

THE RUSSIAN WOMAN AS SEXUAL SUBJECT:
EVOLVING IMAGES IN U.S. TELEVISION
AND FILM, 2012-2016

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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In American entertainment media Russian women overwhelmingly appear in sexualized contexts. For the past 25 years, since the Soviet Union was dissolved, there has been a consistent drive to represent on only a handful of narrative categories. These can be reduced essentially to sex trafficking, mail-order brides, and sexual espionage. Despite this limited repertoire, over the past five years there has been significant variation in approaches taken to those categories. This study offers a surveyed textual analysis of how the construction of the Russian woman as sexual subject has evolved to meet new understandings and imperatives. Many of these texts take on challenging topics with unprecedented levels of discursive and rhetorical sophistication, often subverting popular imagination. Driven by feminist media studies and critical cultural theory, I isolate the elements of these texts that interact with geopolitics and socioeconomic realities, in order to deconstruct the mythologies and ideologies behind these stereotypes.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Russia's post-Soviet geopolitical resurgence came to a head with its 2013 intervention in the Syrian chemical weapons crisis, 2014 hosting of the Winter Olympic Games (amid an LGBT discrimination controversy) and especially, only weeks after the closing ceremony, Russia's bold annexation of the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. All of this came not long after the 2012 arrest and imprisonment of members of the Russian feminist art collective Pussy Riot. While Pussy Riot are not a major subject going forward, I emphasize their place in the reinvigoration of a Western gendered gaze toward Russia. Feminists in Europe and the U.S. were highly active in calling for the release of Pussy Riot via social media (Weij et al 2015), and Western crowds even held street protests in solidarity (Gessen 2014). However, the American view of the trial was filtered in ways that reinforced the idea of Russian women as sexy or dangerous. Pussy Riot as a meme drew the wrong kinds of attention from faux feminists, dilettante Russophiles, and opportunists of all stripes. Since roughly 2012, U.S. shows like *The Americans*, *Shameless*, *Orange Is the New Black*, and *True Detective* have offered plots involving Russian women, in which their characterization relies heavily on sexuality. American popular culture seems to express a growing interest in the Russian woman as sexual subject. In the chapters that follow, I explore the rich history behind, and contemporary implications of, the intellectual sourcing of these characters. I first introduce social and literary theory relevant to the phenomenon, then outline specific texts to be discussed and their relevance, and finally/principally explore individually the major sexual stereotypes of Russian women that have appeared in recent American entertainment media.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

At the height of Russia's transition from communism to capitalism, from 1992 to 1997, U.S. network news "increased coverage of women and women's topics in Russia, introducing for the first time stories on health, drugs, and crime never covered during the Cold War period" (Maistrenko 1997, 42-43). *PBS Frontline* aired a documentary in 2000, "Return of the Czar," which, citing a 1998 poll by the Russian government, showed that female high school seniors ranked prostitute above scientist, engineer and researcher as attractive career choices. These kinds of targeted representations can easily skew one's perception of the category of "Russian woman."

Stereotypes and Subject Construction

Psychologist Susan Fiske defines stereotyping as "a category-based cognitive response to another person. [As opposed to] prejudice (affect) and discrimination (behavior), stereotyping describes people's beliefs (cognitions) about an individual based on group membership" (Fiske 1993, 623). Stereotypes may be *descriptive* (they describe behavior, preferences, and competences of the group), or *prescriptive* (they prescribe thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to members of the group). While Fiske states that the latter type is "more explicitly controlling," all stereotyping "operates in the service of control" (1993, 623). Literary/cinema scholar Roumiana Deltcheva, including Russia in her definition of East Europe, identifies three essential negative stereotypes that were applied to East European women in U.S. films in the 1990s and early aughts: "the scrupulous slut, the conniving trickster, and the helpless victim" (2005, 164). In her analysis of U.S. films from 1989 to 2004, Deltcheva takes issue with a "lack of portrayal

of East European female [] characters not belonging to the milieu of ‘the insulted and the injured’ in the resplendent Western landscape” (2005, 182) While she acknowledges, as I do, that there is often a realistic foundation to characters derived from one or more of those categories, there is a tendency for the construction of the Slavic woman as sexual subject to be alienated from the conditions that produce that foundation. In terms of what Foucault calls “discursive fellowships” (1972, 225-226), there is too often inadequate input from, or respect to, the human source material. To put that in gendered terms, “Within the existing social arena the female subject does not participate in the production of the meaning which organizes her” (Silverman 1984, 325). Kimberly Williams, a scholar of transnational feminism and author of *Imagining Russia: Making Feminist Sense of American Nationalism in U.S.–Russian Relations* (2012), offers the concept of “gendered Russian imaginaries” (2), which I use as a launch point for this study. Williams’ work, roughly in the same timespan as Deltcheva’s, extends beyond media texts, looking at state rhetoric, legislative debates, and the place of ideology in a circular logic that feeds culture into politics, etc. Williams looks at the gendered storytelling that has used “cold war triumphalism” (Schrecker 2004) as “the basis for U.S. unilateralism in world affairs after [the dissolution of the Soviet Union in] 1991” (2012, 2). She evidences how Russia has been, and is, portrayed as “not just inferior, but [] female and subservient to the United States” (2). To distill her work into one metaphor, which she never directly uses, Uncle Sam has put his foot down. He’s told Mother Russia where and what for.

The Power of Messages

Symbolic interactionism is a process in which we build a symbolic consciousness of other cultures through communication processes that may or may not involve authentic

members or elements of that culture (Blumer 1969). People generally consider the resulting approximations realistic unless otherwise challenged. Mass media texts have the power to generate common sense, to build “equipment for living,” the scaffolding beneath our symbolic interactions (Burke 1974). Media messages thus become primary sources in shaping, in this case, Americans’ perceptions of Russians (Goering 2004, at para 1). Film (and television, especially more recently) “serve important sociopolitical and psychopolitical functions” (Monaco 2000, 261-263; in Goering 2004, at para 3). They cater to our senses of knowing and being. Hollywood has “helped mightily to shape—and often exaggerate—our national myths and therefore our sense of ourselves” (Monaco 282). Epistemologically, Williams says that the gendered politics of knowledge production, *vis-à-vis* Russia, produce a “hegemony of American heteropatriarchal nationalism in U.S. political and popular culture” (2012, 4). Her work assumes a certain set of underlying fears of, and assumptions about, gender, which applied to geopolitics, are understood as a “public pedagogy” (14), in which focal points are supportive of the American “triumphalist mythscape, of which the gendered Russian imaginary is an integral part” (15). Drawing on the “agenda-setting model” (McCombs and Shaw 1972), communication theorist George Gerbner (1991), in an evaluation of Cold War depictions of Russians in U.S. news and entertainment, contends that, as summarized by Williams, “U.S. media outlets, because they are largely sympathetic to U.S. government policies, depict foreign countries in the way that the government wants them to” (33).

Gender and Ethnicity

Representations of Slavic women in U.S. cinema have borrowed heavily from the treatment of Anglo women in British cinema in terms of pressuring a certain set of mores

linked to gender (Caldwell 2000). Caldwell looks at female characters in terms of Freud's Madonna-whore complex (1912), adding a third item to the model—the extragenerational mediator who decides the value of a female protagonist. Thus, “the virgin, the mother, and the whore” (Caldwell 2000, at para 1). Or, I would argue, the father, especially in light of the American film noir tradition and, more contemporarily, the patriarchy that Williams articulates. Deltcheva finds that “representation of the Slavic woman as a slut traces back to the Cold War and specifically to the James Bond movies” (2005, 164). She emphasizes *From Russia with Love* (1963), a film punctuated by its sexy Russian spy villainess. In later decades, Deltcheva notes, the playing out of Freudian Noir anxieties is perpetuated in, for example, *GoldenEye* (1995), the first Bond film of the post-Soviet era. In *GoldenEye*, Bond (Pierce Brosnan) bounces between interactions with a rogue Russian military officer, Xenia Onatopp (Famke Janssen), and a civilian Russian satellite technician, Natalia Simonova (Izabella Scorupco). Onatopp literally derives sexual pleasure from killing men and represents an unhinged and morally bankrupt gendered Russian imaginary. Simonova, conversely, occupies the “defenseless-victim-who-needs guidance category,” and is “nothing more than a high-tech puppet in Bond's hands [reduced] to the obedient Russian mail-order bride stereotype” (Deltcheva 167).

Williams notes that each of the gendered imaginaries she explores is ethnically Slavic, “which makes them white Europeans; however, as Russians, they are subject to a complex cold-war-era version of orientalism” (2012, 2). Orientalism (Said 1978) describes an essentialized dichotomy between East and West, an epistemological distinction between the ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident.’ Unfortunately, Said never gave much thought to the fact that three quarters of Russia is on the Asian landmass. He focused on

Russia's European aspirations and lumped them in with that continent (Said 1978, 23). The reality, however, is that of an "uneasy triptych" (Khalid 2008, 695), in which Russians may identify as either, neither, or both European and Asian. The point is that there is a special irony to the practice of making Russians the Eastern Other. Radulescu and Glajar (editors of the volume in which Deltcheva's work discussed above appears) note that such representations often involve the combination of gender tensions with cultural or racial tensions (2005). After the fall of communism, says Deltcheva "the Slavic slut, ready to sell her body and soul [] has become as much a fixture in Western cinema as the Russian villainess used to be in [] the Cold War" (164). Inherent in these representations is a sort of *crypto-Slavism*. Whether Russian, Baltic, or Balkan, women of this configuration often serve the same rhetorical purpose. Radulescu and Glajar describe such an ambiguous woman as "not drastically Other [and thus] endowed with an aura of familiarity," and "perceived as *almost* Oriental, as *almost* exotic, yet not fully so" (2005, 4). Or, at worst, "[o]riental or exotic temptresses with an edge of vampirism" (6). At the end of the day, the Western mind seems ambivalent, juggling "fascination, repulsion and attraction, toward this familiar Other" (Radulescu and Glajar 2005, 7).

Evolving Views

Deltcheva notes that U.S. television shows, especially police procedural dramas, have a history of using the ghost of Russia's traumatic communist past to make sense of how Russian-American female characters get caught up in the legal system (2005, 166). While this excuse is reaching its expiration date, as a 25-year-old Russian immigrant has no memory of Soviet life, the turbulence of economic transition in the 1990s carries its own set of go-to back-stories. We are now seeing a whole new set of sense-making

practices around Russian women, and their sexuality, which come across with varying levels of cultural competence. Some actually involve refreshingly progressive characters and plots, but even those ought to be examined critically. Silverman (1984) asserts that the risks inherent of breaking rules of cultural logic around women and sex are that a representation may be admitted “precisely because she is ‘unusual,’ thereby confirming through her deviation from the female ‘norm’ the larger rule of exclusion” (p. 327). Writing in a less paranoid time for feminists, Deltcheva expresses more hope. She suggests that we do our best to “identify [] instances which break the [] mold of one-dimensional iconic representation in favor of a more full-blooded depiction of female protagonists [who] are able to function adequately and are given a distinct voice, thus becoming bearers of a new kind of experience” (2005, 163). Irony has also brought some interesting flavor to the gendered Russian imaginary and its self-criticism, but it can, of course, also be a negligent practice. Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon famously said “irony means never having to say you’re sorry” (1994, 48). That can be dangerous when topics so sensitive as these are wielded poorly. However, irony does not necessarily imply a detachment from concern, even desire for improvement. It can rather be a tool for lowering psychic defenses, enabling the processing of otherwise prohibitively burdensome information (Heertum 2011). Deleuze (1968) reminds us that irony “is the art of problems and questions. Irony consists in treating things and beings as so many responses to hidden questions, so many cases for problems yet to be resolved” (63).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

For roughly the past ten years, I have closely monitored the landscape of U.S. popular culture for how Russia and Russians are being represented. My interest is both personal and professional. A disproportionate amount of the narrative media I consume pertains in some way to people and topics of Slavic origin. This focus, a growing interest in feminist studies, and a perceived seismic shift in cultural diplomacy between the U.S. and Russia, have led me to ask the following: 1) In U.S. television and film, since 2012, how are Russian women being portrayed in sexual contexts? 2) In what ways do these portrayals contribute to and/or challenge established stereotypes?

Sampling

In qualitative research, corpus construction is usually conducted by stepwise extension of a conceptual system to typify unknown attributes (Bauer and Aarts 2000). I began by reading dozens of blogs and fan pages discovered through open searches of the combined terms “Russian”, “sex”, “woman”, “television”, “film,” etc. I then informally polled colleagues in media studies, women and gender studies, and Russia and East Europe studies, asking if they were aware of recent domestic narrative media involving Russian female sexuality. In addition to what was already “on my radar,” there came very quickly to be a glut of potential texts. According to Bauer and Aarts, extension is to be performed until a saturation point is reached, where “no additional variety can be detected” (35). My selection involved the following criteria: 1) representation of at least one Russian woman, 2) sexuality central to her characterization, and 3) sexual activity, or sexuality, as labor. While the first two of these align with my research questions prior to

conducting a literature review, the third criteria is admittedly influenced by the literature. The labor element became apparent as I realized texts that dealt with sexuality vastly excluded ordinary sexual activity for personal gratification. When Deltcheva identifies the 1) slut, 2) trickster, and 3) victim, she defines slut not as promiscuous, but as transactional (2005, 164). I recognize a certain level of bias here, but I also consider that this is a study of fractious change within continuity and, on some level, I didn't have a problem knowing what I would find. No exact count of dismissed texts was recorded, but I estimate three fourths of items were disqualified by the second criterion alone, while very few were affected by the third. Some items were dismissed on the grounds that they were unsubstantial. Only television programs with more than one episode featuring a sexualized Russian woman were included. The final typification is in three categories: 1) forced sexual labor or "sex trafficking," 2) migratory marriage or "mail-order brides," and 3) seduction as spycraft or "sexual espionage." The principle objects of analysis are five television shows, nine films, and one novel (Table 1). The lone novel is included on the basis of its expected adaptation to film. Two films and one television episode are outside the time range but still discussed in length as they are either highly relevant intertexts or have another justification presented at their appearance in the analysis. Most of these texts were chosen based on, in addition to the criteria above, either their critical acclaim, nuance and cultural sensitivity, or their role as counterevidenciary exemplars of irresponsible and poorly situated representation.

The inclusive years for this study are generally from 2012 to 2016 (with extension to 2010 for one chapter). The strongest basis for this hinges on the March, 2012 arrest of, and August, 2012 start of trial for, Nadia Tolokonnikova and Masha Alyokhina, the two

leaders of Pussy Riot. Importantly, midway between those events, in May 2012, Vladimir Putin returned for his third term as President of Russia after a landslide electoral victory.

<p>2015 Avengers Age of Ultron 2015 The Transporter Refueled 2014 Captain America: The Winter Soldier 2014 St. Vincent 2014 The Equalizer 2013 A Good Day to Die Hard 2012 The Avengers 2010 Iron Man 2† 2007 Hitman*</p> <p>2014-pres True Detective, 2015 (6) 2013-pres The Americans, 2013-2015 (26) 2013-pres Orange is the New Black, 2013-2016 (6) 2011-pres Shameless US, 2013-2016 (20) 1999-pres Law and Order: Special Victims Unit, 2001*/2011† (2)</p> <p>2013 Red Sparrow</p> <p>* intertext † explained in analysis () episode count</p>

Table 1. List of texts to be evaluated

The central literature that inspired this study examines representations of Russians in U.S. popular culture from roughly the end of the Soviet Union through the beginning of the Iraq War: 1989-2004 (Deltcheva 2005), 1990-2002 (Goering 2004), and 1991-2003 (Williams 2012). While my goal is to update Deltcheva and Williams, I make the specific decision to skip over nearly a decade of data on the grounds that mindful cultural diplomacy between the U.S. and Russia was at an insignificant level compared to the period since 2012. In 2001, incoming U.S. President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin had an instant positive rapport that settled tensions, even if only symbolically, between the two countries (Wyatt 2001). The September 11th attacks were also a source of good will between the two countries, a reason to forget the Cold War (for

a time). Meanwhile, the Russian economy was in an upswing from 2001 to 2008, due to increased oil production and high petrol market values (Hanson 2009). The turbulence of the 1990s had seemed to blow over and with it a Western fascination with post-Soviet corruption lulled. Though little time had passed, a film like *GoldenEye* would have been unthinkable in the early aughts. Finally, the arrival of nominally progressive Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and liberal U.S. President Barack Obama, in 2009, sparked a “Reset” policy between the two nations (n.a. 2010). This diplomatic thaw resulted in, among other cooperation, a security agreement to enable the transport of U.S. troops and equipment to and from Afghanistan (n.a. 2009).

