

I Get a (Russian) Thrill Out of You

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Anna Pavich Personal Archive

Триллер: thriller

Let's start today's column with a question — just for native English speakers. What does “thrill” mean? If you're like me, you've just said, “Oh, no problem! A thrill is... well... you know, 'Wow!' ... it's when you are happy and excited... but it can also be something scary... but kind of fun...um... well...”

It's not the easiest word to nail down, is it? After some flipping through dictionaries, I'd define a “thrill” as a mixture of excitement and pleasure; an intense sensation; fun fear, i.e., a feeling of excitement about something that will be pleasant and yet a bit frightening without being truly dangerous — like a ride on a roller coaster.

That's a lot of meaning packed into one little word. Now you know why translators walk around muttering to themselves and shouting at invisible readers and critics. Без пол-литры не разобратъся (that's a real stumper, literally “you can't figure that out without a half-liter [of booze]”).

And like all words packed with meaning, it's hard to translate. You know that it's hard to render in Russian when it's just grabbed from English and transliterated. So, for example, the “exciting-scary-fun” meaning of thrill that gives us a thriller at the movie theater is simply called триллер in Russian.

There is one word in Russian that more or less combines the notions of intense emotion, fun, excitement and possible danger. The problem is that the word is in the wrong register — it's the slangy кайф — originally the word for a narcotic high. But that's not something your cultured pensioner-neighbor Мария Ивановна would say about the ice slide in the courtyard.

So let's forget translation for a moment and just look at how you express notions of intense excitement in Russian. There are plenty of options.

A good place to begin is with the verb трепетать, which is close to the experience of a thrill, but much less extreme. It means to quake, quiver or shake gently, like tree leaves or flames:

Посередине палатки, где мы сидели, трепетал огонёк светильника (The flame of the lantern quivered in the center of the tent where we were sitting.) When applied to a person, it means to be shaken with some kind of emotion: Он трепетал от радости (He shook with joy.) Она трепетала от ужаса (She was horrified, literally “quaking with fear.”)

If you use the expression трепетать перед (to be quaking before), it means to experience fear mixed with respect. This is perhaps close to intimidation: Он трепетал перед начальством (He was terribly intimidated by management.)

For basic excitement you can use the verb волноваться (to be excited, upset) and noun волнение, which is any kind of excitement, agitation or anxiety — a strong positive or negative emotion. Add a verb like испытывать (to experience); переживать (to go through); чувствовать (to feel) and the appropriate adjective to convey the intensity and nature of the excitement. Actually, sometimes the context tells you if the excitement is good or bad. Ветераны войны испытывают глубокое волнение, когда видят парад (The war veterans are thrilled when they see a military parade.)

Another noun you can use is ощущение (feeling) which can be modified with adjectives like острое (extreme); сильное (strong); or захватывающее (breath-taking, spell-binding, mind-bending). Here, too, it's sometimes tough to tell if the emotions are positive or negative: Роман вызвал у меня сильные ощущения (The novel really affected me, literally “evoked strong feelings in me.”)

Острые ощущения are usually — though not always — fun-scary. In fact, любитель острых ощущений is a thrill-seeker. Russians also call this: человек, любящий риск (a person who loves risk); сторонник чрезмерно рискованного отдыха (someone who likes high-risk sports); охотник за адреналином (“an adrenaline hunter”) or simply: экстремал (daredevil) — someone who loves активный спорт и экстрим (active and extreme sports).

If you want to convey a sense of breathtaking excitement, you can use захватывающий alone: У Тодоровского получилось цельное, очень эмоциональное и по-настоящему захватывающее кино (Todorovsky made a satisfyingly complete, very emotional and truly thrilling film.)

If you don't like these words, you can act out how exciting something was: Я ахнула! (I gasped!) Or you can exaggerate a bit: Фильм потряс меня! (The film amazed me, literally “shook me up.”) Or you can exaggerate a lot: Фильм меня просто убил (The film just slayed me.)

Was the film scary, funny, touching, romantic, beautiful or ugly? I have no idea. That's the thing with thrills in any language — you have to watch it to find out.

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