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Glamorous Russia

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editorial

Uniting Russia in Glamour *(Larissa Rudova)*

Russian glamour culture took shape under President Vladimir Putin, and by 2006, it had become one of the hottest topics in the Russian media. The Russian fascination with glamour was so immense that many commentators began to refer to it as the new ideology that the country had been searching for after the collapse of the USSR in 1991 – perhaps even as the answer to the search for a new national idea under Boris Yeltsin. One of the most popular panels at the international Ninth Russian Economic Forum in London in 2006 was 'Luxury as the National Idea'; one participant, Nikolai Uskov, editor of the Russian edition of *GQ*, went so far as to claim that glamour had superseded politics. He argued that politics was no longer about the 'right' or the 'left'; it was about appearances and the display of material culture that accrues to money and power. The idea of glamour, however, is not a monopoly of the political and economic elite – that is to say people with money – everybody was invited to partake in it. The present issue of *kultura* looks at the construction of Russian glamour, its sources, manifestations and social implications.

The culture of glamour owes its origins to the politics introduced by Putin to draw Russia out of the political turbulence and economic woes experienced under Yeltsin in the 1990s. The resulting political stability and steady improvement in the nation's economic wellbeing made it possible. Putin's regime used the exports of oil and gas to stabilise the economy, and within a few years, Russian industry – albeit primarily in the area of raw materials exports – made large gains. The average income rose and poverty rates decreased. The middle class was growing and, for the first time in history, Russians began to experience relative prosperity. The word 'relative' is essential here for although the signs of higher standards of living were everywhere and many people could now afford Western electronic gadgets, cars, fashionable clothing, gourmet foods and foreign trips, poverty did not vanish, especially in the provinces and non-urban areas. However, while Putin's regime promoted the ideology of money, success, entertainment and conspicuous consumption, it discouraged interference in politics.

The ideology of glamour became the most ostentatious and alluring novelties of Putin's Russia. The word 'glamour' (*glamur*) itself has come to describe the emerging culture of Western-style glossy journals, celebrity media, high fashion, the beauty industry, consumption of luxury goods and the hedonistic lifestyles of Russia's nouveaux riches. Despite this latter point, glamour is also very much about the new consumer culture and thus, in essence, democratic and open to everyone. Glamour projects the seductive vision of a beautiful life both through consumer practices and vicariously through the media.

People are fascinated by the lifestyles of the New Russians. Under Putin, their initial image underwent a transformation from vulgar and vicious criminals in brightly coloured jackets and gold necklaces to a hard-working, educated and stylish *haute bourgeoisie*. Since their affluent habits and lifestyles are no longer hidden from the public eye, the media has turned them into objects of mass entertainment. The public appetite for the excesses and eccentricities of the lives of the movie, rock, media or political stars and other celebrities is insatiable and has inspired a variety of glamour programmes on TV and stimulated the emergence of the new literary genre of glamour fiction. Some of the most successful glamour programmes were indebted to Western models, such as 'Star Factory' and 'Dancing with the Stars'.

Not everybody likes glamour. As it continues to dominate Russian popular entertainment, it also acquires a negative meaning through its association with the money and power of a state that continues to neglect human rights and turns a blind

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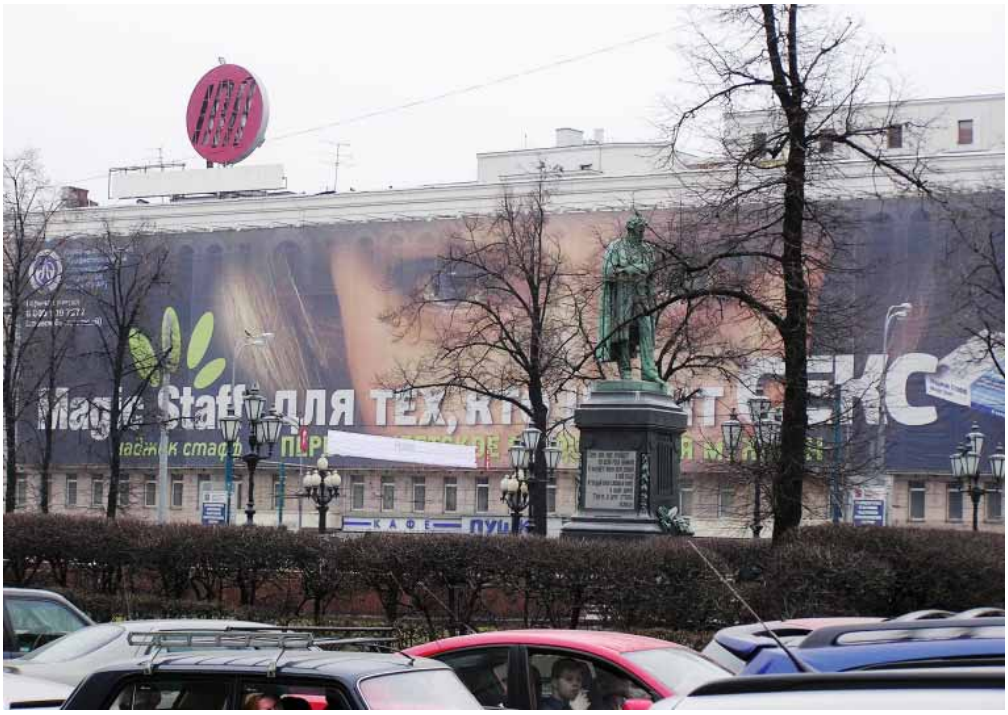
eye to the weak and the poor. Many critics of the culture of glamour condemn it for destroying the humanistic spirit of the Russian cultural heritage. For them, glamour turns people away from real life and makes them socially indifferent.

The present issue of *kultura* outlines key aspects of the contemporary culture of glamour in Russia – its opulence, gloss and seductiveness, but also its social and political underpinnings. In her opening essay, Birgit Menzel discusses how the discourse on glamour has spread into virtually every sphere of Russian popular culture and caught the attention of academic researchers. Kseniya Gusarova explores the relationship between fashion and glamour and focuses on new attitudes towards the body. In the West, politicians are not usually perceived as glamorous personalities, but in Russia their representation in the media has recently acquired the attributes of glamour. Olga Mesropova reflects on how the media construct the glamourised images of Russian politicians as more youthful, more physically attractive, more polished and, of course, richer. Ulrich Schmid's commentary deals with glamour and celebrity TV in Russia and, finally, Larissa Rudova looks at Oksana Robski's bestselling fiction featuring non-working, glamorous female heroines.

About the Guest Editors:

Larissa Rudova is Professor of Russian at Pomona College. She is the author of two books on Boris Pasternak (1994; 1997) and co-editor (with Marina Balina) of *Russian Children's Literature and Culture* (2008). She has published numerous articles on modern Russian literature and culture.