Evaluation

In consuming the texts, I use a combined approach of discourse analysis (Gill 2000) and rhetorical analysis (Leach 2000). Feminist media theorist Rosalind Gill, a social constructionist, emphasizes the role of discourse as the larger base on which rhetoric rests. Taking discourses, or specific formulations in texts, and applying them at an organization level, where discourse merges into rhetoric, I examine the generative and persuasive power of the Russian woman as sexual subject. Discourse, according to Silverman (1984), here somewhat conflated with rhetoric, “always requires a speaking position (a position from which power-knowledge is exercised) and a spoken subject (a position brought into existence through the exercise of power-knowledge)” (325). My work identifies characters and plots that speak both from and to power, revealing the gamut between. Leach calls rhetoric “power of language and discourse to fundamentally structure our thinking, our systems of representation,” and “what argument structures, metaphors and structuring principles are at work” (207-208). He adds that rhetorical

analysis ought to “link the issues which are central to your project with the issues central to other projects in the field” (2000, 220). My objects of analysis are relevant to many fields. They are identified, and discussed in relation to, interdisciplinary understandings of gender and sexuality, ethnic studies, international relations, political science, economics, etc. Williams (2012) believes that this kind of evaluation “necessitates a tolerance for—and, indeed, the embracing of—research methodologies that are uncomfortable, ambiguous, and messy” (p. 4). Given a sometimes highly sophisticated level of character development (even in the presence of rampant cliché), and an often deliberate mutation from standard deviations on the central themes, the majority of the texts under study here need to be respected as a menagerie in which, at least to some extent, the ends of the analysis justify the means. In short, what Deleuze and Guattari call “assemblage” (1987).

As above I noted three inspirations for this study, yet only have promised to update two of them, I now explain why Goering’s (2004) methodology, especially in consideration of its results, acts more as a cautionary tale than anything. Goering coded 26 films for Russian movie characters’ aspects of self-identity (Kuhn and McPartland 1954), including roles and statuses, personality characteristics, interests and aversions, and goals. However, her work is numb to gender and gendered configurations. She claims that (at para 7) “more recent films [] show Russians in a wide variety of occupations, including taxi driver, nurse, doctor, journalist, school teacher, hooker, engineer—” Wait, what? The list goes on for a dozen more occupations, but she just casually skips past “hooker,” as if it has no special connotation versus the other categories. Given that Goering ends up looking mainly at men, and deals with easily legible configurations, she

claims “[t]hey often are no longer cast as ‘Russians’; rather, they are neighbors, shop owners, service workers, acquaintances, friends, etc., who just happen to be Russian” (2004, at para 7). I took this as a cue not to immerse myself in coding, because, if you see a sex worker in a film and she has a Russian accent, what is the real likelihood of her being ambient and arhetorical, especially if she has more than a few lines or even major screen time? In evaluating media that feature Russian female characters, Williams recommends “a sustained analysis of the implicit sexism, heteronormativity, and orientalism embedded in many of the films” (2012, 15). Those issues are a bit wily for any classical coding scheme. Also, while I accept her imperative, I note that Williams is focused more on higher-echelon political analysis and her corpus does not interact with imaginaries at street level, which is territory I explore here in depth.

CHAPTER IV

SEX TRAFFICKING

“Even under appalling conditions people exercise capacities for choice and action that deserve respect”

–Diana Tietjens Meyers

The character of the sex-trafficked Russian woman often draws on simplified notions of a deep and troubled history, politically and culturally, between the U.S. and Russia. Recent depictions of sex-trafficked Russian women have appeared most notably in the premium cable shows *Shameless* and *True Detective*, as well as in the film *The Equalizer*. The plots and characters in these texts offer social commentary about coerced sexual labor, pointing both to dominant views in American culture and challenges to them. Before I examine the texts themselves, I begin with an effort to separate myth from reality so that we might understand what a fair (or unfair) representation consists of.

Background

Prostitution as Slavery

In Victorian England, women’s sexual desire was often exoticized, medicalized, and articulated as a threat (McLaughlin 1991, Groneman 1994). The “prostitute,” says McLaughlin, became something of a “folk devil [and] an agent of disease and moral disorder” (251). In the U.S. late Progressive Era (1900-1917) a moral panic erupted surrounding prostitution. European-American women who performed it were enveloped into a narrative of victimhood in which they became “white slaves,” lured by racially Other men, into sexual slavery (McLaughlin 1991, 252). Governments, religious groups, and other organizations orchestrated campaigns against white slavery that called for the total abolition of prostitution itself. Unlike abolitionist movements against the sale of

African people in the North Atlantic slave trade, these campaigns meant to abolish even voluntary labor if it was of a sexual nature. A puritanical tone regarding the topic was imbedded across a full array of popular cultural and political discourses (Doezema 1999, 25). Women intent on countering the slave narrative were accused, a la Marx, of having a “false consciousness” (Eagleton 1991, 89)—i.e. they do not know what is really good for them. American cinema of the Progressive Era emphasized the “angelically glowing white woman,” a trope that served two purposes: 1) it asserted the hegemony of whiteness in an age of anxieties over rapid immigration, and 2) it set “a trap of moral obligation and unreal moral demands” for women (Dyer 1970, 130). This is important history going forward, as we discuss the rise of “trafficking in women” discourse that accompanied post-Soviet mass-migration. Doezema (1999) says that “narratives of innocent, virginal victims” being dragged into prostitution, which were projected by U.S. government policy and popular culture in the 1990s, were “a modern version of the myth of ‘white slavery’ [that] “reflect[ed] persisting anxieties about female sexuality and women’s autonomy” (Doezema 1999, 23).

The word “prostitute” is actually quite antiquated. Many take offense to its gendered and pathologized connotation. Merriam-Webster.com acknowledges prostitute only in verb form, associated with the noun *sex worker*, which I use henceforth, defined as “a person whose work involves sexually explicit behavior.” The work itself I will call *transactional sex*, not to be confused with the broader panoply of *sex work*, which also includes all other forms of eroticism. Currently, U.S. Code defines *sex trafficking* rather vaguely as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act” (22 USC 2011).

The Natasha Trade

A 1995 International Organization for Migration report sparked the first alarm over Russian and East European women emigrating to find sex work: “[T]he trafficking of women from East to West is increasing rapidly. This form of exploitation and abuse of human rights is no longer confined to women from developing countries” (IOM 1995, 3). The language was plain enough. It was not okay that tens of thousands of *white* women had been reduced to selling their bodies. The archetype born of this time was “Natasha,” a lost, innocent victim duped by organized criminals. Western media emphasized the tragedy of “failed governments that cannot adequately protect their citizens” (Suchland 2015, 65). The following factual summary of related field work epitomizes what experts came to call the “Natasha trade”:

The Russian Federation is a major sending country for women trafficked into sex industries around the world [...] Women are recruited [] by various means, but upon reaching the destination country, they find that the promised job [] is really prostitution under brutal and exploitative circumstances [...] The traffickers and pimps control women by confiscating their travel documents, battering, rape, threats to harm them or family members, and debt bondage” (Hughes 2005, 209).

This kind of data from case studies became the singular truth about international migration by sex workers. U.S. government reports, and in turn news reporting, created “confusion and hyperbole about the magnitude of trafficking,” where sensationalized accounts routinely conflated sex workers, “mail-order brides,” and trafficking victims (Suchland 2015, 64-66). Williams (2012) notes, given that the U.S. is a major destination country for trafficking, we ought to question “the role [it] plays in sustaining the traffic in women from Russia” (17). News media and popular culture, says Williams, have “direct material effects [] on the continued ‘real’ trafficking of Russian women into the [U.S.] for work in the sex industry” (38). In short, Natasha is a proscriptive stereotype. Her role in

antitrafficking discussions narrows advocacy efforts and, as Suchland says in her important macroeconomic critique of post-Soviet transition, obscures “recognition of trafficking’s roots in political economy” (2015, 156).

Economic Violence

Russia’s conversion to a market economy led to unprecedented concentration of wealth into the hands of a small cohort of former Soviet industrial managers (Copetas 1991). The *nouveau riche* then had to cooperate by integrating with a massive informal sector long-maintained by criminal underclasses (Handelman 1995). Meanwhile, the Russian treasury was divesting state assets in broad strokes. “It took only a few weeks in early 1992 [] to destroy the old planned economy, as well as the life savings of the majority of Russian citizens. Now privatization would be carried out with the same ruthless speed” (Klebnikov 2001, 125). Those lucky or brutal enough to come out on top had to hire private security (moonlighting soldiers or police) to protect their assets (Volkov 2002). In the U.S., the chaos that ensued was explained by portraying Russians as possessing an inherent and tragic flaw—their incapability to respect the rule of law (Suchland 2015, 69). Politicians presented the U.S. as an innocent bystander and western advisors culpability never entered the national conversation, despite Russia’s use of a “shock therapy” program developed by Harvard economists and mandated as a stipulation in order for Russia to receive U.S. aid (Wedel 2001). Lacking any notion of a stable telos, ideological importance in privatizing was placed mainly on speed (Suchland 122, 129). Meanwhile, focus on “the ‘old’ violence of totalitarianism [] validated and obscured the violence of new capitalist arrangements” (131). The U.S. effort to dictate Russia’s economic transition was codified in the Freedom Support Act of 1992 (FSA), by

which “state assets of a former superpower became the objects of neocolonial conquest for largely U.S. and Western corporate and political elites” (Williams 2012, 3).

Williams and Suchland both argue that while the end of the Soviet Union should have been a time for reflection, the main imperative was to kick Russia while it was down, if not do worse. Williams considers the FSA central to gender-as-discourse directed at Russia. She notes that in a series of hearings to clarify the language of the FSA, the term “active penetration” was used to describe commerce goals of U.S. corporations and the overall strategy of U.S. “assistance” (66). In context, says Williams this is “suggestive of forced heterosexual intercourse, [] justified by the potent combination of cold-war triumphalism and American exceptionalism” (66). And yet the FSA’s pro-business agenda was remarkably un-gendered in terms of intellectual input and allocation of funds. At the hearings in 1991 and 1992, where legislators debated the nature of the aid, no women served on any of the committees charged with hearing testimony. This, says Williams, reveals a “striking absence among U.S. policymakers [] of any concern for [] how U.S. Russia policy would affect ordinary Russian people, particularly women [and] children” (42). The erasure of Russia’s social safety net in the 1990s had deeply gendered repercussions. Women “experienced greater discrimination, a loss in their competitive abilities, and reduction in employment opportunities” (Suchland 131).

Imagining Miseducation

“[F]emale prostitutes” have a substantial history in Russian mythology (Williams 2012, 104), where they have served to signify humiliation and desperation in “a country forced to sell off its natural and spiritual resources to unscrupulous clients from other

lands” (Borenstein 2006, 175). Women in “mythologies of motherhood in Russian folklore” have carried “antagonisms between what is considered truly Russian and what is corrupted by the West” (Kunkle 1995, 181). Hughes (2005) argues that Western glamour “with its emphasis on [] cosmetics, and fashion was quickly embraced by many women in the Soviet Union as a relief from the imposed drabness of communism” (223). She asserts that in the 1990s, Russians were bombarded by sexualized images in U.S. film and television, and “few [women] could differentiate between liberalization and exploitation” (224). Political scientist Yulia Tverdova claims that in early 1990s Russia, “[r]apidly growing prostitution was the by-product of a belated sexual revolution. Inspired by media and movies, young girls were no longer ashamed to offer their bodies for sale” (2010, 333). As “[w]omen’s fashions became minimalist and provocative,” says Tverdova, men also “felt more freedom to violate a woman’s body [and] the number of rape reports skyrocketed” (2010, 133). The image of Soviet sexuality expressed in the 1990 *ABC News Nightline* report “Sex in the Soviet Union” was one of dangerous incompetence, depicting young women as incapable of detecting their own late-term pregnancies—a moot point, perhaps, given that abortion was the primary form of birth control in the Soviet Union (Williams 1996). The ABC report, says Suchland, supported the idea that Soviet women were “burdened by ‘newfound’ sexual freedoms that they [were] unable to manage [] and this [] made them the perfect prey for traffickers” (2015, 65).

Myths about Trafficking

Globally, there are four major myths proliferated about human trafficking—that its subjects are: 1) female, 2) poor, 3) uneducated, and 4) coerced (Vijayarasa 2015).

Vijayarasa says that while in some contexts “trafficking *is*, in fact, gendered [and it is] essential to recognize women-specific patterns [] push factors and experiences of trafficking” (134-135), a dichotomy of male perpetrator and female victim is a disservice. It 1) does not account for ample evidence of female perpetrators (133), and 2) feminizes trafficking discourse, resulting in stigmatization of male victims, who may perform intense physical labor under duress (161). As poverty is concerned, “studies and trafficking discourse fail to distinguish between absolute and relative poverty” (113). Government reports have characterized East European women as entering into the sex trade out of desperation (133). A common picture is one of destitute peasant women plucked from obscurity in the countryside and auctioned off by recruiters for work abroad (Raymond and Hughes 2001, Hughes and Denisova 2003). A version of this narrative appears in three of the five texts I will soon discuss. Vijayarasa considers that in many cases, the push factor is “the pursuit of improved economic (and social) circumstances rather than the need to address extreme hunger or desperation” (113). Trafficked women are also “presumed to have a lower capacity to assess the risks associated” (97), despite, for example, data from Ukraine showing an inverse relationship between trafficking and education levels (98). “An alternative model, the educated victim as risk-taker [shows that] movement is not driven by naivety but rather by the empowerment derived from higher levels of education than their peers” (112). Finally is the myth of coercion, the most complex of the four. I acknowledge, as do the scholars I have read, that when a sex worker is denied their freedom or safety, it is a terrible situation that should be approached with the full force of the law. However, as Vijayarasa, a human rights lawyer illustrates, “the coerced victim [] is atypical” (2015, 69). Cases and data regularly “fall

outside of the definitions of physical, mental, legal and psychological coercion (71). Voluntariness is a significant aspect in the process. Indeed, both Suchland (2015, 62) and Vijayarasa (117) avoid the term “trafficking” in favor of “irregular migration,” which helps address the vagueness in the U.S. Code definition. Meyers (2013) says that the challenge of framing “trafficking” discourse is “to provide an account of agency that acknowledges the compatibility of agency and victimization and that explicates women’s empowerment” (433). Autonomy, she says, can be a matter of degree and duration.

Condemning the Victim

In response to the Natasha trade, the U.S. government formed antitrafficking legislation that emphasized the role of criminal behavior and a “link between ‘violence against women’ and postsocialist criminality” (Suchland 2015, 54). In October 2000, Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) and the Clinton administration rolled out a strategy of the “three Ps:” prosecution of traffickers, protection of victims, and prevention of recruitment in source countries. According to Williams (2012, 97):

[P]redominately white, male policymakers [] rhetorically cast [the U.S.] in the role of the heteropatriarchal hero with the messianic responsibility of rescuing innocent, young, non-Western female victims from the clutches of foreign (i.e., racially/ethnically Other) villains, particularly transnational crime networks.

While the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009) stopped focusing on Russia’s instability and dangerousness, it elevated discourse on trafficking in general. Soderlund (2005) notes a reinvigoration of the “raid-and-rehabilitation” method of curbing sex trafficking, in which “captivity and freedom [are] diametrically opposed states of existence” (64-65). She identifies the unlikely allegiance of Christian evangelicals and liberal feminists, both willing to maintain an abolitionist stance about

sex work—what Bernstein (2010) calls “militarized humanitarianism meets carceral feminism.” Rather than attempting to address trafficking as a matter of “human security” (Lobasz 2009), tied to macroeconomics, the Bush Administration privileged a “prosecutorial antitrafficking apparatus [where] victims of trafficking only receive [] services once they become potential plaintiffs in a legal case” (Suchland 2015, 54), which is a level of exposure most sex workers want nothing to do with. Jacobsen and Skilbrei (2010) identify what they call “reproachable victims,” in that “[a]s ‘victims’ [trafficked women] are believed to lack the qualities of an active choosing self, while as ‘prostitutes’ they are singled out as different from other women and deserving of [] shame” (208). Jacobsen and Skilbrei also address the impact of proscriptive stereotypes. They conclude from ethnographic field work with native Russian women working in transnational prostitution, that “their experiences, and the way they account for them, are [] informed by [] dominant popular representations” (2010, 194). Some are “worried that the association between Russianness and prostitution would limit [their] chances of making a life” otherwise (206).

