



Patriot Games

by Cathy Young

I spent on guys who just wanted to exploit me because I was a blonde girl from the South, and how I hurt myself over them, I want to shriek. When I think of all the nice men I blew off just because they weren't mean and exciting, I feel sick. What if there's justice?"

Dorothy put down her Diet Cream Soda and started to stroke her leg. "Maybe that's what this is all about. Some kind of justice."

"I think we can be quite sure that on earth, there's no justice," I said. "Otherwise, how would we explain Ross Perot?"

After a short while, Dorothy left and I started to make a list of all the people I know in Los Angeles who are sick in one way or another. I am always tired. B. is always feverish. A. is always headachey. S. is always constipated. This one cannot get out of bed. That one cannot stop taking drugs. Is there no end to it? What makes people here so sick? Is it the smog? The endless sunshine? I read recently that sunlight can break down the body's immunities. Maybe it's the journey into self-obsession. "Hello, I'm Ben and I'm powerless over self-obsession."

Anyway, out to dinner with Mr. Wonderful and my Wife for Life (although she doesn't know it). We went to a Pizza Hut. As we waited for our plain cheese, Tommy asked me if he could go swimming in Mommy's pool after dinner.

"Absolutely not," I said. "It's far, far too late for you to go swimming. You will go home and go right to sleep."

The pizza man called my number and off I went to get my pizza. When I came back, Mommy was having an earnest conversation with young Adonis.

"He told me that he would make a really great deal with me," Mommy said. "He said that if I let him go swimming, he would go buy me a really great toy first thing in the morning."

"Did you really say that?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, all smiles.

"How are you going to pay for this present you were going to bribe us with so that you could do what you wanted?"

"You and Mommy will give me the money," he said. Young Milken.

Back at my apartment there was a message saying I was going to be offered the part in "Dennis the Menace" after all. Suddenly, I feel a lot better. Lots better. In the pink. □

A letter from Ada T., the elderly music teacher at whose Moscow apartment I stayed for a week last November—and who certainly feels no nostalgia for the old regime—offers a none-too-happy view of present affairs: galloping prices, utter chaos ("In one district of Moscow, people pay for electricity at the old rates, in another at the new ones . . ."), and, "most frightening of all, the looming threat of fascism and civil war. Of course, this threat existed before, but now it's more real than ever."

This may be the result of an alarmist predisposition, but a front-page editorial in the *Literary Gazette* voices the same fears. The bizarre battles of the "democrats" and the "patriots" continue, with monarchists and Russian Orthodox joining hardline Communists and even some *ex*-democrats. If Russian idiom had a cliché comparable to "a long, hot summer," it would be cropping up all over the press.

On June 11, a group of demonstrators from the Workers' Russia movement gathered in front of the Ostankino TV tower, from which both national and Moscow programming is broadcast, for a daytime picket and a 6 p.m. rally permitted by the city government. The rally, about 3,000 strong, turned into an encampment of a few hundred people with tents, loudspeakers, a truck, red banners, and such posters as "Put Yeltsin in a Drunk Tank" and "Down With the Zionist Occupation!" (alleged Jewish domination of TV has long been a sore point with the "patriots"). The siege continued for days, with attempts by some especially zealous patriots to rush the police bar-

riers and storm the studio; several policemen were beaten. The chief of studio security complained to *Argumenty i Fakty* that staffers entering and leaving the building were being made to walk a "gauntlet of shame" and called various names, including—if they were young women—"Bush's whores."

One of the demonstrators, N. Galkovskaya, a 60-year-old economist whose poster read, "CIA Strategy: Collapse of the USSR, Plunder of the Gold Reserves, Sex, AIDS," told *Argumenty i Fakty* that she was "allergic" to American programming. She wanted a return to "socialism and state planning," and also "something Soviet or Russian on TV, the way it used to be." (She named two popular singers of the 1970s, one of whom is Jewish and the other Azerbaijani.)

Formal demands included a daily hour of live, prime-time air time for the "opposition." (It is only fair to say that critics of the Yeltsin government, including those who worry about the preservation of *nomenklatura* privilege and the inadequacy of political reform, do not have enough access to the Russian media, TV in particular.) A survey on Russian TV showed 9 percent sympathetic to the demonstrators, while 42 percent were fully behind the state broadcasting company and the rest had no opinion.

On June 15, representatives of Russian TV and the Russian government met with a delegation of protesters, headed by one Viktor Anpilov, a Moscow City Council member and a leader in the Russian Communist Workers' party who, according to *Kommersant* (June 15-22), used to be a state TV correspondent in Nicaragua. Yegor Yakovlev, the head of

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Russian TV, told the delegates that he would set up a joint committee to ensure representation for all political viewpoints if the tent city and the loudspeakers were removed, but the uncompromising patriots would have none of that.

