

THE EROTIC BIOPOWER OF PUTINISM: FROM GLAMOUR TO PORNOGRAPHY

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In the present essay I explain how the exaltation of glamour in Russia and the persecution of queer sexual practices belong to the same normalizing strategy, which aims to freeze ideological discourse and empower conservative nodal points of Vladimir Putin's political regime. By analyzing the genealogy of "glamour" and the emergence of the term in the post-Soviet context, I explore how the glorification of certain sexual practices to the exclusion of others limits the possibilities for symbolic alternatives within Russian society. The study of certain erotic phenomena intimately related with the process of subjectification illuminates how hegemony is articulated in post-Soviet Russia.

Keywords: Putinism; Queer Practices; Glamour; Pornography; Russian Conservatism

THERE CAN BE NO DEMOCRACY BUT WE'VE GOT GLAMOUR

2003 was the year Bentley opened a salon in Moscow, and also when the Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich acquired Chelsea FC, an English Premier League football club. Thereafter, other parallel occurrences happened: *Glamour* magazine landed in Russia, Kseniia Sobchak emerged as a celebrity, the first glamour novel—*Casual* by Oksana Robski—became a bestseller, and *Sex and the City* (created by Candace Bushnell and Darren Star, 1998–2004, HBO) was shown on Russian television, breaking records in terms of popularity.

Through magazines, TV programs, serials (such as *Rublevka live* or *Hunting for Cinderella*), or movies (like *Glianets*), glamour has been offered as a panacea for life's drama. The peak was probably reached in 2007. That year the book *How to Marry a Millionaire* (written by Oksana Robski and Kseniia Sobchak) was published, and the scholar Mikhail Epshtein (2007) proposed "Glamuria" as a new name for the Russian Federation.

Etymological dictionaries trace the origins of the English word "glamour" to Scottish roots centuries older than contemporary celebrity stardom. According to Eric Partridge's *Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, it was an alteration of the

word “grammar” which retained the sense of the older “grammartye”: “magic, occult science” (2006:1284). Nevertheless, the origins of the term remain obscure. Many dictionaries date the word from the consolidation of the Hollywood stardom and show business in the 1930s; the French *Le Robert* translates the term as “*charme*,” referring to the tradition of Hollywood glamour (Rey, Robert, and Rey-Debove 2007). In the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, glamour is however presented as “[m]agic, enchantment, spell. ... A magical or fictitious beauty attaching to any person or object; a delusive or alluring charm.”¹

Oglamurit', a verb that means “to make glamorous,” has been a part of the Russian lexicon for some time. Nevertheless, it is an ambiguous term that may refer to either of the adjectives *glamurnyi* (luxurious, chic) or *glamurnen'kii*² (a diminutive suffix that designates petty style emerging from failed attempts at “authenticity”). In the Russian context, the praxis of *oglamurit'* has to be rooted into the notion of *poshlost'*, a word that presents kitsch, banality, and glamour as related phenomena.

“Kitsch” is described by the Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory as coming from the German *Kitschen* and meaning “to throw together”: “A pejorative term for a work which is of little merit; a mere potboiler; something ‘thrown together’ to gratify popular taste” (Cuddon 1999:444). In earlier years, *poshlost'* was used by the prince and literary critic Dmitri Mirsky and his coauthor Francis Whitfield in reference to the ability of Nikolai Gogol to describe “self-satisfied inferiority, moral and spiritual” (Mirsky and Whitefield 1927:158). Vladimir Nabokov also employed it to communicate derision, encompassing triviality, sexual promiscuity, and a lack of spirituality: “Not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive” (Nabokov 1944:70).

More recently, Russian researcher Svetlana Boym explained that the origin of *poshlost'* has to be traced back beyond the postsocialist era: “Poshlost’ is the Russian version of banality, with a characteristic national flavoring of metaphysics and high morality, and a peculiar conjunction of the sexual and the spiritual. This one word encompasses triviality, vulgarity, sexual promiscuity, and a lack of spirituality. The war against *poshlost'* was a cultural obsession of the Russian and Soviet intelligentsia from the 1860s to 1960s” (Boym 1994:41).

During the first eight years of Vladimir Putin’s presidency the glamorous message soaked everyday life in Russia, becoming a form of social currency that one would strive to acquire through the symbolic exchange of cultural capital (see Goscilo and Strukov 2011). The word *glamur* and its derivatives are linguistic loan words used to describe a phenomenon that had already an older equivalent in Russian: *glianets*, which comes from the German word *Glanz* and describes a shiny quality (Kuznetsov 1998). Thus *glamur* appears as a recent import into Russian vocabulary, and started being widely used in the 1990s in relation to another import, *imidzh* (image). Insofar

¹ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 6th ed.

² In Bakhtinian terms *glamurnen'kii* carries self-referential connotations that demonstrate awareness of cultural discourses, signifying a relationship between the established norm and its subversive subcategories.

as *glamur* conjures up images of something flamboyant and intentionally bombastic, it belongs to the rhetoric of excess in contemporary Russian culture and media.