Textual Analysis

Shameless

On Showtime’s *Shameless* [U.S.] (2010-), Svetlana Fisher (fmr. Milkovich), played by Croatian actress Isadora Goreshter, is a Russian-American former sex worker sold into forced sexual labor by her father at a young age and sent to the United States in a shipping crate. The catch here is that the show is an ironically saturated black comedy, which I argue does not preclude it from producing a serious critique of the stereotypes it uses. Svetlana’s character arc stretches across four seasons and consists of four distinct

phases: 1) struggling/being pushed around, 2) maneuvering toward stability, 3) callous entrepreneurship, and 4) inclusion and fulfillment. On balance, Svetlana's narrative offers a wide range of possible experiences associated with sex work, and more specifically its performance by Russian irregular immigrants.

Shameless follows the Gallaghers, an impoverished family on Chicago's south side tended by the eldest of its six children in the absence of parents who are drug addicts and struggle with mental illnesses. One of the children, Ian, is in a gay relationship with a neighbor, Mickey Milkovich. When Milkovich's father, Terry, catches Mickey and Ian having sex, he viciously beats them before phoning a female Russian sex worker to "fuck the faggot out" of Mickey (3.6 Cascading Failures). Svetlana is a minor character in the third season, where she shows up several episodes later for the purpose of identifying her place of employment, a massage parlor, to the audience (3.10 Civil Wrongs). In the following episode, under the threat of even more serious violence, Svetlana is wed to Mickey in a small, rushed ceremony orchestrated by Terry (3.11 Order Room Service). In season four, Svetlana's presence increases substantially. She is quickly positioned into greater relevance to the plot. The season opens to her pregnant with Mickey's child while working at the "rub and tug" (massage parlor), performing manual ejaculation on men for \$12 per client (4.1 Simple Pleasures), as well as oral sex at an unknown rate. Mickey grows frustrated with Svetlana's inadequate wages and decides to take command of the situation (4.4 Strangers on a Train). He visits the parlor with Svetlana at his side and rounds up all of the employees (in the absence of their managers), marching them out the door with the promise of a strike for better wages. Mickey returns later to negotiate. In an alley behind the building, a cargo truck hauling a metal shipping container is backing up.

Mickey is shocked to learn that the boss, Sasha, is a woman. Armed with a handgun, he tells her what he wants the new prices to be and she ignores him, telling her bodyguards to open the container. Inside are six young women with luggage in tow (Figure 1). Seeing that Sasha has replenished her personnel, Mickey makes a lighter offer, but she replies, “Your girls are tired and stretched out. Go fuck yourself.” As de facto manager, Mickey has to figure out what to do with the women (4.5 There’s the Rub). First, he temporarily hosts them at his house (Figure 2), but the situation becomes untenable after one of the



Figure 1. Trafficked sex workers being delivered



Figure 2. Interim housing for sex workers on strike

women sleeps with his sister's boyfriend. "I'm practically tripping over these bitches!" she yells, "I want them gone *now!*" Mickey's solution is to partner with a local bar owner who has an unused apartment upstairs, which quickly becomes a brothel-in-tenement. Mickey settles into his role as pimp and verbally abuses his employees while ignoring his pregnant wife in favor of spending his time with Ian—which is now safe to do, given that Terry is in jail (4.8 Hope Springs Paternal). Svetlana asserts herself by threatening to visit Terry in jail and tell him how she is being treated. She demands money for a stroller, diapers, and other things, especially a babysitter. Svetlana scolds Mickey for avoiding her since the baby was born and for not knowing his name. Svetlana tells Mickey that the baby's name is Evgeni, after her father. She also tells him that while her father sold her to a Russian pimp for \$300, he wasn't a bad person (4.9 The Legend of Bonnie and Carl). When Terry is released from jail, Svetlana continues to hold Mickey's secret relationship over his head. Mickey gets ahead of the situation by announcing at the bar, to everyone, including Terry, that he is gay. Terry solemnly attempts to beat Mickey to death and is sent away for what will be a lengthy prison term (4.11 Emily). With Terry Back in jail, Svetlana tries to make amends with Mickey by approaching him out of the blue, equipped with a strap-on dildo (4.12 Lazarus). He is repulsed, but it at least starts a conversation.

Svetlana: You like boys. Maybe I like girls.

Mickey: Hold up. You're a lesbian?

Svetlana: Maybe yes, maybe no. Choice!

Svetlana reveals that she is in a relationship with Nika, one of the brothel workers. She appeals to Mickey to make right by his child because he has no choices. "No more bullshit about baby," she says, placing Evgeni in Mickey's arms. "You help." Svetlana slaps the dildo on the kitchen table in front of Mickey, adding "and Nika comes here to live." Season five opens to Svetlana, Nika, Mickey, Ian, and Evgeni living together under

one roof. Svetlana is also visibly pregnant and indicates that she is employed as a surrogate (5.1 Milk of the Gods). Mickey and Ian are downwardly mobile people in Svetlana's eyes and she begins to ignore them, focusing her attention on the bar owner, Kevin, and his girlfriend Veronica. Svetlana begins to bartend and spends more time around the bar, as well as paying visits to Kevin at home. One day Veronica comes home to find Svetlana breast feeding one of she and Kevin's two daughters (5.2 I'm the Liver). Veronica is angry, but Kevin continues allowing it when she is not around. Svetlana makes it her goal to be indispensable to the two of them. When Kevin tells Veronica that their daughter has spoken for the first time, he fails to see the whole picture. "Amy looks up at me and says 'da.' Can you believe that? My little baby girl. She's halfway to da-da." Kevin is oblivious to the fact that the baby is picking up Russian language from Svetlana [*da* means "yes"] (5.4 A Night to Remem... Wait, What?). At one point, Kevin and Veronica are fighting and Veronica is sleeping at another location. With Kevin home alone, Svetlana capitalizes on the fact that Ian recently did something to endanger her son. She tells Kevin that she can't live with Mickey and Ian anymore and she convinces him to let her stay with him until things blow over with Veronica. She says she will sleep on the couch and in exchange for food for herself and Evgeni, she will "cook, clean, and do wifely duties." One morning Kevin awakes to Svetlana performing oral sex on him and, after a brief objection, he acquiesces. "Consider it like rent check," she says, "I go mop now." (5.7 Tell Me You Fucking Need Me). Svetlana divides and conquers by performing the same move on Veronica on a rare night that she is home but Kevin is away (5.8 Uncle Carl). Veronica also objects, but only for only a split second.

Veronica: "I'm not gay."

Svetlana: "Tongue is tongue, no?"

Veronica: “Oh, what the hell. I’m halfway home already.”

Lying in bed afterward, Svetlana tells Veronica, “You Americans like everything to be right or wrong. If someone is like you it is right, if someone is not it is wrong. But this is not real. Life is not so this or that, black and white.” When Veronica and Kevin are living together again but have not really made up yet, Svetlana is still there taking care of their children as well as her own (5.11 Drugs Actually).

Season six opens to Mickey serving 25 years to life in prison after attempting to murder a woman who turned in one of the Gallagher children to the police for drug trafficking. Svetlana acts as a go-between for unknown organized criminals who want Mickey to perform their bidding (6.1 I Only Miss Her When I’m Breathing). She visits Mickey in jail and gives him the name of someone he can kill for \$2,500, half of which would go to Svetlana. At the same time, she starts abusing patrons of the bar. When one customer orders an “Appletini,” it leads to the following exchange.

Svetlana: No pussy drinks. Vodka only.

Customer: What about a Negroni?

Svetlana: Grow tentacles. Vodka.

Customer: What did I tell you? [turns to friends in booth] Classic, right? [back to bar] What about ice? Can I get Ice? [starts capturing video of Svetlana with phone]

Svetlana: Ten dollars.

Customer: It was eight dollars yesterday.

Svetlana: Twelve.

Customer: [grinning] Oh, this is so going on YouTube [hands her twenty-dollar bill, which she tucks into bra] Uh, my change?

Svetlana: My tip. *Spasibo* [thank you].

Customer: Fucking fantastic [laughing]. *Spasibo*. [forgets drink on counter, has to be reminded]

Other customer: Jeez. Twenty bucks and you get to treat em like shit?

Kevin: They love it. They think it’s authentic or some crap.

The bar is later voted “Best shittiest bar on the south side” by a night life magazine, which also says they have “the skankiest and meanest Russian bartender” (6.2

#AbortionRules). When the Gallagher family is evicted after their mortgage bank decides to auction their house, the eldest child, Fiona, asks Svetlana if everyone can stay with her for a couple of nights in the apartment above the bar, which is now Svetlana's exclusive residence. She says no. Kevin then tries to force Svetlana to allow them to stay there, but she only further refuses.

Svetlana: I rent. I have contract. Is my apartment to share, not yours.

Fiona: We don't take up much room.

Svetlana: No.

Fiona: It would only be for a couple days.

Svetlana: No.

Fiona: You're a mom. You know what it's like to take care of someone. I just wanna make sure my family is okay.

Svetlana: So get motel.

Fiona: That adds up.

Svetlana: I get you massage job.

Fiona: [laughs in disbelief]

Svetlana: Oh, you're too good for it? I understand. You don't realize God gave you ATM between your legs. When I do massage is because I have to. No money, I five thousand miles from home. I start I was here [holds hand at knee level]. I work hard, now I'm here. [moves to waist level] This is how America works. Soon when I open my own Quiznos submarine store, I'll be here. [moves to chest level]. You, you think you're here [waist], but you are not. You are here [knees]. And girls who are here must do things that other girls would not do.

Ultimately Svetlana's icy demeanor catches up to her, although the crisis that results reveals how much she is needed and wanted by those around her (6.9 A Yurt of One's Own). One day she refuses a customer change, declaring that the money is her tip. When the customer contests the issue, she ignores him.

Customer: What's her problem?

Kevin: Her dad sold her into sexual slavery. Pretty much put her in a bad mood for life.

Customer: What's that accent, Polish? [begins taking notes on a pad]

Kevin: It's Russian.

Customer: So she wasn't born here?

Kevin: Sent over in a shipping crate.

Customer: You pay her under the table?

Kevin: Shit yeah. How do you think this place stays open?

Unfortunately, the customer is a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS) agent, and after Kevin makes the mistake of revealing Svetlana's experience, the agent adds her to his case load. Veronica is desperate to reconcile the issue. Because Kevin never properly divorced his ex-wife and is still legally married, she offers to marry Svetlana herself in order to provide her with citizenship. The two get married at the local courthouse before Kevin even has a chance to meditate on the plan (6.10 Paradise Lost). Svetlana and Veronica establish intricate, plausible, and consistent answers to questions about the origin of their romantic relationship and, despite the CIS agent's enduring suspicions while evaluating their now well-fabricated living situation, he admits that there is not much he can do to discredit them (6.11 Sleep No More). When Kevin becomes frustrated by the role he has to play in keeping up appearances, Veronica defends Svetlana.

Kevin: I hope Svetlana really appreciates what we're doing for her.

Veronica: What about us appreciating her? Do you know that woman speaks four languages and can play the accordion blindfolded? Her childhood was completely fucked. She could tell you stories that would turn your hair white. We're lucky to have her.

Svetlana is rife with stereotypes. She regularly offers one-liners that play on her broken English and mercenary sensibility. When pregnant as a surrogate, she tells Kevin, "I rent uterus like youth hostel" (5.2 I'm the Liver). However, her character provides a uniquely longitudinal interpretation of a trafficked woman that is otherwise unavailable in U.S. popular culture. Irony, overstatement, and other comic relief are regularly employed to keep her known trauma outside the realm of the tragic as pathetic. The most recent developments in Svetlana's narrative represent a rhetorical granting of asylum and a respect paid to people who have endured irregular migration and persevered socio-

economically, regardless of how they entered the country, who helped them, and how they kept food on the table.

Hitman

The figure of \$300 used in *Shameless* also comes up in the English-language, French-American-British-produced action film *Hitman* (2007), based on the popular video game. *Hitman* stars American actor Timothy Olyphant as the assassin Agent 47, opposite Ukrainian actress Olga Kurylenko as Nika Boronina, a native Russian woman trafficked domestically for service as a courtesan to the Russian president's body double. 47 is instructed to kill Nika because she is a witness to a political assassination. He locks her in the trunk of a car, takes her to a hotel, puts a gun to her head, and is unable to pull the trigger. Nika has a dragon tattooed on her cheek (Figure 3) and it triggers 47's memory of a barcode being tattooed on the back of his own head. He flashes back to a childhood of being engineered since birth to be a killer. 47 identifies with Nika as a victim, putting them on more even ground than one might expect from a typical damsel in distress and/or cumbersome sidekick scenario. Nika later confides in 47, telling him:

I'm not a whore by choice. Belicoff [the body double] owns me. I'm his property. Would you like to know how much he paid for me? 300 ... American [begins crying]. I've tried to escape. The last time ... [flashback of being whipped with a riding crop as a circle of men in suits watch, laughing (Figure 4)] It is a strange thing to wish to die.

In terms of media myths, Nika's is a boiler plate trafficking victim story, here enhanced with a special sadistic edge that justifies future violence to be performed by 47. Nika is reduced to a person who only understands sex and death. "You don't wanna fuck me and you don't wanna kill me," she says to 47, whimpering, "I've never felt so much indifference in my entire life." 47 insists on a platonic relationship with Nika, who means at one point to reward him with sex for protecting her. At a hotel in Istanbul, she attempts



Figure 3. Nika close-up (detail of tattoo)



Figure 4. Nika tortured by her captors

to seduce him, but he stealthily injects her with a sedative and tucks her in for the night. Whether grounded in professional discipline or individual respect, the absence of a sense of entitlement here is refreshing for the genre in question, which would usually call for an obligatory sex scene by this point. Also, the following day, as the two are getting dressed for a formal event, and Nika adjusts 47's tie in a highly familiar way, her level of care indicates she did not feel rejected by him. While from a feminist standpoint the narrative is constantly misguided, it is never pejorative or chauvinistic.

Hitman was co-produced by French filmmaker Luc Besson, also co-creator of the *Transporter* franchise and co-producer/co-writer of its fourth instalment, *The Transporter Refueled* (2015). While the latter features a sex-trafficked Russian woman, this time she herself drives the plot of the film. And, of course, she was sold to organized criminals, this time for \$500. While ‘*Refueled* is an English-language French film with no U.S. production, I choose to include it as a case study in political economy and cultural sense-making. Besson is best known for writing and directing both the 1990 Franco-Italian spy/assassin thriller *La Femme Nikita* and the 1997 French science fiction action film *The Fifth Element*—the latter of which led to his marriage with the film’s enigmatic female lead, played by Ukrainian actress Milla Jovovich. Messy but fibrous food for thought if you’re wondering how Russian sex slaves start popping up in Besson’s later projects.

The Equalizer

Adapted from the ABC series (1985-1989), *The Equalizer* (2014) stars Denzel Washington as Robert McCall, a retired black ops agent living in quiet retirement and working at a big box hardware store in Boston. At night Robert reads at a local diner, where he befriends Alina (Chloë Grace Moretz), a teen sex worker managed by Russian mobsters (Figure 5). Alina is also a singer and working on recording her demo. Robert tries to convince her to clean up her life and she tells him she doesn’t know how. One night Alina shows up with bruises on her face. Another night, her pimp slaps her right in front of Robert. Mistaking him for a client, the pimp gives Robert a business card for “Russian Nights.” Not long after, Alina is hospitalized after a brutal beating. When a co-worker visits the recovering Alina, she tells Robert:

“Guy hit her and she hit him back. Guy called Slavi. So Slavi made example of her. They do that. They burn one girl’s face with battery acid, keep her around as

a reminder for the rest of us. They brought Teri over very young and she got to the point where she thought her life could be hers one day. Slavi reminded her it never would be. He said he'd cut her throat next time. He said a whore who fucks and can't talk might be worth twice as much."



Figure 5. Alina drinks coffee between clients

Robert tracks down Slavi [what's in a name, really?] and offers to buy Alina's freedom for \$10,000. When he refuses, Robert shoots and/or stabs Slavi and his four bodyguards using their own weapons, in a gruesome display of his skills. We later learn that this small operation was part of an international syndicate led by Russian Mafia boss Vladimir Pushkin (no doubt a play on current Russian President Vladimir Putin and Golden Age Russian poet Alexander Pushkin). Pushkin sends an enforcer, retired Russian special forces officer Nicolai Itchenko, to investigate Slavi's death. When Nicolai questions Alina's co-worker, learning that she spoke to Robert, he immediately strangles her to death. Meanwhile, Robert captures a corrupt policeman on Pushkin's payroll and blackmails him into complying with a plan that ends in federal agents seizing Pushkin's main U.S. money laundering operation. Pushkin then orders Nicolai to kill Robert.