On the next day, Moscow's new mayor Yuri Luzhkov—an old-time apparatchik and nemesis of free-market reformers in his capacity as deputy mayor under Gavril Popov, who resigned in May—denounced the talks as a cave-in and gave orders to get rid of the encampment. In the early morning hours of June 17, the riot police—the very same “black berets” who used truncheons to disperse anti-Communist demonstrators—chased the “patriots” away from the TV tower without much violence, confiscating seventeen tents, one truck, and a number of posters.

These events were quite a jolt for the Russian democratic press; there were cries of lawlessness and anarchy. In *Ogonyok*, former editor-in-chief Vitaly Korotich wrote an emotional column comparing the Ostankino siege to the seizure of the Vilnius television tower by Soviet troops in January 1991, and using such words as “takeover” and “occupation” to describe the actions of the “patriots.” In *Izvestia*, Luzhkov defended the dispersal of the demonstrators, invoking the fact that their spoken and written slogans “insulted the honor and dignity of the President of the Russian Federation.”

The siege of Ostankino was not the only show of force by Russia's “new right.” The Russian National Congress met in Moscow on June 14-15. The presidium included the usual mix of suspects: Slavophile, anti-urban, conservative Christian writers Valentin Rasputin and Vasily Belov; KGB general Aleksandr Sterligov; Gen. Albert Makashov, who campaigned against Yeltsin in 1991 on a platform of preserving the Communist Soviet empire; another passionate defender of the defunct empire, former Soviet parliament member Sazhi Umalatova; mathematician, former Solzhenitsyn co-author and dissident, more recently author of the anti-Semitic tract *Russophobia* Igor Shafarevich; and the notorious TV personality Aleksandr Nevzorov.

More shocking was the appearance in this crowd of Yuri Vlasov, a highly respected, veteran member of the democratic movement. Vlasov's is a truly sad case: a champion weight lifter in the 1960s, he

was elected to the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies under Gorbachev and made a stunning televised speech at the first Congress in May 1989 openly and passionately denouncing the KGB. After that, Vlasov, who has the mournful and bearded look of a Russian prophet, remained a faithful member of the democratic movement—until recently.

Izvestia commentator Aleksei Kiva remarked (June 16) that “some mentally unstable democrats can't bear the tensions of the transition period, and so they either get out of the game . . . or go over to the other side.” The implication that people of politically incorrect views must be mentally unhinged has an unpleasant echo of the *ancien régime*, but some of Vlasov's recent pronouncements do suggest a less than sound mind. His June 11 article in *Pravda*, of all places, “Whose Children Are We?” is a long rant filled with such exclamations as “A darkness has set over the Russian land” and “We are the most disgraceful generation of Russians.”

The central, endlessly restated point of this idiosyncratic essay is that without a strong Russian state, the Russians will cease to be a “people” and turn into a mere “population,” to be exploited, abused, plundered, raped, and spit upon by foreigners and domestic “predators.” And that is particularly outrageous, given that “we were the ones who gave the world a model of human relations in which other things besides money, the passion for consumption, the instincts of reproduction and profit . . . exist and matter: love of humanity, soul, self-sacrifice for a just cause.” Russia remains “perhaps the only country that has not completely succumbed to consumerism, lechery, and contempt for poverty.”

And so it goes. Bolshevism was undoubtedly a tragedy, he says, but capitalism in Russia has proved to be a great evil too. Vlasov urges all Russians to stand together and save the country, leaving aside the differences between “right and left, Communists and constitutional democrats,” and ominously reminds the country's new rulers that they are toying with a people which “has the unique experience (via schooling and tradition) of Bolshevik revolution.”

In a June 17 column in the Moscow daily *Kuranty*, political commentator Leonid Radzikhovsky was disconcerted at the sight of the well-known film-

maker Stanislav Govorukhin, author of the acclaimed anti-Communist documentaries *This Is No Way to Live* (1990) and *The Russia We Lost* (1992), among those in attendance at the Russian National Congress. It is not that Radzikhovsky is an ardent fan of the director's; rather that the presence of people like Govorukhin (whose publicly expressed concerns—crime, pornography, etc.—seem far closer to a Western-style social conservatism than to any sort of radical nationalism) indicates the growing legitimacy of neo-fascism. “I think Govorukhin is a very good barometer,” writes Radzikhovsky:

He's no fanatic. He turns—whether sincerely or cynically, doesn't matter—the way he “thinks” the masses are turning. And I trust his intuition more than I do opinion polls. . . . I have been an optimist because I believed in common sense, in the public's instinct for self-preservation. But what if I don't understand anything while Govorukhin has gauged the situation accurately and rushed to join those whom the wave is sweeping to the top?

If anyone doubts that these are strange times in Russia, consider that one of the most prominent exponents of the new wave of “red-and-brown” Russian nationalism, the novelist and poet Eduard Limonov, is not only an émigré currently residing in Paris but a man whose morals should be rather shocking to his austere ideological brethren. His biggest claim to fame, before he put his pen in the service of a greater cause, was the 1979 autobiographical novel *It's Me, Eddie*. It chronicles the author's simultaneous disillusionment with women and with bourgeois society after coming to America and being abandoned by his wife. (Eddie expresses his contempt for both by having sex with a black male vagrant in an empty Manhattan parking lot.)

