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**Queer Art of the Russian Avant-Garde**

*Homosexual Desire and Gender Subversion in Russian Art  
Before and After the 1917 Revolution*

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Leiðbeinandi: Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, dósent

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in Russian Art Before and After the 1917 Revolution

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Dedicated to Gay Putin.

## **Abstract**

This thesis analyses the role of sexual deviance and gender dissent in the Russian avant-garde movement. It asks what kind of role dissenting sexualities played in the movement's history and how they influenced its revolutionary aesthetics. The answer is formed by studying different visual themes such as homosexual desire, androgyny and gender subversion before and after the October Revolution in 1917. Foucault's conceptualization on the history of modern sexuality and central writings in queer theory animate the study's critical framework. At the beginning of 20th century, Russian art experienced a brief moment of interest towards queer subjects which has been previously documented by art historians. This thesis argues that themes of same-sex love and androgyny did not disappear from the avant-garde after the Revolution but rather acquired new forms of expression in line with the language of leftist and socialist realist art. Queer subjectivity acquired a subversive quality after the Revolution with the potential to challenge authoritarian rule through presentation. It argues that the significance of sexuality and gender has been ignored in the canonical narration of the movement's history. Furthermore, the thesis argues that the expression of queer sexualities formed an integral part of the Russian avant-garde and without their consideration its radical aesthetics cannot be fully understood.

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# 1 Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century a queer disposition of homosexual desire and gender ambiguity swept through the evolving Russian avant-garde movement. The interest in subverting traditional models of sexuality coincided with the ongoing political and social upheaval of Tsarist Russia. Russian artists were ready to tap into the creative enthusiasm of sexual exploration, capturing the curious zeitgeist in art works which transgressed traditional gender binaries. Despite the initial prominence of alternative sexualities, their bloom in the Russian avant-garde remained short-lived. As the movement continued to progress towards abstraction and visual experimentation, queer visibility blended in with its revolutionary language.

This thesis argues that sexual otherness and gender subversion constituted an integral part of the Russian avant-garde, a movement in modern art which was driven by the desire to push the lines of normativity. It analyses the prevalence and significance of queer representation and identities in the Russian avant-garde before and after the Revolution of 1917. What kind of role did dissenting sexualities play in the movement's history and how did they influence its revolutionary aesthetics? In order to answer these questions, varying examples of gender subversion and homosexual desire are taken under inspection in an attempt to create an open-ended and diverse narrative.

According to Michel Foucault, sexuality is a socio-political construct specific to time and culture.<sup>1</sup> Relying on Foucault's theory, the thesis traces the historical background of the Russian avant-garde which gave rise to its uniquely revolutionary, "queer" aesthetic. At the beginning of the 20th century rapid industrialisation and urbanisation were transforming the structures of Russian society. After 1905, relaxation of censorship as well as the emerging hopes of political participation gave rise to new discourses amongst the educated. The conceptualisation of modern sexuality had started to take shape through medical and legal descriptions. According to the historian Laura Engelstein, modern discourses on sex and gender were received and absorbed, but also rejected and adapted in Tsarist Russia.<sup>2</sup> Homosexuality was legalised after the Revolution in 1918 by the Bolsheviks, and remained so until the Stalinist regime outlawed same-sex relationships in 1934. Interestingly, themes of homosexual desire and gender subversion were most visible in avant-garde art before the

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 9.

Bolshevik legalisation.<sup>3</sup> A totalitarian interpretation has argued that the Revolution eradicated the queer element from art, while more recent studies on the subject of homosexuality in the early soviet culture suggest a more complex story. This study proposes that the queer visibility of the pre-revolutionary era did not end in 1917 but rather morphed into subjects in accordance with leftist ideology. It also proposes that queer desire did not disappear with the avant-garde's sudden metamorphosis into socialist realism.

The history of queer visibility and the Russian avant-garde has been little researched. Academic studies on the role of homosexuality and gender subversion in the movement's history usually emphasise the period of Russian Silver Age.<sup>4</sup> In order to create a more comprehensive image on the history of queer avant-garde, this thesis analyses aspects of queer visibility throughout the movement's four decades of existence. It employs queer theory as its critical framework, which presents an unmethodical critique of normative models of sex, gender and sexuality.

Queer theory emerged in the early 1990's from various contexts representing both academic and activist backgrounds. It is informed by poststructuralist notions of critique and feminism, animated by gay subcultures and LGBTQ+ political activism. According to Donald E. Hall and Annmarie Jagose, the objective of a queer theoretical analysis is to "clear a space for thinking differently about the relations presumed to pertain between sex/gender and sex/sexuality, between sexual identities and erotic behaviours, between practices of pleasure and systems of sexual knowledge."<sup>5</sup> In other words, it approaches the subject from an alternative perspective questioning the intrinsic meanings of gender and sex.

The term *queer* is employed in order to facilitate the description of visual elements which cannot and should not be categorized consistently. "Queer art of the Russian avant-garde" provides an umbrella concept under which various different art works and artists loosely connected by their differing standpoints to dominant representations of sexuality and gender are gathered. The meaning of "queer" as defined by contemporary queer theorists provides necessary open-endedness to art historical interpretation. It does not simply signify same-sex object choice, but refers to the meaning and possibilities of dissonant sexualities

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Karlinsky, "Russia's Gay Literature and Culture: The Impact of the October Revolution," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Dubermann et al. (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 357.

<sup>4</sup> 'Russian Silver Age' refers to the period in Russian literature and art from the late 1890's until the late 1910's. John E. Bowl, *Moscow and St. Petersburg in Russia's Silver Age* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Donald E. Hall and Annmarie Jagose, introduction to *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, ed. Donald E. Hall and Annmarie Jagose (New York: Routledge, 2013), xv.

and gender at large.<sup>6</sup> The word “queer” enables a shift in perspective with the potential to discover a visual meaning otherwise left hidden. Furthermore, “queer”, functioning both as an adjective and noun, allows the discussion of historical art works without the necessity of posthumously “outing” anyone in the process. Ascribing an identity label to artists living a hundred years ago would be historically inaccurate, since terms such as homosexual or lesbian were only emerging in the contemporary sexual discourse. If the history of Russia is known for its “blank spots”, homosexuality makes no exception in the country’s list of omitted subjects. Since it is near impossible to gain any historical certainty on the sexual preferences of avant-garde artists, the thesis concentrates on analysing visual language with the potentiality to subvert oppressive sexual and gender hierarchies instead of labelling individuals. According to Kosofsky Sedgwick, the term queer can refer to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”<sup>7</sup> The queer theorist Lee Edelman defines the world in terms of negativity: “queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one.”<sup>8</sup> Respectively, queer art history refers to a plurality of destabilizing aesthetics with subversive value in relation to the canon.

The thesis is constructed non-linearistically, by discussing different themes related to and arising from a visual queer presence. The first half introduces the theoretical basis for a critical analysis. It describes Foucault’s theory on sexuality, introduces the conceptualisations of significant queer scholars, as well as accounts the history of homosexuality in revolutionary Russia to the reader. The second half of the thesis analyses the “queer art” of the Russian Avant-garde, beginning from the Silver Age and arriving to socialist realism. The theoretical basis of the first half is employed in analysing the chosen themes from cross-dressing and androgyny to homosocial and homosexual desire.

## 1.1 The Russian Avant-Garde

“Artists of the world, disunite!”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Donald E. Hall and Annmarie Jagose, xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1985), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and Death Drive*. (London: Duke University Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>9</sup> V. Karatygin, “M. Reger”, *Zolotoe Runo*, no. 2 (1906), 97, [https://rusneb.ru/catalog/003673\\_000052\\_01BEFC8B-A6DE-4900-BAA0-AA07C89F9812/](https://rusneb.ru/catalog/003673_000052_01BEFC8B-A6DE-4900-BAA0-AA07C89F9812/).

The period between 1890 and 1930 represents the culmination of creative innovation in the history of Russian visual arts known as the avant-garde. The movement's origin can be traced back to the artistic achievements in the middle of the nineteenth century which enabled the emergence of Russian modernism. According to art historian John E. Bowlt, the 1850's represent a pivotal moment in Russian culture which divided the visual arts into the "classical" and "modern" eras.<sup>10</sup> Up until this time, The Imperial Academy of Fine Arts located in St. Petersburg had dictated the style of easel painting according to neoclassical ideals. Russian academism was devoid of indigenous culture, relying dutifully on the canons of classical antiquity and Western masters. Technical skill and ecclesiastical subjects represented the ideal in painting. By the 1850's however, the rigidity of 'salon art' was becoming increasingly morbid in the eyes of art students interested in depicting the contemporary social reality around them. The transformation happening inside the academy reflected the growing demand for change in Russian society at large. In the 1860's, Tsar Alexander II launched a series of reforms intended to modernise the country. The Great Reforms liberated the serfs, relaxed censorship, reformed the juridical system, and laid the basis for local self-government.<sup>11</sup> The political and social atmosphere gave rise to the Wanderers [Peredvizhniki], an artistic group interested in depicting reality instead of concentrating on pure aestheticism. The realist movement of the Wanderers came to dominate the progressive art scene in Russia from 1870 to 1880's, existing in relative isolation from the West. The group's social and political affinities made the Wanderers inseparable from their Russian context, disconnecting them stylistically from the formal inventiveness of modernists in the West. The dominance of the Wanderers combined with their indifference towards Western European artistic trends partially explains the anachronistic recognition of French Impressionism in Russia during the late 1890's.<sup>12</sup> The Wanderers' eventual decline was inscribed in the aesthetic ideals held by the group: the emphasis on critical observation of the surrounding society inadvertently discouraged individuality and spirituality.<sup>13</sup> According to Bowlt, in the end "the Wanderers neglected the picture as an independent work of art."<sup>14</sup> This led to an eventual artistic impasse among the group, calling for a stylistic resuscitation by the 1890's in Russian art.

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<sup>10</sup> John. E, Bowlt, introduction to *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), 17.

<sup>11</sup> Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Bowlt, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Bowlt, 19.

The rapid industrialization of Russia in the 1860's directly influenced the country's native art as peasants relocated to towns for employment, abandoning traditional methods of art making. In order to preserve the nation's cultural heritage, industrialists and wealthy aristocrats took over the task of patronising the arts. The most influential of them all was Savva Mamontov, a fervent admirer of Russian peasant art and the work of the British arts and crafts founder William Morris (1834-1896).<sup>15</sup> Mamontov was the founder of the famous Abramtsevo estate, which hosted many Russian fin-de-siècle artists and nurtured a culture of knowledge in various fields of arts, crafts and design. The convergence of industry and art promoted by the artists of Abramtsevo laid the aesthetic foundation for the dynamic designs of avant-garde's heyday.<sup>16</sup>

According to John E. Bowlt, "the last decade of the 19th century was a time of tension and search in all areas of Russian art."<sup>17</sup> After the flagrant injustice of serfdom had been abolished, gender relations and sexuality emerged as political and social issues in Russia.<sup>18</sup> On the threshold of the 20th century, the conflict between personal autonomy and conventional social relations became the new embodiment of domination and submission. In art, a new school was emerging interested to study the aspects of individuality and subjectivity: The World of Art group [Mir Isskustva] led by Alexandre Benois (1870-1960) and Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929) which sparked a new era in culture under the doctrine "art for art's sake".<sup>19</sup> The movement shared similarities with English and European Art Nouveau, as well as the French Nabi group in its transitional role from impressionism to symbolism and abstract art.<sup>20</sup> Although not an avant-garde group per se, the group's aesthetics had a profound impact on the following generation of Russian modernists.<sup>21</sup>

The World of Art group had a major cultural influence in the Russian visual arts through its journal and exhibitions, as well as by developing constructive art critique.<sup>22</sup> The objective of its founders was not only to create an artistic society with cosmopolitan tastes, but to provide an international exhibition platform and to publish a magazine by the same

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<sup>15</sup> Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Bowlt, 20.

<sup>17</sup> John E. Bowlt, "The Blue Rose Movement and the Russian Symbolist Painting", PhD diss., (University of St. Andrews, 1975), 85.

<sup>18</sup> Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986), 37.

<sup>21</sup> Bowlt, "The Blue Rose Movement and the Russian Symbolist Painting", 85.

<sup>22</sup> Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 21.

name.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the Wanderers, the World of Art group eagerly directed its gaze towards the West as they promoted cultural universality through collaboration and joint exhibitions with Western contemporaries.<sup>24</sup> Like Benois and Diaghilev, the founding members of the group came from the Western leaning Russian intelligentsia of St. Petersburg.<sup>25</sup> One of the main objectives of the group was to develop the artistic consciousness in Russia by introducing both foreign and Russian contemporary artists to the Russian cultural elite.<sup>26</sup> The magazine World of Art published illustrations ranging from English Art Nouveau, French post-impressionism and German modernism side-by-side with Russian contemporary artists.<sup>27</sup> Besides introducing European art in Russia, the group's goal was also to make Russian artists known abroad. The Russian section in the Salon d'Automne exhibition in 1909 was organised by Diaghilev and marked an important turn in the visibility of Russian arts in Europe. As an effect of the group's influence on the tastes of high-society, a culture of art collecting emerged amongst the Russian bourgeoisie. Especially the entrepreneur Sergei Shchukin's vast contemporary art collection introduced Russian artists to the French impressionist and post-impressionist schools.<sup>28</sup> The works of Matisse, Cézanne, Gauguin and Picasso among other European modernists had a profound effect on the avant-garde the years to follow.

The World of Art movement's major contribution to the avant-garde was their wholehearted aspiration to synthetism which continued to define Russian art during the first quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> With the emergence of competing artistic groups and the gradual demise of fin-de-siècle decadence by the end of 1910's, The World of Art gradually lost its dominance in the Russian art scene. Meanwhile, the representation of queer sexualities and gender play continued to flourish within the creative world of theatre, such as the Ballets Russes. The influential dance company was founded in 1909 as a Diaghilev's spin-off project, continuing in the aesthetic footsteps of the World of Art. It became an important delegate for Diaghilev in his aspirations for recognition of the Russian art scene in Western Europe.<sup>30</sup> The group's decorative aesthetics created by the World of Art members became known in the designs of theatre sets, costumes, and programme illustrations.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Gray, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Gray, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Gray, 37.

<sup>26</sup> Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922*, 40.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>29</sup> Bowl, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 54.

Influenced by the symbolist literary movement, the search for spirituality and individuality characterised the World of Art's designs. The members of the group worked in various projects from fine art to graphic design, costumes, book illustration and theatre. The philosopher Vladimir Solovyov's eccentric theories on gender and sexuality echoed in the group's infatuation with the eternal feminine and the androgyne.<sup>32</sup> The group subscribed to the Art Nouveau aesthetic and admired especially the sexually ambiguous works of Audrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde.<sup>33</sup> The influential ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (1890-1950) epitomised the decadent aesthetic of androgyny, provoking both controversy as well as admiration for his modern performances.<sup>34</sup> The group's tolerant attitudes towards dissident sexualities (many of the artists and writers associated with The World of Art movement engaged discreetly in homosexual relationships, most notably Diaghilev himself<sup>35</sup>) explains why much of the gender-bending visuality of turn-of-the-century Russia can be traced back to it.

From World of Art grew the symbolist Blue Rose [Golubaya Roza] group, active between 1904 and 1908.<sup>36</sup> According to John. E. Bowlt, "...it was with the Blue Rose that the Russian avant-garde really began"<sup>37</sup>. The Blue Rose was a collective of sixteen artists who shared the fin-de-siècle zeitgeist of pessimism, religious mysticism and escapism, aiming towards a spiritual reality in their delicate but distorted art works.<sup>38</sup> Their soft blues and grey-greens became the trademark of the symbolist movement, who besides French post-impressionism were fascinated by the work of Victor Borisov-Musatov (1870-1905) and Mihail Vrubel (1856-1810). The art literature journal *Golden Fleece* [Zolotoe Runo] became an important platform for the Blue Rose group, which continued in the Francophile footsteps of the *World of Art* magazine. The Blue Rose artists together with the aesthetic influence of the *Golden Fleece* represent an important phase in the formation of the avant-garde, paving the way towards neo-primitivism and the increasingly dynamic representation of form, mass and colour.

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<sup>32</sup> Bowlt, "The Blue Rose Movement", 73.

<sup>33</sup> Annabel Rutherford, "The Triumph of the Veiled Dance: The Influence of Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley on Serge Diaghilev's Creation of the Ballets Russes," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 27, no. 1 (2009): 93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40264008>.

<sup>34</sup> Penny Farfan, "Man as Beast: Nijinsky's Faun," *South Central Review* 25, no. 1 (2008): 74, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40040020>.

<sup>35</sup> Engelstein, 388.

<sup>36</sup> Bowlt, "The Blue Rose Movement", 6.

<sup>37</sup> Bowlt, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 23.

With the decline of the World of Art group, the avant-garde's centre of gravity shifted from St. Petersburg towards Moscow.<sup>39</sup> Emerging avant-garde artists were now arriving from rural backgrounds in a stark contrast to the aristocratic stratum of Diaghliev's circle.<sup>40</sup> Women artists however did not follow this trend towards provincialism, due to gender inequalities in independence that only the privileged could bend. Between 1909 and 1911 Moscow became a hotspot for the most revolutionary movements in European art.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, The Union of Youth [Soyuz Molodyozhi] artist association (1909-1917) continued to represent the avant-garde scene in St. Petersburg. Cubism from Paris, the 'Künstlervereinigung' of the future 'Blaue Reiter' from Munich, and the Futurism of Marinetti laid an impact on the aesthetics of Russian artists.<sup>42</sup> However, the influence of Western European styles varied to a degree and was always interpreted in the Russian context.<sup>43</sup> Futurism in Russia and Italy for example, were united by hardly anything but name.<sup>44</sup> From the international melting pot of aesthetic ideas emerged Russian Cubo-Futurism, the immediate predecessor of abstract painting which arose in Russian art between 1911 and 1921.

From 1908 to 1912, neoprimitivism became the dominating art style of the Russian avant-garde.<sup>45</sup> Whereas portraiture had been almost absent in the works of the Blue Rose, it became popular again with the surge of neoprimitivism. The new aesthetic style drew inspiration from the colours and line work of signboards and *lubok* wood carvings, finding affinity in the uncomplicated realm of naïve art.<sup>46</sup> Typical to neoprimitivism was the flattening of figures, distorted perspective, saturated colours and thick or coloured in outlines; this visual reduction favoured by neoprimitivism set off the eventual process towards abstraction within the avant-garde. The influence of French modernists from Cézanne to Gauguin etc., is palpable in neoprimitivism.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, Western influences divided young artists in Moscow, inciting a counter reaction protective of Russian cultural heritage. In 1911, the newly established Knave of Diamonds [Bubnovyi Valet] group was split into

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<sup>39</sup> Bowlt, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Bowlt, 24.

<sup>41</sup> Gray, 81.

<sup>42</sup> Gray, 81.

<sup>43</sup> Bowlt, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Gray, 94.

<sup>45</sup> Bowlt, 25.

<sup>46</sup> Bowlt, 25.

<sup>47</sup> Bowlt, 25.

“French” and “Russian” fractions due to the dispute over foreign influences.<sup>48</sup> The artist couple, Mihail Larionov (1881-1964) and Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962), were founding members of the separatist group ‘Donkey’s Tail’. Both Larionov and Goncharova fervently opposed foreign aesthetic influences of the Munich school<sup>49</sup> to the ‘Paris Cézannists,’ which were predominant among the Knave of Diamonds members. The objective of the group was to establish an independent Russian school of art which would not be indebted to European modernism but able to stand on its own.<sup>50</sup> While the Knave of Diamonds society continued on their academic path, the artists of Donkey’s Tail expanded the aesthetics of the Russian avant-garde by developing cubo-futurism, rayonism and suprematism in the coming years. Knave of Diamonds on the other hand, which held a cohesive front until 1918, remained “at the stage before nonpresentation”<sup>51</sup> and never abandoned figurative representation despite their cubist influences. While the Russian avant-garde is largely known for the progress towards abstraction, it was by no means the aesthetic objective of all artists and groups of the post 1910 era.<sup>52</sup>

The Russian avant-garde’s queer tendency to subvert the approved order of things reached its heights during the years before the revolution. The “Exhibition of Painting. 1915” organized in Moscow illustrates the sometimes rumbustious atmosphere of the avant-garde shaking tradition and aesthetic dogma. It featured works from a diverse group of avant-garde artists, such as Goncharova and Larionov, Natan Altman, Vladimir Tatlin and Kasimir Malevich. However, their contributions were overshadowed by the sensational scandalism provided by the futurists, as “The Burliuks hung up a pair of trousers and stuck a bottle to them;...Mayakovsky exhibited a top hat that he had cut in two and nailed two gloves next to it... Kamensky asked the jury persuasively to let him exhibit a live mouse in a mousetrap...”<sup>53</sup> In spite of the apparent chaos, The Exhibition of Painting. 1915 pinpointed into two separate aesthetic directions which would come to define the final years of the movement: one towards volume and the other towards plane.<sup>54</sup> As pointed out by Camilla

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<sup>48</sup> Bowlt, 26.

<sup>49</sup> Refers to the Neue Künstlervereinigung München (1909-1912), as well as the successor Der Blaue Reiter (1911-1914) formed around Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944).

<sup>50</sup> Gray, 133.

<sup>51</sup> Gray, 133.

<sup>52</sup> Gray, 28.

<sup>53</sup> Aristarkh Lentulov, “Avtobiografiya,” *Sovetskie khudozhniki*, vol. 1, (Moscow, 1937), 161, quoted in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 30.

<sup>54</sup> Bowlt., 30.

Gray, the war-time, pre-revolutionary avant-garde scene in Russia was defined by an irony reminiscent of the Dada movement centred in Zurich at the time.<sup>55</sup>

The revolution in 1917 influenced Russian art immediately in two ways; by demolishing all previously existing cultural groupings and by offering leftist currents the advantage of governmental approval.<sup>56</sup> Avant-garde artists, who had been the face of cultural resistance, were now being recognized by the revolution, and consequently taking offices in administrative and pedagogical positions within the new government.<sup>57</sup> The appointments were a part of the implementation of leftist cultural dictatorship tightly wrapping art in the arms of totalitarian ideology. Established art schools and institutions were reorganised under radical premises while exhibitions and art works became run and collected by the state.<sup>58</sup> However, the broad artistic tolerance towards any kind of leftist art soon led to conflicts among artists. During the early days of the revolution, in a conference held in Petrograd by art students, the consensus was that “art and artists should be absolutely free in every manifestation of their creativity...art affairs are the affairs of artists themselves...”<sup>59</sup> Their resolution did not prevent the ideological disputes on the direction of leftist art and the different fractions which soon arose among artists. Some promoted Communist futurism [Komfut] as others believed in the creation of truly proletarian art by the proletariat itself [Proletkult]<sup>60</sup>. The underlying theoretical obscurity on the role of art in the newly established socialist society, as well as the lack of materials, led to artists turning their attention towards mass activities from street decoration to design between 1918 and 1920.<sup>61</sup>

Since the outbreak of war in 1914, the Russian avant-garde had existed in relative isolation from Western Europe.<sup>62</sup> After lifting of the economic blockade in 1921 imposed by the Allies, international contacts with Russia resumed. The surge of constructivism in Russia was linked with similar movements in Western Europe, especially those in Germany. The magazine *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* was the first post-war, international and multilingual platform to bring together Russian constructivism and European functionalism.<sup>63</sup> Another important event marking the return of the Russian avant-garde to the European art scene was

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<sup>55</sup> Gray, 215.

<sup>56</sup> Bowlt, 32.

<sup>57</sup> Bowlt, 32.

<sup>58</sup> Bowlt, 32.

<sup>59</sup> Bowlt, 33.

<sup>60</sup> Bowlt, 32.

<sup>61</sup> Bowlt, 36.

<sup>62</sup> Gray, 274.