Birgit Menzel is Professor of Russian Literature and Culture at the University of Mainz, Germersheim. Her publications include *V.V. Majakovskij und seine Rezeption in der Sowjetunion 1930–1954* (1992), *Bürgerkrieg um Worte. Die russische Literaturkritik der Perestrojka* (2003). She has co-edited two volumes of scholarly articles on contemporary Russian and East European cultures.



Moscow, Pushkin Square: The 'Magic Staff' – Tibetan Medicine ' for all those who enjoy sex'; photograph: B. Menzel

analysis

Russian Discourse on Glamour

Birgit Menzel

This article offers a brief analysis of the Russian discourse on glamour as it has been cultivated in the media and in popular literature in recent years. First, seven essential features are presented; this is followed and exemplified by a survey of the market of glossy magazines, where global brands compete with domestic ones, and a glance at Andrei Konchalovsky's film Glyanets *(Gloss – Russia, 2007), which is the first cinematic portrait of the Russian glamour phenomenon. The article concludes with a review of the first Russian academic analysis of glamour, Dmitri V. Ivanov's* Glem-kapitalizm *(St. Petersburg, 2008). Ivanov, a young sociologist from St. Petersburg, argues that Russian glamour is a global phenomenon. However, his study is based exclusively on Western material.*

The Essentials of the Discourse on Russian Glamour

Russian glamour has become the cultural equivalent of unchallenged globalised capitalism. It is closely linked to global economic and political developments, especially the media and communications technology that appeared during the last decade. It is a mixture of the new elite's ostentatious self-representation and a universal cult of luxury, fashion and an exotic and erotic lifestyle promoted by the mass-media. In Russia, it has been nurtured by the desire for prosperity and an individual lifestyle in the here and now, that emerged after the chaos of the 1990s, as well as a post-traumatic nostalgia for the grandeur of the imperial Russian past. Glamour has also become the official ideology, and not just a tactic, of 'bread and circuses' which plays a decisive role in job competition and is promoted by the political elite, especially the Putin-administration. Economic success, entertainment and the face-lifted image of Russia in the world go together, while Slavic facial features and Slavic fashion have sold well on the Western beauty market since the fall of communism. Glamour has become a matter of national pride. Managers have become the designers of the New Russian Patriotism. The main features of the new ideology of Russian glamour promoted in glossy magazines, TV talk shows and popular literature, are:

- the commercialised promotion of images connected with what are considered to be basic values – happiness, beauty, youth, health and love – spiced up with the intensifying ingredients of passion and adventure;
- the utmost refinement of packaging and presentation combined with the maximum simplification of content; at the same time, a competition to make products as expensive, exotic and complex as possible, as in, for example, commercials for 'Tibetan medicine' as a domestic equivalent to 'Viagra' and 'Apis (bee-poison) therapy' in Siberia;
- a paradoxical mixture of exclusiveness and accessibility, aloofness and commonality, cynicism and compassion, artificial simulation and authentic emotion; examples include the 'Pop aristocracy', the 'golden generation' of the New Russians' offspring and the celebrity socialite and TV-producer Ksenia Sobchak;
- a mixture of the patriotic cult of Russia's past, the glorification of the current post-imperial renaissance, in which even the Orthodox Church participates in glamorous media performances, and the global Western cult of the celebrity;
- the glamour images attempt to display the ideal of 'wholeness, harmony and radiance' (J. Joyce), but are too vague and rarely understood as a trinity to be aimed at; as a model of communication, however, they are promoted only for the small in-group (*tusovka*), while everything outside of the circle (the losers, the difficult, the non-conformists, the problematic etc.) is aggressively excluded;

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- the demonstration of materialism and outer appearance as a value; the simulation of risky gambling as a successful model of behaviour and an attitude towards life (epitomised by the 'hedge-funds' generation and the use of designer drugs), which implies simple solutions to problems that do not require work and responsibility and an almost religious faith in recovery after loss;
- aggressiveness is promoted as a value for both sexes, while role-models include owning successful business, a publicly visible sex life (exemplified by 'sexssoire' – celebrities nude on the internet), a 'James Bond lifestyle' as opposed to the Western 'metrosexual' image of the gay-fashion maleness of, for example, David Beckham and the a warrior cult of the Russian *muzhik* (macho man).

As for social functions, glamour, as a cult of consumption, epitomises freedom and is an ambivalent phenomenon. With its massive popularity, especially among women, it has the positive socio-therapeutic functions of individual self-improvement, promoting a civilised lifestyle and liberating sensuality, especially in a less normative and upwardly mobile society.

Glossy magazines belong, alongside TV series, fashion and celebrity talk shows, and popular literature, to the most notable means of cultivating glamour as the 'dominant aesthetic mode' (Olga Mesropova).[1] Recent developments on the periodical market illustrate some essentials of the glamour discourse.

> Viktor Pelevin. *Empire V.* Moscow: Eksmo, 2006 (page 91).
> 'Glamour aims to make people live their lives in a cloud of shame and self-contempt. This state, known as "original sin", is the direct result of the consumption of the facade of beauty, success and intellectual brilliance. Glamour and discourse plunge their consumers into squalor, idiotism and destitution. These qualities are, of course, relative. Nevertheless, they inflict real suffering. All of human life is marked by this experience of shame and squalor'.
> (*quotation translated from the Russian by Christopher Gilley*)

Glamour Magazines

The recent changes from a society of distributors to one of consumers, from a text-oriented culture to an image-oriented culture, from ideological to commercial slogans, may be nowhere more radical and obvious than on the market of periodicals. With an annual growth of 13%, it is one of the most dynamic segments of the new Russian economy; 37.5 billion R. (1.4 billion US $) was spent on it in 2006 alone.[2] Back in 1990, Perestroika blessed the intelligentsia with the opportunity to subscribe to a plethora of dignified old, grey 'thick journals'. Now, however, kiosks and book-tables litter the big cities, piled high with colourful glossy magazines. Even the nation's oldest illustrated magazine *Ogonek* is now engaged in a less than glamorous struggle for survival against the brand new competitors on the market. There are Russian editions of all the well-known Western glossies such as *Cosmopolitan* (appearing since 1994; each issue has a print run of 1.05 million copies and 3.8 million readers), *L'etoile*, *Celebrity* and *Marie Claire*; other publications are more like fashion catalogues, for example the 430-page monthly Russian edition of *Glamour*. Weeklies, such as *Hello* (Spanish-owned; in publication since 2001; a print run of 300.000) and *OK* (owned by the German publisher Axel-Springer; on the market since 2006; a print run of 150.000, each copy costing only 25 R.) occupy the lower end of the market. The cheap

1 *www.kinokultura.com/2008/20r-gloss-om.shtml* (review of Kontchalovskii: *Glyanets*, 2007)

2 The figures in this article, supplied by ROSBIZNES Konsalting and TNS Gallup Media, I owe to D.V. Ivanov.

magazines have advertisements for less glamorous British stores such as Marks & Spencer rather than for Prada or Dolce & Gabbana. Analysts expect a rise of 60% in the magazine business by 2010. These magazines, 90% of which are just adverts, make money not by the price paid by the readers, but primarily by presenting a platform for fashion companies to distribute their advertising. In spite of this, Russian glossies, compared to their Western formats, still contain about 20% more text, which includes articles on health and travelogues of foreign countries.