Glamour arrived in late- and post-Soviet Russia through Western films, soap operas, advertisements, and glossy magazines—predominantly American ones. According to Gundle and Castelli, glamour has evolved in Russia “from an invisible allure that bathed the fortunate and the fashionable into a structure, a product and, above all, a culture with its own history of moments, places, objects and people” (2006:188). Elsewhere, Gundle argues that glamour has lost its original elitist aura becoming “egalitarian, an ideal that almost anyone can share through consumption practices or the media” (2008:4). This egalitarian character is arguable, however. The art curator Keti Chukhrov (2007) describes glamour as being quite the opposite: a reflex of lost equality in Russia, encouraging imitation and consumption.

Russian glamour culture took shape under President Vladimir Putin, and by 2006 it had become one of the hottest topics in the Russian media. The Russian fascination with glamour was so immense that it has arguably become a new ideology, or even “a form of civilization” (Rudova and Menzel 2008:2). By 2006, the columnist Viktoriia Shokhina declared “glamour” to be “the most fashionable word in the Russian vocabulary” (2006:8). And the discursive change of mood was described in the media as “from ‘Gulag Archipelago’ to ‘Glamour Archipelago’” (Bogomolov 2006:125–137). Glamorous personages supplanted artists, musicians, and intellectuals, displacing them from their role of *point de capiton* for the community and negating their role as organizers of an egalitarian space within society (Little 2011).

Under Putin’s rule, the initially negative image of the “new Russians” underwent a transformation—from vulgar and vicious criminals in brightly colored jackets and gold necklaces to a stylish *haute bourgeoisie* who invested in art and clad themselves in expensive Western clothes. In a volume devoted to this phenomenon, editors Larissa Rudova and Brigit Menzel describe the key aspects of the contemporary culture of glamour in Russia: its opulence, gloss, and seductiveness, as well as its social and political underpinnings. They, like the aforementioned commentators, also interpret glamour as an official ideology promoted by the political elite and playing a decisive role in everyday social competition. “Economic success, entertainment and the face-lifted image of Russia in the world go together, while Slavic facial features and Slavic fashion have sold well on the Western beauty market since the fall of communism. Glamour has become a matter of national pride” (Rudova and Menzel 2008:4).

Furthermore, glamour has become a new national ideal in contemporary Russia, based on the fusion of political power, financial success, and a “glamorous authoritarianism” also known as “Putin’s glamour” (*putinskii glamur* [Mesropova 2008]). The phenomenon is explained by Keti Chukhrov in this way: “The state becomes the principal source of growth in economics, business, religion, art, the source of resuscitation in morals, the saviour who will offset entropy, and the bearer of the idea of non-xenophobic, thus civilised, nationalism. Accordingly, the signifiers of luxury, entertainment and glamour are all directed to serve this new entity, the ideological synthesis of all material and ideal values—state glamour” (2007:244).

The presentation of ideology, politics, and power as a glamorous spectacle not only facilitates an overtly positive image of today's Russian politicians and oligarchs, it also marginalizes public consideration of controversial or problematic issues, as the prominent Russian cultural critic Lev Rubinshtein has claimed. Interviewed by Tatyana Tolstaya and Dunia Smirnova on the talk-show *Shkola zlosloviia* (School of scandal) in 2006, Rubinshtein commented that "the current Russian government seems to be saying: 'We have politicians to take care of the thinking and decision making. In the meantime you can—if you have the money—go on vacation in the Canary Islands, and if you don't have the money you can read about other people going to the Canary Islands'" (in Mesropova 2008:13).

Yet glamour is not merely a practice reflecting the current national and political moment; it has its own ontology in the historical context of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. In an article about bestselling author Oksana Robski, Larissa Rudova describes the glamour phenomenon as a reaction to the material and symbolic scarcity experienced by Russians in the recent past: "Toward the end of the millennium, after more than a decade of economic and social *chernukha* in literature, film, and the media, Russian people were ready for a lighter and more cheerful view of the world. Glamour, in its ability to answer popular dreams about the good life, became the antidote to *chernukha* and everyday problems" (2011:1105).³

In sum, *glamur* is a convenient formula that allows today's regime to foster its citizens' nonparticipation, to promote alienation, and to instill apolitical submission to the spectacle of consumption, as described by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967. In his analysis, "being" had declined into a state of "having," and "having" merely meant "appearing." This refers in one sense to a media society organized around the consumption of images, commodities, and spectacles but also to all the means and methods that power employs to keep subjects passive.

PUTIN AS CELEBRITY

The "dead-end situation" that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in many ways led to a condition in which the search for adequate symbolic forms was supplanted by a recycling of prefabricated symbolic constructs. As Serguei Oushakine writes, "The shortage of available symbolic forms was overcome by practically limitless possibilities for their combination. Cultural production was overshadowed by cultural derivation" (2010:420).