<sup>63</sup> Gray, 274.

the great exhibition of abstract art organised in Berlin and Amsterdam in 1922 by the Van Diemen Gallery.<sup>64</sup> The exhibition marked the first time the period of the Russian avant-garde was presented as a coherent entity, from the works of the ‘World of Art’ to the latest abstract paintings previously unseen in the West. Conversely, European trends in design and architecture became known in Russia in the 1920’s and 1930’s through periodicals such as *SA* (*Soviet Architecture*), and later, *Arkitektura SSSR*.<sup>65</sup>

After the revolution, the trend towards constructivism brought easel art to bay as avant-garde artists turned to industrial production, photography, textile design, architecture and agit-prop.<sup>66</sup> Yet, a counter reaction was emerging among some artists concerned with painting in the 1920’s, marking the gradual return of easel art.<sup>67</sup> Against expectations, the new generation of art students emerging from the tutelage of the avant-garde artists were reversing the trend from abstract to realistic representation.<sup>68</sup> A group of former pupils declared in their first painterly exhibition in 1922: “We... want to create realistic works of art...”<sup>69</sup>, thus directly opposing the aesthetic trends of the previous decade. The same year, the aKhRR<sup>70</sup> was established, marking the resurrection of conventional artistic values and the eventual turn to socialist realism. While the aKhRR became the single most dominant artistic group of the 1920’s, other painterly groups originally existed as well. This shift from ‘left’ to ‘right’ in art, as expressed by John E. Bowlt<sup>71</sup>, was partially facilitated by The Society of Studio Artists (OST) established at the end of 1924. Including notable future Soviet artists such as Alexander Deineka, the members of OST favoured a style of realism mixed with expressionist and even surrealist tendencies. By the late 1920’s however, the group’s aesthetics were under increasing scrutiny for harbouring “bourgeois tendencies” and in 1930 OST was disbanded due to the lack of ‘ideological realism.’<sup>72</sup> Among some of the other members, Alexander Deineka successfully turned into socialist realism and seemingly abandoned his allegiance to painterly experimentalism. Boris Groys has claimed that socialist

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<sup>64</sup> Gray, 275.

<sup>65</sup> Gray., 276.

<sup>66</sup> Bowlt, 36.

<sup>67</sup> Bowlt, 36.

<sup>68</sup> Bowlt, 37.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in *Sovietskoe iskusstvo za 15 let*, ed. Ivan Matsa (Moscow, Leningrad, 1933), 156, , <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-dc95-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

<sup>70</sup> *Assotsiatsia Khudozhnikov Revoliutsionnoi Rossii, 1922–1928*, The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia.

<sup>71</sup> John E. Bowlt, “The Society of Easel Artists (OST),” *Russian History* 9, no. 2/3 (1982): 203, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24652705>.

<sup>72</sup> Bowlt, 203.

realism was not just a break to the avant-garde but also its aesthetic heir.<sup>73</sup> Groys suggests that despite the obvious stylistic discrepancies, artists arrived independently at the aesthetic conclusion of socialist realism after the avant-garde.<sup>74</sup> While realistic works of art were increasingly valued after 1925, some artists chose to remain loyal to their personal and aesthetic inclinations.<sup>75</sup> In 1932, the Central Committee's dissolution of all artistic groups dealt the death blow to the avant-garde. By this point, artists had to choose between conforming to the new tenets of the official style or being ostracised by formal society.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

Within the last decades identity categories – such as sexuality and gender – have become central in discovering new narratives and perspectives in art history. Much of the transformation is owed to the 1970's feminist cultural invention that questioned the objectivity of canonization throughout art history.<sup>76</sup> The term 'canonization' refers to a process in which specific aspects of culture are established as exemplary and of the utmost importance.<sup>77</sup> In art history, the tradition of the canon can be traced back to Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* from 1550, in which the author collected biographies of Italian artists and architects whom he regarded as the most eminent.<sup>78</sup> The term canon derives from the Greek word 'kanon', meaning 'rule' or 'standard'. In antiquity, a sculpture by the artist Polykleitos was given the name 'canon' because it was considered to express the proportions of the human body perfectly.<sup>79</sup> Originally, the canon existed in a religious context.<sup>80</sup> The first known canonization took place in the selection of the Hebrew Scriptures, collected by an emerging priestly class around the seventh century BCE.<sup>81</sup> According to Griselda Pollock, "canonicity refers to both the assumed quality of an included text and to the status text acquires because it belongs within an authoritative collection".<sup>82</sup> While canons have since

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<sup>73</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde Aesthetic, Dictatorship and Beyond* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>74</sup> Groys, 9.

<sup>75</sup> Bowlt, 39.

<sup>76</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon, Feminist Desire and Writing of Art's Histories* (Routledge: London and New York, 1999), 23.

<sup>77</sup> Gregor Langfeld, "The Canon in Art History. Concepts and Approaches", *Journal of Art Historiography* no. 19 (2018): 1, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/langfeld.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Foster, (London: H. Bohn, 1850 (orig. pub. 1550)), 301.

<sup>79</sup> Langfield, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Pollock, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Pollock, 3.

<sup>82</sup> Pollock, 3.

then become secular in the academic context, the sense of a divine authority prevails in accepting their content as universal. As Pollock points out, the canons of literature, art history and music have all had their competing canons at some point in history, despite appearing as having emerged effortlessly and without selectivity.<sup>83</sup>

For a long time, the canon of art history was understood as existing outside time and place, laying claim to permanence.<sup>84</sup> Today, the Western art historical canon still prevails in textbooks, art market prices and exhibitions of influential museums.<sup>85</sup> A large consensus prevails regarding which artists belong in the canon of the modern era, and the story of the Russian avant-garde is no different. Feminism, and later queer theory, have challenged the processes of canonization and critiqued the idea of art having intrinsic value detached from social conditions. With the influence of feminist and queer theory, sexual biases reproduced and preserved in the Western cultural discourse have come under scrutiny. According to the art historian Griselda Pollock, the canon is ‘politically in the masculine’ as well as culturally ‘of the masculine’.<sup>86</sup> In *Differencing the Canon*, Pollock classifies three different feminist positions which enable the deconstruction of the canon: first, by encountering the canon as ‘a structure of exclusion.’<sup>87</sup> Second, by encountering the canon as “a structure of subordination and domination which marginalises and relativises all women according to their place in the contradictory structurations of power – race, gender, class and sexuality.”<sup>88</sup> Third, by encountering the canon as “a discursive strategy in the production and reproduction of sexual difference and its complex configuration of gender and related modes of power.”<sup>89</sup>

The relationship of feminism and queer theory can be described as reciprocal rather than competitive.<sup>90</sup> The two critical perspectives can be successfully merged into an approach which the art theorist Amelia Jones refers to as “queer feminist durationality.”<sup>91</sup> Queer studies emerged in the early 1990’s across academic and activist platforms and consequently institutionalised a new branch of critical theory dedicated to the study of sexuality.<sup>92</sup> The word queer was deliberately re-appropriated in the late 1980’s by LBTGQ activists with the

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<sup>83</sup> Pollock, 3.

<sup>84</sup> Pollock, 3.

<sup>85</sup> Pollock, 3.

<sup>86</sup> Pollock, 24.

<sup>87</sup> Pollock, 23.

<sup>88</sup> Pollock, 24.

<sup>89</sup> Pollock, 26.

<sup>90</sup> Hall and Jagose, introduction to *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, 16.

<sup>91</sup> Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (Routledge: Oxon, 2012), 3.

<sup>92</sup> Hall and Jagose, *Introduction*, 14.

consequence of transforming a homophobic slur into a word of empowerment.<sup>93</sup> *Queer theory* represents the analytical viewpoint within queer studies, which critiques normative models of sexuality, gender, and sex in various cultural, political and social contexts.<sup>94</sup> While queer theory is informed by feminism and undoubtedly owes much to feminist thought, it has also advanced and evolved feminist discourse. It would be false to presume that queer theory simply comes after feminism, since the two discourses often contribute to one another in a reciprocal manner.<sup>95</sup>

The 1980's AIDS crisis created a need for visibility and representation that was political in nature, consequently calling for queer scholarship. The need to question dominant understanding of sexuality encouraged the definition of the politically radical in non-normativity.<sup>96</sup> Albeit queer theory represents an analytical parting from feminism, its origins cannot be contributed exclusively to any single branch of critical thought.<sup>97</sup> Rather, queer theory draws inspiration from a variety of contexts informed by post-structuralism, such as intersectionality and post-colonialist theory, but also sexual subcultural practices including sado-masochism.<sup>98</sup> Although queer theory is organized around sexuality, its intersectional approaches blur the lines between categories of social difference. Queer theory studies sexuality as a social structure in the crossroads between other identity categories, such as gender, class, race, and ethnicity.

A characteristic feature of queer theory is the resistance to definition and restricting binaries.<sup>99</sup> Its approach is endlessly open-ended, enabling daring interpretation and the re-reading of materials. The elusiveness of queer theory is a part of a theoretical strategy which avoids formalisation in order to prevent sexual characterisation confined in nature or biology.<sup>100</sup> It draws from the Foucauldian theory that sexuality is a social and cultural construction that cannot be defined through essentialist assertions and the idea that bodies are given meaning by discourse and social structures of knowledge and power.<sup>101</sup> As sexuality is manifested differently according to time and place, all cultures have different frameworks for research and analysis which must be taken into consideration. Furthermore, queer theory

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<sup>93</sup> Hall and Jagose, 14.

<sup>94</sup> Hall and Jagose, 14.

<sup>95</sup> Hall and Jagose, 14.

<sup>96</sup> Hall and Jagose, 14.

<sup>97</sup> Hall and Jagose, 14.

<sup>98</sup> Hall and Jagose, 14.

<sup>99</sup> Hall and Jagose, 14.

<sup>100</sup> Hall and Jagose, 14.

<sup>101</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 3-13.

relies on Foucault's genealogy in perceiving sexuality as temporal rather than linear, as discussed in the next chapter.<sup>102</sup> Instead of perceiving historical desires as rudimentary expressions of modern sexuality, queer scholarship emphasises the influence of time and space in understanding sexualities.<sup>103</sup>

The *queer* in queer theory resists definition, offering pluralistic meanings to otherness, the odd and the different.<sup>104</sup> Figuring the 'aberrant' or 'atypical', queer has value in its ability to radically challenge social normativity and to exist outside the governing orders.<sup>105</sup> In *Queer*, David J. Getsby points out the adjectival quality of the word, which rarely stands alone but „attaches itself to nouns, wilfully perverting that to which it is appended.“<sup>106</sup> A queer avant-garde, then, is a conscious attempt to re-read the artworks which contributed to the movement and shaped its appearance. A queer avant-garde seeks to re-view the presumed normal from the perspective of the 'otherwise'. Getsby writes that artists today identifying as queer call forth utopian and dystopian alternatives; while artists of the avant-garde did not define themselves according to modern identity categories it is possible to argue that a part of the movement's radicality derives from its resistance to normativity. The queer theorist Lee Edelman has argued that queer positions of knowing and producing knowledge withhold radical potential because they are located outside the social and political order.<sup>107</sup> Referring this to as "queer negativity", Edelman goes as far as claiming that queerness embodies the death drive of society in representing all that is opposite to its inherent values.<sup>108</sup> To Edelman, the radicality of the queer rises directly from its antagonism to reproductive relations and the threat it poses to the heterosexual matrix.

Queer theory does not constitute a hard-edged field of scholarly inquiry.<sup>109</sup> There are different thematic approaches within the field taking theory into varying directions, each nevertheless energised by Foucault's genealogy. Donald E. Hall and Annmarie Jagose define temporality as the core structure around which queer theory is structured, looping together deconstructive, psychoanalytic and postcolonial thought, "...using notions of time as cyclical, interrupted, multilayered, reversible or stalled to articulate sexuality as a temporal field."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Foucault, 3-1.

<sup>103</sup> Hall and Jagose, introduction to *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, 15.

<sup>104</sup> David J. Getsby, *Queer: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (Whitechapel Gallery: London, 2016), 18.

<sup>105</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 6.

<sup>106</sup> Getsby, 16.

<sup>107</sup> Edelman, 5.

<sup>108</sup> Edelman, 5.

<sup>109</sup> Hall and Jagose, 16.

<sup>110</sup> Hall and Jagose, 17.

Furthermore, Hall and Jagose recognise a strand of thought within queer theory which emphasises sexuality as a psychic rather than a social formation.<sup>111</sup> This antisocial and characteristically negative strand of queer thought has been most prominent in the works of Lee Edelman. The anti-social thesis detaches sex from political correctness wanting to assimilate the queer community into the mainstream society.<sup>112</sup> Instead, the anti-social strand takes a nihilistic approach that emphasises the shattering effects of sexual desire in psychoanalytical terms. According to Edelman, the death drive can be located in queer desire, which violently resists the ego's fantasy of identity – "queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one."<sup>113</sup> In other words, the queer subject inherently withholds resistance to assimilation and conformity due to the constant pull of the death drive. While the nihilistic negativity of the so-called anti-social thesis remains hotly debated in queer circles, it provides a useful perspective for the analysis of works by queer avant-garde artists turned into socialist realism. Edelman's psychoanalytical approach which contests contemporary queer political engagements slips into the authoritarian realm of the Soviet order surprisingly effortlessly.

According to the art historian Amelia Jones, art is always about identity and the process of identification.<sup>114</sup> The inherently dualistic position of identity (man/woman, feminine/masculine, and queer/straight) influences how art is given meaning and value in society.<sup>115</sup> In the canonical account of the Russian avant-garde, the artist in the spotlight is typically the suffering male genius, posing as the ultimate creative protagonist: take for example the well-established accounts of Kasimir Malevich's, Wassily Kandisky's or Vladimir Tatlin's careers. While the exceptionally active role of women artists in the movement has become increasingly acknowledged – especially with the rise in interest towards other female avant-garde artists after the canonization of Natalia Goncharova<sup>116</sup> – sexual dissidents have been largely ignored.

In *Seeing Differently* Amelia Jones argues for the significance of the deeply intertwined connections of identity and visuality<sup>117</sup>—how people make assumptions of others based on their appearance. According to Jones, identification must be accounted for in beliefs

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<sup>111</sup> Hall and Jagose, 17.

<sup>112</sup> Hall and Jagose, 17.

<sup>113</sup> Edelman, 17.

<sup>114</sup> Jones, *Seeing Differently*, 17.

<sup>115</sup> Jones, 17.

<sup>116</sup> Elena Korowin, "Natalia Goncharova's Canonization in Europe After 1945," *Journal of Art Historiography* 19 (December 2018): 2, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/korowin.pdf>.

<sup>117</sup> Jones, 2.

and ideologies regarding aesthetics and in relation to the Western cultural discourse.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, Jones argues that identities influence how visual culture is understood and valued and how these preferences are in fact rooted in binary oppositions constituted by the philosophical discourses of modernity.<sup>119</sup> In order to alter our vision, as is the case with the Russian avant-garde, it is best to stop and look at the differences. The queer signifying the abnormal spurs questions about normalcy and its oppressive, hierarchic power. For Jones, feminist queer durationality represents an active strategy of looking and interpreting which deliberately reads and misreads artwork in order to “open it up to the process of interrelationality and ethical responsibility.”<sup>120</sup> Jones’ critical approach offers a model for this study, which combines both feminism and queer theory for deconstructing binary models of sexuality and gender.

## 2.1 Foucault and Sexuality

”Where there is power, there is resistance”<sup>121</sup>

(Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, volume I*)

It is impossible to write queer art history without addressing the influence of Michel Foucault’s post-structuralist work *The History of Sexuality* published in 1976, a philosophical study of the history of sexuality in Western Europe. Foucault’s work unfolds the complex networks of desire, power and knowledge against the backdrop of bourgeois culture and the capitalist marketplace. Its analysis on the simultaneous emergence of sexualities and modern identities during the 19th and early 20th centuries has had a profound impact on queer theory. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault questions the inception of sexual repression in early modern societies to structure a ”genealogy” of sexuality – a concept which refers to Nietzsche’s influential critique on modern morality<sup>122</sup>. Instead of defining a fixed starting point or a progressive narrative of sexuality, Foucault approaches the history of sexuality delinearistically.<sup>123</sup> According to Foucault, the so-called ”Repressive Hypothesis” claims that sexuality became increasingly suppressed in modern European societies, and that the progress

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<sup>118</sup> Jones, 2.

<sup>119</sup> Jones, 3.

<sup>120</sup> Jennie Klein, “Review of Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts by Amelia Jones,” *CAA reviews* (November 6th, 2013), doi: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2013.120.

<sup>121</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95.

<sup>122</sup> See Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe and ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>123</sup> Foucault, 92-102.

culminated into the infamously prudish Victorian era (1837-1901).<sup>124</sup> Foucault aims to establish a provocative counter-narrative which argues for de facto proliferation of sexual discourses during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>125</sup> According to Foucault, sexuality became a topic of interest and subsequently a tool for control as the conversation around desire expanded during the 18th and 19th centuries.

According to Foucault, social discourses since the Enlightenment era have formulated sexuality as a disciplinary category holding power over people's bodies:

"The appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and "psychic hermaphroditism" made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of "perversity"; but it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturalness" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified."<sup>126</sup>

By "discourse" Foucault is referring to the spectrum of cultural and social communication which brings forth new ideas through language.<sup>127</sup> Definitions of sexuality are not only established by fields of knowledge – such as economic, medical, juridical, or the psychiatric sphere– but also informal, creative and dissenting platforms, including art. In *Feminism and Foucault (1988)* the authors Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby define discourse as "...a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance."<sup>128</sup> Thus, the objective of discourses is not always to dominate bodies in a process of hierarchical meaning-making, but they can adopt reciprocal and lateral forms of communication with dissident qualities. It follows that power is not necessarily hierarchic or oppressive in nature, nor is it controlled exclusively by anyone. Rather, power is distributed through a complex network of relations.<sup>129</sup>

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault traces back the history of sexual categorisation in Western Europe in order to make a case for the artificial nature of "the homosexual". The focal point of transformation in language was the implementation of the heterosexual/homosexual dualism: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the

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<sup>124</sup> Foucault, 3-13.

<sup>125</sup> Foucault, 14-35.

<sup>126</sup> Foucault, 101.

<sup>127</sup> Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections and Resistance* (Northeastern University Press, 1988), 185.

<sup>128</sup> Diamond and Quinby, 185.

<sup>129</sup> Foucault, 92-98.

homosexual was now a species.”<sup>130</sup> Whereas society had previously only known sodomites—a vague term which could refer to anal sex between men, but could also signify a variety of other sexually deviant activities—the homosexual now became a medically labeled aberration.<sup>131</sup> According to Foucault, the categorisation of sexual deviance relied largely on medical discourse and the determination for locating a scientific reason for atypical sexual desire.<sup>132</sup> When sexuality became a diagnosable feature, its oddities suddenly became inscribed in the individual.<sup>133</sup> Foucault describes the reciprocal relationship of definition and visibility: the power in charge of sexuality “set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatising troubled moments.”<sup>134</sup> The medical interest in bodies created a twofold effect between power and desire, where desire inevitably fed back to the mechanism drawing forth its peculiarities: “Pleasure spread to the power that harried it; power anchored the pleasure it uncovered.”<sup>135</sup> Two important observations can be drawn from Foucault’s analysis of “the birth of the homosexual”: Firstly, it illustrates the importance of socio-cultural changes in language which produced the homosexual as a category of analysis. Secondly, it suggests that the features linked to homosexual desire are depended on historical feedback loops between the dominating and resistant discourses. This element of resistance inherent in the relational networks of power is a central element in queer theory and is recognised by Foucault in a passage in which he renders it as the *active* counterpart of dominance: “[Resistances] are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite.”<sup>136</sup> What Foucault refers to as resistance can also be located in alternative art historical narratives. A queer theoretical analysis of the Russian avant-garde is interested in the sexual resistance inscribed in the visual configurations of the odd, the inconsistent and the opposite.

Foucault’s hypothesis on sexuality relies on the emergence of a bourgeois identity in the process of replacing the old social order with the capitalist market space.<sup>137</sup> In Russia however, capitalism never successfully replaced the agrarian society before it was already overthrown by a socialist revolution.<sup>138</sup> Hence, the disciplinary power characteristic to liberal

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<sup>130</sup> Foucault, 43.

<sup>131</sup> Foucault, 43.

<sup>132</sup> Foucault, 43.

<sup>133</sup> Foucault, 44.

<sup>134</sup> Foucault, 44.

<sup>135</sup> Foucault, 45.

<sup>136</sup> Foucault, 96.

<sup>137</sup> Foucault, 5.

<sup>138</sup> Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 3.

democracies –which Foucault referred to as “power-knowledge”– was never able to properly mature in the Russian soil. Authoritarian tsarism was as much unwilling to share its power with legal or medical institutions as the Bolshevik police state which came to replace it.<sup>139</sup> According to Foucault, sexual identities in Western modern societies were fashioned according to the bourgeois family institution and the heterosexual couple.<sup>140</sup> This ‘Victorian’ sexual ethic promoted by the bourgeois married couple confined sexuality into the privacy of the home with the primary purpose of reproduction.<sup>141</sup> However, the social archetypes Foucault is referring to were never successfully adopted by the Russian burgeoning middle-class, who rejected the European quest for self-fulfilment through individualism.<sup>142</sup> Both Laura Engelstein and Olga Matich point out the differences constructing the autonomous subject in Russia: ideas of self-fulfilment resonated differently in Russian culture, due to “the virtual absence of bourgeois individualism.”<sup>143</sup> In Russia, Western notions of privacy, private property and domesticity competed with traditional social values dating back to pre-capitalist culture.<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, since the urban educated class was deprived of political power, they found themselves in logical opposition to traditional ideals of patriarchal rule and family life.<sup>145</sup> Only after the political reforms followed by the 1905 revolution did the Victorian sexual paradigm start to emerge within the Russian middle-class and medical professionals.<sup>146</sup> Even then, its successful implementation among the urban elite faltered, having emerged belatedly in a society with different political and cultural precursors. Hence, while both power and personhood emerged transformed in the course of modernisation in Russia, their context remained local.

Foucault’s theorisation on sexuality has had a profound influence in the development of queer theory.<sup>147</sup> The analysis on the socio-cultural ways of defining, prescribing and proscribing sexualities revoke the idea of sexuality as a concept without history. Instead, the complex interactions between language, culture, and power have constructed modern notions of sexual identities. However, Foucault’s eurocentrism poses limitations to the universal

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<sup>139</sup> Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 10.

<sup>140</sup> Foucault, 120.

<sup>141</sup> Foucault, 3.

<sup>142</sup> Engelstein, 4.

<sup>143</sup> Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia’s Fin-de-Siècle* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>144</sup> Matich, 5.

<sup>145</sup> Matich, 5.

<sup>146</sup> Matich, 6.

<sup>147</sup> Tamsin Spargo, *Postmodern Encounters: Foucault and Queer Theory* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999), 9.

applicability of his theory crossing geopolitical and cultural borders.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, Foucault's narrow interest beyond male homosexuality has incited critique from queer feminists for overlooking the importance of gender in analysing the history of same-sex desire.<sup>149</sup>

## 2.2 Homosexuality in Russia before and after the Revolution

The beginning of the 20th century marked great societal, political and ideological changes in Russia. Ideas of sexuality were emerging against the backdrop of a society in turmoil. In *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (1992) Laura Engelstein argues that Foucault's idea on the emergence of disciplinary power and its formational influence on sexuality during the 19th century cannot be directly applied to Russia. According to Engelstein, the practice of power simply did not evolve parallel to Western Societies due to the difference in society's structures.<sup>150</sup> While Foucault's theorization offers an important starting point for analysing the emergence of sexualities in Russia according to Engelstein, it should also be subjected to critique and revision.<sup>151</sup> To make her claim, Engelstein emphasises the comparatively late-set modernisation process of Russia and the lack of political freedom among its citizens.<sup>152</sup>

Unlike in most Western societies, access to political power was greatly restricted under Tsarist rule until the reforms of 1905.<sup>153</sup> Before the sudden expansion of industrialisation and urbanisation at the turn of the century, these processes had been slow to commence in Russia. Furthermore, the Russian upper social class enjoyed different socioeconomic privileges from their European equivalents. Whereas the bourgeoisie in Europe were defined by their control over the means of production, the Russian intelligentsia enjoyed an inherited status within the imperialist system. While the educated bourgeoisie in Europe could participate relatively freely in public and political discourse, Russian intellectuals were subservient to the Tsar. To Foucault, the transformation which power underwent during the transition from old absolutist regimes to bourgeois capitalist societies is crucial in the formulation of sexual categories and norms.<sup>154</sup> Yet, such a transformation was less apparent in Russia where the modern socioeconomic revolution diverged from the model

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<sup>148</sup> Spargo, 26.

<sup>149</sup> Spargo, 26.

<sup>150</sup> Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 3.

<sup>151</sup> Engelstein, 3.

<sup>152</sup> Engelstein, 1-16.

<sup>153</sup> Engelstein, 3.

<sup>154</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 17-35.

of Western Europe. Engelstein concludes that “Russia produced its own version of the Western tradition, in the sexual arena as well as in other cultural domains.”<sup>155</sup>

If Russian history is somewhat infamous for its ‘blank spots’, then the subject of homosexuality is no exception to the rule.<sup>156</sup> As the historian Dan Healey points out, serious research on the subject of sexuality in general has been sparse.<sup>157</sup> Since Vladimir Putin’s politically motivated attacks on homosexuals in 2011, there remain no academic possibilities for queer theory to flourish in Russian universities. In Russia’s current state propaganda Western Europe is curiously taunted as “Gayropa” in an attempt to ridicule the imagined enemy’s moral decline. The importance of studying gender and sexual dissidence is nevertheless important in understanding the oppressive structures of Russia’s recent history; “without homosexuality in our gaze we cannot see power as it was manifest in the 20th century in Russia.”<sup>158</sup> Power has always been a controversial subject to study in Russia because it insists on looking into the past. In Russia, the recent return of authoritarian rule suggests that the country’s “future is its history.”<sup>159</sup> Studying the visual history of alternative sexualities and gender identities poses a threat to current Putinist totalitarianism because it threatens the official narrative of homosexuality as a Western disease.