The Russian edition of *Glamour*, released in 2004, appeals to its female readers, who make up 80% of its readership and are aged between 16 and 34, with a mixture of Western and Russian celebrity-cult gossip (*glam-diva*), fashion, beauty and lifestyle advice, tips on reinventing your life and self and guidance on achieving a *glam-body* and *glam-psycho*. The selling point of its 'philosophy' may be its revealing selectivity – 'cool glamour', 'intelligent irony without banality', 'provocative topics which don't cross over into sensationalism', 'sex, love and relationships without moral preaching'.[3] Despite a price which would make the average Russian consumer's head spin (120–150R/3–4€), *Glamour* sells 700,000–1.5 million copies per month; each issue is read by 1.9–2.8 million readers.

Glamour magazines are, however, not confined to foreign imports. Domestic glossies, such as *Domashnyi ochag* ('Family Hearth'; appearing since 1995), *Domovoi* ('Brownie'; on the market since 1993), *Karavan istorii* ('Caravan of Tales' available since 1998; a print run of 310,000) and the St. Petersburg *Sobaka* (since 2000), have, together with home-grown celebrities, entered the market successfully. The Russian magazines generally contain slightly more substantial articles, such as health information or portraits of Western countries. They display a leaning towards cultural heritage, family values and the nostalgic aesthetics of prerevolutionary popular magazines. Most glossy magazines address a female audience: they are read by 19.2% of the female population, whereas only 3.8% of the young urban male population buys or reads them. However, new magazines for male readers have become a growing sector of the market, introducing new patterns of maleness, in particular the Western image of the metrosexual. The market leader is the Russian *MAXIM* (a print run of 819,000), followed by *Playboy* (a print run of 620,000); behind them are other global brands, such as *FHM*, *XXL*, *GQ* (the Internet version of which latter has 9,000 subscribers, most of whom are top managers) and *Esquire*.

A characteristic of this globalisation of print media is the explosion in the number of new book and magazine titles. The accelerated pace of releases corresponds to the recent development which Ivanov describes as the 'trend towards accelerated innovation'. A large number of almost identical glossy magazines corresponds with an inflational amount of paperback series of 'glamour novels', released with an inflating number of titles by the monopolistic publishing houses EKSMO and AST in 2006–2008. In the metropolitan bookshops, series, such as *Rublyovka*, *Cinderella's Revenge*, or *Glyanets*,[4] are displayed on special shelves and recommended as 'Glamorous Paperbacks' (*glamurnoe chtivo*).

One successful marketing strategy is the combination of contradictory images and strong metaphors – a mixture of elements, such as management and music, sex and religion or business and revolution, which had been mutually excluded in normative Soviet society. The deliberate uglifying of faces on commercial pictures, for instance, sells as a scandalous provocation of the classical ideal of beauty. Another example for this may be

3 *http://www.glamour.ru/glamour/about/*

4 Rublyovka is the Moscow suburb favoured by the nouveaux riches; glyanets is Russian for gloss.

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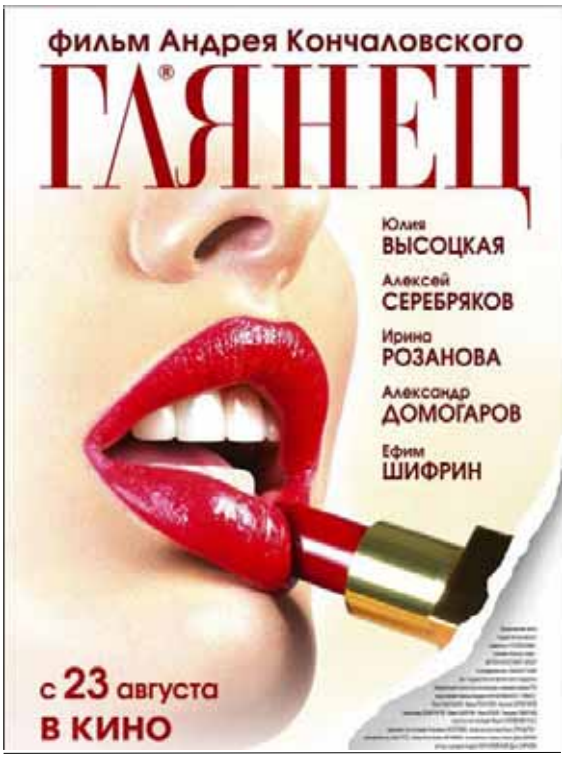
the recent posing of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, for Louis Vuitton and Armani in the net-journal *Icons* (see window).

Glamour magazines pick up and exploit people's desires for colour, beauty and orientation. For some, radical change really does materialise; the Cinderella effect can work in contemporary Russia's upwardly mobile society: Anna Politkovskaya[5] describes how Tanya, her old neighbour during the gloomy Soviet years of stagnation, reinvented herself as a successful business woman. Glossy periodicals and novels offer the means of instant self-improvement in the form of transforming one's outer appearance or participating vicariously in the world of the rich and exceptional, where exclusivity is granted to everyone; as the journalist Dmitri Gubin suggests, this is 'hyper-compensation for the hungry Soviet childhood'.



Movie poster of the film Glyanets *(Gloss).*

A. Konchalovsky's Film *Glyanets* (Gloss)

Glyanets (Gloss) is a perfect illustration of this 'hyper-compensation': a Cinderella tale about the Russian glamour world that concentrates on the gritty realism of its darker side. Set in Moscow's fashion business, the 'second generation' of designers and managers of fashion magazines are presented as today's 'little devils' of decadence, stirring up hype with ever more aggressive strategies: the front page photographs move from fashion towards sexy Playboy montages, and eccentric fashion shows turn into a version of the Rocky Horror Picture Show accompanied by the vulgar language of Russian rap; provocation at any price sells more than professionalism. Once the line is crossed and millions are at stake, fashion shows become an alibi for the slave trade of models, who are sold as prostitutes and/or wives to Russian and foreign oligarchs.

The story centres around the young provincial seamstress Galia, possessed by the desire to make a career. She leaves her wretched alcoholic and violent parents, moves to Moscow and, by being the right person in the right place at the right time, ultimately becomes a supermodel; for this, however, she must pay a price.

Konchalovsky's film is a sarcastic portrait of the excesses of the Russian glamour industry and its obsession with money and success. It critically exposes the endemic cynicism mentioned above (as one female editor comments, 'intelligent people don't read glossy publications: they publish them'), as well as the paradoxes of the scandal-provoking ugliness of the new fashion show called '100% Shit'.