Being unable to represent the rapidly changing social system adequately is not the same as being unable to represent it at all. In his seminal work on aphasia, Roman Jakobson demonstrated that the loss of ability to express certain things is always counterbalanced by a certain type of symbolic "compensation" or "substitution," producing, as Lacan put it, "sense ... from non-sense" (1977:157), a "symbolic function" in the process of formation of individual and group identities.

³ "*Chernukha*" (root *chern-* "black"): a slang term related to a representational art style that emphasizes the darkest, bleakest, animalistic, and cruelest aspects of human life. It came into common usage during the perestroika period.

In the Lacanian view, the symbolic order “provides the form into which the subject is inserted at the level of his being” (Lacan 1993:179), taken to signify both the vocabulary of accessible symbols and the linguistic order and social positions that go with them. Social changes thus manifest themselves as discursive changes, as changes of and in language, linguistic structures, and discursive practices, all of which condition subjectivity.⁴

The cultural representation of Putin in the media endorses his image as a virile-paternal figure to the Russian people (Goscilo 2012). Putin has transcended politics to become something of a cult figure in Russia.⁵ Ultimately, this affects what is visible or not in public discourse,⁶ as well as the connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world where they live, and the way they fit in (Rancière 2004). Glamour and the erotic character of the president affect the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable, and the feasible.⁷

“I love Putin, and Putin loves me,” read the T-shirt of a supporter during the big rally held at the Luzhniki stadium one week before the presidential election of 2012. “Putin. First time only for love,” was displayed as the party slogan in a video supporting his candidacy (*The Week* 2012). Putin might proclaim himself to be the richest man in the world because he has collected the emotions of the nation entrusting him with rule. Likewise, the Russian media do not hesitate to discuss Putin’s luxurious Brioni suits, his exclusive Patek Phillipe watches, and his lavish private jet replete with marble floors (Mesropova 2008:12).

⁴ Michel Foucault suggested that subjectivity is not something extraterritorial in relation to the discursive field. Becoming a speaking subject presupposes a certain position (dominant or dominated) and a certain function (production or reproduction of discourse) within this discursive field. According to Foucault, human beings are made subjects via three modes of objectification: linguistic, economic, and physiological. Those dividing practices are implemented in order to separate the subject inside himself and from others, influencing the way we recognize ourselves (Foucault 1982:208).

⁵ Being chosen by “all the Russian People” (Hyla Whittaker 2001), Putin presents himself as an elected monarch. Even in the demonstrations for fair elections the *point de capiton* seems to be not sovereignty but the inefficiency of the regime, described by the anticorruption activist Aleksei Naval’nyi as a regime “of crooks and thieves.”

⁶ Self-censure complements quite effectively the cultlike construction and celebration of glamour. In Russia self-censorship is commonplace, and even the private media is under pressure because of laws against hooliganism, extremism, and pedophilia, and suspiciousness about “foreign agents.” Because of the threat of direct reprisals, Maksim Koval’ksii, chief editor of *Kommersant Vlast’*, was fired after publishing articles denouncing falsifications in the elections and an anti-Putin cover that was deemed offensive. Similarly, Kseniia Sobchak has recently been recast as an opposition figure. Her show “Gosdep” was dropped from the Russian version of music channel MTV after just one episode, when she invited leading anticorruption campaigner Aleksei Naval’nyi. There have also been instances of threats (Diana Khachatryan), physical attacks (e.g., Sergei Aslanian, Oleg Kashin, Anatolii Adamchuk, Elena Milashina), or even murders (Anna Politkovskaya, Hadjimurad Kamalov, Natal’ia Estemirova) of journalists in Russia. For the complete list, see <http://journalists-in-russia.org>.

⁷ Obviously, Vladimir Putin is not aware of every article or TV report, but he and his team are behind the people who decide to run them and to employ certain discourses and terms.

"Let's learn judo with Vladimir Putin," an instructional DVD released in 2008, shows the then-prime minister of Russia shirtless in several cover photos, and is accompanied by an exercise guide for anyone wanting to acquire Putin's physique. Female students from the Moscow State University's school of journalism prepared a calendar celebrating Putin's birthday, in which they posed almost naked saying "Putin, we love you" and "Putin, you're simply the best" (*Huffington Post* 2010).

Among his young supporters, Putin is idolized like a rock star, as we can also see in the documentary film *Putin's Kiss* (Grubstein 2012). The film owes its title to an episode at a youth meeting at which Masha Drokova got up, went over to Putin, and kissed him on the cheek. In the film, a wholesome looking teen from the central Russian city of Tambov becomes attracted to the only active "subculture" as she calls it, which is the local branch of the state-created youth organization Nashi (Ours). Shortly after Masha moves to Moscow, she somewhat mysteriously gets one of the highest positions in the organization. She becomes a spokesperson for the movement, working closely with then-Nashi leader Vasilii Iakemenko and Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov, known as the architect of the centralization of power and the "sovereign democracy" (*Kommersant* 2006).

