American self-gratificatory pursuit of eye-catching plenitude.  

With desovietization and the indiscriminate enthusiasm for things Western among a significant portion of its urban population, Russia in the 1990s has begun shedding its identity of virtuous self-denial for "the good life" and a "beautiful style." In the new post-Soviet aesthetics, beauty and conventionalized signs of wealth have become as inseparable as Marx and Engels in the pre-market era. Increased travel abroad, the incursion of foreign business into Russia, the publicized rise of successful young Russian entreprenuers, and the influence of popular entertainment--Western films, videos, and television shows and commercials—all undoubtedly promote that coupling. Probably the most aggressive role in disseminating these twinned values, however, has been played by popular magazines. These are the "how to" primers for success *cum* beauty; they publicize not only an affluent way of life but also their own role as readers' initiators into that world of prosperous chic. The obsession with specific images of beauty and wealth within their pages has transformed the 1990s into the Martha Stewart decade or the Era of New Simulacra, which substitutes signs of the real for the real (Baudrillard, 2), dismantling the "successful layer" of contemporary Western life and reproducing it in scrupulous fascimile (Connor 56).

Whereas during the Soviet period "correct ideology" was the sole "product" urged upon Russians through slogans, banners, and publications, Russia's current recuperation of more traditional advertising strategies for marketing commodities is consecrated to selling opulent style. According to Western commentators, since contemporary mass media "serve as increasingly powerful arbiters of reality, the primacy of style over substance has become the normative consciousness" (Ewen 1988, 2). In addition to displaying gorgeous surfaces, of course, style
condenses metonymies of a utopian way of life marked by boundless wealth—a wealth materialized in fetishized objects whose artful contextualization/configuration promises to transport us out of the immediate world as we know it (Ewen 1988, 14). Russians' lengthy history of utopianism, variously (and precariously) founded on religious, social, and political principles, rehearsed their current passion for the production and consumption of a spectacularly escapist style, which finds articulation in the ubiquitous word "image" (imidzh). Omnipotent Image severed from any "reality" other than the one it aspires to create, in fact, presides as the divinity of the 1990s.

As is the case with other recent lexical loans from the West (mentalitet, generatsiia, rimeik (remake), vizual'nyi, arr), ten years ago "image" would have been rendered by a traditional Russian word—obraz. For today's "image," however, obraz (especially given its religious associations) is inadequate, because it predates the cultural developments that have made imidzh virtually synonymous with Potemkin villages.6 The illusion that the hardships of everyday existence may be magically metamorphosed into a fantasy universe of bounty and beauty through the "sorcery of style" (Ewen 14) has replaced the Soviet utopia of a politically inevitable socialist paradise. Thus Russians have negotiated the transition from a simulated socialist realism to an equally simulated "capitalist realism" that affirms the "good life" (Barthel 12). In effect, they have exchanged an overt, ideologically freighted form of standardization for another that is more mediated, camouflaged, and aglow in novelty.

Selling Style: Pictures as Exhibitions

Dozens of publications ranging from the recently founded Voiazh (Voyage) and ND (Novyi dzhentel'men/New Gentleman)7 to the refurbished Krest'ianka (Peasant Woman, aimed at a non-urban female readership) cram their pages with seductive images of elegance and wealth. This boom in gilded aestheticization may be ascribed to the efforts of enterprising Russian editors, but above all to the persistence of the Dutchman Derk Sauer, publisher of the English-language Moscow Times (since 1992) and a pioneer in establishing and popularizing Russian versions of Western glossies in Moscow. Following his withdrawal from Moscow Magazine/Moskovskii zhurnal, the first illustrated Russian bimonthly along Western lines (founded in 1991),8 Sauer has introduced Muscovites to Russian editions of Playboy, Hearst's Cosmopolitan (since spring 1994), Good Housekeeping/Domashnii ochag (since June/July 1995), and Harper's Bazaar (originally scheduled to hit the stalls in late 1995, but debuting only in mid-1996).

Purely Russian publications (e.g., Domovoi, Nashe nasledie, Krest'ianka) now attempt to emulate the unmistakably Western look of these magazines through glossy paper, attractive layouts, high-definition visuals, vivid colors, and audience-specific (i.e., anti-uravmilovka) ads.9 The weekly Ogonek, for instance, dramatically altered its format and general appearance with its first February 1995 issue, jettisoning its former non-standard dimensions, sober appearance, in-depth coverage, and
high moral stance. Modeling itself on Time and Newsweek, the journal began to favor a sound bite approach to its materials, a focus on media personalities, "light" topics in compressed form that tax neither patience nor gray cells, and numerous "pretty" photographs. Success stories accompanied by photographs of "heroes of affluence" have replaced more unsettling, politically engaged contents. Although remnants of serious journalism remain in Ogonek, its emphasis has definitively shifted from appeals to readers' social and political awareness to their aesthetic susceptibilities.