The film can be seen as a sanitised Russian equivalent of the American dream/ nightmare shown in Paul Verhoeven's film *Showgirls* (1995), set in Las Vegas. There are many parallels, from the runaway

5 Anna Politkovskaya: Putin's Russia. Living in a Failing Democracy, transl. by Arch Tait, Owl Books, 2006.

heroine who wins our sympathy on account of her tough childhood and vulnerable commonsense to the depiction of triumphant heroines as classical beauties. The insatiable yearning for glamour as hyper-compensation for a 'hungry [and not necessarily] Soviet childhood' is not only evident in Russian films.

Dmitrii V. Ivanov's Book *Glem-Kapitalizm*

The first scholarly analysis in Russian on the discourse of glamour appeared recently. The young Petersburg sociologist Dmitrii Ivanov offers an original theory of 'glamour capitalism', which he sees as a global system that has spread unchecked since the 1990s: 'both a universally applicable form and an ideology without ideas and total ethical indifference. The characteristics of glam-capitalism are ostentatious lightness, uncompromising optimism and rarefied coarseness'; its strategies are rankings lists and the utmost refinement in packaging combined with the maximum simplification of content and accessibility. These properties shape not only the audiovisual media, but also success in economy, politics (*glam-democracy*) and the social sciences, where impression and appearance are more important than knowledge.

The glamour industry could not exist without the *virtualisation*, i.e. simulation of reality using images, enabled by communications technology. The key values for success and going up in the world have become criteria such as *luxury, exoticism, eroticism, naïve optimism* and, quintessentially, '*blondification*'. Ivanov applies this *hot five* to politics, economics and social sciences and then explains how even countercultural movements have been swallowed up by the *glam-capitalist* system. 'From the glossy painted mouth of the blondes today is proclaimed Truth'. The stylised simplification and the (self-)mocking position are obviously part of the concept of this little paperback. The author understands himself as a translator between the limited but authentic world of the blondes and the rarefied ivory tower of the Russian intelligentsia. The author describes a supposedly global phenomenon by offering an impressive number of facts and figures. However, he only does this with material on Western societies. This is motivated by the author's intention 'to explain to his countrymen that glamour is not an exclusively Russian phenomenon' as the discourse in the Russian media, with 428 articles in the Central Russian Press from 2007 alone and 1383 articles in the internet, might seem to imply.

Preview:

kultura 1-2009 will appear in late February 2009 and will deal with Russian literature on the Internet.
Henrike Schmidt (Berlin) and Ellen Rutten (Cambridge) from *http://russian-cyberspace.org* will be guest editors.

Glamour as Russian Television Magic

Ulrich Schmid

glamour & tv

'Bolshe, bolshe glamura! I makiyazha, i manikyura! Litso super i super figura!'[1] warbles the Russian girl group *Shpilki* (High Heels) in their newest video 'Glamur'.[2] Singing and dancing alongside them is the superstar hairdresser Sergei Zveryev, known in Russian show business for his mastery of androgynous theatrics. Beneath the song's inane lyrics one can see the elusive essence of Russian glamour, which seeks to create the maximum impact through an exaggerated emphasis on external allure. This has nothing to do with a dramatic catharsis, but rather the short-term enchantment of the audience. Glamour is, therefore, essentially an illusion which admittedly arouses, but does not lead to an aesthetic experience. This definition is supported by the word's etymology: according to the Oxford English Dictionary, glamour is a corruption of the word 'grammar', used in Scotland in the sense of spell or bewitchment ('to cast the glamour over someone').

The phenomenon of glamour is rife with the potential for addiction. The spell is only effective while the glittering surface remains intact. For this reason, glamour always demands more glitter, furs and jewels. The NTV series *Rublyovka live!* depicted this aspect of glamour in a season entitled *Glamurnyi manyak* (2006) in the form of a thriller: a killer is at large in Rublyovka, the Moscow district inhabited by the nouveaux riches; the murderer kills women, dresses their corpses up as Marilyn Monroe, Cleopatra or Ophelia and covers them in flowers. At the end of the season, it turns out that the killer is a woman who had experienced rejection in her love life and decorated her victims to reflect herself.

This plot device demonstrates the central moment of self-reflection at the centre of the series *Rublyovka live!*: by means of this morbid amplification, the audience's own addiction to glamour is flung back at them in the form of a perverse crime. In the end, the murderer is nothing other than a victim of glamour's enchantment, which she seeks to perpetuate through the lustrous beauty of the female corpses.

The theme of revenge was not only evident in the interaction of the characters, but also in the media of communication employed in the production of *Rublyovka live!*. Every episode began with a scripted starting point. The protagonists then had to find a solution to the dilemma created by the scriptwriters. At important junctures, the audience could influence the progress of the plot via the internet or text messages. The programme appeared under the telling catchphrase 'This is not a fairy story; it is life, reality style'. Through this concept, the makers of *Rublyovka live!* were able to satisfy several of their viewers' desires. The audience received permission to be voyeurs; at the same time, they found themselves in the pleasant position of being able to direct the glamorous lives of the B-list celebrities with their mobile phones. The TV-viewer took on, as it were, the role of fate via remote control and could avenge himself upon the rich for his own lack of privilege.

The starlet Anfisa Chekhova (born 1977) also emits glamour in carefully measured doses. The buxom presenter of the midnight TNT programme *Sex with Anfisa Chekhova* plays a cunning game with appearance and reality. She claims that her onscreen persona is a genuine reflection of her character, and she goes so far as to suggest that she has a moral mission to fulfil. In one interview she saucily asserted, 'I am flirtatious; I am capricious; I am stubborn. However, I am also an independent, strong woman. It is good to have an image, but I am also worth something without an image. I have my own view of things, and I accept myself as I am. I

1 'More, more glamour! And makeup, and manicures! A super face and a super figure!'.

2 *http://www.russian-imperial.de/video_6896.html*

tv

love life, friends, travelling, sex. If I have experience of all that, why shouldn't I pass it on? Maybe I will help someone to develop a relationship'.[3] Here, the claim to authenticity is, in fact, an affectation – part of the stylised mask that creates the glamorous persona.

The same split between reality and fiction is displayed by Masha Malinovskaya (born 1981), who presented the hit parade *10 Sexy* on Mus-TV until 2005. In 2007, she published a book called 'Men as Machines'. In contrast to Anfisa Chekhova, she does not make any claims to authenticity in order to strengthen her glamorous image; instead, in an interview she made it clear that she transforms her real self in front of the camera into a fictional persona which has nothing to do with her true identity. Every week in front of the camera she pretends to be a 'worldly-wise, ironic, sometimes slightly scandalous person with a sharp tongue'.[4]

3 *http://rasklad.info/tv/woman/chehova/*

4 *http://www.maybe.ru/celebs/index.php?id=37*

Thus Malinovskaya broke one of the basic rules of glamour: the difference between the beaming starlet and the tired mundanity of her everyday life must not be mentioned; otherwise, the magical world of beautiful appearance falls apart. Television creates a powerful reality in which the female presenters are in a sense reflections of the audience's fantasy. Glamorous people seem to present their inner selves for everyone to see. However, the glittering appearance of the glamorous star does not truly reflect what is going on inside them, but rather the lurid desires of the viewers.

