Lesbian Lives
Sexuality, Space and Subculture in Moscow
Katja Sarajeva
Dedicated to mom, gran and Daire.

Посвящается маме, бабушке и Даре.
Contents

Acknowledgements.............................................................................................................................................. 11

Introduction ............................................................................................................................................................. 13

The study .......................................................................................................................................................... 15

Insider/outsider .................................................................................................................................................... 17

Contextualising the study: Soviet times and homosexuality .................................................................................. 20

Subcultures .......................................................................................................................................................... 21

Frames: form of life, state, market and movement............................................................................................... 23

Overview of the chapters...................................................................................................................................... 24

Chapter 1: Historical background ....................................................................................................................... 28

Pre-Soviet Russia ................................................................................................................................................... 28

Sexual politics and culture in early Soviet Union ............................................................................................... 30

Men and women: reconfigurations of gender roles ............................................................................................. 30

Private spaces in early Soviet time..................................................................................................................... 32

The individual and the collective ........................................................................................................................ 32

Homosexuality in early Soviet times.................................................................................................................. 33

After Stalin: The emergence of an unofficial culture.......................................................................................... 35

The three spheres ................................................................................................................................................ 36

Information, control and silence ........................................................................................................................ 38

Sexuality during Stalinism .................................................................................................................................. 39

Perestroika and after.............................................................................................................................................. 40

Perestroika and the gay movement .................................................................................................................... 43

Russia and the West .............................................................................................................................................. 45

The relationship to the West in Soviet times........................................................................................................ 47

Post-Soviet Russia and the West......................................................................................................................... 50

Conclusions ........................................................................................................................................................ 51

Chapter 2: Subculture as a network of social worlds .......................................................................................... 53

A sketch of a subculture ....................................................................................................................................... 54

Temâ: What’s in a word? ....................................................................................................................................... 57

The search for a community .................................................................................................................................. 58

Lesbian landscape ............................................................................................................................................... 60

Gay clubs ............................................................................................................................................................. 61

Lesbian clubs and bars ......................................................................................................................................... 62

“Ladies nights” ................................................................................................................................................... 64

Unofficially gay friendly ..................................................................................................................................... 65
Chapter 3: Hanging out in lesbian spaces ................................................................. 82
  Social worlds ............................................................................................................. 83
  KSP – Botsman’s club ............................................................................................ 84
    Activities: music and creativity ........................................................................... 85
    Festival ...................................................................................................................... 88
    Physical activity ...................................................................................................... 88
    ‘Social work’ and ‘activism’ .................................................................................. 90
    Contextualising KSP .............................................................................................. 91
  The Archive ............................................................................................................... 93
    Archives as safe havens of unwanted histories .................................................... 94
    Books and reading .................................................................................................. 94
    The Archive as a social space ............................................................................... 96
    The Archive as a “Soviet kitchen” ....................................................................... 98
  The Pushka ................................................................................................................ 99
    Making public space private .............................................................................. 101
    Inside mythology ................................................................................................. 102
    Parallel social spaces ........................................................................................... 104
    Interconnections: visibility and movement between spaces ............................ 105
  Not only a lesbian: avoiding lesbian spaces .......................................................... 107
    Homophobia and class ...................................................................................... 108
  Conclusions ............................................................................................................. 111

Chapter 4: Walk the walk and talk the talk ............................................................... 113
  Visibility: to see and be seen .................................................................................. 114
  The “lesbian look” .................................................................................................. 115
  Small signs ............................................................................................................... 117
  Unexpected recognition ........................................................................................... 120
  The Gaze: where the eyes roam ........................................................................... 123
    Learning how to see ............................................................................................ 124
    (Mis)Recognition and identity ............................................................................ 125
  Wordplay: blurring gender with words ................................................................ 126
    Gender in the Russian language ....................................................................... 128
    Uses of gender-switch ....................................................................................... 129
Gay and lesbian language .............................................................................................................. 130
Switching gender, switching identity .......................................................................................... 131
Language, sexuality and desire .................................................................................................. 133
Two dichotomies of lesbian genders .......................................................................................... 134
The origins of butch/fem/klava categories ............................................................................... 136
Butch/fem/klava in a cross-cultural context .............................................................................. 137
Cultural imperialism interrupted? ............................................................................................. 138
Gender roles in Russia ............................................................................................................... 139
Relationship between the two dichotomies .............................................................................. 140
Mixed breeds: playing with the categories ............................................................................. 141
Butch/fem as Yin/yang .............................................................................................................. 142
Finding the right words ............................................................................................................ 143
Butch/fem/klava categories and sexual scripts ........................................................................ 145
Conclusions .............................................................................................................................. 146

Chapter 5: Trials and tribulations of Moscow Pride 2006 ...................................................... 148
Taking to the streets in Russia .................................................................................................. 148
Pride parades: history and context .......................................................................................... 151
Previous “Parades” in Moscow ............................................................................................... 153
Moscow Pride 2006 ................................................................................................................ 154
Events immediately preceding the Parade ............................................................................ 155
Making sense of the Parade ..................................................................................................... 156
A parade: pros and cons .......................................................................................................... 158
Conspiracy theories ............................................................................................................... 161
Guarding privacy .................................................................................................................... 163
The Moscow Pride Festival ..................................................................................................... 164
Re-framing the Parade ............................................................................................................ 165
The Parade unfolds ................................................................................................................ 168
Multiple perspectives .............................................................................................................. 172
Moscow as a sacred space ....................................................................................................... 173
Pride as a media event ............................................................................................................. 175
The camera as many different things ..................................................................................... 176
Epilogue: City day in St. Petersburg ....................................................................................... 179
Conclusions .............................................................................................................................. 180

Chapter 6: Russia and the World – Concluding reflections .................................................... 182
Globalisation ............................................................................................................................ 184
Academics and activists ......................................................................................................... 186
Individual cosmopolitanism .................................................................................................. 187
Subcultures as springboards for cosmopolitanism ................................................................ 189
Concluding reflections .......................................................................................................... 190

References ............................................................................................................................... 195

Index ........................................................................................................................................ 209
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Introduction

When I arrived in Moscow in 2003, I came back to a place where I had never been. The country I left at the age of eight was a socialist state where almost everything foreign was an anomaly and foreigners were often the butt of childish jokes or rhymes. Twenty years later, Moscow was a vibrant metropolis that steamrolled my senses with its pace and numbed my mind with its sheer size and capacity. During my visits to St. Petersburg over the years I had witnessed the steady increase of Western imports and influences. By 2005, Moscow was easily on par with other European capitals. Still this was Russia, with its eight-lane highways in the middle of town, overgrown and intimate backyards, with the very rich and the tattered poor mere blocks away from each other. It was home, and yet it was not.

One of the cornerstones of anthropology as an intellectual practice is to make the strange familiar. This would be the case with classical anthropological studies of the Other. When anthropology “moved” back home, turning to more familiar cultural traditions, analysis required a certain measure of distance that entailed making the familiar strange. In my own situation however, the familiar, which was to become strange, and the strange, which was to become familiar were emotionally and experientially so close together that it was difficult to discern where one began and the other ended. Over the course of fieldwork this ambiguity not only refused to go away, it took root and sprouted shoots.

Before I ventured into the field to investigate the lives of gays and lesbians in Russia, people often wondered incredulously how I would manage. The thoroughly totalitarian past and intolerant official stance towards all kinds of minorities made the existence of a homosexual or lesbian subculture in Russia seem like an oxymoron, and to be honest I did not know how to answer them. I had simply assumed that gays and lesbians existed, in some form, despite the prevalent homophobia and lack of a public sexual discourse, and that despite (or maybe because of) the relatively recent decriminalisation of male homosexuality, there would be a gay and lesbian social world, maybe even a subculture. The situation for sexual minorities had not improved as much as had been hoped since the fall of the Soviet Union. Russia had, after all, revealed unnerving similarities with its forebear, and it became clear that its leaders were intent on regaining the lost glory of an empire rather than escaping its horrid past. On the other hand, I was equally aware of the monochromatically grey image of life in Russia and the Soviet Union prevalent in the West. I was therefore well
aware that real life could not always be seen from the more politically retouched surface of official media and news reports. The ambiguous relationship between appearances and reality in the public sphere became further entangled when Russia was represented by the group t.A.T.u. at the Eurovision Song Contest in 2003 (as I was planning my first trips into the field).¹ Two young adolescent girls sang about being in love and hunted by a misunderstanding society. The lyrics were often about their love for each other, and their videos and performances featured plenty of explicit displays of affection. At the same time, the group was careful not to make any final or direct statements about their sexuality in public. Most people I talked to in Russia considered the girls’ quite explicit display of affection nothing but a clever marketing tactic, even if it did stir up a considerable amount of media commentary abroad (Heller 2007). However, the Eurovision Song Contest as a stage for public queerness neither began nor ended with t.A.T.u. Philipp Kirkorov, who represented Russia in the Eurovision Song Contest in 1995, and Dima Bilan in 2006 and 2008, have both been surrounded for many years by vague yet persistent rumours of being gay. They have not spoken out in the press one way or the other and the press has never made an issue out of these rumours.² Needless to say, being rumoured to be gay and being openly gay are two quite separate issues leading us back to the difference between appearances and what is sometimes hidden behind these appearances.

There was of course a lesbian subculture in Moscow, in the sense that there were established clubs and hangouts, magazines and websites, as well as a cultural repertoire of literature, music, slang and lesbian stereotypes that were joked about. While the subculture was constructed around the explicit assumption of something shared, it also accommodated many differences, as the lesbian population in Moscow was a very heterogeneous group in terms of age, education, interests and preferences (Hannerz 1992a).

My aim in this study is to present the lesbian subculture in Moscow as a continuously unfolding multifaceted network of social worlds that has been woven together from varying historical and cultural traditions. Lesbian women negoti-

¹ The Eurovision Song Contest is one of the largest and most watched festivals of popular music in Europe as well as one of the world’s longest running annual television programs. It was established by the European Broadcasting Union in 1956 to “unify post-war Western Europe through music” (Raykoff 2007). One of my informants, Natasha, noted with approval that the Russian submissions to the Eurovision song contest have received much more funds during the past years, implying that finally somebody realised the political potential of entertainment. Here the Eurovision Song contest was recognised as a thinly veiled political stage where national conflicts could be played out.

² Here I should perhaps also add the Ukrainian drag artist Verka Serduchka/Andrei Danilko, who in 2007 secured the second place at the very same competition, and is a successful musician, comedy performer in both Russia and Ukraine who manages to be both fabulously camp and socially acceptable at the same time.
ate their lives and identities drawing on both Soviet and post-Soviet traditions and practices as well as globally available ideas and images of gay and lesbian lives abroad. Lesbian spaces are created and negotiated, sometimes almost literally carved out of the city landscape, constantly negotiating between public and private aspects of spaces. The ideas and ideals of what a lesbian community or subculture should look like are closely connected to gay and lesbian subcultures in Western Europe and North America. However, within these latter communities a high value is placed on visibility and political activism, which are poorly compatible with the cultural and political context of Post-Soviet Russia. The tentative situational visibility of the subculture is closely connected with a preference for open-ended definitions of identity that enable people to continuously negotiate their positions, keeping their choices open. The lesbian subculture in Moscow is the creation of an everyday life balancing between Western ideas of a subculture and post-Soviet reality.

The study

The available ethnographic works on the gay and lesbian subculture in Moscow by Tuller (1996), Essig (1999), and Franeta (2004) were based more or less on data collected during the early 1990s. They were descriptive of a period when the entire country was in social and economic turmoil, but they also took place before the decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1993, when an open gay and lesbian subculture was starting to form. I suspected that by 2005 the situation might be considerably different and I did not know what to expect. As my 2005 fieldwork was about a decade after the existing ethnographies, it would provide an excellent opportunity to trace changes, developments, or setbacks.

To the questions “Why Russia?” and “Why gay and lesbian culture?” I have initially no better answers than “It seemed like a good idea at the time” and to the questions “Why Moscow?” and “Why women?” I have to reply “Because that was what worked”, but in the end I must admit that it was far from chance that brought forth the theme of this book. When contemplating fieldwork in Russia, I recalled that my mother, like many women, had a gay best friend. I had often met him when I was a child, and after my mother and I had moved to Sweden, he occasionally visited us. He did not only come to visit us, but also an old friend/lover whom he had met during Soviet times and had since then maintained contact with. During that time there was of course an immediately apparent appeal, and risk, in having friends abroad. However, I suspected that in this case the allure was more than Western items or a high status friendship, but an access to a more open gay culture. My initial idea was to investigate the gay and lesbian culture in Russia in relation to global flows and influences. As I became more familiar with the gay and lesbian subculture, I made yet another adjustment as it proved to be far easier to access the lesbian subculture than the male gay one. As the most easily accessible hangouts for gay men, such as clubs
and cafés, were primarily for cruising I was rendered practically invisible to my subjects. In many situations this may have been an advantage, but when it comes to establishing networks for research, it was not. In the lesbian subculture however, I was not only immediately visible but also interesting, and if nothing else this prompted people to talk to me, and occasionally try to pick me up.

Another initial idea was to investigate both the gay and lesbian cultures in different cities, or at least both Moscow and St. Petersburg. But as I began to explore the multifaceted lesbian subculture in Moscow, I soon realised that I had enough variety on my hands to fill at least two dissertations and the wider geographic spread of the trans-local field was squeezed out of my view by the presented complexity. However, it did not disappear, as several kinds of lesbian spaces became available to me and with them a wide variety of networks. My field scattered over many different places and networks and the trans-local field shrunk in scale from encompassing several cities to the different places and networks in Moscow. The application of the trans-local term remains applicable from several perspectives. As I began my fieldwork the multi-local, or multi-sited, approach soon re-emerged as I became a regular participant in several distinct lesbian spaces. I came to spend the majority of my time in roughly three different spaces and the connected networks: the Archive, the club KSP and the Pushka. I also spent time in networks that remained explicitly outside or on the borders of the subcultural spaces. Not only were these four locations geographically distinct, they were also separate as social spaces as the social networks had only a very small overlap.

The primary method of investigation was participant observation, which entailed spending time in various lesbian spaces, meeting new people, maintaining contact with existing networks, and participating in various activities and discussions. All in all I estimate that I was acquainted with around a hundred and fifty people, which means that if we met in another context we would probably recognise each other and perhaps greet. I was on conversational terms with around fifty people; whom upon meeting I would greet and maybe have a shorter conversation. These people would occasionally tell me anecdotes or stories from their life and friends. Twenty-five people became my regular informants, with whom I engaged in longer conversations and discussions about the subculture. They were also the informants with whom I conducted structured interviews that were taped and transcribed. Five informants became key informants and were very helpful throughout the entire period of fieldwork as well as after. Occasionally a camera was appreciated, and sometimes I was questioned about where the pictures would appear. Private conversations, especially with people I knew well would often fluidly transform into semi-structured informal interviews.

I widened my network of informants through careful accretion, most often simply through widening my network of acquaintances rather than following recommendations of informants as these, strangely enough, never tended to be
quite as useful to me as to the person who recommended me. The participant observation was complemented with twenty-five structured interviews that were recorded and transcribed. Elena Grigorievna, Lena Kidanova and Vladislava became key informants and close friends who were willing and forthcoming conversation partners in my search for elusive answers. After I left the field in February 2006 I regularly returned during the following year and a half, which provided numerous occasions to gather complementary data and check my initial interpretations and theories. It also enabled me to participate in the Moscow Pride Festival, which formed an essential contribution to the material.

Insider/outsider

As an “ex-native” (see Wulff 1998) I assumed that I would have at least one clear advantage: but the fact that I spoke Russian fluently made my “foreignness” inconspicuous, unless I made a misunderstanding or not-understanding apparent. Just as I could make myself inconspicuous, I could use my foreignness as an excuse to lure people into explanations that they would not have ventured into for a proper native. The ambiguity of my identity however, soon proved to be a double-edged sword as informants “moved” me from the category “familiar” to the category “stranger” as it suited them. The “foreigner clause”, as I call it, was often used as a tactic to nullify my standpoint or argument, or to underscore a distance. The result was not that I had a different opinion, but that I could not grasp the premise of the question. The “foreigner clause” was occasionally also used as an olive branch, if a disagreement was perceived at risk of escalating into an argument, the defence of cultural difference was brought up and both sides could leave the argument without having yielded their position. Once again difference was underscored, but it was accentuated for unity rather than distance. This “foreigner clause” was resorted to in order to try to manipulate me. This required however, that I was well familiar with the values connected with what was perceived as truly Russian and Western traits respectively and the particular mobilisation in each context. By labelling me “foreign” they implied that I was over-thinking things, that I was emotionally restrained, as opposed to being “Russian”, which in this case would entail impulsive and soulful. This tactic could only have been used from the perspective of the inherent and unquestionable value of my Russian roots and as an attempt to make me try to recapture an ability that I had lost. On other occasions the positive and negative values of these polarities were reversed and “Russian” meant unrestrained, irrational, and often destructive, while “foreign” came to mean measure and reason, traits that were very rarely used in a manipulative way.

While my informants occasionally used the dichotomy as a means of manipulation, and through this revealed the contradictory character of the categories “Russian” and “Western”, it also brought to the fore the relationship be-
tween insider and outsider, which is highly relevant from an anthropological perspective. The anthropological endeavour is based on the privilege of an outside perspective, however, with a goal of understanding the culture from the inside. It is the switching between the outside and inside view that is the deepest anthropological core. Just as one can question the ability of an outsider to acquire or even access all of the inner workings of a culture, the reverse danger looms large over the analysis of an insider, or native anthropologist, as they can be assumed not to be able to distance themselves sufficiently to gain perspective. My own position was somewhere between native anthropologist and a complete stranger, with the term ex-native anthropologist perhaps the best way to describe the predicament. As an ex-native Russian and a woman I had clear advantages in my field. In her study of the ballet world, Wulff (1998) did not attempt to explicitly draw benefit from her own training as a classical ballet dancer in her interaction with the dancers. She was accepted and gained confidence quicker because the years she had spent doing ballet enabled dancers to recognise her as one of them. The basic formation of trust was greatly facilitated through a reliance on a baseline of understanding that did not rely on explanation as much as experience. It is hard to argue that we are absolute insiders in any group: as members of several groups only share some but not all characteristics, we are both insiders and outsider to different extents in many different groups and situations. Anthropologists are not the only ones aware of this situation, or cunning enough to use it. “We are all incipiently bi- (or multi-) cultural in that we belong to worlds of both personal and professional, whether in the field or at home” (Narayan 1993:681).

To situate myself in the field is an important task, if for no other reason than to give the reader a chance to assess my point of view. But no matter how carefully I attempt to pinpoint my position in the field I can never presume to understand all the ways in which my perspective or knowledge is partial. Some of my blind spots will inevitably remain blind and no account of personal history or other idiosyncrasies, no matter how minute, will remedy the partiality of the perspective. It seems to me that the reflexive turn in anthropology not only had a tendency to slip from self-awareness into self-centeredness, but that the position of the underdog was somewhat overrepresented. It has often been women or non-heterosexual anthropologists who turn themselves inside out in their attempt to right the wrongs of others (read straight white male European or North American anthropologists) and often for no good reason. This book is not only a result of me being a white, bisexual woman of Russian descent and anthropological training, but perhaps most of all it is a result of personality.

There was yet another insider/outsider question that kept recurring throughout my fieldwork, and this was whether I myself belonged to the lesbian or bisexual contingent or not. When the question came from my informants, I was first and foremost expected to explain my interest in the topic as such and assure them that I was not out on a “freak safari”. Many of my informants had a hard time imagining that a straight person could find gay or lesbian
culture interesting in its own right. They found it even harder to believe that my supervisor, a real professor at a real university, actually knew what I was up to. In some cases the question was asked in the hope of a flirtation, or just as a curiosity. I also answered as a way to reciprocate the willingness to cooperate. Since they answered questions about themselves that I asked, I could answer some of the questions they had. Most commonly I was asked whether I was lesbian myself and what the gay or lesbian subculture was like in Sweden. I then informed them that I had had relationships with both men and with women, but that I had never participated in the gay and lesbian subculture in Sweden. Thus, here too I remained both an insider and an outsider, this time to the gay and lesbian subculture. While all of the above was true, the answers were at the same time advantageous to me in my work. Coming out as a bisexual preemptively subdued the suspicion of ignorance and prejudice, as did the establishment that I come from a culture and academic environment where a professor not only accepts, but also even encourages studies of lesbians. As I was engaged to be married, on the other hand, I was often considered unfair play for flirts, and most of my informants considered me heterosexual.

Outside the field sites the question of how I had chosen such a topic had a tendency to trail off into a silence indicating that perhaps I had a personal interest in the research topic, without actually asking that explicitly, while on the one hand it is understandable that me being gay was a far more interesting revelation than me being Russian. While I could occasionally tolerate this kind of curiosity in my ordinary life, in academic settings I found this assumption puzzling and annoying. There was the methodological side of the curiosity, namely whether I could gain access to a group which was assumed to be hostile to an outsider, even though the question was very rarely phrased in these terms. This is the reverse side of the insider/outsider quandary where the researcher was presumed to be an insider. This implies first of all that only an insider could find the topic interesting, but also indirectly reduces the research interest to an advanced form of navel gazing.

Through exploration of groups or processes anthropology endeavours to describe not only the specificities of that particular group but also to perhaps say something valid about humans in general. While it is true that gay and lesbian scholars pioneered the study of gay and lesbian cultures, in effect often outing themselves in the process, since then gay and lesbian studies, queer theory and studies of gender and sexuality have proven to be not only a valid research subject but also an imperative contribution to anthropology and social science in general.

Sexuality can be a factor in the field, as it can play a part directly or indirectly in many forms of human interaction. Vague interest or attraction was, as it

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3 This might have something to do with the fact that being gay is often considered to be a more private category of information than ethnic or national background, thus a more exciting in-group identity.
often turns out, both an advantage and an impediment. While some new acquaintances would perhaps spend some extra time with me in the hope of a flirt or something more, there were situations where very giving and interesting interaction had to be broken off entirely because the informant was unwilling to remain only an informant. Sex and sexuality in the field are of course important enough to be “dealt with as a theoretical and empirical issue in anthropology” (Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999:11) but only where it is relevant, that is when it leads to the discovery of new data or changed the course of fieldwork considerably. As I had been in relationships with women before I ventured into the field, I managed to avoid asking (ignorant) questions such as “How can you desire a person of the same sex?” and focus on a more relevant question such as “How do you live desiring a person of the same sex?” There is a clear and fundamental difference, but hardly one that a heterosexual anthropologist would be incapable of discerning. However, the lesbian subculture itself was completely unknown to me and here I was aided more by my status as an ex-native than as a bi-sexual.

Contextualising the study: Soviet times and homosexuality

This research is, in a way, a continuation of previous work that has explored the gay and lesbian subcultures in Russia. Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self and the Other by Laurie Essig (1999) presents a fairly comprehensive overview of the burgeoning gay and lesbian subculture in the very early 1990s, focusing especially on organisations and something she calls “queerness in the public sphere”. While the book is illuminating when it comes to the history and internal dynamics of the early Russian gay and lesbian rights organisation, Essig remains ignorant about the complex relationship between the public and the private spheres in Russia. The fact that she focuses on what she calls “public queerness” and dismisses the private sphere from her research in this way excludes all gay and lesbian culture in Russia that is not directly connected to activism. Fortunately this lacuna is bridged by the journalist David Tuller’s (1996) ethnographically rich and far less theoretically laden Cracks in the Iron Closet: Travels in Gay and Lesbian Russia. Tuller’s prolonged stays with a close-knit circle of friends enabled him to look beyond the uniformity of state repression and his experiences and adventures with his Russian friends became an excellent ethnography of gay and lesbian everyday life in Russia.

Here it is perhaps also appropriate to mention Daniel Schluter’s (2002) Gay Life in the USSR: Fraternity without Community, where he juxtaposes the gay and lesbian subculture in the Soviet Union with the one in North America and Western Europe primarily in terms of the institutionalisation of the subculture. The most comprehensive historical work on gay and lesbian cultures in the Soviet Union is undoubtedly Dan Healy’s Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: the Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent (2001, see also Healey 1999, 2002a, 2002b) where the decriminalisation and subsequent re-
criminalisation of homosexuality is seen within the wider context of the sexual politics of a state in the midst of its construction. Gay and lesbian life in Stalinist Russia must of course be placed within the context of Soviet everyday life.

The academic literature is fairly scarce not only on gay and lesbian subcultures in Russia, but also on subcultures in the Soviet Union and Russia in general. During Soviet times social science was thoroughly controlled by the state and any research agendas were adjusted to the ideological line, as were the results. The opportunities for a foreign researcher to explore Soviet culture were very limited. This was even more so for the sensitive topic of sexuality, not to mention homosexuality. It was not until glasnost and the fall of the Soviet Union that social scientists could explore and investigate subcultures without having to adjust or burnish their results. The increasing openness of the Soviet state also made it possible for foreign researchers to study these topics. During the tumultuous years of perestroika and the fall of the Soviet Union many researchers focused on everyday life (Boym 1994; Pesmen 2000; Ries 1997), gender (Ashwin 2000; Goscilo and Holmgren 1996) youth cultures (Pilkington 1996; Pilkington and Bludina 2002) and the private cultures of the Soviet Union (Boym 1994; Oswald and Voronkov 2004; Pesmen 2000; Yurchak 2006).

Subcultures
The study of subcultures as an intellectual endeavour initially seems rather straightforward: a study of people who share a common interest or characteristic. This illusory simplicity reveals many basic assumptions about subcultures. At first glance subcultures often seem to be separated from the wider “mainstream” society by their focus on or formation around particular interests or identities. A contributing factor may be that the most visible or easily recognizable subcultures, for example youth and countercultures, have as a part of their credo to maintain an antagonistic position to mainstream culture, which contributes to the assumption that subcultures are apart from rather than a part of society at large. This is of course not true since subcultures are formed around the most mundane and unexceptional things such as aquariums or knitting. It is also important to note that mainstream and subcultural spheres are not mutually exclusive, as most individuals often are participants in both the mainstream culture as well as one or several subcultures simultaneously. The lack of antagonism and the rather everyday nature of the focal interest of many subcultures make participation rather unremarkable and easily overlooked.