Formerly, Ogonek depended on its verbal text to attract readers, and the dark, somewhat blurred black-and-white photographs accompanying its earnest reports on hardships, inequities, and sundry socio-political problems lent those items an aura of authenticity. Just as documentaries rely on black-and-white footage as a "guarantor of 'truth'" and "an amplification of the real" (Turner 18), so the rather old-fashioned, grainy visuals in Ogonek conveyed the sense of genuine, unedited immediacy that Steven Spielberg, for example, strove for in Schindler's List.

Today Ogonek inarguably attempts to attract buyers through its entertainment-oriented visuals, to which the verbal text, short and frequently breezy in tone, is subordinated. This reversed hierarchy comprises but one of numerous symptoms of Russia's decisive transition from an overwhelmingly verbal to a predominantly visual culture. For instance, the cover of an Ogonek May 1995 issue (no. 20) boasts a full-page reproduction of a scene from Verdi's opera Aida and a miniature inset photograph of "colorful" spear-carrying natives from New Guinea (a subliminal echo of the chorus from Aida?). By virtue of its size, the larger image subsumes whatever associations the smaller one might evoke within an operatic framework. Inside, the lead item on the May Victory celebrations consists almost entirely of densely clustered color shots of jubilant, festively garbed participants, practically edging out the abbreviated commentary. Color photographs of Mikhail Baryshnikov (ballet), Il'ia Glazunov (painting), Edita P'ekha (popular music), Russian baritones who have created a stir at the Metropolitan Opera, bankers and commerce-barons, filmstars, and video games emphasize the pleasure of leisure-time activities and the material rewards of art. Through its wholesale adoption of Western paradigms, Ogonek has shed its former identity of journalism's conscience to join the countless Russian magazines highlighting externals oriented toward spectatorship rather than thoughtful analysis. Whatever cannot be "exhibited" for the most part disqualifies as newsworthy.

That principle obtains a fortiori in Domovoi, a supplement to the newspaper Kommersant-Daily, hence patently targeting an "economically-sophisticated" audience. Billed on its masthead as a "journal for home reading," the 160-page monthly presupposes home readers attuned to international standards of economic security. Its four sections bear the pointed labels "Pleasant News" (Priiatnye novosti), "Lifestyle" (Stil' zhizni—not the earlier "obraz zhizni"), "House" (Dom), and "Weekend" (in English), followed by two "Yellow Pages," advertising companies and services. In the May 1995 issue, lush illustrations and ads for Wella Hair Design ("fantaziia bez granits"), Reebok sneakers
computers, printers, and banks purvey flattering self-images, formulas for self-enhancement, and commodities manifestly inaccessible to more than 95 percent of a population whose monthly wage during May 1995 averaged 430,000 rubles (approximately $85), with the minimum wage at 43,700 rubles ($8.60). In fact, Domovoi’s full-page ad for Avtopilot—a magazine devoted to cars, hence touted as synonymous with "the life style of the New Russians" (stil’ zhizni dla ‘novykh russkikh’, 25)—accurately identifies its projected readers qua consumers.

In this fantasy universe of stylish well-being, the body reigns supreme as infinite potential—a potential awaiting realization, amplification, and enhancement through purchasable goods. It exists to be filled with mouth-watering gourmet foods and exotic liquors; clothed in expensive, fashionable garments; honed by myriad exercises and sports associated with the jet set; decorated with gold watches and jewelry; washed and scented with imported expensive soaps and colognes or perfumes; enhanced by cosmetics; and pampered by the ultimate word in physical comfort and beauty (i.e., Italian furniture). An advertisement in Domovoi for the Italian restaurant called Dorian Gray orchestrates these entities into a coherent, idealized stage-setting and exposes the sleight-of-hand process of using signifiers for anticipated signifieds. The possibilities of an elegantly appointed table, with a white damask tablecloth, two glasses of white wine, and several colorful dishes, are sketched out in the "poetic" script that translates dining at Dorian Gray into the reification of romantic fantasies:

Za oknom shtali kupola, na stolakh pereshepryvalis’ blednorozovye khristantemy, pleteny krest a rastvorialis’ v zolotisto-olivkovoi dymke, i v vozduke chuvstvovalsia lezki aromat vesennikh grez i liubovykh mechtanii.