The final showdown between Robert and Nicolai (and a dozen of his henchmen), takes place in the hardware store, where Robert uses knowledge of the terrain and the

element of surprise to stalk and kill the henchmen, using booby traps constructed with items in the store. Imagine inserting *First Blood*'s John Rambo (1982) in the place of Kevin McCallister, in *Home Alone* (1990). Robert improvises an aerosol bomb in a microwave to take out the last of Nicolai's men, before shooting the man himself to death with a nail gun. Later, Robert travels to Moscow and confronts Pushkin at his mansion, setting a trap that electrocutes him to death in the shower. Robert slowly walks out of the building, revealing a trail of bodyguards he killed to reach Pushkin.

The severity and duration of Robert's vigilante mission is in close keeping with the triumphalist and exceptionalist mythscape of cultural interpretation of U.S.-Russia relations, as well as the rescue politics of global anti-trafficking rhetoric. Alina appears only the beginning and end of the film, bookending ninety minutes of orgiastic violence, acting as a vehicle for an indulgent, paternalistic revenge fantasy. Alina's character arc serves as an endorsement of the raid and rehabilitation model. When Robert returns to Boston, he reunites with Alina (Figure 6), who has recovered from her wounds and has found a legitimate job "with real hours and stuff." She thanks him for a second chance.



Figure 6. Alina is reunited with her rescuer

The Transporter Refueled

Not unlike *The Equalizer*, *The Transporter Refueled* (2015) is a revenge fantasy, only here the trafficked woman is calling the shots. The film follows former sex workers Anna (Loan Chabanol), Gina (Gabriella Wright), Maria (Tatjana Pajković), and Qiao (Wenxia Yu), who hatch a plot to bring down Arkady Karasov (Radivoje Bukvić), a murderous gangster who pimped them in the 1990s. Karasov has amassed a fortune from his criminal empire and the four women are intent on seizing it, as well as killing him. Anna, the ring leader, enlists the help of a courier, Frank Martin (Ed Skrein), who must work to earn the antidote for a slow-acting poison that is killing his father, whom the women have abducted. Frank acts as getaway driver for a series of burglary and hacking tasks that affords the women access to the electronic banking of Karasov and his two main business partners.

While the film is trying to make a statement about empowerment and justice for survivors of forced sexual labor, or even inequitable voluntary sexual labor, the aesthetic of the women undermines the seriousness of the message. Anna's crew wear identical disguises consisting of a black cocktail dress and blonde wig (Figure 7)—perhaps out of solidarity, perhaps as an ode to all the other nameless Natashas Karasov has controlled—we don't know. But it comes across as objectifying, not empowering. In one scene, the four infiltrate a dance club after pumping knockout gas through the smoke machine. They march in militant lock step across a pile of unconscious bodies, clad in six-inch heels and gas masks on top of their matching dresses and wigs. It reads more like sophomoric fetish pornography than a moment of feminist reclamation (Figure 8). After completing his task, Frank is taken to a safe house to be reunited with his father, who we learn was never



Figure 7. Anna's crew arrive to confront their former pimp



Figure 8. Anna's crew infiltrate a night club

really poisoned. As compensation for their troubles, Frank and his father are rewarded with sex. Anna gives herself to Frank and they lie in bed after, talking.

Frank: How did you get caught up in all of this?

Anna: I come from an impoverished village. Drinking and drugs killed the people that guns didn't. And then when I was 12, I came home from the factory where I worked, when my mother introduced me to a man in a very nice suit—Karasov. He said I could come and do work for him in warm places. He would give me food and clothes, and introduce me with men for money. I looked at mama and she said it was okay. 'Yeah, go.' And so I did. It wasn't until later that I found out she sold me to him, for 500 dollars.

Frank: Jesus, Anna.

Anna: I think she could have gotten 600, right?

Anna, we learn, now plans to lead her crew in an assault on Karasov's yacht. Due to his heavy security, Frank declares it a suicide mission and refuses to help, despite being chastised by his father. The two go their separate ways, but the father is abducted by Karasov, who instructs Frank to deliver Anna's crew to the Yacht or else. While Anna complies, she has masterminded Karasov's two main business partners into thinking that *he* has robbed them, leading to an armed standoff-turned-lengthy gun battle, in which Maria, Qiao, and Gina are killed. Karasov escapes on a speedboat with Anna, and Frank pursues them on a jet ski. On land, the chase continues, ending in hand-to-hand combat between Frank and Karasov, interrupted by Anna shooting the latter to death. Anna kisses Frank and both flee the scene.

One month later, Anna is shown poolside at a villa, wiring money on a tablet. She sends \$75 million to each of the families of Maria, Gina, and Qiao, as well as herself, and \$10 million each to Frank and his father. On the tablet we finally see last names for three of the women—Maria Katju, Gina Guerra Lopez, and Qiao Chang. We see the money arriving to the families and, based on their names plus visual cues, can conclude that they are Indian, Spanish, and Chinese. Karasov is an obscure, but surely Russian name, with some Turkic leanings, according to anecdotal evidence from Russian social networking site VK.com. Conspicuously, Anna's last name is never revealed, an exnomination that offers the privilege of using a stereotype without enduring consequences of it. Anna's accent is also only *approximately* Russian, making her crypto-Slavic in multiple ways.

True Detective

Season two of HBO's *True Detective* (2014-) was not well-received by critics (Collins 2015). Compared to the first season's 85% fresh rating on RottenTomatoes.com,

season two got only 65%. Even the network's executives distanced themselves from it (Shepherd, 2016). While some of the dialog and plot twists are indeed sigh-producingly hackneyed, critics seemed to miss in season two an unprecedented rhetorical undercurrent regarding public attitudes on the morality and agency of sex workers. While season one had two lead performers and both were male, season two offered three leads; two male, one female. The female, Ani Bezzerides (Rachel McAdams) is a hyper-aggressive detective with the Ventura County, CA Sheriff's Office.

In the very first episode (2.1 The Western Book of the Dead), Ani leads a police raid on a suspected brothel, which turns out to be a completely legal adult web camera studio. Nonetheless Ani assumes that the performers are all trafficked women, asking the property owner if he is holding their visas. Each of the women is then instructed to say "I am an American," to see if they have an accent. None of them do. Also in this scene, we learn that Ani's sister, Athena, is one of the performers. From the onset, the show positions Ani and Athena as ideological poles, where Ani tries to shame Athena over her line of employment and Athena successfully defends her choices, both aesthetically and politically. When Athena visits Ani at home later, Ani continues to criticize Athena's wardrobe and choice of friends. We learn that Athena is a painter and is working to afford school. "I'm saving up to go to Cal Arts," she says, "I'm not a whore" (2.4 Down Will Come). The raid scene is only the beginning of a subplot involving trafficking, transactional sex, and ultimately Russian and East European women. The main plot is about solving the murder of a corrupt city manager, who, of course, "had a weakness for young women" and "frequented escorts," according to his psychologist, whom Ani interviews (2.2 Night Finds You). The man's favorite girl, we learn, was "Tasha." While

later Tasha is revealed to be Hungarian (2.7 Black Maps and Motel Rooms), the name is usually of Russian origin, an abbreviation for the very emblem of our topic itself—Natasha. The official in question worked for the fictional city of Vinci, CA, and his boss, the mayor, is later sought in an unsanctioned home visit by Ani and another detective. When they arrive, the mayor is absent, but his wife, Veronica, is home (2.3 Maybe Tomorrow). Veronica has blue eyes and blonde hair and speaks with a thick Russian accent. Her hair and makeup are disheveled. She appears intoxicated and disengaged, only coming to life when a door left ajar blows her fashion magazine clippings from a coffee table. Asked how she met the mayor, Veronica, holding back from chuckling, answers “at a party.” We learn that this was a very specific kind of party, where the rich and powerful gather in hilltop mansions in the wilderness to enjoy busloads of prostitutes brought in from Los Angeles. Athena tells Ani that while she has not been to one, it’s where “the real hooking happens.” (2.4 Dawn Will Come). During a surveillance mission, Ani’s partner Ray Velcoro (Colin Farrell) gets a look at the apparent source of these women (2.5 Other Lives). Ray follows the Vinci mayor’s son from a warehouse owned by Russian crime boss-turned-legitimate business tycoon Osip Agranov. Ray’s target arrives at Agranov’s home, where Ray witnesses the delivery of three young, attractive women equipped with carry-on suitcases. Agranov, waiting outside, immediately inspects the women, touching one’s hair and face.

Everything so far has paved the road for another raid and rehabilitation scenario, this time occupying an entire episode, which marks the highest point of tension in the season (2.6 Church in Ruins). Ani goes undercover to infiltrate one of the sex parties and Athena instructs her on how to blend in. As directed, Ani goes to a night club at 6 p.m.

and asks for “Bogdon,” a man who loads her on a bus with about 50 other women who are lined up on the sidewalk. A bodyguard in a suit with an indistinct Slavic accent collects purses, phones, etc. “You get back tomorrow,” he tells Ani, “Do not be arguing, bitch.” Inside the party, Ani is again put in a line where an older woman is administering an oral spray to everyone. Ani asks two women next to her “What is that?” The first replies “Pure Molly [MDMA]. It’s pretty great.” The second, in an East Slavic accent, says “Keep you in good mood.” There are also two chalices full of pills nearby, one white, the other blue. Ani does not react well to the drug. She begins hallucinating, and, being a survivor of pre-adolescent sexual assault, has flashbacks of being lured into a van. At this point, Ani also identifies that Agranov and the Vinci chief of police are present at the party. Suddenly a man claiming to be an oil executive takes her by the arm and begins to lead her into a bedroom for sex. She continues to imagine her childhood captor and panics, wiggling out of his grip. In an effort to buy time, she says, mimicking the other women’s accents at the party, “Excuse please. I bathroom, return ... splash of water, perfume.” Ani enters the bathroom and induces vomiting. She also finds a person of interest in the city manager’s death, Vera, who was reported missing by her family. Vera is unconscious in a corner and Ani props her up, carrying her away from the main activity of the party. Ani covertly grabs a knife from a catering table and, when accosted by the oil executive and a bodyguard, stabs/slashes both extensively and efficiently, leaving them dead on the floor [the entire season Ani is characterized by her fondness of knives and regularly shown practicing on a wooden dummy]. Finally, two detectives who have been waiting outside after disabling perimeter security, aid in exfiltrating Ani and Vera to a car, which speeds off amid pursuant gunfire. This essentially marks the end of

that subplot, as the last two episodes of the season wrap up the “man’s world” around which the trafficking narrative is woven. The only exception is a conversation between Ani and Vera about another sex worker, whom was murdered after threatening to release photos from one of the parties (2.7 Black Maps and Motel Rooms).

Ani: Will you testify?

Vera: Fuck no. I was hammered. Come to think of it, I don’t know what I seen.

Ani: Is that when you tried to get out?

Vera: I never tried to get out. Girl fucked up. All you gotta do is follow the rules. I didn’t wanna get out. You feel me? I was *never* missing.

Ani: You didn’t look like you wanted to be where you were. I found you.

Vera: I took too much Molly on top of Champagne. So what. It happens.

This scene helps highlight a point made earlier (Soderlund 2005, p. 66):

While some women use brothel raids and closures as an opportunity to leave the sex industry, others perceive the rehabilitation process itself as a punitive form of imprisonment thereby complicating the captivity/freedom binary asserted by abolitionists.

In a final word, regarding linguistics, in the vein of our Hungarian Tasha, there is also another potential informant earlier on named Irina. In the storytelling, Vera and Irina are both said to be Mexican, which is a stretch given that, according to Wiktionary.com, Vera is a *given name* in Russian, but a *surname* in Spanish. The site also indicates that Irina is a distinctly Russian given name. The writers can make their Russians Mexican all they want, but it doesn’t conceal the fact that the discourse, viewed as a whole, speaks to a normalized Russianness in the U.S. imaginary of the sex worker and the sex-trafficked woman.

CHAPTER V

MAIL-ORDER BRIDES

“Foreign women who enter intimate familial spaces are believed to pose a significant threat to the ideal of modern US families and marriages”

–Nicole Constable

Our next set of texts, the television shows *Orange Is the New Black* and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, and the film *St. Vincent*, address the Russian “mail-order bride,” as well as the boundary between explicit sex work and implicit sex-driven upward mobility. As with trafficking, I first look at the stereotype’s origins and its uses in politics and culture, as well as examining some key issues and experiences that inform a reading of the texts and characters under study.

Background

Virtual Spaces

While bride agencies had existed in the U.S for decades, in the 1990s, Russian women “generate[d] more media attention and public controversy than any other ethnic group” (Osipovich 2005, 231). Public interest and media attention began “only when women from the former Soviet bloc started to sign up” (239). The stereotype of Soviet women as “overweight, blunt, and rigid” was replaced by the Russian “mail-order bride,” who was “appropriated by the mass media and constructed in accordance with a specific purpose in public discourse” (240). Agencies played to that discourse in marketing, emphasizing gender and ethnicity (Ridenhour-Levitt 1999). In 1996, *AnastasiaWeb.com* emerged as a popular site (Williams 2012, 68) and later sites would employ titles like *eastwestmatch.com* (Minervini and McAndrew 2006, 122). Growing internet connectivity led to the formation of what the Immigration and Naturalization Service called “internet

matchmaking agencies” (IMAs) (Sholes 1999), later known as “international marriage brokers” (IMBs) (Congress 2005). I will stick to the former definition, as well as, in lieu of “mail-order bride,” the term *migratory bride* (as party to transnational marriage).

Regulating Marriage

The International Marriage Broker Regulation Act of 2005 (IMBRA) was the next step in the “moral crusade” surrounding sex trafficking (Constable 2012, 1149), which began with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. After the U.S. first situated itself as the global leader in eradicating sex trafficking, it seized on the deaths of two foreign brides murdered by their American spouses: Susanna Blackwell, of the Philippines, in 1995 (Egan 1996) and Anastasia King, of Russia, in 2000 (Thornburgh 2001). These victims were employed as “anecdotal horror stories [that] dramatize human suffering and are designed to cause alarm and outrage” (Weitzer 2007, 463). The sensational headlines that followed the death of King (née Sutnikova) made gratuitous mention of both her being Russian and a “mail-order bride,” which Osipovich (2005) says “creates the impression that the crime is somehow provoked by the victim *being* a mail-order bride” (238, my emphasis). Johnson (2007), based on field work in the area, says “foreign women searching for romance online are often presented in a pejorative way as victims or gold diggers” (in Suchland 2015, 66). In short, once again the victims are reproachable. Sutnikova had used a service to meet her American husband. In the obtuse logic of IMBRA, an IMB is an agency that typically arranges meetings between men from wealthy western nations and women from poor eastern ones. The law “relies on a simplistic construction of the legislative role of the state in rescuing vulnerable women from evil men” (Constable 2012, 1138).

IMBRA conflated mediated migratory marriage with sex trafficking and this muddling was socially acceptable at the time—seen not only in news media, but also primetime dramas like the Lifetime mini-series *Human Trafficking* (2005), which aired only months before the law passed. IMBRA, says Osipovich, “not only misrepresents post-Soviet women to the American public but also poorly serves the needs of U.S. immigrant women” (2005, 240). IMBRA provided foreign brides who use an IMA access to the criminal history on their intended spouse, supposedly making them less likely to be victims of abuse (Zug 2014, 169-170). Under the law, immigration marriages may observe a 90-day visitation period in which to assess the relationship’s potential success. However, in the late 1990s only 4-6 percent of foreign-born spouses in the U.S. met through IMAs (Sholes 1999). Thus the other 94 percent would not receive the information unless it was provided by immigration officials (Constable 2012, 1141). In short, the protections were merely symbolic. The law accomplished very little. It was estimated that in 2007, there were more than 16,500 U.S. marriages resulting from IMAs, and by 2010, IMAs were an over \$2 billion dollar-a-year industry (Wayne 2011).

Concerns over Authenticity

At the same time that American men who use IMAs have been portrayed as controlling and abusive, despite “surprisingly little proof” (Zug 2014, 164), clients also bear the risk of scarcity of information on their potential partner (Ryabov 2013, 52). Domestic men are not allowed to conduct background checks on foreign women. Sahib et al (2006) asked, “Given the allegedly contrived nature of the profiles, [do] they contain any genuine information at all?” (62). Their short conclusion was yes, but authenticity always takes time to assess. Interviews with male IMA clients have revealed that some

women use the same photo on multiple websites, under multiple names, or even use a proxy image to gain attention and then share the real one once contact has been made (Sarker et al 2013, 23). While the Internet and social networking sites have made cultivating international relationships a lot less complicated and fearsome than they were at the introduction of IMBRA (Ryabov 2013, 46), IMAs have maintained market relevance by distinguishing themselves from traditional online dating sites. They have done so by refusing the use of matching algorithms, as well as offering service extensions like sending flowers (Sarker et al 2013, 3). Sarker et al (2013) studied socio-technical aspects of IMAs in terms of media synchronicity (Dennis et al. 2008). Media with low synchronicity have high rehearsability and reprocessability, unlike, for example, a highly synchronous live, two-way web-camera feed. Agencies offer spaces for separate photographs, audio clips, video clips, and text, with high customizability (Sarker et al 2013, 23). Women have expressed their appreciation that these media offer flexibility of presentation and high rehearsability, thus increasing the quality of their self-expression, while men have expressed appreciation for reprocessability and retrospection, which aid in determining compatibility and authenticity. Studying this technology has the potential to “safeguard participants from possible predatory behavior” (Sarker et al 2013, 35).

