

**Born Under a Bad Sign:
Spice Boyz and Belarusian Horror**

Adam Lowenstein

Author's Note: The following text was delivered as a response to a screening of *Spice Boyz* (Vladimir Zinkevich, 2020) held at the University of Pittsburgh's annual Russian Film Symposium in May 2021. I have left the text in its original form, which means that two shattering events that have occurred in the interim go unaddressed here: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the passing of Denis Saltykov. The former raises a host of geopolitical issues that will have to remain beyond the scope of this brief response, although Belarus's initial support of the Russian invasion suggests a number of retrospective extensions to the interpretation of *Spice Boyz* offered here. The latter is a source of profound personal sadness. Denis was a remarkable PhD student in the Film and Media Studies Program as well as the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh. When he invited me to respond to this screening of *Spice Boyz* that he had organized along with a number of connected symposium events concerning Russian horror, it was a true pleasure to accept his generous invitation. I had been lucky to teach Denis in a graduate seminar on the horror film, so I already knew him as one of the best, brightest, and kindest young scholars that I have ever had the chance to meet. He had already produced important published work on the horror film in a Russian context¹, and I knew his programming for this symposium would be even more significant. After the symposium concluded, I connected Denis with editor Kristopher Woofter and the wonderful horror studies community at *Monstrum* in the hopes that a published record of Denis's efforts could be made more widely available. Denis was hard at work on this project when he died suddenly and unexpectedly. The personal loss for those who knew him, as well as the professional loss of a voice that would have doubtlessly transformed our understanding of global horror studies, cannot be replaced. But I am grateful to Denis's wife, the scholar Eva Ivanilova, for her strength and resolve to make this dossier a reality and to honor Denis in the process. In the short time I knew Denis, he had already taught me so much. I am deeply saddened by the loss of all those future conversations with him that are no longer possible. But I know that the publication of this dossier would have made him proud, and that the dossier's contents will allow us all to learn from him for many years to come. I would like to dedicate my own text here to the memory of Denis Saltykov.

¹ Denis Saltykov, 2019, "The Living Dead in Post-Soviet Cultural Consumption," *Studies in the Fantastic* 7 (Summer/Fall): 89-104.

Even though *Spice Boyz* (Vladimir Zinkevich, 2020) is bookended by the songs “Run Through the Jungle” by Creedence Clearwater Revival and “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” by Bob Dylan, the lyrics that kept reverberating for me as I watched it are from Albert King’s blues standard “Born Under a Bad Sign,” written by William Bell and Booker T. Jones. That song includes these lines:

Born under a bad sign
Been down since I began to crawl
If it wasn’t for bad luck, I wouldn’t have no luck at all

I feel like these lines could serve quite nicely as an epigraph for *Spice Boyz*. The film is organized as a comprehensive catalog of bad luck, from full moons and black cats and desecrated icons to botched wedding rituals and tainted drugs. Nearly everyone in *Spice Boyz* seems to be in the wrong place, at the wrong time, doing the wrong thing. And since the film is unusually insistent on foregrounding its basis in a real-life 2014 incident that occurred in the Belarusian city of Gomel, it also seems to suggest that to be born in Belarus today is to be born under a bad sign.

Perhaps some of the film’s horror, which is extensive and disturbing even when tempered with a black sense of humor clearly indebted to Quentin Tarantino, can be traced to the fact that the whole superstitious concept of being born under a bad sign carries some strong empirical evidence in the Belarusian context. From the devastating destruction of World War II, to the deadly postwar Stalinist state violence, to the radiation of Chernobyl that impacted Belarus inordinately, to the brutally repressive authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus has absorbed more than its share of sociopolitical misery. But no matter how much bad luck is visited upon the cast of beautiful young people that populates *Spice Boyz*, even the opportunity to be in their unlucky position must seem like a cruel joke to most average Belarusians. After all, these young people are able to gather 500 euros quite effortlessly for a lavish bachelor party in a country where that sum would be a sizable chunk of most people’s annual income.

Yet there are also poignant dimensions to the premise of *Spice Boyz*. Most of these young people seem trapped and isolated, as distant from the far-off glamour of Moscow as they are from the consumerist plenty of the US; the film makes a point of noting how even the ketchup for hot dogs, however sexily these hot dogs are marketed, is diluted in Belarus. This sense of dead-ended lives in a dead-ended place collides with a desperate desire to celebrate what should be a shining high point in the collective experience of these characters—

the wedding of two close friends. This collision between unyielding dead ends and unquenchable desire results in a doomed pressure cooker situation, shot through with bad ideas and worse luck.