The ad, which doubles as a 10 percent discount coupon (thereby exposing the dependence of romance on rubles), substantiates John Berger’s aperçu that “publicity can never really afford to be about the product or opportunity it is proposing to the buyer who is not yet enjoying it. [...] Publicity is always about the future buyer,” whose glamour will be enhanced by the pertinent purchase (132). Market images thus allow us to glimpse the future selves into which our investment of funds will magically transform us. As much is made clear in the advertisement for Dorian Gray in the first genuinely Russian issue of Playboy (Summer 1995): in an “intimately darkened” isolated part of the restaurant, a solitary woman semi-clad in a golden dress, holding a glass of wine, smiles meaningfully into the eyes of a young waiter apparently proffering her a dish of seafood, but synecdochically inviting her to sample fare that will appease a different appetite. The text of the ad urges readers, who presumably identify with both waiter and waiting customer, to realize their Gatsby-like dream of themselves: “Mechtaite... I pust’ Vashi mechty sbyvatsia...” (‘Dream... And
may your dreams come true”). The orgy of submerged syllogisms in such ads maps the route to the ego’s paradise.

In this universe of specular promise, the primacy of gesture, stance, and display of costly or prestigious possessions—designer clothes, fabulous jewels, cars, boats, villas or palatial interiors, paintings and priceless *objets d’art*, animals—accounts for the frequency with which publications feature singers, actors, models, writers, athletes, and public figures whom extraordinary success or scandal has propelled into the limelight. Fashion shows therefore provide ideal subjects for today’s popular magazines. For instance, Moskovskii zhurnal’s article on a fashion show at the State concert hall Rossia in 1994 ran to a full eight pages, mostly filled with photos of extravagant costumes, and bore the hyperbolic wish-fulfillment headline "Moskva—stolitsa Haute Couture?" In a phrase neatly yoking consumption and visuality, the fashion spectacle was dubbed "a feast for the eyes" (*pir dlja glaz*). Accordingly, "supermodel" Cindy Crawford, hostess of the TV show "House of Style," has become the female icon of affluent panache indefatigably reproduced in countless issues that frequently violate copyright laws by, for instance, superimposing a photo of her face on advertisements for sex-related products or services that she has not endorsed. In the overwhelming majority of cases, she functions not as Cindy Crawford, but as a shorthand signal for "sexy, moneymaker new style."

Even Krest’ianka, formerly a bastion of prudish and practical domesticity, nowadays features vivid scenes from uncollectivized Nature ("woman’s realm") on its covers, while its contents favor physical grooming, with illustrated tips on cosmetics, fashion, romance, and sex, over traditional recipes and news from the kolkhoz. Krest’ianka appears monthly in a print run of 600,000 copies. Given the harsh conditions of the Russian countryside, where women’s taxing physical labor continues to imperil health, receive pitiful remuneration, and leave little time for rest or relaxation, the revamped magazine’s ability to sustain such a sizable readership indicates that in post-Soviet rural Russia, agriculture may be teetering on the brink of catastrophe, but utopian fantasy is flourishing.

**Gendering Simulacra: Male Merchants Unpacking Female Goods**

Despite disclaimers by various publishers, the new simulacrilized aestheticization of Russia has been spearheaded by the New Russians—a tiny but influential group of *nouveaux riches* composed chiefly of men. Amidst voluble feminist-bashing and laments about a crisis in male identity, the 1990s have witnessed the emergence of several magazines patently intended to boost men’s morale and supply guidelines for their image construction in the brave new world of market machismo. Synthesizing in various proportions elements from *Mad Max*, *Playboy*, *GQ*, and *All in the Family*, they opt for disingenuously blunt titles: *Supermen*, subtitled "*zhurnal dlja nastoiashchikh muzchin*."

6
MaKhaON. Medved' ("nastoiaschii muzhkoi zhurnal"), ND (Novyi Dzhentl'men) and Dzhentl'MAN.19

Printed in Russia, but liberally borrowing material from Cosmopolitan, Penthouse, People, and Time, Superman inclines to the "tough men in leather" school of macho strutting. The cover of its second issue in 1995 boasts a biker clad in black, with skullbones on his shirt, a half-dressed, leather-booted "moll" in his lap, and tattoos on his arm, his fingers covered with rings. Two inset illustrations show a naked cannibal from New Guinea20 and an Israeli in "ethnic" garb aiming a Kalashnikov. A proponent of a more powerful and masculine Russia, the editor, Gennadii Shvets, ensures that the magazine intimates Russian prosperity (e.g., ads for Jaguars, casinos, Caribbean cruises), while spotlighting male bodies in action: sexual athletics, shooting and hunting, exploration, "speed and strength" sports, body building, and the like. Technically primitive, Superman strives to project sophisticated machismo not only through advice on sexual prowess ("Kak dovesti zhenshchinu do pika naslazhdeniia odnimi gubernii") but also through photographs of Western icons of infallible muscledom (Jean Claude Van Damme, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Sylvester Stallone) and a list of the 25 strongest supermen in the country (e.g., film director Nikita Mikhalkov, Evgenii Evtushenko, chess champion Gasparov, and, among politicians, Zhirinovskii).

