Lilya Kaganovsky. *How the Soviet Man was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 256 pp. $25.95 (pb).

This is a creative study of Soviet textual and visual culture that explores how Soviet masculinity was “constructed and represented” in Stalin’s time (ix). Scholar Lilya Kaganovsky’s analysis of this artistic landscape begins with her revisiting standard interpretations of Stalin-era gender norms, which have tended to fixate on a monolithic notion of the Soviet man. In particular, she urges her readers to move beyond the image of masculinity that requires a gymnastically-fit body, an extreme devotion to the state and an ascetic attitude toward decadent sexuality or desire. Although this now well-known set of gender expectations is part of the story that Kaganovsky tells, it is only one aspect of her impressive and tremendously rich analysis.

In Kaganovsky’s readings of Socialist Realist novels, films, paintings and posters, the Stalinist male body – both in its potential and its limits – occupies center stage. In all of her texts, she looks closely at “corporeal representation” in order to highlight fundamental tensions within the dialectical nature of Stalinist masculinity: a masculinity, which incorporates both the virile, strong body and the “wounded, mutilated body”. This Soviet Man is at once the Stakhanovite of the Stalinist imagination as well as the victim of the “loss of bodily mobility” (4). Yet, these two seemingly contradictory images of Soviet manhood coexist within individuals in each of Kaganovsky’s examples, whether in *How the Steel was Tempered* or *A Story about a Real Man*, among many, many others. The ideal man is at once “committed to the cause, yet chained to his bed” and he is “visionary yet blind.” (4) Her challenge is to explicate how this is possible. Kaganovsky does so convincingly and artfully.

A central piece of this multilayered argument revolves around the role of Stalin the Man, the quintessential hero always lurking in the shadows or in the imagination, in each of these Socialist Realist texts. The central male heroes in her texts are often on the verge of their own “unmaking” (of the book’s title) as they are unavoidably subjugated before the Great One, before Stalin himself. In other words, given Stalin’s own centrality to Soviet power – his place at the pinnacle of manhood – individual men, even those who come closest to the Stakhanovite idea, would always have to contend with the fact that “there was always someone out there more Soviet, more true, more heroic, more of a real man.” This meant that “masculinity and power” – or, in Kaganovsky’s psychoanalytic/Freudian terms “penis and phallus” – were not necessarily the same. The achievement of the singular masculinity was, thus, always illusive and resulted in “maimed, wounded and disabled male bodies”, who would pose no threat to Stalin himself (146).

Kaganovsky’s analysis of Mikhail Chiaureli’s 1949 film *The Fall of Berlin* – itself perhaps the culmination of the tendencies described above – illustrates the role of Stalin in these Socialist Realist texts most clearly. It is in this film, one which Khrushchev later denounced as a reflection of Stalin’s Cult of Personality, where Stalin’s presence dwarfs the Stakhanovite-like hero Alesha Ivanov as he receives his Order of Lenin. Paradoxically, as Kaganovsky points out, even though Ivanov can never embody the almighty hero, the very fact of his wounded body illustrates the “perverse logic of Stalinism”: each of his wounds represents his “sacrifice and submission” to Stalin, to the state to the Soviet Union, thus illustrating his ideal status, even as he is emasculated before the Great One (146-7).

One aspect of Kaganovsky’s analysis is her attention to the subtle differences in how the creators each of her genres – posters/paintings, film and novels – approaches this complex norm of masculinity. Each genre that Kaganovsky treats requires its own interpretive
apparatus and plays its own role in representing the norms of masculinity in the Stalinist Soviet Union. In posters/paintings, for example, damaged male bodies do not appear before the viewer. In films, overt signs of disfigurement tend to be muted, as the audience is exposed to the bandaged wound or the crutches; the focus is not on the mutilation, per se, but rather on a masculinity that acknowledges and even encourages its own undoing. It is necessary to represent the vast distance to power, in each instance and to showcase (as in the case of Aleshya Ivanov above) the sacrifices each man endures. Novels, on the other hand, are “free to dwell on the details of their heroes’ dismemberment,” and do so in gritty detail, in some cases. (10) Although there is not room to rehearse each chapter and every individual analysis here, it is worth noting that the book builds upon itself moving both thematically and through its chosen genres.

The detailed analysis begins with a discussion of Ostrovsky’s How the Steel was Tempered, the quintessential Socialist Realist novel with the quintessential Stalinist male hero, Pavka Korchagin. Pavka, the novel’s protagonist, is a committed communist whose biography parallels the history of the revolution. In order to devote himself to the cause – through revolution, war and the daily hardships, Pavka “undertakes one task after another that destroys his body” (20) on behalf of the state. With each challenge that Pavka takes on – war, revolution, building of the Soviet state – and each physical deformity that he endures, it becomes increasingly clear that power lies outside of himself. His body becomes more and more mutilated and deformed. Devoted entirely to the building of a socialist society, Pavka is physically crippled and his body destroyed. Stalinist patriarchy – in the above example and throughout Kaganovsky’s analysis – while still privileging the male, works to undo the power of the masculine. (89) In her descriptions of the wartime pilot movies, for example, we learn that the Stalinist hero is always constrained, he cannot break ranks. (95). In The Pilots, Nikolai Rogachev is the commander of a flight school, but under strict medical orders never to fly again. (95) Rogachev, the film’s clear hero, must accept his own limitations, something not easily performed by his rival and a kind of nemesis, Sergei Beliaev, who is frivolous and reckless. Rogachev embodies the duality of Stalin-era masculinity: he displays the necessary strength and commitment while also accepting that he must be crippled. Here the masculine ideal hinges on a man in his hospital robe, lying in his bed. This is a far cry from the virile, invincible muscular man of the Stalinist imagination.

Despite the fact that the main focus of this study is men, it does not neglect women and the roles that they play in the creating and sustaining of ideal masculinities. The chapter entitled “Heterosexual Panic” is particularly poignant in this regard. This chapter – which also displays Kaganovsky’s comfort with a multitude of theoretical languages (from psychoanalytic frameworks, to gender analysis, to postmodern literary theories) – begins with the work of Eve Sedgwick. Kaganovsky turns Sedgwick’s discussion of the love triangle in her classic book Between Men on its head: the homosexual panic of Sedgwick’s analysis transforms into a heterosexual one. In the standard love triangle, detailed in Sedgwick’s Between Men, same-sex desire is “always mediated through heterosexual longing”; the pretense of desire for the woman is standing in the way of the two men consummating their affections. In Kaganovsky’s texts this scenario is reversed, and “two conflicting mechanisms turn homosexual panic into heterosexual panic.” (86) There is fear and mistrust of women, on the one hand, and a “melancholia” that is defined by the mourning for the loss of heterosexual desire in an all-male homosocial collective, on the other. Instead of homosocial desire being channeled through the women, in the Soviet examples there is a profound loss in a world where heterosexual love is not central to the movement of the plot.