About the Author:
Ulrich Schmid holds the chair of Russian Culture and Society, University of St. Gallen. His research interests include lifestyles, *Alltagskultur* and media in Russia, Polish and Ukrainian nationalism, literary theory and aesthetics.

The Glamorous Heroines of Oksana Robski

Larissa Rudova

glamour & fiction

'Glamour is something you can wrap up very beautifully and sell as the national dream' (Oksana Robski)

A member of the new Russian elite, Oksana Robski (b. 1968) was catapulted to fame when her first novel, *Casual* (2005), became a national bestseller. *Casual* provided the first detailed record of the new elite's lifestyle and introduced to Russian literature a new character type, *chelovek glamurnyi* (*homo glamourosus*), who expressed the ideology of affluence, conspicuous consumption, narcissism and indifference to social and political problems. In capturing the spirit of Putin's Russia, *Casual* accomplished at least three tasks: it responded to the public's curiosity about the lives of the rich; it created a desirable fantasy world filled with luxury objects, exotic tourism and self-indulgence, and it used wealth and glamour as sources of entertainment. After a decade and a half of *chernukha*, or bleak literature emphasising social misery and violence, the public was ready for entertaining, pleasurable and accessible reading matter, and *Casual*, as well as Robski's subsequent books, offered glamour as a panacea for all of life's drama.

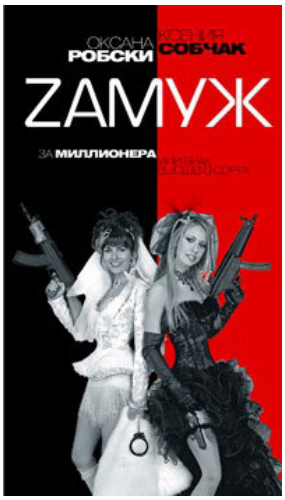
To date, Robski has published seven glamour novels, one of which she co-authored with the celebrity socialite Kseniya Sobchak, a cookbook, a collection of short stories and a manual on upscale interior decorating. Her fiction has been translated into eighteen languages and has a domestic circula-

fiction

tion of two million copies. Despite Robski's overwhelming success with the readers, her fiction has been a constant target of negative criticism. Most critics attack her work for its lack of moral values, low professionalism, and imitation of such American authors as Candace Bushnell, Loren Weisberger and Jackie Collins.

Casual has become a manifesto of glamour life and the master plot for the glamour genre. Its woman-centered plot is uncomplicated and has autobiographical undercurrents. The novel's first-person narrator is a young, beautiful and rich woman who lives in a posh mansion in Rublyovka, a real-life elite suburb of Moscow, where tycoons and celebrities have made their home. Her enviable life is, however, disrupted when she discovers her husband's infidelity. Soon thereafter, while she is planning revenge, he is brutally murdered, leaving her with their nine-year old daughter. The story then follows the heroine's attempt to overcome her traumatic experience and ends with her encounter with Prince Charming. Robski animates the novel through the heroine's successful and unsuccessful business ventures, high-end shopping sprees, cocaine parties, fashionable dining, spa visits, luxury tourism, Botox sessions, plastic surgery and society gossip. Where *Casual* succeeds best is in its message that appearance and visibility are everything. This message is emphasised again and amplified in *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Eksmo 2007).

Robski's heroines are highly successful in society and, as a rule, their ascent on the social ladder does not depend on good education or professional ambition but rather on their physical beauty, sex appeal and ability to manipulate wealthy and powerful men. They are a new breed in Russian fiction and, for the most part, literary critics dislike them. Pampered and non-working, these heroines go against the grain of the Russian literary tradition that elevates socially engaged, working women or mothers, usually casting the non-working female characters in negative roles. In the 1990s, women's detective fiction produced a number of memorable working heroines. The most striking and original of them was Aleksandra Marinina's Nastya Kamenskaya, an undomesticated and 'unfeminine' police officer who put her professional obligations above her family concerns. She did not wear makeup, and her wardrobe was emphatically desexualised.



How to Marry a Millionaire: the two authors Robski and Sobchak as covergirls

Robski's super-consuming and luxury-addicted heroine is the exact opposite of Kamenskaya's 'masculinised' independent women. In the world of glamour fiction, women are neither caring mothers nor good housewives, nor are they interested in anything outside their narrow comfort zone. They cannot stand on their own either. In those cases when they do, their wealth inevitably comes from men. The social configuration of gender relationships in Robski's fiction thus supports the all-pervasive mysogyny in Russian society. Her construction of womanhood flies in the face of such women authors as Viktoriya Tokareva, Ludmila Petrushevskaya, Ludmila Ulitskaya, and others who explore the complexity of women's domestic and professional lives in Russia.

fiction

The success of Robski's fiction among a broad spectrum of readers reminds us how Russian society has changed under Putin. As in Brezhnev's time, the socially apathetic but politically mobilised population of today finds an outlet in glamour culture and materialism, while leaving the politics to the powerful tycoons and politicians. It is in light of this social disengagement that Robski's glamour fiction appears as a dangerous ideology to many Russian critics.

RECOMMENDED READING:

Robski, Oksana. *Casual*. Trans. Antonina W. Bouis. New York: Regan, 2006.

I CHOOSE RUSSIA – I CHOOSE GLAMOUR!

Olga Mesropova

glamour & politics

On the evening of March 2, 2008, while Russia was still voting in the presidential elections, a concert entitled *Ya vybirayu Rossiyu!* ('I choose Russia!') was taking place beneath the Kremlin's walls. The show, organised by the Russian youth organization *Rossiia molodaia* ('Young Russia'), featured prominent pop singers, rock groups and celebrities, such as Leonid Agutin, Stas Pekha, *Mashina Vremeni*, *Kuba*, as well as the rock band *Lyube* – reportedly Vladimir Putin's personal favourite. At around 11:00 pm, President Putin and the clear winner of the elections, Dmitrii Medvedev, briefly took the stage in front of the cheering crowd of over 20,000 young fans. Dressed in blue jeans and a leather jacket, Medvedev assured the youngsters that he planned to continue along his predecessor's path, while Putin made an appeal to the audience to 'unite in the work for the good of all citizens of our great Motherland.' Both politicians left the stage with the crowd waving Russian flags and chanting 'Putin! Putin!' with no less enthusiasm than they had expressed for their favourite pop stars just a few minutes before.

These patriotic appeals by Russia's two top politicians within the setting of a rock concert are highly representative of a recent Russian tendency to link politics with elements of popular spectacle and stardom. In their country's popular imagination, major politicians and celebrities alike have become dazzling personifications of style, wealth, social status, power, youthfulness and conspicuous consumption. Whereas Putin himself might proclaim that he is the richest man in the world merely because he 'collects the emotions of the nation that twice entrusted him to rule the country,' the Russian media do not hesitate to discuss the ex-president's luxurious Brioni suits, his exclusive Patek Phillipe watches and his lavish private jet replete with marble floors.