Market Approaches and User Aspects

Visson (2001) notes, regarding the image of men as abusive chauvinists, that “[p]eople who choose a spouse from a different culture often do so because they are unable to find a place in their own society [...] and would prefer a mate unaware of their alienation” (46). Despite popular representations of migratory brides as passive victims, interview and survey data show that “women can be quite assertive in their relationships:

many [] take charge of the family finances or steer their husband's career prospects" (220). IMAs, of course, did not advertise this. Rather they projected an image of Russian brides as "feminine, mature, responsible, loyal, and dedicated to their families," seeking a "dependable American man" able to provide for her financially (Osipovich 2005, 232). Osipovich identifies a metanarrative of the Russian woman that speaks to both mythic essentialization and triumphalism (2005, 234):

[T]he image [] manufactured by the mail-order bride industry [is that she is] 'the best kept secret of the Cold War,' a 'beautiful princess' who is unlucky to have been born into a poor country and to be mistreated by an alcoholic and violent male. The fairy-tale quality of such representations not only reconfirms Anglo-American patriarchal values but, most importantly, also symbolically reinforces the dominance of capitalist North America over its former communist enemy.

Johnson (2007) found that Russian women who use IMAs to meet American men tend to report their non-interest in Russian men as the result of "extremely high alcohol consumption, high tobacco smoking, and risky sexual behaviors." Indeed, alcoholism had been linked to a severe decrease in Russian men's life expectancy at the time (Leon et al 2007). As for what American men want, a study of the highest-volume Russia-serving IMA, conducted in 2002, showed four main factors that influence selection: 1) from a major city, 2) speaks English well, 3) lesser in weight, and 4) is greater in height (Sahib et al 2006, 75). Women from Moscow or St. Petersburg had over double the chance of finding a husband than women from other cities because the two cities are the site of "romance tours" conducted by the IMA (78). Men also preferred avoiding outlying areas, as to reduce the risk of exposure to criminal scams. Men indicated they would not seek a woman who seemed desperate or indiscriminating. Rather they preferred women's profiles that mention attractiveness of the partner as a factor in their own decision

making. Surprisingly, say Sahib et al, “factors such as the woman’s age, previous marital status and the presence of children make little difference” (76).

Cultural Baggage

As much as Russian women have been put in the spotlight, in the U.S., East and South-East Asia lead in the number of transnational marriage immigrants (Ryabov 2013, 44). Osipovich notes that American men who chose Russian women are motivated by a desire to appear racially similar to their spouse, which reduces “outsiders’ immediate suspicion regarding the character of their matrimonial arrangement” (2005, 233). As of 2002, 94 percent of men seeking wives from the former Soviet Union were white (Sahib et al 2006, 65). Furthermore, marriage migrants from the former Soviet Union have “understood that their whiteness makes them a desirable commodity and [] capitalize on it on the transnational marriage market” (Ryabov 55). According to Ryabov, the majority of Russian women did not perceive themselves as the “colonized other” (Spivak 1999), but rather were ambivalent about their own interethnic sexual subjectivities. Oddly, some Russian women have deliberately married African-American and Latin-American citizens, as their spouse’s appearance may deflect perceptions about the nature of the marriage. “They [] understood that they fitted neatly into the racial hierarchies of the U.S. and might be less readily recognized as ‘mail-order brides’ when appearing with their husbands in public” (Ryabov 2013, 55). Furthermore, respondents indicated they were willing to adopt “mainstream gender ideology that stigmatizes transnational marriage migrants” in order to resist oppression and legitimate their own marriage (44). While perhaps unfortunate, this is certainly understandable, given the way use of IMAs has been represented. Echoing our previous discussions on “white slavery,” Constable (2012) says

that anxieties about both immigration and prostitution drive the American imaginary of the Russian woman, which is positioned in opposition to “the sanctity of marriage and the values and choices of middle-class US women” (1148). Each of the texts we will now discuss exhibits such anxieties, either in defending that sanctity, or questioning its ongoing validity and rhetorical uses.

Textual Analysis

Orange Is The New Black

Netflix’s *Orange Is The New Black* (2013-), is a comedy-drama set in a New York State women’s prison. Among its lead characters is Galina “Red” Reznikov (Kate Mulgrew), a middle-aged Russian woman serving time after getting caught up in her husband’s organized crime activities. Red is not a very sexual character at all. On the contrary, she fits the stereotype of the crass, brooding, husky Soviet woman. In addition to Red, there is another Russophone character, Katya Healy (Sanja Danilovic), the wife of the prison’s head counselor, Sam Healy. Katya is a quite limited character, having about as much screen time in all three seasons of the show as Red does in certain single episodes, but Katya’s presence is potent and topical. She is understood as a mail-order bride from her earliest appearance and is made sexual from the very first words out of her mouth. Eating dinner with her mother and Sam, she brings up the idea of learning to pole dance (1.7 Blood Donut).

Katya: [RU] It’s not stripping. It’s for nice ladies, housewives. For exercise.

Mother: [RU] That’s what they tell you! Then one day you wake up in Atlantic City ... where girls are trash ... and I’m lighting candles under your picture.

Sam: [EN] Can we please speak English at the table? Just at the table.

Mother: [RU] Two more years for a green card, be nice.

Katya: [RU] You don’t have to fuck him.

Mother: [RU] I should be lucky, a decent man wants to fuck me.

While Katya is Ukrainian, not Russian, she is mediated by a Russian character. Red is ever suspicious of Katya and views her as a gold-digger, a perspective that stems from her own secret romantic longing for him.. Twice Red acts as translator to help settle disputes between Sam and Katya. While the first time she is more friendly, helping Katya leverage herself domestically (1.12 Fool Me Once), Red takes a later opportunity to speak her mind (3.3 Empathy Is a Boner Killer; see Figure 9) [the conversation alternates abruptly between English and Russian, and between translated and untranslated].

Sam: You've lost that feeling you had at the beginning.

Katya: We never have real feeling at beginning because you not the man you say to me on internet. You catfish ... I thought he was a real psychologist. I thought we'd go to the museum, the opera. I thought he'd be funny. He seemed funny online when he could edit himself [...].

Sam: Look, I have not been perfect, but there is nothing between us that we cannot work through together.

Katya: No, is too late. I deserve better man than you, Sam.

Red: Oh give me a fucking break, deserve!? You're a mail-order bride."

Katya: I'm *not* a mail-order bride!!

Red: Whatever. You "made an arrangement" and he's holding up his end of it. And you're the type who wants the world to be perfect, but you're not willing to lift a finger to help it along [...]. At least he's fucking trying, which is a lot more than I can say for you!!!



Figure 9. Red, Sam, and Katya hold an intervention

Ultimately, the arrangement becomes unmanageable. In the finale of the latest season, Sam and Katya are sleeping in separate beds and increasingly at odds with one another (3.13 Trust No Bitch). The following exchange effectively marks the end of their marriage.

Sam: [RU] What do you really want from me?

Katya: [RU] My freedom.

Sam: [EN] [offers to help pay for an apartment for Katya and her mother]

Katya: [EN] You would do that for me?

Sam: [EN] I'm surrounded by women in captivity all day long. I don't need to come home to another one.

Earlier on, Sam attempts to make a joke about Katya's Eastern "Otherness" (3.13 Trust No Bitch) when he asks, "Did you ever consider that you're technically Asian? Round-eyed Asian with blonde hair." Dumbfounded, she replies, "I'm Ukrainian." You might expect an American man marrying a Ukrainian woman to perform the few seconds of research required to learn that: 1) Katya is not Russian; Ukraine is not part of Russia, and 2) Ukraine is separated from Russia's Europe-Asia boundary (the Ural Mountains) by give-or-take 1,000 miles. The joke-gone-wrong enables a rhetorical criticism of the misunderstood geography of the former-Soviet Union.

Law and Order: Special Victims Unit

While *Orange Is The New Black* takes a light-hearted and introspective look at the topic, NBC's *Law and Order, Special Victims Unit* (1999-), a police procedural drama dedicated to sexual crimes in New York City, produced an episode in 2011, "Russian Brides," insinuating brokered international marriages are closely tied to organized crime and the trafficking of women. The episode begins, in typical *SVU* fashion, with a sex worker homicide victim lying face down in an alley. She is difficult to identify as her teeth have been pulled, her fingertips cut off, and her face power-sanded away. Her only

identifying mark is a tattoo in Cyrillic font that says *prosti menya mama* [forgive me, mom] (Figure 10).

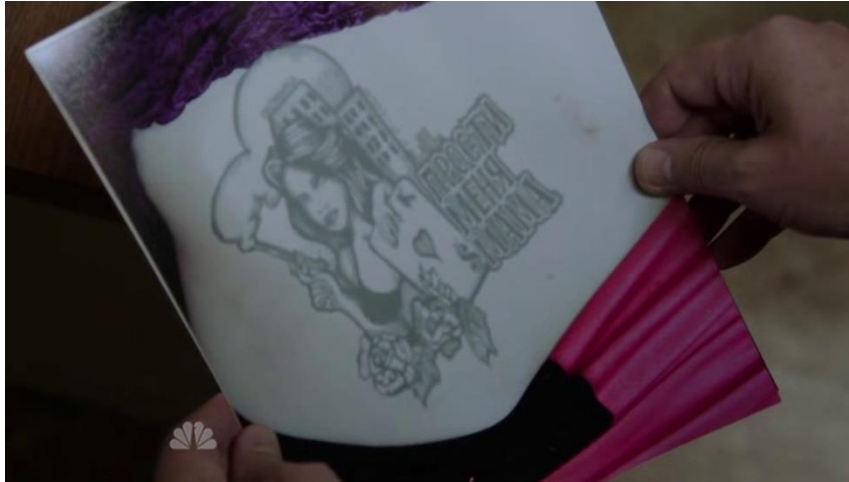


Figure 10. A Russian tattoo found on an unidentified body

After some leg work, detectives believe that they have identified the victim as Lena, a Russian woman who was recently wed to American man through a “relationship agency.” We learn that the husband, Daniel, was extorted for \$100,000 by Russian mobsters, who claimed that they held Lena captive, but would release her once paid. Upon further investigation, detectives learn that the body they found did not belong to Lena at all, but was strategically placed by an “international prostitution kidnapping ring” that operates in Moscow, Johannesburg, Vancouver, and Munich. Lena has gone from one client to another, while her “captors” have been forcing them to pay up and then erasing all lingering concern by providing a random corpse with Lena’s tattoo duplicated on it. Or as one detective puts it, “He’s branding them so the mark knows his tsarina is dead.” The crime ring is in control of *YourTsarina.com*, the agency which introduced Daniel to Lena. Detectives go to the location of the website’s servers and, via threat of

Finally, Lena's story is a disinvitation to victimized Russian women. Their problems are their own. They don't need to be dragging them onto America's doorstep.

"Russian Brides" was the first episode of *SVU* in a decade to deal exclusively with experiences of Russian women in the U.S. and it is worth discussing the previous such episode, which is truly the ground it stands on, albeit a shifting ground. "Russian Love Poem" (2000) aired only months before the passing of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. However, the topic was not trafficking at all. In fact, the subjects of these two episodes are inverted in their chronological relevance. "Russian Love Poem" is a whodunit that begins with the death of a wealthy American businessman who has multiple ongoing extramarital affairs with both young men and women. Spoiler: he dies of a heart attack during S&M play with two Russian sex workers. Detectives are chasing their own tails until the end of act two, when one of those women is slaughtered with an axe by a jealous lover.

More than anything, the episode hosts a forum for discussion on women from post-Soviet Russia engaging in sex work or otherwise romantically-entangled upward mobility. The investigation begins with a cheap joke. "She's off the boat three years ago," says the eldest male detective. "Green card occupation listed as *gulyashaya devka* [streetwalker/working girl, lit. walking girl]. Every sailor knows—that's Russian for hooker." When they finally locate this *devka*, Sonya Petrovich, she is working as a lounge singer, having seduced a man to get the job—a clear step up from her former gig as a "clerk" at a bathhouse. When Sonya is taken in for questioning, she pawns the businessman's death off on the other woman, Katya Ivanova. While she is waiting to be questioned, detectives speculate about her life.

Detective 1 [female]: Sleeping with guys is the only way she knows to get on top.

Detective 2 [male]: So all Russian girls are whores?

Detective 3 [female]: Listen you guys, remember what they've been through—poverty, corruption, drunken abuse. They learn that they have to lie. And their bodies are their only asset. Sex is money.

Detective 2: So then by doing the right guys they end up on the Forbeski 400?

Detective 4 [male]: [...] Americans think it's just about being a whore. The Russians know there's always a little commerce in the art of love.

After learning that Sonya's alibi is false, detectives plead with her to tell the truth.

Sonya: Even if I could tell you, maybe you wouldn't understand... I see the way you look at me. I know you look down on me for what I do for a living. But there are certain things about what I do that are not easy to read.

Munch: Like what?

Sonya: Is exciting to do something forbidden. My job itself is forbidden in this country, a country that is all about freedoms, but more than that I am with men who are breaking promises to their wives and that excites them. It makes them come alive again. *I* make them come alive again. *I* am their freedom and that is just delicious. In America you are what you do. I am thankful not to work in a spa. I am thankful not to work in a salon.

When the businessman's widow is interviewed, she reflects on what Russian women are doing to American men.

Widow: They are *everywhere*. They're sucking the men dry, and not only of their money, but of their sanity. They're ruining everybody's marriage. [...] And what? I'm supposed to become one of those pathetic divorcees who has to say "and how old is your Russian?"

Later, after Sonya is killed, detectives track down Katya, seeking her help in that case. Katya only agrees to be questioned after the threat of an immigration raid on her friends. At the station, despite knowing that the businessman died of essentially natural causes, a detective threatens to pin it on her as murder if she won't give them information about Sonya's ex-boyfriend, Alex.

Detective [female]: Do you know how easy it would be to convict you?

Katya: No.

Detective: [...] A jury would find you guilty in a heartbeat.

Katya: I am not guilty.

Detective: So help us catch Alex.

Katya: I'm busy.

Detective: So, what? You don't care if a murderer gets caught? You don't feel any fear or any guilt? Who are you? [pause] Some sex machine with a cash register between her legs? Or maybe you're just too afraid to get involved?"

Katya: [...] I want to make sure that I survive, understand? Some lose, some die, and some win. No one helps anyone. I want to make sure that I survive, understand? [...]

Detective: You make your living sleeping with guys.

Katya: You should sleep with men more. Trust me, it would help you. You wouldn't be such a mean bitch.

Detective: I make my living catching murders. America is not so different from Russia, you know—especially the prisons. There's no Champagne. There's no caviar.

Katya eventually agrees to cooperate, but her reluctance was not the product of fear for her safety. Rather, she caved to her own blithe mercenary philosophy, which the storytelling conveniently does not accuse the detectives of. They operate with impunity, administratively roughing people up and unironically finding cultural common ground only in authoritarianism. So, in 2000, Russian women are succubi draining successful men of their life force, and in 2011, they are victims capable only of perpetuating the cycles of violence that have made them so.

St. Vincent

In the comedy-drama film *St. Vincent* (2014), Daka Parimova (Naomi Watts), is a Russian sex worker who strips and hooks. She also acts as the unlikely moral voice of anti-hero protagonist Vincent MacKenna (Bill Murray). Watts is known for her powerful performance as British-Russian midwife Anna Khitrova in the 2007 British-Canadian-American mystery/crime film *Eastern Promises*, a title referencing the Slavic mythscape of deception endemic to the Natasha trade. That film is not really about trafficking, nor is *St. Vincent* about a mail-order bride, but Watts' character in the latter speaks back to immigrant bride discourse that categorizes as parasites sex workers (or Russian women in general) who lean toward domesticity. Vincent frequents a strip club where he is Daka's

most dedicated customer. In the club, Daka is shown stripping during the third trimester of a pregnancy, and it is implied that Vincent is the father.