The prefix sub- can also imply a hierarchical relationship, when subcultures are seen as small pockets within a larger “mainstream” culture, or inferiority in standard or quality. In Russia subcultures were also often dismissed on “aesthetic merit” where the subculture might be perceived as inferior to the mainstream culture based on the “greatness” of works of art, music and literature
produced within that particular subculture. “Subcultures are defined in relative terms as smaller units of collectively carried meaning within wider cultures” (Hannerz 1992: 37). There is, however, no a priori opposition between a subculture and the mainstream culture in terms of symbolic or cultural forms. To a large extent they draw on the same cultural flows with mainstream cultures often incorporating ideas and images from various subcultures. What is more common is that everyday objects assume alternative meanings in a subcultural context, as Crisco Oil can metamorphose from a benign cooking product into a fisting aid (Graham 2004). In its totality, subculture is social interaction around a common interest. As social interaction requires spaces where people can meet, networks through which people can communicate with other participants in the subculture, hierarchy can be exemplified in terms of size and scope. Subculture then becomes synonymous with spaces and forums. These are not just simply “there” but are created by actors and maintained through social interaction, requiring organisation and considerable effort. Subculture thus creates and establishes meanings, knowledge sets and practices around this focal interest. In all interaction cultural production is present to varying degrees, in the form of slang, signs and subcultural and tacit knowledge and also in the form of music, literature and art. I will therefore conceptualise subculture both as a field of social interaction, i.e., places, Internet forums and networks where people socialised, and as a field of cultural production, i.e., knowledge and practices, stereotypes and ideas that are considered to belong to the subculture. Both the social interaction and the cultural forms have overlaps and convergences with other cultural spheres and subcultures. Through their participation in the subculture, women created and established spaces, networks and forms of interaction. They also learned, negotiated and continuously recreated what it meant to be a lesbian; at the same time, the subculture only provided a limited number of spaces and activities and thus the ways to “be lesbian” were somewhat limited by the scope of the subculture. This investigation will therefore be structured through these two interpretations of subculture, focusing on both similarity with, and difference from, the mainstream culture.

The subculture as a field of social interaction will be presented through an overview of the subcultural infrastructure of places, organisers and information resources. Following the decriminalisation of male homosexuality and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the development of the subculture has been closely connected with the development of the market economy in Russia as well as the influence of the gay and lesbian movement in the West. The subculture as a field of cultural production entails trying to capture what is culturally unique within the lesbian subculture, of course without overlooking convergences with Russian and Soviet traditions. Here the uniqueness of lesbian sub-

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4 When it comes to art invoking great artists who happened to be gay, such as Michelangelo and Tchaikovsky, this circumstance could redeem the gay and very occasionally lesbian culture.
culture is precipitated into stereotypes, aesthetic forms and linguistic tropes. Some of the stereotypes within the subculture, such as the mannish lesbian, overlap considerably with stereotypical images of lesbians that are prevalent in Russian society in general, as well as other societies. Rather than dismissing this stereotype as a “lie” and “preconceived notion,” I explore its permutations within the lesbian subculture where there were multifaceted and fundamentally ambiguous debates that revealed a deep resonance and rootedness of the categories masculine and feminine within the reality of Russian society.

As a field of cultural production the lesbian subculture also accumulates a certain catalogue of cultural forms, a lesbian heritage of artists, singers, movie-makers, films, books and music that were considered to be works belonging to the subculture, works that portray and make visible gay and lesbian lives. It was through popular culture and literature that globalisation was most frequently present in the lives of my informants. This underscores once again that subcultures are far from nationally bounded phenomena, and the gay and lesbian subculture is no exception. Novels, television shows, and films from the West comprised considerable part of the catalogue of cultural forms of the lesbian subculture. At the end of my fieldwork the American television series The L Word was shown on the Russian MTV channel, and frequently sold in pirated copies in underpasses and kiosks as were books by Western gay and lesbian authors. They were recommended, downloaded and passed around although they were rarely viewed or discussed as a foreign influence upon a Russian cultural sphere, but more commonly as good or bad, relevant or irrelevant, stories or images. Another more explicitly globally contextualised topic was the discussion of family law, partnership, marriage and adoption where Russia was compared, often negatively, to other countries. Foreign influence and globalisation within the lesbian subculture were not in themselves considered to be interesting topics until the announcement of the Pride Festival in 2005 and the idea of the subculture as a social everyday space collided with the idea of a subculture as a political platform.

Frames: form of life, state, market and movement

On a more abstract level the lesbian subculture in Moscow can be conceptualised against the background of larger change in late Soviet and Russian society through the idea of the four frameworks that organise the flow of meaning as outlined by Hannerz (1996). These four frames are: form of life, state, market and movement. They are a way to conceptualise the variations in cultural flows and communication as they present different configurations in the way that “meanings and meaningful forms are produced and circulated in social relationships” (Hannerz 1996:69). The relationship between these different frameworks differs markedly between various cultures, and the formation of the gay and lesbian subcultures in Moscow were greatly aided by a gradual shift to a market economy that made it possible to cater to different tastes and interests. As the
totalitarian Soviet state attempted to control all media as well as most other aspects of Soviet life, the state framework was clearly dominant, at least in the official and public sphere, as it rigorously controlled the institutions of Russian society. The form of life frame on the other hand is characterised by the “not very deliberate communicative by-product of living, decentred, largely symmetrically organised in the sense that we are all more or less equally at the producing and consuming, sending and receiving, ends” (Hannerz 1996:69). Despite attempts by the state to control as much as possible of the everyday frame, the latter remained considerably more independent than officially projected images allowed. The form of life frame remained the most important frame and, as the Soviet state began to crumble, other frames than the one of state became influential, most conspicuously perhaps the frame of the market. These shifts in power between the different frames were concurring with changes in Soviet and Russian society. As the opening of borders decreased, the power of the state increased the opportunities of both the market and the movement frames. It facilitated contact with gay and lesbian organisations abroad and thus increased the influence of the framework of the gay and lesbian movement. The movement framework within gay and lesbian subcultures is the framework of social and political activism and projects that seek to improve life for gays and lesbians both through action directed at the state as well as the everyday life. In this respect the movement framework is actively aimed at both the state and form of life frameworks, the greater the influence of a movement, the greater the incorporation of meanings from the movement framework into the state frame and the frame of everyday life. In Russia it is this very aim that disqualifies the movement as such as it would allow the state framework to become indirectly valid in everyday life. The concept of the four frames is a way to grasp and illustrate the shifts of influence and the power balance between the different frameworks.

Overview of the chapters

In the first chapter I will place the lesbian subculture both culturally and historically within the wider context of sexuality and the private sphere in Russia spanning both the revolution as well as the fall of the Soviet Union. The chapter focuses on how the power of the Soviet state was not only restrictive but also productive, even through its forbidding and controlling capacity. In its attempt to reach all spaces and align all forces with the building of communism the repressive regime shaped discourses and exerted considerable control over the population; at the same time it also precipitated a unique relationship between public and private spheres. With time people adjusted to the system and learned not only to survive within it but also to live and thrive within it. This was, however, not done in public spaces, but rather in private-publics (Oswald and Voronkov 2004). Even during Soviet times there were gay and lesbian
spheres, or fraternities as Schluter (2002) prefers to call them, but rather than being well-known or visible they were accessed exclusively through private networks and lived out beyond the reach of the state. With perestroika, glasnost and the gradual lifting of censorship as well as the juggernaut of capitalism, these networks slowly began shifting into what could be called a subculture. The deregulation of the press enabled first gay and lesbian publications to appear in wider circulation, and this aided the formation of an imagined community (Anderson 1992) that was more widely spread than ever before.

The second chapter outlines the lesbian subculture as it was during my fieldwork. This is the general overview of the subculture, the places, forums and organisers that one would find if one were to search the Internet or read the Moscow Time Out. All the clubs, cafés, journals and mailing lists composed the field of social interaction where people met and socialised. There were a variety of different spaces where women could meet just as there were a variety of virtual lesbian hangouts. The lesbian subculture was, in large part, dependent on the initiative and determination of individuals who took it upon themselves to organise cafés, bars, poetry readings, picnics, magazines and mailing lists in order to make it easier, more interesting or even possible to meet other women who were interested in women. The chapter focuses on how the subculture, while held together by one particular interest, was a diverse and heterogeneous social field consisting of a variety of smaller social worlds loosely interconnected in a variety of ways.

In the third chapter I take a closer look at three specific lesbian spaces, two formed by individual organisers and the third a place-specific hang-out, a subcultural variation on a form of social interaction that is common within youth cultures: hanging out in parks. Much of the subcultural activity that I participated in was tied to various spaces that were often created by one or several individuals. These places were therefore often quite uniquely coloured by the tastes and interests of each organiser. These projects illustrate not only individual preferences but also elucidate how the lesbian subculture is intertwined with other subcultures and Soviet and post-Soviet Russian culture. This chapter also illustrates how subculture is experienced and constructed through smaller networks, social worlds (Strauss 1978, 1984; Unruh 1980) where the majority of interaction was carried out.

In the fourth chapter I move away from subculture as a field of social interaction to the subculture as a field of cultural production—the culture of the subculture, so to speak. I am primarily interested in the visual and linguistic codes that were a part of the subcultural repertoire. As homosexuality and lesbianism were taboo in Russia, it was important to be able to communicate with a chosen few without anyone else knowing and to be able to speak about something without mentioning it explicitly. The codes that develop in secret societies are usually conceptualised as a sign of oppression. Visibility has been one of the cornerstones of the gay and lesbian movement. But speaking out and reclaiming one's voice is only one path towards freedom. The tactic of doublespeak
need not only be a severe case of being in the closet, but it can also be a refusal to be named, pinned down and controlled by a knowledge that is undoubtedly more powerful.

The theme of ambiguity as an inherent aspect of freedom is continued in the different ideas and concepts of lesbian genders that were prevalent within the subculture. While the mannish lesbian has been a lesbian stereotype since at least as far back as the novel The Well of Loneliness by Radclyffe Hall, it remained relevant to my field. Just as this stereotype was used as a laughing stock outside the subculture it was prevalent as a joke within the subculture, albeit with a different meaning. Within the subculture the mannish lesbian, or the butch, was only one of two sets of dichotomised stereotypes буч//фем//клава (буч//фем//клава) and aktif//passif (актив/пассив). The relationships within and between these dichotomies and occasional trichotomies were far from simple or straightforward oppositions. While the opinions on what was feminine and masculine were firmly established, the question of who had the right to claim these labels, characteristics and attributes remained open. While on the one hand the lack of consensus may have been due to a lack of debate, it may also have been the result of a lack of interest in a consensus.

In the fifth chapter I focus on the announcement and organisation of the Moscow Pride Festival 2006. The Pride Festival was announced as a celebration with a wide cultural and recreational agenda, with entertainers and gay activists visiting from abroad. The plans to hold a Pride parade as a part of the Pride Festival revealed many tensions and schisms in Russian society. While the protests of the municipality, composed of right-wing groups and religious leaders, were expected and widely publicised both in local and international media immediately following the announcement (as well as preceding the event), there was very little coverage of the profoundly contradictory emotions and reactions that were stirred within the gay and lesbian subculture. The parade not only brought to the fore unavoidable tensions between the “leaders” of the community, but also forced ordinary gays and lesbians to seriously contemplate if and by what means they should attempt to improve the situation for homosexuals in Russian society. On a wider scale the controversy over the parade revealed not only the deeply rooted homophobia in Russian society, but also many of the tacit assumptions about political power and the relationship between the state and its citizens, as much of the anxiety was rooted in the unpredictability of the actions and reactions of the state. The Pride parade can also be seen as a manifestation of global cultural flows that are relayed through the gay and lesbian subculture into the wider national debate in Russia. While subcultures are most easily seen as parts of the national culture, they are at the same time entities that have a tendency to be open to transnational flows and networks.

In the sixth and concluding chapter, I draw together the various forms of globalisation that were unevenly but continuously present throughout my field. While the Pride parade was the most notorious event, more mundane global flows were far less controversial but no less influential. The occasional presence
of academics or activists, as well as the interests, hobbies and life histories of individuals made global flows and influences a part of everyday life. In a way, involvement in the subculture could become a springboard to cosmopolitanism as it opened many possibilities to interact with people outside of Russia in a context of both shared life experiences as well as fundamental differences. These contacts often spurred people to contemplate and compare the current situation in Russia to other places and other times. These comparisons formed an important contribution to visions of the possible futures people could wish or strive for, as was the placing of the gay and lesbian subculture within the context of Russian national politics.
Chapter 1: Historical background

“We have no sex here!”

These were the words of a woman from Leningrad during one of the first American-Soviet television debates at the beginning of perestroika in 1986. This ad lib statement immediately took on legendary status, “vividly reflecting the long-standing and official anti-sexuality stance of the Soviet regime” (Kon 1995:1). But somehow despite the fact that “there was no sex in the Soviet Union” the population managed to reproduce and just a few years later the very first gay and lesbian organisations stepped into their official existence.

In this chapter I present a brief overview of the history of homosexuality in Russia during pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet times. Homosexuality will be placed within the context of the sexual politics of Russia and the Soviet Union, which are, in turn, placed within the context of everyday intimate lives during state repression. Especially important is the relationship between private and public spaces that developed during Soviet times.

Sexuality is simultaneously part of the political sphere and a deeply intimate sphere. National subjects are always also sexual subjects. As human reproduction is a prominent interest of the nation-state for the production of the population there is always a correct way to be sexual (Kulick 2005). Sexuality was also an important aspect of the Russian revolution, where the radical ideas of sexuality and equally radical laws served as a means to demolish the traditional way of life. While exploring the structures of control and repression of the Soviet state it is imperative to remember that no matter how extensive in its intentions, state power is never absolute. Any history of state politics and ideologies must be balanced with a view of the ways that the extension of state power precipitated different manipulations of the public and private, and enabled people to live their lives within, around, and outside these structures.

Pre-Soviet Russia

Until the October revolution in 1917, the overwhelming majority of the population in Russia were peasants. Peasant life was largely communal and there was no recognised divide between domestic and public affairs. Most villages rejected private claims to landed property. Conjugal privacy was an exception, individual nonconformity rare (Engelstein 1992). Women were subordinate to
their fathers and husbands. It was among educated urban groups that the conjugal family based on a relationship between freely chosen partners, shielded from the intrusions from the larger community, began to emerge as a cultural norm.

The first mentions of same-sex sexuality in Russia can be found in the travelogues of Western diplomats who travelled in Russia in the eighteenth century. They were appalled by the lenient attitudes towards male same-sex practices. The punishment for sexual relations between men was not more severe than that for infidelity (Engelstein 1992; Kon 1995). The first anti-sodomy statutes were introduced by Peter the Great as a response to Western criticism and as a way to Westernise Russia. Historical records show that the first homosexual subculture began to take form in Saint Petersburg and Moscow in the 1880s (Healey 1999, 2001). This was a predominantly clandestine male homosexual culture centred on public spaces such as public lavatories, parks and arcades.

In the late nineteenth century there was considerable interest in new scientific theories on both sexuality and homosexuality. Professionals in Russia as in the rest of Europe read the works of scholars such as Havelock Ellis, Krafft-Ebing, Hirschfeld and Lombroso. Russian medical and legal experts were engaged in debates on whether homosexuality should be decriminalised or not. Those who were in favour of a decriminalisation argued that a medical condition should not be criminalised and that private conduct between consenting adults did not merit prosecution. The opponents denounced the validity of a clear distinction between public and private, and underlined that Russia had not yet fallen to the level of depravity of the big European capitals such as Paris and Berlin. In the end, the ban against homosexuality was not abolished on the grounds that in this question one could not separate private interests from social ones (Engelstein 1992). It is interesting to note that same-sex relationships between women, in contrast, remained outside of the criminal code. There are only a few historical sources on female homosexuality in pre-revolutionary times; because of women’s restricted movement in public space, they were more seldom apprehended. Female homosexuality attracted less attention also among scholars (Engelstein 1990, 1992). “The influential British juridical system – which during Britain’s colonial period was adopted or enforced as a legal template in many other countries – criminalised male homosexual acts while ignoring the possibility of female homosexuality. The Labouchère Amendment of 1885, on which much Western anti-homosexual legislation is founded, specifically outlaws acts of ‘gross indecency’ between ‘male persons’, but leaves comparable acts by female persons legal by default” (Jagose 1996:13). The same-sex relationships between women came to the knowledge of the police through either prostitution or criminality, or both, but not in itself.5

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5 The interest of forensic science in homosexuality was connected both to medicine as well as law. Forensics tried to ascertain physical indications or traces of homosexual
Sexual politics and culture in early Soviet Union

With the Revolution in 1917 Russian society underwent violent upheaval and transformation. To build a new society, the Bolsheviks were intent on destroying as much of traditional Russian society as possible (Courtois 1999). This was done both through unbridled violence, but also by breaking down established social institutions such as marriage and the family. In 1922 the Soviet Union instituted the most liberal jurisprudence in the world by legalising divorce, abortion and homosexuality. The legalisation of abortion and divorce became yet another way to demolish traditional Russian society. A clause about division of property upon divorce was a serious blow to the peasant way of life. The legalisation of abortion relieved women from reproduction that bound them to the family. At the same time there was a fundamental suspicion against complete sexual freedom in the higher ranks of the party (Kon 1995; Healey 2001). The intimate lives of Soviet citizens were very much an issue of party politics. Political activists such as Alexandra Kollontai dreamed of a society where free love reigned and women were not distracted by childcare and domestic chores from the work of building Communism. Lenin, on the other hand, did not share her enthusiasm and considered the interest in sexuality an entirely bourgeois preoccupation, which would deflect energy from the revolutionary cause (Kon 1995). “[F]reedom of love should wait (as would all sexuality) until a proletarian revolution reconstructed the material order” (Healey 2001:112). In this way sexuality was doubly political: a normal and healthy sexuality was an important part of being a good Soviet citizen, while at the same time sexuality was not to be seen as anything other than a biological prerequisite for the continuation of the nation. An excessive interest in sexual matters was viewed with suspicion because all energy should be spent on political work and the building of Communism.

Men and women: reconfigurations of gender roles

The aim of the Russian revolution was not only to overthrow political order, but also to radically reshape society. One of the fundamental parts of this transformation was a reconfiguration of gender roles. Women were to be liberated from the confinement of domestic labour and propelled into the workforce. In this way they were to be “transferred from the private dependence on men to acts or habits, medics were interested in the origin of homosexuality as such and legal experts discussed whether a congenital affliction could be punishable by law.

The correspondence of the dichotomies masculine/feminine and public/domestic is “well established and often implicitly assumed in much research on gender” (Hylland Eriksen 1995:129, see also Rosaldo 1974). However, this generalisation is complicated by ethnography that has shown that the two spheres are not easily separated: men can wield considerable influence in the domestic sphere and women can be influential in the public sphere.
the ‘protection’ of the Soviet state” (Ashwin 2000:10). As women were to take equal part in the building of Communism, they also gained access to public spheres and activities dominated by men.

But even though the gender politics of the Bolsheviks aimed at social transformation, they were premised on an entirely traditional view of a ‘natural’ sexual difference. Even the most radical of sexual advocates, Alexandra Kollontai, promoted traditional gender roles where motherhood was perceived as the ‘natural’ destiny for women (Ashwin 2000; Issoupova 2000). Soviet womanhood was a balancing act between two opposite demands: women as workers and women as mothers. The cult of motherhood aimed to be a counterweight to the excess of “masculinisation acquired by working-class women on the shop floor or at the aerodrome” (Healey 2001:203). In Bolshevik ideology, motherhood was not a private matter but a social and political one, a duty to the state.7

The relationship between the sexes was destabilised not only through women’s access to spheres previously marked as exclusively ‘male’. The communist party interfered directly in the relationship between individual men and women. If there was trouble within a marriage such as drinking or infidelity, one of the spouses could write a letter of complaint to the local Communist party cell. The letter would be read aloud during a meeting and the wrongdoing spouse would be publically humiliated and possibly reprimanded. This was an attempt to make women closer allies to the state than to their husbands. The Communist authorities attempted to construct a set of relations where the primary relationship of married men and especially women was not to their spouse but to the state (Ashwin 2000). In the early 1930s the legislation on both marriage and abortion became more rigorous. These were attempts to increase birth rates and to strengthen the family by administrative methods. Homosexuality was criminalised in 1934, and in 1936 divorce was made considerably more difficult, and abortions became illegal again. This form of interference and control of the most private spheres did have a variety of influences on gay and lesbian culture. One of my informants told me that during Soviet times she had no qualms about marrying her gay friends so that they would be better armed to ward off suspicions of homosexuality at work. “Once they had a stamp in their passport, it was almost like a sign that they were all right. If that stamp was missing and they were suspected of something, they would have been more vulnerable. Of course sometimes there were complaints and suspicions anyway, and then I would be summoned to his workplace where I would be questioned and sometimes presented with evidence. I would of course swear that the suspicions were without grounds and that everything was all right.” Another example of marriage being a bureaucratic necessity rather than a civil status is that

7 In 1936, a number of rewards for motherhood were introduced, for instance the title ‘heroine mother’, a reward to a woman who was the biological mother of ten or more children. There was no corresponding title for ‘heroine father’ (Issoupova 2000:33).
several of my informants had at some point contemplated marriage, just to “get the stamp” or to “get it over with”.

Private spaces in early Soviet time

Both the civil war after the Revolution and the rapid urbanisation during early Soviet time had a monumental impact on the way of life. An ultimate example of the destruction of private spaces was the communal apartment, the *kommunalka*. Lenin drafted the idea for communal living just a few weeks after the October Revolution in 1917. A maximum number of square meters per capita were calculated and housing arrangements were based on the approximation of 10 m² per person or 13 m² per family (Boym 1994:124). The expropriation and resettlement of several families into private apartments was not only a temporary practical solution, alleviating the housing shortage, but also an ideological arrangement: in the revolutionary project all citizens were to unite in their struggle for freedom and Communism. This required complete dedication. All aspects of life were to be permeated by Marxist ideology. To close off a private sphere was a bourgeoisie indulgence, the mark of a time past and ultimately of the enemy. The creation of a new society entailed the creation of a new everyday life whose political restructuring was a strategy to extend the reach of state power into private spaces and the family. In the ideal communal apartment, people were envisioned to share chores and their lives. However, the reality of the *kommunalka* was full of conflicts, spying neighbours, and possible informants. The established maximum of 10 square meters per capita meant that rooms often had to be divided into separate living quarters by fragile partitions, and there was little sound isolation. Cramped living quarters also meant that entire families often had to share the same living space, creating a serious impediment to intimate life (Kon 1995; Rotkirch 2000).

The individual and the collective

“Private life did not shrink to intimacy in the sense of a legitimate and protected sphere of privacy. Both privacy and particularism were completely rejected and completely stamped out by the social . . . There was no recognisable space left which was not, in principle, part of the social” (Kharkhordin 2005:88ff).

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8 Private spaces are of course never free from either politics or ideology. The battle cry of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s was ‘the personal is political’, bringing forth the claim that the confinement of women to the domestic sphere is neither neutral nor natural, but a part of patriarchal ideology. In the Soviet Union this statement was precluded by the state.
Both the revolutionary project and the political climate during early Soviet times shaped this configuration of public and private spaces. Not only was privacy physically difficult to attain, but it was also ideologically questionable, and therefore potentially fatal, to detach yourself from the collective. The division between the public and the private does not only mark the limit of the official power of the state, but also the extent of the right of the collective over the individual, and hence defines the relationship between the two. One of the results of the Great Purge between 1936 and 1938, when a great number of people both within the party and in general society were labelled as saboteurs or spies and exiled or executed, was that each collective had to decide which of its members were to blame for any failures and not only find but also approve of the judgment themselves. A continuous mutual surveillance not only from above, but laterally, among equals was a hallmark of early Soviet society. In Soviet ideology the individual was not primarily a basic unit that constructed the collective but a product of that very collective. According to Kharkhordin (2005:80), the private sphere was created within this all-encompassing “social” through dissimulation. People learned quickly that certain types of behaviour had to be hidden both from superiors and from equals. Privacy in Soviet society was the result of a different configuration of power, relationships, and social ties than in the West. Most importantly, homes and other ‘private’ spaces were not private, in the sense of primarily belonging to an individual and thus delineating the space within which their actions would not be interfered with. As all spheres of activity could be beneficial or harmful to the state, there could be no exceptions for completely private spaces. With the death of Stalin and the beginning of the Thaw, a new era began in Soviet politics. Repression decreased perhaps in degree, but not in kind, and as the collective continued to be one of the cornerstones of Soviet society, this was carried out not only in the working collective but also in private spaces. Boym notes that from the late 1920s onwards, especially throughout the Stalin years, the *kommunalka* became a major institution of Soviet surveillance and control (Boym 1994).

Homosexuality in early Soviet times

The different and, at times, contradictory discourses on male homosexuality within medicine, psychology, criminology and forensics came about in relation to the formation and positioning of state power. The male, urban homosexual subculture that had formed during late Tsarist times continued both in public spaces, such as parks and boulevards, as well as in bathhouses and the private space of apartments (Healey 2002b). As for female homosexuality, Healey notes that the masculine ideals of the revolutionary worker provided many opportunities for women to live outside of traditional norms of femininity, both socially and sexually. But there were fewer possibilities for a lesbian subculture to emerge in the revolutionary years, both due to economic scarcity, which made it
impossible to socialise in commercial spaces such as cafés, restaurants and arcades, and again due to the fact that women did not have the same ease of access to public spaces as men. While the Soviet Union was the first state in the world to decriminalise homosexuality there are several different, and quite divergent, interpretations of this radical shift. Kon (1995) suggests that the temporary legalisation was a miscalculation, that the laws against homosexuality were discarded with the rest of the Tsarist criminal code, and that the soon resurrected repression and “sexophobia” (Kon 1995) were the integral approach of Soviet power. Healey, on the other hand, places the criminalisation of homosexuality within the context of the propaganda war between Fascism and Communism in the 1930s (Healey 2001, 2002). While communists ascribed homosexuality to fascism, in Germany the burgeoning national socialists linked homosexuality to communism. The facility with which political dissidence is presented as sexual dissidence once again reiterates the close connection between sexuality and politics.