Clearly and consciously projecting a drastically different persona from those of the aging and 'fashion-challenged' Soviet- and Yeltsin-era leaders, Putin – at 56 – purportedly serves as an embodiment of youthful physical strength and power as recently confirmed by the mass release of his DVD 'Let's Learn Judo with Vladimir Putin.' Russia's current prime minister has also managed to appear shirtless in several photos published in the Russian press, (accompanied by an exercise guide for anyone wanting to acquire Putin's physique[1]) and has also figured prominently in the pages of the celebrity gossip glossy *Tainy zvezd* ('The Secrets of the Stars').

While Russia's top politicians present their political personas within the frameworks of spectacle and glamour, glamorous celebrities and socialites themselves have become an inseparable component

1 For more on this, see *kultura* 3 (October), 2007.

of the country's political scene. In a peculiar mix of luxury and politics, Valentin Yudashkin, one of Russia's most prominent couturiers, has started designing uniforms for the Russian military. Similarly, while generally focusing on fashion and style for men, the Russian version of *Gentlemen's Quarterly* simultaneously provides intellectual content: it commodifies the dissident writer Eduard

March 2, 2008; source: www.kremlin.ru/eng/photoalbum201116.shtml

Limonov and the non-conformist television journalist Evgenii Kiselev by publishing their columns amidst the glossy surroundings of chic advertisements and advice columns for self-improvement.

In another example of the peaceful co-existence of politics and the glamorous world of celebrity, Kseniya Sobchak, the scandalous socialite and daughter of the former mayor of St. Petersburg, has added a layer of patina to her notoriety by launching a Russian youth movement called 'Everyone is free' (*Vse svobodny*). In addition to the proclaimed goal of creating 'equal rights of self-realisation' for young Russian men and women, membership in this organisation also affords free entry to a number of swanky night clubs, as well as discounts in high-end department stores and travel agencies.

Asserting that glamour has clearly become the 'new national idea' in contemporary Russia, some Russian cultural commentators have discussed the fusion of political power, financial success and glamorous imagery as 'Putin's glamour' (*putinskii glamur*) or, alternatively, 'glamorous authoritarianism.' The presentation of ideology, politics and power as a glamorous spectacle not only facilitates an overtly positive image of today's Russian politicians and oligarchs, it also marginalises public consideration of controversial or problematic issues.

As the prominent Russian writer, poet and cultural critic Lev Rubinshtein has recently argued, *glamur* has become a convenient formula that allows today's regime in Russia to foster its citizens' 'non-participation,' to promote individual inertia and – to use Guy Debord's terms[2] – to instil an apolitical submission to the 'spectacle of consumption.' Speaking in a 2006 instalment of Tatyana Tolstaya's and Dunia Smirnova's talk-show *Shkola zlosloviya* ('School of Scandal'), Rubinshtein commented that 'the current Russian government seems to be saying: "We have politicians to take care of the thinking and decision-making. In the meantime you can – if you have the money – go on vacation in the Canary Islands, and if you don't have the money you can read about other people going to the Canary Islands."'

It is a given that politics has always involved some sort of spectacle. Whereas the Soviet regime was

February 21, 2008, Kazan; source: www.kremlin.ru/eng/photoalbum 201116.shtml

replete with its own public displays, such as military parades and the Lenin Mausoleum, in today's Russia, political power – fuelled by a torrent of petrodollars – frames itself as a spectacle of glamour and conspicuous consumption. In the meantime,

2 Guy Debord, Society of the Spektacle, numerous editions.

politics

anyone can partake of the glossy side of Russian politics by purchasing a hot new item on the Russian memorabilia market – portraits of Vladimir Putin and Dmitrii Medvedev laid out entirely in Swarowski crystals.

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Olga Mesropova is an Assistant Professor of Russian at Iowa State University. Her publications have examined post-Soviet cultural discourse in Russian film, television, popular literature and performance. She is also the author of *Kinotalk. Russian Cinema for Conversation* (Slavica Publishers, 2007) and the co-editor (with Seth Graham) of *Uncensored? Re-Inventing Humor and Satire in Post-Soviet Russia* (forthcoming).

The Deviant Norm: Glamour in Russian Fashion

Kseniya Gusarova

analysis

Glamorous fashion is both a consequence of globalisation and a symptom of Russia's internal social problems. Of the latter, the most important is the tension created by social inequality. The underprivileged majority seek to mask their lack of real prospects by mimicking the outer appearance of the elite, thus creating the phenomenon of 'mass glamour'. On the other hand, the glamorous style inspires intense antipathy among many, who see it as a visible symbol of social injustice. The criticism of glamour has also become gendered in that the phenomenon is above all associated with women.

'An assortment of string tops – tops with shoulder straps tied around the neck – are an integral element of a glamorous young lady's wardrobe. They expose the shoulders and back – the sexiest parts of the body, the display of which is not considered vulgar'; this is how an article entitled 'Glamour: an instruction manual' from an online Russian women's journal commentates upon current trends. The issue also specified other elements of a glamorous appearance: stiletto shoes, designer bags and sunglasses, as well as an abundance of loud accessories. No description of this style is complete without mentioning its favourite colours – pink, white, gold and various metallic hues – or the indispensable rhinestone decorations and common use of hearts and stars as ornamental motifs.

Similar apparel can be seen in any part of the world; the word 'glamour' is also international, drawing on the glamour of Hollywood, the unattainable aura emitted by top models, the world of glossy magazines and elite nightclubs. In Russia, however, 'glamorous' fashion is not exclusively associated with show-biz stars or oligarchs and their inner circle; it has become a genuinely mass phenomenon that has even spread to members of the lower-middle classes. The use of the word 'glamorous' as either a compliment or insult has become extremely common in everyday speech to refer to clothing and accessories, and not only on the pages of fashion magazines. Mass 'glamour' is confronted by the no less mass rhetoric directed against it.

As a result, one can say that glamour occupies a central place in contemporary Russian culture; it is a point of reference which a considerable proportion of the country's population – above all, urban youth – use in one way or other to define themselves. Both the popularity of glamorous fashion and the vicious attacks on the infringement of its rules are rooted in a specific socio-economic context.

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'Used to Have a Little…'

In Russia, the system responsible for the material and symbolic 'manufacture' of glamour – boutiques, beauty parlours, glossy magazines and TV programmes – emerged at the end of the 1990s; at the same time, the word 'glamour' entered popular usage. The collapse of the USSR at the beginning of the decade paved the way for this phenomenon: a considerable proportion of the population was unable to find its feet under the new conditions and dropped into poverty. Meanwhile, successful entrepreneurs, some of whom had close contacts to the criminal world, appeared on the scene and came to form a new, wealthy class.