Michel Foucault makes a distinction between sovereign and governmental power, theorizing the duality of the subject within two different "games" of power relations: the city/citizen game of the Greek *polis* (related to sovereignty) and the Judeo-Christian "shepherd/flock game" (based on Christian love [*agape*] and care of the living) (Foucault 1988; Ojakangas 2005; Prozorov 2007). *Agape* is, in a sense, the implicit foundation of "biopolitics." Such legitimacy, grounded in a "care of subjects," means that the power of the "shepherd" to discipline is posited as a duty—in contrast to political power in the *polis*, which is bestowed as an honor (Prozorov 2007:54–55). This entails that unlike the "city/citizen game," which is inherently preoccupied with the idea of *limits* (to the power of the sovereign, to the freedom of the subject, to the domain of legitimate intervention, etc.), the shepherd/flock game is *limitless* by definition, if only because, since life is everywhere, its politics must necessarily embrace everything (for more on the topic, see Prozorov 2004:267–293).

Once life has been taken as an object of power, the only way to resist is by asserting the "power of life" (in contrast to "power over life"). At this stage, resistance to biopower must entail the *refusal of care*, an attitude of indifference not just to the threat of power but to its loving embrace. As Sergei Prozorov, explains, "one should not *love* power either, neither in the sense of being obsessed with seizing and possessing it nor in the sense of reciprocating its *agape* in the utopia of a 'better' biopolitics. Instead, a Foucauldian strategy of resistance is enabled by an attitude of indifference with regard to power, a refusal to submit to the temptations of possessing it or being cared for by it" (2007:62–63, emphasis in the original).

As remarkable examples of resistance through an attitude of indifference with regard to power, we can refer to the interventions of Voina and Pussy Riot. By reappropriating public spaces, introducing extraordinary elements into ordinary activities, and playing with anonymity and their bodies, these two groups demonstrate the artificiality of political hegemony. Such an achievement is based on an oblique

opposition that rearticulates the love-hate discourse. Interventions such as Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer" (in which they use the love demonstrated to Putin by religious forces to argue for his retirement), the phallus drawn on a bridge near the central station of the FSB in St. Petersburg, or the orgy organized at the Museum of Natural Science in Moscow, all demonstrate the profane potential of bare life.

Foucault (1990) argued that life cannot be totally integrated into the techniques that govern it; it constantly resists their domination. Life must provide an opposition to the operations of hegemonic power precisely because biopolitics depends on life. Foucault found the potential for resistance to domination within the body. His assertion of the pleasures of the body does not refer, however, to pornography or prostitution—rather, it relates to the care of the self and the cultivation of authenticity. In his view, authenticity (understood as self-creation, in contrast to Sartre who presented the self as something which is given to us) threatens any hegemonic order, which reacts by trivializing and marginalizing the defiant. An example of this attempt to trivialize and marginalize the defiant is the "slut" tweet published by deputy Prime Minister Dmitrii Rogozin following Madonna's declaration of support for Pussy Riot and gay rights in Russia. Another is the accusation levied against chess player-turned-politician Garry Kasparov of biting a police officer as he was being detained—an accusation that eclipsed the question of how and why he had been detained in the first place.

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben refers to pornography as a site of political transformation. In his understanding of the logic of pornography, any content, discourse, or political order can be construed as pornographic under certain conditions. "If we look for the truth content of pornography, it immediately displays its artless and insipid claim to happiness. The essential character of this happiness is that it be enactable at any time or place: whatever the initial situation, it must inevitably end up in a sexual relation. A pornographic film, in which by some mischance this did not happen would, perhaps, be a masterpiece but it would no longer be a pornographic film" (Agamben 1995:73–74). In its promise of happiness, pornography displays the "utopia of a classless society," but it does so in a context characterized by "a stubborn insistence on class markings in dress at the very moment that the situation both transgresses and nullifies them in the most incongruous of ways" (73). According to Agamben, social democracy, like pornography, promises the attainment of happiness in the context of existing class relations. Therefore, the truth content of pornography is revealed to be ultimately anecdotal and ephemeral. The second essential characteristic of pornography consists in the necessarily episodic nature of the happiness to which it attests: "It is always a story, a moment seized on, and never a natural condition or something taken for granted" (74). Thus, pornography affirms the potential for happiness at any moment in everyday life, but this happiness is conceived neither as a natural condition of humanity nor as a utopian "everlasting heaven of pleasure" (74) but is rather explicitly presented as anecdotal.

At the moment when pornography brings to maximal visibility the climax of the act it represents, the illusion of authenticity is unveiled and the consumer of

pornography ends up observing nothing but his or her own reflection. As Prozorov points out: “By obstinately displaying the unrepresentable, pornography reveals the ultimate impossibility of combining the two imperatives. The greater the visibility attained in the representation, the more staged, simulated and inauthentic the represented act appears. Conversely, the more ‘real’ the represented act, the lower the degree of its visibility” (2011:83).

