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‘The bottom line is that the problem is you’: Aesthetic Labour, Postfeminism and Subjectivity in Russian Self-Help Literature

Maria Adamson & Suvi Salmenniemi

Introduction

This chapter explores the ways in which women are called upon to work on and manage their body, personality and sexuality in bestselling Russian self-help literature targeting a female audience. We argue that the aesthetic labour promoted in this literature needs to be understood as intrinsically embedded in the cultural and economic context where it is performed. Growing job insecurity, widespread gender discrimination, insufficient social protection and decreasing employment quality characterize the everyday life of a great number of women in Russia (Adamson and Kispeter, forthcoming; Kozina and Zhidkova, 2006). At the same time, the rise of the service sector and the demand for ‘aestheticized’ forms of labour (Walker, 2015) have been accompanied by a growing rhetoric concerning the importance of self-presentation and ‘image’ (Cohen, 2013), and an increasing emphasis on beauty practices as a crucial part of successful femininity (Porteous, 2013). As we show in this chapter, women are encouraged to invest time and energy in aesthetic labour in the hope that mastering ‘the art of femininity’ will allow them upward mobility in a context where channels for mobility are increasingly constrained. We suggest that aesthetic labour is mobilized as a form of tactical agency (de Certeau, 1984) to combat social and economic precarity¹. Through unpacking the elements of this labour we also suggest that this aesthetic make-over entails a profound transformation of subjectivity.

Our analysis draws on nine books by bestselling Russian authors explicitly addressing a female readership and dealing with relationships, love and sexuality (see Appendix). These authors were chosen because they are particularly popular: most of these books have been on the popular psychology bestseller lists (e.g. Kniga.ru, Ozon.ru, Bookberry.ru, Biblio-Globus.ru), and most early editions have been reprinted, indicating books’ continuing success. We understand self-help books as a cultural technology that invites readers to shape their ways of being, feeling and acting in order to become particular types of gendered subjects. In this way, the books normalize certain understandings of gender, the self and social relations

(for a more detailed discussion of data and methodology, see Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015).

In what follows we first discuss the concept of aesthetic labour in the context of our study, followed by a discussion of gender, (post)feminism and the therapeutic discourse in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. We then analyze the different dimensions of aesthetic labour involved in mastering the ‘art of femininity’ as they appear in the self-help texts, and continue with a discussion of this aesthetic labour as a variation of the spirit of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011).

Aesthetic labour

The crucial role of the body in the (re)production of gendered, classed and racialized inequalities has been persuasively highlighted in the literature. The body constitutes a pivotal site in and through which power relations operate and are lived. Although the monitoring and surveilling of one’s bodily and psychic dispositions have long been part and parcel of the performance of successful femininity, what is new and distinctive in the present moment is the dramatically increased intensity and expansion of self-surveillance and regulation of the body (Gill, 2007).

The concept of aesthetic labour, originally developed in work and employment studies, refers to the process of the mobilization, development and commodification of one’s embodied capacities and attributes at and for work (Witz et al., 2003: 37). The concept importantly captures the embodied nature of self-work. Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) suggest that the maintenance of embodied capacities and attributes as well as emotional investments is required to project a particular kind of self-presentation. The concept of aesthetic labour foregrounds how such embodied work is commodified and intentionally mobilized for commercial gain. Whilst a number of studies have explored how particular embodiments are valorised and ‘converted into economic capital by and for organizations’ (Witz et al., 2003: 41), Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) also highlight how aesthetic labour can be converted into personal economic gain by individuals who become skilful at managing the self as an ‘aesthetic project’. For example, fashion models become enterprising in their efforts to shape their self-presentation according to fashion trends and clients’ expectations, and they convert aesthetic labour into personal economic gain (ibid.: 791). The study also highlights the on-

going nature of aesthetic labour because these models need to be ‘always on’ and ‘cannot walk away from their product, which is their entire embodied self’ (ibid.: 791).

In our analysis we argue that the concept of aesthetic labour may be helpful in making sense of the ways in which women are hailed to manage their bodies and minds in therapeutic self-help literature. Indeed, the self-help books in our data can be seen as ‘how-to’ manuals of aesthetic labour. They present the readers with a set of values, norms and tastes, which the ‘new woman’ of capitalist Russia is expected to command. As we will elucidate below, mastering the ‘art of femininity’ involves not only work on the surface of the body but also dramatic shaping of embodied desires and psychic dispositions. Women are encouraged to build on, mobilize and commodify their dispositions and capabilities and transform them into ‘skills’ (Witz et al., 2003: 37) geared toward gaining upward mobility.