According to Healey, the silence around homosexuality has worked to reinforce a myth of a natural and unquestioned heterosexuality, which underpins the modern system of gender relations dependent on dominant masculinity and subordinate femininity.<sup>160</sup> Studying the hidden presence of dissenting sexualities in Russian culture does not only reveal a minority history of queer identities, but entangles the intricate layers of power practiced through control. In the modernising nation of Russia, gender and sexuality occupied a significant role in the story of contesting power relations. Without acknowledging how same-sex relations functioned as significant constituents of gender and sexual identity, gender cannot be properly understood as a form of power in early 20th century Russia.

The legal and medical position to same-sex love started to evolve during the pre-revolutionary years of the late Imperial Russia. One of the underlying causes for the disinclination to medicalize ‘homosexuality’ in Russia was the comparative lenience of high-

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<sup>155</sup> Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 3.

<sup>156</sup> Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, 1.

<sup>157</sup> Healey, 1.

<sup>158</sup> Healey, 2.

<sup>159</sup> Refers to the title of Masha Gessen’s *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (London: Granta, 2017) in which the author convincingly argues that the Russian state was unable to rid itself from totalitarianism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with Putin clawing back the authority lost temporarily under Yeltsin’s rule.

<sup>160</sup> Healey, 3.

society towards same-sex practices.<sup>161</sup> Whereas the police in Berlin and Paris had been practicing targeted surveillance already in the previous century, the police in Russia made little effort to control homosexual acts in public spaces.<sup>162</sup> The homosexual relationships of the Tsarist family members further complicated the legal supervision of same-sex relations.<sup>163</sup> A male homosexual subculture developed in the urban areas, deriving from the traditional and intimate relationships between men of the Tsarist society. A seed of identity appeared when men engaging in erotic relationships with other men started to refer to themselves and others alike as “tetki” (e.aunts).<sup>164</sup> The backdrop of urban centres created a space for a subculture where form of speech, body gestures or effeminate style helped individuals to recognize one another. A red tie or a handkerchief could be employed as a discreet symbol of same-sex desire, as the portrait of the homosexual author Mihail Kuzmin from 1909 uncandidly reveals (Fig.1).<sup>165</sup> Yet, the single most meaningful sign was the suggestive glance, an eye contact heavy with desire.<sup>166</sup> The Bolshevik revolution in 1917 changed the dynamics of the public and private spaces, where urban homosexual encounters had taken place during the late Tsarist rule. While privacy was contradictory to the ideas of the new social order, men continued to organize erotic encounters in boulevards, parks and public lavatories.<sup>167</sup> The Russian Oscar Wilde, Mihail Kuzmin, wrote about an erotic encounter with a “sweet-looking” young professional on the streets of Leningrad in 1924, reminiscent of his pre-revolutionary erotic adventures.<sup>168</sup> The nineteenth century legislation had regarded homosexuality as a crime but the Soviet regime in the 1920’s regarded it as an illness to be cured.<sup>169</sup>

While same-sex relationships between men in early 20th century Russia proves a difficult subject to research due to a lack of sources, even less is known about the history of female homosexuality. Women who had sexual relationships with members of their own sex had much less access to the public sphere and were therefore less likely to construct a recognizable subculture compatible to men. This does not suggest that female homosexuality did not exist in pre- and post-revolutionary Russia. The reason for the obscurity of female

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<sup>161</sup> Healey, 78.

<sup>162</sup> Healey, 95.

<sup>163</sup> Healey, 92-93.

<sup>164</sup> Healey, 49.

<sup>165</sup> Healey, 37.

<sup>166</sup> Healey, 37.

<sup>167</sup> Healey, 49.

<sup>168</sup> Healey, 46.

<sup>169</sup> Karlinsky, “Russia’s Gay Literature and Culture”, 358.

same-sex love lies in the patriarchal and archaic legal system of Imperial Russia, which regarded women as “less than complete sexual and civic subjects”.<sup>170</sup> Judith Butler has observed how the legal position towards lesbianism historically is characterised by ambivalence: “Lesbianism is not specifically prohibited because it has not even made its way to the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural integrity that regulates the real and the nameable...” Furthermore, Butler connects the legal disregard over female same-sex relations to the cultural visibility of such identities: “to be prohibited explicitly is to occupy a discursive site from which something like a reverse-discourse can be articulated; to be implicitly proscribed is not even to qualify as an object of prohibition”.<sup>171</sup>

Unlike in Western Europe, not only the law but the medical discourse showed little interest in female homosexuality in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>172</sup> Research on the topic of ‘lesbianism’ as a sexual psychopathology emerged in Russian medical circles as late as the 1920’s.<sup>173</sup> Even then, doctors “treated” patients individually, failing to recognize a pattern of social connections between women who loved women.<sup>174</sup> With little to no legal policing on female homosexuality, not much is known of the early urban subculture between queer women.<sup>175</sup> Female same-sex relationships, if they did propose a legal problem in late tsarist and early Soviet societies, were associated with morally depraved individuals such as prostitutes and prisoners.<sup>176</sup> Despite the scarcity of sources, certain conclusions can be deduced from historical data which help to decode the gender deviant aesthetics of avant-garde women.

Class position was a defining factor in the expression of same-sex love between women.<sup>177</sup> Women, who were protected by the socio-economic privileges of their status, were able to engage in alternative lifestyles outside the conventional family model. In 1922, five years after the Bolshevik revolution, sodomy was decriminalized in the Soviet Union.<sup>178</sup> Yet, similar queer subcultures did not evolve in Moscow or St. Petersburg as they did in Paris or Berlin in the 1920’s. Women, unlike men, did not acquire a presence in the public space by marking off sexualized territories reserved for the practice of same-sex encounters. The

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<sup>170</sup> Healey, 77.

<sup>171</sup> Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Subordination,” in *Inside Out/ Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (Routledge: London and New York, 1991), 20.

<sup>172</sup> Butler, 50.

<sup>173</sup> Butler, 78.

<sup>174</sup> Butler, 50.

<sup>175</sup> Butler., 50

<sup>176</sup> Butler, 51.

<sup>177</sup> Butler, 51.

<sup>178</sup> Butler, 115.

unequal status of genders explain why women did not establish a homosexual subculture similar to men; no red tie existed for women to express their deviant desires in public like the one seen in Mihail Kuzmin's portrait. Instead, women were able to practice same-sex love privately and in the comfort of their privileged social stratum.

After the civil war broke out in 1917, a masculine style for women came to signal revolutionary credibility.<sup>179</sup> While not at all women who wore collars and ties with trimmed hair were drawn to their own sex, the revolutionary look came with the potential of disguising other motives; “[women] adopted a masculine style not merely because they wished to resemble men, but because they wished to attract other women.”<sup>180</sup> The masculine woman was tolerated in the revolutionary society until the mid-1930s, when Stalin's regime reshuffled gender roles in the process of assembling the Soviet heterosexual.<sup>181</sup> Prior to the revolution, aestheticized sexual ambiguity among women had gained popularity within the bourgeois salon culture of the Russian intelligentsia.<sup>182</sup> The style icon of androgyny and the Russian decadence, Zinaida Gippius, was immortalised in masculine attire in 1906 by the artist Leon Bakst (Fig.2). Yet, such clothing for women was only possible to don in the city, while skirts and dresses were a better alternative for avoiding ‘unwanted attention’ in the countryside.<sup>183</sup> After the revolution, ‘sartorial’ androgyny was rejected as bourgeois, and a more “stronger”, vernacular female masculinity was embraced by avant-garde women as a sign of emancipation, and occasionally, homosexual desire.<sup>184</sup> The fluidity of gender traits had been part of the aesthetic fashion within the decadent movement, allowing both sexes to engage in androgynous play. With the demise of decadence, female masculinity became connected with leftist feminism.<sup>185</sup> The Marxist Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) described the ‘new woman’ as independent and single, “walking the streets with a businesslike, masculine tread” in her essay in 1913.<sup>186</sup> However, the masculinization of the new woman happened first and foremost through her self-confident behaviour rather than attire.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Butler, “Imitation and Gender Subordination”, 52.

<sup>180</sup> Butler, 79.

<sup>181</sup> Butler, 66.

<sup>182</sup> Butler, 75.

<sup>183</sup> Butler, 75.

<sup>184</sup> Butler, 73.

<sup>185</sup> Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 398.

<sup>186</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, “The New Woman,” *Novaya moral' i rabochii klass* (Moscow 1918), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1918/new-morality.htm>.

<sup>187</sup> Engelstein, 398.

## 2.3 Queer Theoretical Perspectives on History

“It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another, precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of century and has remained as *the* dimension of sexual orientation”<sup>188</sup>

(Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*)

Extremely influential for queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) critically analyses the problematic bias of heterosexual maleness in Western cultural canons. According to Sedgwick, hetero/homosexual definitions regulate the processes of knowledge production and permeate Western cultural discourses. Hence, without a critical analysis of sexual bias any aspect of modern Western culture cannot be fully understood.<sup>189</sup> Sedgwick studies her subject by re-examining a selection of 19th century canonical texts and their relationship with the emergence of homosexuality as a codified identity. Sedgwick’s idea of “The trope of the closet” refers to the way homosexuality has been rendered invisible and categorically dismissed as an insignificant identity in Western cultural discourse.<sup>190</sup> Sedgwick argues that the homosexuality of historical figures has been categorically obscured and downplayed in later narratives. Neglecting to take into account the influence of the authors’ queer sexuality in constructing historical narratives of their work inadvertently reinforces cultural heteronormativity.

Sedgwick criticizes the contemporary theoretical discourse on homosexuality as burdened by debates on essentialist against constructivist views.<sup>191</sup> While both theoretical approaches aim to answer questions on the ontologism of homosexuality and its interchangeability to a given society, they also advocate the binary of nature versus nurture. In order to avoid the conceptual deadlock between the two opposing views, Sedgwick emulates an alternative framework for arguing in behalf of homosexuality’s relevance to cultural discourse. She reassembles the essentialist/constructivist dialectic framework, asking instead “In whose lives is homo/heterosexual definition an issue of continuing centrality and difficulty?”<sup>192</sup> Sedgwick’s alternative conceptualises two opposing standpoints on the importance of queer theoretical analysis for cultural discourse: one, the *minoritizing* and second, the *universalizing view*.<sup>193</sup> According to the *minoritizing view*, the question of sexual

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<sup>188</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 8.

<sup>189</sup> Sedgwick, 2.

<sup>190</sup> Sedgwick., 3.

<sup>191</sup> Sedgwick, 54.

<sup>192</sup> Sedgwick, 40.

<sup>193</sup> Sedgwick, 40.

difference is primarily relevant to the identity and objectives of the gay community.<sup>194</sup> The *universalising view* on the other hand, perceives the subject of homosexuality relevant to all people across the sexual spectrum.<sup>195</sup> In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick sets out to argue for the latter by making a case for the fluidity of sexuality and its centrality in the construction of Western cultural canons: “In so far as the problematics of a homo/heterosexual definition, in an intensely homophobic culture, are seen to be precisely internal to the central nexuses of that culture, this canon must always be treated as a loaded one.”<sup>196</sup> Sedgwick’s approach enables her to analyse the influence of homosexuality in culture without having to establish an ontological answer to the question of “what is the cause of homosexuality” first.<sup>197</sup> According to Sedgwick, despite the nominal marginality of the sexually aberrant, its presence is what defies and defines the ruling cultural dichotomies from a position of centrality.<sup>198</sup> A queer analysis of canonical narratives, such as the Russian avant-garde, is significant not only to the marginalised community at hand, but to the field of research at large. Sedgwick’s queer re-readings of Western canonical literature aim to demonstrate how regarding homosexuality as “insignificant” to the meaning of art disables us from truly seeing. Shutting eyes to same-sex desire does not simply leave a blind spot but counterfeits the entity in which heterosexuality is always already assumed as the norm. Sedgwick’s formula offers a malleable approach to the subject of historical homosexuality, leaving room for speculation and open-ended interpretation. Rather than fixating on the definability of sexual orientation, Sedgwick encourages to break the silence around homosexuality in the canon: “Has there ever been a gay Socrates? Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare? Has there ever been a gay Proust? Does the Pope wear a dress?”<sup>199</sup> Sedgwick’s approach demonstrates that the limits for a queer art historical inquiry are fluid, offering open-ended possibilities for interpretation.

In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial theory* (1985) Sedgwick analyses the immanent relationships between men and their influence on the oppression of women. The book, which preceded *The Epistemology of the Closet*, demonstrates how women have been culturally employed as vessels for transporting desire between two men. The classic love triangle created a stage for homosocial bonding in the disguise provided by

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<sup>194</sup> Sedgwick, 40

<sup>195</sup> Sedgwick, 40

<sup>196</sup> Sedgwick, 54.

<sup>197</sup> Sedgwick, 40.

<sup>198</sup> Sedgwick, 40.

<sup>199</sup> Sedgwick, 52.

erotic rivalry; the bond linking the rivals was as intense as the one linking them to the object of desire. In popular culture, the phenomenon is similar to “bromance” – the exceptionally affectionate relationship of two men, exceeding that of usual friendship and distinguished by a particularly high level of emotional intimacy.<sup>200</sup> While the practice of homosocial bonding in a patriarchal society seemingly repels homosexuality, it is under the constant threat of collapsing into itself, destroying the heterosexual smokescreen.

Yet another queer feature of the Russian avant-garde was the interest in cross-dressing and gender subversion. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Judith Butler famously argued that gender is a performative act embedded in culture. By combining feminist and queer perspectives, Butler seeks to answer the question of how non-conformative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis. Moreover, Butler seeks to question the unequivocal differentiation between sex and gender and argues that the relationship between the two categories is in reality much more complex than it appears at first. Among many other feminist philosophers, Butler’s aim is to deconstruct the naturalisation of sex as a biologically given fact. According to her, gender is an act that consolidates the impression of being a man or being a woman. While gender is not a manifestation of any intrinsic essence it is not performed consciously as a “role”, but constitutes a phenomenon which is constantly produced and reproduced. While Butler uses the act of drag as an example of performance which has the effect of destabilising the gender binary, she does not suggest that gender in real life is something to be put on consciously, or a matter of choice.

Akin to Butler’s theory on the performativity of gender is the queer theorist Jack Halberstam’s study on female masculinity. Women artists of the avant-garde often adopted masculine appearances, for reasons varying from revolutionary egalitarianism to claiming their place in the male dominated art world. Sometimes however, female masculinity signaled same-sex desire.<sup>201</sup> Since the motives for simulating masculinity varied between women artists of the avant-garde, many appearances of female masculinity emerged. In *Female Masculinity* (1998), Jack Halberstam suggests that numerous alternatives of masculinity have existed throughout history, asserting a plurality of female masculinities with different sexual identities.<sup>202</sup> While the gender-bending aspects of the avant-garde have been studied in academic literature before, there is a lack of theoretical analysis to the different *meanings* of female masculinity. As Halberstam points out, “Sometimes female masculinity coincides

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<sup>200</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism, Sex, Gender and the Edge of Normal* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2012), 189-191.

<sup>201</sup> Healey, 73.

<sup>202</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 9.

with the excesses of male supremacy, and sometimes it codifies a unique form of social rebellion; often female masculinity is the sign of sexual alterity, but occasionally it marks heterosexual variation; sometimes female masculinity marks the place of pathology, and every now and then it represents the healthful alternative to what are considered the histrionics of conventional femininities”.<sup>203</sup> According to Halberstam, acknowledging multiple forms of female masculinity can lead to affirmations of new gender taxonomies in a reversed relationship with male masculinity. Instead of female masculinity being seen as subverting male masculinity, Halberstam promotes a refusal to engage in any kind of position where female masculinity is validated against the standard of male masculinity.<sup>204</sup>

As Halberstam argues, the masculine woman has challenged gender systems “at least two centuries”<sup>205</sup> in history. Yet, the study of historical sexualities and gender deviance remains problematic to queer theorists. According to Halberstam, the challenge for queer history is to produce methodologies which are “sensitive to historical change but influenced by current theoretical preoccupations.”<sup>206</sup> In order to avoid ahistoricism in the study of pre-twentieth century cross-identifying women, Halberstam promotes a methodology entitled “perverse presentism.”<sup>207</sup> The objective of a perversely presentist approach is to study historical gender deviance without the necessity to categorize the subjects as “lesbians who lack a liberating and identitarian discourse.”<sup>208</sup> Halberstam’s methodology is modelled after Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, in which the philosopher calls for a ‘history of the present’<sup>209</sup> instead of ‘history of the past in terms of the present’. In other words, Halberstam, in accordance with Foucault’s methodology, avoids reading history in terms of linear evolution in which the present is always more enlightened than the past. In *Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also notices the problem of replacing earlier models of sexuality with contemporary queer theory, and the risk of rendering the history of homosexuality as a “narrative of supersession”.<sup>210</sup> Instead of belittling historical understandings of same-sex relations as the lesser cousins of present knowledge, Sedgwick encourages to invest attention in the context of past sexualities. Rather than denaturalizing the

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<sup>203</sup> Halberstam, 9.

<sup>204</sup> Halberstam, 9.

<sup>205</sup> Halberstam, 45.

<sup>206</sup> Halberstam, 45.

<sup>207</sup> Halberstam, 52.

<sup>208</sup> Halberstam, 53.

<sup>209</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 31.

<sup>210</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 46.

past, Sedgwick aims to denaturalize the present in order to render “homosexuality as we know it today” less destructive.<sup>211</sup> For Halberstam, this means that a queer history should avoid making bold claims about the sexualities of the past: “what we do not know for sure today about the relationship between masculinity and lesbianism, we cannot know for sure about historical relations between same-sex desire and female masculinities”.<sup>212</sup> In other words, applying the term ‘lesbian’ to historical women, despite having definitional power, is complicated at heart.

The problem, according to Halberstam, is how the many of the historical women who we are tempted to define as ‘lesbian’ according to current understanding, did not identify themselves as such in the past. In Russia, the term ‘lesbian’ was not a recognized term at the beginning of the 20th century. Instead, female same-sex desire was often related to the hermaphrodite, who “was a freak of nature with an enlarged clitoris” and “desired to penetrate other women who might have been drawn to her ambiguity”.<sup>213</sup> No wonder women who desired other women in the past might have shown little enthusiasm to identify as hermaphrodites. In fact, women avant-garde artists, who engaged in cross-dressing, or were otherwise perceived as having an ambiguous gender identity, most likely had to navigate carefully in order to avoid accusations of hermaphroditism from the surrounding society.<sup>214</sup> For Halberstam, studying historical forms of female masculinity without prescribing to the label ‘lesbian’, enables the “consideration of various categories of sexual variation”,<sup>215</sup> which otherwise might be obscured. One of the popular terms used to describe gender deviance in turn-of-the-century Russia was the androgyne, a term which could refer to both sexes. Unlike the hermaphrodite, the androgyne was not typically perceived as signifying same sex-sex desire.<sup>216</sup> For avant-garde artists, the androgyne represented a harmonious union of the sexes, and an aesthetic ideal rather than a sexual identity. To Halberstam, the androgyne and the hermaphrodite represent the historical plurality of gender variance, which both produce different models of sexual nonconformity.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Sedgwick, 48.

<sup>212</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 54.

<sup>213</sup> Halberstam, 55.

<sup>214</sup> The case of the cross-dressing poet Zinaida Gippius provides a viable example: Gippius’ gender ambiguity was endlessly speculated to be a sign of hermaphroditism, while the poet herself never identified as such. See Olga Matich, “Gender Trouble in the Amazonian Kingdom: Turn-of-the-century representations of Women in Russia” in *Amazons of the Avant-Garde*, ed. John E. Bowlt and John Rutt (Guggenheim: New York, 2000), 81.

<sup>215</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 57.

<sup>216</sup> Olga Matich, “Androgyny and the Russian Silver Age.” *Pacific Coast Philology* 14 (1979): 42, doi:10.2307/1316437.

<sup>217</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 59.

## 2.4 Psychoanalytical Perspectives: The Queer Death Drive

The queer theorist Lee Edelman has studied the relationship of visual culture and queerness through a formulation of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In the book *No Future* (2004) Edelman argues for the connection between queerness and the death drive, from which a radically disruptive force arises.<sup>218</sup> To the author, “homosexuality marks the otherness, the difference internal to ‘sexuality’ and sexual discourse itself.”<sup>219</sup> Edelman’s central argument is that sexual deviance threatens the fallacious wholeness of reproductive state-led ideologies and political systems.<sup>220</sup> Queer desire withholds radical potential to subvert the dominant discourse, because it represents pleasure instead of reproduction. According to Edelman, the subversive qualities of queerness can ultimately be traced back to the death drive of Sigmund Freud and later, Jacques Lacan. Since homosexual desire carries no reproductive value it cannot lead in the “immortalization of the self” through copulation. Without progeny, the individual chooses to self-destruct. Besides self-destruction, Edelman connects the death drive with the concept of irony as “the queerest of rhetorical devices”.<sup>221</sup> The definition of irony as “the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite”<sup>222</sup> resonates with the historical disguising of queer desire. In socialist realist representation homosexuality could only be visualized through irony. In his analysis of contemporary Western visual culture, Edelman concentrates on the recurring images of children, positioning queerness against the conservative values of heteronormative reproduction. Although Edelman’s book delivers its highly political message in the context of contemporary North-American politics, the psychoanalytical queer approach can be applied to other visual contexts as well.

The psychoanalytic concepts employed by Edelman function within the Lacanian formulation of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. This trio describes the various levels of psychic phenomena in which subjectivity is situated.<sup>223</sup> The essence of Edelman’s theory translates as follows in the context of socialist realist art: According to Edelman, the queer death drive has the ability to reverse, subvert or disturb the Symbolic order.<sup>224</sup> The

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<sup>218</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 22.

<sup>219</sup> Edelman, 19.

<sup>220</sup> Edelman, 19.

<sup>221</sup> Edelman, 23.

<sup>222</sup> Definition by *Lexico*, 2021, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/irony>.

<sup>223</sup> Lionel Bailly, *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Oneworld, 2009), 8.

<sup>224</sup> Edelman, 29.

aesthetic ideology of socialist realism, as defined by artists and party officials in accordance with the socialist ideology, constitutes the Symbolic order. In Edelman's formulation, the queer subject, or the *Sinthomosexual* poses a threat to the order of things. The *Sinthomosexual* is a neologism coined by Lee Edelman, which derives from Jacques Lacan's conceptualisation of the *Sinthome*.<sup>225</sup> As Lacan points out, the word derives from an archaic way of writing "symptom."<sup>226</sup> In his study on the connection between art making and the *sinthome*, Arthur R. Walker suggests that artworks can be read as symptoms: "ciphered messages to be dissolved through theoretical interpretation".<sup>227</sup> The *sinthome* represents the unique way each subject knots together the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, which can itself become manifested in art.<sup>228</sup> Yet, it is a contingent and meaningless sign, which only exists as a kind of structural aspect of the visible symptoms.<sup>229</sup> This means that an interpretation of an artwork concerned with the *sinthome* inspects the piece in relation to the R-S-I, rather than aiming to isolate singular symptoms and their meanings. Deriving from Lacan's work on the *sinthome*, Edelman suggests that the *Sinthomosexual* can become an element subject to interpretation.<sup>230</sup> In other words, the *sinthomosexual* is as open to interpretation as 'queer' is, because it cannot be isolated; the *sinthomosexual*, like queerness, cannot exist independently because it is always defined in relation to something else.

Lacan illustrates the *sinthome's* place in the interrelation of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real with the help of the Borromean knot, a structure which collapses if any of the intertwining toruses are removed.<sup>231</sup> The *sinthome* functions as a combining element between the circles, and consequently figures the unique way each subject becomes realised.<sup>232</sup> In art theory, the *sinthome* has been utilised as a conceptual framework helping to decipher the meaning of art works.<sup>233</sup> According to Lacan, the *sinthome* configures the subject's access to *jouissance* – the search for enjoyment through extreme measures that can ultimately be linked to the death drive as a search for satisfaction through measures leading to

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<sup>225</sup> Edelman, 33.

<sup>226</sup> Jacques Lacan, "Seminar XXIII: Le Sinthome," ed. J-A Miller, *Ornicar* 6-11 (1976-7), trans. Luke Thurston, <https://www.lacanonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Seminar-XXIII-The-Sinthome-Jacques-Lacan-Thurston-translation.pdf>.