The mass media has given extensive coverage to the new elite's profligacy, presenting it as charming and turning it into a refined show. This confirms the status of the privileged classes and has spurred the wider public to consume in order to transform their external appearance to correspond with the 'glamorous' model. A similar system exists throughout the world; the boundless allure of 'glamour' lies in its partial attainability: it is possible to acquire piecemeal the trappings of the elite, such as accessories and cosmetics, but not the whole lifestyle. Russia is exceptional in that the middle classes are also striving to keep abreast of 'glamorous' fashion; many individuals spend the lion's share of their income – and not merely what is left over after buying necessities – on their external appearance.

This paradox can be explained by the fact that the dramatic social stratification that took place in Russian society at the beginning of the 1990s has become even more deeply entrenched. There exist

Ramzan Kadyrov – a Lion in Armani Furs (*Birgit Menzel*)

R.K., dressed in Louis Vuitton, Alexander McQueen and Ralf Lauren; source: http://club-rf.ru/r20/news/3705

'Make money – not war' was the slogan adopted by the nouveau-riche owners of hedge-fund shares at their yearly conference in England. Might it not also be apt for Chechnya's young president? Ramzan Kadyrov (32) has been on the political stage since the murder of his father Akhmad, the former Chechen president; he has been president himself since 2007. He does not only pride himself on rebuilding the ruins of Grozny and restoring it to new splendour, not least with two cinemas bearing the name 'Hollywood'. He has also acquired a taste for the luxury life of the new Russian elite, in particular in the form of fast cars, boxing matches and wild animals. He shares with the western shareholders a love of risk. However, he does not seek this thrill by gambling in the stock-exchange casino. Kadyrov likes to show in his own, private zoo complete with lions and pumas how he, himself a predator, teaches his opponents to 'wag their tail'. Recently the Caucasian clan leader posed for the magazine *Icons* as a model for Armani, Louis Vuitton and other designers. The warlord with the James Bond look? Paradoxes are one of the most successful marketing strategies of the glamour industry.

R.K. in his private zoo; source: http://www.informacia.ru/2008/news698.htm

enormous gulfs between the lifestyles enjoyed by the elites and the middle classes, between the middle classes and the lower classes, and between those in Moscow and those in the provinces. Moreover, this gulf is growing, in part due to the taxation system, which taxes all citizens at the same rate regardless of the amount they earn. In the light of this, the mimicry of the upper classes hides the lack of opportunities for genuine social mobility. Glamorous clothing denotes success; consequently, it improves one's career prospects and allows one to network better. Above all, women have the chimerical possibility of vertical mobility in the form of a marriage or relationship with a member of the elite. Such hopes are fuelled by the mass media, which regularly produces lists of the country's most eligible bachelors – for example, single bankers, industrial magnates and successful producers.

The fate of the majority of the Russian upper class, particularly women, can be summed up in the words of one icon of world glamour, Jennifer Lopez, in her 'autobiographical' song *Jenny From the Block*: 'Used to have a little, now I have a lot'. The singer is alluding to both her status as a self-made woman and, at the same time, her continuing proximity to the 'common people' from whom she emerged. However, this formulation of the phrase 'from rags to riches' can also be understood negatively. The novelty of the Russian elite, alongside the obscurity with which they acquired their enormous wealth, gives rise to the simplistic conclusion that these people rose to their current position 'by chance' – that anyone could have done what they did. Thus, the less fortunate adopt a 'glamorous' appearance as a way of claiming that they too could belong to the privileged few but for the intervention of a clear social injustice.

The elite regard the lower classes' infringement on their status with disquiet; indeed, this has encouraged new attempts to bolster their 'chosen' status. As one might imagine, this is connected with the importance of brands for glamorous fashion: top designers augment the aura of their rich and famous clients and act as a form of magical talisman. However, the demand for certain brands has spawned an industry of cheap copycat products, available to almost everyone, which for the casual observer are often indistinguishable from the originals. The inability to manufacture signs of belonging to the elite that are not connected to the possession of expensive things has given rise to a constant search for luxury brands not yet known to the broader public in order to preserve the system of stratification.

The mass media has repeatedly reacted to changing tastes among the elite with guides to the season's trends and advice on glamour written in the style of an 'instruction manual' similar to the one quoted at the beginning of this article. These texts are reminiscent of nineteenth-century guides to etiquette, which allowed middle-class parvenus to adopt the manners and posture of an aristocrat. In a similar way, glamour is presented as a norm which is tied up with a certain social prestige. In contrast to the extremely serious texts of the nineteenth century, the model offered today can be the object of irony ('The defining characteristic of glamorous make-up is loads of colour on the lips'). Nevertheless, no doubt is cast upon the necessity of obeying these rules.

'The Youngest Designer in the World of Fashion'

One of the most characteristic features of glamorous fashion is the top-down diffusion of models to copy. The tastes of the Russian elite, which draw on the extravagant fashions and wild nightlife of Milan, determine the preferences of the middle class, which in turn define the mass market. As one researcher pointed out, 'even the youth brand *Mango* mainly sells evening clothes in Moscow

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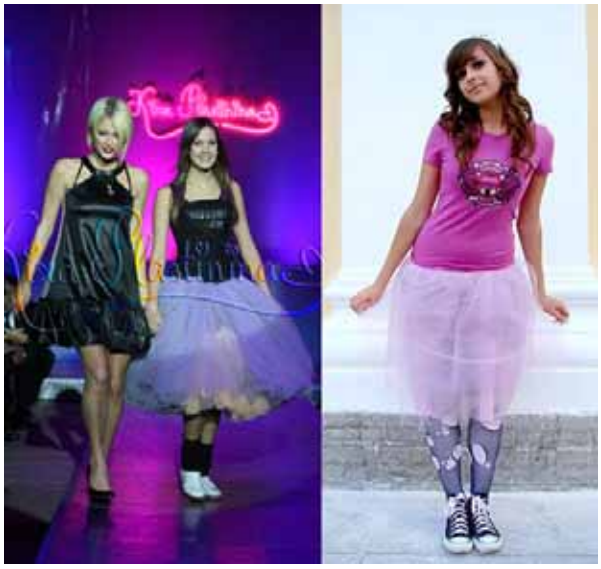
and is constantly reducing its range of simple casual clothing'.

However, members of the upper class do not only create norms by selecting trend-setting styles. As with western stars who place their names on clothes, accessories and perfumes, Russian celebrities have sought to make inroads into this area. These brands' products are more widely available than the brands preferred by the elites themselves, but 'star' names make these goods more attractive by elevating them above the mass market.

The case of Kira Plastinina, who was only 14 years old when she started working as a fashion designer, is atypical in that she was completely unknown before the release of her first collection. Kira owes her success to her father, Sergei Plastinin, one of the founders of the company 'Vimm-Bill-Dann', a manufacturer of milk products and soft drinks accounting for more than a third of the dairy products on the Russian market. He bankrolled the creation of the 'Kira Plastinina Style Studio', set up the business organisation and directed the marketing campaign. At the moment, 'Kira Plastinina' shops exist in more than thirty Russian cities, as well as in Ukraine and Kazakhstan. In summer 2008, the brand was introduced to Los Angeles.