Sexuality is also an inextricable part of citizenship, as sexual aliens have a tendency to slip into the category of national aliens in light of the fact that homosexuality is often perceived as either imported or is a result of foreign influence (Graham 1998). Healey underlines the complex processes of the decriminalisation and re-criminalisation of homosexuality, and points out that one also needs to take into consideration that in different parts of the recently established Soviet Union, homosexuality was used as an allegation against politically troublesome populations. In the early 1930s the discourses of homosexuality shifted away from biological interpretations to social ones. Homosexuality was thus increasingly connected to backwardness and anti-revolutionary sentiments and to ways of life that had no place in modern Soviet society (Healey 2001). Practices of sodomy were ascribed to populations constructed as Other to the Soviet power and used as yet another motivation behind the Soviet civilising power. Ethnographic data of “homosexual” practices among ethnic populations at the margins of the empire served as a justification for the modernisation and colonisation of remote regions. In a similar vein the legislative measures against sodomy were used to weaken the clergy, the Other at the heart of the Soviet state. The political uses of homosexuality also struck against male homosexual subculture. At the height of Stalinism any kind of social ties, other than those formed by politically acceptable goals, were per definition perceived as subversive and counter-revolutionary. On one hand, the private circles of homosexual men were perceived as spaces where alternative allegiances could develop, ultimately leading to treason. On the other hand the state was vigilant against the public aspects of homosexual sociability and its “demoralizing effects” (Healey 2001:187). It was thus primarily the male homosexual culture around the Boulevard Ring in Moscow and Nevskii Prospekt in St. Petersburg that attracted the attention of the police. Male homosexuality was redefined from being a medical condition to a social and political threat, and was therefore criminalised and relegated to the penal system.
Lesbianism, on the other hand, did not warrant such interest from the state and remained within the medical discourse. This relative leniency may in part have been due to the absence of a visible lesbian urban culture that could attract the attention of the police. While male homosexuality was equated to a subversive homosociality there was no corresponding threat from lesbian women. Same-sex desire between women fell under the diagnosis “sluggishly manifesting schizophrenia” (vishtekushaia shizofrenia), an umbrella term that could cover anything from sleep disorders to making copies of forbidden or censored literature and thus broad enough to be capable to classify anything inconvenient (Essig 1999:28). In this sense female same-sex sexuality clearly remained within the framework of political and ideological dissidence, although to a lesser degree than male homosexuality, which warranted incarceration.

There were also other, perhaps more pressing, ideological motivations. As female sexuality was not considered to have any intrinsic motivation or goal other than reproduction, treatment of lesbianism was preferred to imprisonment in order to rehabilitate women to a proper (read fertile) sexuality. Because female sexuality was considered to be substantially weaker than male sexuality divergences were therefore slighter and could be cured. If in the end the medical treatment proved powerless, there was one final solution: if a lesbian woman could not be “cured”, there was always sex reassignment surgery. The inconceivability of female same-sex desire in official Soviet medical discourse resulted in a situation where there were ten times as many female-to-male transsexuals as male-to-female in Russia (Essig 1999). If the proper desire could not be elicited in the female body, the body would be changed to correspond to the desire.

After Stalin: The emergence of an unofficial culture

Stalin’s death in 1953 brought about a new era in Soviet politics. A more humane socialism was to take form under the leadership of Khrushchev, which resulted in another wave of urbanisation and an increase in living standards. Even though repression never ceased, under these comparatively auspicious circumstances there was an opportunity for people to attain a reasonable stability and find ways to survive within the system. It was during this time that the system of obtaining goods and services through personal networks outside official channels, known as blat, became ubiquitous.

Stalin’s death was a turning point not only in terms of alleviating the threat of further purges and repression, but also for the political discourse. During the height of Stalinism, Stalin was the absolute expert in all possible areas, in questions ranging from Marxist-Leninist ideology to matters of everyday life. After his death there was no one who could fill this position of authority. To avoid ideological mistakes political texts became increasingly formulaic. The form of both political discourse and political rituals became increasingly rigid and circu-
lar, and conforming to the form became a central issue (Yurchak 2006). What people thought of politics and ideology on one hand and what could be expressed in public on the other slowly became two separate things. It was therefore entirely possible to participate in public events while not fully believing in the slogans while at the same time not being against them. People recognised the formulaic nature of the slogans, but did not necessarily consider them entirely false. One could disagree with ‘truths’ as they were officially formulated, but it did not automatically mean that one found it necessary to voice this disagreement in public. This discursive distinction made voiced opposition, or dissidence, an extreme form of opposition rather than the only disagreement or divergence from the party line.

Kharkhordin has argued that during the times of informants and impending purges during early Soviet times people had to hide their thoughts and feelings even from their closest comrades in order to survive (1999) the purges and repression. Dissimulation played an integral part in carving out a safe sphere, a private space within. However, the alternative spaces of the unofficial Soviet culture during the 1960s and the 1970s were not a result of lying in public and telling the truth in privacy, but rather a double consciousness, a tacit knowledge that public and private spheres require different strategies and discourses. It was not a question of lies and truths, but rather different kinds of truths. Boym notes that “[T]he American metaphors for being sincere and authentic – ‘saying what you mean’, ‘going public’, and ‘being straightforward’ do not translate properly into the Soviet and Russian contexts. ‘Saying what you mean’ [in the wrong context] could be interpreted as being stupid, naïve, or not streetwise” (Boym 1994:1).

The three spheres
The intentions of the Soviet state to subsume all life under the rules of party politics effected the development of the public and the private spheres and the relationship between them. Oswald and Voronkov (2004) argue that instead of a sharp divide between the public and the private sphere, as is the common conceptualisation of the two spheres in the West, the main divide in Soviet and post-Soviet society lies between the official-public sphere and private-public sphere. The former would include spaces where people came into contact with official structures and were visible to the state, the private-public sphere on the other hand consisting of gatherings of friends in private spaces that became the primary spaces of social interaction. The generation that came of age in the 1960s, commonly referred to as the ‘sixtiers’ (shestedesiatniki), sought an existence outside the confines of ideology, while not directly contradicting it. Within the intelligentsia in Leningrad and Moscow there developed a ‘kitchen culture’ (Boym 1994; Kelly 1998; Lindquist 1994; Yurchak 2006) where people who had their own flats started to have unofficial gatherings in their homes. While these spaces were not individually private, that is, belonging to one indi-
individual only, each one was restricted to a limited number of people within the trusted circle of friends. This in-group of most trusted friends was often referred to as ‘ones own’, in Russian simply svoi. The in group svoi could encompass anything from the closest group of friends to the entire subculture at times, the most important feature being its use as a distinguishing mark between those who belonged and those who did not. The institution of the kitchen as a meeting space and close-knit networks of friends formed a fundamental part of Soviet life. This private-public space in turn is less sharply separated from the more intimate sphere of close family and intimate friends. These private-public spaces became a prevailing structure in Soviet society because almost everyone participated in such private-public life. There was no fundamental difference between those who belonged to the party and those who did not. Party functionaries too participated in these alternative cultures. They too read samizdat publications, hand-typed or hand-written manuscripts of forbidden literature that circulated among circles of friends, and listened to half-forbidden music by bards such as Vysotskii and Okudzhava. As long as there was no direct opposition by alternative cultures to the state and the activities were restricted to the private-public sphere, they were tolerated by state powers. Open opposition and dissidence not only challenged the state, but it also jeopardised the existence of the alternative spaces.

Yurchak (2006) distinguishes between three types of Soviet people: normal people, who tried to minimise their interaction/friction with state structures; activists, who believed wholeheartedly in the official ideology (and were therefore considered to be idiots by normal people); and dissidents, who openly opposed it (and were therefore considered to be troublemakers). The first category played by the tacit rules, both in public and in private, executing their official duties as Soviet citizens, participating in meetings, votes, and parades while at the same time keeping their private lives separate from their official sphere. The other two categories, activists and dissidents, interacted actively with the regime and interfered with the tacit rules of the private spheres. Activists tried to motivate people to a more energetic political engagement while dissidents drew attention to themselves and people around them by not abiding by the tacit rules of everyday life. Both groups were problematic or unwanted precisely because they extended politics beyond the official-public sphere and brought them into the private everyday lives. The fact that people did not speak out against the regime in what is considered ‘public’ in the West, which would correspond to the Soviet’s official public, does not necessarily mean that they were politically ignorant or supporters of the regime, nor that they were lying. The three types of people outlined by Yurchak and the three spheres outlined by Oswald and Voronkov underline the exclusion of party politics from private spaces.
Information, control and silence

Perhaps the most important political strategy of the Soviet state, apart from legal and medical intervention, was the control of information. Before the Revolution, Russian medical and legal experts had been involved in many of the same debates on sexuality as their Western counterparts, and they were up-to-date on the most recent writings and theories. After the Revolution, this discussion of gender and sexuality continued, but shifted gradually from a radical to a more conservative and finally to a reactionary stance. During the 1920s a large number of investigations into sex problems had been undertaken, both social and medical. By the 1930s however, research into sexual questions were deemed both unnecessary and dangerous. No professional literature was published, nor was foreign literature imported and the studies from earlier periods remained under lock and key (Kon 1995; Banting, Kelly and Riordan 1998). In his writings on sexuality in Soviet Russia, Igor Kon distinguishes between four different periods: Revolutionary 1917-1930, Sexophobia 1930-1956, Medicalisation 1956-1986, and Glasnost 1986-onwards (Kon 1995). Kon uses different sources, ranging from historical documents, surveys and personal experience as a researcher during the Soviet regime, but focuses mainly on the official discourse on sexuality. In her study of sexual autobiographies, Anna Rotkirch (2000) brings forth a much more multifaceted view, elucidating the everyday sexuality of Soviet men and women. Based on her analysis of the autobiographies of four generations of Soviet men and women Rotkirch (2002) argues that, despite the fact that there was no official discourse on sexuality the autobiographies of people who came of age during the period 1930-1956 were among the richest sexual biographies of the study. She underlines that people who lived adventurous lives did not discuss them openly and what information one happened to access was rather more a question of chance or as a result of personal friendships and relationships than a result of any public campaigns or education. This once again reiterates the importance of private networks in everyday life, networks that are not traceable through public records or official decrees.

Political and cultural specificities of communication technology in late Soviet Russia were an important factor both to communication within its borders and in its connections with other countries. In comparison to other highly industrialised countries the Soviet Union did not invest quite as heavily in light industry and kept a tight control on new communication technologies, such as faxes and computers, restricted to specialised environments and out of reach of the general public. But the lack of easily accessible technology did not mean that people in the Soviet Union or Russia were in any sense efficiently cut off. Just as people managed to attain rare goods and services and even travel abroad through personal networks (Ledeneva 1988) there were also alternative channels or the innovative use of existing technologies. The restrictions on the press were compensated by secret self-publishing: samizdat, the circulation of hand
copied or typed manuscripts among circles of friends; and *tamizdat*, literally there-publishing, the publication of works that were smuggled out of the country as manuscripts and smuggled back in printed form (Gessen 1997). In the realm of music and song, the production and distribution of forbidden music were appropriately named *magnitizdat*, magnetic publishing or simply cassette copying (Smith 1984; Yurchak 2006).9

The broadcast of Solzhenitsyn’s banned book *Gulag Archipelago* on Radio Free Europe illustrates how the combination of already existing technologies enabled people to get past the intentions of the state. This is not an instance of new technology breaking through established boundaries, but rather of new ways of using existing technology to do the same.

After the *perestroika* and the fall of the Soviet Union there was an influx of information and international media, but due to the economic crises there was a lag to the development of communication technologies in Russia. However, in 2005 Moscow and St Petersburg were in no way lagging behind with respect to the availability of globalised information and communication technologies. Especially in Moscow there was a multitude of Internet providers for private households and a large number of Internet cafés, some of which were open twenty four hours a day.

Sexuality during Stalinism

During the period 1930-1956 there was virtually no publicly disseminated information on sexuality and intimacy (Kon 1995). All of the political propaganda during this time focused on the necessity to work and all energy was to be directed into either production or reproduction (Issoupova 2000). To publicly discuss ‘normal’ sexuality was considered improper and even decadent, in Lenin’s words “a bourgeois preoccupation”. This standpoint is supported by Rotkirch (2000) who notes that Soviet Russia during the Stalinist era could be counted as one of the most sexually ignorant cultures in the world due to the fact that both the oral tradition of agrarian culture and the erotic culture of the upper classes had disappeared and that the new evolving Soviet middle class was kept in ignorance by the strict control of information. After Stalin’s death in 1953, during the period of the Thaw, there were also changes with regard to official sexual discourse, with Kon referring to the period 1956-1986 as the “Period of Medicalisation”. It was during this time that academic interest in sexuality once again became possible, albeit under the disheartening label of “sexopathology”, and academic work remained difficult (Healey 2001; Kon 2006).

9 There were of course records and tapes from abroad that circulated in the Soviet Union. One of my informants told me how she nearly was arrested for almost buying or almost selling a Bee Gees LP album. For more on Western music see also Rozanova (2003) and Yurchak (2006).
1995). This also led to an increased interest in sexual minorities, both in men and women. The research on female homosexuality was carried out mainly within the penal system and focused on the division between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ roles, investigation of pathology as well as the search for possible treatments or cures. Many of the records of female same-sex sexuality come from either camps or prisons. If same-sex relationships took place during the time in labour camps or prisons these histories were seldom recounted after the return to ‘normal’ society, as they were perceived to belong to ‘that life’.

The private-public spheres harboured many different practices that were, though not directly dissident, not entirely approved by the state ideology: the ‘kitchen culture’, where people gathered, socialised and discussed everything they felt like discussing. As I noted earlier, these spaces were not necessarily dissident or oppositional, they were the oases of life, within the gray drudgery of the state, where one lived and searched for things that were worth living for. To devote oneself to talk of politics and all the life outside would destroy this haven. Outside you were often forced to do what you had to do, but within there was a possibility of choice. This was not only an escape; it was also an affront to the system that went out of its way to make living colourless and joyless.

“To an extent romantic and erotic love, and sex as its expression, was practiced as a form of protest, even though the majority of people did not consciously spell it out that way. Moreover, love was the only form of protest that was politically harmless. It did not threaten the regime directly, and it was tolerated by it, unlike other forms of protest. To engage in romantic love (as well as in flirting and fornication, which could be preludes, substitutes of sincere illusions of love) in the Soviet times was the easiest (and most pleasurable) way to experience the illusion of freedom” (Lindquist 2007:155).

Perestroika and after

The perestroika, which was initially meant to vitalise Soviet society in general and the economy in particular, was the beginning of turbulent and fundamental changes and ended up toppling that entire system (Humphrey 2002; Lane 1981; Pesmen 2000; Ries 1997). In January 1987 Gorbachev delivered a speech at the 27th Party Congress that was a fundamental critique of the deficiencies of Soviet society. The economic reforms that were intended to invigorate the economy and the subsequent shock treatment had led to rampant inflation and

10 Freedom can of course be obtained by other means. During an interview Evgeniia Debrianskaia explained that her own alcoholism during her youth as well as the Russian proclivity towards strong alcoholic beverages in general have the rather simple explanation that intoxication is an escape, a freedom, from a reality that demands in the most oppressive terms that you conform and do as you are told.
transformed everyday life into an unpredictable turmoil where even shopping for the most common household items such as toilet paper, socks, or sausage became a Herculean feat. There was a drastic increase in unemployment and criminality, and a drastic decrease in life expectancy.

Glasnost, being outspoken about the realities of Soviet society, economics, and the party system, was a fundamental part of the perestroika and led inevitably to an increased flow of information. This gave journalists the freedom and the courage to ask questions that they had never dared to ask before, and articles on taboo topics began to appear in the state publications. These articles discussed events in the Soviet past that became known to the wider public. The state archives were partially opened to researchers and journalists revealing the political turbulence during the Stalinist times. This freer flow of information was in turn refracted through different social milieus in various ways. Works that had previously only been accessible through samizdat were, in the early 1990s published in prestigious literary journals such as the well-established publication Literaturnaia gazeta. Initially many people who had previously read the samizdat manuscripts were euphoric; they were overwhelmed by the feeling of freedom and that now anything was possible and began reading everything they could get their hands on. But after the initial excitement there was a certain disenchantment as people realised that as these works became openly available, they were no longer a constituting part of the private-public spheres of informal gatherings, and in this way taking away an important piece of that life (Yurchak 2006).

While the official discourse on sexuality in the Soviet Union was restricted to the field of “sexual pathology” there were spheres—not subcultures but social networks—where sexual practices were quite liberal. Glasnost became a contributing factor to what Rotkirch (2000) terms the period of “articulation of sexuality”, when sexuality became something that could be discussed, both in public as well as between partners. This acceptance was perhaps most visible in newspaper stands, the yellow press or sensationalist journalism, and the availability of erotic and pornographic films in small ‘video salons’. Images of nudity became almost ubiquitous and their occasional crudeness came as a shock to a society where the naked body had been on public display only in strictly sex-segregated, ‘hygienic’ contexts such as bath houses and changing rooms (Banting, Kelly and Riordan 1998). This explosion of explicit content was not backed by any considerable change in the public and official discourse at large. Smaller publishing houses, whose independence from state structures was ensured by the economic reforms of the perestroika, published a few books on

11 During the early 1990s ‘video salons’ seemed to crop up absolutely everywhere, and almost every block had their own video salon. They appeared in basements, vacant offices, small back rooms in cinemas, railway stations. They were rarely more than a darkened room with a television set and a VCR with rows of chairs in front of it where people paid a small fee to watch pirated copies of mostly American blockbusters, but films ranged from cartoons and horror films to pornography.
sexuality. However, a state-funded discourse on sexuality was still conspicuously absent. One of the few programs of sex education in schools was stalled by sheer embarrassment of those who had to deal with the administration and actual execution of the education (Kon 1995). Another telling example of the sexual politics of the late Soviet era was the reaction to the spread of AIDS.

The first reports of the AIDS virus appeared in the summer of 1985, but officials gave conflicting accounts of whether there had been any registered cases in the Soviet Union. Over the next few years glasnost prompted greater political openness about social problems and by the end of 1987 the figure of AIDS cases was admitted to be nearing two dozen. Most of them were exchange-students from Africa and other foreigners rather than Soviet citizens, which reaffirmed that AIDS was an ‘imported’ affliction. Since neither prostitutes nor homosexuals officially existed in the Soviet Union there were no “social conditions for the spread of the disease”. Unfortunately, this claim was disproved when reports that people who did not belong to the risk groups had been infected by unsterilized syringes in hospitals. Despite assurances that homosexuality did not exist in socialist society, the Soviet government had long implemented very aggressive contact tracing in cases of syphilis, and all VD clinics maintained ‘pink lists’ of local homosexuals who, under the threat of arrest, were required to appear for annual check-ups and disclose all sexual partners. When the threat of AIDS was acknowledged health officials implemented a policy of mandatory HIV tests of patients in hospitals, foreigners, people returning from abroad, army draftees, pregnant women, and blood donors. Despite the range of the program, it was grossly inefficient and the draconian attitude towards HIV-positive men and women was a powerful incentive to avoid testing. After Article 121 was repealed many gays perceived the AIDS epidemic and HIV clinics as an excuse to keep track of and control homosexuals. But even during Soviet times people realised that the anti-sodomy laws were about more than “just” homosexuality. According to Franeta Viktor, a forty-five-year-old man from Novosibirsk remembered in 1995 that “they couldn’t put me in jail only for listening to the ‘Voice of America’ but they could for being gay” (Franeta 2004:118). Another of Franeta’s informants, Sergei, noted that “the law is like a connecting rod, the way you point it that’s the way it will shoot. Just as the anti-sodomy law was used to get at people for ideologically troublesome behaviour, homosexuals were persecuted under other statutes” (Franeta 2004:97).

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12 This was a claim made by Viktor Zhdanov, the director of the Soviet Institute of Virology (Tuller 1996).
13 When I was nine or ten years old I was subjected to one of these mandatory HIV tests just because I was living in Sweden. I found the disease mysterious and seriously petrifying as it was, but when I was tested for it I wracked my brain to understand how I might have contracted it. And to make sure that I did not fall sick after the test I kept weighing myself for months, just to ensure that I was not losing weight, as I had heard people infected with HIV tended to do.
Perestroika and the gay movement

The first tentative mentions of homosexuality in the press in the early years of perestroika started an avalanche of responses, not only from isolated gays and lesbians who wanted to find others like themselves, but occasionally from grieving and concerned mothers who had nowhere else to turn (Kon 1995). The liberation of the press was manifested not just by the lifting of censorship, but also by greater freedom of production. Magazines and newspapers could now be printed outside the state-controlled system, which facilitated the advent of publications where a large part of the stories were about love, sexuality, and intimacy, with a considerable amount of nudity in the pictorial content to ensure robust circulation. These early publications were also where some of my informants placed, and replied to, their very first personal ads, in this way coming into contact with other gays and lesbians. Many of the publications of the early gay and lesbian press were so-called “guerrilla commodities” (Condee and Padunov 1991:84) both in terms of production and distribution. Printed outside of the state system, sometimes simply typed and photocopied, they were laid out for sale on a blanket on the ground and quickly gathered up again at the first sign of the militia or offended citizens, rather than being sold in kiosks or stalls (ibid.).

Already in 1984, some thirty young people in Leningrad set up the group “Gay Laboratory”. They had managed to establish contact with a Finnish gay and lesbian association, but it did not take long for the KGB to silence and disband the group through terror and intimidation (Essig 1999). In the early 1990s many different organisations for gays and lesbians were established by different constellations of activists, but most were never registered, both due to the bureaucratic difficulties but also due to their short-term existence. In late 1989, the Sexual Minorities Association was established in Moscow and its main purpose was to campaign for equal rights of people of different sexual orientation and the repeal of Article 121. The group began to publish the newspaper Tema. But already in October 1990 internal conflicts between the more moderate and radical activists created a split within the organisation and the Moscow Union of Lesbians and Gays (MULG) replaced the Sexual Minorities Association. The radical political activist Evgeniia Debrianskaia and the twenty-four-year-old student Roman Kalinin headed the second organisation. They managed to officially register the newspaper Tema with the authorities and they were acclaimed in the West as the first courageous people who had finally ‘come out’ to fight for their rights. The tactics as well as slogans of MULG were intentionally radical and shocking as they did not distance themselves from any “sexual deviation”, and this not only lead to defamatory campaigns by the press but also to considerable criticism from gay activists Vladislav Orтанов, Olga Zhuk, and Alexander Khurkharskii.14

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14 The genealogies and fates of the various gay and lesbian organisations during the early 1990s are quite thoroughly described in Essig 1999).
In the summer of 1991 MULG was the Moscow organiser of the “Soviet Stonewall” festival, arranged in cooperation with the American organisation International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC). Importantly this was the first open gay and lesbian event in the Soviet Union. The festival became a meeting place for gays and lesbians from all over the Soviet Union as well as America and Western Europe (Tuller 1996, Franeta 2004). The festival was held again in St. Petersburg the following summer. American gay and lesbian activists held workshops on lesbian writing, safe sex, fundraising strategies, and gay spirituality, and the festivals provided a forum for people to meet and openly discuss their lives and hopes for the future. Also in 1991 MOLLI (Moskovskoe Obiedinenie Lesbiiskoi Literatury i Iskusstva – The Moscow Association of Lesbian Literature and Art) was founded in Leningrad, soon to be St. Petersburg, by Mila Ugolkova and Lyubov Zinovieva. The group focused originally on social support, but soon transformed into an association facilitating woman-centred culture. The organisation began publishing the magazine Adelfi with a literary supplement Sapfo Sapfo. The latter was, after a few issues, taken over by Olga Gert and became the radical feminist publication Ostrov (Island), which was still published during my time in the field in 2005. The market economy and the liberation of the press resulted not only in an upsurge of gay-themed magazines, but also in the publication of famous gay books by both Russian and Western authors, for instance James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room (1964), William Burroughs’s Naked Lunch (1959), Mikhail Kuzmin’s Wings (1905), the poetry of Sophia Parnok and many others. Soon after the first conferences in Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1991 the Russian organisation MULG disintegrated and many of its members went on to form their own organisations.

In 1993 President Boris Yeltsin repealed Article 121.1 and consensual sex between adult males was no longer punishable by law. But this slight warm-up of the political climate did not improve the ability of gay activists to collaborate with each other. In 1993 Debrianskaia and Kalinin, also prominent members of MULG, formed the organisation Triugolnik (Triangle), most notably, which was meant to become a national umbrella organisation for all gay and lesbian organisations. The organisation was funded by Western donations. They published a bulletin and organised an archive of gay and lesbian publications and newspaper clippings. But already on the first anniversary of the organisation there were discussions of disbanding it. While many Russian gay activists in the early 1990s were staging controversial actions and criticising each other, prominent Russian gay and lesbian artists and intellectuals were appalled by the commercialisation and vulgarisation of the gay lifestyle and sexuality in the new

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15 Sexual relations committed with the use of physical force or with a minor were, and still are, illegal.
16 Parts of these materials were later included in the Archive where I spent a lot of time during my fieldwork.
These ideological divisions and conflicts ran along lines of social class. Ortanov and Khurkharski, both of whom had distinguished careers, separate from their activism, distanced themselves quite early from more radical activists such as Debrianskaia and Kalinin who on the other hand had quite marginal positions in society and therefore comparatively little to lose. Organisations were not only entirely dependent on Western funding for their existence, but also to a certain extent on initiative and the strength to keep them from disintegrating into quarrels. Triugolnik, like many other organisations, was founded by several charismatic and headstrong individuals, whose presence was imperative for any kind of work to get done, but at the same time this focus on a strong leader made it difficult for people to cooperate and almost all cooperative organisations soon splintered into individual projects or new, equally unstable, coalitions (Essig 1999). This tendency continued to dominate the organisational landscape during my own fieldwork and the collaborations and alliances shifted regularly.

Social differences in late Soviet society were gravely exacerbated during the economic hardship of the perestroika. The market had proved itself to be not only a liberating force, but also violently chaotic, where money ruled and almost everything was for sale. Conflicts over finances caused serious friction among organisers, and accusations of swindling and misuse of Western funding were fairly run of the mill occurrences. Even today, with the economic situation considerably more stable, seeking funding from Western organisations is often implicitly perceived as a question of professional activist finding employment, rather than a grassroots fight pursued for the rights of Russian gays and lesbians. The Russian gay and lesbian movement was a transnational project almost from the outset as both international pressure to decriminalise homosexuality and funding from Western gay and lesbian organisations were imperative for the survival of the projects.

Russia and the West

The relationship between Russia and the West has been a long and ambiguous one. While some histories take into account that Russia was effectively isolated from the rest of Europe by the Mongol Tartar yoke in the early Middle Ages, the most common point of departure in the exploration of Western influence in Russia is the Westernisation of Russia initiated by Peter the Great in the seventeenth century. In his unyielding desire to create order and civilisation in a country he considered backward, he resorted to quite barbaric methods, as most civilising processes have tended to do. In the social sphere, the influence

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17 In certain ways this is similar to the mourning of the disintegration of the private-public spaces when previously forbidden literature was released which in a way made the distinction between those who had access and those who did not obsolete.
of Tsar Peter's Westernisation was not profound and the attempted order did not penetrate deeper than the top layers of society. Russia was a country where the majority was composed of the same old peasants, ruled by a somewhat enlightened aristocracy.