Gender, Postfeminism and Self-help in Russia

The body was in many ways a highly ideologically regulated and political issue in the Soviet Union. The Soviet state institutionalised collective care for the body with a programme of physical culture in order to develop its citizens’ mental and physical capacities with the aim of cultivating a healthy and vital citizen-worker. The model Soviet citizen was imagined as strong, athletic and fit, and bodies deviating from this norm were targeted with moralizing instruction (Vainshtein, 1996: 78-79).

The female body in the official Soviet discourse was predominantly conceived as a (re)productive body harnessed for the economic prosperity of the state and in the service of the nation. The body was not articulated as a source of pleasure and the official approach emphasised sexual restraint (Rotkirch, 2000). Soviet ideology also rejected the emphasis on materialistic beauty. Fashion, jewellery and cosmetics were seen as ‘bourgeois preoccupations which had no place in Soviet society’ (Attwood, 2001: 166). Western sexualised images of femininity were associated with exaggerated frivolity and prostitution (Rudova, 2014). Instead, the Soviet ideology emphasized modesty, simplicity, ‘naturalness’ and moderate taste as key pillars of feminine appearance (Rudova, 2011, 2014). Soviet women were nevertheless expected to look after their appearance, but they had few resources for that. Foreign beauty products were almost impossible to obtain and domestic ones were often of poor quality and had notorious effects; for example, according to Azhgikhina and Goscilo (1996: 105), the perfume ‘Red Moscow’ was ‘potent enough to anesthetize a herd of

buffalo'. As a corollary, women made use of 'natural' home expedients (butter, vinegar, honey, milk etc.) recommended by Soviet women's magazines.

The shift from state socialism to global consumer capitalism in Russia in the 1990s entailed an influx of new beauty products and services and a profound renegotiation of cultural understandings of femininity, beauty and the body. Reclaiming beauty, sexuality and 'true' femininity and the ability to consume shiny goods was seen as 'liberation' from the Soviet project of women's emancipation. Extensively promoted by the media, an emphasis on sexualised beauty and self-disciplining practices of diet, exercise and beauty treatments became an important aspect of the middle- and upper-class lifestyle and feminine subjectivity (Rudova, 2011; Ratilainen, 2012; Porteous, 2013). The discourse of 'glamour' replaced 'bleak' discourses of moral collapse and survival of the late *perestroika* era, and glamour was presented as something that was 'achievable to anyone willing to try' (Rudova, 2014: 389).

Popular media culture provides an illuminating lens for understanding the negotiation of and anxieties around the shifting gender and class orders in Russia. Women's magazines, chick lit, 'glamour fiction' and self-help literature constitute pivotal sites in which the symbolic production and contention of gender, sexuality and class take place. Popular psychology and self-help literature occupied a marginal position in Soviet society, but during late *perestroika* years the 'psy industry' grew dramatically (Griffin and Karepova, 2011). Popular media culture has been the primary site through which the therapeutic discourse has been culturally appropriated and disseminated in Russia (Lerner, 2015; Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015). Today, the self-help genre is an established and highly visible part of the Russian mediascape, consumed first and foremost by women, younger age groups and the middle class (Salmenniemi and Vorona, 2014).

As pointed out by several commentators, popular media culture is also the key arena where postfeminist discourses are articulated (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Rudova, 2014; Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015). Whilst in the West postfeminism has evolved partly as a response to second-wave feminism (Budgeon, 2011), in Russia postfeminism is situated in a different context. It stands in a contentious relationship both with the state-sanctioned equality politics of the Soviet era and with feminism as a 'foreign' ideology. In contemporary Russia, feminism is simultaneously repudiated as Western and therefore unsuitable for Russia, and as a remnant of discredited Soviet equality politics,

preventing women from ‘fulfilling’ and ‘enjoying’ femininity. However, whilst feminism remains unpopular, globally circulating postfeminist ideas have nevertheless been widely appropriated in Russian popular culture (see Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015 for a full discussion). The cultural landscape of gender discourses is highly conflicted: while the Orthodox Church and the Russian state have been actively propagating highly traditional ideas of gender and sexuality, popular media culture has circulated postfeminist images of women as autonomous and sexually empowered individuals. It is at this intersection that we can see a complex entanglement of therapeutic, neoliberal, conservative and postfeminist discourses (Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015).