Daka is constantly concerned with saving for maternity leave, something her employer clearly does not provide. When Vincent tries to pay her later for sex now, she tells him “My shit is not layaway. I’m not J.C. Penney.” Daka always stands up for herself and hopes for more, despite the obvious inequity of her situation. Importantly, the story is critical of her particular employer and clients, never the profession itself. “I should sue these assholes,” she says, “What’s the word? Discrimination against pregnant woman. Yes? ... Maybe I call stripper employer and ask them to fax insurance card to pay ultrasound? Yes?” At the same time, Vincent ends up an unlikely father figure to Oliver, a boy next door, whose single mother works long hours and can’t afford a traditional babysitter. Vincent, a jaded and reckless but profoundly wise person, seeks to simultaneously corrupt and enlighten the frail and naïve Oliver by taking him to gamble at a race track, teaching him how to fight, and closely acquainting him with Daka. When Vincent is hospitalized after suffering a stroke, Oliver trusts Daka and is regularly at her side. Deltcheva (2005) observes that in HBO’s *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), mob boss Tony Soprano has a Russian mistress, Irina (Oksana Babiy), who “fits into the expected formula of the demanding, hysterical, irrational Slavic tramp whose mission in life is to disrupt Tony’s already precarious balance” (165). Irina is held against Carmela, Tony’s pious wife, in a classic Madonna/whore dichotomy. In *St. Vincent*, we see that Daka is both Madonna and whore. Vincent pays her for sex while also relying on her to center him in the face of turmoil. Amusingly, she bears a child of technically unknown origin

(as Vincent has no interest in a paternity test). One day at the hospital, Oliver's mother, Maggie, arrives and enquires about Daka's presence.

Maggie: How do you and Vincent know each other?

Daka: I am working for this man.

Maggie: Doing what?

Daka: [pause] Working. [pause] I am also dancer.

While Daka's matter-of-factness and absolute lack of shame leads Maggie to drop the issue, it comes back to haunt her when, at a custody hearing with her ex-husband, Oliver (not knowing any better) testifies that he has been attended by Daka absent Vincent's supervision (Figure 12), and that Vincent described her line of work as "lady of the night." Ultimately, Daka's role in the child's life and her own life choices are not a detriment to Maggie and Oliver. The court rules in line with the logic of the film: it's nobody's business what a woman does with her body and it has nothing to do *per se* with her guardianship potential. The plot concludes with Daka giving birth to a baby girl. Deltcheva (2005) notes that "pregnancy [] is yet another fixture in constructing the image of the vilified Slavic woman; she not only wants to trick the naïve male protagonist



Figure 12. Daka meets Oliver as he arrives home from school

into giving her a new Western passport and providing for her, but also wants to force him to raise a child not his own” (169). While we know nothing of Daka’s immigration experience, we do know she will raise her baby under one roof with a willing Vincent, who earlier accompanied her to her ultrasound, and was supportive in general. While Vincent is in the hospital, Daka cleans up his otherwise squalid home and situates herself to be his live-in caretaker when he returns. Her settling into a domestic routine is galvanized by the final scene, in which she serves a large meal to Vincent, Maggie, and Oliver. And yet none of this reads like she was rehabilitated from sex work. She may very well continue it for all we know, although she tells Vincent he can no longer be a client.

CHAPTER VI

SEXUAL ESPIONAGE

“Our century’s fascination with the spy has produced at least as much mythology as recorded fact”

–Julie Wheelwright

In this, the last major chapter, I discuss several recent examples of Russian women spies in U.S. film and television: *The Americans* (television), *The Avengers* franchise (4 films), *A Good Day to Die Hard* (film), and *Red Sparrow* (novel awaiting adaptation to film). *Espionage* is the process of learning secret information. It is generally performed by agents of national foreign intelligence services or more colloquially “spies.” American popular culture involves a close association between spies and sexual seduction. Women are regularly shown in the context of a “honey trap,” in which a female spy uses sex, or the promise of sex, to lure a male spy (or any person with secrets worth extracting). A honey trap might be used to lure a target to their death, to entrap and blackmail them, or simply to flatter them into revealing secrets of their own will.

Background

Preconditions

Sexual espionage was industrialized by the major parties of World War II (the U.S., Britain, Germany, and the U.S.S.R.) in the decade from the war’s end (1945) to the formation of the Eastern Bloc (1955) (Hutton 1972, Lewis 1976). The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB) brought espionage (and its sexual component) to new heights during the Cold War. As British war biographer J. Bernard Hutton put it, “Red women spies have been a big headache for Western counter-intelligence” (1972, 97). And while every nation with a clandestine

intelligence service used attractive female agents at the time (Cooper 1981), it is no surprise that Russia would have a particularly mature program, given its 30-year head start beginning with the formation of a federal secret police in 1917, followed by drastic political purges in the 1930s (that surely resorted to honey trapping) (Laver 2008). However, between the first Red Scare in the U.S. in the 1920s, and the U.S.' entry into WWII, the American gendered Russian imaginary was less about spies *per se* and more about supporting an existing domestic movement to identify assertive women as dangerous and unnatural. This agenda, easily nested in the already burgeoning category of Film noire, singled out Russia with roles such as Greta Garbo as *Ninotchka* (1939) and Hedy Lamarr as "Lizzie" in *Comrade X* (1940). In these films, "The Communist woman [] was cold, ruthless, and, above all, humorless" (Olmstead 2004, 80).

The Cold War

In the years leading up to the McCarthy hearings of 1954, there were several high-profile cases of women alleged to be informants to the K.G.B—Elizabeth Bentley (1948), Judith Coplon (1949), Priscilla Hiss (1948), and Ethel Rosenberg (1950). Rather than focusing on the serious implications of the information potentially leaked by these women, news media prioritized "their appearance, their sexuality, and their relationships with men" (Olmstead 2004, 79). In addition to being objectified, they were also generally denied agency. Bentley was portrayed as a mistress to a spy, rather than being one herself. Coplon's image was turned into a scandal over her alibi involving liaisons with a strange man. Hiss was blamed despite evidence pointing exclusively to her husband, and Rosenberg, like Hiss, was singled out (despite evidence pointing to she *and* her husband) as a "domineering woman [and] the master of her weak husband" (89). In summary (90):

[N]ot everyone let the truth get in the way of a good story. Reporters, investigators, and prosecutors imposed stereotypes about female spies and Communists upon these accused women spies, and these stereotypes warped the media coverage and even the judicial prosecutions of these cases.

In a study of British rhetoric and public culture from the 1950s to the 1980s, Wheelright (1993) found that female characters in spy writing intimately conformed to a male perspective, invoking the *femme fatale*. “The female agent, in both espionage fiction and intelligence history, is most often sexualized, and her role confined to seducing the enemy.” She absorbs “anxieties about female betrayal, male vulnerability, and alienation” (293). According to Wheelright (1993) and Olmstead (2004), the Western tendency has been to see a drive for material or sexual power where there is actually ideological conviction and a sense of sacrifice. In Hutton’s *Women in Espionage* (1972), his non-fiction account of female spies frames women mystically and with clear bias. First he asks, “[D]oes the subtle flavor of feminine charm in a man’s world of danger give women an overwhelming advantage?” (7). Later he blames a woman spy’s betrayal of Russia on her body, saying that she “failed Russia miserably because of a basic unchangeable factor in her make-up: her sex” (101). Hutton is, of course, describing a woman who fell in love with an American officer and defected to the U.S. This undercurrent of gendered chauvinism will be of importance in discussing *Red Sparrow*, our final selection of the chapter. Cooper (1981), asserts that “Women spies [] have a certain undeniable utility conferred upon them by reason of their sex. Like greed, sex or lust, is one of the basic human frailties. And one of the most readily and easily exploitable” (255). As if men have no such utility and women are just blessed with predatory instincts that men are cursed to be defenseless to.

Post-Soviet Era

I would be remiss not to again mention *From Russia with Love* (1963), the second film of the James Bond franchise, and the capstone of a merger between the Russian *femme fatale* and the world of spycraft. Bond films were known for their villainesses, however, as Garland (2009) argues, after *You Only Live Twice* (1967), “the Bond girl villain fades into relative insignificance for thirty years” (183), until Pierce Brosnan’s first Bond film, *GoldenEye* (1995). As discussed, Xenia, the film’s *femme fatale*, is designed as the be-all, end-all of deadly Russian women. Her “extreme combination of eroticism and death [] identifies her as an exaggerated reincarnation of the Bond girl villain” (185). *GoldenEye* did not reflect any enlightened thinking about Russian women, but it did (as a product of its time) take a post-modernist flame thrower to the usefulness of its stereotype. Its outlandishness set the stage for contemporary representations that have no choice but to engage in deeper nuance.

The first such representation I will discuss is *The Americans*, which, despite its revolutionary approach, has its origins in an event that was laced with objectification. In 2010, when the FBI discovered, arrested, and deported a group of 10 Russians operating as “deep cover” agents in New York and New Jersey (Justice Dept. 2010), U.S. media attention of the scandal focused on only one of the operatives, Anna Chapman, whom *ABC News* dubbed a “bombshell” (Chuchmach and Schecter 2010). Upon returning home to Russia, Chapman was rewarded with her own television show (Anna Chapman 2015), and was featured in a cover story for *Maxim Russia* (Volkova 2010). The cover (Figure 13), on which Chapman wears black lingerie and totes a handgun, is a parody of classic spy film imagery (Figure 14).



Figure 13. Anna Chapman in *Maxim*

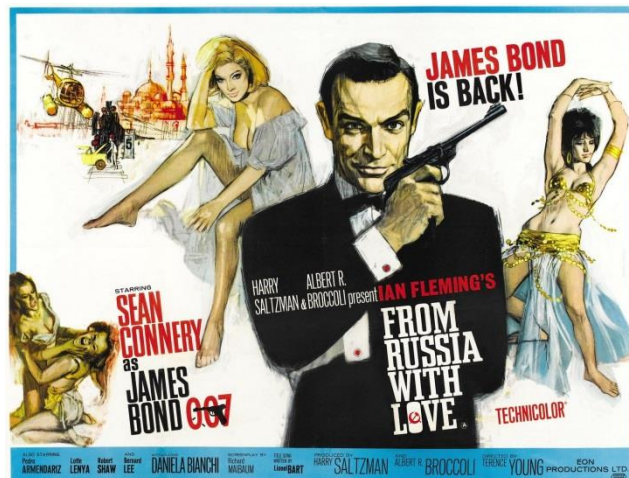


Figure 14. *From Russia With Love* movie poster

Appropriately, the story was written by a former Russian actress who also served in the Soviet Army in East Germany (Volkova, Irina Vladimirovna, 2015). Soon after the arrests, American television writer-producer and former Soviet/East European operations CIA case officer Joe Weisberg was approached by FOX executives about producing a show inspired by the 2010 arrests (Randall 2014). *The Americans*, a series dedicated to Cold War espionage, was the result. The show has been lauded for its accuracy by both

former CIA and KGB officers (Randall 2014). A study affiliated with the International Association for Intelligence Education, which informs intelligence communities in NATO, recently recommended that classroom learning use shows like *The Americans* in overcoming “lack of knowledge or interest in history among students” (Cozine 2015, 92). “Ironically,” Cozine says, “it is television and film that brought us Bourne and Bond that can also aid in the teaching of the variety of issues and concepts important to the study of human intelligence” (2015, i).

Textual Analysis

The Americans

Set in early-to-mid 1980s Washington, D.C., FX’s *The Americans* (2013-) follows Elizabeth and Philip Jennings (Kari Russell and Matthew Rhys), two KGB agents posing as husband and wife, working as travel agents. The Jenningses have been in the U.S. for 20 years as “illegals” or deep cover operatives. They have two adolescent children and every appearance that they are, indeed, Americans. The show is, at its core, about spies, but, as television critic Anne Nussbaum poignantly notes, it is really “about human personality as a cruel performance” (2014). *The Americans*, which contains at least four Russian female characters that appear or converse in some sexual context, is remarkably sensitive to the psychology of sexuality. To again borrow from Nussbaum, it is “gripping precisely because it takes sex so seriously, treating it as life’s deepest joy and its most terrifying risk” (2016).

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is the first character we meet. She is wearing a blonde wig and sipping on rosé as she chats up an unidentified intelligence asset whom she will later felate in a

hotel room (1.1 Pilot). Elizabeth's mark is taken aback by her prowess in the act, setting the stage for what she can do to a man. The pilot also reveals Elizabeth's vulnerability and the high cost she has paid to be the successful operative she has become. After she and Philip capture a treasonous ex-K.G.B. officer, Elizabeth realizes that the same officer had sexually assaulted her twenty years ago, following a hand-to-hand combat training exercise. Elizabeth and Philip kill the man in lieu of returning him to the Soviets and, strangely, it sparks their first ever romantic feelings for one another. Up to that point, the two were never lovers. Their marriage and family were merely a cover. We also learn what patience Elizabeth has in being a passive partner, even to the point of suffering violence in the name of not blowing her cover (1.5 COMINT). When she is sleeping with an executive from a major defense contractor, the man forces her onto all-fours and begins first spanking her, then whipping her back with a belt. He hits her eight times before she falls off the bed and cowers, despite her ability to easily subdue the man. When Philip sees her bruises later, he is up in arms, ready to avenge her suffering, to which she says, "If I'd wanted to deal with him, don't you think he'd be dealt with? I wanted the intel and I got it. I don't need you to fight my battles for me." You get the sense that Philip both fears for her safety and is in some way jealous of her interactions with other men. The Jennings' marriage is threatened later in the first season when Philip is sent to New York City to assist in an operation (1.7 Duty and Honor). The mission is a honey trap in which Irina, another K.G.B. officer, frames a Polish political opposition leader, making it seem that, in a drunken stupor, he beat her to the point of hospitalization. Philip and Irina, we later learn, were training partners in "sex school" (3.5 Salang Pass), and she gave birth to his son without ever informing him. The two

have a passionate affair in New York, which Elizabeth later learns about from their mutual handler. The latter half of the first season is consumed by a dejected Philip living in a hotel after Elizabeth refuses to forgive him (1.8 Mutually Assured Destruction). It is only after Elizabeth is shot near-fatally by the FBI that she invites him to return home (1.13 The Colonel). With each passing season, Elizabeth's major acts of seduction reduce in number (three in the first, two in the second, and only one in the third), but there are still six of them in total, all unique in character. For example, Elizabeth is tasked to seduce a Naval employee who turns out to be a closeted homosexual (2.4 A Little Night Music). Instead of turning the assignment over to Philip, she pretends to be a skittish recent survivor of sexual assault who wants an emotional connection before anything physical happens. Her plan works. It's worth mentioning that Philip does at least as much sexual espionage as Elizabeth. He is even party to a fictitious marriage in which he works an FBI secretary as an asset. In season three, Philip is tasked with his most difficult mission yet—to seduce the teenage daughter of a top CIA officer in charge of Russian affairs, in order to gain access to his briefcase (4.4 Dimebag). The assignment is deeply troubling to Philip because he has a daughter of similar age himself (discussed below). Philip tries to process the moral implications of the work by sharing it with Elizabeth (3.5 Salang Pass).

Philip: Do you think about when we learned to do this?

Elizabeth: No. [Philip recalls meeting Irina for the first time, walking into a room to find her there, waiting naked] It must be different for a man.

Philip: I don't know. [recalls training with an elderly woman] You had to find it in your mind somewhere. [recalls training with a chubby, middle-aged man, on whom he must perform oral sex]. They kept telling us we had to make it real to ourselves.