MaKhaON, visually a much slicker new publication (printed in Finland), likewise promotes expensive cars, imported alcohol, beautiful Italian bathroom furnishings, and all the other instantly recognizable signs of elitism defined by moneyed panache. What distinguishes MaKhaON from Ogonek, Krest'ianka, Domovoi, and Superman is its avowed dedication to "love of beauty" and "full rights for both sexes," on the one hand, and its exploitation of pornography, on the other. Associating its profile with the "road to a harmonious Russia," which purportedly consists of a "unity of humankind's spiritual and physical essence," MaKhaON declares its opposition to the "crass sameness of the EQUALITY of the sexes" (protiv poshloi odinakovosti RAVNOPRAVIIA polov). In practice, that "philosophy" predictably means the inclusion of 13 pages of the roller-skating nubile Nastia in various stages of undress ("v zdorom tele--zhorovyi dukh") and a photo-article titled "Lesnye nimfy"--three nude "nymphs" frolicking in water and woods, engaged mainly in lesbian intimacies. Just as the commodities scattered throughout the magazine invite acquisition, so do the "nymphs" stimulate the male viewer to thoughts of possession.

Yet, like most such magazines, MaKhaON actually advertises not products, but affluence and the fantastic "lifestyle" to which it presumably gives access. What the magazine proffers is the excitement of an illusory ever-expanding range of experience that begs to be mistranslated into a condensed eternity. As Berger observes:

Money is life.[...] money is the token of, and key to, every human capacity. The power to spend money is the power to live. According to the legends of publicity, those who lack the power to spend money become literally faceless. Those who have the power become lovable.
...[S]exuality [...] is a symbol for [...] the good life in which you can buy whatever you want. To be able to buy is the same thing as being sexually desirable. (143-44)

Indeed, "love" recurs with exhausting frequency in the pages of these magazines, even as they speak of salable objects and experiences. Editors intoxicate male readers with a potent self-image: that of a powerful man with the financial resources to acquire the commodities being advertised, including the women who, as desirable luxuries, corroborate his social status and sexual identity. The symbolic significance of women's physical presence explains the regularity with which the self-styled New Man, contrary to Soviet tradition, arrives with at least one strikingly outfitted woman at photo-op functions. The contrast between this New Wave self-presentation and the older gender-separatist style of confronting the public is dramatized by El'tsin's wife, a normally silent and invisible persona, who speaks out and makes her presence known only when Her Man is incapacitated and cannot appear before the public.21

Anyone harboring doubts about gender disposition in the brave new world of Russia's visual era should speak with Igor' Mal'tsev, the editor of Russia's self-nominated first non-pornographic men's magazine, Medved' (Bear): "All Russian men are male-chauvinist pigs. For 70 years, the state has been oppressing male-chauvinist pigs. It's about time we had a magazine for ourselves" (Matthews 1995b:24). The brainchild of Vladislav List'ev, the assassinated managing director of Ostankino TV, the expensive (15,000 rubles/$3) monthly has the explicit agenda of restoring to "ego-bruised" Moscow males the machismo suppressed, according to Mal'tsev, by the Soviet regime. The cover of the first issue carries a photograph of List'ev (plus a "memorial plaque" with "vlad" on it) and a selective list of the contents. These include "Garderob angliiskogo dzhentl'mena," "Bol'shaia medveditsa: Eros--ne vsegda nagota," "Kanikuly na Kapri--ostrov starykh i bogarykh," and "Starye russkie: kak brak po raschetu pomog Otechestvu." In addition, the issue contains articles on war correspondents ("Men's Work"), the erotic filmmaker Tinto Brassi, historic houses, pipe smoking, wine, a new Kalashnikov carbine ("Toys"), hunting, boxing, and the inevitable photos of young female flesh. On the cover of the second issue, in which Mal'tsev asserts that "men insatiably rule the world" (muzhchiny nenasytno praviat mirom), appears the scowling, uniformed Aleksandr Lebed', the lieutenant general whose heroic exploits in Afghanistan and elsewhere are featured in an article under the rubric "Muzhskaiia rabota" ("Men's Work"), consisting largely of photos depicting him in uniform and battle fatigues.

What may strike a Westerner perusing Medved', apart from its programmatic sexism, is the magazine's apparent historical dimension. That preoccupation with older Russia, however, merely reflects a strategy of contemporary legitimation through picturesque nostalgia. Style and opulence, after all, characterized the pre-Revolutionary aristocratic way of life, and any Russian today bent on certifying his sophistication and finesse in matters of wardrobe, cuisine, domicile, art, and so forth could do worse than demonstrate his connections with the era of the Anglophile "gentleman." That is
precisely the tactic employed nowadays by both the nouveaux riches and the nouveaux pauvres, the latter constituting the progeny of Russia's diminished nobility, who have formed the Nobles' Club, headed by Prince Andrei Golitsyn, so as to consolidate their elite status and to teach the younger generations of blue bloods the rudiments of "noble style." For specifics of that style—for the "image"—one can turn to the coffee table glossy bimonthly Nashe nasledie (Our Heritage, founded in 1988), originally printed in Great Britain and devoted entirely to the graceful aspects of bygone Russian culture.

