

Levent, Nina Sobol. *Healthy Spirit in a Healthy Body: Representations of the Sports Body in Soviet Art of the 1920s and 1930s*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004. 208 pp. 26 b/w illustrations. \$43.95 (paper). ISBN 3-631-52267-3.

This book sets out on a potentially interesting journey into an area of Soviet art history that has not received much specific coverage – the shifting representations of the athletic body in the art and visual culture of the 1920s-1930s. Several strands of the sports body genre are identified: the ‘flying athlete’ and aviator-hero; the female athlete; the sporting nude; the sports parade; and, as a sub-genre, the airplane modeller or future pilot. The visual shift of male and female body image seems to be identified as a move from an anonymous ascetic, mechanised body in the 1920s, to an individualised, happy, healthy and voluntaristic body in the 1930s. The intended argument issues from a particular perspective locating Bolshevism as a secular religion of a type similar to that defined by Max Weber as the ‘Protestant Ethic’. Within this religion, sport (including *fizkul'tura*) is interpreted, via Foucault's theories on discipline, to have operated as a ritualised form of control over the unruly sexual body, particularly of Soviet woman.

Although interesting in intention, the execution and contents are somewhat disappointing. The book's main value for the scholarly community seems to lie in a few facts, mainly about the Soviet nude, the list of art works cited in the text (whether or not illustrated), and the literature search provided by the bibliography. The bibliography is divided into a very short list of primary sources, a list of periodicals that do not seem to be cited in the text, and a very long list of secondary sources. The latter, while by no means comprehensive, does offer the scholar some useful, recent English, German and post-Soviet Russian sources. The weighting of the bibliography,

Levent, Nina Sobol. *Healthy Spirit in a Healthy Body: Representations of the Sports Body in Soviet Art of the 1920s and 1930s*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004. 208 pp. 26 b/w illustrations. \$43.95 (paper). ISBN 3-631-52267-3.

however, is indicative of the nature of the book itself, which mainly consists of assertions, generalisations and précis of secondary sources interspersed with descriptions of art works, with little direct recourse to primary source material from the 1920s-1930s. Even the writings of N.A. Semashko, 1920s Commissar of Health and prime mover in promoting *fizkul'tura*, is only referred to via secondary sources.

The lack of specific contextualisation renders Levent's identifications of differences between 1920s and 1930s images hard to follow, and in some cases her assertions are misleading. For instance, Aleksandr Deineka's painting of female cross-country runners, *Razdol'e* (1944), is cited on pp.46-7 as an example of 1930s body-image ideology, which rather misses the point about its connection by subject, title and date to specifically wartime discourses on the liberation of the motherland.

There are also contradictions between the intended and actual methodology. The 'Introduction' pp.12-13, for instance, apparently promises an art historical approach that eschews the Cold War 'totalitarian' model of Stalinist culture and denial of art status to Socialist Realism. Yet the start of chapter 1 indicates clearly that Levent derives the construct of Bolshevism as secular religion from theorisations of totalitarianism (Erich Voeglin, *Die Politische Religionen*, Munich 1938; Jacob Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, London, 1952; David B. Apter, *The Politics of Modernisation*, Chicago, 1965). Moreover, in chapter 2, assertions of the 'quality' of images

Levent, Nina Sobol. *Healthy Spirit in a Healthy Body: Representations of the Sports Body in Soviet Art of the 1920s and 1930s*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004. 208 pp. 26 b/w illustrations. \$43.95 (paper). ISBN 3-631-52267-3.

by Deineka, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Aleksandr Samokhvalov depend for their legitimacy on the establishment of connections between these artists and the early Soviet avant-garde.

The book seems expensive for what it is. It is poorly edited, containing typographical and spelling errors as well as sub-headings that are not listed in the table of contents. The illustrations are situated at the back of the book and, while mainly legible, are very pale and small. They also lack figure numbers and there are no indications in the text as to which of the works discussed are actually illustrated.

Pat Simpson, University of Hertfordshire.

(606 words including author name and institution)