<sup>227</sup> Walker, "Artmaking and the Sinthome," 3.

<sup>228</sup> Walker, 3.

<sup>229</sup> Walker, 3.

<sup>230</sup> Edelman, 33-35.

<sup>231</sup> Lacan, "Seminar XXIII: Le Sinthome", 3.

<sup>232</sup> Art for artists can figure the *sinthome* itself, which prevents the Borromean knot from unravelling, preventing a descent into psychosis. See Bailly, *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide*, 150.

<sup>233</sup> Walker, "Artmaking and the Sinthome," 3.

pain.<sup>234</sup> Jouissance holds centre stage in the creative process as the drive which keeps the artist working, even when pursuing the outcome might lead to suffering.

In order to interpret the Sinthomosexual present in art representing the queer subject one must also understand the context in which these images were created. A sensuous male nude painted by Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin is only a symptom, if not fully analysed in its cultural and ideological context– in the context of the revolution and its heteromandate perpetuated by artists. Furthermore, sinthomosexuality can only become visible when analysed in relationship with the reproductive futurism it resists and subverts. The Sinthomosexual reveals a historical blind spot, illustrating the significance of gender and sexuality as constructed categories of power utilised to uphold the autocracy. With its ability to embody jouissance located beyond the pleasure principle, the sinthomosexual challenges the logic of social reality and the Symbolic order.<sup>235</sup> Interpreting Edelman’s words, the sinthomosexual is the queer artist whose work screams: “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorised... Fuck Laws both with capital Is and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop!”<sup>236</sup> Finally, the sinthomosexual embraces the death drive instead of the ‘false futurity’<sup>237</sup> promised in the images of young pioneer’s and Soviet athletics.

According to Edelman, queer figures the “aberrant or atypical”. It has value in its ability to radically challenge social normativity, because it “marks the ‘other side’ of politics... the side outside all political sides”. The outcome of Edelman’s queer negativity is an anti-essentialist approach to identity: As there is no such achievable thing as “essential queerness,” one can only approach supposed queer aesthetics in relationship with their contemporary visual language, never forgetting the context in which they were created. The result is a visual critique which reveals much more about the role of compulsive heterosexuality and sexual control in the early Soviet society than it defines ”queer art” – for queer art, like the art made by women artists, cannot be isolated from art history by prescribing it a set of innate features. While Edelman’s theory relies in a somewhat passéist image of the cruising gay man in search of nihilistic sexual pleasure, it offers a strong perspective for analysing socialist realist art. As this study will argue, after the avant-garde, homosexual desire became thoroughly fused within the aesthetic demands of socialist realism.

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<sup>234</sup> Bailly, 151.

<sup>235</sup> Edelman, 25.

<sup>236</sup> Edelman, 29.

<sup>237</sup> Edelman, 29.

### 3 Queer Art of the Avant-Garde

#### 3.1 Erotic Utopia: Sexual philosophies of fin-de-siècle Decadents

According to Olga Matich, the key difference between Russian and European views on sexuality was their contradicting cultural perceptions in individualism at the turn of the century.<sup>238</sup> In Europe, both Nietzschean moral philosophy and Freudian psychoanalysis had had a major impact on the emergence of the individual's psyche and selfhood as concepts.<sup>239</sup> In Russian philosophy however, the concept of the psyche was deeply grounded in religious and communal thought.<sup>240</sup> While Russian thinkers at the turn of the century were extremely interested in the new "science of sexuality" arriving from the West, it was not digested silently but rather turned into a cultural hybrid.<sup>241</sup> The different cultural precursors shaping identity and the individual as concepts explain why the Russian avant-garde did not simply reproduce the queer aesthetic of Western modernism. In *Erotic Utopia*, Matich argues that the Russian sexual philosophies of the early 20th century turned away from medicine and psychology towards the realm of metaphysics.<sup>242</sup> The gender-bending climate of the Russian decadent movement at fin-de-siècle illustrated the curious politics of sexual identity.<sup>243</sup> In Europe, decadence had been a style of excess related to the symbolic aesthetic of the 19th century. However, due to the cultural "belatedness" of Russia, the decadent ideal continued strong during the years before the First World War. According to Matich, Russia's decadent views were grounded in a mixture of religious mysticism and utopian eroticism.<sup>244</sup> According to Olga Matich, at the turn of the century Russian professionals did not locate the sex drive in the individual's unconscious, as had been conceptualized by Freud in Europe. Rather, sexual desire transcended the individual into a shared collective consciousness.<sup>245</sup>

Whereas the bourgeoisie in the West were generally becoming increasingly secular in thought, the Russian upper-class experienced a religious revival at the end of the 19th century.<sup>246</sup> As a part of this revival, the Russian cultural elite eagerly combined theories of

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<sup>238</sup> Matich, *Erotic Utopia*, 5.

<sup>239</sup> Matich, 5.

<sup>240</sup> Matich, 5.

<sup>241</sup> Matich, *Erotic Utopia*, 5.

<sup>242</sup> Matich.

<sup>243</sup> Matich

<sup>244</sup> Matich

<sup>245</sup> Matich, 20.

<sup>246</sup> Matich, 6.

homosexual desire and gender subversion with a twist of orthodox mystique.<sup>247</sup> Rather than a product of the individual psyche, homosexual desire was envisioned as a part of a historical continuum ending in antinatalistic love.<sup>248</sup> The thought of bringing the nation's history to an end by practicing same-sex love sounded fittingly decadent to appeal to the poets, artists and writers of fin-de-siècle opposed to traditional family order. Homosexuality, according to Matich, was seen as means to “displace nature’s laws of perpetuating the species” and “subverting the patriarchal gender restrictions” of society.<sup>249</sup> The popular Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900) considered erotic celibacy— by which he meant abstaining from heterosexual intercourse— a prerequisite for abolishing death and immortalizing the body.<sup>250</sup> While it is not exactly clear how turning to same-sex love would bring immortality to the nation, Solovyov’s theorization was nevertheless influential among the artistic and literary elite of Russia’s salon societies. Moreover, Solovyov’s erotic utopia resonated in the circles of liberal society members where the question of female emancipation had become an urgent issue.<sup>251</sup> Erotic celibacy was considered radical because it released the body from patriarchal restrictions as well as promised sexual liberation. The philosopher’s gender fluent thought was likely to have been inspired by his sister, the poet Poliksena Solovyova, who lived in a lesbian relationship and dressed in male clothing.<sup>252</sup>

One of the vocal points of Solovyov and his followers was that of ‘universal bisexuality’ epitomized in the figure of the androgyne.<sup>253</sup> The androgyne or the ‘third sex’ was the culmination of evolution in which femininity and masculinity were joined in a harmonized union. Idealized androgyny veiled a double meaning, working as euphemistic substitute for homosexuality or at least sexual ambiguity.<sup>254</sup> Yet, Solovyov’s sexual philosophy always remained open-ended, the discourse remaining suggestive rather than specifically diagnostic. Laura Engelstein notes that ‘the open-endedness of the philosophers was limited by the otherworldly quality of their ruminations.’<sup>255</sup>

According to the art historian Natalia Budanova, creative interest in androgyny and gender subversion related to the modernist egalitarian thought reaching beyond individual

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<sup>247</sup> Matich, 6.

<sup>248</sup> Matich, 6.

<sup>249</sup> Matich, 8.

<sup>250</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, trans. and ed. Thomas R. Beyer (The Lindisfarne Press: London 1985), 19- 34, [https://www.academia.edu/15658974/The\\_Meaning\\_of\\_Love\\_Vladimire\\_Solovyov](https://www.academia.edu/15658974/The_Meaning_of_Love_Vladimire_Solovyov).

<sup>251</sup> Matich, 9.

<sup>252</sup> Dmitrieva, 126.

<sup>253</sup> Matich, 9.

<sup>254</sup> Matich, 9.

<sup>255</sup> Engelstein, 394.

goals:” In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Russian visions of a utopian future inevitably included an improved or new human being, conceived as a necessary prerequisite and natural outcome of a just and happy society.”<sup>256</sup>

While the emergence of androgyny and interest in gender subversion in Russia followed the general pattern of discourse on sexuality in Europe, they were practised largely for different cultural purposes. In the patriarchal system of Imperial Russia, androgyny offered an enticing alternative to artists keen to transgress the polarised male and female roles of society. According to Matich, androgyny became a metaphysical ideal that ruled the sexual discourse during the first three decades in Russian culture; “The androgyne— a troupe of homosexuality— represented a degenerate, unnatural gender. But in the context of a universal theory of bisexuality, the androgyne signified the whole in which male and female became united again.”<sup>257</sup> According to Natalia Budanova, ideal of the utopian ‘third sex’ continued to influence avant-garde artists until its eradication from Soviet ideology in the 1930’s.<sup>258</sup>

Vladimir Solovyov’s thought had a profound impact on many future modern artists, such as Marianne Werefkin who attended his university lectures in Moscow during the 1880’s.<sup>259</sup> The decadents of fin-de-siècle perceived gender subversion as a sign of collective harmony rather than an expression of self-definition.<sup>260</sup> Solovyov’s followers were searching alternatives for patriarchal institutions, heterosexual sex, monogamous marriage and the procreative family. This search led to a whole new subversive gender aesthetic unique to the Russian avant-garde.

The androgyne was a controversial aesthetic figure in the art of the Russian fin-de-siècle artists. One of the first artists to study androgyny in Russian art was the symbolist Mihail Vrubel (1856-1910). In 1890, the artist painted *The Demon Seated* in which he depicted a mythical creature squatting against a mosaic background of flowers and the setting sun. The creature was inspired by Vladimir Lermontov’s romantic poem *The Demon* (1829-39) in which a spirit of the underworld dwells in isolation, his immortality and magical powers nothing but a worthless burden. However, Vrubel’s demon was not an evil spirit, but an incarnation of the soul’s ‘eternal struggle of the mutinous human spirit seeking the reconciliation of its stormy passions with knowledge of life’, finding ‘no answer either on

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<sup>256</sup> Budanova, 25.

<sup>257</sup> Matich, *Erotic Utopia*, 20.

<sup>258</sup> Budanova, 25-26.

<sup>259</sup> Tanja Malycheva, “The Cosmopolitan Approach as a Constituent Aspect of Modernist Thought,” in *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in her Circle* (Boston: Brill, 2017), 72, doi 10.1163/9789004333147\_007.

<sup>260</sup> Matich, *Erotic Utopia*, 20.

earth nor heaven’, as described later by his biographer Nikolai Prakhov.<sup>261</sup> Vrubel continued to work with the theme in his next painting, *The Falling Demon* (Fig 13).

In Vrubel’s interpretation, the demon combined androgynous features with the spiritual suffering Lermontov had described in his poems. When the painting was first exhibited in 1902 it led to an immediate controversy.<sup>262</sup> *The Falling Demon* was the first major work to portray androgyny in Russian art, and the slender and sexually ambiguous body of its subject was too much for its contemporaries to accept. ‘At first glance...this Demon appeared to me as sensual...repulsive...elderly woman’<sup>263</sup>, the artist’s father commented at the time. Another influential art critic rejected the Vrubel’s androgyne with harsh words: ‘Vrubel in his Demons have given us the most appalling examples of an unbecoming and repulsive decadence’<sup>264</sup>.

The harsh reception of Vrubel’s androgynous demon demonstrated the difficulty of visually portraying the sexual paradigm. Writing about the harmonious union of the feminine and masculine left room for imagination, but portraying the union in physical form awakened the sexual anxieties of high-society. Although the controversy initiated Vrubel’s eventual self-destruction, the artist succeeded in the avant-garde goal of distinguishing himself from previous generations. Under the influence of French symbolism and fin-de-siècle decadence, artists and writers alike deliberately ventured into the realm of ‘bad taste,’ including the explicitly sexual.<sup>265</sup> The relaxation of censorship laws in 1905 allowed artists the creative freedom needed to experiment.<sup>266</sup> In 1907 the writer Mihail Kuzmin published his novella *Wings*, which was the first of its kind to discuss homosexual desire between two men. Whereas Oscar Wilde had only hinted at the homosexuality of his main character in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Kuzmin’s *Wings* was an open celebration of finding same-sex love: The protagonist Vanya acquires ‘wings of joy’ after embracing his homosexuality. Richard Dyer writes of homosexual imagery and the connection of winged figures and homoerotic desire: “wingedness invokes the sky and, generally, heaven. Taking flight is, minimally, joyous... or a way of expressing sexual ecstasy, but it also suggests

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<sup>261</sup> Nikolai Prakhov, *Stranitsi proshlogo Ocherki-vospominaniia o khudozhnikakh* (Kiev, 1958); English translation in Aline Isdebsky-Pritchard, *The Art of Mikhail Vrubel*. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982), 94, quoted in Budanova, *Utopian Sex*, 27.

<sup>262</sup> Budanova, 27.

<sup>263</sup> Aleksandr Vrubel, letter to Anna Vrubel, February 1885, in A. Ivanov and A. Vrubel, eds., *M.A. Vrubel. Pis'ma k sestre. Vospominaniia o khudozhnike. Otryvki iz pis'em otsa khudozhnika* (Leningrad, 1929); English trans. in Isdebsky-Pritchard, *The Art of Mikhail Vrubel*, 58, quoted in Budanova, *Utopian Sex*, 27.

<sup>264</sup> Vladimir Stasov, *Sobranie sochinenii* (St Petersburg, 1906), vol. 4:181, in Budanova, *Utopian Sex*, 27.

<sup>265</sup> Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 368.

<sup>266</sup> Engelstein, 368.

transcendence.”<sup>267</sup> Vrubel’s *Demon Downcast* employs flying as a metaphor for sexual deviation, only his protagonist has lost its wings, falling from the sky in despair.

The same year Kuzmin published *Wings*, the writer Lidiia Zinovieva-Annibal produced a lyrical short story of lesbian love. *Thirty-Three Abominations* did not end as happily as Kuzmin’s love story had, closing with the lover’s estrangement and the heroine’s suicide. The openness with which Zinovieva-Annibal described the lovers’ physical love, rather unexpectedly, shocked especially male audiences: “She kissed my eyes and lips and breasts and caressed my body.... life and death abide in the drunken juice of the rosy fruit of her fresh lips, the secret phial of my insane love.”<sup>268</sup>

The theme of transcendence reappeared in the philosophies of fin-de-siècle artists. Vladimir Solovyov’s writings concentrated on the metaphysical union of the male and female, which promised to unfold the secrets of human creativity.<sup>269</sup> Since the social framework for creative women was much more restricting, transcending gender offered arguably a more radical means to shake off the limitations of their sex. The portrait of the writer Zinaida Gippius by the artist Leon Bakst from 1906 captures its subject’s androgynous dandyism intended to break gender boundaries. Gippius is dressed in male clothing, hands in her pockets and reclining self-confidently on a chair like a proper example of fin-de-siècle decadence. Zinaida Gippius was the incarnation of androgyny, famous for her gender performance in the society circles of Russian intelligentsia. As a part of her masculine self-representation Gippius employed male pseudonyms.<sup>270</sup> In her poetry, she employed the masculine form, yet signed her work as a woman. Smoking was another device employed by gender-bending women like Gippius, because it was considered an emblem of mannishness and frequently signaled homosexual desire.<sup>271</sup> Gippius was the style icon of her day, her androgynous looks and masculine impersonation endlessly fascinating artists and writers of the creative circles. However, Gippius’ gender subversion was not a signal of queer identity purely in an individualistic sense. Rather, she combined her masculine performance with the erotic utopia and the philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov. Androgyny was but a philosophical means to transcend the boundaries of the female sex and a part of the mystical, quasi-

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<sup>267</sup> Richard Dyer, Julianne Pidduck, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*. (Routledge: New York, 2003), 17.

<sup>268</sup> Lidiia Zinoeva-Annibal, *Thirty-Three Abominations and the Devil: Tridtsat' Tri Uroda I Chort*. (Jiahu Books, 2015), 58.

<sup>269</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, trans. and ed. Thomas R. Beyer (The Lindisfarne Press: London, 1985), 27, [https://www.academia.edu/15658974/The\\_Meaning\\_of\\_Love\\_Vladimire\\_Solovyov](https://www.academia.edu/15658974/The_Meaning_of_Love_Vladimire_Solovyov).

<sup>270</sup> Matich, 177.

<sup>271</sup> Matich, 177.

religious beliefs of Solovyov's followers. A part of Gippius ethos was her celibate marriage with the writer Dmitrii Merezhovsky, with whom she engaged in numerous unconsummated love triangles in the spirit of Solovyov's preaching.<sup>272</sup> Together, they defied the patriarchal institutions of monogamous marriage, procreative family and heterosexual sex. Gippius was an important figure to the fin-de-siècle avant-garde artists, whose gender-bending appearance gave a visual reference to sexual deviance.

The young artists Leon Bakst and Konstantin Somov both belonged to the close circle of Gippius' sexually deviant friends, who would regularly meet together in soirees dedicated to Dionysian play.<sup>273</sup> Both Somov and Bakst were also members of the World of Art group, an artistic movement which greatly influenced the development of the avant-garde. The group promoted artistic individuality and were influenced by art nouveau aesthetic.

Besides the selected salons of fin-de-siècle celebrities, the theatre provided a creative environment for gender play. In the disguise of fantasy and art, sexual ambiguity and cross-dressing were a part of the everyday masquerade. According to Natalia Budanova, in the realm of imitation, "inherently risqué subjects were presented as amusing games of gallantry, set in a world of artistic fantasy".<sup>274</sup> After the portrayal of androgyny fell out of fashion with the demise of fin-de-siècle decadence and erotic utopianism, feminine masculinities and same-sex desire continued to flourish in the safe space of the theatre.<sup>275</sup>

Without the relative freedom of expression enjoyed by artists and writers at the beginning of the century, the Russian avant-garde might not have ever evolved through its characteristic experimentation. Despite the gender-bending climate in fin-de-siècle Russia, Laura Engelstein argues that "while it is true that the world of Russian modernism... accommodated some exploration of the sexual spectrum, it is clear not even the most culturally radical cream of the creative intelligentsia... embraced the representation of sexual deviance as an artistically appropriate liberty."<sup>276</sup> Yet, behaving appropriately was never the goal of the avant-garde artists, which is exactly why their art remained radical, breaking sexual and gender boundaries. Androgyny remained as a controversial visual subject, because it balanced on the fine line between artistic fantasy and sexual deviance. By the 1915's the World of Art group's aesthetic ideals had become outdated in the turn towards socialist utopianism, which had no place for bourgeois self-indulgence.

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<sup>272</sup> Matich, 179.

<sup>273</sup> Jevgeni Berštein, "Venäjän Oscar Wilde Myytti," *Idäntutkimus* (3/2004), 13.

<sup>274</sup> Natalia Budanova, "Utopian Sex: The Metamorphosis of Androgynous Imagery in Russian Art of the Pre- and Post-Revolutionary Period." *Utopian Reality*, no. 14 (January), 25, doi: 10.1163/9789004263222\_004

<sup>275</sup> Budanova, 29.

<sup>276</sup> Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 394.

### 3.2 Women Artists and the Subversion of Gender

At the turn of the century the majority of Russian high society was decisively liberal in thought.<sup>277</sup> Despite having little access to power, educated Russians advocated social reform as the only formidable solution for the country's future.<sup>278</sup> One of the major talking points emerging in the late imperial society among the urban elite were gender equality and the role of marriage.<sup>279</sup> Yet, while Russian liberals advocated an end to the tyranny of tradition, the amount of toleration had not amounted to concrete changes to end the oppression of women: patriarchy was well protected by the imperial legal system as well as by the traditional social order.<sup>280</sup> Despite the discussion on gender emancipation made possible by the political reforms of Alexander the II in the 1860's, no concrete changes had taken place in society.<sup>281</sup> In fact, Russian women remained virtually powerless in all aspects of social self-determination even after the 1905 reforms, unable to gain the right to vote until the revolution in 1917. The position of the Russian liberal bourgeois was peculiar, Engelstein writes, for being "at once behind and ahead of its time."<sup>282</sup> The emergence of female artists with the avant-garde movement accurately describes the contradicting possibilities available for women in the late Imperial patriarchy. Economic independence and social status could allow influential upper class women to participate in art patronage and business side by side with men.<sup>283</sup> Furthermore, art education was relatively available for the Russian upper class woman. The Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg opened its doors to women already in 1891, thus becoming one of the first major art institutions in Europe to do so.<sup>284</sup> Many women avant-garde artists also engaged in private tuition under the guidance of accomplished men.<sup>285</sup>

According to Natalia Budanova, the need for social reform in late imperial Russia sparked debates on gender relationships and identities, which in turn were reflected in the arts

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<sup>277</sup> Engelstein, 3.

<sup>278</sup> Engelstein, 3.

<sup>279</sup> Engelstein, 3.

<sup>280</sup> Engelstein, 4.

<sup>281</sup> Engelstein, 6.

<sup>282</sup> Engelstein, 6.

<sup>283</sup> Natalia Budanova, "Women Artists to Victims of War– The First Exhibition of the Moscow Union of Women Painters and its Reception by the Contemporary Press," *Artl@s Bulletin* 8, no. 1 (2019), 111, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1173&context=artlas>.

<sup>284</sup> Budanova, 111.

<sup>285</sup> Budanova, 111.

as the surging interest in androgyny and gender subversion.<sup>286</sup> Marina Dmitrieva makes a similar connection, linking the women's liberation movement with the surge in cross-dressing practices among women artists of the avant-garde.<sup>287</sup> Despite obstacles set up by the patriarchal social order, women artists not only participated in the avant-garde but were working directly at the heart of the movement, side to side with men. The two realities in which women were able to emerge as artists for the first time in the nation's history, while having virtually no rights as individuals, illustrates the ideological turmoil bubbling under the late Imperialist society. The contradiction between the two identities of the submissive wife and the self-ruling artist reasonably pushed artists to break gender boundaries in their work. Women artists expressed themselves in a terrain of double standards, where they could work and exhibit side to side with men, yet were often unable to gain financial independence or safely travel to exhibitions without the protection of marriage.<sup>288</sup> The only way for women to practice art at the turn of the century was to belong to the right social class.<sup>289</sup> The female descendants of upper class families could enjoy relative self- autonomy, a privilege which did not extend to the lower classes of Russian society. While women participated in the same exhibitions as men, their art could be subjected to a harsher critique. The trial of Natalia Goncharova in 1910 exemplifies the double standards women artists were faced with while practising their profession: In the first exhibition of the Jack of Diamonds group Goncharova exhibited expressionist female nudes, which were claimed to provoke male audiences with their indecency.<sup>290</sup> Goncharova was accused of distributing pornography, a claim which no Russian artist had faced before for a nude-life study.<sup>291</sup> Male conservatives simply found it obscene for a woman to interpret the female body naked, preferring that the female nude be left exclusively in the hands of male artists. Goncharova was acquitted, but the controversy reinforced her position as a vanguard artist and fed into the reputation of the avant-garde as a radical art movement. Reclaiming the female nude from the objectifying male gaze was a

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<sup>286</sup> Budanova, "Utopian Sex," 25.

<sup>287</sup> Marina Dmitrieva, "Transcending Gender: Cross-Dressing as a Performative Practice of Women Artists of the Avant-garde" in *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in Her Circle*, ed. Malycheva Tanja and Wünsche Isabel (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017), 123.

<sup>288</sup> Dmitrieva, 33.

<sup>289</sup> Dmitrieva, 33.

<sup>290</sup> Jane A. Sharp, "Re-drawing the Margins of Russian Vanguard Art: Natalia Goncharova's Trial on pornography in 1910," in *Sexuality and the Body in Russian culture*, ed. Jane T Costlow; Stephanie Sandler; Judith Vowles (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1993), 102.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

strategy employed by many women avant-garde artists, in Russia as well as Europe.<sup>292</sup> The year 1907 witnessed the creation of such famous modernist female nudes as Picasso's *Demoiselles D'Avignon*, André Derain's *Baigneuses* and Henri Matisse's *Nu bleu, Souvenir de Biskra*. Avant-garde artists were clearly fascinated with the female nude, which like Goncharova's figures, were usually painted aggressively in large scale, and specifically in androgynous and anti-feminine manner.<sup>293</sup>

Abstraction provided many women avant-garde artists visual means to overcome gendered hierarchies in representation. The artist Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958) was known for her androgynous costume design and geometric figures which epitomized the revolutionary egalitarian spirit. In a photograph from the 1920s, the artist is wearing a unisex sports uniform of her own design exhibiting bold shapes and graphic colour (Fig.3). Together with her husband and artistic collaborator Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956), Stepanova promoted utilitarian aesthetics capable of bridging the gap between the sexes. Stepanova was also one of the founding members of Russian constructivism, and published her aesthetic writings under a gender-neutral pseudonym.<sup>294</sup>

Like Natalia Goncharova, Varvara Stepanova worked together in a mutually beneficial union with her male partner. The artists' relationships endorsed the egalitarian spirit of the avant-garde and the idea of the sexes joining forces in a shared creative effort.<sup>295</sup> These creative partnerships were not unlike the utopian sexual philosophies of fin-de-siècle decadents, who had promoted an unconsummated marriage based on intellectual equality rather than gender submission.<sup>296</sup> Indeed, artists such as Goncharova and Larionov and Stepanova and Rodchenko were one of many avant-garde's 'heterosexual' couples, who engaged in mutual artistic projects without the necessity of a sexual consummation of the relationship.<sup>297</sup> In addition to their emancipative gender representations, masculine self-representation and staging were an important part of Goncharova's and Stepanova's artistic identities. In a photograph taken around 1913, Goncharova poses in men's clothing, pointing at her partner; the artist Mihail Larionov with a long paint brush (Fig. 4). The phallic symbol combined with Goncharova's aggressive pose transforms the gender dynamic between the

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<sup>292</sup> Dorothy Price, "Between us sleeps our child—art": Creativity, Identity, and the Maternal in the Works of Marianne von Werefkin and Her Contemporaries," in *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in her Circle*. Edited by Tanja Malycheva and Isabel Wünche, (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 109.