From then on the question, “What is to be done (to help Russia?)”, posed both explicitly or implicitly in discussions in the parliament, universities and around kitchen tables, has had at least two standard answers: that the Westernisation of Russia was superfluous or that it was incomplete.18

In both cases however, Russia is perceived as intrinsically different from the West. Certain historical events may have served to increase or decrease the distance but were in no way the cause of the difference as such. There are two possible, diametrically opposite, ways to deal with this conflict, which are to have less Westernisation, or more. From the first perspective, known as ‘Slavophiles’, any attempt to Westernise Russia will not only fail, but will also be fundamentally destructive to both parties. Just as Russia will perish in the attempt to assimilate the ways of the rational and logical West, so will the West lose its spiritual saviour. Those who were in favour of more Westernisation were appropriately called ‘Westernisers’. From this perspective Peter the Great and every other Westerniser were fools who were destroying the true essence of Russia. From the other perspective, Russia is, and should always have been, a part of Europe and the West, but various historical and cultural factors have been a hindrance to this process. Russia should therefore, for her own good and salvation, relinquish her backwardness and obsession with mysticism and spirituality and move forward towards a bright European future unhampered by an Asian or Byzantine or Orthodox past. From this perspective Peter the Great was a hero, who despite difficulties and opposition tried to reform Russia and create a civilised, Western society.

Those who propagated the first perspective came to be known as Slavophiles and the second as Westernisers. Of course the core of this debate was not so much about the specificities of Russian culture or political institutions as it was about the idea of the Russian soul. Marian Broda conclusively summarises the difference between the two positions:

> “On one side [Slavophiles] there is the tendency to absolutize the continuity, force and decisive character of the specific traits of the ‘Russian soul’, the ‘Russian idea’ or ‘Russia’s soul’. The other side [Westernizers] tends to the polar opposite, it minimalizes, epiphenomenalizes or simply negates their significance, treating them as something to grow out of. The first is based on faith in the unique nature, history and destiny of Russia, in its unknowability for outsiders – and in terms of rational categories, its unknowability in general – which renders impossible the application to Russia of universal developmental standards, unmasked as exclusively Western. The second underwrites the comforting possibil-

18 “What is to be done?” is the title of the novel by the revolutionary writer Nikolai Chernyshevski published in a literary journal in 1863. In 1901 Vladimir Lenin wrote a pamphlet with the same title.
ity of transferring automatically to Russia Western theoretical models of social and cultural development” (Broda 2003:10-11).

These terms are not introduced in order to continue the debate or to determine whether anyone adheres to either flank in any stricter sense, but rather to underline that there were two well established interpretations of Western influence that Russians could draw on interchangeably, depending on the context and the point they wished to make. The West was an Other that could be an inspiration and aspiration, or deterrent example and foe. While Russia’s relationship with the West did change with the Russian Revolution, it did not become less ambiguous.

The relationship to the West in Soviet times

During the late nineteenth century Russia stayed up-to-date with European debates and developments both in terms of science, art, literature, and fashions. After the October Revolution the West did not in any way lose importance; rather, the importance of the West in the Soviet Union was unavoidably refracted through the pervasive lens of Soviet ideology. A crucial part of the interest in the world outside Soviet borders was the internationalisation of the Revolution and the liberation of the workers of the world. This long-term political goal was one of the frameworks through which interaction with other countries was justifiable within Soviet ideology. At the same time, while the central tenant of the Soviet state, the building of communism, was in direct opposition to capitalist countries of the West in general and the United States in particular, the very same countries were the measure of success that the Soviet state was to achieve. From the earliest years of the newly formed state, one of the primary goals was to prove not only that socialism was just as good as capitalism, but even better. This meant catching up with, and even surpassing, the West to prove that communism as an ideology could leapfrog capitalist development. Once again, as the case had been with the Westernisation of Russia, the rapid industrialisation was carried out at a great expense to human lives.

The relationship between the Soviet state and the West was, from the outset, fraught with contradictions and consisted of almost equal parts competition, curiosity, and mistrust. A large part of the image of the West was created or maintained through the press. Stalin and his supporters monopolised the press

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19 Rozanova also notes that the conviction of the irreconcilable differences between Russia and the West actually diminishes the tension in attempting to confront Russian reality with Western standards. In the West this idea “assist in justifying the absence of successful attempts to influence Russia’s course politically” (Rozanova 2003:12).

20 While the losses during the perestroika were not quite as large as those during shock industrialisation, the average life expectancy of men shortened by ten years during the early 1990s.
slowly in the 1920s, but they did not quite manage to create a “xenophobic perspective on the world” or spread it very far (Brooks 1992:1436). The ambiguous relationship with the rest of the world can be seen through how news of the world was framed in Soviet press. Events were placed in different scenarios, signalling either amicable relations or adversarial ones. The former related the growth of peaceful relations with other countries, how well regarded the Soviet state was and the prospect for world revolution, while the latter related foreign dangers and the bad life under capitalism. This division was maintained until the 1930s when the threat of war simplified journalism considerably, and the more xenophobic side won. Nevertheless, “the Soviet Union was bound to Western nations and a wider world by an immense fabric of perceptions, ideas and images. To tear it up and weave another was beyond the Stalinists’ power and they never fully dispelled the cosmopolitanism they hated” (Brooks 1992:1448). The cosmopolitanism evoked by Brooks should not be confused with the quite specific meaning that the term held in the Soviet Union. During the rule of Stalin, cosmopolitanism acquired a wide and a narrow meaning, both of which differed markedly from the common meaning in the West. In its wider definition the term was used as ‘rootless cosmopolitan’, a person who had no roots or country, a person who had his or her loyalties beyond the boundaries of the Soviet state. More specifically cosmopolitanism was a euphemism for Jews and came into wide circulation during the last Stalinist purge initiated in 1949.21

Just as information about the world had been cast in separate frameworks, the judgment of whether a cultural form or influence was acceptable or not, was determined from the perspective of building and promoting socialism and communism. This could, of course, vary with context and depended greatly upon one’s ability to argue one’s position. While the influences from the West were always within the ideological realm, they were also present in different areas such as science, technology, culture and art. The interest in the West, and the rest of the world, was also a part of being a knowledgeable and educated Soviet citizen; to be a cultured person, was a part of Soviet ideology. However, to remain acceptable this knowledge had to be critical and distanced, “distinguishing between the creativity and imagination of working people and the materialism and philistinism of the bourgeois classes” (Yurchak 2006:17). While the cultural influences from the West were under continuous political and ideological scrutiny, by the late 1950s the interest in Western clothes spawned its own subculture. Young people, whose main hobby was to dress in imported Western clothes, and premiering particularly colourful and attention-seeking outfits, were dubbed stilyagi, which would be translated into something akin to

21 Initially the targets were prominent artists, poets, and writers but the entire Jewish population was affected and it was intended to lead to yet another purge. These plans were interrupted by Stalin’s death in 1953 and were promptly disowned by the rest of the party.
‘stylies’ in English, who were often made fun of in the Soviet satirical publications (Yurchak 2006). However, people who had a certain interest in Western clothes, items, and literature, but were not fanatic and did not wear shrill outfits, but read well and regularly participated in high culture such as exhibitions and going to the theatre, had no difficulty bypassing this form of criticism.

Yurchak argues that interest in the West was not automatically deemed politically inappropriate or dangerous. In the Soviet ideology any cultural influence could be interpreted as either cosmopolitan or internationalist, but there were no official rules as to how this distinction was to be made. Often, as in the case of the work of Picasso for instance, the official position of the Soviet state changed from ‘bad’ to ‘good’. This ambiguity enabled Soviet people to continue to be enchanted with Western detective stories and heroes (Brooks 1992), dancing the twist and longing for an authentic pair of jeans (Yurchak 2006). By the 1960s and 1970s, the acquisition of Western items was such a pervasive and well-recognised phenomenon that it was an unremarkable feature in Soviet films.22 During this time Western items such as clothes, posters, and plastic bags became a special category of items that were especially coveted. Brand items were obtained through contacts and friends, who had obtained the items from people who had visited other countries and visitors from abroad.23 This fascination with Western things should not be mistaken for a desire to flee to the West, or for a longing for a particular lifestyle. The persistent yet elusive presence of the West coupled with its unattainability transformed it into an illusory or dream realm, the evidence of which was all around but where very few could go. The West was in a way the constitutive outside to Soviet life, a continuously present yet ungraspable Other. For some people this Other became attainable with the emigrations in the 1970s.

The journalist and writer Sergei Dovlatov was forced to seriously consider emigration when his wife suddenly informed him that she was emigrating with their teenage daughter. Until then, emigration had remained an abstract choice, something other people did, but that was not really perceived as a possibility. After she had already left the country and he was waiting for his documents to be processed he contemplated the alternatives. “The world had two real polarities. The clear, familiar, smothering – HERE and the unknown, half-imaginary – THERE. Here – the boundless plains of the excruciating life among friends

22 This did not focus on the illegal aspects of the necessary transactions but rather served as a trope to establish a character. In Riazanov’s Office Romance from 1977 the secretary Verochka is very stylishly dressed and smokes Marlboro. She is cunning about how to be alluring and seductive, but as if to compensate she is unhappily in love and lonely (for more on Riazanov’s comedies see MacFayden 2003).

23 For a long time after my mother and I had moved to Sweden we continued to bring ordinary plastic bags from Swedish stores to my grandmother in Leningrad, who would distribute them as small gifts to friends and acquaintances. Sometimes on the subway I would encounter a person with a plastic bag from the Swedish pharmacy or the state monopoly for alcoholic beverages, and every time it was equally amusing.
and enemies. There – only the wife, a tiny island of her unflappable calm” (Dovlatov 2004:140, author’s translation).

Post-Soviet Russia and the West

Perestroika was not in itself intended to open up the Soviet Union to the West, but this became an almost inevitable side-effect as the changes, once initiated, could not be stopped and the country embarked upon a journey in the opposite direction of the one undertaken seventy years before. This time, however, the aim was to catch up with capitalism, rather than outdo it. The archival West was transformed, if not into a role model, then at least into a teacher. However, with time this rosy image was tarnished as the hopes for quick fix economic reforms turned into raging inflation, collapsing economy and the deterioration of society in general. Many people began to question not only the reforms, but also Western influence in general and whether it was for better or for worse. In a way this parallels the debates between Slavophiles and Westernisers. With the catastrophic effects of shock Westernisation of the Russian economy, the reforms were soon perceived as a way to break down the Russian empire. The difficult time also profoundly influenced the perception of globalisation in general. In Russia the official stance of the government leans towards the malevolent interpretation of globalisation, even if implicitly. In Russian foreign policy the Kremlin “assumes that as a big country, Russia is essentially friendless; no great power wants a strong Russia … and many want a weak Russia that they could exploit and manipulate” (Trenin 2006:87). This focus continues within the social sciences where despite the considerable variance in the approaches to globalisation, political self-determination remains a key concept (Rozanova 2003). Molchanov colourfully summarises a quite common view of globalisation:

“Where Western pundits decry sluggishness of adaptation and unyielding dependency on a patronizing state, Russians see life paths disrupted by exogenously generated shocks. They see a government reneging on the social contract forged in blood and cemented by the suffering of the two post-revolutionary generations. More often than not, they see a great country reduced to shambles by the greed of its own elites and transformed into a hapless resource appendage of a global capitalist economy run from afar” (2005:404).

This quote is fairly representative of a view of globalisation that is very common in Russia. Similar to this position is the assumption that globalisation is a subjective process that is directed by unknown agents, rather than an objective

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24 To compare economic “shock therapy” in the early 1990s with the Russian revolution was not far off, neither in terms of economic reform nor loss of human lives, as the economic crisis greatly increased mortality rates. “Between 1989 and 1994, Russia’s crude death rate rose 45 percent (Chen, Wittgenstein and McKeon 1996:518, see also Gavrilova et al 2001).
process. In the official political stance, the notion of globalisation is very often interpreted as thinly veiled Americanisation.

Conclusions

Despite the aspirations of the Soviet state, it never managed to fully control social life. The outline of the history of sexuality and intimate spheres during Soviet times has brought forth two important points. First, the extent of the repressive mechanisms that permeated Soviet society, and secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the various tactics developed by Soviet people that enabled them to create habitable spaces within and alongside the state structures. This underlines that the relationship to power is more multifaceted than a binary choice between either being determined by it or resisting it. In the words of de Certeau: "The goal is not to make clearer how the violence of order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline'" (de Certeau 1984:xiv-xv). The initial waves of repression that silenced all criticism and opposition through violence or threat of violence changed with time, and a decreased repression precipitated into three private and public spheres: the official public, the private public and the intimate private. While in the West public spheres are to a certain extent assumed to belong to the public, in the Soviet Union and to a certain extent in post Soviet Russia, these spaces are still considered to be the stage of the state. Social life in Soviet times was lived out in the private public spaces such as the Soviet kitchen culture. While the maintenance of the private publics demanded that open criticism should be kept away from the official public it did not forbid disagreement in private. Open opposition and dissidence was an extreme form of disagreement rather than the only divergence from the party line. Refusing to get involved in politics was a political statement in itself. A similar development occurred in the social sphere where personal networks became more important than official positions. Personal networks, friends, and the friends of friends became the most common way to get access to goods or services. As the private publics became established it is possible to conceptualise them as more than tactics of the weak but as strategies. Rather than simply hiding, it became a way to remove oneself, at least in part, from the immediate field of interest of the state. After decades of practice, the tactics of avoidance of the Soviet state had become an established culture that had its own separate spatial realm, neither completely out of the reach of the state, nor directly in its view. These social networks could also function as a source of information on subjects about which the state discourse was nearly completely silent, such as sexuality (Rotkirch 2000). Despite the rigorous controls of scientific publications and discourse and isolation from information flows from abroad, the everyday life framework (Hannerz 1996)
still managed to prevail. The most significant change came with *perestroika* and *glasnost*, and the cautious opening of a dialogue about Soviet society. This in combination with the introduction of market economy developed into processes that would ultimately crumble the Soviet state. The increased influence of the market created opportunities for the formation of an imagined community (Anderson 1992) of gays and lesbians through the burgeoning free press. Crucial momentum was gained when gay and lesbian activists organised the first conferences in Russia in 1991, and the imagined community became a little less imagined as a more visible subculture began to emerge. However gay and lesbian lives were to a large part lived in the articulation between the private and the public spheres.
Chapter 2: Subculture as a network of social worlds

I do not remember where I met Elena Tsertlikh. I suppose that it must have been either in the Archive or Botson’s club, KSP. She is a woman in her mid-fifties—when she was young she must have been a redhead—but but now her hair is silvery white, and, with her light complexion, her cheeks have a tendency to become ruby red in wintertime. She has raised three children on her own, and even though she works a lot she manages to always be energetic and jocular. Constantly on the go, she often carried a guitar, as she loves to write poetry, and music. Here is her story:

“I grew up and came of age during the Soviet times. From a very early age I realised that women were special to me. I remember that I read the word lesbian for the first time in an encyclopaedia or a dictionary, I don’t recall which, and it said ‘an unnatural attraction to women.’ Upon reading it my emotions were very mixed. On one hand, it was an affirmation that what I was feeling was possible. On the other, it was bad because it was unnatural. I could not understand it, and I couldn’t apply it to myself. When I fell in love with women I continued to make a difference between my own feelings and what it said in that text. I didn’t see my feelings as dirty or unnatural; they were an expression of pure spiritual love. When I met women, sex was not the first issue at hand. I courted them, and was there for them in many different ways. Sometimes this process went on for several years. I never thought of my feelings as dirty or unnatural. To be honest, I never came into contact with any kind of subculture. Partially this was because I worked at one of the most prestigious universities in the country, Moscow State University. I had to be very careful with whom I socialised. I have now heard that there was a kind of a gay and lesbian subculture among artists and performers in the 1970s and the 1980s, but I had no contact with that world. I did actually meet a lesbian woman once; she was a friend of a friend. We had nothing in common, so we didn’t keep in touch and she was apparently not a part of a lesbian world either. I lived my life quietly in academia. Actually, within traditions that focused on antiquity, no matter if it was philology, archaeology, art or history, it was, however, known and accepted that one could have such relationships, as long as one did not flaunt them in public. And so I was a part of that world and did what everyone else did at the time, took trips to archaeological camps, slept in tents, and had a few quiet romances. But then I had children. I had wanted children so dearly, that I fi-
nally allowed a man to court me. And so life went on, there were some romances but the big change came in the 1990s. During the perestroika, pornography appeared. In matters of sexuality and erotica, we had all been living in darkness, as ignorant people. During that time I read everything I could get my hands on. I remember that there was a paper, printed in Riga, called Jeshe (More) where there were some personal ads where I read that there was a Christian organisation, MOLLI, which believed that God supports all kinds of love. I realised that there was a lesbian organisation in Moscow. But there was no contact information. I began to literally sniff the air for something. I felt that something was close, but I did not know where to look. There was no Internet in those days which meant that finding something was much more difficult than it is today.

One day, in 1991, I was walking through the underpass at Pushkinskaya. In those days it didn’t look like it does today with all the built-in kiosks. There were rows of tables where books, magazines, and pamphlets were on sale. As I walked by one of the tables I noticed that there were books on homosexuality. I was perplexed, petrified and exhilarated at the same time. These books were lying out in the open and nobody was getting arrested for it! I walked past several times, on different days, before I could gather the courage to walk up to the table. Well, at that table I learned of the conference, and that was that. I only found women like me after I turned forty. That was when my life began for real.”

A sketch of a subculture

This is how Tsertlikh found her way into a more open gay and lesbian subculture, which was just taking shape. It was a gay and lesbian organisation and eventually a conference that opened up a possibility for Tsertlikh to find people with whom she could be open not only about her sexuality, but about many different interests. She recalled that the world she came into could not have been called a “lesbian subculture”; it was all too new and too loosely formed for that, but it was, perhaps, the beginning of one. At the time of my fieldwork one did not have to rely on the serendipity of being in the right place at the right time to find gay and lesbian spaces in Moscow. There were established clubs and cafés, publications online, and in print, all of which served as possible ways to find the likeminded. People, whether they were chance encounters, infatuations, or friends, offered “paths” into the lesbian subculture. It was the desire to be among “one’s own” that propelled people into the gay and lesbian subculture.

In this chapter I will describe the (infra)structure of the subculture, anchor it geographically by mapping out the different spaces, both physical and virtual, that were, in different respects, considered to be a part of the subculture. In a similar way I will outline the information networks, the channels through which
information was gathered and disseminated and finally the various social networks that were an important part of social everyday life. All of these networks were interconnected in different ways, some more and others less independent from each other, a flexible interconnectivity that allowed people to be more or less involved in the subculture according to their preferences.

Many of the lesbian spaces and informational nodes were the result of the work of one or a small number of individuals, people I refer to as organisers. Through their projects, which were of many varying types and scopes, organisers created lesbian spaces that became meeting points, informational outlets, and contact points between different social networks. These smaller networks are very similar to what Strauss has termed “social worlds”, social networks held together by interaction around a point of interest, an organisational focus (Strauss 1978, 1984, see also Unruh 1980). Generally speaking social worlds can be big or small, widely known or quite obscure and form around the most mundane or exotic interests such as opera, golf or the crocheting of small Japanese toys. To reach a deeper understanding of subcultures it is necessary to understand how these social worlds form, develop, and disintegrate. Unruh further specifies the structural characteristics that unite social worlds: the relationship between geographical and information centres, the formation and division of social worlds around special interests into sub worlds as well as struggles over resources, recruitment of new members along with overlaps with other social worlds. It is possible to conceptualise the entire lesbian subculture as a social world formed around one specific focal point, same-sex sexuality. But then we would lose the advantage of a social world perspective, which allows a very down-to-earth and quite detailed view of the social processes. To become a part of a subculture of the scope of the lesbian subculture in Moscow entailed becoming a part of an imagined community (Anderson 1992) as people rarely interacted with the subculture as a whole. Because of its large size, I therefore find it useful to distinguish between the subculture and the smaller social networks that comprise it that I will refer to as social worlds. The social world perspective also allows us to distinguish between various parts of the subculture, as well as how it overlaps with other subcultures. The aim of this chapter is thus to present a basic outline of the lesbian subculture: networks of real and virtual spaces, outlets of information and forums, and a variety of smaller social worlds. Of particular interest are the connections between the

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25 It is hard to assess the number of people I came into contact with. I can say that about 200 people were my acquaintances; we would recognize and greet each other. About 60 people were my friends, people I would definitely greet and talk to upon meeting. About 10 of my informants became good friends and key informants. This was just in the networks that I was a part of and participated in. There were networks, projects and events that I did not participate in but that I knew about, as did my friends and informants. They were also a part of the lesbian subculture and, in a way, supported the idea that there was such a subculture, even if at the same time they were seen as proof that there was little unity within it.
different networks and the relationship between the subculture as a whole and the smaller social worlds.

At the most basic level, a subculture is a network of social relationships and cultural forms constructed around a certain theme or interest. To socialise with like-minded people one does not need much more than a group of willing participants and a space to be in, but in a heteronormative and thoroughly homophobic society such as the Soviet Union, this can be excruciatingly difficult. At the time of my fieldwork there were a number of places, both in real life and online, where women could meet and interact. The search for the interaction itself was based on the idea of a common characteristic, sexual preference. The term subculture is well established both within the academic literature as well as familiar to the layperson; however, there are a few aspects that may be problematic. First of all, the term suggests a degree of boundedness, comprising smaller units that somehow fit in within a more uniform, larger culture. The prefix sub- is often taken to indicate an inferior version of a more genuine or “real” culture (Hannerz 1992a). This prefix sub- also implies that subculture is a smaller part of a larger cultural unit. Often this would be the nation state and, with this, the assumption that subcultures are somewhat homogenous and bounded both in terms of population and territory. People can be members of or participants in several different subcultures, as well as being proficient or familiar with large parts of the dominant, mainstream culture. In this way the boundaries of what is usually designated as subcultures are actually permeable and allow the flow of people, images, ideas, practices and knowledge. The different subcultures tend to mesh and overlap rather than become mutually exclusive. To methodologically or theoretically sever subcultures from cultural flows and traditions of the surrounding cultural sphere and focus exclusively on the meanings and practices within that particular subculture would lead one to overlook important aspects of the subculture itself, as it is fruitful to see the overlaps and interconnections between different subcultures (Hannerz 1992a). Pilkington supports this perspective, underscoring that “youth cultural practice has never been either sub, counter, or parallel to ‘dominant’ culture but interwoven and interacting with it” (Pilkington 1996:243).

What I refer to as the lesbian subculture in Moscow was the total field of interaction of lesbian women with a caveat that its boundaries remained permeable. The people who participated in this subculture were a heterogeneous group; their lives overlapped and incorporated cultural flows both from the mainstream culture and other subcultures. At the same time the subculture had a unique focal point as there were images, ideas, practices, and knowledge that flourished within the subculture that remained relatively unknown to people outside it. The subculture was thus both a field of social interaction and a field of cultural production. This production involved different cultural forms and expressive art such as music and literature, but also more folkloric forms such as styles of dress, stereotypes, and jokes. A part of this cultural production became a part of what was considered to be the subcultural heritage. This heritage
can be defined as the totality of works of poetry, music, literature, and films about same-sex love and relationships. Some artists and writers were considered to be such an integral part of the subcultural heritage that their works and names could be used as hints or as passwords.

**Tema: What’s in a word?**

In Russian, the in-group can be referred to with the simple and short word *svoi* (their own) or *nashi* (our). The expression *svoi chelovek*, literally meaning “our person”, a person who belongs, *svoi* is a very concise way to vouch for someone or to express closeness and affinity to a person, indicating understanding and common values (on *svoi* see Caldwell 2004, Yurchak 2006). *Svoi* is also a common term to define a small group of friends, a circle within confines which unauthorised people will not enter (Yurchak 2006). Within the lesbian subculture the words *svoi* or *nashi* (our) are often used synonymously with the word *tema*. The literal meaning of the word is simply “theme.” In the lesbian context it is a term for same-sex preference, without making explicit to what degree, which means that it usually includes both homosexuality and bisexuality, but not specifying which one.²⁶ In contrast to the words homosexual or lesbian the word *tema* is not tainted by the homophobic medical discourse in Russia. This elusiveness should not be seen as an expression of internalised homophobia. Valentine notes that “it is not only that which is not named does not exist but also that that which is not clearly defined can escape the controlling gaze” (Valentine 1997:106). Using *tema* one also avoids of the milder, but widely known, words *goluboi* (light blue) for gay and *rozovaia* (pink) for lesbian. It is a way to maintain the “secret code” of the subculture, separating insiders from the outsiders.

While *tema* is used to refer to the lesbian world in its entirety, with its different spaces, the word is also used more narrowly, referring to people who participate actively in the lesbian subculture, who go to clubs and other sites where socialisation is based primarily on an idea of a shared sexual preference.²⁷ The term can thus encompass the physical venues and social networks, as well as the people who participated in them, and therefore to a certain extent the social interaction itself within the lesbian subculture. Interestingly enough *tema* is also described as a place or social world that literally draws you in, sometimes said with the meaning that it “drags you down”, using a phrase that was most com-

²⁶ At other times bisexual women are derogatorily referred to as double-barrelled guns (*dvuhstvolka*, *двухстволка*), implying duality, but also duplicity, as the common perception is that bisexual women only play lesbian for a while and will inevitably return to a man.

²⁷ *Tusovka* literally means shuffling (of cards) and is used in reference to both the act of hanging out and the group that hangs out together, both regularly and at one particular moment. For more on *tusovka* see Yurchak (2006) and Pilkington (1996).
monly used in reference to swamps. Here it may not be so much the same-sex sexuality that has the derogatory effect, but rather the social world itself, with its clubs, hangouts and social life.

In its adjective form, *tema* was frequently used in reference to cultural products such as films, books, images and songs that were perceived to have an air of more or less explicit same-sex eroticism and thus seen to belong to the subcultural heritage. They included classical literature, such as the works of Sof’ia Parnok, Anna Akhmatova, Mikhail Kuzmin and other Silver Age writers as well as contemporary authors and musicians such as Mara, Zemfira and Svetlana Surganova. At times many different kinds of images were interpreted to incorporate a lesbian aesthetic. For me, *tema* was often the easiest word to use to loosely delineate my interest. At the same time, with the different meanings of the term I often had to specify that I was not only interested in women who spent a large part of their lives in explicitly lesbian circles, but also women who were pursuing intimate relationships with women while staying on the margins of the lesbian subculture.

The search for a community

The world in which I lived and worked for more than a year was however not a gay and lesbian “community.” That was at least what people continuously underscored in our conversations. Here many informants used the Russian word *kommuniti*, which was simply transliterated from the English, although sometimes people used the corresponding translation into Russian, *soobshestvo*. The “community” in Moscow was seldom mentioned as a reality, only as a dream existing elsewhere but not, perhaps yet, a reality in Russia. These laments over the lack of community were often a way to voice a larger critique against organisers and the participants in the subculture in general. The reason that the lesbian scene in Moscow was not a community, according to my informants, was that it was too fragmented. The perception was that there was no solidarity or togetherness, people were unable to unite or agree or to act together, that there was no leader. The organisers were criticised for being too busy bickering among themselves rather than striving for a common goal. On the other hand,

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28 See also Clark (1993).

