

ABSTRACTS

The Tramp in a Skirt: Laboring the *Radiant Path*

ANNA WEXLER KATSNELSON

In this article, Anna Wexler Katsnelson focuses on Grigorii Aleksandrov's musical comedy, *Svetlyi put'* (The Radiant Path, 1940) as a way of investigating the modes of screening laughter in the USSR in the 1930s and exploring the reasons for the film's gradual disavowal of laughter. The key questions posed by the article are why does laughter disappear from the nominally comedic, purposefully merry *Svetlyi put'*? Where is its affective energy redirected? And, finally, is laughter on film at all possible under the conditions of high Stalinism?

Mr. Twister in the Land of Bolsheviks: Sketching Laughter in Marshak's Poem

YURI LEVING

Samuil Marshak's poem *Mister Twister* (1933) is a biting satire about an evil American capitalist who travels to the Soviet Union with his spoiled wife and daughter. The work enjoyed immense popularity among generations of Soviet children until the 1980s and is considered a prime example of a socialist spoof on a genre of travelogue oriented toward mass culture. Yuri Leving puts Marshak's poem into a historical context and observes it against the ever-changing ideological landscape of Soviet literature during the three decades following the poem's initial publication in the satirical magazine for children, *Ezh* (Hedgehog). In *Twister*, Marshak was able to strike a careful balance between the comic and the ideological: although an obviously satirical portrayal, the protagonist sometimes appears more sympathetic than malignant. Over the years Marshak tried to adapt his poem to shifting official climates, a process that resulted in a series of curious metamorphoses highlighting a double-edged relationship between the mechanisms of oppression, auto-censorship, and laughter under state socialism. In addition, the article surveys Vladimir Lebedev's illustrative convoy of "Mister Twister" throughout its rich republication history and discusses visual representations vis-à-vis the issue of producing (rather than depicting) totalitarian humor.

A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhin Proved That Lenin Was a Mushroom

ALEXEI YURCHAK

In 1991, Leningrad television broadcast a program that has since become infamous. The program's guest, Sergei Kurekhin, claiming to be a political figure and scientist, conducted an elaborate hoax that he presented as a serious historical exploration into the origins of the Bolshevik revolution. Using visual, textual, and scientific evidence, Kurekhin argued that

the revolution was led by people who had been consuming hallucinogenic mushrooms. As a result, their personalities were being replaced by mushroom personalities, and their leader, Vladimir Lenin, was simply a mushroom. This fact, according to Kurekhin, shed new light on many enigmas of Soviet history. Millions of viewers were at a loss: were they witnessing a serious program, a daring prank, a case of unprecedented lunacy? In this article, Alexei Yurchak analyzes that remarkable comedic performance, its social and political effects then and now, and what it may contribute to our understanding of the relationship between politics and irony.

**“There Is Nothing Funny about It”:
Laughing Law at Stalin’s Party Plenum**

NATALIA SKRADOL

In this article, Natalia Skradol analyzes the laughing interventions of the participants at the Russian Communist Party plenum in 1937 at which Nikolai Bukharin was charged with conspiring against the leaders of the state. The era of high Stalinism was a state of exception, where the production and administration of law was based on unacknowledged ad hoc considerations that took shape only in the direct verbal interactions between participants. Thus the laughter at the plenum was completely consistent with laughter’s function as a consolidating force among those representing the Stalinist system of legality. Elements of comedy made it possible for mechanisms of oppression to be exercised unhindered, without being framed, or limited, by any mediating factors.

**Recalling the Dead: Identity, Memory, and
the Witness in Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolymskie rasskazy***

SARAH J. YOUNG

From recurring characters to the retelling of stories, repetition plays a central role in Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolymskie rasskazy* (Kolyma Tales). Sarah J. Young examines how repetition functions in Shalamov’s collections of short stories as an indicator of trauma, by foregrounding the tensions created by the erosion of identity in the labor camp and its connection to the gulag survivor/narrator’s problematic relationship to memory. At the same time, repetition also becomes a means of drawing the uncomprehending reader into the text to act as witness to that trauma. Comparing Shalamov’s mode of testimony to Giorgio Agamben’s theorization of the nonsurvivor as the true witness to Auschwitz, drawn from Primo Levi’s conception, Young argues that Shalamov’s stories bear witness to the trauma of Kolyma and to those who did not survive it, not through a transformation of the writer, but through a reciprocity between writer and reader.

The Tale of Joseph and Zulaykha on the Volga Frontier: The Struggle for Gender, Religious, and National Identity in Imperial and Postrevolutionary Russia

AGNÈS KEFELI

The ancient tale of Joseph, son of Jacob, and Zulaykha was a “best seller” on the Silk Road from Russia to China. Before the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, the Tatars, a Turkic-speaking people living in the middle Volga, used this tale to propagate Islam among the animistic and Eastern Orthodox Finno-Ugric and Turkic peoples. Tatars drew upon this famous tale to address the internal communal fractures caused by Russian colonization, which opened the doors to Eastern Christianity, a far stronger competitor than the local indigenous religions. While scholars have shown interest in the tale’s literary value and linguistic history, there has been no effort to investigate its readership. Yet the story of Joseph and Zulaykha as presented in popular poems and religious books empowered both men and women on the Volga frontier to refashion their religious and national identities. Today proponents of national revival call for the reappropriation of such tales to restore boundaries between Tatars and Russians.

Ideology and Its Ethics: Maria Dąbrowska’s Jewish (and Polish) Problem

RACHEL FELDHAY BRENNER

This article is part of a project that examines Polish writers’ diaristic responses to the Warsaw ghetto and to the Holocaust in general. Rachel Feldhay Brenner examines Maria Dąbrowska’s response in the context of her prewar attitude to Polish Jews, which was shaped by her nationalistic ideology of Poland’s messianic position among the nations. Although Dąbrowska publicly denounced *Endecja* and its antisemitism, in private she cultivated a powerful sense of resentment toward the Jews, seeing Jews as outsiders who stood in the way of Poland realizing its special mission. This attitude persisted during the Holocaust and explains Dąbrowska’s emotional disengagement in the face of Jewish extermination. In the postwar years, her resentment became more pronounced, as even Jewish suffering in the Holocaust became an object of competition and envy. Dąbrowska’s response to the Holocaust offers a poignant example of the impact of ideological beliefs on emotional and ethical aspects of human interaction.