

Title: Phantasmagoria as a Social Commentary: Arsen Savadov's Series "Donbas-Chocolate"
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The photo series "Donbas-Chocolate" by Arsen Savadov, a leader of the "New Ukrainian Wave", documents a performance that the artist organized in a coal mine of the Donbas region of Ukraine in 1997. Below ground level, Savadov staged a bizarre costume drama in which real miners, together with professional actors, appeared naked and covered with coal dust, dressed as ballet dancers carrying Christian gonfalons and hewing tools, while playing with dolls and recreating famous scenes from art history. Primarily interpreted as a clash of symbols, as a "response to the collapse of the symbolic order" (Viktor Misiano), the series demands a more engaged examination. This work has been understood as epitomizing the post-Soviet condition, since it demonstrates the inexhaustible interpretive possibilities of postmodern pastiche. I will complicate this discussion by showing how the grotesque depictions of miners can emerge as a powerful social commentary revealing the ambivalent status of the miner as an obscene byproduct of the Industrial Revolution.

When coal miners appeared as a class in Victorian England, society's perception of them was assigned to the realm of the Imaginary (P.Stalybrass and A.White). Inducing fear and fascination in the urban bourgeoisie, miners were perceived as chthonic creatures crawling beneath the earth. Concurrent with the Victorian Era, Russian Itinerant artist Nikolai Kasatkin faced the impossibility to depict the miner in the totality of his working conditions. This historical context contributes to Savadov's interpretation of the contemporary Ukrainian mine as a cemetery for ideological remnants and empty symbols of the two ruined empires, the Russian and the Soviet. Enacting his grotesque carnival in the mines, Savadov gives an ingenious response to the two-century-old representational dilemma of the miners whose realities of life guaranteed that their realistic representation would remain problematic.

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