Julie Cassiday, *Russian Style: Performing Gender, Power, and Putinism.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023. 255pp.

Timely, provocative, and brilliant, Julie Cassiday's book begins from the premise that "Putinism was more style than ideology between 2000 and 2020" (56). Over five chapters, Cassiday dissects the various styles of Putinism, developing a sophisticated theoretical framework to explore the relationship between style, gender, and power in contemporary Russian culture. Her methodology draws on poststructuralist feminism and queer theory, especially concepts of performativity and drag. Cassiday's primary source base is refreshingly popular: pop music, self-help literature, viral videoclips, and the Eurovision Song Contest come to the fore.

For Cassiday, popular culture offers a "powerful means of transmitting the model of gendered and sexualized citizenship that emerged during Putin's first two decades in power" (6). With acerbic wit, she points out that "Russia's ideal citizen during the first two decades of the twenty-first century was a young, sexually available woman eager to shape herself in accordance with Putin's needs and desires" (xi). She illustrates this idea with examples from the girl group Poiushchie vmeste's "Takogo kak Putin" [A man like Putin] to the racy calendars that female students made for Putin's birthday.

However, Cassiday's major intervention lies in her argument that much Russian popular culture that appears superficially ironic, or even subversive, in fact ends up serving the status quo. She develops the theoretical underpinnings of this idea in Chapter 1, where she offers a genealogy of the ironic style in Putin's Russia. She enumerates seven different modes: charisma, camp, kitsch, *poshlost'*, *stiob*, *glamur*, and *travesti*. Cassiday carefully defines each concept, teasing out the distinction between concepts that are recognized globally (e.g., camp, kitsch) and those that are apparently homegrown (poshlost', stiob), yet she rightly resists the urge to essentialize these differences. While Cassiday recognizes that style could be weaponized to challenge the current regime (e.g., in her discussion of Pussy Riot), she is most interested in how apparently ironic styles can in fact mark disengagement from politics, or reaffirmation of the Putin regime and its logics.

Travesti receives particular attention. Cassiday distinguishes between transgender travesti (where one performs a gender identity other than that assigned at birth) and cisgender travesti (where one performs a hypergender version of the gender assigned at birth). Chapter 2 makes a powerful case for cisgender travesti as a "central strategy for performing citizenship under Putin" (59). Cassiday locates the origins of strategy in the reaction against late Soviet anxieties about masculinized women and feminized men. In the post-Soviet period, women turned to hyperfeminine wardrobes as a kind of weapon, whereas men hid their physical and psychological scars behind hypermasculine garb. Cassiday supports her argument through close analyses of masculinity in three Soviet-Afghan War films: Bondarchuk's *9th Company*, Balabanov's *Cargo 200*, and Loban's *Dust*. Cassiday recognizes that cisgender drag retains the possibility of "slippage" (77), where

the performativity of gender is unintentionally revealed, but she could elaborate further on this idea.

Chapter 3 turns to the more familiar topic of cross-gender travesti. Here the drag artist Vladislav Mamyshev-Monro is discussed at some length, especially his performances as Stalinist film icon Liubov' Orlova. Cassiday finds a curative potential in his work for resolving Russia's "crisis of masculinity" (81). However, she argues that Putin-era drag artists tend to reinforce, rather than challenge, the neo-traditional gender order. Cassiday considers Andriy Danylko's Verka Serduchka, Sergei Zarubin's Lora Kolli, and the *estrada* glamazons Aleksandr Peskov, Zaza Napoli, and Anatolii Evdokimov. Far from subverting the norms of Putin's Russia, these performers use travesti to make the "hierarchical and heteronormative gender regime" of Putin's Russia appear "'natural'" (95). The chapter concludes with a discussion of Conchita Wurst, the bearded drag queen who won Eurovision for Austria in 2014. For Cassiday, Wurst's performance truly did challenge gender norms, explaining why it caused a moral panic in Russia, deepening the apparent divide between decadent "Gayropa" and the traditional Russian Federation.

Chapter 4, focused on Queer Performativity, begins with the emergence of apparently LBGTQ+ content in popular music and film in post-Soviet Russia. For Cassiday, much of this work is only superficially queer. Again, Eurovision provides valuable source material: Cassiday offers an incisive interpretation of Russian entries by t.A.T.u. and Dima Bilan. Cassiday calls these "double-voiced performances" (108): to European audiences, they appear to be LGBTQ+ affirming, but Russians may read them as mocking, and knowingly capitalizing on, European acceptance. When discussing the "gay propaganda laws," Cassiday remarks that they not only affect LGBTQ+ citizens, but heterosexual and cisgender Russians, who are now required to prove their conformity. Paradoxically, these laws, in their very insistence of the threat of non-traditional sexualities, have subjected the country to "the unsettling epistemological and affective ambivalence associated with queerness" (128).

"Post-Soviet Postfeminism" is the subject of Chapter 5. Cassiday distinguishes between feminism as a "coherent ideology geared towards actual equality of the sexes" and post-feminism as a "less coherent sensibility that blends core feminist ideas with antifeminist assumptions" (130). Examples include Putin's Army, a group of young women who display their support for the President with sexualized YouTube videos. Cassiday suggests, the carefully curated image of Liudmila Putina also serves to promote the postfeminist agenda. Another example is "bitchology" [*stervologiia*] (139), a self-help movement that supposedly encourages women to be bold and bitchy, but actually reinforces the patriarchy, teaching women to accommodate and internalize its logic.

The war in Ukraine sits below the surface in most of Cassiday's book, the bulk of which would have been penned before the full-scale invasion. However, the conclusion brings the war to the fore, convincingly demonstrating how the logics that she has described are writ large in Putin's foreign policy and the horrors of war. She points out that while Putinist styles had appeared to many to be "fun and games" in the early 2000s, the war revealed that they had always been "dead serious" (177). This line resonated with

me as a scholar and a teacher, as I certainly have been guilty prior to 2022 of introducing students to material such as Putin"s shirtless photographs or the Poiushchie vmeste song as an amusing curiosity, without stopping to consider the darker implications of where he was leading Russia.

The genius of Cassiday's monograph lies in her thorough exposure of how apparently playful, even subversive, performances can end up reinforcing hierarchies. Yet such an approach can seem relentless. While Cassiday mentions the possible ambivalence of popular culture, she focuses the bulk of her attention on how they reinforce the status quo. I would have welcomed more discussion of the slippages in these performances, and the unintentional exposure of the cracks in the gender order.

As befits a book about style, Cassiday's monograph is engaging and written with verve. One of her key points of reference is Susan Sontag, and her style also recalls Sontag's: unsparingly rigorous, yet accessible to a broad public beyond any one field. I found myself frequently underlining pithy observations for use not only in this review, but also in the classroom. The book also makes a substantial contribution to the field of gender and sexuality studies in contemporary Russia, complementing work by Alexander Kondakov, Emil Edenborg, Helena Goscilo, Valerie Sperling, and others. It is essential—and enjoyable—reading for anyone interested in Putin's Russia.

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