

BOOK REVIEW

Mass Culture and perestroika in the Soviet Union. Edited by Marsha Siefert. New York, Oxford University Press, 1991. 200 pp. First published as Volume 41, Number 2 of the *Journal of Communication*.

Paul Valery's dictum, 'The future is not what it used to be', has taken on new relevance and significance in the late twentieth century. This is, of course, especially so in the newly independent nations that were part of the former Soviet Union. Not only must these nations reclaim, recover, rename, and to a large extent, reinvent the past in order to create a national identity and forge a shared sense of destiny, they must also articulate visions of the future that can capture the imaginations and mobilize the energies of the citizens of these nascent democracies. These visions must not only be consistent with the new and renewed interpretations of the past, they must also address the current harsh realities of struggles to establish domestic political and economic stability, legitimate policies that cool some of the revolutionary fervor for immediate results, and establish visibility and positioning within the new global order.

The papers collected in this volume, prepared prior to the August 1991 coup, address a future that is now past, but that does not render them obsolete. To the contrary, in my judgment, it makes nearly all of the studies collected here extraordinary valuable historical documents for two reasons.

First, because of the epochal significance and pragmatic importance of events after August 1991, Soviet (CIS) studies are now, appropriately, focused on issues and problems related to the break-up of the Union, ethnic divisions, processes of nation-building, and current economic restructuring. Consequently, the extraordinary period, 1985-91, that led to these historic events, the period covered by the papers in the Siefert collection, is unlikely to receive sustained scholarly attention for some time. When the long eye of history does look back, these papers will provide exceptionally valuable lens.

Second, 1985-91 is likely to prove to be an extraordinary period not only in Soviet history but also in world history, and more specifically press history, for reasons as yet little recognized in scholarly or media accounts of the significance of the transformations. As Schillinger and Porter (p. 147) point out, the period covered in this volume '*may be a rare point in media history, a narrow window in time when political authority has ceased to exert control and economic constraints have not yet emerged to curb editorial imagination. If this is indeed the case, then the Soviet media in the 1990s may well be as free as any in the world.*' I would add, any in world history. Indeed, one can compare the Soviet media of this period with the revolutionary press that declared war against the British in the U.S. following the Stamp Act, the media produced by 'encyclopedia wars' that climaxed in

and intellectuals. The majority of the articles were presented at a conference held in Moscow in September 1990, sponsored by the Moscow University School of Journalism and the All-Union Institute for the Study of the Artistic Problems of the Mass Media.

Siefert has divided the book into four sections: Mass Culture and the Market; Youth Culture; Glasnost, Journalism, and the Media; and Television and Perestroika. The articles range widely over such topics as the relationship of culture, even 'the spirit', to market forces; descriptions of the wares and the free political spaces provided by open-air markets in Moscow; theatrical innovation; the film industry; the role advertising is currently playing as a 'collective mobilizer' (to use an obsolete, Leninist expression) for an advanced guard of Western-style consumer culture; teenage scrapbooks or romantic song albums created by young girls; the emergence of rock music culture from the underground; the influence of Western radio in cultivating interest in 'information', not simply musical entertainments, among Soviet youth; 'belletrization' or fictionalized accounts of real events in mass media as a genre that appeals to anti-semitism, misogyny, and ethnic prejudices as well as to more emancipatory sentiments and ideas; the critical role that *glasnost* in the media played in recontextualizing the Chernobyl disaster and thereby accelerating demands for democratization; the fascinating history of and recent transformations of the *Moscow News*, a paper founded in 1930 by Anna Louise Strong, an expatriate Iowa-born Quaker; representations of ethnicity in Soviet television news, with strong dominance, fully 90 percent, of speaking time by Slavs; exploration of mythic aspects of Soviet television including continued silence or under-coverage of ethnic conflicts, the repressions of the 1930s and 1950s, and institutionalized abuse in the military, as well as the role of advertising in creating a Westernized glamour and star culture, and the popularity of televised 'seances', secularized versions of evangelical faith-healings; and two, somewhat different, views on television as both a medium for building what Muratov calls democratic 'space bridges' and as a site for struggles, for democratization.