Bodies under construction

We now move on to examine the forms of aesthetic labour articulated in the self-help books we have analysed. These books offer advice to women on how to become an optimizing and entrepreneurial subject in order to get ahead in life and secure a position in the upper echelons of the class structure. Readers are presented with two closely-connected tactics for achieving this: finding a lucrative career and ‘capturing’ a rich man. Both may be achieved by mastering the ‘art of femininity’, which requires meticulous aesthetic labour. Yet, in both cases, women’s lives are portrayed as ultimately mediated and regulated by men.

One of the most prominent storylines in the analysed self-help books is the encouragement of continuous and relentless self-management and self-invention characteristic of the postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Women’s subjectivity and bodies appear as sites that are permanently ‘under construction’. Women are advised to learn to monitor and manage their emotions, attend to their body, and become both sexually desiring subjects and sexually desired objects. The body is presented both as a resource and as unruly, requiring constant discipline (see Gill, 2007). Caring for it is no longer perceived as a duty towards the state as during Soviet times, but a duty towards oneself and one’s existing or potential partner. Aesthetic labour is portrayed as an ethical obligation and a key to success:

Even when the pressure is high, a real woman always finds time to pull herself back together and look good ... What kind of success ... are we talking about if you were too lazy to wipe off the peeling nail varnish last night? (Sviyash, 2012)

Most books contain detailed sections on appearance management, emphasising the importance of beauty treatments and giving advice on choosing the right clothes, the ‘right’ nail varnish colour, ‘the right ways’ of skin, facial and body care, doing make-up and hair ‘properly’, and even advice on how to wear glasses. There is also detailed advice about shopping and suggestions to invest in the most expensive products, because ‘a real woman’ must:

always look top-notch. She will never let herself wear tatty old clothes, scruffy sports clothing or bland fake jewellery ... Go to an expensive shop and buy only famous luxury labels.... (Shatskaya, 2007a: 38-49).

As the above quotation indicates, mastering the ‘art of femininity’ is a thoroughly classed practice. Class is coded into the ways in which femininity is constructed through a symbolic association between ‘good taste’ and acquiring expensive items. In addition to beauty, controlling one’s demeanour and embodied presence is also crucial; there are chapters dedicated to how to walk, how to conduct oneself during a meal, how to smoke a cigarette and so on. All these elements promise to increase the exchange value of the ‘new improved self’ (Skeggs, 2004).

The books also suggest an intimate connection between appearance and subjectivity: appearance is taken to reflect moral character. As one book suggests, ‘inner beauty always manifests itself in the appearance’ (Pravdina, 2002: 92). Sloppy appearance is seen as reflecting psychological pathologies. A slim and feminine figure, carefully polished nails, and elegant clothes are, in turn, seen as signalling neoliberal and postfeminist virtues of responsibility, self-discipline, and self-governance. By working on the body women are assumed to remake their personality, and vice versa.

Reminiscent of the global postfeminist discourse (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2007; Lazar 2009), the Russian self-help texts repeatedly suggest that aesthetic labour is to be performed for women themselves. However, on closer inspection, this labour is presented as palatable mainly because it holds out the promise of the heterosexual relationship:

For such a woman [who corresponds to men's fantasy] a man would do anything! He will be begging her to stay, he will never cheat, and he will break his back working hard to earn money to buy her a new pair of shoes ... Isn't this worth getting up a bit earlier in order to put on some make-up and make him a coffee? (Shatskaya, 2007c)

Femininity is time and again represented in the books only in relation to masculinity, and women's lives are described as ultimately mediated and regulated by men. Although women are encouraged to learn emotional detachment and not 'cling to men', a relationship is always posited as an unquestioned anchor of women's lives.

When beauty is not enough

While aesthetic labour on the body is absolutely essential, the books also suggest that 'conquering a man with your beauty is only *the beginning*' (Shatskaya, 2007a, our emphasis). Women are also urged to work on their psychic dispositions:

Without an inner state of desire for radical change and a fundamental belief in yourself as well as meticulous work on your new image ... all the expensive cosmetics, stylish clothes, refined manners and secrets of male seduction will be useless. (Shatskaya, 2007c)

Through aesthetic labour, women are encouraged to cultivate specific psychic dispositions, such as attentiveness, self-confidence, self-love, self-reliance and motherliness targeted towards men rather than children. Women are called to inhabit two contradictory subject-positions: an autonomous and self-sufficient woman and a maternal care-taker responsible for the emotional support of her male partner (see Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015). She is warned to downplay her independence, because becoming too independent 'is not healthy' (Pravdina, 2002: 82) and also may 'scare men away', thus turning her into an undesirable commodity in the heterosexual marketplace.