The very titles of several new publications announce the primacy of an aristocratic and moneymarker style, notably Dzhentl'MAN (1995), which is a supplement to the magazine Biznes klass (Business Class), and ND (Novyi dzhentl'men). The latter's inaugural spring issue, its cover boasting a naked, sandy Naomi Campbell posed with her back to the camera, carries photo-studded items (combining interviews and extracts from their works) on the three currently most popular (and financially secure) media stars of High Culture: the writers Dmitrii Prigov, Viktor Erofeev, and Vladimir Sorokin. In addition to warming male egos, the magazine has a pedagogical dimension, as evidenced, for instance, in the article by Dar'ia Tsivina titled "Dzhentl'men v restorane" ("A Gentleman in a Restaurant"), which provides pointers for gentlemanly etiquette in fine dining (2: 54-57). Both issues published thus far offer an accelerated education in what a "real gentleman" (a "man of means" aspiring to "style") needs: how he should dress and comport himself, with the aid of what accoutrements and "signs of chic" he should construct his image, and what he should know and appreciate.

"Live" Images and Life's Theatre

Visitors to Moscow have no difficulty perceiving the symbiosis between simulacra in publications and simulacra in "real" life. Evidence of the pursuit of beauty, conceived predominantly as cynosural style, proliferates in the countless spectacles mounted throughout the city: the relentless barrage of openings, inaugurations, "presentations" (of prizes, books, journals, etc.), exhibitions (of art, hairdressing "innovations," handicrafts), competitions. Benefit balls. Fashion shows (of clothes designed by the perennially-popular Viacheslav Zaitsev, Natal'ja Naftalieva [leather]), bodybuilding contests, beauty contests (Miss Moscow, Miss Russia, Miss Hair, Miss Legs, Miss Tit [sic]), strip shows, bride markets, casino scandals, and a broad range of other spectatorship genres. Three "events" typical of this trend bracket the four years of born again Petrine re-visioning: (1) the publicity-saturated opening of the Regina Art Gallery in 1992, revealingly labeled 100 porosiat (100 Suckling Pigs), at which film sex symbol Svetlana Svetlitskaia distributed handfuls of suckling pig, slaughtered and cooked for the "happening," among the glitterati in attendance. (2) In a tamer but more luxurious mode, at the inauguration of Medved' in 1995 at the Moscow Business Club, the city's beau monde feasted on caviar, sturgeon, and champagne, to the deafening music of a jazz band.
Matthews 1995b:24). (3) As the nightclub Metropole celebrated a "presentation" of "Luka," a full-length erotic musical cartoon (sic) based on Barkov's infamous narrative poem Luka Mudishchev that director Roman Mitrofanov expects to complete in two years, red-stockinged thespians performed a striptease on stage, while a fleshy, gaudily but minimally dressed woman sprawled on a table contemplated a teapot and a mound of bagels, in imitation of Kustodiev's hefty merchant wives (Ziablik 16-17). Short-lived public performance that may be photographed has superseded production of objects for prolonged or repeated perusal.

Under the impact of the current specularization, even professions normally deemed unspectacular have undergone theatricalization. For instance, Karina Gyulazizova, a psychoanalyst who opened shop in 1989 at the ripe age of twenty, has become a media star, voted the fourth most popular woman in Russia, according to one poll. With a regular column in the magazine Rabotnitsa (Woman Worker), she often performs on television and at women's clubs that seek her wise counsel (based, no doubt, on a lifetime of experience). A graduate of the School of Psychoanalysis at the Moscow Society of Psychoanalysis, Gyulazizova frankly admits to incorporating into her practice aspects of her second profession—that of theater producer (with a diploma from the Moscow Institute of Culture)! That background, coupled with her four marriages and her reputation as a charlatan with the psychiatric establishment, does not deter clients, presumably with genuine psychological problems, from consulting her (Bode 16). After all, her credentials as a chic television personality with "style" are impeccable.

Quite apart from organized institutional "image making" and individual media-created stars, "average Russians" encountered along city streets often seem ambulatory copies of the simulacra peddled by popular magazines. Clones of Stallone and Van Damme in sleeveless bodyshirts flex their biceps, aspiring though unemployed young businessmen wear threepiece suits and exorbitantly priced imported ties, and terminally soignées young women awash in French perfume go shopping decked out in what Westerners would consider formal evening wear. The dramatic increase in two status symbols—foreign cars and pedigree dogs—has noticeably changed the overall look of many urban regions and exerted an impact on the city's already potent smells. So has the innovation of parading on horseback along Moscow's streets, where horses answering the call of nature leave their substantial mark.