Nina

The other Russian woman of major consequence in *The Americans* is Nina Krilova (Annet Mahendru), a junior K.G.B. officer assigned to the Soviet embassy, whose presence in the U.S. is documented. Nina speaks in subtitled Russian while at work and accented English elsewhere. Unlike Russell (American) and Rhys (Welsh), Mahendru is ethnically Russian: Afghan-born and of Russo-Indian descent. The show treats Nina's ethnicity with respect, in that you never get the impression that her Asianness is predictive of her behavior or the treatment that befalls her. The Soviet Union was a vast, multi-ethnic Empire and, as examined previously, it produced a lot more than white people, so there shouldn't be anything to explain about Nina's appearance. However, she does not blend in entirely. Nina is placed opposite F.B.I. counter-intelligence agent Stan Beeman (Noah Emmerich), who is so tall, pale, and blonde, that Nina's black hair and tan skin call her ethnicity to the forefront. Nina's accent also paints her as pathetic and helpless at times, however often this is the product of role play tied to her espionage duties. Nina's narrative follows three phases, each generally contained to the seasons of the show: 1) entrapment by, and informancy to, the FBI, 2) renewed loyalty to, then betrayal by, the KGB, and 3) imprisonment for treason and execution. Simply put, Nina never has a fair chance. We are introduced to her when Stan approaches her at an outdoor produce market and blackmails her into becoming an informant, threatening to report to the Soviet government that she has been smuggling consumer goods out of the country to her family in Russia (1.2 The Clock). Faced with a difficult decision, Nina agrees to inform to the FBI in exchange for her safety. She realizes that she will be worth more to the Bureau if she has access to higher levels of classified

documents, so Nina seduces the director of the embassy, who rewards her with increased access (1.5 COMINT). Once Nina has earned the director's trust, Stan instructs her to plant a recording device in his office that, when discovered, results in the director's arrest and deportation (1.6 Trust Me). After this successful series of tasks, Stan calls Nina to a late night meeting, shows up drunk, and in a roundabout manner expresses his affection for her. Nina capitalizes on his weakness by initiating their first kiss, which she assures him is not part of any mission (1.7 Duty and Honor). From that point, Stan really gets in over his head. At a point it becomes Nina who is working him. She is still reporting to the Bureau, but Stan comes to need Nina as much as she needs him. They begin to meet regularly at a safe house for casual sex before mission debriefings (1.8 Mutually Assured Destruction). Nina really sinks her hooks into Stan, baby-talking him, getting upset over little things to provoke him, and telling him anecdotes such as that she dreamt he rescued her from a burning building (1.11 Covert War). She tells Stan about her dream as he waits patiently at the foot of the bed, knowing, as she does, that he is only there for one thing (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Stan and Nina meet at an FBI-provided safe house

Once Nina is certain that she has control over Stan, she confesses to the new director of the Embassy, who is not entirely immune to her charms himself, that she has been spying for the Americans (1.12 The Oath). The director, Arkady, takes pity on her and, while reporting her to authorities in Moscow, insists that not only can she be rehabilitated, but is an irreplaceable asset. Nina begins to type official reports detailing her activities with Stan (2.2 Cardinal), “like some pornographic Scheherazade, spinning tales to save her own head” (Nussbaum 2014). Stan, who is married and has been cheating on his wife the whole time, finally decides to tell Nina, for the first time, that he loves her (2.3 The Walk In). Nina, however, begins to lose control of the situation, when a new KGB officer at the embassy, Oleg, questions how Stan ever thought that Nina was *his* informant in the first place (2.4 A Little Night Music). Once again, Nina defends herself the way that works best. She tells Oleg every detail of what has happened and asks for his protection. The two have sex for the first time in a five-star hotel that Oleg procures through the connections he has as the son of the Soviet railways minister. All of Nina’s protection is for naught though, as Arkady has already accepted a mission from high command to use her as a pawn in bid to coerce Stan into procuring stealth aircraft technology (2.12 Operation Chronicle). Nina calls Stan to the safe house and when he arrives, she has been beaten up and is surrounded by KGB henchmen (Figure 16). Nina believes that her role in the trap is make-believe, but when Stan refuses to cooperate, she is sent to Moscow to stand trial for treason.

While things only get worse for Nina in terms of her freedom, once she has returned to Russia, she never again finds herself in a position where she has to offer sex to preserve her safety. She still gets worked by the system and has to manipulate others,



Figure 16. Stan is ambushed by the KGB at the safe house

but Nina's life in prison camps removes the viewer from the glamorous distractions at the center stage of the show. Nina's mind becomes the site of a rhetorical exchange, in which the audience sees the morality of the show from a unique existential angle. Nina is given many chances to save herself, but ultimately she is in search of something else. At first she is given a 10-year sentence, but corrections officials offer her a reduction if she can elicit a confession out of her cell mate (3.2 *Baggage*). When she succeeds, Nina has to watch a clearly harmless woman kick, scream, and cry as she is dragged away by guards to suffer God knows what. Nina is told that her task was minor and would only alleviate a sliver of her sentence, but if she does one more (very challenging) task, she will be freed (3.8 *Divestment*). She is sent to another camp where she must coerce a captive physicist to perfect stealth technology for Soviet aircraft. Nina's approach to the physicist, Anton, is to be his friend and learn about what motivates him. She learns that he is not allowed to write to his children who now believe that he abandoned them. Slowly Nina's feigned sympathy turns to a genuine admiration for Anton, who she encourages to resist his situation (3.11 *One Day in the Life of Anton Baklanov*). Ultimately, Nina comes clean to

Anton about her assignment and he respects her honesty (3.13 March 8, 1983). In the fourth season, Nina is authorized a visit from her estranged husband (previously unknown to the audience), who thanks her for the items that she sent before, bringing everything full circle. Not long after, Nina is caught trying to smuggle a letter out of the camp to Anton's children (4.3 Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow). She then has a dream about getting her release papers, walking onto a snowy Siberian runway, and boarding an airplane with Anton (4.4 Chloramphenicol). Nina is woken by guards, taken to the basement, read a revised sentence of death for treason, and shot point-blank in the back of the head.

Paige

The cliffhanger between seasons three and four was that the Jennings' 15-year-old daughter Paige (Holly Taylor) has mishandled her parents' confession that they are Russian spies. Paige has long grown apart from her parents, clinging to Christianity and developing something of a surrogate father in her pastor. At first Elizabeth and Philip are furious, being Leninist atheists, but their interventions only aggravate the situation. Eventually, they receive orders from the K.G.B. to prepare Paige for not only the knowledge of their duties, but the performance of them. Elizabeth does not question the orders, but the ever protective Philip is openly insubordinate. In the pilot, Philip is shopping for shoes at the mall with a then 13-year-old Paige, when a man in his thirties, accompanied by another teen, makes sexually suggestive comments about Paige's appearance (Figure 17). The man then invites Paige to go shopping for makeup with the two of them. Philip intervenes, reminding the man of Paige's age. He responds, "I don't know, daddy. She sure looks ready to me." Philip is fuming, but contains himself. On



Figure 17. Paige is sexually harassed at the mall

the way out, he tells Paige “It’s no use fighting guys like that.” Proud of his mature response, she replies “God, I wouldn’t want you to.” Later that day, having observed the man’s name from his credit card lying on the counter, Philip arrives at his home and brutally beats him, stabbing him in the crotch with a hot pair of grill tongs. “No more little girls,” Philip reminds the man, “or I’ll be back to stick that in your heart.” Later in the first season, Paige and her younger brother, Henry, are abandoned at a movie theatre when an operation Elizabeth and Philip are performing goes awry (1.6 Trust Me). While the children are walking home, Paige decides to hitchhike. She and Henry are picked up by a young man with a disarming face and blue collar wardrobe, who brings them to a nearby lake, opens a beer, and assures them they’ll leave shortly. The man then gives Henry a bag of bread and tells him to go feed the ducks while he talks to Paige. The man starts an ominous rant about how unappreciated he is and Henry and Paige notice he has a large knife in his coat. Sensing danger, Henry breaks a beer bottle over the man’s head, incapacitating him. The two children take off running and never see the man again. From the very beginning, the audience is warned that Paige is off-limits, but also told to expect

that she will be under threat. When Paige gets dragged into the would-be formation of a second-generation illegals program, it calls back the sexual traumas of her parents and creates an unmanageable level of tension for the audience. She becomes a living metaphor for the battle ground of knowledge reproduction in bilateral Cold War ideologies. Paige is an aching reminder of the ambivalence and general moral lostness of both sides. If you aren't ever sure who the "good guys" are, you are certain of one thing: Paige is the only seed of peace in sight.

The Avengers Franchise

In the past decade, one of the most prominent female Russian characters in American film has been Natasha Romanoff, a.k.a. Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson), in Marvel's "The Avengers" franchise. According to BoxOfficeMojo.com, *Marvel's The Avengers* (2012) and its sequel, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), had a combined gross of over \$1 Billion. If tickets are \$15 (well above average), it would mean that 67 million Americans saw Johansson portray a deadly, sexy Russian spy. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Romanoff has appeared in *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2013), and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016, in theatres [exceeds the scope of this study]). Natasha Romanoff—whose family name refers to the Tsarist dynasty that ruled Russia for 300 years, until 1917—first appeared in the "Iron Man" feature of the Marvel comic "Tales of Suspense" (No. 52), in April, 1964. To put that in perspective, *From Russia with Love* was released in May of that year and Soviet premiere Nikita Khrushchev was deposed in October. While Romanoff was introduced as a villain, in 1966 she switched sides to fight with the American super-hero team "The Avengers," and was thereafter assigned a uniform conducive to her moniker. Widow has no superhuman

powers, but she is a flawless martial artist, has impressive interrogation skills, can hack computers, and has a generally competent scientific mind (no doubt a positive stereotype of Russians). In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Romanoff was prepared from a very young age to enter the KGB, where she became one of their top assassins. In the distant past, Clint Barton, a.k.a. Hawkeye, was hired to kill her, but chose to spare her life out of admiration for her skills. Barton then recruited Romanoff into SHIELD, the murky shadow government that employs the Avengers.

Iron Man 2

As in the comics, we first find Romanoff with Tony Stark, a.k.a. Iron Man (Robert Downey, Jr.), a billionaire inventor who fights in an impervious suit of armor of his own design. Stark inherited his father's company, Stark Industries, which was a major weapons manufacturer. *Iron Man 2* gets an extra dose of Russianness in that the villain is Ivan Vanko, a.k.a. Whiplash, the son of a Russian physicist exploited and abandoned by Stark's father. Romanoff is assigned by SHIELD to keep tabs on Stark and see if he will be of use to the agency's "Avengers initiative." Even after Stark learns that Romanoff is a SHIELD agent, she remains his "assistant." He begrudgingly develops a respect for her that is reinforced when she saves the day at the film's climax. Vanko has seized control of an army of military drones and is wreaking havoc on a defense industry convention. Romanoff is the only one able to access a server location and hack in to regain control. As instrumental as this makes her, Romanoff is still a shallow character, defined more by her body than her mind. When Stark meets her, he is in full male gaze mode, reading her personal history from a tablet as he looks her up and down. Stark is excited to learn that Romanoff worked as a model. While he reads, his chauffeur, a former professional boxer,

offers to teach Romanoff some moves. She steps into the ring and pulverizes him in seconds, which is certainly empowering, but on balance Romanoff is just a ninja Barbie. Stark's chauffeur is the one who drives her to the drone server, and while she changes from evening wear into a sleek uniform during the ride (Figure 18), her driver stares at her in the rear-view mirror most of the time. When they arrive, Romanoff has to disable a dozen guards to get to the terminal. Brutal and deadly as she is, there is still a lot about the scene that feels campy (Figure 19) such that the choreography takes care to keep Romanoff feminine and attractive. It reflects standard Hollywood sexualized marketing.



Figure 18. Romanoff's driver watches her undress



Figure 19. Black Widow in a Ninjitsu-style low fighting stance

Marvel's The Avengers

Romanoff undergoes a transformation under new writer and director Joss Whedon, known for strong female leads on the many television shows he has created over two decades. While the show he best known for, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), offers the very things I complain about in Romanoff, the show was relatively progressive for its time. Fem-nerddom embraced it. Whedon's other female characters in *Firefly* (2002), *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), and other projects have given him a reputation among mainstream female critics as being tasteful, respectful, and writing complex characters that subvert sex and gender hegemonies (Martinson 2013). *The Avengers* opens to Romanoff tied to a chair in a warehouse, being interrogated by Russian military officers. We are given all the classic cues of a damsel in distress scenario. What we don't know yet is that Romanoff has allowed herself to be captured and is actually the one performing the interrogation. After she learns what she came for, she uses her skills to break free of her restraints and subdue her "captors." The film continues to focus on Romanoff's expertise in the psychology of espionage, when she allows a captive Loki (Tom Hiddleston), the film's villain, to taunt her and believe that she has become seriously affected by it. In reality, Romanoff is manipulating him into revealing his plans. We also see more of Romanoff's martial arts skills, here less showcased and more normalized into the distribution of action. Romanoff's knack for technology is again helpful as she and the other Avengers fight the Chitauri, a horde of soldiers from another dimension bent on wiping New York City off the map. Romanoff makes effective use of Chitauri vehicles and weapons, and her prowess allows her to seal the wormhole from which the enemy is arriving, thus resolving the plot.

Captain America: The Winter Soldier

Romanoff's presence in *The Winter Soldier* is unremarkable, as is the film in general. It reads like a typical piece of conspiracy fiction sprinkled with buddy cop humor. Romanoff and the Captain have been framed for murder and are on the run, searching for the real assassin while trying to clear their names. The only potential item of interest, the narrative choice to make them strictly platonic partners despite their growing intimacy, fails to communicate new information about Romanoff.

Avengers: Age of Ultron

The second film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe written and directed by Whedon is *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, in which Romanoff enters a new phase of self-discovery. If in *Iron Man 2* she is eye candy and in *The Avengers* she is counter-eye candy, here she is beyond simple rhetoric of talking back to culture. Romanoff's sexuality is constructed as having a past and a future, and being every bit a vulnerability as it is a weapon. When the Avengers have all been incapacitated by subvillain Scarlet Witch, who makes them dream of the things they fear most, Romanoff envisions her earliest K.G.B. training. She is shown as a young child, arriving at a ballet academy, where the director is openly cruel to the girls. An older Romanoff is engaged in marksmanship training, including the performing of a summary execution on a stranger wearing a burlap bag over their head. Later in the film, while taking an ordinary nap, she has flashbacks of a medical procedure. Romanoff develops romantic feelings for Bruce Banner (the Hulk), whom she pursues in subtle escalations throughout the film. In a moment alone with Banner, she tries to arouse him sexually and suggests a partnership between the two.

Banner: I can't have [kids]. Do the math! I physically can't!!

Romanoff: Neither can I. In the Red Room where I was trained, where I was raised, they had a graduation ceremony. They sterilize you. It's efficient. One less thing to worry about. The one thing that might matter more than a mission. Makes everything easier, even killing. You still think you're the only monster on the team?

As prominent as Romanoff's character is, in *Age of Ultron*, Wanda Maximoff, a.k.a. Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen) and her twin brother Pietro Maximoff, a.k.a. Quicksilver, steal the show with exciting new powers in the franchise's repertoire. As Romanoff explains, "he's fast and she's weird." Wanda is gifted with the powers of telepathy and telekinesis. She can hypnotize people, harnessing their will indefinitely, as well as relocate or disintegrate matter with her thoughts. The Maximoffs have something of a trickster air about them, which I see as evocative of "gypsy" stereotypes. Wanda's whole demeanor is Roma-Orientalized. Her physical movement in fight scenes carries a vague mysticism, resembling interpretive dance more than combat. And yet she is known to be terribly more dangerous than any of the Avengers. *Age of Ultron* is set in the crypto-Slavic fictional nation of Sokovia, birth home of the Maximoff twins. The two are war orphans, motivated by a desire to avenge their parents, who were killed by a bomb with "Stark" printed on it. The events are recalled in a way that parallels U.S.-driven intervention into the Yugoslav wars of the late 1990s—intervention considered by former Soviet and Warsaw Pact states as a provocation that perpetuated violence as much as it alleviated it (Zunes 1999). In *Ultron*, civilians are being evacuated from Sokovia's capital city, which is under attack by an army of sophisticated drone soldiers. In a scene with evacuees fleeing a café, you finally are shown a business marquee with unequivocally Serbian Cyrillic text (an obvious, and much appreciated, Easter egg for folks like myself). In the beginning, the Maximoffs are terrorists, but ones whose actions seem justified.

Slowly they learn that the thirst for destruction brewing in their leader exceeds their own commitment, and they switch sides, helping the Avengers. Wanda's brother dies at the hands of the sentient cyborg leading a drone army into battle against the Avengers (while also trying to raze the city). Here we see how much Wanda is characterized through raw emotion, making her everything Romanoff is not, acting as her discursive counterweight. Wanda's grieving at the loss of her brother instigates a non-voluntary, all-consuming wave of destruction (Figure 20) that glows like blood-red magma. She also wears a red leather jacket, and—while Scarlet is part of her code name, and the word and color could have many implications—given the Belgrade mythscape in which she exists, I am willing to entertain a connotation with Communism and Russian post-Yalta colonialism. You might say that Wanda's cathartic release speaks to the horror of ignored wounds from totalitarianism, as well as their festering at the hands of supposed champions of freedom.