29 After the end of the Golden age of Russian literature in the nineteenth century, came a period that is often labelled the Silver Age. This period is most often considered to cover the first two decades of the twentieth century even though sometimes it also includes the last decade of the nineteenth century. Many of these poets were forbidden during Soviet times. They circulated in handwritten or typed manuscripts as *samizdat* and were not properly published until after the *perestroika*.

30 For example, a billboard featuring two women in a metro uniform, or a mobile phone ad with an androgynously dressed girl with inconspicuously applied make up, or not [too obviously] masculine hands (that could therefore be perceived as female hands) on the small of the back of an almost undressed woman.
the participants of the subculture were critiqued for being too passive. Sometimes the lack of a community was perceived as a result of the lack of coherence within *tena*, people were too different, both in tastes and in social terms. The word “community” was primarily used as a rhetorical weapon, to criticise both individuals and groups of people, by stating that they were not “community” enough. Occasionally there were comparisons with Soviet times, when people helped each other out even if the political climate was much more severe. Now as life was becoming a little easier and it was possible to live a little more openly, people were becoming too well aware that just because two individuals share a sexual preference, they do not necessarily have anything else in common and are in no way obligated to offer assistance (see also Franeta 2004). In this way “community” was often wielded as a rhetorical sledgehammer, to underline flaws. This was particularly obvious during the controversy around the Moscow Pride where the gay and lesbian “community” became a “now you see it now you don’t” argument, which was used by various organisers to invalidate the enterprise. Either there was no united gay community that supported the event, or there was a community, but it did not support the event.

They were of course not objecting to the term community as a scientific term, but rather to the idea(l) that this word was associated with for my informants. When they took a stand either one way or the other, it was based on the globally available images and ideas of gay and lesbian communities in Western Europe and North America. It should be noted that these images are historically and culturally bound to the metropolitan middle class areas in the United States and are therefore coloured by very specific economic and political ideals. Rather than searching for a precise definition of community, and thus indirectly for what would constitute a community proper, the declaration of an insufficient community could be seen as a recognition of an almost-community, however deficient. It stated that a group of people who could and perhaps should form a community were doing a bad job at doing so, while also a judgement that people who belonged together were an imagined community, but did not behave like it. It may therefore be more fruitful to “think of community as a site lived through the desire for community rather than a site that fulfils and ‘resolves’ that desire” (Ahmed and Fortier 2003:257, emphasis in original). Community becomes a constant project, a relational negotiation between what is present here and now, the remembered and thus imagined past, and an equally imagined future. People constantly relate information about Russia with that of other places to create interpretations of the present as well as possibilities for the future. The objection to the term *kommuniti* then stems both from

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31 This can be interpreted as a part of a wider trend that was outlined by Ledeneva as an aspect of the change in the Russian informal economy, *blat*, that occurred after the fall of the Soviet Union when networks were used not so much to get something done but rather to gather information (Ledeneva 1998).
the idealised perception of what a community should be like and the discrepancy between this ideal and the reality in Moscow. Amit and Rapport poignantly note that this discrepancy is inherent in the reality of every community.

“Rhetorically, communities may represent themselves to themselves, as well as to others, as homogenous and monolithic, as a priori, but this is an idiom only, a gesture in the direction of solidarity, boundedness and continuity. The reality is of heterogeneity, process and change: of cultural communities as diverse symbolizations which exist by virtue of individuals’ ongoing interpretations and interactions” (Amit and Rapport 2002:7f).

Lesbian landscape

During my fieldwork in Moscow there were a number of places where one could go to hang out in a lesbian crowd. This topography is not only an inventory of lesbian spaces in Moscow, but it also illustrates how spatiality is a significant aspect of subcultures. The various lesbian spaces constitute the dispersed and fragmented geography of the subculture. A considerable amount of energy and resources were dedicated to establishing clubs and cafés, finding new and interesting places to go and spend time with one’s friends. Very often the spaces were not exclusively lesbian spaces and had to be appropriated, negotiated, and maintained as such. As the physical spaces were often used by different groups of people simultaneously they could therefore contain several social spaces. The limits between these spaces were always under negotiation as social interaction and the perception of spaces changes over time.

In this chapter I will focus on the creation and negotiation of lesbian spaces. Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003) refer to processes responsible for the material creation of space through social, economic, ideological and technological factors as the “social production of space”. The lesbian geography comprised all of the places widely recognised as meeting places for women, but it also included the exploration of different ways to spend time and different ways to be a lesbian. Finding lesbian clubs was not only a matter of finding out a particular address, but also of recognising the crowd, because none of the gay or lesbian clubs in Moscow were advertised with immediately recognisable symbols such as pink triangles or rainbow flags. Sometimes the gay-friendliness of a club was based on an evaluation of the clientele rather than any explicit statement from the management. The social interaction in these spaces as well as the relationship between them will be the focus of the next chapter where I will focus on the social construction of lesbian spaces.32

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32 Low defines social construction of space as “people’s social exchanges, memories, images and daily use of the material setting” (Low 2001:2).
Gay clubs

During Soviet times the first contact with the established subculture could be the result of a chance encounter, as it was for Tsertlikh, but today very few have to rely on just the chance of being in the right place at the right time. Of all the gay and lesbian spaces in Moscow, it is the gay and lesbian clubs that are easiest to find simply because they are advertised in magazines such as Time-Out Moscow and Dosug (Leisure) along with other clubs and entertainment venues. Three Monkeys was considered to be one of the better gay venues. It was a large club on three floors, with one large dance floor, three bars and a small movie theatre behind the lush red bar on the top floor. When I visited the club they were screening old Marilyn Monroe films. I only visited this club a few times and the only women I saw seemed to be having a “girls’ night out” with their gay male friends. Straight women often frequented gay clubs because they could relax and dance without having to worry about unwanted male attention.

Another prestigious gay venue was Sunday nights at the club Propaganda. This club had no entrance fee but instead there was a rigorous screening at the door, feis kontrol (a transliteration of the English words face control). The crowd at Propaganda, as I observed it, was cool and trendy, to the extent that people would almost conspicuously pose on the sidewalk outside the club under the excuse of smoking or talking on the phone. The club Dusha i Telo (Body and Soul) was housed in what used to be a House of Culture for the Deaf; the steel letters cemented into the façade of the building had not vanished in the transformations of the building since the communist times. The crowd I observed was consisted predominantly of gay males, even though there were some women and the occasional lesbian. The club had changed names several times, and probably even owners, but had continued to function.

Gay clubs ranged in size from big venues such as Three Monkeys and Dusha i Telo, which had several levels, a number of bars and several dance-floors, to smaller establishments like club Baza and 12 Volt that were housed more or less in just a couple of rooms. The latter was so full of tables and chairs that there was barely any space where one could dance to the disco and pop that blared in the smoke-filled room. The low ceiling was a constant reminder that the club is located in a basement. Then there were also well-hidden venues and far less glamorous ones such as the ancient café Dary Moria (Gifts of the Sea) that was a small one-room club/café in a basement without windows. According to long-time patrons, the club has remained unchanged for decades and the décor and atmosphere seemed to have remained from Soviet times and resembled a train station cafeteria. Amusingly enough during my visit it also seemed to have retained the level of service of the Soviet era, which was appropriately embodied by a voluptuous woman with peroxide curls and frivolously applied makeup. Her permanently laconic expression barely managed to hide her dissatisfaction with all the visitors that were forcing her to do even the slightest task.
There was a firm steel door that was opened from the bar, so that even those who wanted to leave the establishment had to have the door opened by the administration, and again, there was no sign outside this club either.

Lesbian clubs and bars

As in many other countries the homosexual subculture in Moscow is primarily oriented toward a male clientele. The marginalisation of women in public spaces thus continues within the spaces of gay and lesbian subculture. Clubs and venues that are predominantly oriented towards gays (and not lesbians) considerably outnumber the lesbian or even mixed venues (Geri 2003; Casey 2004). The gay clubs were frequented by gay men and their heterosexual female friends, which resulted in a marginalisation that rendered lesbians invisible even within these homosexual spaces (Casey 2004; Bell and Binnie 2004a). Another tactic of segregation was the differentiated price of admission, At the time of my fieldwork, the entry fee for a girl to Three Monkeys on Fridays and Saturdays was 600 roubles compared to 300 for men. Doubled admission was often used in combination with club membership and sometimes women were simply not allowed at all. Of the six or seven gay clubs that were stable both in terms of location and working hours, only two were aimed exclusively at a lesbian clientele and one was a mixed venue.

This mixed club, 12 Volt, was located in a backyard behind Tverskaia Street. There was no sign, just a grey steel door and a doorbell. After descending down the stairs another steel door led into the club itself, which was a mix between a café and a club. The official policy was that they did not let in more people than could be seated at the small tables. The club welcomed both men and women, who frequented the bar to an equal extent.

The only exclusively lesbian club that had existed without interruption during the two years prior to my fieldwork and during it was the club Udar, which was advertised in Moscow TimeOut and on Internet portals such as gay.ru, lesbi.ru and lesbiru.com. It was located inside the premises of the sports complex and was not easily found unless one knew what one was looking for. From the outside the club could not be distinguished in any way as a nightclub, let alone a lesbian one. The sign above the entrance read simply “Sport and Leisure Club Udar” with an image of a punching fist. Only when one had passed through the entrance and climbed a flight of stairs could one hear the blaring pop music and only when one went through the final door did one end up in an environment that resembled a nightclub.
The homepage of the club advertised that it is open every day and offers a number of events such as birthday parties or theme celebrations. On the main clubbing nights, Friday and Saturday, it had a strict “women only” policy which was the same policy as in gay clubs, only here it was applied to men who had to pay double admission fee. Men had to come in the company of women and even then there was no guarantee that they would be allowed in. During my visits at Udar the beer was cheap and the crowd young, even though there were occasionally women in their mid-thirties, which was unusual. I saw men in the club only three times. Once it was a flamboyantly dressed man in his mid-forties in the company of a woman roughly the same age. The second time the man was a part of the group of friends I was with. The third time involved a heterosexual couple that insisted on making out on the dance floor. The couple elicited nothing more than annoyed or bemused looks from the same-sex couples that surrounded them. Everyone was assuming that since they had been admitted and were allowed to behave in this fashion, they were guests of the administration. I once witnessed how a man was trying to talk his way past security at Udar, not really understanding why he was not let in. The girl at security only smiled coyly and said that this was a women’s night and that men were not admitted. At that point one of the male security guards, dressed in a white shirt and slacks, exited the “club” and the man who was trying to get in pointed and said with disdain, “but he is allowed in.” The girl tried hard not to laugh as she explained “he’s security”. She did not give a more specific explanation to what kind of women’s night it was and resolutely did not let the man in but continued smiling at the man’s puzzlement and incomprehension.
“Ladies nights”

The fact that a man was kept out of a club is an interesting reversal as it is often lesbian women who find themselves relegated to girls’ nights at gay clubs or other venues. The invisibility of the lesbian club scene is not a trademark of Russia only. Several researchers have noted this tendency, and suggest different explanations. Wolfe (1992) describes a similar situation in London in the early 1990s where lesbian bars did not have their own venues but instead moved continuously. Wolfe adds that these bars were often held in the private spaces of various establishments in order to protect women from being beaten up (Wolfe 1992). Wolfe’s explanation for this un-rootedness is grimmer than any explanation I ever heard in Moscow. Evgeniia Debrianskaia explained club nomadism by noting the “financial inability of lesbians,” a rather categorical statement supported by Rothenberg (1995) who argues that in a society where women earn considerably less than men they will have a much smaller disposable income and will therefore be unable to maintain business venues economically. It is important to remember that many of the places where gay men (and lesbian women) “can be ourselves, become ourselves . . . are still operated as businesses, rather than charities” (Binnie 1995:187).

“In the lesbian and gay movement, to a much greater degree than in any comparable movement, the institutions of culture-building have been market-mediated: bars, discos, special services, newspapers, magazines, phone lines, resorts, urban commercial districts . . . this cultural environment has meant that the institutions of queer culture have been dominated by those with capital: typically, middle class white men” (Warner 1993:xvi-xvii).

Even though it is quite justified to interpret high mobility and turnover rate of lesbian clubs in Moscow as a sign of instability and vulnerability, nevertheless I would like to bring attention to the opportunities amidst this gloomy insecurity. The point is that new spaces could and did spring up all the time. It should also be noted that secret and underground clubs are a part of a general metropolitan club culture in many countries, and not only a factor in minority subcultures.

A group of friends or business partners can come to an agreement with a bar or a café and arrange to hold a “girls’ night.” In some cases such arrangements work out for longer periods, but many do not last for very long, which forces the organisers to find new locations or close down. One such arrangement was the lesbian club Pink Fly that at the time of my arrival in the field (early 2005) boasted on its homepage that it had existed for seven years, but in different locations. There were no addresses or dates for parties, just a notice that new dates would be posted soon. The club was “revived” in late 2005 and continued for several years. A similar project appeared in November 2005 when a couple of girls rented a small art gallery, which for some reason had a bar with a tap in the middle of its hallway. There they held a weekly club for women, TemAtik. It was officially described as an art gallery where works of female artists could
be displayed, but most of the clientele came exclusively for the club and the bar. There were regular concerts, photo exhibitions, and book presentations. After the cultural program the place turned into a club. Yet another project was launched in December-January 2006-2007. A girl’s night at the restaurant Jaktoria was advertised as “Anti-Udar Night.” As a joke and in a polemic stance to the infamous club, the crowd was promised to be decent, the contests interesting and the music good as opposed to the indecent crowd, tasteless shows, and lousy music at Udar. The club was held downstairs in a sushi restaurant. The parties resembled a large birthday party. I later found out that this was probably because most of the visitors belonged to the same network of friends.

Unofficially gay friendly

A number of clubs were considered to be only unofficially gay friendly. Maki Kafé was one of them during the main period of my fieldwork. It was a restaurant located in the very centre of town, and had a modern minimalist style with bare concrete walls and big, spacious, square sofas. There were no signs of it being gay friendly and the club was not advertised as gay friendly, neither in the press nor on the Internet. Natasha, who introduced me to the spot, explained its popularity by its geographical location, open-minded personnel, and reasonable prices. “It’s just a five-minute walk from the gay bars 12 Volt and 911. Both of them are quite small and have a tendency to become full quite early in the evening, so people who can’t find a place in either one come here—it is sort of halfway. It is also a very nice café.” Sometimes the establishment was considered gay and lesbian friendly simply because a large part of the clientele was recognised as gay or lesbian or because part of the staff was assumed to be gay. It was not unusual for groups or networks of friends to patronise a particular bar or café if there was ‘one of our own’ on the staff. Information about these spaces spread through networks of friends rather than public advertisements.

It is also important not to mistake widely publicised venues for all available venues. Beside the advertised clubs, I heard of closed clubs and private parties. These are clubs and parties that one finds out about strictly by invitation, and a regular participant has to vouch for every newcomer. One of my informants, Oksana, told me that she had heard about a closed club in Novosibirsk, but had never been there and did not know where it was located.33 One of my informants who had grown up during Soviet times told me that “going to these trashy gay and lesbian clubs was not the only way to have a social life”. Among people who could afford it, private parties were a very practical solution. A group of friends would rent a restaurant or a club and do whatever they

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33 When I met her in 2005, Oksana, she was 36 years old and had lived in Moscow for a little more than a year. She had moved from her native city Novosibirsk with her two daughters, aged ten and thirteen. She had a second level education in the area of economy and accounting and worked at a firm that stocked local stores with vegetables.
wanted. The operative word in these arrangements was, of course, “privacy”. According to Galina, who was in her early fifties and trained as a psychologist but worked in media production, it was not only a question of discretion, but also of distinction. People would not risk their reputation or social status by being seen in a gay or lesbian club full of screaming, drunken teenagers. The secret gay clubs were not only a sign of fear of being found out; they were also linked to class and social capital. There were many restaurants that underscored their exclusivity by issuing membership cards that were spread only by recommendation, just as was done with closed clubs, some of which were also secret. Such clubs functioned on the premise of exclusivity of the ‘chosen few’. They maintained a tradition from Soviet times when contacts and connections were an important part of everyday life (Ledeneva 1998).

Temporary lesbian spaces

Not only did festivals and concerts organised by people within the subculture create lesbian spaces, but concerts featuring different, unofficially lesbian artists also gathered large crowds of women and girls. The opportunity to spend time in a lesbian space was often as important as the music itself. When my informants talked about concerts or gigs it was not so much a discussion of a music event as it was a meeting space. In Russia four big rock stars were recognised within the subculture to be lesbians and have therefore achieved cult status. Svetlana Surganova and Diana Arbenina used to form the group Nochnye Snaipery but have since gone their separate ways with Arbenina taking over the group name and Surganova performing under her own name. It was quite widely known that Arbenina and Surganova used to be a couple. There was the superstar Zemfira as well as Mara. The fact that Zemfira was living with her girlfriend the director Renata Litvinova was something that was widely known but never openly commented upon in the press. These concerts attracted large crowds of both lesbian and straight audiences. During such concerts the spaces were partially and temporarily “queered,” that is, a large part of the audience came to the concert not only because of the performer but also to a great extent because of the crowd. The concert became very much like a lesbian club. The venue was then recognised as a lesbian space that coexisted with the straight space.

This aspect of the concerts is known outside the subculture. In October 2005 the vice mayor of the city of Perm announced that artists who positioned themselves as representatives of an “untraditional orientation” would have to pay a higher rent for the concert halls in Perm. His statement was countered by representatives within the municipality in Perm and the antimonopoly service of the Russian Federation. The manager of the group Nochnye Snaipery said that they sent free tickets to the vice mayor so that he could make sure for him-
self that there was no “evidence of an untraditional sexuality in our show.” It was the visibility, or rather the advocacy, of homosexuality that worried the vice mayor rather than the concerts actually being a lesbian space.

Non-commercial venues
There were of course other places where people could meet and interact. During the warm season, the parks, boulevards, and courtyards of the city provide many spaces for people to sit on the benches and relax with a soft drink or a beer. Such relaxed drinking in the public space was traditionally connected with male leisure, but today it was common for many different kinds of people to spend time in parks and boulevards. Some of my informants connected this kind of socialising over beer in the park to a lower class status. A common assumption was that people who spent time in a park could not afford to go anywhere else. While it was true that people who could not afford clubs and restaurants would socialize more often in these places, by far they were not the only ones to do so. As one well-off informant put it “we have to be cooped up inside nine months of the year when it’s cold and dark and horrible, so why not spend time outside in when we can?” Urban gay culture has historically focused around different leisure areas such as parks and arcades (Healey 1999). Lesbian culture in city space has been far less visible, to a large extent due to the restricted mobility of women around the city. In every town there were special gay and cruising places, so-called pleshkas (Healey 2001; Essig 1999; Tuller 1996) literally this word means bald spot, but within the gay and lesbian subcultures it refers to cruising areas. Most often such places were located in the very centre of town in front of the largest theatre. In the 1990s the pleshka in Moscow was in front of the Bolshoi Theatre, but during the end of the decade that area of town was closed off for reconstruction for a long time and the pleshka moved to a stretch on the Boulevard Ring near the Metro station Kitai Gorod. This was where the gay pleshka was located during the time I spent in the field. In the early 1990s there had also been a meeting place for women, at that time located across the road from the male pleshka outside the Bolshoi Theatre, around the statue of Karl Marx. During my fieldwork the one place in town considered to be an open air lesbian hangout was a small stretch on the Boulevard Ring. In the subculture the place was known as the Pushka, shorthand for Pushkinskaia. Women gathered around the statue of the poet Sergei Esenin, just a few minutes’ walk from the Metro station Pushkinskaia. While the pleshka frequented by men are primarily cruising places for picking up sexual partners, both for money and not, the Pushka was primarily a social space. I should note that it is common for all kinds of people to spend time in parks and boulevards. After the long and often harsh winter months, people long to spend time outside and the Boulevard Ring is not at all an exclusively lesbian space, but it is rather a

mixture of people, mingling or sitting on the benches and the boulevard. Within the subculture the Pushka was infamous. Most girls who spent time there were in their mid to late teens. During spring, summer, and autumn girls gathered on the benches or on the grass, and during the wintertime the most avid visitors continued to hang out in the underpass at the Pushkinskaia Metro station. According to several of my informants there have been many different meeting spaces like the Pushka; a few years before, a similar meeting place was formed around the statue of Mayakovski at the Square of Triumph. Different subcultures or groups have their own areas in town where people can meet (for more about the Pushka see Chapter 3).

Organisers

During my fieldwork the lesbian sites that appeared, existed, and disappeared, both online and in real life were often created and maintained by a single individual or in a few cases, a small group of people. During the span of my fieldwork, a number of people in Moscow were recognised as ‘organisers’ in the lesbian subculture. They had earned this by organising gatherings, festivals, and conferences, maintaining mailing lists, portals, or pages of varying sizes that provided different kinds of information as well as the possibility to socialise through forums and chats.

In Queer in Russia, Laurie Essig (1999) described the disputes between Russian gay and lesbian activists in the early 1990s. To her dismay she concluded that almost every venture that required the cooperation of several individuals would sooner or later end and the separate parties would often carry on their projects individually. In the early 1990s the dire economic conditions and competition over scarce resources provided by Western organisations bred mistrust. The recriminations eventually tore apart almost all collaborations and occasionally, new ones were created from its splinters. At the time of my fieldwork the economic situation was far less dire. People were no longer starving, but some of the organisational dynamics were still in play. To a large extent this remained the case during my fieldwork, fifteen years after the economic troubles, as most of the projects operating in Moscow were centred on a single individual. There was cooperation, but the alliances were usually not particularly long lasting. In the following section I will present the main organisers in the lesbian subculture during my fieldwork and outline their main activities and contributions. They formed a heterogeneous group of people but the sum of their efforts formed an integral part in creating the lesbian geography, information networks and outlets in Moscow. Their projects were geographical and informational nodes in the network of subcultural interaction and provided the overwhelming majority of social events and information flow. The projects of various organisers were often the focal point, both in the spatial and information networks. The listing below is somewhat incomplete as these were the people that I had heard
of or met personally and there were, of course, other organisers that I did not have a chance to interact with.

The conference Ona+Ona (She+She) that I attended on my first field visit to Moscow in November 2003 was organised by Olga Suvorova. It was held in 12 Volt, a gay bar/café that belonged to Evgeniia Debrianskaia, the grand dame of gay activism in Russia. The conference was a mix of equal parts psychological/self-help workshops where volunteers played a variety of games or participated in group therapy sessions, and presentations by local representatives from various gay and lesbian organisations who spoke about their work or plans for future work. Suvorova said she tried to organise this kind of event once or twice a year, with support groups and occasional meetings in the meantime. The support groups that she organised in 2003 and 2004 were held in a room adjacent to the offices of gay.ru. While Suvorova was officially the organiser, someone else almost always led the groups. These meetings provided a space where girls came and talked about issues that worried them. Only occasionally were they led by a person who was trained or had experience in psychological work. The sessions took place in a small room with white polyester curtains and fraying paint on the walls and ceiling. People gathered in a circle and discussed whatever topic was decided on that day, such as coming out, relationships and suicide. Sometimes the person who headed the group did some kind of exercise that was later analysed. The support groups were discontinued during the summer of 2004. Until Spring 2005, Suvorova maintained the lesbian-oriented site www.pinkstar.ru, with chat and a forum. She was also the editor of the www.lesbi.ru section of the site www.gay.ru, Russia’s largest LGBT Internet site, owned and administrated by Ed Mishin. The portal had an extensive news archive and a large number of articles on varying aspects of gay and lesbian culture. The site also had a large dating section that served as a meeting space for people in and outside Moscow. Gays and lesbians in other cities logged onto the network to meet others in the same city. The portal also hosted an online shop that sold feature and pornographic films, gay and lesbian television series such as ‘Queer as Folk’ and ‘The L word’, sex toys, and clothes. The online shop had recently opened two physical stores, one in Moscow in 2004 and another in St. Petersburg in 2005, both under the name Indigo. The shop in Moscow was located just a few minutes’ walk from the Duma, the Lower House of Parliament, and in St. Petersburg the shop was located in a back alley of Nevskii Prospekt, the central shopping street. Both were very central locations. The shops stocked a large choice of films related to gay and lesbian subculture, gay and lesbian literature and magazines, male lingerie and gay and lesbian symbolism in the form of key chains, bracelets, etc.

Mishin was also the editor of the monthly magazine Kvir (the word queer transliterated to Russian). This was the only permanent gay publication avail-

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35 This happened allegedly because tenants in the building had complained about the noise, and about a (same-sex) couple kissing outside.
able in newspaper stands in Moscow today. It was a glossy magazine filled with articles, reviews, news and general commentary. In 2005 gay.ru initiated the publishing of a corresponding magazine for lesbians, PINX. Unfortunately, just like www.lesbi.ru was the smaller and far less interesting “little sister” of www.gay.ru, PINX was a publication of noticeably lower quality than Kvir both in terms of form and content. In comparison to Kvir it resembled a free newspaper on semi-glossy paper. This once more underscores the inequality that exists between material aspects of gay and lesbian culture. The quality and content of the magazines mirrors the situation of commercial culture in general where men have access to a considerable number of clubs, while lesbians are relegated to “lesbian” nights at gay or straight venues. Mishin’s organisation Ja+Ja (I+I) provided space to hold the support groups organised by Suvorova as well as a hotline for gays and lesbians, which was staffed by volunteers who received some training from professional psychologists. Sharon Horne, a psychologist from Memphis University, visited Moscow in July 2005 and took the opportunity to hold a workshop for the volunteers working at the helpline. Mishin was one of the most known organisers and he was often approached by the media to comment on events. However he also occasionally participated in some gay and lesbian activism. In July 2004, Mishin and the Duma representative Eduard Murzin attempted to register a same-sex marriage. According to Mishin the aim was to bring attention to the discrimination against gays and lesbians in Russian family law. Many of my informants, especially other organisers, saw this marriage as part of Mishin’s campaign for himself rather than as an action in the fight for equal rights of gays and lesbians to marry.

Evgeniia Debrianskaia is a veteran among gay and lesbian activists in Russia. In the early 1990s she organised and participated in several controversial events and co-founded the organisation Triugolnik (Triangle). Before her alliance with Alekseev in the organisation of Moscow Pride in 2006, she had published a number of books but had not really participated in gay activism save for the occasional interview in the press or on television. She owned the mixed gay and lesbian bar/café 12 Volt and maintained a homepage dedicated to her own writing, and, of course, to herself.

