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Eliot Borenstein. *Pussy Riot: Speaking Punk to Power*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 135 pp. ISBN 9781350113534.

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Speaking Punk to Power by Eliot Borenstein delves into one of the most remarkable causes célèbres of the Putin era—the story of Pussy Riot. At first an anonymous feminist collective whose radically ironic videos were visible mostly within the underground segment of the Russian internet, Pussy Riot became internationally famous after being accused of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” for their short musical performance in the biggest Russian Orthodox cathedral of Moscow. The sentence—two years of penal colony for two members, Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova—was announced in 2012. Ten years later, it is hard to imagine that such a controversy could actually occupy the forefront of Russian public debate, several years before Ukraine became an inexhaustible source for tropes of unruliness and radical threats to conservative values of the so-called *ruskii mir*.

Stepping away from the judicial saga that is well documented by academics (Seal 2013; Sharafutdinova 2014; Zychowicz and Tchernalykh 2021), journalists (Gessen 2014), and protagonists themselves (Alyokhina 2017; Tolokonnikova and Žižek 2014), Borenstein’s book promises to address the relationship between political repression, performance, and activism by tracing the sources of Pussy Riot’s “punk,” understood as a metaphor for radical expression rather than a musical genre.

Besides giving a succinct yet factually precise account of Pussy Riot’s political and aesthetic “adventures,” the book has the merit of being light and entertaining, as the author—who sometimes appears in the brackets to give a witty commentary on another unexpected twist of the plot—escapes the temptation to overtheorize their art, leaving enough room to the reader’s imagination and further debate. Despite the understandable lack of space for deeper analysis—the book series is called Russian Shorts, after all—Borenstein advances a few novel arguments, ready to be picked up by various academic audiences.

Whereas the book does not necessarily focus on the legal aspects of the case, it accurately reveals the transformative force of the judiciary that, alongside the penitentiary, functioned as a “social incubator,” producing new political identities for the protagonists and the larger public. The trial, accompanied by a mediatic and political scandal, produced a rupture in Pussy Riot’s social trajectory and in their rhetoric: “After their arrest, the women of Pussy Riot are forced to abandon their more ‘indecorous behavior’ in favor of clear and persuasive language. This was not Pussy Riot’s preferred mode of address, but the actions of the state, in unmasking and prosecuting them, obliged them to remove the mask of punk and put on the guise of the rational dissident” (pp. 38–39). Those interested in critical readings of law will notice

that the author describes its transformative force by using the image of the mask (or the balaclava). Or rather the related gestures—the liberty to mask oneself and the violence of forceful unmasking, both of which have since acquired new overtones, stimulating a tremendous amount of political affect in the recent context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In *Speaking Punk to Power*, Pussy Riot emerge almost as two different collectives: the “ironic” Pussy Riot I,¹ a “masked” punk/feminist anonymous group with a diffuse structure and interchangeable roles, and the “iconic” Pussy Riot II, a group of three, then two, women, “unmasked” and caught in an uncontrollable mediatic, political, and legal scandal, unfolding both at the national and transnational arenas.

The accelerated change of scale, from the “ironic” to the “iconic,” from “local” to “global” literally propelled Pussy Riot from the underground of the Russian antiestablishment to its most visible avant-garde. In this regard, Borenstein points to a controversy: On the one hand, the de-anonymization of the collective by means of a trial led to the political subjectification of the accused, which stimulated the ascendance of the Russian feminist performance as an internationally visible aesthetic genre, separate from other forms of actionism. On the other hand, their inevitable transformation into transnational celebrities, or “dissident icons,” appeared to be destructive for the nonconventional aesthetic and political project as such.

Naturally, this was followed by a rhetorical shift: the “radical performance” related to the traditions of the avant-garde, situationism, and conceptual art has been replaced by other dissident genres, such as the serious “courtroom speech,” rooted in the history of Soviet dissidence, and later the rhetoric of “fund-raising” and “institution-building” for the sake of a more democratic Russia. What Borenstein omits to mention, however, is that both Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were slowly drifting away from the feminist agenda, prioritizing sectors of art and activism that are more socially accepted in Russia.

In the latter parts of the book, one ends up having the feeling that the book cannot escape the ambiguity it highlights: whereas it proposes a rather critical analysis of Tolokonnikova’s later musical experiments, it mentions only superficially Alyokhina’s theatrical work and LGBTQ activism and places no particular emphasis on total disengagement of other anonymous members that happened after the trial or on the near-absence of new visible members. In the end, the author insists on tracing a semantic continuity between Pussy Riot I and II, whose “goal has always been political and social change,” and states that in the Russian context “punk as a revolutionary force might choose institution-building as a radical strategy” (p. 109).

“It’s the same fight, but with different weapons,” concludes Borenstein, suggesting that the newly acquired glamor, celebrity, and fame were reinvested in the building of institutions, reinvigorating them with “punk energy” (p. 111). One might disagree with this statement. Perhaps we should admit that there is neither a

¹ The author does not use the numbers I and II; I take the liberty to assign them for purposes of clarity, to emphasize that the group was downsized to two members, and as a wink to Vladimir Paperny’s *Culture Two* ([1985] 2002).

common denominator for all the facets of Pussy Riot nor a coherent way to tell their story, a story that is captivating and yet indicative of the culture of late global capitalism, in which more often than not “mainstream fascination with a pretty face kill[s] the anonymous star” (p. 89).

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