The ubiquitous aestheticization takes various forms: the emphasis on prettifying apartments (Italian furniture and especially Italian bathrooms are "in") and on presenting food attractively in restaurants and cafés, which also pay more attention than formerly to the aesthetics of place settings and service; incomparably improved store displays; individualized book designs; imaginative flower arrangements, and the like. Most bookstalls carry literature on beauty and modes of beautification. The aesthetic trend runs the gamut from moderate efforts at eliminating the unsightly to a frantic chase after impressive effects that will establish an identity by astounding spectators and imprinting
an indelible "image" in their memories. To the latter category belong not only stunning exercises in conspicuous consumption, but dramatic outsized gestures, such as wildly extravagant tips and outrageous statements: Zhirinovskii's advocacy of group sex as a solution to Russia's travails comes to mind—a "bad boy" provocation in fascinating dialogue with his image on Zhirinovsky vodka, advertised, not coincidentally, on the rear cover of MaKhaON.\textsuperscript{27} Transcending the ordinary is \textit{de rigueur}, and the drive for uniqueness and originality accounts for the relentless repetition of the words "\textit{super}" and "\textit{skazka}" (fairy tale) in today's vocabulary.\textsuperscript{28} Visitors accustomed to the undifferentiated greyness of Soviet life might well grow dizzy from the new kaleidoscope of vivid behavioral hues.

That Potemkin villages nonetheless remain operative on both micro and macro levels in Russia may be deduced from numerous factors. Illusion relies on distance, and much of the surface glitter does not withstand close scrutiny. Perhaps one of the most telling, if trivial, details about Russians' priorities is the majority's preference for makeup, cologne, and perfume over deodorant—still not an overly popular item even among self-conscious image seekers. Cover-up is favored over clean-up, as attested by the heaps of garbage strewn over sidewalks, the debris abandoned by construction workers after they complete a project, and the puddles of urine forlornly spreading in elevators of countless apartment buildings. Above all, the fad for aestheticization may provide a (psychologically understandable) retreat from the ugly facts of contemporary Russian reality, but simultaneously serves to underscore them. Simulacra of grand style compensate for, without eliminating, the knowledge that amidst commercialized modernization, the Russian economy is in shambles; life expectancy and population levels have plummeted;\textsuperscript{29} the overall death rate increased by 18 percent in 1993;\textsuperscript{30} teenage crime has escalated drastically;\textsuperscript{11} estimates of mafia control over businesses range from 40 to 80 percent;\textsuperscript{32} unemployment continues to rise;\textsuperscript{33} alcoholism and bootlegging have reached all-time highs, as have drug-related crimes;\textsuperscript{34} Russia's abortion rate remains the highest in the world;\textsuperscript{35} retail prices have spiraled and the Moscow tax hike on imported foods (which account for 80 percent of the city's food products) may push them up further;\textsuperscript{36} and burying the dead has become so expensive that many corpses in Moscow and St. Petersburg rot unclaimed. Even for the stalwart, such conditions must appear irreversibly bleak, hardly susceptible to improvement through individual action. Given the sweeping disillusionment with, and indifference to, politics ushered in by desovietization, a shift to consumerist narcissism offers one of the few available escape routes from the unpalatable facts of daily existence.

Berger maintains that envy is at the heart of consumerist psychology, for the publicity that ostensibly promotes merchandise in fact promises the happiness of eliciting envy: "Being envied is a solitary form of reassurance. It depends precisely upon not sharing your experience with those who envy you" (133). The communal imperative under Soviet rule, in tandem with \textit{ravnilovka}, minimized the likelihood of such envy, as well as the pleasures of solitary experiences. Untrammelled
individualism, however, sets a different psychological stage, highly dependent on economically marked props. Tellingly, Iurii Olesha's *Zavist* (Envy, 1927) explored its fantasist-protagonist's bitter resentment of his NEP "rival's" public success precisely during a period that in its modified receptivity to free enterprise has analogies with Russia's current lurch to capitalism. No doubt, nowadays envy partly motivates many Russians' automatic accusation of mafia involvement leveled against anyone who achieves rapid financial success and flaunts it through New Style.