An organiser who had attempted to publish a glossy magazine aimed exclusively at lesbian women was known by the nickname VolgaVolga. She was in her mid-thirties and originally from Volgograd, hence the nickname. She was the webmaster of the portal lesbiru.com where forums and chats were the main attraction. While the news section was updated only sporadically the site contained a large number of articles on female sexuality, butches, fems and klavas and a variety of other topics. A considerable number of these articles were translations from unspecified English language sources. In the summer of 2004 she organised evenings for women in a pub under the name La Femme. These were discontinued due to disagreements with the owners. She also organised two music festivals, in May 2004 and 2005, which featured lesbian artists from Moscow and other parts of Russia. Plans to hold a similar festival in May 2006 were
announced earlier that year, but the arrangements never got further than a call for participants on her website. One of VolgaVolga’s lasting contributions was a more thorough establishment of the categories *butch, fem and klava*. Articles on lesbi.ru were the only sources that people referred to when asked about these categories. VolgaVolga often presented herself, literally, as being “the best organised egomaniac” in the lesbian subculture. This snide remark contained a considerable amount of truth as many of my informants perceived VolgaVolga to be rude, egotistic and obnoxious. VolgaVolga’s ‘attitude’ was often considered to be a privilege of people such as Debrianskaia who had earned her position in Russian gay and lesbian activism through more than a decade of activism and hard work. This fancy to present oneself as the (only) leader of the subculture was a common feature among this group of people. Sometimes this was done by referencing to oneself in the third person, perhaps half jokingly retelling something someone else had said: “They all say that I’m this lesbian leader”. More often it was often done by questioning and undermining the credibility of other organisers.

Festivals that were held regularly however, were the ones organised by Elena Botsman. She was a woman in her mid-fifties who, ironically enough, came into contact with gay culture when a colleague told her to look up gay.ru on the Internet. She organised weekly meetings in a basement for a club called KSP (*Klub Svetodannogo Poseshenija*, The Club of Open Admittance). Its focus was on the arts as well as wholesome living and outdoor activities. KSP became the acronym for the organisation of the Russian bards and singer songwriters and in a sense an acronym for the entire tradition. Every year she strived to organise one festival in February and a *Slet*, (a coming together) in the woods during the warm time of the year. The festivals were held either in a House of Culture on the very outskirts of Moscow, in one of the closest towns, or in the same basement where the ‘club’ was held. The excursions into the woods and campfire trips were arrangements that did not need to be organised around a line-up of performers. Botsman’s mailing list included a listing of events for the coming month, which recounted most, but not all, events that had been advertised within the subculture. She also had a posting board at the Archive where she put up notices and announcements of future events.

The Archive was a private collection of material on gay and lesbian life that was, in 2005, housed in the apartment of Elena Grigorievna and open to visitors once a week. Apart from the collection of Russian periodicals, there was a library where people could borrow books and magazines. With the help of some donors from abroad the Archive managed to publish an anthology of lesbian prose (Smirnova 2006), which featured short stories about same-sex love by local writers. This was not the only contribution of the Archive to the production of printed matter; the Archive was regularly advertised in the radical feminist magazine Ostrov (Island), which also focused on poetry, prose and to a certain extent news from the subculture such as reviews and interviews with organisers and performers. Ostrov had been published regularly since the mid-
1990s and was, once again, a one-woman project, edited and published by Olga Gert. She collected the material from friends and acquaintances within the subculture.\textsuperscript{36}

In early 2005 a new project appeared in the field, the publishing house Labrys Msk, a project financed by an independent, undisclosed investor who, according to one of the organisers, was interested in doing something different, to support ‘untraditional’ artists.\textsuperscript{37} This organisation published an almanac of prose and poetry, arranged concerts and released compact discs with music and poetry. They also maintained a large Internet portal with information and forums and a concurring community on the resource LiveJournal. The almanacs were distributed through gay and lesbian bookstores, as well as the chain of more hip bookstores/art cafés OGI. During 2005 the concerts were held once a month, but have since then been discontinued and the almanacs have been published more sporadically.

In 2005 yet another organiser took a major step into the spotlight. Until his announcement about organising Moscow Pride 2006, Nikolai Alekseev had been an almost unknown figure in the gay and lesbian subculture. Only a handful of my informants were aware of who he was: a law student who had written a book on gay marriage. Other than that he had not attracted much attention. However, with his plans to arrange a Pride festival he indirectly claimed to speak for the gays and lesbians in Moscow and placed himself as the leader of the subculture. Needless to say, this move did not play well among the other organisers who perceived it as a provocation and ultimately a part of a personal PR campaign. Not long after the announcement, Alekseev launched a homepage for the Pride festival where news about the organisation was posted as well as interviews with him as the main organiser. To a certain extent the indignation of the established organisers was justified, as the idea to organise a festival was in no sense unique. Botsman, Suvorova, and VolgaVolga had all done so on a regular basis during the previous years. In fact many of the organisers regularly held conferences or festivals of varying scope and aim, but having in common that they united people around a sexual identity, usually including both artistic and social interests, but at the same time staying out of the media spotlight.

The conference arranged in July 2005 by the organisation Tolerantnost (Tolerance), headed by Elena Kidanova and her partner, and did not focus so much on the cultural aspect as it brought together a wide array of social scientists and activists to talk about the past, present and future of lesbian women in Russia. The content of this conference was somewhat more academic than the concerts and conferences arranged by other organisers that focused more on music and

\textsuperscript{36} The publication was a continuation of the magazine published in the 90s by MOLLI.
\textsuperscript{37} Henceforth I will refer to the Moscow Labrys as Labrys Msk in order to distinguish it from the St Petersburg organisation, which I did not have any contact with.
poetry, but in neither case were there any lengthier discussions of a more political agenda, or anything that could be called activism.

A different kind of activism

In Russia homophobia was assumed to be almost self-evident: “Russian people are very homophobic” was a blanket statement I sometimes heard in interviews and interaction. And as the events of Moscow Pride demonstrated, there was more than enough homophobia in Russian society, just as there was plenty of racism and sexism. Many of my informants explained that people had been pushed to the limit by economic and political crises, violent conflicts and the sheer chaos of everyday life in Russia, but that there was no outlet for all this anger and frustration and it remained bubbling under the surface, threatening to spill out at any provocation. This proliferation of hatred did not spur my informants to fight for a more tolerant society, but rather it made them even more determined to keep out of society’s way. The unspoken rule in dealing with this widespread homophobia was to be discreet, or in other words, to pass as heterosexual. The only available tactic of reform was to patiently try to build up tolerance, a process that was done on the terms of the listeners rather than the speakers. The only incidents relevant to homophobia that were mentioned were the ones of its absence, where people had been surprised by the tolerant or positive reactions of co-workers or even psychologists to carefully worded statements or chance admittances. These stories were related not only as surprising stories but also as examples that things were not that bad and that not all Russians were homophobes. Lena Kidanova was at one time working in the same office with her partner Olga and told me how another colleague, Tatiana, had gradually become invested in the status of Lena’s relationship.

“At first we didn’t tell anyone. But when we both came into work moody and curt, Tatiana started to suspect something was going on. Then one day, Olga and I had had a really big fight, and I just sat down with her and told her like it was. She was surprised at first, but she didn’t throw a fit or anything. Since she had gotten to know and like us she could not see us as the deviant lesbians. We were two persons who loved each other and our relationship was like any other with ups and downs. Now if we come to work after a fight or blow up at each other over the phone, she sits us down in separate rooms, gets us some tea and tries to negotiate a truce.”

This story was similar to many others I had heard about colleagues finding out, or revealing that they had known or suspected for a long time. The key point was to let people get to know you first as a person and only then might you consider telling them about your private life. Lena Kidanova summarised elegantly: “If the first thing you tell people is that you are a lesbian, then that’s the only thing you will be to them. But if you become a person first, then lesbian-
ism will only be one aspect of who you are. Perhaps in the long run that person will not perceive lesbians as such a strange thing after knowing you”.

A very similar logic governed the attitude towards political activism within the gay and lesbian subculture, which explains the preference for a soft form of activism, if it can even be called activism at all: One should not, and could not, force one’s opinion upon another person, nor should one expect people to be able to deal rationally and calmly with information that was completely alien and shocking to them without any preparation. However, a more weighty reason for the absence of gay and lesbian political activism in Russia was the fundamentally different attitude towards political activism in general and politically motivated groups in particular. In the beginning of the twentieth century Russia experienced a violent overthrow of power, led by a minority in the name of an oppressed majority, to build an equal and just society. However, this society turned out to be neither just nor equal. It was also exceedingly violent to the people in whose name and for whose benefit it was constructed. The evident successes of provocative activism as a political strategy in other countries were outweighed by the suspicion towards confrontational and “revolutionary” measures and the Russian state in general. In Russia the general attitude toward the state and its bureaucratic appendages was the following: “the fewer interactions you have with the state, bureaucrats or officials, the better”. Any interaction with the state on political issues, whether as a group or an individual, was widely recognised to have a potentially lethal outcome, as journalists and human rights activists were mysteriously murdered.

Labrys Msk, VolgaVolga and Botsman all created similar arrangements in that they almost exclusively followed the purely artistic strand. One of the goals of Labrys Msk as a publishing house, at least according to the editor, was to provide people with alternative representations of lesbians in order to change the topography of available images of homosexuality. The strategy was to reinforce positive images of gays and lesbians and only thereafter attempt to change the public opinion. This was culture used for political ends. My informants preferred to call this kind of work social rather than political, emphasising that it was done with words and culture rather than at the barricades.

Activities that strongly resembled political rallies or explicit political activism were as a rule frowned upon as revolutionary politics, and radical ideas had a somewhat tarnished image because of the Russian revolution and its many consequences. They carried an association of a pointless bloodbath (see discussion of Moscow Pride in Chapter 5) and the advancement of a handful of people rather than a process that benefitted the masses. Therefore, the attempts to change the situation for gays and lesbians tended to gravitate toward projects that fell into the “social projects” category rather than those that attempted to change public opinion. Social projects ranged from organising meeting places, concerts and events to different forms of psychological help and support as well as discussion about how one could influence society in a positive way. In the realm of influence however, preference was given to art exhibitions, con-
certs, and poetry readings, all of which remained within the subculture. When there was talk of fighting for one’s rights, this was most commonly in the sense of juridical questions and more mundane every day practicalities of family law and employment rather than any form of explicit activism on a wider scale.

Literature was perceived as a political tool with which one can affect the minds of those one wishes to convince well before the convincing had begun. Masha, the editor of the journal Labrys, explained that only after alternative representations of untraditional sexuality have been established in the minds of ordinary people would it be possible to lead some kind of political activism. “Providing alternative representations and descriptions of gay and lesbian lives is crucial, because only then will people have something other than the Soviet propaganda to rely on when they form their opinions.” The more “in your face” forms of activism, often being public and confrontational, were not considered to be particularly judicious. Masha explained:

“It is really nothing other than an attempt to force your opinion upon somebody, which is nothing other than aggression and would be rightfully met with aggression. Quite possibly even violence.”

At this point capitalism was regarded as an important mechanism that would sooner or later aid the gay and lesbian subculture. The reasoning went as follows: when the market becomes completely free, demand will determine production and supply, and as more and more information about gays and lesbians produced by gays and lesbians will become available, these more correct images will push back the strength of outdated prejudices. Once again, the faith in the good of the market forces was the slow approach to activism rather than any radical political statement, which was closely connected to violence. This somewhat uncharacteristically positive perception of the market had separate reasons. First of all many had experienced firsthand how the gradual removal of state control from the press and publishing market had benefitted gays and lesbians, who perhaps for the first time had a chance not only to find information but also find other people. The second was that many were well aware of the privileged position of Moscow in relation to other regions both in terms of the general standard of living and more specifically the favourable economy and larger size of the city that was a prerequisite for gay and lesbian clubs, magazines and other merchandise.

Information

A crucial part of finding others like oneself is to recognise that one belongs; or rather on what grounds one belongs. In short, one must realise that one is a lesbian and that there may be others. In Russia, heterosexuality remained the only socially acceptable choice. While in the West there was extensive discus-
sion about the deviation from the norm and almost no discussion of heterosexuality (Foucault 1978), in the Soviet Union there was almost no information whatsoever to find on homosexuality. The official discourse was also silent on the topic of “normal” and “healthy” sexuality. Not even medical doctors or sexologists were allowed to publish books on the subject (Kon 1995). For many generations information about sexuality and intimacy came exclusively from the works of fiction writers such as the French authors Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant and the American Henry Miller, and also through friends and acquaintances (Rotkirch 2000). The silence of the official discourse made an imagined community of gays very difficult, if not impossible (Anderson 1992).

With glasnost and the deregulation of the press in the 1990s the first gay publications were published together with other romantic and mildly erotic publications. The gay press may have been irregular or even sporadic, but it broke the silence. One of the first books published on homosexuality was Klein’s An Other Love (Drugaia Liubov) (2000), which was simply a collection of all mentions of homosexuality from literary sources. Against the backdrop of the complete silence of Soviet times the importance of such anthologies was considerable. The information flow in the lesbian subculture was much more varied and more easily available than in Soviet times, even though it was still quite unstable as Internet resources appeared and disappeared and print media was published irregularly. The virtual spaces of portals, forums and chats together with different forms of media spaces formed an interconnected network that structured the information flow of the subculture.

Print media

It was only after the beginning of the perestroika that the subject of homosexuality could be broached in state-owned publications. There was also an upsurge of gay publications, though most did not produce more than a handful of issues. At the time of my fieldwork, two gay and lesbian journals were published regularly. The biggest and most commercial one was Kvir, a glossy lifestyle magazine in form and content similar to American and European gay magazines featuring young, muscular, and tanned models on the cover and a variety of stories and photo spreads on gay-related themes. The magazine was sold both online and, to the great pride of Ed Mishin, also in mainstream newspaper stands. Even though every new issue was brought to the Archive, very few women bothered to buy or read it, simply because it was targeted at an exclusively male audience, save for the occasional article on one of the famous “lesbian” rock stars Zemfira, Arbenina, Surganova or Mara. In 2004 the organiser VolgaVolga released a lesbian lifestyle magazine, appropriately titled VolgaVolga, printed on glossy paper with original editorials and photo spreads. Only two issues were released. Despite the fact that the official homepage of the magazine (volgavolga.com) invites artist and writers to submit material for the coming issue, no new issues appeared during my fieldwork, or subsequent vis-
A lesbian magazine that appeared regularly was the literary journal Ostrov (Island), a small black and white journal that was distributed at the Archive, KSP as well as at the store Indigo. Occasionally, mainstream publications featured stories on homosexuality and lesbianism. These were sometimes considered to be of special interest. For instance, in the summer of 2004, the magazine Zdarovie (Health), a magazine that had survived since Soviet times and therefore retained some of the aura of a “state-approved truth” published a special issue on homosexuality. My informants admitted that not all of the texts were unequivocally positive or free from stereotypes, but the fact that homosexuality was discussed in such an old and established publication was a clear sign of progress.

Internet

The most easily accessible and cheap channel of information was of course, the Internet. For a long time, Moscow lagged behind in the area of information and communication, but Internet access was no longer unattainable: about eighteen million Russians used the Internet regularly, fifty-five percent of who lived in eleven cities with a population of more than one million people (Ustinova 2006). There were scores of different Internet providers throughout the city. Many citizens could use the Internet at home, at work or in any one of the numerous Internet cafés. Of course not all would venture onto gay and lesbian sites from their work computers, but a majority of my informants had some access to the Internet.

Most entrepreneurs and organisers catering to the subculture had one or more sites online where they promoted their own activities and products as well as the activities of those they wished to endorse. Needless to say, for every organiser there was a different goal and a different focus, and thus a different relationship between the real life and online aspects of their activities. Just as people had spatial habits, frequenting some spaces rather than others, they also had informational habits, preferring certain formats or channels rather than others. Within the lesbian subculture there were a multitude of sites that provided spaces for expression, interaction, and gathering of information. The information flow online was divided between the different major gay and lesbian portals such as gay.ru and lesbiru.com as well as gaynews.ru and other sites. All of the sites were in Russian, but they often included news or information that had been translated from other languages. Most often the news came from North American gay culture, but they also included news about national and European events. In most cases these sites were managed by one or sometimes a few people, and therefore the opinions and preferences of individual

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38 This illustrates how, while the Internet is the place for the latest news and trends. It is also a sort of a graveyard. The page proclaiming newness may very well be old and not at all relevant.
organisers could have considerable influence on the content and even moderation of the forums. In this way every portal was an important part of the individual project of the organiser. Since the knowledge of English was scant, very few of my informants frequented pages in English, or any other non-Russian language for that matter. Most of the information about events of gay or lesbian life came through these sites. Organisers such as Mishin, and VolgaVolga thus functioned as brokers of information. In all fairness it should be noted that the news section was usually not the most popular one on the site. For a long time gay.ru had a very popular dating site, where people could upload images and short descriptions of themselves. This was a more recent form of social networking than for example chats and forums and soon became an important resource for social networking and online communities.

New projects almost inevitably created new virtual spaces. When Labrys Msk launched their concerts and their almanac they also launched their own Internet site, with forums, poetry, prose and news about forthcoming concerts and publications. This site had a linked group on the blog resource LiveJournal, which I will discuss more closely in the next section. These sites should not be seen as simply the information tools of projects that really exist somewhere else, but as integral parts of the project itself. The site of a project can recruit new members and has its own dynamic that was not determined by the events in real life. In many cases there was activity online even when many other parts of the project have been temporarily or permanently discontinued. When the printing of the Labrys Msk almanac Labrys became more irregular, works were still being published online. VolgaVolga has not organised any festivals or other events after 2005, but she has continued to maintain her portal, the biggest and most active part of which are the different forums and chats.

39 This enabled the imagining of the "global gay community". Add to that an increasingly recognisable rainbow flag as the symbol of gay pride, which can be considered a part of a "banal nationalism" (Billig 1995) of a 'gay nation'.

40 Many people who maintained portals, newsletters or even had pages on LiveJournal used images to illustrate their texts. These images were very often poached from various sites online, very often gay and lesbian sites, and approximated the lesbian aesthetic of the particular brand of androgyny described in chapter four. Images that were not initially intended to represent same-sex couples could, in the context of a lesbian themed text, be used and interpreted as such. Gay and lesbian images became dominated by images that were the easiest to decipher which led to further establishing the stereotypes of lesbian aesthetics and the "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein 1953) in the representations of lesbians across the globe.

41 Other social resources that became popular after the end of the network period were Odnoklassniki (Classmates) and Vkontakte (In contact), Russian variants of Facebook which were more straightforward networking and social resources, not primarily aimed at dating, but very often used for such.
LiveJournal

A very popular Internet resource that did not belong to the lesbian subculture as such, but was widely used, was the blog community LiveJournal. LiveJournal is an Internet community or network where people can post their musings, texts, poetry, photographs and comment upon the posts of other people. Most important is the interaction with “friends” within the blog resource through keeping track of the most recent entries of your “friends” as well as the system of commentary. The network has over 1,7 millions accounts that are “in some way active” and while it was originally an American resource, it has successfully spread to other countries and languages. To access the community one only has to create an account. This can be done both by individuals and groups, and it creates a personal journal where one can post text, images and links. It is possible to restrict the visibility of the posts as well as the possibility for other people to comment on them. This is primarily done through the system of “friends” and “groups”. If you mark a user as a friend, their posts will automatically be added to your “friend list”. Beside individual pages there were “groups”, organised around different interests, where one could post to an entire group at the same time. The resource was used both as a creative outlet, organisational news feed and a social grapevine.

Virtual spaces, real spaces, networks

There is an inevitable reach of Internet communication, enabling people from different parts of the country and the world to communicate, yet these translocal networks often feed back into local, more spatially bounded communities. Firstly, networks with a national or even global reach could, and often were, used to communicate and find information about local events. Many informants noted that gay.ru, with its wide reach in and beyond Russia, was an excellent resource to find people in their own town. Secondly, there was a tendency for virtual and actual life networks to blend into each other. Here I use the term “actual” In accordance with Boellstorff (2010) who underscored that virtual worlds are just as real as IRL (in real life) worlds are, just different: people who already knew each other in real life formed networks online, online friends could turn into friends in real life. The virtual social worlds on various portals did not exist only as an extension of the actual world (Miller and Slater 2001), and they also were not worlds that existed completely separate from actual life

42 “LiveJournal is an online community, a social network, and a place for self-expression. … We believe in self-expression, and we provide tools that you can use to communicate with others in immediate and in creative ways… diversity (…) creativity (…) community”. From http://www.livejournal.com/site/about.bml
43 Incidentally, the Russian Federation is the second largest “country” on LiveJournal, with over 500 000 users, as compared to 3 100 000 in the United States. The most current statistics of LiveJournal can be seen at http://www.livejournal.com/stats.bml
(Boellstorff 2010). Virtual and real life social networks were mutually generative, interlacing, and interdependent as well as, at least partially, independent. As Coleman notes “‘Virtual’ reality is not a reality separate from other aspects of human action and experience, but rather a part of it.” (Coleman 2010: 54).

Both the actual and virtual social networks had a relationship to space, and not only in the sense of the ‘virtual space’ metaphor. As more or less close-knit friendships and networks formed online, people tended to meet in real life. I heard several times from girls at the Pushka that they did not like to hang out at the park Chistye Prudy, explaining that there were a lot of people from the chat Valerie there and that there were serious animosities between the two groups. Another casual acquaintance at the Pushka, a young man who was in no way connected to the lesbian subculture, related to me that virtual meeting spaces tended to spawn off real ones. People who socialised online on a particular chat sometimes had agreed upon a day of the week when they met in real life.

The Internet should be considered to be “continuous with and embedded in other social spaces” (Miller and Slater 2001:5). The relationship between virtual and real life has been explored from a number of various perspectives. In the setting at the time of my fieldwork the Internet was not a separate domain where people created alternative identities and led lives separated from their real lives (Boellstorff 2010), primarily because the resources preferred by my informants were blogs and communities rather than separate worlds. Yet the real life networks did not determine the Internet habitats, as the real life networks were only partially mirrored by the virtual ones and their relative independence facilitated the mobility between and beyond the current networks. Where networks were congruent or overlapping, they tended to strengthen social ties and interaction. The relationship between the networks of spaces, social networks of friends and networks of Internet sites was that they influenced each other, allowing a person to go from one medium to another and back to a new part of the first. But this network not only encouraged movement, but also regulated it. When people moved through the real and virtual spaces of the subculture, they often did so through already existing networks using already established connections. This interaction created and re-created the networks as their stability depended entirely on their use. This leads us back to the point that the different spaces, both virtual and real, were not just “there” for people to use; rather, they were established and maintained through use, i.e., through human action and interaction.

Here one could also discern a way to gauge the level of involvement with the subculture where the minimal level would be participation in any one of these frameworks, and the more time one spends within the subculture the more of one’s social interaction would take place within these networks.
Conclusions

In this chapter, the lesbian subculture in Moscow was divided into its constituent parts: the places where people go, social relationships, and channels and modes of communication within the subculture. While the primary focus was to elucidate the pragmatics of the subculture on an everyday level, it also provided insight into how subcultures draw on a variety of cultural flows and cultural processes while at the same time maintaining its semi permeable boundaries and remaining a unique cultural sphere, *tema*. Implicit or explicit references to *tema* were an acknowledgement that there was a whole that each individual project or network belonged to, perhaps most appropriately an imagined community. The subculture was therefore both people and places, real as well as virtual, and a person could belong, contribute or interact with *tema* in many different ways. Here the subculture stands out not only as a multitude of social worlds but as a variety of interconnected networks: a network of lesbian and gay friendly spaces that were interconnected both as a category of spaces but also by their organisers and visitors. The second network was one of social interactions, a multitude of loosely connected groups and networks of friends, and the third was the networks of information and communication. These three networks were interconnected as groups of friends had a number of favourite hangouts, habitats, both in the city and online. These networks were never bounded or static; people often had access to and participated in a number of more or less different social circles, moving between them. Connections in one network often established connections in another, as friends from chats met in real life and real life friends connected to each other online. The three interconnected networks, spaces, friends and Internet contacts were always connected but still changing in relation to each other. The subculture can thus be described as a flexibly interconnected network of networks that enabled people to vary their participation in the subculture, carefully choosing where they would spend their time and who they interacted with. This flexibility was a part of the social and cultural distinctions within the subculture and the connections to other subcultures and mainstream culture.
Chapter 3: Hanging out in lesbian spaces

It was cold, dark and raining, and, appropriate for the conditions, I was lost. I had been on my way to Botsman’s club KSP for the first time. When, at long last, I managed to find the right building, aided by directions from passersby and a map, I spent nearly half an hour wandering around outside before venturing into the only available door which led to the basement. After descending the dark stairs I found myself in a room that resembled the hallway of a very shabby apartment, except that there were no windows. The room was lit by a naked light bulb and the fraying wallpaper was haphazardly decorated with posters from the magazines Muscle and Fitness and Boxing World. Everything was dead still. An improvised shower down the corridor had leaked a large puddle of water, which I promptly stepped into. A bulky man in his early thirties came into the hall from the room at the end, and walked slowly towards me. He had broad shoulders, a square jaw, a thick neck and a crew cut that bordered on a clean shave. As the shadowy figure slowly approached me, I began to question the wisdom of my actions, saying to myself, “Stupid, stupid girl . . . Going down into a dark basement on the outskirts of town, all alone.”

The man was the first to speak, in a surprisingly soft voice. “Can I help you?” The polite form of address took a considerable edge off my unease. “I don’t know”, I answered cautiously. “I was looking for some people”. “Would those people be men . . . or women?” he asked with a glimmer in his eye. “Women”, I answered. “Well, then you’ll need the door right there”, he said, smiling slyly. Then he turned around and headed back. Inside was a small room with a table, a few chairs, and a piece of furniture that had, a very long time ago, been a sofa. People were sitting around, sipping tea and chatting among themselves. I had arrived at my destination.
Social worlds

In this chapter I will take a closer look at a few of the projects and networks that are a part of the lesbian subculture in Moscow, elucidating how the lesbian subculture was included in Russian, Soviet and global cultural flows and tradi-
tions. These different flows and traditions are combined into a multitude of projects, which brings forth the heterogeneity of the subculture. These everyday subcultural networks draw, to varying degrees, on the four different frameworks of managing meaning (Hannerz 1992a) being variously connected to the market and to movement frames. The dynamic tensions within the subculture between commercial and non-commercial spaces, even between explicitly lesbian commercial venues and other types of establishments, show the consciously balanced involvement with the subculture and the limitations of the subculture itself.

The three spaces I will profile here (KSP, the Archive and the Pushka) were chosen not because they are particularly representative of the lesbian subculture as a whole, nor because they were the most popular, but because they combined lesbian subculture, Russian, and in some cases Soviet, traditions, with globally available ideas and images of what a lesbian subculture can, or perhaps should, look like. While clubs and other venues focused primarily on entertainment and were inevitably based on consumption, the three spaces described below were primarily non-commercial lesbian spaces that provided other ways of interacting within the subculture. These lesbian spaces were often created by a single individual who organised a meeting space, which could occasionally be migratory, and a communication network, such as a mailing list or a web page. These spaces formed social worlds (Strauss 1978, 1984; Unruh 1980) that were an important constitutive part of the subculture. Some of my informants would never consider socialising in a shabby basement, even if it was an exclusively lesbian space, when there were so many nice cafés where one could go. Botsman's projects were sometimes considered to be amateurish, and were often referred to using the somewhat derogatory term samodeetelnost, literally translated as “do-it-yourself” but in meaning closer to “amateurish”. Irrespective of its occasionally questionable reputation, these were places where people would come to hang out, meet friends, listen to music, and find out the latest news and gossip. The Archive, while fundamentally different in its aim, was also a place for hanging out.