<sup>293</sup> Price, 109.

<sup>294</sup> Budanova, 35.

<sup>295</sup> Budanova, 35.

<sup>296</sup> Matich, *Erotic Utopia*, 71.

<sup>297</sup> Budanova, 34.

artists: Larionov becomes the passive subject in the image, threatened by Goncharova's poised attack. Also Stepanova and Rodchenko appear in a photograph in a similarly gender-bending fashion, taken in their studio during the early 1920's (Fig. 5). Rodchenko is sitting on the ground, looking up towards the standing Stepanova in a constructivist composition of musical instruments, random objects and tools. While Stepanova poses confidently, supporting her hand on a guitar turned upside down, holding a huge paintbrush, Rodchenko appears more submissive: he is handing a large piece of wood to Stepanova as if providing the tools for her performance. Both photographs present a strategic displacement of a binary relation between genders. According to Judith Butler's analysis on contemporary feminist theory, gender hierarchy serves compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>298</sup> The binary regulation of sexuality, in Foucault's view as interpreted by Butler, represses the subversive multiplicity of sexualities that are able to disrupt heterosexual, reproductive and medico-judicial hegemonies.<sup>299</sup> The artistic practices of Varvara Stepanova and Natalia Goncharova, which extended from the canvas to their artistic partnerships and identities, challenged the idea of reproductive heterosexuality and the subordination of women.

### 3.3 Self-Representation and Cross-Dressing

Sometime between 1908 and 1910 the artist Marianne Werefkin (1860-1938) produced a striking self-portrait combining feminine and masculine qualities describing her own identity (Fig. 6). The gender subversion in the image is atypical, partially because Werefkin is dressed in feminine attire crowned by a huge flowered fedora. Yet Werefkin's presence is anything but typically feminine: The direct gaze of her burning red eyes defies the viewer tempted to objectify her on the grounds of beauty. Her long yet unusually thick neck together with the contrasting colours on her face draw forth a masculine air, making her appear almost insolent with her bold stare. In her diary, Werefkin indicated how she experienced her gender identity as dualistic, consisting of both masculine and feminine qualities united in artistic practice: 'I am not a coward and I keep my word. I am faithful to myself, ferocious to myself and indulgent to others. That is I, the man. I love the song of love— that is I, the woman. I consciously create for myself illusions and dreams, that is I, the artist... I am neither man nor woman— I am I.'<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 26.

<sup>299</sup> Butler, 26.

<sup>300</sup> Marianne Werefkin, entry for 30 October 1905, *Lettres à un Inconnu*, vol. III, cited by Shulamith Behr, 'Veiling Venus: Gender and Painterly Abstraction in early German Modernism', in Caroline Arscott and Katie

Werefkin's dualistic position can be analysed with the help of Judith Butler's poststructuralist theory, which asserts that gender is constructed and performative.<sup>301</sup> In an interview from 1992, Butler explores the possibilities of fantasy in escaping and resisting forms of gender based constraints.<sup>302</sup> While Butler asserts that fantasy does not exist outside the relations of social power, it has the ability to "orchestrate and shatter" those relations by unmasking anxieties, fear and desire.<sup>303</sup> For women artists of the avant-garde, simulating masculinity became a way to transcend the constraints of traditional gender roles and to gain credibility as artists. Cross-dressing and gender ambiguity were popular means for avant-garde women artists to claim a space in the masculine arena of the art world. Self-representation which questioned essential femininity was not simply a masquerade intended to provoke others, but a means to justify one's place in the masculine art world as a creative individual. By claiming "I am I," Werefkin establishes an identity as an artist which moves beyond appropriating the masculine norm.

After having acquired her education in Russia as the apprentice of Ilya Repin (1844-1930), Werefkin moved to Munich and became acquainted with other Russian émigré artists such as Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). Throughout her career, Werefkin travelled considerably in Europe and was well connected with the avant-garde art scene in Germany, especially Der Blaue Reiter group.<sup>304</sup> While Werefkin combined various expressionist influences from different artists in her work, notably from Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Edvard Munch, her stylistic connection to the Neue Sachlichkeit has also been noted. Werefkin formed a close partnership with the artist Alexander von Jawlensky (1864-1941), an expressionist like Werefkin who was also fascinated by the androgyne motif.

Due to the advantages provided to her by her aristocratic background, Werefkin was able to carry out her transnational lifestyle without the necessity of marriage.<sup>305</sup> Unmarried women artists such as Werefkin were pejoratively referred to as Mannweib, or "manwoman" in the artistic societies of early 20th century.<sup>306</sup> Whether they engaged in same-sex relationships or not, women acquiring a role within the traditionally masculine were accused

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Scott, eds., *Manifestations of Venus: Art and Sexuality* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 132.

<sup>301</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 68-73.

<sup>302</sup> Butler, "The Body you Want. Liz Kotz interviews Judith Butler," *Artforum* 31 (November, 1992) 3, 87. <https://faculty.ucr.edu/~ewkotz/texts/Kotz-1992-Artforum-ButlerInt.pdf>

<sup>303</sup> Butler, 87.

<sup>304</sup> Bernd Fäthke, "Marianne Werefkin: Clemens Weiler's Legacy," in *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in her Circle*, ed. Tanja Malycheva, Isabel Wünche (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 8.

<sup>305</sup> Fäthke, 8.

<sup>306</sup> Fäthke, 8.

of defying nature.<sup>307</sup> In other words, female masculinity was found offensive, because it broke the accepted roles of gender hierarchy. Women artists performing masculinity revealed how there was no innate link between masculinity and male power, questioning the omnipotence of patriarchal authority. According to Jack Halberstam, “female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing”<sup>308</sup> However, avant-garde women artists created their own version of masculinity free from the misogyny related to patriarchal power, revealing how no single ‘real’ masculinity exists.

To Werefkin, transcending gender was a question of fluidity with the objective to overcome traditional antagonisms and boundaries. By adopting a masculine demeanour, she could be more outspoken and unconventional without losing her respectability.<sup>309</sup> Like many Russian artists of the pre-revolutionary era, Werefkin’s practice was influenced by the writings of the fin-de-siècle philosopher Vladimir Solovyov.<sup>310</sup> The religious mystic had envisioned a kind of a “third sex”— a cryptic fusion of masculine and feminine elements in the form of an androgyne. Another religious philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev also connected creativity and androgyny, albeit ten years later than Werefkin. Echoing Solovyov’s utopian vision, Berdiaev envisaged the coming of a new human being, the creative androgyne, writing: ‘Never before have there been such widespread deviations from the ‘natural’, birth-given sex; never before has there been such a feeling and recognition of man’s bi-sexuality. The ‘natural’ boundaries between female and male are being blurred and confused’.<sup>311</sup> The utopian “third sex” was not to be confused with hermaphroditism, a condition which was considered a physical deformity of the body and looked down upon with fear and disgust in early 20th century society.<sup>312</sup> The curiosity mixed with contempt around hermaphrodites revealed the actual anxieties around gender and sex; the androgyne could only be glorified as long as it stood for a creative ideal and not the actual fusion of sexes.

In Munich, Werefkin and Jawlensky became acquainted with the Jewish dancer Alexander Sakharoff, who was known for his effeminate stage-presence and cross-dressing. Sakharoff’s androgynous looks inspired Werefkin, who produced multiple sketches

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<sup>307</sup> Shulamith Behr, “Performing the Wo/man: the Interplay between Marianne Werefkin and Else Lasker-Shüler.” In *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in her Circle*. Edited by Tanja Malycheva and Isabel Wünche, 92.

<sup>308</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1.

<sup>309</sup> Engelstein, 398.

<sup>310</sup> Dmitrieva, “Transcending Gender,” 130.

<sup>311</sup> Nicolas Berdiaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (Collier Books: New York), 1962, 199.

<sup>312</sup> Budanova, “Utopian Sex,” 32.

reminiscent of the dancer's features. In 1906 both Werefkin and Jawlensky painted portraits of the dancer, capturing his feminine gender staging on canvas. Sakharoff was a talented performer who combined elements of classical ballet with expressive dance and acrobatics on stage. A part of his stage presence had always been the mixing of gendered signs, from clothing to body gestures.<sup>313</sup> A German newspaper described Sakharoff in 1913 on stage wearing "a 'blue velvet robe with its swelling intimation of a hoop skirt under a sharply contoured waistline and the strong naked legs mix both male and female characteristics', while his dancing 'ingeniously combined supple feminine grace with male strength'.<sup>314</sup>

Despite their close affiliation, Werefkin and Jawlensky took distinctly different approaches in their portrayal of the dancer. In Jawlensky's interpretation, the cross dressing of the dancer is enhanced by the thick brushstrokes and strong colour palette. (Fig. 7) Apparently, Sakharoff visited Jawlensky's studio in costume and stage make-up and the painting was dashed off at speed.<sup>315</sup> Jawlensky captured the dancer with a slightly mischievous look on his face as if hinting at the gender play taking place in the picture. Jawlensky's portrait is intended to capture a performance, like an image of a drag queen in costume. Indeed, in *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler asserts that the practice of drag exposes the performative nature of gender.<sup>316</sup> The parody of drag, like Sakharoff's performance, has the ability to resist society's power structures by revealing that there is no essential source to gender identity; "There is no original or primary gender a drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original."<sup>317</sup>

Werefkin's portrait offers a more subtle interpretation of Sakharoff's drag. Whereas Jawlensky employs an aggressive colour palette and high contrast, Werefkin goes for midnight blue and soft lines (Fig. 8). Both artists portray Sakharoff as a kind of femme fatale, a tempting seductress of ambiguous gender. In Jawlensky's version, Sakharoff is shamelessly confronting the viewer's gaze, while Werefkin opts for a playful glance over the shoulder. In 1912 Werefkin made another portrait of Sakharoff, this time a more colourful interpretation which captured a feminine beauty, instead of flirtatious enticement (Fig. 9). Without knowing the subject's true identity, it would be impossible to tell the gender subversion going on in the image. This time around, Werefkin clearly decided not to underline Sakharoff's sex but to

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<sup>313</sup> Budanova, 32.

<sup>314</sup> Horst Koegler, "A Single Being and a Single Soul with Two Bodies: Alexander and Clothilde Sacharoff and the Pre-World War I Munich Avant-Garde" *Dance Chronicle* 26, no. 2 (2003), 253, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1568127>.

<sup>315</sup> Alex Pilcher, *A Queer Little History of Art* (London: Tate, 2017), 25.

<sup>316</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 76.

<sup>317</sup> Butler, "Imitation and Gender Subordination," 21.

capture the simulation of femininity as a truly constructed performance. The later portrayal perhaps captures more accordingly the utopian ideal of the androgyne as envisioned by Solovyov and Berdyaev, than the sensational version of 1909. For Werefkin and Jawlensky the interest in depicting a male dancer in female costume was connected to the fashionable study of the Japanese woodcut, in which male actors performed female roles.<sup>318</sup>

Werefkin was an influential figure in the avant-garde scene of the pre-revolutionary era.<sup>319</sup> Her wide network across Russia and Europe included many like-minded women who defied traditional gender roles by navigating the masculine art world. One of the women in Werefkin's larger social circle was the graphic artist Elizaveta Kruglikova (1865-1941). Like Werefkin, Kruglikova lived a cosmopolitan lifestyle travelling across Europe, unmarried and in charge of her own life. In a bold self-portrait from 1934, the artist depicts herself dressed in men's clothing. The picture is a black and white silhouette in which Kruglikova adorns a dandyish bow tie and a dapper vest, wearing her hair short (Fig. 10). Kruglikova's portrait is a nostalgic tribute to the androgynous aesthetics of the fin-de-siècle era.

In the puritan and stylistically homogeneous Stalinist culture of the 1930's, Kruglikova's self-portrait represented especially daring gender subversion. Before the First World War, Kruglikova had led a popular studio in Paris, often visiting Russia during the summer months.<sup>320</sup> In artistic circles she was called the "Russian Parisian" and known for her unfeminine style of clothing.<sup>321</sup> Kruglikova's residency in France provided her with more access to materials and greater opportunity as a woman to work in printmaking than could have been possible at the time in Russia.<sup>322</sup> Since printmaking was a relatively little practised technique at the time, especially in Russia, it offered Kruglikova an opportunity to side-step the masculine hierarchies of the other established media in fine art. According to Galina Mardilovich, 'Printmaking gave women the rare chance of inaugurating themselves as pioneers'.<sup>323</sup> Kruglikova gained international renown with her work, which elevated the status of the medium from its previously undervalued position as 'applied' art.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Budanova, 33.

<sup>319</sup> Tanja Malycheva, Isabel Wünche, Introduction to *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in her Circle*, 2.

<sup>320</sup> Galina Mardilovich, "Women as Catalysts for Innovation in Printmaking: Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva and Elizaveta Kruglikova" In *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in her Circle*, ed. Tanja Malycheva and Isabel Wünche, (Boston:Brill, 2017), 215, doi: 10.1163/9789004333147\_007.

<sup>321</sup> Mardilovich, 216.

<sup>322</sup> Mardilovich, 216.

<sup>323</sup> Mardilovich, 220.

<sup>324</sup> Mardilovich, 220.

In 1938 and 1939, the artist Mikhail Nesterov painted two portraits of Kruglikova, again in men's clothing and with a distinct aura of masculine authority. In the earlier portrait, Kruglikova reappears in the dandyish clothing of fin-de-siècle, her arm confidently on her hip, the other one holding a cigarette (Fig 11). In the portrait painted a year later, Kruglikova appears as a confident artist wearing her signature clothing: under her painter's white jacket she is wearing a dapper vest and a black bowtie. The cigarette has been replaced by a printmaking pencil, leaving no place for doubt that she indeed, is the artist and creative genius (Fig. 12). For Kruglikova, cross-dressing provided a transfiguration from passive to active individual in accordance with her profession. It was also likely to be a part of a deliberate gender performance signaling same-sex desire. Kruglikova, like other artists of the pre-revolutionary era, was forced to inactivity during the Stalinist era. Little is known of her private and romantic relationships, except that she remained unmarried throughout her life.

The simulation of masculinity in the cases of Natalia Goncharova, Varvara Stepanova, Marianne Werefkin and Elizaveta Kruglikova had various motifs ranging from professional to personal. Jack Halberstam argues that female masculinity endangers the link between masculinity and male domination. He claims that "masculinity in ... society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege."<sup>325</sup> In 1913, the Russian feminist Marxist Alexandra Kollontai described the 'new revolutionary woman' as independent and single, earning her own living, and "walking the streets with a businesslike, masculine tread."<sup>326</sup> Kollontai's description fit the profile of Kruglikova, who undoubtedly shared her views. Kollontai's statement connected women's emancipation with the adoption of masculine features, in line with Halberstam's statement on the culturally constructed connection of power and masculinity.

Judith Butler theorized that cross-dressing and performativity can function as means to deconstruct normative behaviour and has the ability to reveal gendered fallacies.<sup>327</sup> Women who broke into the masculine arena of art at the turn of the century were faced not only with the prejudices of their male colleagues, but the internalised fear of inferiority. In order to overcome gender anxieties, it was necessary for women artists to defy established norms of behaviour. By knowingly adopting masculine features, these artists were not simply trying to conform into the established standard, but to question their essentiality altogether. The masculine performance of Goncharova, Werefkin and Kruglikova was not carried out in

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<sup>325</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 2.

<sup>326</sup> Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 399.

<sup>327</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

order to justify their abilities to men, but for themselves as creative individuals. For Butler, gender subversion has the potential to overstep sexual norms by revealing gender to be a copy with no original: '*in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself— as well as its contingency*'.<sup>328</sup>

### 3.4 Self-Representing Otherness: The Queer Jew

In 1911 the avant-garde artist Natan Altman painted a self-portrait in which he enhanced his Jewish features creating a strikingly androgynous look (Fig.14). The portrait's bright colours and strong contrast bear a resemblance to Paul Gauguin's works as well as those of Alexei von Jawlensky. Altman had good connections to Paris, which suggests that he was familiar with the post-impressionists' strong colour palette.<sup>329</sup> Like other avant-garde artists of the time in Russia, Altman would visit Sergei Schukin's and Ivan Morozov's collections of contemporary Western paintings and be influenced by the works of Cézanne, Derain, Gauguin, Matisse, Van Gogh etc.<sup>330</sup> The warm yellow of Altman's V neck shirt contrasts against the green background, as well as the red and violet flowers of the lower left corner. Altman's black, wavy hair frames his handsome face. The artist has chosen to emphasise his feminine countenance, the oriental shape of his cat eyes accentuated by the finely trimmed eyebrows and a long nose leading to his voluptuous, pink lips. Combined with the artist's chiselled jawline, strong shoulders and a flat chest, the image becomes a celebration of male beauty. Altman was a member of the St. Petersburg avant-garde group Union of Youth [*Soyuz Molodyozhi*], which had roots in the city's symbolist circles. While some critiqued the transcendent philosophies of its leaders as the resurrection of "postsymbolist decadence of spiritualist séances, table tapping and erotic mysticism..."<sup>331</sup> The group had significant influence on the development of Russian futurism and critical art theory.

In another self-portrait painted a year later, the artist again presents himself in an androgynous manner, moving from neoprimitivism towards a cubofuturist style (Fig. 15). In the self- portrait, Altman is dressed in a loose white shirt, his figure half-blocked by a composition of red flowers. His slightly long hairstyle is typically Jewish, as are his features which deliberately play with the element of orientalism. Unlike many Russian Jewish artists, Altman did not shy away from self-representation revealing his ethnicity. While other avant-

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<sup>328</sup> Butler, 137 (Butler's Italics).

<sup>329</sup> Altman stayed in Paris in 1910-1911, pursuing a one-year training after his graduation in Russia. There he met with many avant-garde artists, both Russian and European. See Alina Orlov, "Natan Altman and the Problem with Jewish Art in Russia in the 1910s," PhD diss., (University of Southern California, 2003), 11.

<sup>330</sup> Bowl, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 25.

<sup>331</sup> Bowl, 28.

garde artists of Jewish descent did not openly reclaim a Jewish identity in their self-portraits, Altman was clearly intrigued by the aesthetic possibilities of representing otherness. Jean-François Staszak defines otherness as “the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group (“us, the Self”) constructs one of many dominated out-groups (“them, other”) by stigmatizing a difference, real or imagined— presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination.”<sup>332</sup> According to Alina Orlov, Altman saw a possibility to identify as well as advance himself as an artist at the wake of Jewish nationalism, which consequently coincided with rise of the anti-Semitic front in Russia.<sup>333</sup> Through self-representation, Altman was able to confront both anti-Semitic and nationalist characterizations of Jewishness.<sup>334</sup>

The self-portrait of 1911 is a double representation of otherness: the accentuation of Altman’s Jewish features by making himself appear more feminine, engages both with ethnic and sexual difference. The image finds a contemporary connection in Adrian Piper’s self-portrait *Exaggerating My Negroid Features* (Fig. 16, 1981) in which the artist addresses themes of identity and race. Natan Altman’s work has been studied in connection with his Jewish identity and the revolution, but little attention has been given to the other subversive qualities of his self-portraits. Altman’s Jewish features which he chose to exaggerate are consequently those which make him appear feminine. The Jewish artist Maurycy Gottlieb produced a self-portrait in 1876 in which he portrayed himself as the Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew. Like Altman, Gottlieb was purposefully enhancing his Jewishness. As described by Nehama Guralnik, his “thick sensuous lips, black curly hair, hooked nose and a melancholy look,”<sup>335</sup> completed the look of the characteristic oriental Jew. Another artist who enhanced his Jewish features in order to appear more feminine was the Dancer Alexander Sakharoff. His gender bending appearance inspired many avant-garde artists at the same time Altman was producing his effeminate portraits in accordance with the aesthetic ideas of the Union of Youth.

It would be easy to dismiss the gender subversive qualities of Altman’s self-portraits as the manifestations of Altman’s religious and ethnic identity. However, the femininity in his 1911 self-portrait becomes even more clear when compared to yet another self-portrait the

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<sup>332</sup> Jean-François Staszak, “Other/Otherness,” *Elsevier: International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography*, (2008), 2, <https://www.unige.ch/sciences-societe/geo/files/3214/4464/7634/OtherOtherness.pdf>.

<sup>333</sup> Orlov, “Natan Altman,” 24-26.

<sup>334</sup> Orlov, 26.

<sup>335</sup> Nehama Guralnik, “Maurycy Gottlieb: Ahasuer and Dreamer, a Polish-Jewish or Jewish-Polish Artist?” In *The Flower of Youth: Maurycy Gottlieb, 1856-1879*, Exhibition Catalog (Tel Aviv: Dvir Publishing Ltd, 1991), 36, quoted in Alina Orlov, “Natan Altman and the Problem with Jewish Art in Russia in the 1910s,” PhD diss., (University of Southern California, 2003), 10, doi: 10.25549/usctheses-c16-376100.

artist painted in 1912 (fig. 17). The two portraits are actually almost identical, except they seem to offer two dualistic interpretations of the artist's identity: a masculine and a feminine self. It is interesting to notice that Altman did not need to make himself appear androgynous in order to appear characteristically Jewish: the "masculine" portrait offers also an exaggeration of his ethnicity, complete with thick lips, strong nose and exotic looking eyes. The difference between the portraits is more nuanced, arising from subtle differences almost impossible to entangle. In both pictures, the artist is wearing similar attire, positioned almost identically in the image which crops the shoulders from the image. The bright yellow V neck sits lower together with the black jacket, making Altman's attire seem more feminine in the other picture. The colours are almost opposite, and there are no bright flowers in the darker, toned-down portrait. Similarly, Altman's features have a slightly different feeling to them, from the shape of the face, to the colours of the skin and softness of the pitch-black eyes. Yet, both pictures clearly represent the same person. Perhaps Altman's intention was to illustrate the overlapping and inseparable quality of identities. Sexual ambiguity becomes entwined in Altman's Jewishness as two intersecting identities representing otherness.

Altman was a prolific artist, who managed to make a name for himself in the avant-garde scene despite anti-Semitism and his rural family background. Throughout his career, Altman successfully combined Jewish and modernist visual elements in a unique manner. According to Alina Orlov, bridging the gap between radical modernism and ethnicity did not present an ethical or a political conflict to the artist.<sup>336</sup> Yet, it is difficult to imagine that the artist remained unaffected by the Russian anti-Semitic paranoia, which reached its height the years before the First World War and again in the Stalinist 1930's.<sup>337</sup> According to Orlov, by using his own appearance to exemplify the Jewish youth, "Altman made himself vulnerable to anti-Semitic sneers."<sup>338</sup> Yet, the same self-offering was also self-empowering, reinforced by the resistant Jewish nationalist discourse.

Altman was the first Jewish artist to create a body of works in self-representation as a Jew in Russia.<sup>339</sup> His self-portraits problematized both Jewish nationalist imagery and anti-Semitic caricatures. However, as Orlov argues, Altman did not want to be labelled exclusively as a "Jewish artist", which could have led to the minorisation of his work and

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<sup>336</sup> Alina Orlov, "Natan Altman and the Problem with Jewish Art in Russia in the 1910s," PhD diss., (University of Southern California, 2003), 4, doi: 10.25549/usctheses-c16-376100.

<sup>337</sup> Matich, *Erotic Utopia*, 14.

<sup>338</sup> Orlov, 146.