As an apparatus of expropriation, pornography represents its objects as unrepresentable, which ensures the impossibility of their experience and use (Prozorov 2011:91). Paradoxically, pornography is distinguished from other forms of erotic representation by the demand for the authenticity of the represented act. The spread of “amateur” genres of pornography should be understood thus as an expression of this “crisis of reality,” whereby the genre that prides itself on bringing the real to maximal visibility begins to depend on technical artifice to assure its audience of the reality of what it represents.⁸

This dichotomy between the visual and the authentic is not totally new in Russia. The anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (2006) explains how Soviet citizens experienced the falsity of official ideology and its symbols at the same time as their immutability and omnipresence. There was no way to counter official slogans, so they were simply ignored. “People, then, did not counter official culture, but played another game: they produced parallel culture within official order. And they simulated support for official ideology by ‘pretense misrecognition’ of the gap between genuine parallel and false official meanings, therefore, the Power was domesticated not by ridicule but by transforming it into an ignorable backdrop for the parallel event” (Yurchak and Boyer 2010:211). In Putin’s Russia however, signs, meanings, and rituals can be ignored—but not the *loving* figure that is behind them.

PEDOPHILIC POP

Two teenage girls kissing each other became Russia’s most successful music export since Shostakovich. They represented Russia in the 2003 Eurovision contest, setting up “Russianness” in the global cultural flow through “pedophilic pop” (for more on this, see Bode and Tolstikova 2006). Back then, most of the publicity focused on the

⁸ The suggested “crisis of reality,” its political abuses, and process of alienation are intimately related to the notion of “society of the spectacle” presented by Guy Debord ([1967] 2006). In the view of the French situationist, the consumer society, with its proliferation of goods and culture industry, offers people the illusory image of happiness and unity strategically created from social exclusions, fragmentations, and compartmentalization. Half a century after the publication of his book, we can see how the accumulation of spectacles has been intensified, evolving into the so-called celebrity culture and its portrayal of lives whose freedom and dazzle suggest the opposite of life. More recently, the French postmodernist Jean Baudrillard has argued that the concept of spectacle has been superseded by a new regime of simulation producing “hyper-reality.” According to him, in this new virtual reality there is no distinction between real and unreal, since roots and meanings were already lost through repetition and trivialization. Simulacra are mere signs and images of the real that come to constitute new experiences and perceptions (the hyper-real) (Baudrillard 1988:166–184).

detailed stage regulations for the physical interactions of the t.A.T.u. singers, and, in the end, a brief kiss in front of the audience was allowed by the organizers.

Producer Ivan Shapovalov (a former child psychiatrist who had also worked in the advertising industry) created the duo t.A.T.u. as “a controversial band with a nontraditional sexual orientation” (Beumers 2005:233). In a much-discussed creation myth, Shapovalov first developed the idea of an “underage sex project,” allegedly getting the idea for the band after browsing porn sites (Walker 2003). Later, Elena Kiper, coauthor and original deputy manager of t.A.T.u., related the band’s concept to her own dreams of kissing a woman and cited *Fucking Åmål*, the Swedish film about teenaged lesbian relationships, as an inspirational source. The name of the band is superficially a reference to tattoo, yet also has a hidden meaning: from the Russian “*ta [liubit] tu*”—this girl loves that girl. Thus, the marketing and packaging of the band itself presents a clear example of “commodity lesbianism” (Bode and Tolstikova 2006).

The examination of pornography and performative sexuality above has to be placed in the historical and ontological context of the post-Soviet transition. Over the course of the last decade, these Russian women intentionally played into male fantasies of “hotness” and used their sexuality as a marketing tool. This state of things stands in contrast to the musical “norms” up to the 2000s—previously, the topic of sex was regarded as lowering a song’s lyrical value in Russian musical traditions (Steinholt 2003:102). Cultural critics such as Artemii Troitskii observed with disappointment that the image of the “hero” in Soviet music was now replaced in modern pop with more trivial issues, pleasing to political authorities (Martínez 2011). Even major personalities of the traditional *estrada* showbiz, such as Alla Pugacheva, now present themselves as teenagers, prompting cries of “vulgarization and sexism” (Shirayev and Danilov 1999:221).⁹

The final Communist leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, opened the floodgates of debate about sex with his policies of perestroika and glasnost. Russia experienced a belated “sexual revolution” that accompanied the democratic waves of the late 1980s and early 1990s. This revolution gathered more speed when Communism collapsed in 1991 and Russia began its dash to capitalism. The sexual “revolution” was not only

⁹ If society traditionally channeled erotic desire through the elaborately regulated and constrained exchange of women as gifts, the great excitement of the whore is that she promises the buyer liberation from all that. Erotic desire and also those forces of fantasy-life that might imagine a better society are then cathected onto commodities (Buck-Morss 1986:120–121). As Walter Benjamin remarks: “Not in vain the relationship of the pimp to his wife, as a ‘thing’ which he sells on the market aroused intensively the sexual fantasies of the bourgeoisie” (1972:436). Benjamin depicted the figure of the whore as an allegory of the transformation of objects, an “attempt to lure sex into the world of things” (1213). Describing the prostitutes’ stroll in Paris, he demonstrated how they were “seller” and “commodity” in one. As a commodity, Benjamin set the whore within the constellations of “exhibition,” “fashion,” and “advertisement”: “The modern advertisement demonstrates ... how much the attraction of woman and commodity can fuse together.... The prostitute does not sell her labor power; instead her trade brings with it the fiction that she is selling her capacity for pleasure” (436–439). As a seller, she mimics the commodity and takes on its allure: the fact that her sexuality is for sale is itself an attraction.

discursive (although that was certainly an important and notable facet of this social shift)—it also had legal and practical implications. Homosexuality between men, banned by Joseph Stalin in 1934, was decriminalized in 1993, and a new criminal code enacted in 1997 redefined rape and the age of consent.