KSP – Botsman’s club

Like many other gay and lesbian enterprises, KSP was entirely dependent upon its main organiser, Elena Botsman, who was its driving force, both practically and ideologically. Although Botsman often went into lengthy lamentations


45 Botsman is not Elena’s last name, but it is rather a nickname that is used more frequently than her given name, and while there are many Elenas there is only one Botsman. I have no idea where the nickname came from, but I suppose that it might have something to do with her vagabond tendencies and the preference to wear the striped navy shirts that Russian sailors wear.
about how tired she was and how nobody helped her out or cared to do anything, it was at the same time perfectly clear to everyone that she would not have it any other way. The club was not only the result of what she did, but it had become a part of who she was. Conversely, much of what went on in the club was influenced by her tastes, preferences, and personal history.

Botsman was born in 1958, studied to become a geologist, and spent most of her youth on different hiking trips, during a time when the Soviet singer/songwriter tradition *afarskaia piesnia* was an important part of informal groups. It emerged in the late 1950s primarily in connection with various establishments of higher learning (Boym 1994; Smith 1984; Yurchak 2006) and flourished in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s. Her first contact with gay and lesbian subculture happened almost by chance. In 2000 or 2001 a colleague at the geological institute where she worked suggested that she should take a look at gay.ru. Since that time her interests expanded considerably beyond websites. When Botsman later found out about the existence of the Archive she went there with similar expectations. Her love of nature and her curiosity about other countries had transformed into an interest in the lesbian subcultures abroad and she was also very keen on cross-examining every foreign visitor who had made their way to the Archive or KSP about what lesbian culture was like in their country, what clubs they had and what they did. With the word ‘club’ Botsman did not mean discos and bars, but rather an interest club, similar to her own arrangement. The space remained rather marginal, both spatially and economically, and was independent of commercial spaces or services. This was not only a dictate of necessity, but also a conscious choice, something Botsman often reiterated, emphasising that things should be free and simple. Even when Botsman used the Internet, both for a homepage as well as a mailing list, these remained at a minimal level and were used primarily because they were the cheapest way to spread information. At the same time, the Internet enabled Botsman to stay true to her explorer soul, staying in touch with activists and researchers abroad, occasionally taking it upon herself to hand out questionnaires someone had forwarded to her. And in return, she told me, she had written a few “reports” to gay and lesbian organisations abroad on lesbian life in Russia today and her work as an organiser.

**Activities: music and creativity**

To Botsman, KSP was more than just a basement; it was a possibility to create a lesbian space where people could relax and enjoy each other’s company as well as recreation and entertainment. Botsman was very keen on having differ-

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46 According to Botsman, she had not confided to this person or let on her private affairs, nor had they ever spoken about anything related since then. But with her preference for men’s clothes, shoes and haircuts, as well as a somewhat bawdy style, Botsman is quite easily perceived as lesbian even to the moderately initiated person.
ent kinds of activities, and she was continuously running around trying to engage people in whatever project that was her favourite at the moment. There were certain rules to be followed. They included no drinking on the premises, and no kissing out on the porch, as the residents of the building might find such behaviour offensive, and that would entail that she would no longer be able to rent the space. The latter was apparently a rule that did not come from the landlord, but Botsman never failed to remind people of it anyway. While drinking was strictly prohibited, people drank anyway, stowing away cans of cocktails in the dark staircase and drinking them while they smoked in the doorway or on the porch. This I did not find out until the end of my fieldwork.

One of the central activities at KSP was music. If somebody brought a guitar, Botsman always encouraged people to sing (and she was not the only one). People often took the opportunity to ask a friend to sing and the guitar passed along from one person to the next. Some of the time people performed their own songs and poetry, and other times they performed works of other authors. These performances can only be properly understood as the continuation of the Russian bard and singer/songwriter genre aftarskaia piesnia introduced earlier. Poetry about life was accompanied by acoustic guitar, often in the setting of a house concert, or just a social gathering. This air of intimacy and sincerity stood in stark contrast to patriotic songs or ideologically correct mass songs.

“In the late 1950s and early 1960s the main tool in the war against Stalinist totalitarian kitsch was a new tone of voice—casual, lyrical, individual, fragmented” (Boym 1994:115). Many of the poets and singers, most notably perhaps Vladimir Vysotskii, became the first Soviet superstars of the people. Botsman’s inspiration became unavoidably apparent considering that to the average Russian the acronym KSP deciphers as Klub Samodeiatelnoi Pesni—The Club of Amateur song. This was a famous club that existed in Moscow for a long time. Similar clubs of bards and singer-songwriters exist in many cities all over Russia.

The first time Botsman visited a gay club in 2001 she came to the women’s night at the gay club Three Monkeys. The irony was that the gay club was located in the same or adjacent building as the original KSP where Botsman had spent many evenings and the two venues were separated only by a wall. Botsman came to the gay club with the same intentions as she usually did to KSP, guitar in hand, hoping to sing and listen to some songs, hoping to be moved. But the crowd inside was of a different category and not surprisingly, she was “appalled by the drunkenness and moral degradation of scene.” When she had a chance to create her own lesbian space she not only borrowed the acronym KSP but she also aspired to create a space similar to the original KSP, but with a lesbian twist.

Small concerts were regularly held at Botsman’s club with the performers being primarily women who came to the club. At a small concert there might be one or several performers, often without microphones or amplifiers, but often recorded on video to show later or maybe make copies of on-demand.
Every year Botsman arranged several bigger concerts that gathered performers not only from Moscow, but also from other cities. St Petersburg was the closest metropolis, but often people came from far away cities such as Ulianovsk and Yekaterinburg. Every year Botsman organised two big events: a festival that was usually held in mid-February and a Slet, a “Fly-together”, that was held in May in the woods outside Moscow. The festivals were usually held in a local House of Culture at the outskirts of town, or in any similar establishment with a stage that could be rented.47

Figure 3. Houses of Culture were adapted to market economy and were popular venues for various events, in this particular case a punk rock concert. (Photo by author)

47 On Houses of Culture see Grant 1995.
Festival
The first festival I visited was held in February 2005 and it took place in a suburban youth activities centre. In the large courtyards of the seventeen- twenty storey apartment blocks there are often two- or three-storey buildings that house either schools or kindergartens, and this one happened to be a youth activity centre. The one-day festival was called Festival of Female Creativity (Festival Zhenskovo Tvorchestva). While explicit references to same-sex sexuality were consistently avoided, this was communicated through other means. The flyers, tickets, and small posters that decorated the doorway and the walls were variations on the rainbow.

The festival was held in a large room where rows of chairs had been placed facing a stage. The stage had neither wings nor a curtain, only a backdrop of black cloth to which a solitary rainbow flag was pinned. This very same flag would appear at other events, both indoors and outside as a reminder of the purpose of the gathering. The room was lit by fluorescent lights, which were never dimmed, since there was no other lighting equipment for the stage. Throughout the nearly six hours that the festival lasted, the crowd sat watching and listening to the different performers. As time went on, people became increasingly restless and began to chat in small groups, moved in and out of the auditorium, with some sharing whatever beverages they had stowed away in their pockets or backpacks. Through most of the performances, Botsman was running around making practical arrangements, or filming the event, both the stage and the crowd. All in all, the concert progressed in a very similar manner to a regular day at KSP, just on a larger scale and it lasted much longer.

Physical activity
Another important part of Botsman’s agenda was various forms of physical activity. She regularly tried to find people who had experience in martial arts, yoga and fitness to come and give classes. Despite Botsman’s enthusiasm, or perhaps because of it, these activities never amounted to much. Most people would sit around and watch as the “assigned” trainer held a class for a few participants. In her desire to have as many people as possible “holding classes” she sometimes made agreements with several people to hold class on the same day, or made new arrangements without cancelling those made previously. It often seemed to be more important to her to be doing something than to actually make sure that something was done with any regularity. I suspect that this interest in physical activity was motivated not only by her passion for hiking and other outdoor activities, but also by her own proclamation for a “clean living ideology and wish to provide public service and activities for the lesbian subcul-
As I mentioned earlier, this desire was thwarted at her club, where people regularly sneaked in drinks.

During the summer, people escape the city at every given opportunity. The stone structures heat up during the day, and the city becomes a furnace. And while parks provide a certain shelter, to leave the city altogether is a more pleasant alternative. The space for KSP was rented during the school year, which meant that there was nowhere to hold the meetings during the summer. In the summer of 2005, a more or less regular picnic was held every other Sunday, weather permitting, in a glade outside of Moscow. The usual interaction at KSP was resumed around a fireplace, perhaps with some meat to barbecue and a few drinks. This was not only an extension of Botsman’s own interest in hiking and singing songs by the fire, but the romantic reverence of nature was another re-connection to Soviet life in the 1960s and 1970s.

For those who were born in the late 1950s and came of age in the 1960s, the generation that in Russian parlance was referred to as ‘sixtiers’ (shestdesiatniki), fleeing into nature, hiking, mountain climbing, and archaeological expeditions became a way to escape the drudgery of everyday life and the system. “The 1960s mark the romantic re-conquest and re-mapping of the lost Soviet continent: its secret Gulag regions and closed cities. A new breed of nomads celebrates hiking and camping trips and resists the daily grind, domesticity, and conformist stability” (Boym 1994:116; see also Yurchak 2006). The hikes or work on archaeological sites were mostly excuses for sitting around bonfires all night, reading poetry by poets who had long been unpublished by the regime for ideological reasons, and singing songs by politically ‘problematic’ singer/songwriters, such as Okudzhava and Vysotskii. The holding of activities outside the city can also be viewed from a more gloomy perspective. This flight outside the city limits, picnics, and the open air concerts, can be regarded as a voluntary exile, similar to the practice of the Soviet regime of sending unwanted elements beyond the radius of 101 km outside the city. During Soviet times, there were laws that stipulated that certain kind of criminals could neither obtain a proof of residence propiska in the city, nor at a certain distance from it. Instead they were forced to live beyond the outskirts of the city. Before the Olympics in 1980 many petty criminals and vagrants were exiled beyond this line of demarcation of the socially and politically acceptable for the duration of the event. An eyewitness to the events of Moscow Pride Parade angrily blurted out that nobody prevents gays and lesbians to gather in their basements or in the woods beyond city limits, well out of sight, but to let them gather in the centre of town should not be allowed. Social marginalisation can be directly translated into a spatial one; just as being within the system was equated with being in the city, escaping it was to move beyond its physical limits.

By “clean living” she meant no drinking, no cursing, but also different kinds of physical activities, especially outdoors.
‘Social work’ and ‘activism’

The third type of activity that Botsman burned for was what she and many others referred to as social work. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, Russian organisers often avoid conceptualising their projects in terms of politics or activism. Instead many referred instead to their projects as ‘social work’ (sotsialnaia rabota). I have no doubt that Botsman saw her entire project as “social work”—helping people in social ways. Arranging places to meet for those who had a hard time finding like-minded people, arranging music and poetry for cultural education, and organizing support groups were more focused ways of helping people with their problems. Support groups had existed on and off during my visits in November 2003 and August 2004, but had been discontinued during my fieldwork. There were several attempts to revive these sessions at KSP. Botsman tried to organise people into a circle and get some kind of conversation going but it never caught on, either because people were not interested in talking about depressing things when they had come to socialise, or the support groups were perceived as an impediment to ‘ordinary’ interaction, or because there was no professional guidance. I suspect that people were not all that interested in talking about sensitive topics under such ambiguous circumstances. But all Botsman tried to do was help, in the sense of providing a space to interact, to talk about problems, or to socialise.

Apart from the Festival and the open-air concert Slet, in 2005 Botsman also occasionally arranged a ‘Rainbow Cruise’ on the Moscow River. The information available beforehand was the approximate time and the rendezvous place. The idea was to have a social outing, but there was an undercurrent that somehow invoked the image of activism. Botsman kept coming back to the idea that it was going to be something of a secret political action: “We will gather quietly, have a nice little trip, and wave our rainbow flags as we pass the Kremlin without bothering anyone”. Around forty people in total gathered at the quay of the tourist boats by the Moscow River in the centre of town. It was a slow day for tourists and the entire group bought tickets and boarded. There were no signs, banners or flags and the group looked just like a big, unidentifiable group of people. During the two-hour trip, Botsman had organised small contests and performances, awarding a prize for the best rainbow outfit, but mostly people listened to music, relaxed and socialised. When we passed the Kremlin walls, people really did take out rainbow flags and waved them at the Kremlin. By the end of the tour, a large rainbow flag had been fastened below the Russian tri-colour at the stern of the boat. As people were leaving the boat, some took the opportunity to climb up next to the rainbow flag and pose for a photograph. This was a small reminder of the ever so slightly revolutionary aspect of the event, but the revolutionary impact was meagre at best, as there were few other people around who could recognise the flag or connect it to gay and les-

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49 A picture of the two flags can be seen on the cover of this book.
bian culture and be influenced by the action. After the boat docked and the last picture was snapped, the flag was soon removed. Even if there were few witnesses, it was still a form of visibility, albeit to the self; a demonstration that one could hoist a rainbow flag on a boat and nobody would mind, an action of marking and appropriating public space, no matter how fleeting or superficial. It was a careful tiptoe on the verge of public political action—being open, but not quite.50

Contextualising KSP
So far I have presented KSP as an individual project, primarily guided by the tastes and preferences of its main organiser, but it can also be viewed as a combination of various influences as it draws on different available traditions and cultural repertoires. I once heard Botsman describe the features of her ideal project of a lesbian centre. This was a “what I would do if I could do anything” story, but of course it was also her idea of what a lesbian community centre should be like, and by extension, the interests of the lesbian community. It was a long and quite detailed account of how things could, or should, be. Botsman imagined a house, much like a community centre, where a multitude of activities would be going on every day, such as singing, theatre performances, some hobby groups, as well as various activities such as fitness or study groups. People could just walk in from the street and participate in activities, find information and like-minded people. As Botsman mused over her vision I listened quietly and realised that both of us had listened to a description of such a centre when Marina from Labrys Spb had described the LGBT centre in San Francisco. At first I thought that this idea(l) of a LGBT community centre must have made quite an impression on Botsman but I realised soon that there was also another, culturally closer, influence. This dream project shared substantial overlaps with many institutions of education and culture in Soviet times, when there was a great range of state-sponsored after-school societies. Many of these took place at Houses of Culture, a Soviet institution that was to bring culture to the proletariat. There were clubs and events, from choirs, symphony orchestras, jazz groups, and dance ensembles to literary, mathematics, chess, and archaeological clubs (Yurchak 2006).51 The value placed on “socially useful activity” was an implicit, but recurring, idea in the events at KSP. During a conversation

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50 This was just a day or two before Nikolai Alekseev announced his plans to hold Moscow Pride Parade 2006 the following year, and the question of public visibility and presence of gays and lesbians was posed more acutely and became the focus of a nationwide debate.

51 Yurchak duly notes that some of the ‘clubs’ of the Houses of Culture “while perfectly in line with the socialist values, actively promoted the types of knowledge, critical judgement, and independent thinking that taught children to question authority and ideological pronouncements”(2006:135).
about KSP my informant and friend Lena Kidanova characterised Botsman as a thoroughly Soviet person.

Botsman is almost a direct continuation of Soviet times, for a different part of the population and with a different focus, but nevertheless. If you think about it the club has a strong resemblance to the Pioneer organisations and the ‘after-class activities’ at school. Since we had to do something, and there was one person in charge to make sure we did something useful, we were constantly being dragged off to museums, theatre plays, and concerts. The person who was in charge not only had to make sure we went but also had to provide information, keep people in line and such. There were hiking trips and singing around the bonfire. Well, really that last part also overlaps very much with the singer/songwriter tradition and the original KSP.

But the intention of the KSP activities was not the only similarity with the Soviet times and school. “Have you seen how people behave? It’s almost like being back in school”, Lena said laughing. “There is this person who runs around and tells you, and you comply . . . well, as much as you want to, anyway. People are there voluntarily, but still it is the same dynamic, the same structure but based on a different world view: gender, sexuality and rights.” The way that events were organised, as well as the activities themselves was firmly rooted in practices from Soviet culture. Here the different perspectives and preferences of one person, in this case Botsman, form a loose framework for the opportunities open to people who come to the club. Interestingly enough, some visitors chose to respond with an equally familiar script, playing hooky.

KSP was not only a lesbian space, but also had a specific focus, which distinguished it from other available lesbian spaces. The activities and social interaction were not determined but heavily influenced by Soviet traditions, not only in the choice of interests but also in its social dynamic. In terms of social world theory, Botsman can be conceptualised as an insider, a person who “create[s] experiences for other social world participants” (Unruh 1980: 164). She was the sine qua non of the social world and of course her interests were the main determinants of what went on at KSP, while at the same time, Botsman herself was greatly influenced by other traditions.

For the people who visited it, KSP was an unpretentious meeting space where one could meet new people, and for those who were already familiar with it, it was a space that they could visit to see a performer they liked. The performances of music and poetry, this includes the festivals and the open-air gatherings and concerts, were the only of Botsman’s activities that people deliberately sought out. Only a fairly small number of people showed up regularly over a longer period of time, but new visitors were always welcome. The KSP was a social world that people drifted in and out of for periods of their lives. Some people really liked the concerts and could always count on running into

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52 At the same time these people have no influence over what goes on there.
friends at such events. When people went back after long periods of absence they often remarked “it is always the same”, at first with a smile, later on perhaps with an annoyed tone in their voice.

The Archive

Another lesbian space that was a confluence of the lesbian subculture and older traditions was the Archive that materialised once a week, if the proprietress was in town. It was a library, a literary salon, and something of a cosy kitchen with a temperamental black and white cat, all neatly fitting into a two-room apartment in a nondescript high-rise building on the edge of the sprawling city. Going to the Archive was one of my favourite routines. I would take the Metro from the centre to the last stop and watch the underground architecture mirror the one above ground amid the deafening noise of the train. The ornate and lavishly decorated Metro stations at the centre became elegant, then simplified, then finally bare as I faced the white tiled walls and went up a very short escalator at the end stop. I would buy some treats from the vendors outside the Metro--in the winter it would be cakes and cookies and in the summer it would be fruit--and make the fifteen-minute walk past the slowly deteriorating houses until I arrived at the green and white houses in neat rows. Second house, third doorway, the one with graffiti sprayed on it. As I punched in the code on the intercom I would try to guess who would answer it. I took the worn elevator up while trying to decide whether it creaked in a scary or a romantic way. When I stepped over the threshold into the tiny hallway I would try to estimate from the pile of shoes and mountain of coats how many visitors there were inside. After I had spent a while digging out a matching pair of slippers from the pile under the coats, I would pop my head into the living room to see who was already there. Sometimes there was cigarette smoke trailing faintly from the kitchen, sometimes the teapot was on, sometimes all was quiet as few had the energy to make it on a cold and snowy November evening, or perhaps the summer weather had convinced people to find a grassy spot in a park instead. Here one could meet with friends, stock up on gossip and find something interesting to read, preferably on the subject of gay and lesbian culture or by a gay or lesbian author. The place was named the Archive, or more correctly the Archive of Elena Grigorievna, and it hosted a collection of the Russian gay publications from the early 1990s, as well as a smaller amount of imported gay and lesbian magazines along with newspaper clippings from the mainstream Russian press. The library also included a collection of gay/lesbian fiction and non-fiction books. In 2005 about one hundred-thirty people held library cards, and on a regular evening one could expect between five to fifteen visitors. Some people came just for the books or the magazines, but they were a minority; most people came to meet friends, talk and socialise. People moved be-
tween the tea, biscuits, and cigarettes in the kitchen and the books and magazines in the living room.

Archives as safe havens of unwanted histories

In the beginning of the 1990s when the first gay and lesbian publications began to emerge, Elena Grigorievna could sense that something was changing and was fascinated. Out of curiosity and interest she began to collect as many publications as she could get her hands on. Later she was asked to set up and maintain an archive for the organisation Triugolnik. When the funding for the organisation ended and Triugolnik ceased to exist, the materials were moved several times between different locations until Elena Grigorievna could put them in her apartment where they remained. The Archive was open to anyone and everyone who cared to visit it, both men and women. Elena Grigorievna’s main reason to maintain the Archive, beside her own passion for books and knowledge, was to keep these materials open and available to the public.

Archives are places of memory, or perhaps a supplement to memory. They are for things that need to be remembered, things that will otherwise be lost forever. While the goal—to preserve—is the same for all archives, the purpose of remembering—what to preserve—may vary greatly. Archives are, in a sense, the foundation of the history and the legitimacy of the state. In every narrative certain aspects are brought forward while others are conveniently forgotten. In totalitarian regimes archives also become privileged sites, and they often contain more information than the politically approved narrative. While many countries have an unpredictable future, the Soviet Union had an unpredictable past as both events and people could easily become undocumented and slip out of the history books. While many Western LGBT archives focus on salvaging the past and attempt to remedy the “trauma of historical absence” (Cvetkovich 2002), archives also offer alternatives to the hegemonic representations available in Soviet and early post-Soviet times. The Archive provided a variety of scientific, literary, and amateur texts on a subject that was nearly silenced during the Soviet era (Kon 1995; Rotkirch 2000).

Books and reading

It was early 2005, a winter that brought Moscow glorious amounts of snow: heaps of it were lining roads and streets and reached above two metres. As I was crossing the yard, I passed some children in their early or mid teens who were playing on a mountain of snow. As they climbed as high as they could,

53 Such editing of history was perhaps made obvious in the errata slip to the 1954 edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia where readers were advised to use scissors or a razor to remove “Beria” and insert an expanded entry on “Bering Sea” (Condee and Padunov 1991).
grabbing on to each other for support, one of the girls lost her balance. As she almost pulled a friend down with her in the fall, the boy cried out in response “Get this Desdemona away from me”. I smiled and thought to myself “Children who spontaneously quote Shakespeare. Yes, I am definitely in Russia.”

That Russians are the most avid readers in the world is an opinion that Russians often proudly voice about themselves (Lovell 2000). Books in general, and classical literature in particular, enjoy an especially revered position in Soviet culture. But this is not only a result of an unquenchable love for the great classical works; the battle against illiteracy was one of the most important battles that the early Soviet power fought in order to create the modern Soviet citizen. Importantly, this was not so much a question of civilisation as it was a question of power. During the early years of the Soviet Union, literacy was explicitly politicised. Learning how to read and write was key to educating a correct Soviet citizen and to instilling the “proper” values and outlooks on life (Lovell 2000). The political and ideological importance of the printed word not only made literacy a political goal, but it also made print media important ideological tools for communist rule, it was a direct way to influence and shape the proper Soviet citizens. To the ruling class, the printed word became a very sensitive instrument that could undermine the state and send out the “wrong” message if vigilance was lax. The entire printing industry was therefore placed under rigorous control by the state. During my recurring visits to Russia during my youth, I could not understand why the very few copy machines that appeared in Russia were always placed in offices where you had to fill out forms and applications in order to use them, as they were neither particularly expensive nor exceedingly difficult to use. At the time, I did not understand that it was a question of control of information through control of technology.

Many people were well aware of the constructedness or illusory nature of official information. Learning not to take official news at face value—reading between the lines—was an imperative ability. Yet the highly formulaic discourse of the Soviet state did not destroy the idea of ‘the word’ as the bearer of truth (Yurchak 2006). Lovell notes how, in early Soviet times, people read, not only for pleasure, but also for guidance. Fiction was seen to provide possible solutions and interpretations of events (Lovell 2000). The writer and essayist Viktor Erofeev also notes that while “the Western reader has become accustomed to the fact that beneath the cover of a book there may be a pseudo-book, with only a commercial value, the Russian reader still takes the book seriously, seeing it either as a tool for propaganda or as a free space for the soul” (Erofeev 2005:240, author’s translation and parenthesis). As noted earlier there was an almost complete absence of literature of any kind on sexuality during Soviet

54 My mother told me that few intelligent people considered what the newspapers wrote as truth. When you read the news you knew that the numbers in the report of the progress of the current Five year plan was usually arranged according to a specific structure: “The plan was exceeded by such and such percent”. Everyone listened to the Voice of America and other alternative sources of information.
times and fiction became an important source of information (Rotkirch 2000). Over the course of Soviet history access to information was governed by the structure of friendship networks and habits of social interaction rather than reflecting any marked increase in available information (ibid.). The Archive continued this tradition both in the sense that it was a private space and also because it was primarily accessible through private networks.

The Archive as a social space

D’Emilio noted that already in the early twentieth century lesbians began forming literary societies and private social clubs while homosexual male culture formed in public spaces such as bath-houses (D’Emilio 1993). Archives of gay and lesbian texts not only provide safe spaces for documents that might otherwise perish due to neglect or destruction, but are also often safe places for gays and lesbians themselves. People came to the Archive not only to find fiction and information about things of which society was either silent or hateful, but also to be in a physical space that welcomed a different sexual standard. Being in a person’s home—in a private space—had a significant impact on the social interaction, because of the place’s combination of the public and the private. As Cvetkovich notes, it is the bedrooms that have often been turned into “safe havens for history” (Cvetkovich 2002:136). The Archive was located in a private home, but was open to the public, even if a limited one, and thus combined aspects of both private and public space. When one is very accustomed to certain public spaces, they come to share the familiarity of home. The division between the public and the private is not firmly drawn and categorical, but relative. Rather than talking about spaces as either public or private, it may be more productive to talk about the construction of the differences and boundaries between the two, the shifts and manipulations that move one closer to either end of the continuum, and the grey scale in between. Here again we come back to the public-private spaces established during Soviet times (Oswald and Voronkov 2004).

The living room, with its books and magazines, was the room most readily transformed into a public space. Depending on the day and the mood of the visitors, the Archive could very much resemble a reading room or a library where people sat by themselves and leafed through magazines and books, or quietly searched the bookshelves for a particular volume. If there was a conversation it was most often in hushed tones, and even though I had never heard anyone being shushed, people behaved as they would in a library, quietly and respectfully. This silence was not only about speech, but also observable in people’s demeanour and movements. In such situations newcomers were especially quiet and careful, not only to avoid making noise but also sometimes cautious to engage in conversation. Often this shyness passed. People who had not been introduced could easily strike up a conversation about a particular book, or ask someone to recommend something, but in comparison to a purely
social gathering, there was no requirement to introduce yourself unless you actually initiated a conversation.