<sup>339</sup> Orlov, 13.

consequently cast the artist aside from the heart of the avant-garde.<sup>340</sup> While Altman remained loyal to the Jewish nationalist cause, as an artist he wished to be connected with the avant-garde movement. As a testimony to his loyalties, Altman chose to display his works in non-Jewish venues first, and even his distinctly Jewish works were realised in a style which suited the tastes of the modern, international art circles.<sup>341</sup> His position within the avant-garde movement was secured at the latest in 1914, when Altman immortalised the famous Russian poet Anna Akhmatova on canvas in cubofuturist style. An artist with a sense for the latest currents in visual culture, Altman participated in all of the major avant-garde exhibitions, including ‘World of Art’ (1913, 1915-16), ‘Union of Youth’ (1913-14) and ‘Jack of Diamonds’ (1916). After the revolution, Altman gained formal recognition among other notable avant-garde artists and engaged in the grand project of reorganising all artistic life in the socialist society. True to his origins as a believer in the transcendental qualities of art, Altman promoted Communist futurism [Komfut] as the utopian aesthetic of socialist society. However, Altman never promoted futurism as a totalitarian aesthetic, but endorsed its anti-academic, progressive and experimental aesthetic qualities.<sup>342</sup>

After the revolution Altman began working in a style more appropriate for the political climate and the revolutionary cause. Due to his creative adaptability and mastering of different styles, contemporaries referred to Altman as a chameleon.<sup>343</sup> Yet, his role in the avant-garde as argued by Orlov was “not that of a follower or an imitator, but a pioneer”.<sup>344</sup> Orlov accuses Altman of non-sentimentality and opportunism when it came to promoting himself as a Jewish artist.<sup>345</sup> Altman was an artist caught between two worlds, who understood that in order to advance his career he needed to adapt within the dominant ideological discourse. An astounding testimonial of his ability to adapt is the large bust of Lenin Altman produced in 1924. At first glance, an artist who had previously created radically subversive self-portraits, and now turning into a promoter of an atheist leadership cult, seems forced. Still he was no different to other avant-garde artists, who after the revolution willingly supported the transformation into socialist realism.

Gender serving as an unstable and performative concept, so did Altman’s Jewish identity. With his self-portraits, Altman radically challenged nationalist and anti-Semitic

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<sup>340</sup> Orlov, 13.

<sup>341</sup> Orlov, 13.

<sup>342</sup> Orlov, 46.

<sup>343</sup> Orlov, 46

<sup>344</sup> Orlov, 10.

<sup>345</sup> Orlov, 11.

conceptions of Jewishness which lead to the expansion and subversion of Jewish avant-garde art. His self-portraits also challenged gender categories and extended the language of queer avant-garde. According to Orlov, Altman's self-portraits can be interpreted as "statements against conformity" and "blending in".<sup>346</sup> Judith Butler, on the other hand, promotes identity categories "as sites of necessary trouble."<sup>347</sup> Altman's self-portraits created trouble on the double fronts of gender and Jewishness.

Although Altman's success after the revolution promoting art ideologically hostile to religion and individualism seems at odds, it should be remembered that throughout his career the artist had a good sense for possibilities advancing his career. Furthermore, Altman was not an exception among the leftist avant-garde artists, who joined the reorganisation of all art life with fervent belief in the revolutionary cause.<sup>348</sup> While Altman ceased to produce androgynous self-portraits after the revolution, he remained loyal to his aesthetic beliefs and the idea of transcendence through representation.

### 3.5 Homosocial Desire

Imagine two muscular men sitting next to each other on a couch, wearing nothing but black trunks and socks. Their flexed biceps and bare breasts tell the story of shared sweat and clammy skin, gazing directly at the observer as if ready to showcase their strength. Except the man on the left is holding a violin in his hands instead of a kettle bell, while his friend on the right is holding a sheet of music instead of a weight. The physical tension between the moustachioed heroes is about to climax at the point of their knees, just inches away from brushing against each other. Against expectations, the image in question is not the homoerotic work of the artist Touko Laaksonen (1920-1991), better known as *Tom of Finland*, but an acclaimed piece of Russian avant-garde art. The painting is a double portrait by Ilya Mashkov featuring him and his artist friend, Pyotr Konchalovsky (Fig.18). Both men were members of the influential Knave of Diamonds avant-garde group which held their first exhibition in Moscow in 1910, remaining active until the revolution. The Knave of Diamonds artists were influenced by Western modernism, fusing together foreign stylistic innovations and elements of Russian peasant art in their work. The strong colours and defined brushstrokes are characteristic to Mashkov's style, who sought inspiration from the works of

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<sup>346</sup> Orlov, 10.

<sup>347</sup> Judith Butler "Imitation and Gender Subordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. by Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991) 14.

<sup>348</sup> Bowl, *Art of the Avant-Garde*, 32.

Monet and Cézanne, while paying tribute to traditional Russian wood carvings [lubok]. While Mashkov's portrait might not have been intentionally homoerotic, the flamboyant homosocial bond between the two men is nevertheless striking to the eye. The portrait is a spectacular tribute to the superior nature of male friendship over heterosexual love relations by completely excluding the feminine in the patriarchal hand-holding. Mashkov and Konchalovsky's intense male-bonding and glorification of the athletic body foreshadows the coming of socialist realism a decade later.

The queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has analysed homosocial bonding between men in European culture. Male relationships, such as the professional intimacy of Mashkov and Konchalovsky presented on canvas, are structured according to class, on the oppression of women.<sup>349</sup> The intense bonding between men repels otherness and reinforces love for heterosexual masculinity through likeness, a social phenomenon which Sedgwick refers to as "homosocial desire". According to Sedgwick, the line between homosocial and homosexual desire is obscure: "To draw the "homosocial" back into the orbit of "desire", of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual".<sup>350</sup> The porous ground on which homosocial bonding is built on is under a constant threat of collapsing.

Jean Lipman-Blumen defines homosociality as "...the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex"<sup>351</sup> In *Between Men* Sedgwick identifies a pattern of triangular relationships reinforced in the romantic narratives of English literature during the mid-18th and 19th centuries. According to Sedgwick, this "love triangle" is formed by two men functioning as the active participants of the relationship, engaged in an erotic rivalry over a yielding woman. The "ménage à trois" is a popular trope in culture; take for example the queer relationship of Donald Duck, Daisy Duck and Gladstone Gander, where the two cartoon birds' rivalry repeatedly triumphs in emotional intensity in their shared love for the subservient Daisy. The same-sex desire between Mashkov and Konchalovsky becomes unmediated through a seemingly heterosexual premise; the self-indulgent love for the ideal man circulates between the two men independent from the usual female mediator. A situation of sexual sameness like this creates what Sedgwick refers to as "homosexual panic":

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<sup>349</sup> Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 10-11.

<sup>350</sup> Sedgwick, 1.

<sup>351</sup> Jean Lipman-Blumen, "Toward a Homosocial Theory of Sex Roles: An Explanation of the Sex Segregation of Social Institutions," *Signs* 1, no. 3 (1976): 15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3172990>, 16.

The underlying fear of compulsory heterosexuality that somewhere the line between homosocial and homosexual desire has been crossed.<sup>352</sup>

The double portrait, which premiered in the first exhibition of Knave of Diamonds, was without a doubt intended to stir the tastes of the public. The sheer size of the painting, being over two metres in height and width, emphasised the eye-catching nudity of the sitters. Contemporary Russians were not accustomed to seeing the male body naked in the context Mashkov portrayed the two men; nudity in academic art had traditionally been reserved for the classical heroes of antiquity instead of self-portraiture.<sup>353</sup> The bare chests of Mashkov and Konchalovsky were an intentional assault on stuffy academic standards, representing the general position of the avant-garde as vanguard art.<sup>354</sup> With the painting, Mashkov intended to capture the nouveau idea of physical self-grooming which was emerging among the cosmopolites of Russia at the time. According to the latest Cartesian influenced philosophy, the cultivated mind needed to be matched in physical strength. Mashkov's portrait is an image promoting the coalescence between the mind and the body which he, among other members of the Knave of Diamonds group, perceived as their guiding spiritual ethos. Showcasing the physical body declared a stark departure from the spiritual idealism of artists preceding the avant-garde era, who had dwelled in the metaphysical questions of the human condition. Mashkov's portrait boldly suggested that appearances mattered.

Later, the aesthetic worship of physical strength would become a central theme in socialist realist art. Both women and men would be idealised as robust and able-bodied citizens of the communist utopia. In the paintings of the socialist realist artist Alexander Deineka, the male body is repeatedly eroticised in homosocial settings. Yet, Deineka's works passed the censorship protocols of the Stalinist regime, exactly because they could simultaneously pass as the physical reincarnations of the iconic "New Soviet Man". The theoretical formulation of the communist ideal started after the Bolshevik revolution in the 1920's. According to critics of the avant-garde, it was necessary for art to return into a more classical formal aesthetic in order to properly capture the image of the "New Man", the superman and the demiurge.<sup>355</sup> While the New Man symbolised the great communists of Marx, Lenin and Stalin, who certainly had not been in great physical condition nor especially handsome, their aesthetic reincarnations were unceasingly ripped and good-looking. In a strikingly homoerotic painting entitled *After Battle* (1937-1942, Fig. 19), Deineka portrays a

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<sup>352</sup> Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 89.

<sup>353</sup> Sharp, "Russian Vanguard Art," 103.

<sup>354</sup> Sharp, 103.

<sup>355</sup> Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 65.

group of men showering after exercise. The painting was inspired by a somewhat homoerotic photo taken by the artist's friend, the Soviet photographer Boris Ignatovich (fig. 20). Deineka was fascinated by the composition in the picture, spending years capturing the muscular athlete's turned back on canvas. By the time the painting was finished, the oncoming Second World War required a title change, and the merry athletes became soldiers. The setting of the showers as an exclusively male space encapsulates the homosocial bonding at hand. The bodies of the young men are reminiscent of neoclassical paintings, their buttocks as round and smooth as that of a Greek statue. It is interesting to notice how the figure in the foreground is casually observing the other men. With his wide shoulders and thick back, the man appears to be older than the youth showering in front of him. The portrayal of young men naked in homoerotic art is a recurring theme, while the dominating presence of a more grown man draws parallels to the homosexual relationships of classical antiquity. Unexplainably, the observing figure in the forefront reminds of Deineka himself. In a self-portrait painted six years after, Deineka presents himself proudly half-naked in a confident pose (fig. 21). The painting is an obvious tribute to the artist's athletic body, which he exposes by wearing scarcely anything but a bathrobe drawn down on his shoulder. Deineka's self-portrait, like that of Mashkov's and Konchalovsky's, has a distinct homosocial aura in its unaffected love for the male body. In 1927, Deineka humorously recounted an event in a letter to the committee for the USSR Revolutionary Council of War. According to Deineka, he had been caught "practically naked" exercising in his underwear whilst supposedly working on his commission.<sup>356</sup> An official from the committee supervising Deineka's progress had walked in on him, witnessing both a naked canvas and a naked artist. The official had then returned to the committee, stating that Deineka "had done nothing and I am afraid he won't do a thing".<sup>357</sup> However, Deineka finished the commission in a week, returning from the studio with *Defence of Petrograd* and used the incident to dispel the committee's doubts. Deineka's recount created a narrative of him as dedicated to the Soviet ideal, his love for the male body on canvas and in life being no different from Mashkov's and Konchalovsky's artistic ideals.

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<sup>356</sup> Ivana Zabiianka and Maria Zozaya, "A life in the Country of the Soviets," in *Alexander Deineka (1899-1969): An Avant-Garde for the Proletariat*, (Madrid: Fundacion Juan March, 2011), 14, [https://monoskop.org/images/6/6d/Aleksandr\\_Deineka\\_1899-1969\\_An\\_Avant-Garde\\_for\\_the\\_Proletariat\\_2011.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/6/6d/Aleksandr_Deineka_1899-1969_An_Avant-Garde_for_the_Proletariat_2011.pdf).

<sup>357</sup> I. A. Rakhillo, "Deineka (Iz zapisey raznykh let)" (1972, repr. 1978), 479–80, in *Alexander Deineka (1899-1969): An Avant-Garde for the Proletariat*.

According to Lilya Kaganovsky, the male entitlement of Soviet culture antagonized weakness, homosexuality and women as the radical other of the homosocial continuum.<sup>358</sup> In her analysis of socialist realist literature, Kaganovsky notes how sexuality is buried under the socialist paradigm, yet “in its attempt to rechannel sexuality, the socialist realist text inadvertently produces desire at the site of male bonding.”<sup>359</sup> In a reworking of Sedgwick’s theory, Kaganovsky refers to the ironic condition which follows as “heterosexual panic”.<sup>360</sup> The Soviet ideology towards heterosexual and familial relationships as inferior to the citizen’s love for the country and its leader inadvertently lead to a culture producing desire between men.

#### 4 Queer Art After the Revolution

The historian Simon Karlinsky was first to address the brief bloom of queer visibility in Russia between 1905 and the October Revolution in 1917. In the essay *Russia’s Gay Literature and Culture: The Impact of the October Revolution* (1989) Karlinsky noted how same-sex love, androgyny and gender fluidity were popular subjects in the works of decadent symbolists and fin-de-siècle avant-garde artists.<sup>361</sup> Karlinsky describes the pre-revolutionary period in Russian culture as witnessing “amazing tolerance towards homosexuality.”<sup>362</sup> By the 1920’s however, themes of same-sex love and gender fluidity had dwindled. According to Karlinsky, the shift in visibility could only be explained by the thoroughly homophobic Bolshevik regime, which ruthlessly subjugated artists under its rule. Pre-revolutionary homosexual artists and writers were shunned due to their class backgrounds. Karlinsky claims that the Bolsheviks considered homosexuality as essentially a mental ailment of the bourgeoisie.<sup>363</sup> Furthermore, desire without reproduction contradicted the puritanical sexual values of both Lenin and Stalin, who were known to be averse of sexual liberation in any form.<sup>364</sup> In the light of the revolution, queer desire represented individualistic and petty-bourgeois dwelling on sexual pleasure, which had no purpose in the collective society. Hence, the unprecedented legalisation of homosexuality by the Bolsheviks that lasted until 1932 was never an intended reform on human rights, but rather a legislative mishap.

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<sup>358</sup> Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man was Unmade: Cultural fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2008) 71-72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qh907>.

<sup>359</sup> Kaganovsky, 71.

<sup>360</sup> Kaganovsky, 71.

<sup>361</sup> Simon Karlinsky, “Russia’s Gay Literature and Culture,” 355.

<sup>362</sup> Karlinsky 356.

<sup>363</sup> Karlinsky, 356.

<sup>364</sup> Karlinsky, 349.

According to Karlinsky, it was not the Stalinist oppression on homosexuals that brought an end to the queer subject but the October Revolution.

However, Karlinsky's totalitarian view neglects to take into account the reciprocal relationship of art and ideology during the 1920's as well as it fails to understand socialist realism as the descendant of avant-garde. According to Dan Healey, explaining the legalization of homosexuality as a legal oversight does not provide a satisfactory explanation.<sup>365</sup> Rather, the communists' attitude towards issues of sexual liberation was defined by their general belief that such problems would be naturally resolved in the collective society.<sup>366</sup> Rather, the Bolsheviks left a discursive vacuum around issues of sexual and gender dissent which Soviet legal and medical experts tried to eagerly resolve during the 1920's.<sup>367</sup> Attitudes towards homosexuality during the years of legalization did not display unanimity from behalf of medical or juridical authorities.<sup>368</sup> It follows that the disappearance of queer subjects in art was neither as abrupt nor totalitarian as Karlinsky claims.

After the revolution in 1917, many avant-garde artists participated in the utopian project of creating an art which fully embodied the political and social dimensions of the communist doctrine. As Natalia Budanova argues, despite the seemingly radical transformation in aesthetics, the motif of the androgyne maintained its appeal in visual art.<sup>369</sup> The androgyne, as "inherently utopian and idealistic"<sup>370</sup> resonated with the Bolshevik archetype of the 'New Man', *novy chelovek*, a citizen dedicated to selfless collectivism.<sup>371</sup>

Between 1919 and 1921 the avant-garde artist Varvara Stepanova created a series of easel and graphic works entitled *Figures* (Fig. 22). Characteristic of Stepanova's work was the employment of geometrical abstraction in order to overcome gendered representation. In *Figures* Stepanova continued to employ abstraction as a means of emancipation as she had done before the revolution. By portraying androgynous humans engaged together in various creative activities from sports to dance, gendered hierarchies are replaced with a dynamic union of the sexes. With the return to figurative painting, the experimentalist aesthetic of the pre-revolutionary avant-garde was attacked with criticism.<sup>372</sup> By the end of the 1920's, the emerging Stalinist regime was rapidly establishing cultural values which reinforced the

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<sup>365</sup> Healey, 127.

<sup>366</sup> Healey, 127.

<sup>367</sup> Healey, 129.

<sup>368</sup> Healey, 129.

<sup>369</sup> Budanova, *Utopian Sex*, 35.

<sup>370</sup> Budanova, 35.

<sup>371</sup> Budanova, 35.

<sup>372</sup> Bowl, Introduction to the *Art of the Avant-Garde*, 35.

mandate of reproductive heterosexuality. Unlike Stepanova's harmonious and emancipative aesthetic, socialist realism could only realise androgyny through a hostile eradication of the subjective feminine. The new Soviet ideology visualised gender equality through an overwhelming masculinization of culture, promoting values such as discipline, order and utilitarianism.<sup>373</sup> In visual culture, from propaganda posters to easel painting, androgyny came to signify the subordination of the feminine for the revolutionary cause. In Butler's readings of Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig, the gendered binaries of language mask "the univocal and hegemonic discourse of the masculine" which silences the feminine.<sup>374</sup> In socialist realist art, gender equality in fact signified the obscuring of sexual difference and the promotion of universal masculinity. Qualities traditionally associated with the feminine, such as compassion, tolerance and forgiveness, were rejected as signs of weakness and treated with suspicion.<sup>375</sup> According to Budanova, socialist realist aesthetics promoted the masculinization of Soviet women to some degree, whereas "it allowed no feminisation in depicting the perfect Soviet men."<sup>376</sup> From 1930's onwards, the Soviet androgyne was practically always depicted engaged in a revolutionary endeavour or activity.<sup>377</sup> This purposefulness of androgynous masses epitomized the Stalinist zeitgeist, which perceived sexuality among other possible identities as subordinate to socialist ideology. Soviet psychologist, Aron Zalkind wrote in 1926: "In the interest of revolutionary expediency a class has the right to interfere in the sexual life of its members. Sexuality must be subordinated to class interests; it must never interfere with them and must serve them in all respects".<sup>378</sup> The contradiction of homosexuality to the reproductive cause leads to the inevitable repression of such identities and end to any tolerant psychiatric interest.<sup>379</sup>

In Alexander Deineka's *Defence of Petrograd* (1928) Soviet soldiers march collectively in mud coloured uniforms with rifles on their shoulders (Fig. 23). It takes a while for the viewer to notice that two of the soldiers in the middle are female. The almost identical uniforms, expressionless faces and indistinguishable height difference render the person's physical sex irrelevant. The women are presented as androgynous comrades passing for a man, the only visible difference being their head scarves instead of soldier's hats. They

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<sup>373</sup> Budanova, 35.

<sup>374</sup> Budanova, 26.

<sup>375</sup> Budanova., 36.

<sup>376</sup> Budanova, 39.

<sup>377</sup> Budanova 38.

<sup>378</sup> Aron Zalkind, *Polovoi vopros v usloviakh sovetskoi obshchestvennosti* (Leningrad, 1926) 24, quoted in Lilja Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man was Unmade*, 67.

<sup>379</sup> Dan Healey, "Unruly Identities: Soviet Psychiatry Confronts the 'Female Homosexual' of the 1920's" in *Gender in Russian History and Culture*, ed. Linda Edmondson (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), 131.

appear every bit as confident as the men, their gender identities engulfed by communal, heroic masculinity. At the heart of the gender subversion lays the ideal of a female communist, as strong and fearless as their male counterpart. As Lilya Kaganovsky argues, the new Soviet woman was tirelessly portrayed as a young man.<sup>380</sup>

According to Monique Wittig, opposition between the sexes is marked by gender, but only one truly exists: the feminine.<sup>381</sup> In socialist realist representations of the late 1920's and early 1930's, woman as a sign became absorbed by the masculine in an attempt to eradicate her altogether.<sup>382</sup> Following Wittig's position, the attempt to eliminate the woman from the masculine socialist utopia essentially aimed at the annihilation of gender altogether. The feminine disappears under the masculine universal, which is always the positive and point of departure for difference. The construction of the feminine gender and the illusion of the female sex as its continuum prohibited the new Soviet woman from the same autonomy enjoyed by men. Therefore, the only solution was to abandon the feminine gender and to become a man, as "only men are persons".<sup>383</sup> The peculiar situation of eradicating the feminine changed the binary opposition between the sexes in socialist realist presentations, because it did not reinforce compulsory heterosexuality through romantic relationships. The traditional ménage-à-trois trope turned into a vis-à-vis situation as only the boyish woman was allowed to enter the heroic representations of relationships between men.<sup>384</sup> The masquerade of the feminine lead to a queer situation, where homosocial bonding reinforced desire for sexual sameness.

### 5.1 Queer Socialist Realism

In 1912, five years before the October Revolution, the Russian avant-garde artist Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin painted perhaps his best known piece entitled *Bathing of the Red Horse* (Fig. 24). The modernist painting portrays a naked boy riding a scarlet horse. The emerald green water on the background contrasts accordingly with the blood-red stallion, which clearly represents a fantasy rather than a real animal. The rounded curvature of the lake, which brings the background unnaturally close to the viewer, makes the image appear even more dreamlike. The slightly reclining boy appears sharp, yet slender as all the muscles, joints and

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<sup>380</sup> Kaganovsky, 73.

<sup>381</sup> Monique Wittig, "The Point of View: Universal or Particular?" *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1992), 60, <https://pdfcoffee.com/wittig-monique-the-straight-mind-and-other-essays-2-pdf-free.html>.

<sup>382</sup> Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man was Unmade*, 73.

<sup>383</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 27.

<sup>384</sup> Kaganovsky, 75.

bones in his body glow under his yellow-toned skin. Together with the intense colours and accentuated shapes, the image appears flat and symbolic. It is the nudeness of the young man that prompts neoclassical connotations with elements of queer desire. At the same time, the boy's expressionless face brings in mind Byzantine frescoes with the countless blank faces of saints. The two boys with horses in the background add up to a three of each, reminiscent of the Holy Trinity.

Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin was a pre-revolutionary avant-garde artist who continued a successful career as a socialist painter while managing to preserve his distinct style. Trained in traditional icon painting and influenced by the works of Cézanne, the artist became known for his development of a “spherical perspective,” an optical distortion which was to bring the image closer to the viewer.<sup>385</sup> In art theoretical discussion, it is his unique aesthetic style that attracts attention rather than the sexualised subject matter itself. The artist's transition from an experimental avant-gardist into a socialist realist painter illustrates the ideological changes influencing Russian visual culture after the revolution. Petrov-Vodkin's artistic transformation can be pessimistically regarded as an example of “what happens to art when it is bent to the service of political narrative.”<sup>386</sup> However, such a view comes across as ahistorical in forgetting how the majority of avant-garde artists, including Petrov-Vodkin himself, promoted an aesthetic turn towards socialist realism.<sup>387</sup> Among the political, economic and social objectives of the October Revolution was the aesthetic reorganisation of society promoted specifically by avant-garde artists themselves.<sup>388</sup>

Regulating artists became possible with the inception of the Association of Artists of Soviet Russia (AkhRR), which was founded in 1922. The association was superseded by the Union of Soviet Artists, which monitored artists with an iron fist during Stalin's era of oppression. The objective of the new revolutionary aesthetic replacing avant-garde, as defined by the AkhRR in 1924, was to present “revolutionary Russia in a realistic manner by depicting the everyday life of the proletariat, the peasantry, the Red Army etc.” AkhRR's definition essentially rejected any daydreaming fantasies, such as Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin's *The Bathing of the Red Horse*.

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<sup>385</sup> Kirill Sokolov, "Extracts from *Euclidean Space*, the Book by K. S. Petrov-Vodkin (1878-1939)" *Leonardo* 11, no. 2 (1978): 142, [www.jstor.org/stable/1574015](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1574015).

<sup>386</sup> Judah Hettie, “The RA's Russian Show Is a Fascinating Survey of Life and Art During the Revolution,” *Artnet*, February 8th, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/russian-art-at-the-royal-academy-review-851075>.

<sup>387</sup> Bowlit, introduction to *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 35.

<sup>388</sup> Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 4.

