

**REQUIEM FOR A DREAM.**

**Review of Peter Pomerantsev. 2015. *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible. Adventures in Modern Russia*. London: Faber and Faber.**

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Peter Pomerantsev's book is a documentary written in a very easy flowing style that can be read as a selection of short stories or even a novel. It seems to be infused with the atmosphere of *Great Gatsby* set in a much darker, sinister setting. It starts in a swirl of a party where everything is possible, where money falls from the sky, where becoming rich is so easy 'it does not seem real' and where long Northern winter nights are one endless entertainment. It finishes with the same disillusionment of the main protagonist (the author himself) with the 'Eastern' life and return to the West to be haunted by memories of the past and images of the world left behind. For most readers who have not experienced the 'Soviet' or 'post-Soviet condition' this book may well read the same way as that of Fitzgerald – a seducing peek into an era and a place which they will never visit and which is as distant for them in its deeds and mores as that of 1920s America. For those who have lived in 'the system' it will remind how deeply entangled it was and how difficult it is to get rid of its tentacles.

Pomerantsev's book is narrated, as befits a TV producer, through a camera lens. It is a set of stories, quite different from one another, quite fitting to be separate documentaries, but which, told together create a powerful portrait of Russian society, its visitors and its 'offshore'. The razzle-dazzle in the book quickly starts seeping the juice of bitterness. The country where everything is possible too soon appears to be not only the country where someone just out of the university can get to produce his own programs and fulfil his dreams, but also the country where people's possessions and even lives depend on the charity of the state, where everything revolves around the elusive figure of 'The

President' (never with the actual name), the ultimate shape-shifter, the contemporary Wizard of Oz.

Moscow as a city becomes the metaphor for the contemporary Russian society. A city that cannot grow outwards shaped by a 'still feudal social structure defined by needing to be within the touching distance of the tsar' and which is destroyed and built over again and again as without expansion, 'every generation stamps on the heads of the previous ones'. It is a city whose memory is destroyed and written over, whose memory, like that of the country itself and its people, is kept only in the minds of single individuals, such as Alexander Mozhaev. Between the TNT television channel where the author works, with its bubble gum pinks, producing 'happy things' and the disappearing Moscow with its histories of purges, terrors and endless bloodletting, that Mozhaev wants to save, one is left with an impression of a double world familiar in life for those who went through the Soviet system, also aptly described in numerous pieces of literature.

'Nothing is real' as a part of the title is also part of experiences of the people Pomerantsev describes. One of the darkest story is that of Yana Yakovleva through whom it is shown so clearly that one can 'drive with a frothy white dress in the morning only to be treated as a parcel in the afternoon' in a country where 'there are no property rights just gradations of proximity to the Kremlin.' Everything is coated in an illusion of legality with all the participants accepting that legality is a farce, and the words cannot 'do things' but, quite to the contrary, are utterly meaningless. This unreality permeates the other stories as well, with many a protagonist stuck in the limbo of truth, looking for an escape from it in the various flourishing cults and new religions. At the same time, the majority simply accepts the game and smiling benevolently at those expressing belief in, e.g., human rights, 'raise conformism to the level of aesthetic act'.

One does not encounter too many well-known names in this book, it is, after all, the story of a society and people who make it what it is. Two persons, however, do stand out, two demiurges of contemporary Russia, the people who contributed the most to making it one big reality show

where news ‘should feel like a movie’ and where gangster movies are forbidden because politicians act like gangsters: Vladislav Surkov and Boris Berezovsky. Surkov is given the entire chapter with a rather detailed description of his life and works, mainly literary but also some of his most masterful illusions in politics. Berezovsky we encounter fleetingly, in the ‘offshore’, at a trial in London, a pathetic figure eliciting laughter from the audience but probably the only one who deserves a place in a Shakespearean tragedy with his confession and apology to the Russian people. It is this contrast between two men: one regretting, too late, his own role in the (re)creation of the ‘system’ and the alternative (TV) reality for Russia (and is his regret genuine?); and another, announcing with his Cheshire cat smile that he is proud to be considered so important as to evoke Western sanctions, as by sanctioning him the West seems to admit that he perfected the art of the surreal – that I found truly fascinating.

I finished the book with a heavy feeling that, I believe, permeates many a person in the Baltics: that we are caught in someone else’s fantasy. Even if we are not part of the society Pomerantsev describes, even if our tragedies, when told, would sound different; even if our countries have done a lot to dismantle the ‘sistema’ which had us all in its claws; if we do not believe that ‘nothing is true’, now, with Russia increasingly more belligerent, with its regime increasingly attempting to penetrate and corrupt the West from within, to make them believe that nothing is true and that the Hobbesian pre-Leviathan world of all against all is back, but it is all ‘only business’, we still have to take into account the fantasy. We have to follow every move and try to predict which turn the delirium will take and so the chimera becomes a reality, because it is real in its consequences.

At the same time, we live another dream. We ourselves dreamed of Russia as a ‘normal’ country, ‘normal’ in a Western sense, focused on giving the individual a space for self-advancement, cooperating with other countries in trying to make the world a better place and maybe pointing out to others their mistakes so that all can grow. This book can be read as a requiem for that dream.