Figure 20. Scarlet Witch's reaction to the death of her brother

A Good Day to Die Hard

The 2013 American action film *A Good Day to Die Hard* stars Bruce Willis as Detective John McClane, a New York cop who flies to Moscow to investigate the

imprisonment of his son Jack (Jai Courtney). The two end up dragged into a conspiracy that has them traversing Russia and Ukraine in search of a father-daughter team intent on selling weapons-grade uranium to the highest bidder. The chief antagonist, Yuri Komarov (Sebastian Koch) takes a back seat to his accomplice/daughter Irina (Yuliya Snigir). Irina is a full-throttle maniac along the lines of *GoldenEye*'s Xenia Onatopp. She exudes an inexplicable sensuality, at times appearing to be aroused by inanimate objects. Her perversity and taboo are reflected further in the satisfied reaction she has to her father suddenly shooting to death one of their henchman, accentuated further by her disheveled hair and (in defiance of all explanation) freshly applied bright red lipstick. When the McClanes finally kill Yuri, Irina's wildly irrational response is to perform a suicide attack by flying a helicopter into the building they occupy. The McClanes easily escape the attack by diving out of an already blown-out wall into a body of water below. Irina's facial expression is frenzied, even lustful, as she approaches her target. Her demise speaks to a lack of control as well as competence. She is nothing but a hysterical villainess—insatiable and pathetic.

Snigir's sexuality was featured prominently in the marketing of the film which, oddly, employs a sort of escalation-turned-anticlimax. You end up seeing less of her body in the final cut than anywhere else. The first U.S. trailer, released three months ahead of the U.S. premiere, shows Snigir arriving in a parking garage on a motorcycle and unzipping her leather jacket, revealing only a bra beneath. The wraparound shot ends before you can see more than a little cleavage (Figure 21.1). About three weeks ahead of the premiere, a promotional still, shot in modeling light, showed Snigir with the majority of her torso exposed (Figure 21.2). And yet the version of the scene shown in theaters,

and on the U.S. DVD, shows only a sliver of one half of her upper torso, before cutting away (Figure 21.3).



Figure 21.1. Yuliya Snigir in *A Good Day to Die Hard* trailer



Figure 21.2. Snigir in *'Die Hard* promo still

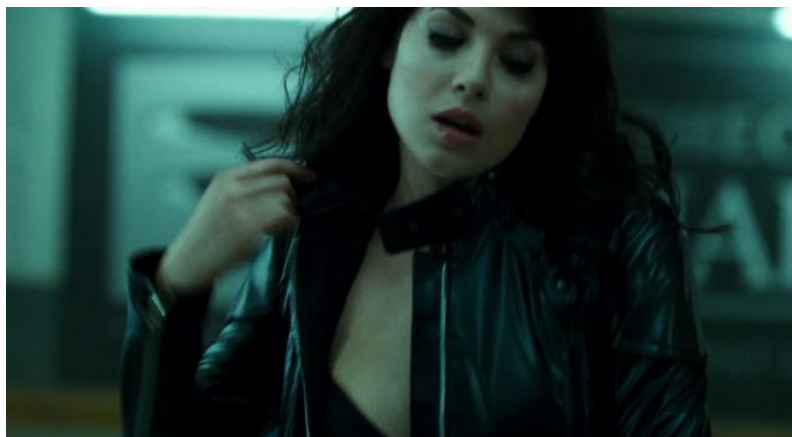


Figure 21.3. Snigir in the actual film

Shockingly, Snigir is actually ethnically Russian and a Russian citizen. She now lives in Los Angeles, but made her name modeling and acting in Russia. Hers is the only example I have found of a portrayal of this kind of character by a Russian actress proper (others have been Italian, Dutch, etc.). Regarding Irina, Snigir told *The Hollywood Reporter* (Danilova 2013):

THR: Are you not put off by the fact that Russian actors often play villains in Western movies?

Snigir: Not only Russians do it. But it would be strange to expect something else from the Americans. And it has nothing to do with the aftermath of the Cold War or a political statement. They are just patriots who fight evil all over the world. That's their national trait.

Yet the film's tagline, "Yippee Ki-Yay, Mother Russia," has strong implications with respect to Williams' gendered Russian imaginaries (2012) and Schrecker's Cold War triumphalism (2004), especially considering the multi-generational nature of both the heroes and villains. In *Die Hard* (1988), the first of five films in the franchise, the elder McClane is nicknamed "John Wayne" by terrorists he battles inside a Los Angeles skyscraper. McClane responds by radio with the patriotic one-liner "Yippee ki-yay, mother fucker," at each milestone in overcoming his foreign enemy. "Yippee ki-yay" derives from an old cowboy song, "Git Along, Little Dogies" (Lomax 1910), poetically appropriate given that the cover of Schrecker's book features Ronald Reagan riding a white horse, sporting a Stetson. The phrase also famously appeared in the Cold War dark comedy *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), in which American actor Slim Pickens shouts it atop a nuclear bomb that he rodeo-rides as it falls to the Earth.

Red Sparrow

Imagine Black Widow's deadliness paired with Scarlet Witch's mystique, and you have Dominika Egorova, the heroine of *Red Sparrow*, a 2013 spy novel written by

retired CIA officer Jason Matthews. *Red Sparrow* follows the present-day exploits of two intelligence officers: the Russian Dominika, and an American, Nathaniel Nash. *Red Sparrow* was met with critical acclaim, receiving a shining *New York Times* Sunday Book Review (Cumming 2013), as well as a 2014 Edgar Allan Poe Award, for best first novel by an American author, from the Mystery Writers of America. In 2015, Matthews published a sequel, *Palace of Treason*, now listed on Amazon.com as book two in the “Dominika Egorova & Nathaniel Nash Series.” A film adaptation of *Red Sparrow* is in development (IMDb n.d.), and it is rumored that American actress Jennifer Lawrence has been offered the lead role of Dominika (Bell 2015).

Russia

Roughly the first 100 pages of *Red Sparrow* (of a total 400+) occur in Russia, following the twisted path that leads to Dominika’s recruitment into the Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). Dominika begins adulthood as a new-wave Muscovite patriot, uncritically adherent to the Putin way of things. The progress of the novel feeds on her slow disillusionment with the Russian state and especially its intelligence and security apparatus. Predictably, when we meet Dominika she is a prima ballerina, living a somewhat repressed life with her parents. She is a hard-working and talented professional with a bright future who becomes the victim of a lustful corruption in the ranks of her troupe. After being sabotaged by a rival and suffering irreparable bone damage to one of her feet, Dominika must find a new career. Then her father dies, putting her mother at risk of losing their apartment. To the ultimately nefarious rescue is Dominika’s uncle, Vanya, an SVR officer, who promises to use his connections to protect her mother—if she will join the intelligence service. She agrees, having no real choice in the matter.

Before she even goes to formal training, Dominika is assigned a special mission to spy on Dimitri Ustinov, a dissident Oligarch who is causing Putin problems. She conducts the mission as assigned, but after being wined and dined and returning to Ustinov's posh penthouse apartment with him, things go awry. Mid-coitus, an off-the-books special forces assassin appears and cuts Ustinov's throat, letting his plump corpse fall on Dominika, smothering her. While she is absolutely furious about how she was set up, Vanya again holds Dominika's mother's financial security over her head, coercing her to attend first the SVR basic course, and then the notorious "sparrow school," which specializes in training for sexual espionage. Nothing is easy for Dominika from this point on. The overriding mood at every turn is that she is stuck in a man's world and that men are determined to exploit her. At the basic course, in an academy deep in the forest outside Moscow, Dominika is sexually intimidated by a male cadet who finds her alone in the showers and pins her to a wall. A defiant Dominika turns loose a faucet knob and drives it into the man's eye socket, rendering him permanently blind. She is reprimanded for the incident and made to see a psychologist—a man she sleeps with in order to procure a positive evaluation and thus her continued inclusion in the academy.

From there, Dominika flies a thousand miles to the ancient city of Kazan in order to fulfil her destiny as a Russian spy seductress. The sex school described by Matthews in vivid detail aligns remarkably with accounts produced by journalist-turned-psychologist David Lewis in *Sexpionage* (1976), a book that offered a first public look at information gleaned from 1) a KGB instruction manual recovered by the CIA in 1973, and 2) a long interview with a female Soviet defector who worked extensively in sexual espionage. And yet, with all of the procedural and atmospheric descriptions—cameras hidden behind

mirrors, body critiques performed by strange men—what steals the spotlight in this brief chapter of 13 pages (77-89), is consensual female homosexuality occurring outside of the formal training. Dominika’s internal monologue at this point is occupied by concerns over lost innocence, desensitization, and whether or not, after experiencing all of this, she will ever be able to make love again. The first connection Dominika forms is with Anya, a young woman first described as “slight and blond, with a wide mouth and high cheekbones lightly dusted by freckles” and “like an elegant milkmaid with pale blue eyes” (80). Anya is terrified from the onset and just wants to leave, but you get the sense that she, like Dominika, was coerced into being there. Anya is weak though, in comparison. She wears her heart on her sleeve and her innocence. We can tell from the start, will be her downfall. The revolution will eat this child. Anya never explicitly identifies herself as lesbian, but she exhibits great duress when watched or touched by men, and only seems comforted when touched by women. Dominika’s instincts are to protect Anya and she does so, offering frequent pep talks. Following a particularly challenging day of training, Anya comes to Dominika’s room crying and is invited inside. What follows is an admittedly compelling, though grossly uninformed sex scene. Dominika’s thoughts tell us that she is not attracted to women, but she pities Anya and would do anything to protect her. Dominika brings Anya to climax by penetrating her with the handle to a hairbrush—one given to Dominika by her great grandmother when she was a child. An earlier scene has revealed that Dominika’s first experience of self-pleasure involved this brush. It’s hard to tell if this is just sentimentalism or a conflation of auto-eroticism with female homosexuality (the former generally viewed in terms of lack despite a seeming endorsement of the latter). When Anya comes to Dominika’s

room the next time, she is refused even a conversation. “It isn’t my problem, thought Dominika. It’s enough that I’m fighting for my own sanity” (86). The next morning Anya doesn’t come to breakfast and soon after guards find she has strangled herself with a piece of hosiery. What now do we make of Anya the lesbian martyr? She does turn on its head the idea that students of this school are repulsed by their requirement to perform homosexual acts (which appears in every piece of literature I can find on the topic). Russia has known issues with anti-LGBT legislation and public legitimization of discrimination and violence (Gessen 2014, 55-79). And yet, if we consider this in terms of American exceptionalism, is the shaming of homophobia, what Rahman (2014) calls “pink-testing” (281) any less rhetorically suspect than reports on sex trafficking?

The West

The remainder of the book takes place in points west—Helsinki, Finland; Rome, Italy; and Athens, Greece, with brief cuts away to New London, CT, and Washington, D.C. The focus levels out to include much more of Nathaniel “Nate” Nash, who finally meets Dominika face-to-face. Nate is working as a field agent in Moscow when his diplomatic cover is blown, and he has to be reassigned to Helsinki. It is at this point that the SVR assigns Dominika to seduce Nate, and the CIA, figuring her for a Russian spy, assigns Nate to convince her to defect. Each thinks that they have the upper hand on the other, as slowly they develop an attraction to, and dependency on, one another. Dominika is already deeply frustrated about the treatment she receives from her employer, but she is pushed over the edge by the loss of a dear friend. At her office in Helsinki, Dominika gets to know a retired “Queen Sparrow,” Marta, whom she confides in about the difficulty of her work. The two meet often socially and come to know everything about

one another. Dominika makes the mistake of sharing with her the details of Vladimir Ustinov's death, and in a moment of anger and weakness at work, Marta alludes to the events before her superiors. The very same assassin then visits Marta in her home and takes far too much pleasure in eviscerating her with a fixed-blade survival knife. Dominika keeps her composure in the workplace and agrees to work for Nate as a double-agent.

Once their love affair becomes the central plot element, we find ourselves in a framework that employs all the trappings of both the romance and spy genres. Things start to feel a lot more Hollywood. The intendedness for adaptation is eye-rollingly palpable. The last 100 pages take place in Rome and Athens—gorgeous summer shooting locations and easy places to justify the wearing of few clothes. These scenes are there to sell the sexiness of it all and are poorly integrated into the plot. In Rome, the two have sex on a hotel balcony and it reads like the implied next moment of every misogynistic fragrance ad you've ever seen. His masculine conquering and her feminine passivity become nested in both their espionage operations and their love making, which are now quite separate.

[Dominika] 'I want to feel that sometimes we leave the operation behind, that there is just you and me.' Her bosom heaved in her brassiere. He stood up and put his arms around her. His mind was a riptide of damage control battling the stirring of his passion for her. He smelled her hair, and felt her body. You gonna slip a third time, Mr. Case Officer? he thought [] 'I want you to violate your rules . . . with me . . . not your agent, me,' said Dominika. 'I want you to violate *me*' (371, emphasis derived from audio book).

I've never had an alarmist response to consensual masochism, but in this case the cultural baggage is too heavy: American male author, American male active sex partner, Russian female passive sex partner. Dominika's disillusionment occurs mainly within the context of how other women in her life are treated by Russian men. Her mother is used

against her. The two women she is close to, Anya (the little sister she never had) and Marta (a surrogate mother), die tragic deaths. We are told essentially that Russians don't understand how to respect women, and there is even the suggestion that they have a pathological hatred for them. Rhetorically, Dominika is subject to Williams' (2012) greatest concern: "geopolitical traffic in gendered Russian imaginaries" (33).

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the nature of recent plots and characters in U.S. film and television that construct the Russian woman as sexual subject. The themes of “sex trafficking,” “male-order brides,” and “sexual espionage” exhibit complex and evolving relationships between entertainment media and the social realities that likely act as their source material. We have seen how different discursive configurations rely on nation, language, ethnicity, gender, etc., and the problems of identity and representation that creates.

In many of the texts, ethnolinguistic elements reveal the ideological intentions of the authors. Use of a Russian accent with no speech in the language itself might serve to authenticate a character, but it can also be exaggerated, evoking sympathy, desire, fear, condemnation, etc. Conversely, in *The Equalizer*, Alina, who has no accent whatsoever, is thus assimilated, making her captivity all the more offensive to some. Spoken Russian can also mean many things, based on setting, frequency, and duration. In *The Americans*, for example, whole conversations in Russian unite and authenticate the characters, but in *Orange Is The New Black* these exchanges represent unmanageable cultural distance. We also see that, in *Shameless*, token uses of Russian language make for comedy.

It is to this study’s benefit to also step outside of the troubling of what are in ways already privileged categories. Renouncing the white slavery narrative of sex trafficking only to discuss the problem in exclusively Eurocentric terms has certainly not been my intent—indeed the part of the world I study requires attention—but it pays to be critical of my own framing and the logic it can promote. Consider that in 1999, during

hearings that were held to produce the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the House Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights was briefed thoroughly on geographic areas from which women and children were being trafficked, which included Central America and Southeast Asia. Yet the committee chair singled out Russia as their focus (Williams 100), thus distorting advocacy and aid priorities for years to come. The Russian as the familiar Other also has implications in the political economy of production environments from which the texts I evaluated emerge. From a casting standpoint, Russian characters are white, so putting the star power of an actress like Jennifer Lawrence, who represents ideal beauty to many viewers, behind a Russian character means guaranteed success with the added bonus of including an ostensible alternative to the dominant ethnic group.

The production leadership behind the texts I've discussed is also overwhelmingly male. Further research would benefit from a closer look at the performers, directors, writers, etc. of these texts, and what motivated them to build female Russian sexuality into their narratives in the first place—besides the convenience of whiteness and the absolute given that sex sells. Why did feminist and queer ally Jenji Kohan, creator of *Orange Is The New Black*, write a “mail-order bride” into her show? It would be quite telling to zero in on, however few, those most culturally invested parties, i.e. women at a minimum, and Russian women where present. But even then, one wonders if elitism might stifle progress. While programs like *Shameless* and *True Detective* successfully dismantle what we think we know about a sex trafficking “victims,” these shows are on premium cable and lack the reach of more popular and accessible narratives in *Law and Order: SVU* or *The Avengers*.

While in general our Natashas and Katyas are growingly mindful, U.S. film and television still remain locked into a pattern of readily accessible stereotypes. Do the collective consciousness of the gendered Russian imaginary and its symbolic interactions need to correct their entrenched simplicities before attempting to build understandings beyond them?

The power of representation in entertainment media texts often lies in the fact that they do not claim to be producing an argument or promoting a position. And yet narrative relies on the presence of rival stories to be distinguished (Fisher 1989). Narrative “works by suggestion and identification” (75), producing the basis for moral argument. Because we index rhetorical transactions in the context of our own hierarchies of values, says Fisher, we should “ensure that people are conscious of the values they adhere to” (113). Contemplating what these texts say about Russia, women, and sex, and understanding the generative and persuasive power of those statements, brings us closer to our own truths. The position of this research is one not only oriented toward sex positivity and women’s socio-economic empowerment, but one that encourages a cultural diplomacy committed preventing another Cold War and eliminating its lingering language of insult.

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