Social silence on the topic of homosexuality came to a rather abrupt end during this time, when “the full signifying potential of homosexuality burst forth in literature, film, art, and the press, as well as in popular medical literature” (Baer 2009:2). Vitaly Chernetsky has described it as an “unprecedented renaissance of textual representation and self-representation of possibly the most stigmatized and oppressed minority group in contemporary Russia: gays and lesbians” (2007:146).

Nevertheless after 2000, conservative-nationalist critics (long upset by these “Western” trends and cultural globalization) denounced this “sexual revolution” as threatening “the nation and the state” (Healey 2010:210). They even argued that homosexuality is a sign of national impotence and abjection.¹⁰ Thus, the newly fashionable love—linked with nationalism and glamour—became an exclusively heterosexual one, albeit with a modicum of commodified sexual openness and experimentation (though not a legitimate political voice).

Queerness has been interpreted through the lens of national identity over the last decade, a fact that is relevant in order to analyze the ideological discourse but is not a uniquely Russian feature. Within public debates and official speeches, queer sexuality is not simply presented as a foreign import, that is, a direct effect of Western influence, but also confirms that “Russia has defined itself *sexually* against what in its view were its historically more developed neighbours in the West and its less developed neighbours in the East” (Baer 2008:6, emphasis in the original).

As Healey explains, “Sexual values became a critical battleground for national regeneration. Conservatives and nationalists turned their attention to Russia’s demographic implosion and prescribed the re-regulation of sexuality. Putin put the rapidly shrinking Russian population on the national agenda and marshaled support in Russia’s parliament, the Duma, to promote family values and to boost marriage and the birthrate, and to stigmatize divorce” (2010:211). This interpretation of a mobilization against queerness, especially when entangled with top-down normative reproductive policies, illuminates the focus and the parameters of how biopower is concentrated and deployed in the service of Putin’s post-Soviet, post-1990s Russian “revival.”

Russian society tends to be repressive when it comes to non-normative sexuality. Class, age, objectification, patriarchy, exaggeration, or sadomasochism seem to be irrelevant when heterosexual preferences are exhibited. However, merely the

¹⁰ In *One Hot Summer in St. Petersburg*, the British author Duncan Fallowell represented homosexuality in post-Soviet Russia as an erotically liberating alternative to Western-style gay identity. His novelistic travel account is the result of time spent in St. Petersburg in the early 1990s when Russian society was undergoing dramatic changes. For Fallowell, who did not speak the local language, Russia appeared a libidinous place, a hallucinatory psychosexual landscape of seething passions, and St. Petersburg is reflected as an “improbable dream city,” “the sexiest town I’ve ever been in.” According to one Russian he meets, “the unconscious is in volcanic eruption here” (Fallowell 1995:299).

demonstration of homosexual and lesbian orientations in a common, relaxed, and naturalistic way (even when not explicitly referring to sex) upsets a great part of Russian society. Queerness is thus reduced to pure deviancy and any attempt to show authenticity related to these preferences is strongly repressed.

One example of this heteronormativity can be found in the slang term used for “straight”: *natural*. Despite homosexuality having been removed from the official list of clinical pathologies by the Russian Psychiatric Association in 1999, it is still common to hear homosexuality referred to as “abnormal love” (*nenormal’naia liubov’*) and heterosexuals as “normal people” (*normal’nye liudi*) (Healy 2001). As Baer points out, “The association of homosexuality with abnormality has in Russia produced its own logic, according to which homosexuals are capable of all kinds of abnormal activities because homosexuality itself is abnormal. In other words, homosexuality becomes a repository for virtually anything considered to be outside the norm” (2009:9). Though this association with abnormality creates further stigma, it also locates homosexuality as a potentially radical, generative political “space,” which, in turn, necessitates further repression.

During historical moments when homosexuality was granted visibility, it was done in order to make it available to surveillance and control, which would render it invisible once again—thus creating a dialectic of visibility and repression. Only during perestroika was queerness able to blossom alongside other deviant behaviors and nonconformist identities. Analogously, Putin’s government aimed to silence public discourses on queerness, in this case by cultivating a limited, domesticated visibility. As explained above, this pornographication of queerness produces not only the marginalization of deviant behaviors and repression of cultural alternatives, but also imposes a certain cohesion within society, *freezing* the conservative political discourse.