But “poignant” is probably not the adjective most viewers would use to describe *Spice Boyz*. “Outrageous” or “cruel” might be closer to the mark, and the film’s horror is perhaps most usefully understood in relation not just to Tarantino in a general sense, but to Tarantino’s protégé Eli Roth in a more specific sense. Roth’s most well-known film is 2006’s *Hostel*, where Eastern Europe is deployed as the setting for a group of mostly American young tourists to experience the sort of bad luck endured by the protagonists of *Spice Boyz*. In *Hostel*, the Americans fall prey to the promise of sexy good times in Bratislava, Slovakia that turns out to be a trap: the Americans are being used as game for an illicit international hunting club where the most exquisite pleasure you can pay for is human torture and murder. Not insignificantly, Americans are the most desirable and expensive victims for the moneyed, international clientele of this hunting club.

The Gomel of *Spice Boyz* and the Bratislava of *Hostel* are not simply interchangeable locales, but they share a relation to Eastern Europe’s role in the global imaginary of horror cinema. These are places where life is cheap, times are desperate, and the opportunities for horror are plentiful. *Spice Boyz* strikes me as a sort of Belarusian reply to the American imagination of Eastern Europe in *Hostel*. If Eastern Europe is dangerous for Americans in *Hostel* because it is so easy and inexpensive to access, then Eastern Europe is dangerous for Eastern Europeans in *Spice Boyz* precisely because better places like America or Moscow are so impossibly expensive and inaccessible. Part of the drug trafficking crisis in Belarus stems from the fact that spice and related narcotics are so cheap to buy, offering youth especially an affordable artificial “dream” of better things. Cinema, of course, traffics in dreams as well, and the dream of Eastern Europe that lures the Americans in *Hostel* is fascinatingly complemented by the dreams of elsewhere that galvanize the horrific hyperreality of Belarus we see depicted in *Spice Boyz*.

Hostel was at the heart of contemporary US critical debates expressing alarm that horror had devolved into “torture porn.” I have written elsewhere about how categories such as torture porn, or the recent New French Extremity, or the even more recent “elevated horror” are all misbegotten and ultimately condescending terms because they assume that horror must be one easily

defined thing rather than many difficult to define things.² *Hostel* and *Spice Boys* may not be your cup of tea, but there is certainly a place in the vocabulary of horror for them. Accepting that for starters seems to me a much more critically productive reaction to these films than the expression of morally incensed disdain or panic about how such films are beyond the pale in some way, whether that means morally below the horror norm in the cases of torture porn and the New French Extremity or morally above the horror norm in elevated horror examples like *Get Out* (2017) and *The Shape of Water* (2017). Horror is capacious and complex enough to house all kinds of highs and lows, to the point where the very act of distinguishing between high and low comes to feel largely beside the point.

For example, one of *Spice Boys*'s most outrageous scenes involves the gory removal of a character's eyes, brutally cut out of his head with a knife by his own friends under the influence of the drug they have ingested. The escalating accumulation of horrors here certainly seems to qualify as torturous and extreme. Not only are the eyes removed, but they are then placed in the microwave, where they explode with a sickeningly bloody pop. And as if this weren't enough, the character who absorbs this punishment, the heartlessly nicknamed Lambada, is already coded as a victim by suffering from cerebral palsy. This spectacular display of cruelty may strike some as contemptibly vulgar bad taste or even textbook "torture porn," lowbrow horror in all of the worst ways.

And yet this sequence can also be linked to horror's most highbrow iconography of confrontational images, descended directly from Surrealism. The eye sliced by a razor that opens Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's 1929 Surrealist masterwork *Un Chien andalou* is an unavoidable evocation here, as is Buñuel's long and infamous line of morally compromised disabled characters. Buñuel refuses to let conventional feelings of sympathy and pity for the disabled dull the ferocity of his Surrealist attack on bourgeois society's hypocritical belief systems.

Of course, one's willingness to place *Spice Boys* in the orbit of Buñuel, or Tarantino, or Roth, or others is completely dependent on your reaction to the quality of the film, and it is these reactions that I am very eager to turn to now in our discussion.

² See, for example, Adam Lowenstein, 2011, "Spectacle Horror and *Hostel*: Why 'Torture Porn' Does Not Exist." *Critical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (April): 42-60.

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