

THE KIDS IN THE LAST ROW

Every country has the “worsts” that it deserves. For example, in our own little world, we Italians have the “Tapiro d’Oro” (Golden Tapir), while Americans have their “Razzies”, as the Golden Raspberry Awards are affectionately referred to. These very “un-coveted” Hollywood acknowledgements have been awarded for twenty-seven years now, as recognition for the year’s worst achievements in film. The 2007 “raspberry” went to Sharon Stone for her performance in *Basic Instinct 2*. But, on the other side of the world, just a few weeks later, another “worst-list” of awards was handed out for a different category of flops: those of the literary world. During the “Books of Russia” fair, Moscow awarded its “Abzats anti-prizes”, the anti-Oscars of literature that are reserved for the most unreadable works published in Russia. The word “Abzats” originally meant “paragraph” but over time it has also taken on the additional meaning of “fiasco”, and was chosen by organizers, including the daily newspaper “Knizhnoye Obozreniye”, to baptise this year’s edition of an enormously popular event. The latest edition (the sixth) took place during the last week of March and even had an entire series among its nominees: *In Life* is a daring attempt to reproduce the success garnered by Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, with titles such as *Stalin in Life*, *Jesus Christ in Life* and so on. But those who did really well (as fiascos) included an unexpected Chingiz Aitmatov, a sacred “behe-moth” of Soviet literature, prolific author of novels and stories, chosen for his *Eternal Bride*, and “Moscow Times” journalist, not to mention successful mystery writer, Yulia Latynina, with her embarrassing *Lands of War*. The ceremony is divi-

ded into categories, just like the Oscars: the winner in the category of “Worst Editing” was the book by sports journalist Igor Rainer entitled *How Spartak Was Killed*, a soporific collection of excerpts and articles on the parabola of the Russian football club. The winner of the “Worst Translation” prize was Yelena Samarskaya, who, according to the explanation behind this award, managed to translate *A Society of Consumption* by Jean Baudrillard with such skill that she rendered the thoughts of the French philosopher “unintelligible”, to say the least. **And for the absolute worst-selling Cyrillic publication of 2007, “the winner is...” Sergej Minayev who beat out the competition with not just one, but two novels: *Dukhless* and the most recent *Media Sapiens*, dedicated to the country’s media boom of the last decade.** Both of his books were honoured with the “Total Fiasco” award because of an alarming distinction they share: an atrocious quality of content combined with commercial success. But the show didn’t stop there; this year’s ceremony had one big novelty, something that was really wanted by its organizers: the “Certificate of Dishonour” is awarded to the person who has committed “a true crime against Russian literature”. This year’s guilty party? Konstantin Ernst was unanimously awarded the prize because the ex-biologist turned super-potent head of Channel One with “his extreme power and the influence of television, is pushing people away from books and other forms of culture”. Such criminals, these Russians.

PAPARAZZI SNAPS

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because one day we just might miss it: China now has its own rumour mill and is definitely responding to the wave of gossip from the West with a threatening supply of self-made scoops. However, if here this is caused, more or less, by a media rampage, in the Far East “credit” should perhaps go to censorship. Because among the many customs borrowed from the Far West, the bulimia of scandal magazines in the Celestial Empire represents an *escamotage*, a way to get around the merciless editing imposed by the government on information and reporting rights. In short, without the possibility of covering internal politics and shielded by the fragile protection of independent associations like the local CPJ (Committee to Protect Journalists), reporters and photo-journalists in the Republic of China have no other option than to comb the sector that is the least irritating to authorities: gossip. Not that this new area of interest is without its more dramatic elements: if, for example, the collective conscience of Western paparazzi will always be stained by the death of Lady Diana, what will dirty that of their Asian colleagues is a similar automobile accident, which fortunately was not fatal: **a couple of years ago, a local pop star, Wang Fei, crashed on a motorway while trying to escape a group of gouzai. This is the term used to refer to the Chinese paparazzi who in their country are seen as fortune-hunters without scruples and are ready for anything.** It has only been in the last few years that they’ve organised themselves as a category of journalists, concentrating themselves around a (few) large publishing houses in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Here in Italy the popularity of these “thieves of images” dates back to the 1970s of Rino



Grazia Neri_Sinopix

Barillari, while the golden age of the *gouzai* only just began in 2000 with some juicy stories and exposés: the actor Mao Ning who was revealed to be gay and the divorce between the soap star Gong Li and the director Zhang Yimou. For Westerners, these are really just everyday anecdotes, but they are extremely fascinating and, above all, novel for the thirsty pop-culture that is “made-in-China”. “We used to be interested in the films and songs our stars made; today we want to know about their ‘backstage’ lives”, writes “China Daily” reporter Wang Jiangyue. Indeed, the demand has been sufficient to help create a new publishing business. **In the last four years, the circulation of scandal magazines has increased by 50% and even respectable and traditional newspapers have decided to quadruple the number of pages dedicated to entertainment.** And while the market is flooded with ideogram editions of the “bibles” of Western gossip – such as the weekly magazines “People”, “OK!” and “Hello!”, which after recent launches in India have already turned a watchful eye to the Chinese market – local publications are also doing very well. These include “Beijing

Youth Daily”, the trash insert (bright pink colour) in the “Beijing Daily Messenger”, the pseudo-official site of the Chinese paparazzi, www.gouzai.cn, and the magazine “8 Weekly” which specialises in the publication of paparazzi snaps and indiscreet photos, often organised in sequence, just like real serial photo-novels. What’s next, a Chinese edition of “Grand Hotel”?

RELIGION VS. EMIGRATION

Imams are on the front lines to fight social issues. Following Morocco’s lead, which in its battle against HIV appealed to these religious Muslim leaders to enlighten the public about sexual education, now Algeria is turning to them in order to curb clandestine emigration.

For years the Algerian authorities have boasted, especially to neighbouring Morocco, about their country’s ability to control its borders. However, since Rabat bloodily repressed the attempt of a sub-Saharan group of would-be emigrants from scaling a wall separating them from the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melillia in the autumn of 2005, the country’s

migratory flows have shifted borders, pushing more and more southward, towards Mauritania and Senegal, and eastward towards Libya and, somewhat embarrassingly, Algeria too.

The attempt to curtail a phenomenon which in the span of a few months has resulted in a number of victims, Algiers has set up fenced areas, imprisoned scores of clandestine immigrants and has even invited its citizens to report any suspicious boats to the authorities. **Now the Minister of Religious Affairs has decided to conduct an information campaign which will bring forward the Imams of the 14,000 mosques present in the country. They will have the assignment of discouraging these destitute folks from embarking on whatever transport is available headed to Italy, Spain or France.**

However, the Minister of Religious Affairs, Boudadelà Ghlamalà, promises that these Friday sermons will not be their only weapons of dissuasion. The *Ulema*, or Islamic wise men, are supposedly preparing a specific *fatwa* based on a verse from the Koran, which states that it is a sin to endanger one’s own life, because it is a gift from God. According to the President of the National Commission of *Fatwas*, young people who attempt to emigrate illegally are aware of the dangers they face and their actions are in fact comparable to a suicide attempt.

Of course the local press has already voiced the first doubts about the success of this type of operation; one that is delegated to a well-off ‘caste’ which fears neither poverty nor unemployment and which focuses on heavenly issues that have little in common with day-to-day life here on earth. Surely, the solution to the complex problem of clandestine emigration will not be found in denying even God’s clemency to these desperate souls.

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