Hence, similarly to the labouring on bodily dispositions, work on psychic dispositions is to be performed mainly for one's existing or potential partner: 'a real woman should nurture and cultivate her femininity so that she can bestow it on her man' (Sviyash, 2012a). The ideal postfeminist subjectivity is sketched in the books by drawing a contrast with 'other', abjected femininities: that of a dull housewife, horrible feminist, pushy businesswoman, and hysterical

and clingy woman (Shatskaya, 2007a, b; c; Robski and Sobchak, 2007; Pravdina, 2007a, b). Women are urged to understand and embrace that ‘emancipated women puzzle men ... a man needs to think that he is the boss and the master...’ (Shatskaya, 2007b). Hence, the ‘right looks’ have to be aligned with the ‘right’ personality. The nature of this aesthetic labour is on-going and uncertain but is made attractive through the promise of a relationship:

You will be loved if you ...tailor yourself to your man ... but the ideal [woman is able] to understand and bring to life the dream of a man... [she] is the one who feels what a man wants. (Shatskaya, 2007b)

Always work!

Aesthetic labour is also described as an essential part of achieving a successful career. The books advise women not to ‘slave’ day and night in tedious low-paid jobs but pursue a high class career in office jobs like journalism or business:

Always work. Work allows you to have independence that men value so much ... it disciplines you and doesn’t let you leave the house without proper make-up, a proper hair-do or with peeling nail polish... it also allows you to meet a man ... and there is a higher chance of meeting a Rockefeller’s grandson if you work in a large top firm in a senior position. (Shatskaya, 2007b)

Reminiscent of the Soviet ideology, paid work is seen a crucial ingredient of female subjectivity. But a stylishly dressed, sexually seductive businesswoman has superseded the figure of a smiling female tractor-driver from Soviet cultural iconography. Moreover, although the rhetoric partly resonates with the postfeminist idea of a ‘working girl’ (McRobbie, 2009), the quotation above suggests that work and economic independence are not necessarily seen as values in themselves, but are construed as a means of self-improvement in order to become more attractive in the eyes of prospective suitors. Whilst self-fulfilment in a career is important, many books place an even greater emphasis on finding a successful man as a source of a ‘good life’. The books suggest that women should approach man-searching as a job and fastidiously study the science of ‘menology’ (Shatskaya, 2007) in order to find and exploit men’s weaknesses (see also Gill 2009). A paradigmatic example of this is Oksana Robski’s and Kseniya Sobchak’s glamour slash self-help manual *How to Marry a Millionaire*. On the cover, the authors pose in lingerie-like

wedding dresses, armed with pistols, hand-cuffs and machine guns. With this heavy armour they aim to track down and capture a wealthy oligarch and scare away potential female competitors. The picture signals female sexual power being mobilized in order to seize the resources and power residing in the hands of men (Salmenniemi and Ratilainen, 2014). This re-signifies the sexual terrain from being a sign of women's exploitation to that of women's empowerment (Lazar 2006: 512).

The texts do acknowledge at times the gendered forms of subordination and the restricted opportunities that women face in their lives. They give historical examples of how women have always had to 'sell' their embodied feminine capital in exchange for climbing the class ladder. The books suggest that this remains the case today and that women's lives are very much dependent on and regulated by men. They propose that women should mobilise femininity as a form of tactical agency in the pursuit of a better future:

Manipulation is a typically feminine method. In the context of patriarchy ... a woman had to find indirect routes to power, using men and her charm over them ... [you should begin] to think like men, but nonetheless remain a woman ... rather than have a bulldozer-like strategy and the pushiness of a bluestocking businesswoman, you can manipulate men without them knowing it... (Shatskaya, 2007c: 59).

Most of the books portray aesthetic labour as an investment that helps to get hold of male-controlled resources. Getting into a relationship with a rich man is presented as worth the hassle as it will literally pay off: 'your darling husband will pay for treating your neurosis [that you get whilst searching for him] as well as for your Bentley, your yacht and a mansion in Belgravia' (Robski and Sobchak, 2007: 3). However, the books warn about the precarity of such relationships:

He can leave any minute. He can leave because of your constant nagging or because you refuse sex too often ... he can leave because you go to bed wearing too much cream on your face, or stopped putting make-up on and stopped being a woman and began to turn into a comic-book housewife with curlers on her head ... the bottom line is that the problem is you (Shatskaya, 2009: 10).