Like *The Bathing of the Red Horse*, many of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin's pre-revolutionary paintings feature what Igor S. Kon refers to as "exquisite naked boys".<sup>389</sup> Petrov-Vodkin's specialisation in the male nude has earned the artist an interestingly obscure place in queer history: While his name repeatedly appears in various academic publications discussing the representation of homosexuality in art, the truth behind the artist's own sexual identity remains a mystery.<sup>390</sup> However, there remains an interesting contrast between the pre-revolutionary and socialist paintings of Petrov-Vodkin. After the revolution, the subject of the male nude vanished from his repertoire as the artist took to portraying domestic scenes, still lifes, and the Virgin mother in growing numbers. In 1925 Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin returned to the subject of the *Bathing of the Red Horse*, this time realising it according to the standards of the AkHRR. The painting, entitled *Fantasy*, features a peasant boy flying over a mountain range on the back of a scarlet horse (fig. 25). The dishevelled young man is a far cry from the rose-cheeked boy which Petrov-Vodkin had painted a decade earlier. The painting stays true to Petrov-Vodkin's unique style, yet is unable to attain the same fantasmagoric presence as *Bathing of the Red Horse*. There is an uncanny feeling that the peasant boy is in fact fleeing on the back of a dream, leaving behind him the tiny village tucked between the mountains. The two paintings of the symbolic red horse epitomise the transformation in Russian art before and after the Revolution: experimentation became replaced with a system of fixed guidelines, providing stability instead of temporariness. Queerness, on the other hand, as theorized by Lee Edelman, inherently resists stability, control and conformity.

Through its figurative absence, queerness acquires disruptive power in many of Petrov-Vodkin's post-revolutionary works. The artist's speciality of rendering the perspective spherical often creates a feeling of claustrophobic anxiety in his works. A closer analysis reveals that the artist's seemingly wholesome and heteronormative representations have an uncanny presence in them, as if questioning their utopian wholesomeness through a restless imposition. In his psychoanalytic work, Jacques Lacan repeatedly connected anxiety with a loss: "Anxiety, as we know, is always connected with a loss . . . with a two-sided relation on the point of fading away to be superseded by something else, something which the patient

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<sup>389</sup> Igor S. Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 34.

<sup>390</sup> See i.a. Simon Karlinsky, "Russia's Gay Literature and Culture," in *Homosexuality in Europe and America*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 360 and Joseph A. Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2014), 366.

cannot face without vertigo.”<sup>391</sup> In relation with Petrov-Vodkin’s work, the patient is the observer of the image who senses the impossibility of the utopian socialist project as essentially unattainable— and therefore already lost.

## 5.2 Reproductive Futurism

”Thank you Stalin for a Happy Childhood,” cheers Viktor Govorkov’s gleeful Soviet propaganda poster from 1936. The picture depicts Uncle Stalin surrounded by a group of cute, smiling young pioneers— the future’s socialist leaders (fig. 26). The image is exemplary of the Stalinist leadership cult established during the 1930’s. As argued by Catriona Kelly, “One of the most visible aspects of the Stalin cult was its link with the idealised image of Soviet childhood.”<sup>392</sup> Children as the revolution’s incarnation became an increasingly popular visual subject in art from 1920’s onwards.<sup>393</sup> They represented the joint cause of revolution, promising utopia for the masses in return for personal sacrifices. The idealistic images of children allied with representations of Soviet motherhood. The re-criminalization of abortion together with the toughening of divorce laws in 1936, as well as the criminalisation of homosexuality two years earlier, marked a pro-family turn in soviet politics and end to utopian sexualities.<sup>394</sup> However, according to Liliya Kaganovsky, the “new cult of maternity” signalled less a return to traditional family values rather than the state’s ever increasing involvement in the family.<sup>395</sup> Whereas the new Soviet woman in the 1920’s had been represented through masculinization or abstraction, the state’s urge for increasing reproductivity rates called for a return of more romanticised femininity.<sup>396</sup> The contradictory roles between the masculine and maternal woman are present in Alexander Deineka’s painting *Mother* from 1932 (Fig.27.) The painting is a tightly cropped image of a woman’s turned back with a baby on her shoulder. The simplified composition and colours underline the image’s utopian idealisation of the maternal woman. Yet the model for the painting was the sixteen year old champion long distance swimmer Liusia Vtorova, whose broad-backed,

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<sup>391</sup> Jacques Lacan and W. Granoff, ”Fetishism: The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real” in *Perversions: Psychodynamics and Therapy*, ed. S. Lorand and M. Balint (New York: Random House, 1956), 273, [https://www.psychanalyse.com/pdf/lacan\\_pas\\_tout\\_lacan\\_1956-00-00a.pdf](https://www.psychanalyse.com/pdf/lacan_pas_tout_lacan_1956-00-00a.pdf).

<sup>392</sup> Catriona Kelly, ”Riding the Magic Carpet: Children and Leader Cult in the Stalin Era.” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 49, no. 2 (2005): 199, doi:10.2307/20058260.

<sup>393</sup> Kelly, 199.

<sup>394</sup> Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, 6.

<sup>395</sup> Kaganovsky, 74.

<sup>396</sup> Lynne Attwood, ”Rationality versus Romanticism: Representations of Women in the Stalinist Press,” in *Gender in Russian History and Culture*, ed. Linda Edmondson (Palgrave: Hampshire, 2001), 158-159.

muscular body had inspired Deineka before in his works.<sup>397</sup> Her body represented the ideals of the masculinized new Soviet person, which the artist now tried to settle with the emerging ideals towards maternity. However different these two idealizations were, the healthy-looking boyish woman or the maternal woman, the feminine remained desexualized in Soviet representations.

In Petrov-Vodkin's socialist paintings, children are often present yet they are never depicted in the enthusiastic sense of Deineka's athletic pioneers. If anything, the child as a stand-in for the proletariat's future is portrayed with an alienating and even anxiety-producing manner. Take for example the painting entitled *In the Nursery* painted in 1925, which portrays a sleeping baby in his crib, while an attending mother watches over in the doorway (Fig. 28.) Yet, the claustrophobic perspective and the shadow over the woman's face create an alarming atmosphere, suggesting there is more to the image than a simple glorification of the "better future of mankind."<sup>398</sup> The anxiety present in *Nursery* rather testifies to the uncertainty of a future in a society increasingly controlled by fear and self-censorship. In the painting, queerness is not manifested straightforwardly as a visualisation of homosexual desire, but as an oppositional force to the social fantasy presented in the image of the child. A queer irony, as Edelman would call it, penetrates the idealised symbol of the children in Petrov-Vodkin's works. The anxiety present in *Nursery* disturbs the heterosexual fantasy, hinting at the fear and oppression of the Soviet regime. Despite the seemingly homogenic style of Soviet art, Petrov-Vodkin's queer aesthetic disrupted the Symbolic order by creating idiosyncratic pieces striving towards, and arising from, the Real.<sup>399</sup>

In another painting, entitled *The Anxiety of 1919*, Petrov-Vodkin portrays a working class family in their apartment (fig. 29) A man is peeking between the curtains, alarmed by an invisible threat looming outside, while a woman clutches a child protectively. The painting, which officially represented the terror of the Whites against supporters of the Revolution during the Civil War era, in fact refers to Stalin's purges two decades later: the clock on the wall points at 9:34– the year 1934 in which it was painted. The political persecutions during the 1930's are known for ostracising cultural intelligentsia perceived as counter-

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<sup>397</sup> Christina Kiaer, "Alexander Deineka: A One-Man Biography of Soviet Art," in *Alexander Deineka: An Avant-Garde for the Proletariat* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2011), 62.

<sup>398</sup> One of the goals of Soviet artists according to the Union of Artists. AKhRR, "The Immediate Tasks of the AKhRR: A Circular to all Branches of AKhRR– An Appeal to All the Artists of the U.S.S.R." (1924) in *The Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism*, ed. John. E Bowlt (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), 270.

<sup>399</sup> Sydney R. Walker, "Artmaking and the Sinthome," *Synnyt/ Origins 2* (2014): 1-4, <https://wiki.aalto.fi/download/attachments/97623342/1.Walker%20Synnyt.pdf?version=1&modificationDate=1412238507891&api=v2>.

revolutionaries, but it also targeted homosexuals.<sup>400</sup> As an artist of the pre-revolutionary era with an interest in the male nude, Kuzma-Vodkin perhaps had reason to expect the worst from Stalin's purges.

To the queer theorist Lee Edelman, the visual trope of children works as a stand-in for heteronormative oppression. According to him, it is impossible *not* to be on the side of the children, whose ideological value images of the innocent child unquestionably affirm.<sup>401</sup> By referring to "the Image of the Child," or simply "the Child," Edelman is making an important distinction between actual children and the cultural representation of children. The Child is a monolithic figure, and as such, extremely political; "the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust."<sup>402</sup> Furthermore, the Child is a symbol of a society privileging heteronormativity and the task of reproduction. It is directly opposed to homosexual desire, yet unavoidably pointing towards it by figuring its very absence.<sup>403</sup> In socialist realism, same-sex desire embodied the antithesis to socialist identity and therefore had no place in representation. Whereas avant-garde artists had perceived the queer subject as someone who transcended mortality through an immortalisation of the body in *jouissance*, artists of the AKhRR placed the Child in the immortalising role. Thus, queerness became to figure the social order's death drive in the new system of aesthetics. Images of children serve a propagandistic purpose in socialist realist art, their sentimental kitschness veiling the political message asking to sacrifice oneself for the sake of future generations.

In a circular letter published by the Association of the Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR) in 1922 one of the objects of socialist art was defined as "shaping and organising the psychology of the generations to come."<sup>404</sup> Artists were to give future precedence, which was to be portrayed in a "realist" manner confirming its inevitability as already existing on the canvas. In a society emphasising reproductivity, queer sexualities were inevitably assigned a place in the opposition as perpetuating a *jouissance* possibly endangering the Symbolic order's continuity. According to Edelman, "queerness names the side not fighting for the children," suggesting that queer subjectivities have the capability to question the absolute value of "reproductive futurism" – which is epitomised in the visual worshipping of

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<sup>400</sup> Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, 259-262.

<sup>401</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 2.

<sup>402</sup> Edelman, 11.

<sup>403</sup> Edelman, 17.

<sup>404</sup> AKhRR, "The Immediate Tasks of the AKhRR," In Bowlt, *The Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 270.

idealised children. The term is easily applicable from modern neo-capitalist societies to authoritarian socialist dictatorships as all political ideologies by default emphasise the importance of futurity. However, a queer subversion makes it possible to imagine an alternative reality, or at least it has the ability to envision a resistance. Hence, queerness withholds a radical potential because it derives from “outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism”. For queer artists working in the strict confines of state regulated art and panoptic culture of control, the resistance had to be embedded within the official visual language. Artists such as Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin and Alexander Deineka did not reject the image of the Child. Instead, the artists disrupted its absolute value through subtle subversion and irony, puncturing the fallacious wholeness of a totalitarian ideology. According to Edelman, queer opposition has the ability to reveal the promise of reproductive futurity as a fantasy of achieving Symbolic closure because it points at the void by a jouissance of the Real. The queer subject rejects the fantasy of such a social order which is grounded on “the denial of the drive”— a culture which has taken the jouissance out of sexuality and promotes compulsory heteronormativity purified from sexual interaction not leading to reproduction. It is the “threat of societal death” which antagonises the queer, who— by virtue of accepting the disposition— has the ability to stultify the logic of reproductive futurism.

Lee Edelman’s theory on death drive as the fundamental apparatus of queer resistance illustrates these oppositional aesthetics by naming the positivity they are subverting: namely the image of the Child which functions as a symbol for reproduction through heterosexual partnership. The Child reinforces patriarchal values by promoting traditional gender roles and marriage as the devices of securing a future, promising immortality through multiplying. Edelman refers to the queer character, able to carry out resistance through a tactics of disturbance and irony, as the *sinthomosexual*. In the works of Deineka and Petrov-Vodkin the *sinthomosexual* or *sinthomosexuality* becomes a concept which takes on different subversive forms on canvas from desire to horrific anxiety. Most importantly, the *sinthomosexual* embodies a jouissance reaching beyond the pleasure principle, disregarding societal, cultural, and ideological norms visible in the symbolic order. The *sinthomosexual* as a visual representation comes to signify the death drive and the denial of a false future which promises immortality through reproduction. Thus, its meaning reaches far beyond an individual’s drive towards self-annihilation, because it reveals the meaninglessness of a social order at the scale of the symbolic— in the case of post-revolutionary Russia *sinthomosexual* visual representations questioned the logic of the autocratic social order, which violently

attacked anyone endangering its continuity through future generations. Edelman's theory also finds ground in the apocalyptic atmosphere of Russia's fin-de-siècle decadence, where homosexuality transcended the shortcomings of reproductive relationships. Despite their differences, then queer subversion in the works of Kuzma-Vodkin and Deineka can be described as the representations of *Sinthomosexuality*: that which denies the appeal of fantasy posed as realism and refuses the promise of futurity, instead turning it inside out, revealing "the seams of its costume exposing reality's seamless as mere seeming."<sup>405</sup> Take for example Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin's painting *Bathing Boys*, realised in the 1920's (Fig. 30). The image provides a rare flashback to the artist's pre-revolutionary work, portraying a slender boy in a sensuous pose, one arm raised behind his neck and the other propped on his hips. Yet the artist was aware of the subject matter's controversy, which did not abide with official notions of art's purpose. By painting the image, the artist took a conscious risk of being accused with petty-bourgeois classicism and possibly even homosexuality. In all its controversy, *Bathing Boys* contradicted Petrov-Vodkin's artistic interests by endangering his promising career as a state-recognised artist. Edelman locates queerness from within the sinthome as the search for such pleasure which resists the logic of the Symbolic order.

Instead of red-cheeked children, the sinthomosexual artist painted dewinged Nazis and effeminate boys riding the revolution. In a painting by Alexander Deineka, a Nazi soldier whose parachute has failed to open is falling from the sky (Fig. 31). *The Downed Airman* (1943) became a subject of contemporary criticism, because it portrayed the enemy in a manner capable of arousing sympathy in the viewer.<sup>406</sup> Besides the falling soldier's greenish Nazi uniform, the handsome figure is not unlike the homoerotic Soviet athletes often portrayed by Deineka. By portraying the flying Nazi under the gaze of homoerotic desire, while strangely aroused by the tragedy and the otherness in the enemy, threatens to discompose everything socially acceptable. Not only does Deineka's poetic portrayal of an enemy soldier arouse sympathy, but it questions the logic of killing in the name of children and futurity as absurd. The flying Nazi has lost his wings, finding an uncanny parallel with Mihail Vrubel's *The Demon Downcast*, for whom homosexual transcendence brought destruction.

While death was an accepted subject in art as long as it served the interests of reproductive futurism, it was a complete taboo around the revolutionary leaders. In 1924

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<sup>405</sup> Edelman, 35.

<sup>406</sup> Musya Glants, "Images of the War in Painting," *World War II and the Soviet People: Selected Papers*, ed. John Garrad, Allison Healicon (London: The Macmillan Press, 1990), 59.

Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin was invited to Lenin's funeral and assigned to paint a portrait of the deceased leader in his open casket. However, *Lenin in his Coffin* (1924) with its morbid realism was deemed too controversial to put on display precisely because it presented the great revolutionary leader as a mortal. This is perhaps why the artist painted another portrait of Lenin posthumously ten year later, by which Stalin had successfully immortalised him as a part of the nation's leadership cult. In *The Portrait of Vladimir Lenin* (1934) the prematurely balding leader sits behind his desk, working as always for the benefit of the workers. The ideological obsession with futurity prevented people from witnessing their leaders as mortals, due to the authorities' fear of such a sight generating too much anxiety, abjection and eventually loss of faith in the revolutionary cause.

In 1942 Alexander Deineka painted perhaps his best known piece up to date, still celebrated in contemporary Russia as the embodiment of nationalist sentiment. The *Defense of Sevastopol* (Fig. 32) is magnificent piece of Socialist Realism, portraying a heroic battle of the Soviet navy soldiers against vicious Nazi troops. The city of Sevastopol carried a personal significance to the artist, who was very fond of the Crimea region, its relaxed beach life inspiring him on many occasions— such as in the mosaic wall piece *A Good Morning*, portraying the athletic figures of male Soviet bathers (Fig. 33) or the painting *Lunch Break in the Donbass* with its group of muscular youths playing naked in the sea (Fig. 34). In the light of Deineka's handsome male nudes painted in Crimea, it is not difficult to imagine the queer subversion unconsciously placed on the *Defense of Sevastopol* by the artist, which by all contemporary standards represented a masterpiece of Soviet art. A celebration of violent masculinity appearing as the linchpin of heteronormativity collapses in the weight of its own impossibility – the image is simply too perfect, too patriotic, and too utopian: a queer irony subverts the image by rendering the soldiers as objects of homosexual desire, testifying to the senseless and anti-futuristic nature of sexuality as a stubborn jouissance.”<sup>407</sup> Irony, defined as “the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite”<sup>408</sup> is also the queerest of rhetorical devices.<sup>409</sup> Due to its ability to undo, disrupt and to subvert the dominant narrative, not unlike the death drive itself. Interestingly, the celebration of Deineka's violent queer subversion in contemporary Russia reveals the parallels between authoritarian Stalinism and anti-democratic Putinism. The work still holds its politically subversive power, despite the economic transformation from socialism to oligarch capitalism.

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<sup>407</sup> Edelman, 27.

<sup>408</sup> “Irony,” Definition by *Lexico: Oxford Dictionary*, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/irony>.

<sup>409</sup> Edelman, 24.

While Simon Karlinsky has upheld a totalitarian perspective towards the revolution and its impact on tolerance, in reality same-sex love was neither as monolithic nor as homophobic in the early Soviet society as portrayed by the historian.<sup>410</sup> In fact, the systematic antagonising of queerness did not properly emerge before the Stalinist turn towards traditional moral values emphasising marriage and reproductivity. The re-criminalisation of homosexuality in 1933 was followed by Stalin's purges, while socialist realism was decreed the official style of the Soviet Union in 1934. It is reasonable to argue that the disappearance of queer representations from art and literature was not a direct consequence of the Bolshevik regime's homophobia as suggested by Karlinsky, not until Stalin's restoration of the traditional family model and conventional gender roles during the 1930's. Rather, artists as "the spokesmen of the people's spiritual lives"<sup>411</sup> were developing visual culture into a direction which by default cast the queer conscious outside their ideological domain. Modernist painting with its decadent Western influences was frowned upon by the rising wing of socialist realist artists, who perceived it as "alien both economically and stylistically".<sup>412</sup> Furthermore, the new wing of proletarian artists was generally foreign to the sexually tolerant salons of the tsarist era.<sup>413</sup> Neither were the creative efforts of the visually experimental avant-garde artists held in high regard by the culturally old-fashioned Bolshevik elite, to whom a degree of realism surely was more likely to appeal.<sup>414</sup> Another reason could be found from the emigration of queer artists and cultural figures, who the Bolshevik regime now attacked as tsarist bourgeoisie, leading to a vacuum in the gay community of the day.<sup>415</sup> As Dan Healey notes, "Significant figures who had contributed to the elaboration of aestheticized sexual ambiguity... emigrated during the revolution, and those who remained... endured an increasingly unstable material and political situation."<sup>416</sup> Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the changes in art affirming heteronormativity cannot be explained exclusively by a repression from above, but were the outcome of multilateral ideological interests. As Boris Groys has argued, the avant-garde did not present an antithesis to socialist realism but provided a conclusion to its total aesthetico-political project.<sup>417</sup> Socialist realism was not created by the masses any more than avant-garde had been; its formal qualities were

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<sup>410</sup> Healey, 4.

<sup>411</sup> John, E. Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 270.

<sup>412</sup> Bowlt., 268.

<sup>413</sup> Karlinsky, 360.

<sup>414</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde Aesthetic, Dictatorship and Beyond* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992) 32.

<sup>415</sup> Karlinsky, 360-361.

<sup>416</sup> Healey, 60.

<sup>417</sup> Groys, 36.

the outcome of intellectual debates and tenets laid out by well-educated artists and party members.<sup>418</sup> Inside the strict tenets of socialist realist art, artists willing to express queer desire were able to do so without breaching the objective of transforming reality through art.<sup>419</sup> The socialist realist works of the avant-garde artist Alexander Deineka illustrate the possibilities for expressing queer desire under the guise of heroic masculinity. At the same time, the disappearance of homosexual expression in the works of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin witnesses the will of avant-garde artists to transcend the desires of the individual in behalf of the collective society.

## 5 Conclusion

This thesis has argued that homosexual desire and gender dissidence had significant visual influence in the Russian avant-garde movement. The period between 1890 and 1930 witnessed many different artistic groups and styles with differing positions to art's purpose and subject matter. The representation of queer subjectivity also transformed with the evolution of the Russian avant-garde. The objective of this thesis has been to show the diversity of such presentation by approaching the subject of "queer art" from a perspective of otherness, subversion and resistance. Instead of a sexual category, "queer" has been applied as a noun describing visual representation verging on the inconsistent, the odd and the disruptive.

Homosexual desire and gender subversion during the avant-garde had various appearances and meanings depending on the context they were simulated in. As this thesis has shown, the Russian avant-garde includes many examples of visual expression disrupting normative models of sex, sexuality and gender. Most obvious examples of queer art appeared in Russia before the October Revolution, yet their presence reaches well beyond. The androgynous ideals of the 1920's and the egalitarian attitudes of artists present a side of avant-garde's queer utopianism. Somewhat unexpectedly, the disruptive power of queer desire finds presence even in the most ultra-masculine works of socialist realism.

The emergence of queer sexualities in modernizing Russia was fundamentally connected with the evolving ways to control and practice power in society. According to Foucault, various discourses have functioned to define sexuality in modern societies, from formal to informal contexts.<sup>420</sup> Queer visibility in Russia bloomed against the backdrop of a

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<sup>418</sup> Groys, 9.

<sup>419</sup> Groys, 29.

<sup>420</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, 1978.

society in turmoil, which finally led to the fall of authoritarian Tsarism. Unlike in the West, the upper echelons of society in Russia had virtually no access to political power until the revolution in 1905. The disabling effects of authoritarian Tsarism explain Russia's comparative "belatedness" in defining and understanding sexuality. However, the eagerness to absorb and adapt Western influences lead to Russia producing its own version in the sexual arena as well as in modern art. Emerging queer identities, although greatly resembling those produced in the West, represented a unique understanding of sexual identity. Simultaneous to the dominant discourse, which aimed to restrict and assert power over individual bodies through legal and medical definitions, an alternative sexual discourse with subversive potential evolved. In Russia, the visual emergence of queer subjects coincided with the volatile political climate of late Imperial rule. The aesthetic of fin-de-siècle decadence introduced gender deviance, androgyny and homosexual desire to the avant-garde movement. Evolving from an esoteric philosophy, the harmonious union between the sexes became attached with feminist emancipation under Marxist ideology. For women artists of the avant-garde, gender ambiguity functioned as a tactic of gaining space in the masculine art world.

During the Tsarist rule homosexuality constituted a crime. After the Revolution, the Bolsheviks regarded homosexuality as a medical problem to be defined by physicians and doctors. Simon Karlinsky has argued that the legalization of same-sex relations in 1918 did not describe the realistic attitudes of the Bolshevik regimes towards homosexuality.<sup>421</sup> According to him, queer visibility which had bloomed in Russian fin-de-siècle culture came abruptly to an end because of the October Revolution and the consequent suppression of dissident sexualities. However, the impact of the Revolution on queer representation was not nearly as totalitarian as Karlinsky asserts. Soviet authorities and medical professionals were eager to define homosexuality in the 1920's, sometimes with contrasting opinions on the subject. At the same time, the avant-garde had not lost its interest in the utopian ideal of the androgyne or equality between the sexes. By the 1930's however, the Stalinist project of resurrecting the traditional family unit put an official end to any ambivalent positions regarding same-sex relations. Homosexuality was criminalized again along with changes restricting abortion rights and divorces. While socialist realism officially came to replace avant-garde art in 1932, the movement had for a while been in a state of remission.

After the Revolution in 1917, avant-garde artists fervently experimented with different approaches combining ideology and art. The outcome was an aesthetic returning to realism under the prerequisite of socialism. However, queer representation did not disappear

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<sup>421</sup> Karlinsky, *Russia's Gay Literature and Culture*, 1989.

with the demise of avant-garde; if anything, the official eradication of homosexuality inadvertently called forth the very thing it was trying to repel. Kosofsky Sedgwick has compellingly argued that the cultural attraction between men verges on the homosexual in its exclusion of the feminine.<sup>422</sup> In Soviet fantasies of the New Man homosexual desire circulated freely between men without the excuse of a woman as intermediary.

The key argument for the relevance for a queer theoretical approach is that in order to understand the way knowledge is produced in Western societies, one must take into account the omnipresence of cultural biases based on sex, sexuality and gender. A critical analysis of the Russian avant-garde as a canonised movement in the history of modern art must take into account the hierarchized structures of power in order to reveal their false pretences. At its best, discovering historical narratives of queer subjectivities has the ability to reach into the present and to threaten contemporary authoritarian regimes. In a hundred years' time, queer avant-garde has not lost its potential to subvert, disrupt and ridicule oppressive power.