To suggest that the potentially lemming-like rush toward image is the only venturesome "act in town," however, would be inaccurate. A small but visible percentage of the younger generation of Russians comprise less flamboyant seekers of financial security who have chosen to build stable careers through hard work. Largely in their twenties, they have founded their own businesses or joined slowly developing enterprises that give every indication of success: In Moscow, for instance, Dmitrii Blekher runs a real estate agency, Ekaterina Shalneva handles press relations for the Russian Privatization Center, Sergei Skatershchikov owns a financial information company that now employs fifty people, and Leonid Bershidskii, a journalist, works as a translator for *Newsweek* and *The Philadelphia Enquirer* (Erlanger 1 and 12). Resourceful and down-to-earth (Skatershchikov reportedly turned down a job with an annual salary of $120,000 to pursue his own goals), this quartet and others like them in business, industry, culture, academic institutions, and government offices have faith in the old ethic of unglamorous, tireless effort as a viable means not only of achieving personal well-being but also of rebuilding a traumatized society. While probably not impervious to the lure of "image" (one of the photographs accompanying an article on the young entrepreneurs features Shalneva, for example, with the now obligatory pedigree dog [Erlanger 1]), this segment of Russia's population seems to have escaped the hypnosis of the "quick fix" Potemkin village gesture popularized by the mass media. It provides a vital counterbalance to what Baudrillard gloomily characterizes as a situation of "inoperable inertia, in which nothing can challenge or upset the system of interchangeable simulacra" (Conner 57).

In a culture that for seven decades radically politicized the good, the bad, and the ugly according to puritanical criteria equating beauty with moral turpitude, the pleasures of aestheticization must be irresistibly seductive. Succumbing to the allure of "looking good" does not necessarily doom one forever to a surface, fantasy existence. As Peter the Great's dream of a "Venice of the North" bore out, wild flights of the imagination may translate into tangible reality. Baudrillard's lugubrious scenario of signs obliterating or substituting for experience notwithstanding, Potemkin villages did not eliminate the possibility of the rise of *bona fide* rural communities. And, perhaps more interestingly for the cultural historian (as opposed to the prophet intent on predicting the future fate of Russia), the current Russian mania for the stylish *imidzh* offers endlessly rich material for analysis, delection, and imaginative speculation.
I extend warmest thanks to the six friends and colleagues who helped me obtain some of the publications discussed in this essay: Nadezhda Azhgikhina, Seth Graham, David Lowe, Volodia Padunov, Galina Shcherbakova, and especially John Kachur. As always, my thoughts and text have benefited from Volodia’s keen responses and suggestions.

1 To appreciate the rich diversity of long-standing, let alone recent, concepts of beauty, see Hofstadter and Kuhns.

2 Concerned chiefly with literary issues, Siniavskii’s Chto takoe sotsialisticheckii realizm? accurately observes that the eighteenth century shared the Soviet period’s "idea of political purposefulness" and similarly "conceived of itself as the center of Creation." See Terts 431-32; in English, Tertz 195-96.

3 Soviet moralization of a minimalist way of life accounts in part for its intelligentsia’s romance with Ernest Hemingway and his signature brand of macho heroics couched in a "striped," "bare bones" style.

4 As Mark Hopkins notes, Soviet advertising "pleaded for special causes rather than merchandised goods." And the advertising revived after World War II took the form primarily of announcements. For examples of infrequent exceptions to this rule, see Hopkins 186-89.

5 For a sampling of pre-Revolutionary Russia’s advertising campaigns, see Torgovaia reklama i upakovka v Rossii XIX-XX vv. (Moscow: Gos. istoricheskii musei: 1993).

6 Perhaps that explains why the term lakirovka (varnish[ing]), so frequently wielded by proponents of alleged "truth-telling" during the Soviet period to denounce the prettification of a grim reality, has greater affinities with imidzh.

7 Although the new Russians publications, often in cooperation with Western colleagues, sponsors, etc., rely on at least a scattering of English in each issue, they often make primitive errors of the sort found on the cover of the inaugural issue of Novyi zhurnal dlia muzhchin (Spring 1995): Whereas the Russian title is in the singular (novyi has the masculine singular ending of the adjective), its English rendition on the coverpage is New Gentlemen.


9 Nowadays the majority of "Russian" popular magazines have foreign partners or (co-)sponsors and often are printed abroad: e.g., in England, Finland.

10 That shift was noted by Vladimir Padunov in a private conversation as early as 1992. For another glance at the (re)aestheticization of Russian culture, though understood in a slightly different sense, see Nancy Condee and Vladimir Padunov, “Makulakul’tura: Reprocessing Culture,” Stanford Slavic Studies 7 (1993):53-80.

11 The title, in contrast to the adjective domovyi (house), conjures up the folkloric house spirit (domovoi), thereby suggesting the ineffable nature of what the magazine purveys. That precious aura of "something extra, indefinable" informs all those magazines that sell style, deploying a rhetoric that indefatigably repeats "fantastic," "super," "unique," and so forth.