Four of the articles (three by Westerners) rely on quantitative content-analyses. The remainder use descriptive, even in some cases what Clifford Geertz (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973) calls 'thick description', and historical approaches. A few of the articles are carefully argued opinion pieces.

The historical background provided by most of the articles is an especially useful 'crutch' for Western readers: one that makes this collection accessible to students. I can personally attest to this accessibility because I assigned the volume to an advanced undergraduate seminar on mass communication theory.

Siefert uses the metaphor of 'translation' as a trope for organizing both her introductory narrative and, if the word is not too strong, the 'telos' of the volume. Quoting Boris Pasternak's (p. 11) contention that translation 'is not a method of getting to know isolated works, it is the channel whereby cultures and people communicate down through the centuries', she warns of the dangers of being misled by apparent

term, the Soviets spoke of the differences between looking through a window that is opened and one that was closed, and then described *glasnost* as the transparency of the glass. Siefert offers this volume, which relies on many translations, as an effort 'to clean the glass in the window, to increase visibility, and to enable one to see not a self-reflection but the power of the original' (p. 11).

My undergraduate students found their translations, their 'space bridges', in the following articles. Bogemskaya's analysis of the open air markets, so like and yet so different from, American and European flea-markets: alike in appearance and vibrancy but hawking very different wares, political toys, pins, and arts, and serving a very different social function in building political community and perhaps even civic culture. The students also found the article on advertising compelling; alas, the 'space bridge' here—that is, the source of their familiarity with the emerging Soviet advertising industry—seems to be the fact that advertising is serving as a tool of Western corporate colonialism. The articles on youth culture, especially the teenage *samizdat* (song albums) and rock culture, also predictably found a receptive audience among my students.

In contrast, I found the failures of translation, the points where the bridges collapse, most fascinating: the places where, as Siefert puts it, 'search for one-to-one correspondence . . . may lead to common ground but it also carries the seeds of disappointment when differences are discovered that contradict that common understanding' (p. 11). For this reason, I was fascinated by idea of the open-air market as a rallying point for the creation of civic culture; the untranslatability of the Soviet concept of 'individuality', constructed in the shadow of the demise of the social or 'new' man of seventy-four years of communism; Orlova's seemingly naïve belief that the discipline of the market will allow the cream to rise in Soviet rock culture; the discussions of the popular television seances by Vartanov and Androunas; and, of course, the descriptions of the structures of Soviet media systems where control and censorship by the command economy often appears to replicate market control and censorship in the West but never fully or exactly.

Writing from the perspective of a Fellow at the (former) Gannett Foundation Media Center, Elena Androunas, who has also been a Senior Research Fellow at the School of Journalism at Moscow State University, is perhaps most strategically positioned to chronicle and translate for Western readers the issues involved in 'The Struggle for the Control over Soviet Television'. Pointing out that for decades the structure of the media system had remained unchanged and unchallenged, and certainly uncovered in news, Androunas maintains that the power struggle that followed in the wake of *perestroika* dramatically changed the situation. It placed media 'at the very center of the turmoil being both weapons in the fight and one of its principal objects' (p. 185). Androunas describes the forms the struggle has taken in fascinating detail exploring such developments as an American-style news program, '600 Seconds', apparently a thinly disguised recreation of '60 Minutes'; conservative complaints about 'the "monopoly of anchormen"' (p. 198); the use of artifacts of the emerging market system, 'accounting

As I re-read Androunas' closing paragraph today—five months into what must now be regarded as 'the third draft of history'—her reflections on tanks as 'the ultimate last argument of any dictatorship' (p. 200), seem uncannily prophetic: *'we no longer live in 1940. A military action of this kind is meaningless today, a battle lost at the outset. Tanks can prolong the agony of the empire but cannot save it. The unforgettable taste of freedom raises optimism and hope that what started as glasnost will become a genuine freedom of the press.'*

I believe this volume represents an exceptionally valuable contribution towards understanding what the history of the former Soviet Republics may become.

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