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<sup>422</sup> Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men* (1985).

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## Appendix 1: Images



### 2.5.1. Homosexuality in Russia Before and After the Revolution

Fig. 1. Somov, Konstantin. *Portrait of Mihail Kuzmin*. 1909. Oil on canvas. Moscow: Tretyakov Gallery. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/konstantin-somov/portrait-of-mikhail-kuzmin-1909>.

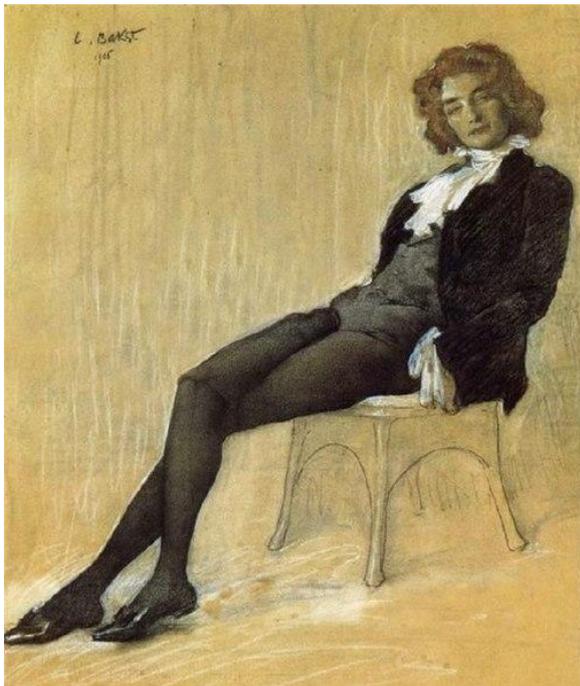


Fig. 2. Bakst, Leon. *Portrait of Zinaida Gippius*. 1906. Pencil and chalk on paper, cardboard. Moscow: Tretyakov Gallery.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Z.\\_Gippius\\_by\\_L.Bakst\\_\(1906,\\_Tretyakov\\_gallery\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Z._Gippius_by_L.Bakst_(1906,_Tretyakov_gallery).jpg)

#### 4.1. Women Artists and the Question of Female Emancipation



Fig. 3. Stepanova, Varvara. Costume designs. 1922.



Fig. 4. Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov on the background scenery for the opera-ballet *The Golden Cockerel* in the workshops of the Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, 1913.

1913.[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Natalia\\_Goncharova\\_and\\_Mikhail\\_Larionov,\\_Moscow,\\_1913.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Natalia_Goncharova_and_Mikhail_Larionov,_Moscow,_1913.jpg)



Fig. 5. Alexander Rodchenko with his wife, Varvara Stepanova. 1920's.  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rodchenko-Stepanova.jpg>

### 3.3 Self-Representation and Cross-Dressing



Fig. 6. Werefkin, Marianne. *Self-Portrait*. c. 1910. Tempera on cardboard. Munich: Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Werefkin,\\_Marianne\\_von\\_-\\_Selfportrait\\_I\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Werefkin,_Marianne_von_-_Selfportrait_I_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

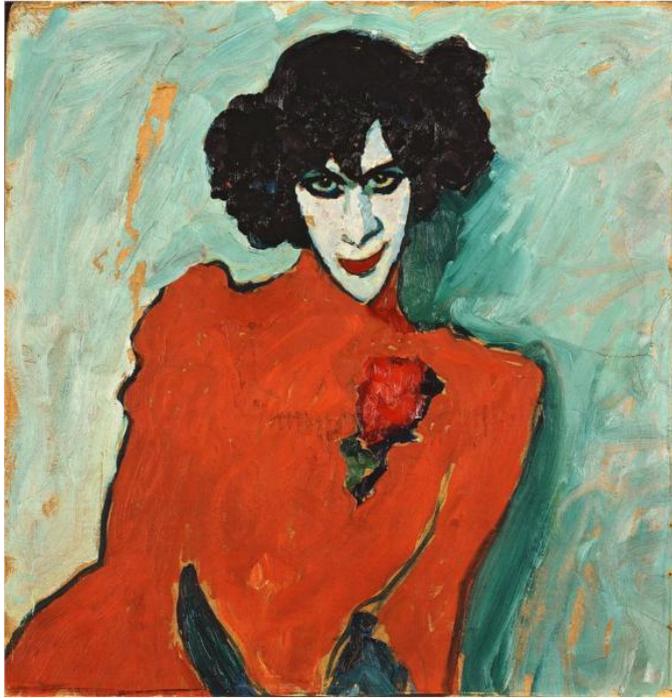


Fig 7. von Jawlensky, Alexei. *Portrait of the Dancer Sakharoff*. 1909. Oil on canvas. Munich: Lenbachhaus. <https://sammlungonline.lenbachhaus.de/objekt/bildnis-des-taenzers-alexander-sacharoff-30018179.html>



Fig 8. Werefkin, Marianne. *Portrait of Alexander Sakharoff*. 1909. Tempera on cardboard. Ascona: Museo Comunale d'Arte Moderna. [http://www.terminartors.com/artworkprofile/Werefkin\\_Marianne\\_von-The\\_Dancer\\_Sacharoff](http://www.terminartors.com/artworkprofile/Werefkin_Marianne_von-The_Dancer_Sacharoff)



Fig 9. von Werefkin, Marianne. *Portrait of Sakharoff*. 1912. Tempera on cardboard.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marianne\\_von\\_Werefkin\\_-\\_The\\_Dancer\\_Sacharoff.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marianne_von_Werefkin_-_The_Dancer_Sacharoff.jpg)



Fig 10. Kruglikova, Elizaveta. *Self-portrait*. Silhouette. 1934. St. Petersburg: State Russian Museum.



Fig 11. Nesterov, Mikhail. *Portrait of Elizaveta Kruglikova*. 1938. oil on canvas. Moscow: Tretyakov Gallery.

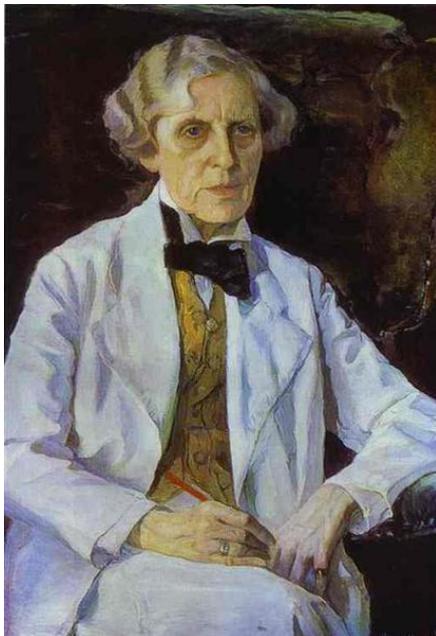


Fig 12. Nesterov, Mikhail. *Portrait of Elizaveta Kruglikova*. 1939. Oil on canvas. Moscow: Tretyakov Gallery.

### 3.4. Erotic Utopia: Sexual philosophies of fin-de-siècle decadents

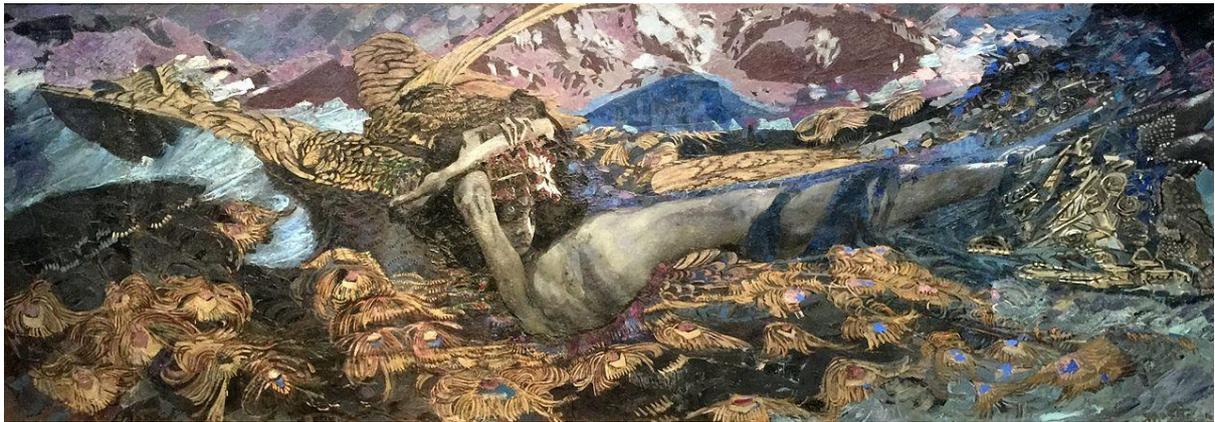


Fig. 13. Vrubel, Mikhail. *Demon Downcast*. 1902. Oil on Canvas. Moscow: Tretyakov Gallery.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Demon\\_Downcast#/media/File:Vrubel\\_Fallen\\_Demon.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Demon_Downcast#/media/File:Vrubel_Fallen_Demon.jpg)

### 4.3 Self-Representing Otherness: The Queer Jew



Fig. 14. Altman, Natan. *Self-Portrait*. 1911. Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg: The State Russian Museum. <http://www.rulex.ru/rpg/portraits/28/28510.htm>.



Fig. 15. Altman, Natan. *Self-Portrait*. 1912. Oil on canvas. Moscow: Tretyakov Gallery. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/nathan-altman/self-portrait-1912>

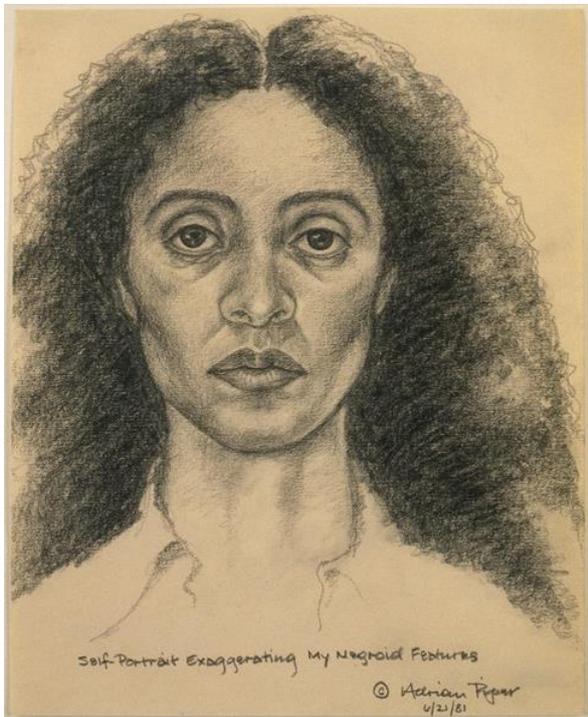


Fig 16. Piper, Adrian. *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features*. 1981. pencil on paper. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AdrianPiper1981Self-Portrait\\_Exaggerating.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AdrianPiper1981Self-Portrait_Exaggerating.png)

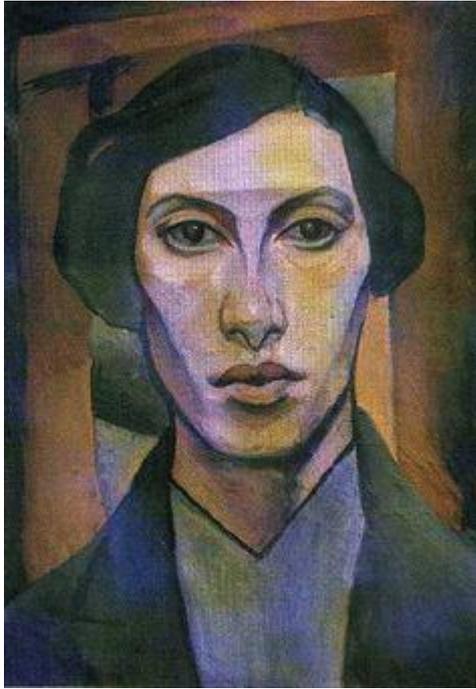


Fig. 17. Altman, Natan. *Self-Portrait*. 1912. Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg: The State Russian Museum. <http://www.rulex.ru/rpg/portraits/28/28510.htm>.

#### 4.1 Homosocial Desire

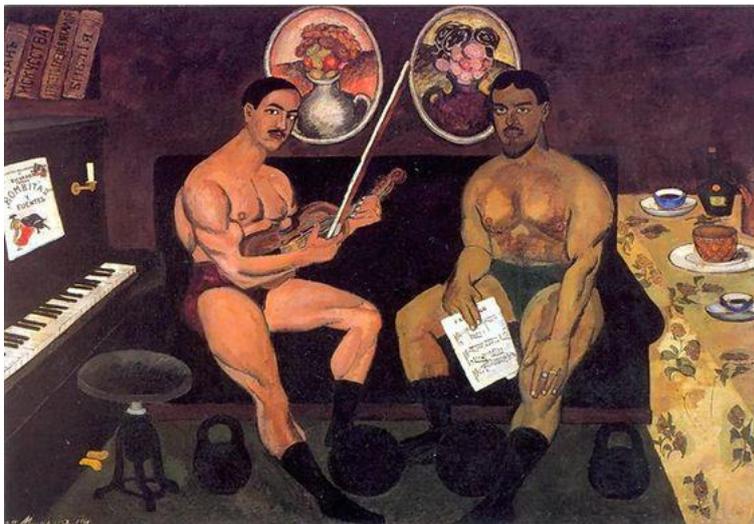


Fig 18. Ilya Mashkov. *Self-Portrait and Portrait of Pyotr Konchalovsky*. 1910. Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg: State Russian Museum.

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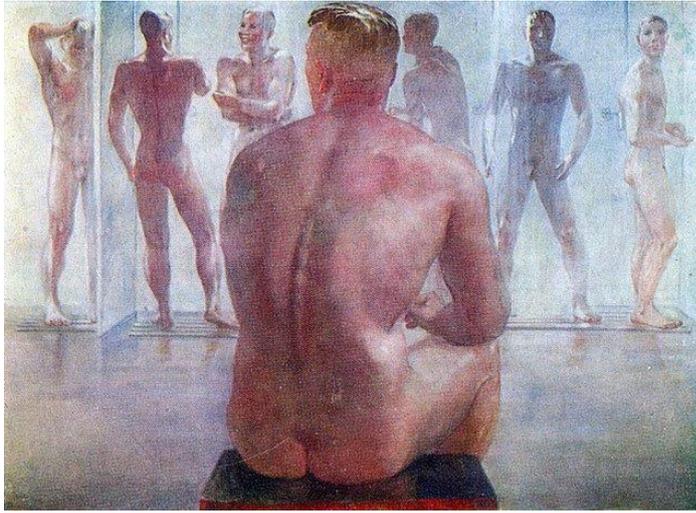


Fig. 19. Deineka, Alexandr. *After the Battle*. 1944. Kursk: Kursk National Gallery.

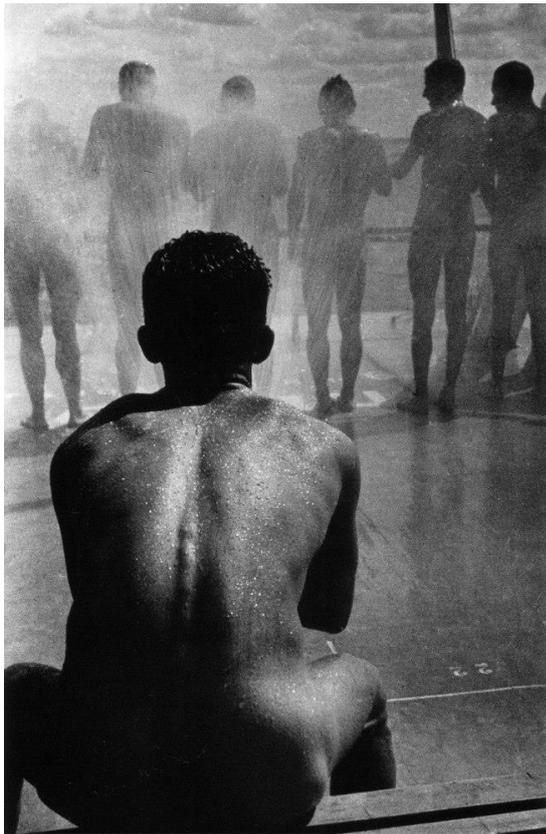


Fig. 20. Boris Ignatovich. *Douche (Shower)*. 1932. Silver Gelatin Photograph.

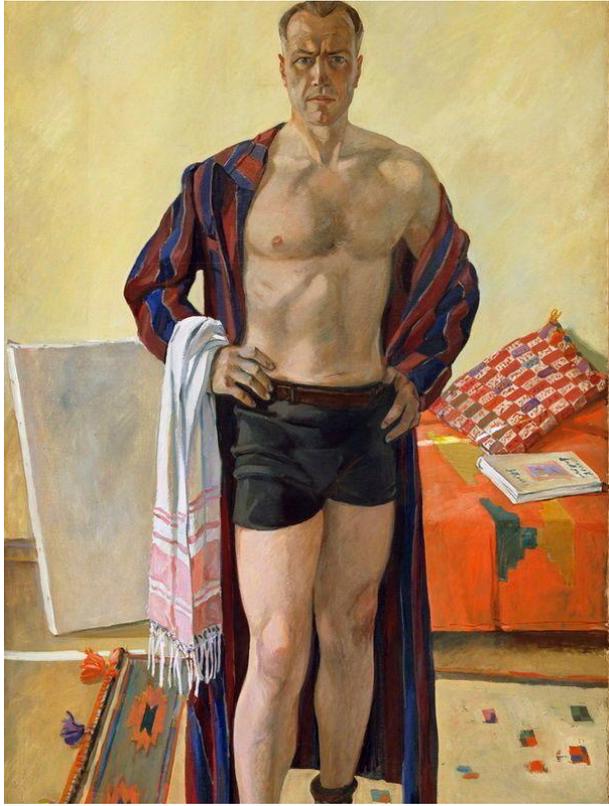


Fig. 21. Deineka, Alexandr. *Self-Portrait*. 1948. Kursk: Kursk National Gallery.  
<https://arhive.com/aleksandrdeyneka/works/35753~Selfportrait#show>

## 5. Queer Art After the Revolution



Fig. 22. Stepanova, Varvara. *Five Figures on White Background*. 1920. Oil on canvas.  
Moscow: The Pushkin State Museum of Fine arts.



Fig. 23. Deineka, Alexandr. *Defence of Petrograd*. 1928. Oil on canvas. Moscow: The Central Armed Forces Museum.

### 5.1 Queer Socialist Realism



Fig. 24. Petrov-Vodkin, Kuzma. *Bathing of the Red Horse*. 1912. Moscow: Tretyakov Gallery. <http://bibliotekar.ru/kPetrovVodkin/4.htm>.



Fig 25. Petrov-Vodkin, Kuzma. *Fantasia*. 1925. Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg: State Russian Museum. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kuzma\\_petrov-vodkin,\\_fantasia,\\_1925.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kuzma_petrov-vodkin,_fantasia,_1925.JPG)

## 5.2. Reproductive Futurism



Fig. 26. Govorkov, Viktor. *Thank you Stalin for a Happy Childhood*. 1939. Litograph.

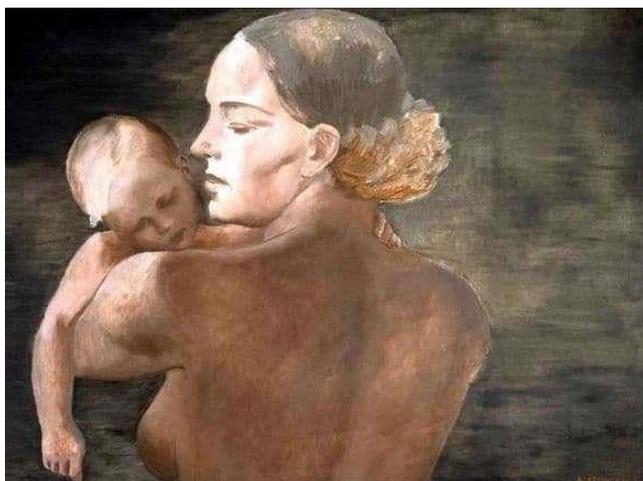


Fig. 27. Deineka, Alexander. *Mother*. 1932. Oil on canvas. State Tretyakov gallery, Moscow.



Fig. 28. Petrov-Vodkin, Kuzma. *In the Nursery*. 1925. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.



Fig. 29. Petrov-Vodkin, Kuzma. *Anxiety of 1919*. 1934. Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg: The State Russian Museum. [https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/painting/19\\_20/zh-1269/index.php](https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/painting/19_20/zh-1269/index.php)

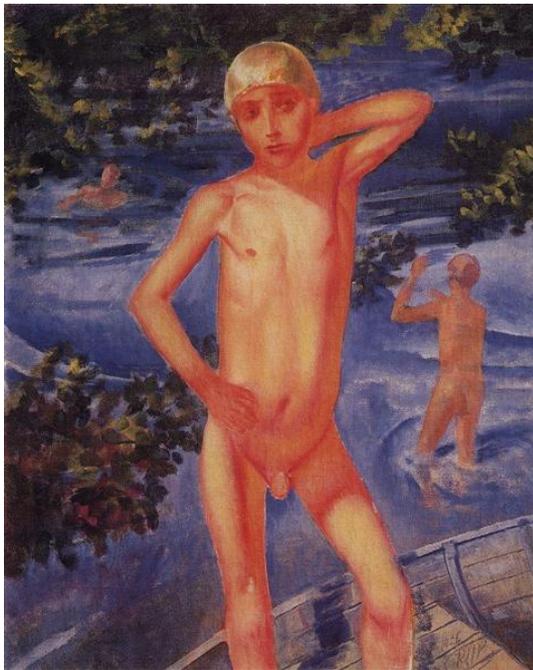


Fig. 30. Petrov-Vodkin, Kuzma. *Bathing Boys*. 1926. Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg: The Russian Museum. [https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/painting/19\\_20/petrov-vodkin\\_k.s.\\_kupayuschiesya\\_malchiki.\\_1926.\\_zhhb-1268/index.php](https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/painting/19_20/petrov-vodkin_k.s._kupayuschiesya_malchiki._1926._zhhb-1268/index.php)



Fig. 31. Deineka, Alexandr. *Shot Down Ace*. 1943. Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg: The State Russian Museum.



Fig. 32. Deineka, Alexandr. *Defence of Sevastopol*. Oil on canvas. 1943. St. Petersburg: The State Russian Museum.

[https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/painting/19\\_20/zhb\\_954/index.php?lang=en](https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/painting/19_20/zhb_954/index.php?lang=en)

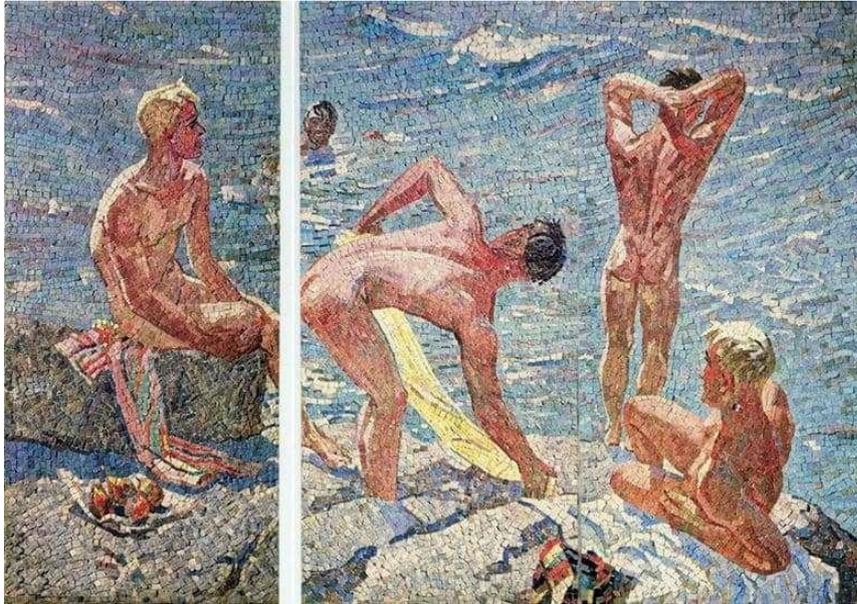


Fig. 33. Deineka, Alexandr. *A Good Morning*. Mosaic. 1960. Moscow: Tretyakov Gallery.



Fig. 34. Deineka, Alexandr. *Lunch Break in the Donbass*. Oil on canvas. c.1935. Riga: Latvian Museum of Art.