Limonov's latest literary effort appeared in June in *Sovetskaya Rossiya*—a nearly full-page article titled “A Russian Nationalist Manifesto,” which holds that Russian nationalism embraces the legacy of both Peter the Great and Lenin and rejects the “unconstitutional destruction of the USSR”; that what is good for the state is good for the individual; and, most ominously, that Russia must unite with the Islamic world against the West, which is destroying Russia with the superweapon of “democracy” and “human rights.” □



Batting Around

by James Bowman

Let's start, this time, with the inevitable Movie of the Month. Tim Burton's *Batman Returns* is less impressive visually than the *Batman* of 1989, but it has interesting things to say on serious subjects, including that of sexual identity. At the end of the film Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) says to Batman (Michael Keaton): "I'd love to come home and live with you in your castle"—pause—"It's just that I couldn't live with myself." She then proceeds to execute the evil Max Shreck (Christopher Walken) with an electric kiss that is meant to seem both a condign punishment for his sexism and an allusion to the recognition line between Batman and Catwoman: "Mistletoe is deadly if you eat it; a kiss can be even deadlier if you mean it."

Of course, Catwoman has nine lives—we really are into mythic archetypes here—so the kiss does not kill *her*, and the deadliness she fears in a meaningful kiss is not electricity but love and consequent loss of identity. Having emerged out of the mousy little secretary, Selina Kyle, Catwoman is not about to become a mere "appendage" (as her psychobabbling ex-boyfriend puts it) of someone else. Not even Batman. The traditional-feminine appears to her as only another grotesque disguise that she put off when she chose to put on her cat suit, trashed all the girlish stuff in her apartment, and went looking for revenge against men.

Yet Tim Burton is not giving us the Hollywood party line on women's toughness and independence. Catwoman's feline fanaticism is tinged with ambiguity, which is why she is afraid of a kiss from Batman. At one point she says: "He makes me feel the way I hope I really am." But then she quickly retreats from

this flirtation with an identity that is not self-determined and depends on being loved by a man. Her vulnerability appears again when she and Bruce Wayne appear at a fancy dress party where they are the only people not in disguise. "I'm tired of wearing masks," she says as the sexual chemistry begins to cook.

But the mask cannot be removed. Batman's come-on line to her at the end—"We're just the same: split down the middle"—is true, but also the reason why they can't get together. Neither the Catwoman nor the would-be Batwoman can be merged into a single identity. There is just the hint of tragedy about this, just the suggestion that the new feminist world splits all women down the middle. Even Max Shreck, who is by no means a mere one-dimensional villain, is allowed to voice a not altogether villainous doubt about the moral "disease" abroad which "changes happy homemakers into catwomen."

I don't think that it is mere fancy on my part to see this as a sign of Hollywood's new and not very robust longings for more traditional, "family" values. In *Batman Returns*, both Batman and the Penguin (Danny DeVito) are orphans, lonely figures who share in the pathos of not belonging. When DeVito tries to "re-emerge" from the sewers where his parents dumped him at birth, he is rebuffed and retreats to the makeshift family of "my beloved penguins." By contrast, Max Shreck's devotion to his son, to save whom he volunteers to be submerged in sewage up to the eyeballs, is as rare here as his fabulous wealth. Love, marriage, and families in the film seem to be regarded with a nostalgic longing usually reserved for the unattainable.

There was no such wistful ambiguity about last summer's big hit, *Thelma and Louise*, which, like Catwoman, embod-

ied a feminist revenge fantasy while insisting that girls, too, could be the heroes of a picaresque adventure. But once such Tough Women have cleansed their cinematic world of annoyances, they may begin to wonder what is the point of being women at all. Given the constraints of the feminist consensus, which will not allow women to be depicted as docile homebodies except in a negative context, *Batman Returns* sets a pattern for bringing back a form of traditional femininity that other films are able to some extent to follow. The trick is to set the film in a world other than this one, or in the past, or else to try for subtlety and a tragic mood by hinting at possibilities that remain more or less unfulfilled.

There is nothing subtle about Ralph Bakshi's *Cool World*. It combines an exotic setting—the cartoon world pioneered by *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*—and a partial time-transplant, since it begins in the 1940s and in style owes a lot to the *film noir* of the period. The cartoon character Holli Would (played by Kim Basinger when she comes alive) displays a grotesque femininity that resembles a Hugh Hefner fantasy of the 1950s and shows why feminism grew up in the following decade. The phallic imagery of "the spike of power," by which the cartoon characters are able to translate themselves into such reality as the film is able to pretend to be in touch with, must have got past the feminist censors only as part of such obvious fantasy. The cartoons cling to unreality because in cartoonland none of life's disasters or losses is permanent, but the same fantasy world seems an appropriate resting place for such an old-time sex kitten as Holli Would.

Although its sexual imagery is repellent, *Cool World* at least offers a version of the feminine that is not a mere replica-

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