13 The post-perestroika body in general has acquired formidable symbolic status in Russia. Fascinatingly, Zhirinovskii’s supporters and proponents of a militaristic solution to Russia’s travails, who decry the Western commodification of the (primarily female) body, embrace a masculinist glorification of the body as a "mean, lean machine," amply evidenced by the cult of Bruce Lee, Sylvester Stallone, Jean Claude van Damme, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the proliferation of macho magazines and martial arts manuals (Sportsmen, Commando) along Moscow streets, a mania for bodybuilding, and the related production of and traffic in such growth hormones as Somatropine and Gonadotropine. On smuggling activities in such hormones, see Penny Morvant, “Illegal Trade in Growth Hormones,” OMRI Daily Digest I, No. 134, 12 July 1995.

14 On the role of reification in advertising, see Goldman 23, 61-84.

15 “Outside the window the cupolas shone, the pale pink chrysanthemums on the tables whispered to one another, the wicker armchairs dissolved in an olive-green haze, while the delicate scent of spring reveries and dreams of love wafted in the air.”
In January 1995 the State Statistics Committee reported that 90,000 women suffer occupational injuries annually. Interfax maintains that deterioration in women's health is due largely to poor working conditions, particularly in agriculture. See OMRI Daily Digest I, No. 8, 11 January 1995.

By comparison with the circulation of men's magazines in the United States, however, that readership is modest. **Playboy**, for instance, sells 4.1 million copies, **Penthouse**, 3.8 million, while **Sports Illustrated** sells 2.7 million. Barthel 170.

These emanate not only from conservatives and nationalists, but also from self-designed liberals. On this question, see Sheila Kunkle, Gender, Sexuality and Discourses of Russian National Identity. Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1995.

To these may be added the male-oriented glossies **Tovarisch**, **Penthouse**, and **Soldier of Fortune** (Matthews 1995b:24). Most of these share elements with the irregularly issued first Russian pornographic magazine **Andrei** (1991-96), likewise subtitled "russkii zhurnal dlia muzhchin," the fifth issue of which carried a "thriller" by Iuri Nagibin, *Pereverten*.

In Russia, where male impotence is an acute problem, "natives" from New Guinea may offer a reassuring image of male potency in the two-foot orange gourd penis sheathes of the tribesman. See Fisher 46.

For instance, it took El'tsin's recent hospitalization and lurid speculation about his highly publicized alcohol abuse to bring his indignant wife into the limelight as she defended his public image.

English, not always used correctly, nowadays figures centrally in popular publications, particularly in titles and headlines. ND (Novyi Dzhentel'men) is characteristic of anomalous usage, insofar as "gentlemen" appears in the plural, but the adjective "new" that qualifies it has a grammatical ending in the masculine singular.

A revealing "sign of the times" is the ironic transfiguration of political space, as when the gym of the Central Army Sports Club served as the venue for a heavily publicized hairdressing championship in late 1993. See Moscow News, No. 49, December 3, 1993:15.

For instance, *Life* magazine photographed a benefit ball at one of Moscow's palaces to which an entrance ticket cost "about three months' salary for an average worker." *Life* (July 1995):62.

Stallone, whose bared testosterone torso weary travelers have been encountering on posters at practically every Moscow subway station since the early 1990s, remains a big draw for Russian movie viewers. The hottest current muscle king, however, is the Belgian Van Damme, who reportedly accounts for approximately 20 percent of "unofficial" (i.e., illegal) video sales in Moscow kiosks. Photos of Van Damme, often reproduced from Western publications, repeatedly turn up in popular magazines, and the first issue of the monthly Moskvarium devotes a full page, with no text, to color shots of van Damme taken when he visited Moscow (*"Zhan Klod Van Damme v Moskve" [Jean Claude Van Damme in Moscow]) (1995) 1:33.

Report from Moscow by David Lowe via E-mail, 16 July 1995.

The ad equates Zhirinovsky vodka with New Russia ("Vodka Zhirinovskii—eto novaia Rossiiia").

On the ordinary as something to be overcome at all costs in advertising, see Barthel 91.

According to Labor Ministry representative Aleksandr Tkachenko, life expectancy for men has fallen to 57.3 years, and for women to 71.1. In 1993-94, the population likewise diminished, by 1.7 million. See OMRI Daily Digest, No. 135, 13 July 1995.


Russian and Western agencies report that teenagers committed three murders in 1991, as compared to sixty in 1994. A spokeswoman for the Interior Ministry cited a gang of children led by a 10-year-old, which robbed shops, kiosks, and state institutions with impressive skill. See OMRI Daily Digest I, No. 64, 30 March 1995.


By September 1994 the unemployed made up 1.7 percent of Russia's entire adult population. See RFL/RL Daily Report, 27 September 1994. According to Labor Minister Gennadii Melikian, in January 1995 roughly 5.1 million people were jobless, although only 1.5 million registered as unemployed. OMRI Daily Digest I, No. 4, 5 January 1995.

35 The latest statistics indicate that for every 100 births in Russia there are 225 abortions, compared to 67 in Sweden, 62 in France, and 25 in the Netherlands. See OMRI Daily Digest I, No. 122, 23 June 1995.