This precarity underscores the necessity of keeping up the aesthetic labour. As one of the books advise, ‘any attempt to have a happy long-lasting family life with an oligarch is an illusion’ (Sobchak and Robski 2007: 3). Thus, women should devote themselves to cultivating the ‘art of femininity’ as a way to postpone the inevitable break-up.

‘Giving oneself without asking anything back’

Finally, a crucial dimension of aesthetic labour is learning how to cultivate sexuality ‘in the right way’. Sexuality is construed as an essential part of a healthy selfhood and a manifestation of women’s empowerment. Women are expected to explore and work on their sexuality:

A real woman sees sex as a healthy part of life. She allows herself not to feel guilty about having sex or wanting to have sex. She likes her body. She can enjoy herself ... (Sviyash, 2012).

Despite the recurrent celebration of sexual empowerment, female sexuality does not appear as important in itself, but rather, once again, it is harnessed to serve the sexual pleasure of one’s partner. The discussion of sexuality exclusively assumes heteronormativity and the ultimate motive for working on sexuality is to be able to fulfil the sexual needs of men:

Let’s be honest with ourselves: women don’t just want to have sex for pleasure and this cannot be their main goal in life ... sex is first and foremost a way to ensnare a man, to tie him; and wanting to please your man is a crucial element of a happy and balanced life ... if you learn to do this you’ll get love, admiration and the respect of your man ... Giving oneself without asking for anything back should give the real woman the most pleasure and happiness (Shatskaya, 2009).

As this quotation indicates, women’s sexuality is instrumentalised and conceived of as a way to preserve the relationship, a message which echoes the globally circulating postfeminist discourse of ‘sexual entrepreneurship’ (Harvey and Gill, 2011) and ‘compulsory sexual agency’ (Gill, 2008). These efforts are portrayed as an obligation; those women who refuse to engage in the labour of sexuality are proclaimed ‘apathetic’ and ‘lazy’ and thus rightly cheated on and abandoned by their partners (Shatskaya, 2009). However, women are not only expected to embrace sexuality but also learn to derive pleasure from pleasing their partner’s

desires and leaving their own desires aside. This elucidates how the labour of sexuality involves a great deal of psychic and emotional labour and discipline. Women are urged to take care of their partners' sexual needs but also show genuine care, love and compassion. As one of the books explains: 'men are not only there to be used ... you need to learn to love and learn to get pleasure from throwing yourself into a loving relationship' (Shatskaya, 2009). Thus, although women's autonomy and independence are propagated in the books, they are also constantly destabilised by naturalizing women's subordination and positioning women's lives as worthless without a man.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which Russia self-help books encourage women to conceive of and shape their bodies and subjectivities. We have argued that aesthetic labour on the body, personality and sexuality is part and parcel of the 'art of femininity', which appears as a crucial tactic to navigate the social and economic precarity of contemporary Russia. In aesthetic labour, psychic and bodily surveillance and regulation are intimately enmeshed. Femininity appears in the books simultaneously as something natural and essential and as a complex performance accomplished through meticulous aesthetic practices.

The imperative of perpetual and arduous aesthetic labour is made attractive to the Russian female audience by portraying it as a form of self-enjoyment and a source of pleasure (Lazar 2009) and by holding out a promise of upward mobility for those who learn how to perform it successfully. We could think of this as a variant of a spirit of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011): the books hail women to invest time and effort in the 'art of femininity' by holding out the promise of empowerment, success and a better future, while simultaneously drawing women into forms of labour that are likely to wear them down, legitimize sexual hierarchies and reproduce women's subordination. Moreover, not only is this aesthetic labour never-ending and tedious, it is also difficult to 'walk away' from it (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006), as the cost of doing so is portrayed as being very high.

The feminine subject sketched in the books is a highly classed figure who has access to the material and symbolic resources of self-making and can invest in herself (see Skeggs 2004). However, this subject is also inherently fragile since much of her life is presented as ultimately regulated by and mediated through men. The books portray the commodification of personality, femininity and sexuality and their tactical deployment as a way to navigate

gendered and classed constraints. In this way, they encourage the use of individual and commercial strategies to manipulate structural constraints rather than collective mobilisation to eradicate them.

Notes

¹ de Certeau (1984) makes a distinction between strategy and tactic. Strategy refers to the grid of force-relationships and rules of the game defined by dominant powers and within which tactical action can take place. Tactical action seeks to navigate this strategic grid by trying to make use of its frictions and turn them into opportunities, thereby seeking to subvert the grid.

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