An example is the gay parade controversy that erupts every springtime in Moscow. Former Mayor Iurii Luzhkov and the Russian Orthodox Church even deemed the march to be “satanic” and against Russian mores, and Moscow City Hall has consistently banned the event since 2006. In May 2007, Pride marchers were even assaulted by nationalist and religious zealots and arrested by police (Healey 2008:2). “We’re somehow not doing something right: you can’t drink, you can’t smoke, but we’re allowing gay parades,” asserted Oleg Malyshkin, deputy of the State Duma (Repov and Fufyrin 2007).

At the time of writing, a law condemning any debate about homosexuality is being approved in St. Petersburg’s Legislative Assembly, and similar bills were passed in the Riazan Oblast in 2006 and in Arkhangelsk in 2011. In November 2011, Valentina Matvienko, then chairwoman of Russia’s Federation Council and a former St. Petersburg governor, proposed that “promoting homosexuality” should be outlawed throughout the entire country. According to the text of the bill, the aim is to stop “promoting sodomy, lesbianism, bi-sexuality and transgenderism to minors” (Chernov 2012). And, in a rapid Foucauldian cycle of sorts, in 2011 the gay parade was first authorized (on April 27) and then quickly prohibited (May 17), demonstrating that the visibility of gay identity movements is still determined on the level of state policy.

COCKTAIL CONSERVATISM

In the present Russian political constellation, “conservatism” is less a name for a stable hegemonic configuration than a designator of the field of political struggle in which Putin appears always as a nodal point (Prozorov 2004). The linguist Mikhail Kochkin laments the eclecticism of this discourse as a “cocktail” of both liberal-reformist and outright “chauvinist” ideas, mixed with “religious-mystical rhetoric, traditionalism, isolationism and a conviction that the interests of the state should take priority over the interests of the individual” (2003).

In the course of Putin’s first presidential term, “conservatism”—political, social, and sexual—became a privileged mode of political self-identification within Russian hegemonic discourse. Yet, in accordance with a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as a *system of dispersion*, the conservative mode was purposely fractured into two antagonistic strands, identified by their practitioners as *liberal* and *left conservatism*. Whilst the liberal conservative orientation supports and sustains a *depoliticizing* project (ordering and stabilizing the effects of the anticommunist revolution), left conservatism functions in the modality of *radical opposition* to the Putinist political party, which is fluctuating between both sides thereby contributing to an illusory pluralization of political opinion.

As the Russian political analyst Gleb Pavlovskii (2000) pointed out, within the terrain of conservatism Putin “simply can’t be opposed.” This notion of *liberal conservatism* also permits a more nuanced understanding of the overall character of the Putinist project, depicted by Viacheslav Morozov (2010) as “managed democracy.” It is indeed possible to conceive of the Putin presidency in terms of the “end of transition”—a change from the political assertion of liberalism in the anticommunist revolution to its depolitization as the foundation of a new order (*post-postcommunist*), defined no longer against Soviet history but the revolutionary turmoil of perestroika.¹¹

The liberal conservatism of the presidency is thus “conservative” in a conventional sense, seeking to simultaneously stabilize the gains of the postcommunist revolution and do away with the “revolutionary disposition”—with its flux, contingency, and unfounded decisions. At first glance, liberal conservatism paradoxically exemplifies both the *success* of the revolution and its ultimate *betrayal* disavowing the contingent origins of the emergence of the present regime (Prozorov 2004). And yet, it is precisely this depolitization brought about by the Putinist project that was challenged in the course of Putin’s first term by a discourse that also sought to reclaim the mantle of conservatism—this time as a designator of a domesticated *opposition* to the presidency. Furthermore, the slogan of sovereign democracy promoted by some high-level ideologues in the Kremlin is dismantled by Morozov (2008) in this way: on the one hand, the ruling power accepts democracy as the universal frame in which politics takes place, but on the other hand, they insist on the Russian nation’s sovereign right to define for themselves what democracy means and which institutions are best suited to express the will of the Russian people.

¹¹ See Magun (2003) for the philosophical treatment of the problematic of the postcommunist revolution.

During his presidential term, Dmitrii Medvedev reiterated that paternalistic attitudes constitute one of the main obstacles to modernization. The inability of many people to take their fate into their own hands was narrated as a “problem” for both democratization and economic development. For instance, in the article “Forward, Russia!” Medvedev (2010) insisted that the twenty-first century belongs to “the educated, intelligent ... complex person who ... does not need leaders, patrons or others to make decisions for him [or her].” But who is the subject thus defined? Eventually, Medvedev is prepared to grant autonomy only to good members of civil society. For him, it is imperative to promote “high culture,” including “political and legal culture,” the culture of “social interactions,” and the culture of “civil dialogue.” The “low level of culture,” on the other hand, goes together with “intolerance, irresponsibility, and aggressiveness,” which “destroy democracy” (Morozov 2010). People of “high culture” are those who behave according to the rules, while all those who, for instance, stage unauthorized protests are classified as barbarians (see Morozov 2010:2–4).