'I'm often asked how I would describe the style of my clothes. But I don't know. Special, in some way. It seems to me to be "art-glamour-sporty"'. This definition reflects the eclecticism of Kira's collection. Indeed, Russian glamour shares this heterogeneity: it runs a broad gamut of styles – from golden cocktail dresses to tracksuits and business attire. The mention of 'art' in Plastinina's definition suggests an understanding of fashion as a branch of artistic self-expression. In this she has the support of many of her peers, who not only wear her clothes but also make their own apparel. The street fashion competition conducted every season by the website *be-in.ru* has brought out an astonishing number of girls aged 14 to 16 who are all trying to look 'individual', but nevertheless still conform to the aesthetic of glamour.[1]



Kira Plastinina, Paris Hilton and 15 year-old Karina from Moscow in a skirt she made herself; photomontage: K. Gusarova

The figure of the girl designer reflects glamorous fashion's fundamental myths about eternal youth. Middle age, not to mention old age, is incompatible with glamour, which demands a carefree and active lifestyle. Kira, now 15 years old, sees 25 as the age limit for her customers. Plastinina herself and the models showing off her collection embody the figure of the child-woman. Infantilism and overt sexuality are the defining characteristics of glamorous style. Thus, extremely short skirts can either be a reference to children's clothing or the wardrobe of a seductress. It is not uncommon to find middle-aged women in Kira Plastinina's shops who are trying to fit in with the culture of glamorous youth.

Kira herself wears clothes from her own label, confirming its 'glamorousness' with her status as a rich heiress and the occasions at which she shows off her apparel (high-society events and parties). The

1 *http://www.be-in.ru/streetfashion/2008/10/karina*

designer believes it is possible to diversify 'classical' glamour and introduce elements of the style favoured by youth subculture. Thus, her autumn-winter collection of 2008–9 displayed the influence of skateboarders and hip-hoppers. For the spring-summer collection of 2008, the models posed in the industrial regions of Moscow in front of walls covered in graffiti. These features of the urban subculture aesthetic act in glamorous fashion as additional symbols of youth and contemporaneity.

It is interesting that the American version of Kira Plastinina's website is in this 'alternative' style, using expressive photomontages and predominantly darker hues. The Russian-language site is much more 'glamorous': the photos of the clothes are set against a white-pink zebra-patterned background and the links are decorated with hearts and diamonds.[2]

Not Just Clothes

Often, glamour does not exist as a separate discipline; rather, it is characterised by its use of combination. In this way, the separate signs of sexuality, youth and carefreeness impart an overall tone to a suit: austere office clothing can thus be accessorised with large, flamboyant costume jewellery which lends a celebratory or festive ambience even in the workplace. The atmosphere of an evening party or get-together is essential to the existence of glamorous apparel, which demands from the wearer the appropriate 'star' behaviour and determines the form of communication with those in one's immediate proximity.

When creating a glamorous appearance, the outfit plays a secondary role in comparison to a well-groomed body, which is not only hidden but also accentuated by clothing. Low-cut necklines, short skirts and bare shoulders, belly or back – the glamorous style builds upon these attempts to draw attention to the erogenous zones. Care of the body and face is sometimes more expensive than a complete wardrobe: it is possible to find imitations of clothing brands, but physical perfection requires substantial investment.

The svelte and tanned glamorous body seems to be impervious to time and illness, and it does not fear cold when nude. The impression of eternal youth is achieved with the help of various forms of cosmetic surgery, including the extremely popular Botox injections used to combat wrinkles. This works by blocking the nerve impulses that control the facial muscles. A partially dead face is the cost of stopping time.

Criticism of Glamour

The abuse of cosmetics, diets and sunbeds that is part and parcel of the culture of the glamorous body is believed to pose a serious medical risk. It is thought that glamorous fashion endangers women's reproductive capabilities: those who regularly wear high-heels deform their pelvis, and going out in cold weather in short skirts and tops can bring about pneumonia. This behaviour does not correspond to traditional conceptions of female roles, and women who engage in it have become the target of anti-glamorous rhetoric, which often takes on a clearly sexist character.

Hidden behind the aggressive attacks on glamour one often finds insecurity about status and prospects. A search of forums and blogs throws light on the character of the discomfort experienced by men when they meet glamorous, fashion-conscious women: they feel that these women size them up, work out that they do no belong to the economic elite and dismiss them from their thoughts. On the other hand, 'unglamorous' women suffer from the frustration of having to compete with their better groomed and more confident rivals. Both genders are inclined to equate the observance of a glamorous aesthetic with prostitution.

A striking paradox exists in contemporary Rus-

2 *http://www.kiraplastinina.com/*

sia: glamour is treated by a broad swathe of the population and media as mainstream, despite the fact that from an aesthetic, ethical and even medical point of view it represents more of a deviation from the 'norm'. This is an indication of the instability within Russian society today and the internal oscillation between activity and passivity. 'Mass' glamour signals the desire for social change, but this longing has been redirected into the sphere of consumption. However, even the criticism of glamour has so far rarely gone beyond the unconstructive expression of personal phobias, a low level of tolerance and an unwillingness to enter into a dialogue.

From the Russian by Christopher Gilley

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Kseniya Gusarova is writing her doctoral thesis at the Russian State University for the Humanities. She specialises in the history and theory of culture. Her PhD deals with changes in standards of hygiene and the concept of beauty in Russian culture in the first half of the twentieth century.

Anti-Glamour (*Ilya Utekhin*)

The fashionable new novel *Духless* (dukh= spirit; Moscow: AST, 2006) by Sergei Minaev opposes glamour, and with it pop music, bright young things in expensive restaurants, the denizens of fashionable clubs, high heels, rhinestone and long fingernails; it advocates a strident renunciation of glamour as a style, subculture and ideology. Who is it aimed at? Those young people who prefer a more simple and economical method of self-expression than the pursuit of glamour.

The novel had an enormous print run. Its title satirises the fashionable trend in naming Russian works, evident in, for example, *Про любоff/on* ('About love') by Oksana Robski, that combine Russian and English words. It describes, not without humour, the world which it rejects as if from the inside. In employing a familiar mode of speech, this work exploits a sure-fire, tried-and-tested stylistic recipe: the writer finds the profane and down-to-earth in that which is normally thought of as extravagant and beautiful, in order to strip away all masks and pretensions. The hero throws up in an expensive restaurant; the characters consume excessive amounts of alcohol and drugs, and expound on their understanding of history between the third and fourth joint. The emphatic naturalism comes off, whichever way you turn it, as kind of glamorous.

This is because glamour easily absorbs its opposites when there is the possibility of commercial success; it allows someone to make money by pretending to take part in the glamorous life for those who themselves do not belong to this subculture, but are ready to cough up their hard-earned cash in order to gain a feeling of complicity in the goings on described by the glossy magazines.