The implication, of course, is that it is up to the state to differentiate between civilized and noncivilized forms of political activity and thus to decide which of them are to be supported and which suppressed. Likewise, citizens who benefit from a range of opportunities and freedoms must take on more responsibilities—becoming “good” subjects. Such logic weds political power to the aforementioned biopower, as the range of “political” activities and the categories of “good subject” formation include everything from political protests to sexual behavior.

Ironically, such a strategy effectively mobilizes nostalgia about the Soviet Union, being intimately integrated into a new Russian patriotism. “Soviet” as a symbolic category here loses its historical specificity becoming part of a common cultural heritage. This happens not as a restoration but as a neutralization of the past, which becomes an object fostering either “positive” or “negative” identification. As the Russian scholar Ilya Kalinin points out, this future projected by modernization “does not signify a return to the past, but rather the use of the past as a constructed horizon of memory that calls for us to be worthy of it.... Behind the populist rhetoric of [Medvedev’s] *Forward, Russia!* lies a concealed call finally to establish a relationship of inheritance, joining in an organic (but limited) manner the Soviet and post-Soviet generations” (2011:163–164).

In the construction of this continuity exclusion plays a crucial role. It is the experience of injustice that makes people willing to join in a community even if their basic tastes, ideals, or views are not shared (Aronson 2007). The ultimate example of this is contemporary Russia, where the political opposition has drawn together members from very different ideologies with only one point in common: dissatisfaction with the ruler. Putinism was able to tactically merge sovereignty and biopower over many years. However, *agape* (or care of citizens) has been progressively degraded and the new generation deploys a more critical approach to politics. The change in the nature of the government did not happen, therefore, after a “metamorphosis” but via the exhausted character of the biopolitical system itself.

Several subversive actions, profane artistic interventions, and social protests demonstrate that Russian society has awakened from their love of Putin and that the

social contract with Putinism is over. Increasingly, voices of dissent articulate conditions grounded in expectations of sovereignty, not *agape*. Love can only be *absolute*, and a social contract established on love permits no resistance—"the measure of love is love without measure" (Caputo 2000:183). In such a case, love evolves into pornography: an expropriation of the potentiality for change, a surplus reality without content, and a ubiquitous visibility that communicates but does not care. Moreover, *agape*—if it ever existed as such—has shifted into *eros*, substituting altruism and sociality for physical attraction and possession.

Machiavelli's *Prince* poses the question of whether it be better to be loved or feared. During most of his rule, Vladimir Putin has been able to command both fear and love. Photo ops that feature him riding a horse naked from the waist up, torso prominently displayed, or "finding" an amphora in barely three meters of clear water are transparent cultivations of his macho sex appeal. Other attempts to boost Putin's image as virile include photos of him arm wrestling, hunting, riding a motorcycle, or fitting a collar onto a tranquilized polar bear. This celebration of virility has been constantly repeated in the Russian media, and Putin has even been nominated as the country's sex symbol (A. 2012). However this combination of two affects, love and fear, cannot last forever and cracks have arisen on the side of love, already trivialized as pornography.

This pornographic becoming of Putin's regime has evolved through an ontological cult of glamour, the physical oppression of deviancy, and the cooptation of the symbolic frame as part of a strategy prompted in order to impose a stable hegemony. During his first two terms as president, Putin balanced on the nodal point of conservatism in order to freeze and control the political spectrum in Russia. However, that balance appears to have been jettisoned after liberals began to desert him, with protesters taking to the streets and high-ranking figures—such as his former finance minister Aleksei Kudrin—joining the dissenters (Fisher 2012). As a consequence, in his new presidential term, Putin has progressively turned to the more conservative elements of society. The clear visibility of the pornographic character of the regime has awaked Russian society from the loving illusion of Putinism. The consequent reaction (after the social disinfatuation) has cornered the ideological discourse in a nationalist and conservative rhetoric. Trapped in a spiral of growing exclusion of communities and rising oppression, the all-loving power loses any possible legitimacy and becomes unstable.

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ЭРОТИЧЕСКАЯ БИОВЛАСТЬ ПУТИНИЗМА: ОТ ГЛАМУРА ДО ПОРНОГРАФИИ

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Работа над этим эссе оказалась длительным процессом, в ходе которого некоторые части текста были переписаны и обновлены. Благодаря терпению и рекомендациям редакторов была создана финальная версия эссе.

В настоящей работе автор пытается показать, что доминирование гламура в России и преследование квир-сексуальности принадлежит к одной и той же стратегии нормализации, которая, в свою очередь, направлена одновременно на замораживание идеологического дискурса и актуализацию консервативных оснований. Отслеживая появление термина «гламур» в российском контексте и подвергая его дискурс-анализу, автор рассуждает о том, как прославление одних сексуальных практик и исключение других ограничивает территорию символических альтернатив. В результате изучение такого явления, как «гламур» в постсоветской России, показывает, как артикулируется гегемония и какие силы приводят в движение позиционность субъекта в постсоветском официальном дискурсе.

Ключевые слова: путинизм; квир-практики; гламур; порнография; российский консерватизм