While the living room had the air of a library, people who were in a chatty mood did what people usually do: they went to the kitchen. Very often almost everyone ended up in the kitchen talking loudly and laughing, and private conversation had to move somewhere else. If on the other hand it was the living room that had become the lively spot, the phrase “Let’s have some tea” could often be quite accurately interpreted as “Let’s have a more private chat”.

In comparison to the living room, interaction in the kitchen followed a different social code. Being quiet was no longer mandated by the requirements of the space. People sat and chatted, drank tea and smoked. The social interaction in the kitchen was also intensified by the small size of the room. If there were more than four people in the kitchen it was already crowded. Squeezing past people, sharing cookies, and passing cups of tea created a very homey atmosphere. People almost always brought sweets or biscuits for the tea as a sign of gratitude for the hospitality.

The interaction at the Archive continuously balanced between the public and the private, sometimes tipping more to one than the other. This balancing act put certain strains on Elena Grigorievna: “While the Archive is a very rewarding enterprise because I know it makes a difference in people’s lives, it is quite hard at the same time because you invite strangers into your home every week. And I have to be a hostess, and anticipate things. And even though you trust people to use their judgement when they bring people there are no guarantees.”

People who were regulars treated the space more as a private space, more and more so with greater familiarity. Being one of the regulars entailed that one could be asked to help out with some simple chores, such as putting on the kettle and make tea or coffee. Many regulars were willing to perform such tasks without being asked. One such occasion occurred on a winter evening when Botsman took it upon herself to be on “mop-watch”. When new people came to the flat she would admonish them for not wiping their shoes or walking too far into the hallway and making puddles of slush. She would then amend the situation and incur shame by vigorous mopping.

It was also the regular or well-known visitors who easily turned the reading room into a more talkative place, often merely by arriving. When a familiar voice was heard on the intercom people would already start chatting and when the person emerged through the door, there were greetings and jokes. People who felt quite at home engaged in conversations across the room with loud and cheerful greetings and the library reverted back into a living room for a while. Space was not a priori public or private but became more or less public or private through relations and social actions within that space. The same physical space was not only perceived differently by different people, it actually became several different social spaces depending on who you were and your level of access. In their interaction at the Archive, as well as in other places, people drew on a number of templates connected to a variety of spaces. At the Ar-
The Archive as a “Soviet kitchen”

This particular combination of public and private can be related to another domestic/political tradition that was created by the censorship and the lack of meeting spaces during Soviet times. The Archive served as a place where people could meet and informally discuss issues that they could not discuss openly in public links back to the tradition of the alternative kitchen culture that emerged in the 1960s. “[M]embers of Moscow intelligentsia who happened to live in their own separate flats (in Leningrad this was more rare) started to have unofficial kitchen gatherings in their homes. The kitchen became a kind of an informal salon for the culture of the thaw generation. The most important issues were discussed in the overcrowded kitchen, where people ‘really talked’, flirted and occasionally ate” (Boym 1994:147-8). In many ways the Archive continued the tradition of the Soviet kitchen culture as a space where people met and shared rare or sensitive information. The Communist Party or the Soviet state, whichever way one chooses to see it, allowed such places to exist as long as there was no open dissent or opposition.\footnote{Some of my informants who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s pointed out to me that there were always snitches present at these kitchen discussions. This was something that everyone was aware of but it was a part of the deal.}

The intense discussion in the Soviet kitchens was an outside to the official order, which was tolerated and accepted, as long as it did not threaten the order itself.

In a similar vein, the Archive was not kept a complete secret and, according to Elena Grigorievna, that was not necessary. Neighbours were aware that something was going on, even though it remained unclear to what extent. This was illustrated by a story that Elena Grigorievna loved to tell: “Two girls had made their way to the Archive. They had found out the address from someone, or a description of how to get here. They surely hadn’t called because then they would not have found themselves in the situation they were in. Even if they had found the right entrance and made their way past the intercom, they didn’t know what floor they had to go to. So there they were, standing outside the elevator, unsure of where to go. A neighbour, who was waiting for the elevator too, looked them over from head to toe”. Here Elena Grigorievna made a pause and gave a very good impersonation of “the gaze”, made another pause and said in a grave, slightly contemptuous voice, “You need the eighth floor.”

The point of this story was that people in the building were in fact aware that a certain type of women gathered in a certain apartment on a certain day but as long as it was not made explicit who and for what purposes, no one would...
object or interfere. The neighbours thus treated the Archive as the private affair of Elena Grigorievna, and the Archive came to resemble the private-public sphere of the Soviet era (Oswald and Voronkov 2004). Even though there were notices about the Archive at a few Internet sites and an advertisement in the small but regular publication Ostrov, the most common way to find out about the Archive was to be brought there by someone.

Despite the scant advertising the Archive was relatively famous abroad, at least among social scientists. Just like the lesbian subculture in Moscow, academia is a wide network of networks, and the paper trail of articles, dissertations and interviews had led me and many other researchers to this little literary node and social space. During my fifteen months of fieldwork in Moscow, I met six academics from four different countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Germany. It was not only the academic paper trail that led researchers to the Archive. It was also Elena Grigorievna’s personality, her knowledge of languages, her curiosity and her ability to maintain contact with researchers and visitors that almost inevitably made visiting it a must for any academic who was interested in gay and lesbian culture in Russia. In much the same way that KSP was an adaptation of some Soviet traditions to the lesbian subculture, mediated of course through its main organiser, so was the Archive the continuation of both Soviet and even pre-revolutionary Russian traditions. Elena Grigorievna tapped into the pleasure of reading and the use of private social networks and the private-public sphere that developed during the Soviet era. In comparison to Botsman and KSP, Elena Grigorievna’s personal tastes were not quite as influential in the everyday life of the Archive even though her determination and commitment made the very space possible.

To summarise, the Archive incorporated several different strands of Russian, Soviet and international cultural traditions, combining the literary salon, the Soviet kitchen, a gay and lesbian archive and an international meeting space. While it was itself not commercial, it benefited from many post-Soviet developments. The loosening of the control of the Soviet press system was the very spark that started the process and by 2005 the flow of relevant literature was too big to fit inside the small apartment. The gay and lesbian movement, influential contacts and financial support in the early 1990s had been imperative in beginning the gathering of the materials that later became the Archive. Over time, connections were maintained and continued to grow.

The Pushka

The geography of the city reflects how Moscow has developed in stages, forming concentric circles around the medieval core of the city that is created by the Kremlin and the part of the city called Kitai Gorod. This area is enclosed by the Boulevard Ring, a semicircle that was a central thoroughfare with a wide swath of green between the opposing lanes of traffic, which forms a boulevard with
trees, benches and walking paths down the centre. Pushka was the subcultural nickname of a particular part of the Boulevard Ring, more specifically the square around the statue of the poet Sergei Yesenin and the adjoining squares of grass. The name was a short form for the name of closest Metro station, Pushkinskaia.

Figure 4. The view of the Boulevard Ring facing away from the Esenin statue and overlooking the benches and the grass where people gather. (Photo by author)

As a public space the park was, of course, not frequented only by lesbians. In general, there were many different people on the Boulevard: people of all ages, though the majority young, sitting on the benches, drinking, talking, resting or waiting for someone. If the weather allowed, people sat on the grass. It was also common for different youth cultures and subcultural networks to establish spatial anchoring in the park (Pilkington 1996) as I was told by members of a chat group on the Internet that used to come there on particular days.

I visited the Pushka for the very first time in June 2004. Olga Suvorova took me there as a “special treat for the social scientist—like a trip to the zoo”. She explained that she and her girlfriend really (and she almost could not stress this enough) did not go there themselves, not to socialise certainly, but they sometimes went there “to have a laugh, just to see what’s going on”. To complete the outing her girlfriend was to join us, as well as a few other friends. It was summer and it was hot, and even though it was a weekday she expected that there would be people. As we were walking from the McDonald’s near the Metro station towards the square I was informed that I had to buy a beer; oth-

56 This is what Pilkington and Bludina referred to as “unstructured ‘time out’ spent among territorially located peer groups” (2002: xvii).
erwise I would not blend in. I was also advised to purchase the cheapest beer, the kind in large plastic 1.5 litre bottles, to have an “authentic experience” of the place. On that day I did not learn very much about what actually went on at the infamous Pushka. The people I had come there with were too keen to distance themselves from the place and the people who come there.

Much later I was introduced to people who could give me the inside view. I met Galina and her girlfriend Stas (in this case a short form of Anastasia, but the name is more widely used as a familiar form of the male name Stanislav) who had been regular visitors to the Pushka for three years. For Galina the Pushka was actually her first encounter with the lesbian subculture. When I met her in 2005 she was thirty years old, she worked with basic computer maintenance at a publishing house, and lived with her girlfriend Stas. She had stumbled upon the Pushka by chance. One day the entire computer system had crashed at work and she had nothing to do but chat online. A newly made online friend suggested meeting up in town after work, at the Pushka. At the time Galina was married, her husband knew of her bisexuality and they sometimes lived with a third woman. A few weeks after being introduced to the Pushka Galina showed up at home with Stas and introduced her as the woman she loved, the marriage began to deteriorate and she began to have conflicts with her family. After many trials and tribulations Galina’s marriage ended and her daughter moved to live with Galina’s mother. Despite the losses, and unlike the situation of many other informants that I talked to, Galina had stayed at the Pushka for what would be considered a long time. At this time Stas was only twenty-three and her social networks within the subculture had not yet gone very far beyond the Pushka, so her presence was not as surprising.

Making public space private

There were two different, and conflicting, views of the Pushka. Most often it was met with ridicule and disdain, described as “the lowest of the low”, a place for girls who could not go anywhere else either because they were too young or because they had not “made anything of themselves”. This was a stereotype of girls who are considered to be interested only in drinking, fighting, and being rowdy. Because of the close connection made between the place and the people who spent time there, Pushka could be used to refer to the place, a type of person, and a form of interaction. For those who avoided it, the Pushka was “a disgrace” because of the kind of women who went there, and likewise, the women who went to the Pushka were a particular kind of people because they went to that kind of place. These judgements of spaces and places reveal the values attached to them, how spaces are understood, related to each other and experienced and how these judgements are sometimes passed on to people who spend a lot of time there.

The Pushka was often described as “one of the worst places to be”, both because of the place itself and because of what went on there. As a physical
space it was open to everyone and in that sense not exclusive. Both within mainstream culture and subculture there was an implicit hierarchy of places, be they clubs, restaurants, or other spaces. The position in the hierarchy was often closely connected to how accessible or exclusive places were: the more difficult a club or restaurant was to get into, the more exclusive it was. Access was not only regulated by money through entrance fees and prices, but also via membership requirements or by invitation only, and by simply making certain establishments completely secret. The least valued spaces were those of easiest access or transit, such as small parks or railroad stations. People who were there were on their way between places, in motion and therefore nowhere, in non-places (Augé 1995). Pushka was often described as a place of transition, a space to move through and move on from in a social sense. People who stay or live in non-places would be a non-person, something that is applicable in the case of the homeless population around railway stations (Höjdestrand 2005). Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga note the following:

The relationship between people and their surroundings encompasses more than attaching meaning to space, it involves the recognition and cultural elaboration of perceived properties of environments in mutually constituting ways through narratives and praxis (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003:14).

The judgement of the Pushka had a great influence over the perception of people who spent a lot of time there. Many of my informants who often and loudly expressed their disdain at my interest in the Pushka were equally disdainful of the people who spent time there and characterised them as failures because they were still there: “Pushka is a place all of us have been to, but most people move on from as soon as they can, to something better”.

Inside mythology

The various negative statements above were opinions of the Pushka from the outside, expressed by two lesbian women; the first had never frequented it and the other used to but did not do so any longer. Those who used to go there tended to say “In my time things were different. We just sat there, talked, maybe with a guitar. Today everything has changed.” Some said that they left because the place changed, others because they outgrew it or settled down with a partner. Insiders, on the other hand, painted a different picture. People who spent a lot of time at the Pushka were well aware of the reputation it had within the subculture. To counterbalance this reputation there was an internal mythology, a set of stories that underscored positive experiences that presented the Pushka as a place of freedom and inclusion.

To demonstrate this Galina recounted an incident where a girl had spent most of the evening sitting on a bench waiting for her date who never showed up. At the end of the night she was nearly crying. Galina and her friends, who
had been sitting on their regular bench not far off from the girl, had witnessed the sad progression of events and felt sorry for her. To make her evening not a total loss they invited her into the group and made her feel welcome: she was immediately introduced to everyone in the group, someone gave her a beer and a drink and everyone proceeded to try to lift her spirits. In this story the physical openness of the space is equated with social openness, something that allows anyone to meet and spend time together. "It is a place without hierarchies, money does not matter. That's why it's good." Olga Krauze, who had travelled through most of the Soviet Union, assured me that there were places like the Pushka in every city, however, they did not all have such a bad reputation as the one in Moscow.

These stories of openness and hospitality created a positive counter-image of the Pushka that was maintained by those who spent time there. However, my own experiences contradicted these stories of immediate inclusion. First of all, people who came to the Pushka most commonly did so to see someone they already knew or made plans to meet. It was entirely possible to come by yourself and "be open to suggestions" as it were and it was true that people would come up and sit next to you and talk to you, for a while, but you would not become a member of a group. A certain distance was maintained towards newcomers, which became obvious only after a while. There was a sheen of openness that covered, if not a hostile, then at least a somewhat cautious, stance. Irina the rowdy butch who had spent some time there when she was younger and occasionally still did, told me that "the Pushka is an open place, but if you come alone, you'll leave alone". The more I visited the place, the more I noticed that people would greet me and talk to me a little, but that they kept their distance. One explanation given by regular visitors was simply that not all people who went there had the appropriate "egalitarian outlook". “Anyone can come to the Pushka, but not all can stay, the Pushka will not accept anyone. A person who is very keen to show off or to establish their superiority will not be long-lived”.

While distance towards newcomers was explained as a reluctance to include those who are keen to show off or try to create hierarchies, in this way supporting the internal image of the Pushka as an egalitarian place, this behaviour was simultaneously a way to close off the social space. Seemingly a paradox, this was a space where everyone could come, but far from everyone would be included or stay, which in a way reversed its "all access" aspect. By being cautious or conservative in their interaction, girls who spent time at the Pushka created a more private space within the public space, reminding us once again that the line between public and private space is continuously constructed by the social interactions that go on in that space.

What kind of space a person is in depends on her relationship to the space and the people around her. To a great extent it was the ignorance of the wider public that allowed the Pushka to be a lesbian space. The girls themselves seldom unveiled this ignorance. If a stranger attempted to join a group, most of-
ten a man, he would be politely turned away, with the phrase “we have our own private party here, please go somewhere else.” Sometimes this was done in less polite terms, but the space was never singled out as an explicitly lesbian space.

The ‘live and let live’ mentality reigned as long as people did not have to take a stand or openly face alternative lifestyle choices. The partial visibility, the restricted social access and the internal division of the Pushka underscore that the same physical space can encompass several social spaces that may be not only separate but also invisible to each other. Rather than being a meeting place for all, that particular part of the Boulevard Ring was a physical space of overlapping, and at times parallel, social spaces, one of which was the Pushka. They were parallel almost in the mathematical definition of the term, planes that never intersect.

To those who felt at home, the Pushka was a big living room, a place of familiar interaction with friends, a “public-private” sphere, a private realm in public, which was a reversal of the “private-public” of the Archive (Oswald and Voronkov 2004). To many other lesbians who knew of the place but did not spend time there, the space was a marginal one, a place to pass through and to avoid if possible. It was seen as a place where women who were considered to be nobodies hung out in a place that was “nowhere.” This sense of “nowhere” was amplified by the fact that the Pushka was never a proper lesbian space, as it remained indistinguishable from any other part of the Boulevard Ring. Its regular visitors were not “producing ‘proper places’ but always using and manipulating . . . places” (Cresswell 2004:636). To those simply passing through it was only a thoroughfare, a space to be crossed from point A to point B. The ignorance of the passersby also facilitated the process by which a public heterosexual space became a private lesbian space. Passersby who recognised what kind of place this was, were most often nothing more than casual visitors who did not gain access. Those who came to the Pushka regularly saw it as a private space that harboured private interaction and intimate secrets, guarded not by physical barriers like walls and doors, but instead by a quite rigorous social exclusion.

Parallel social spaces

All the people who passed or stayed on the square could be divided into two categories. First, those who were oblivious to the specific subcultural meaning of the space, to whom this was just another part of the Boulevard Ring with yet another statue of a great Russian poet and yet another mass of people hanging out. And secondly, those who knew about this place, who were able to differentiate between the different kinds of people and the activities that were going on. Thus not all of the people who happened to be near the Esenin monument at a given moment were actually at the Pushka. They might not even have been aware of the fact that this was a place with a specific social meaning. The invisibility of the lesbian space was also facilitated by the fact that to the unknow-
ing, or the “untrained” eye, the crowd may have appeared as mixed since quite a few of the young women at the Pushka dressed and behaved as one would expect teenage boys to behave and were easily mistaken for them. The ignorance of lesbian styles and visual codes split the same physical space into several spaces, parallel spaces or a space within the space. Coming to the Pushka required that one knew about it or that one was somewhat familiar with the lesbian subculture and would recognise the lesbians hanging out. The Pushka can be said to be an almost purely socially constructed place as it was a “transformation of space—through social exchanges, memories, images and daily use of the material setting—into scenes and actions that convey meaning” (Low 2000:128). People who had not participated in these experiences, or participated in the lesbian subculture, could not enter the social space while being in the physical one.

Stephen Hodge points out that places are more than just locations on maps; they are cultural creations that bear different meanings to different people (Hodge 1995). Just as the Archive seamlessly shifted between being an apartment and being a public space, so did a part of the Boulevard Ring shift depending on the interactions within that space. While the Archive housed public interaction in a private apartment, the Pushka was very often a private interaction in a public space and thus in a way a reversal of the private-public space that was the Archive. This privacy in a public space can be juxtaposed not only with the public aspects of the Soviet kitchen, but also with the lack of privacy at home that gays and lesbians sometimes experience as a result of the surveillance from other household members. “Coming out” and “being out” at home is a process that in many cases has to be carried out over and over again as family members refuse to accept reality (Holliday 1999; Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003). Hiding one’s sexuality from some, if not all, family members turns the private space, assumed to be offstage, into a place where self-restraint needs to be exercised and which almost reverses the relationship between public and private space (Johnston and Valentine 1995). Being in a private space no more guaranteed privacy than visibility was guaranteed by being in a public one (Cresswell 2004).

Interconnections: visibility and movement between spaces

While I have described these three places as independent they are of course connected: geographically, as they are all a part of the same city; socially, as people move between them; conceptually, as they are perceived to belong to

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57 “Coming out” is a well-established description of informing people around you of your homosexual orientation. However, “coming out of the closet” is an old expression that did not refer to sexuality specifically, but now primarily carries that meaning (Lazerson 1981).

58 This splitting into social spaces in public also provided a certain level of safety as homophobic violence has a direct link to visibility (Corteen 2002).
the same subculture. But they are also related hierarchically as they are compared to each other and judged as more or less cultured or refined. There were also antagonisms. For instance, at the time of my fieldwork there were, to my knowledge, almost no overlaps between the Pushka and the Archive, with the exception of Lena Kidanova, who introduced me to some of her friends at the Pushka. When I asked around among my informants at the Pushka only a handful were vaguely aware of the Archive. While some expressed desire to go to the Archive, this could also have been an indirect way to communicate an interest in “culture” and in this way present oneself as a cultured person, to refute the common assumption about Pushka-girls. During my visit in 2007, Elena Grigorievna was happy to report that there was a considerable increase in new visitors to the Archive. She was also pleased to note that many of the girls were from the Pushka, in this way accentuating the attraction of “real” culture embodied in the Archive. It was also not particularly common for people from KSP to spend time at the Boulevard Ring, or at least not that I knew of. Lesbian hangouts were chosen according to interests and one’s social circle, but there was also the aspect of class. Many of my informants did not spend time in any of these “establishments” but considered themselves to be *tema* nonetheless.

One day as I was sitting at the Pushka I saw a couple passing, two women, thirty-something, feminine, holding hands, clearly a couple. I started to think about whom they were and why they were there. Maybe they used to go to the Pushka, and on this day just walked past it to see what was happening then, or perhaps they had never gone there at all. They had been strolling on the boulevard, but as they passed the Pushka they knew they would be recognised as a couple, at least by some of the people.

Visibility thus becomes an experience connected to movement, a search for places where you will be visible and recognised (Giorgi 2002; Puar, Rushbrook and Schein 2003). Visibility is not simply to be seen, but it is also a question of whom you are being seen by. Different sites in a city offered possibilities to be out in a way that was not allowed at home or at work: one could come out just by moving through the right places and being recognised. Julia Podmore has noted that “few have focused on how lesbians produce place in the city to be visible to each other” (Podmore 2001:348, on visibility see also Cieri 2003; Eves 2004). Both the Pushka and the Archive lesbian spaces were kept hidden from the mainstream society, irrespective of whether they were in public or private. The Pushka blended in with the general culture of parks in Russia, while maintaining a social boundary between in-group and out-group. The different layers of city spaces thus enabled different subcultures to coexist side by side. It also enabled people to pass through different social facets of their lives as they moved through the city space. At the same time, since these different social worlds focused on different interests or activities, the way one engaged with the lesbian subculture, or lived out a lesbian identity, varied quite drastically. What
united all these different spaces was that they were all to different extents recognised as *tema*, even when they were frowned upon.

Not only a lesbian: avoiding lesbian spaces

Learning where the gays and lesbians are is a fundamental part of your way into the subculture (Graham 1998). But these spaces are isolated, and they often mesh and overlap with the mainstream urban fabric as people move between different spheres. In many cases, I encountered a curious avoidance of anything explicitly connected to the “scene”. Just as people had been proud to introduce me to a new lesbian café, they could later suggest that we should go somewhere else in order not to go to the scene. Just as there was a movement towards the subculture, a desire to escape the homophobia of the “ordinary” Russian culture, to find a place where one did not have to speak in code, but know that “I know, and I know that you know, and I know that you know that I know” (Hannerz 1996: 57), there was also a resistance against going only to subcultural spaces out of fear of being constricted to this particular part of their lives. To spend all of one’s (free) time within the subculture, or to go only to the clubs advertised explicitly for lesbians and gays, was often perceived as admitting that that was all there was to you as a person. Drawn to its logical endpoint it would mean that sexual interests are the major determinant in one’s entire personality. There was also an aspect of a gleeful resistance; in the same way that many Russians refused to wear seatbelts for a long time, the occasional shunning of lesbian hangouts was a resistance against a dictate to the masses, against being defined as a uniform horde that was determined by one single characteristic. In Soviet times this defining characteristic had been one’s relation to the proletariat, whether one was a part of it or against it. Now it would be one’s preference in bed. To go only to gay venues implied that one accepted that they were the only places where one was allowed to be, that one would not be accepted or welcome anywhere else, like stamping around on one tiny spot of grass marked off for the “special” population. This would not only be equal to admitting that one had been defeated by oppressors, but also that one was inferior, feeble, and unable to use or get around the system.

It was in these “out of subculture” contexts that people most often expressed their disdain and ridicule towards an overzealous involvement with *tema* as they underscored that they were not only, or even primarily, lesbians. However, this should not be interpreted as a movement beyond identity politics into a queer identification, which was the interpretation Essig (1999) made when her informants refused to call themselves homosexual. The refusal of Russian gays and lesbians to accept homosexuality as a core identity in the early 1990s should not necessarily be taken as an indicator that they had moved beyond identity politics into the realm of queer. The fundamental flaw in this argument is that Essig fails to consider the historicity of queer politics as they developed out of
and in opposition to the gay and lesbian movement, which in turn was the successor of the homophile movement, the second wave of feminism and the civil rights movement in the United States (Jagose 1996). A queer position is dependent upon solid identity politics because it dismantles the categories of gender and sexuality upon which the LGBT movement developed. In Russia “femininity” and “masculinity” were firmly established and almost unquestionable concepts even if there was a certain amount of flexibility as to who could claim these traits and qualities. There was on the other hand very little sympathy for identity politics, neither on the basis of gender, as is the case of feminism, nor sexuality. A group action based on one trait was perceived to force an individual into yet another collective, a collective that ultimately exists at the expense of the freedom of the individual. This individualistic stance permeated much of the views of my informants and was partly the reason why I have not drawn on queer theory in my dissertation as it aims to create a space of freedom for individual identity by creating a category outside of the already existing categories. In a context where encompassing categories were frowned upon this approach seemed counterintuitive. Another reason was that since queer theory focuses on the problematisation and deconstruction of established categories, applying such an approach to my material seemed counterproductive as my informants used the well-established categories of masculine/feminine to negotiate and construct a variety of identities that incorporated aspects from both polarities and in this way could maintain a very open ended dialogue with themselves about their identities. And finally, the use of the general categories masculine and feminine underscored universal characteristics rather than sexual preferences and did not separate my informants discursively from the rest of Russian society, something that was a recurring theme throughout my fieldwork where avoiding lesbian places could be seen as a search for an outside, vnye, governed by freedom from control and pre-established frameworks and courses of action (Yurchak 2006).

Homophobia and class

There are also issues of homophobia and class in the uses and avoidances of gay and lesbian spaces. One of my informants, Sasha, was exceptionally strict in separating the different parts of her life. Work was work, her straight friends were her straight friends, and her lesbian friends were her lesbian friends and these three spheres were not to be mixed. One day it happened that we met in town, right after she got off from work. She announced that she was feeling tired and cranky and said resolutely that she was done thinking for the day. Besides, it was my turn to take her somewhere, that is, to choose a café or a restaurant. It so happened that we were close to Maki Kafé. I decided that it would be a good idea to show off my subcultural knowledge and take her to a gay or lesbian venue that she did not know about. I had perhaps been a little too confident that I would elicit the usual positive reaction at the encounter of
a new gay-friendly location, and was taken quite aback when I was scolded for taking her to such a venue as she was in her work clothes, i.e., black slacks and a white shirt. As we were leafing through the menu and making our orders she was self-conscious about being recognised, about not looking like she usually looks when she goes out to lesbian spaces, but most of all she was worried that she was going to be recognised by people who she might later encounter at the lesbian club Udar.

Sasha insisted on maintaining clear-cut divisions between the different spheres of her life, focusing particularly on containing and isolating the gay or lesbian interaction from all other spheres of life. Sasha did not make sense of her avoidance in terms of sexuality, but in terms of class:

I know of several lesbian women who have very high positions in successful companies. They would never allow themselves to be seen in a gay club, and never ever consider going to the Pushka. If these women go out, it is to the regular, but perhaps more upscale, clubs, and if they want to spend time in a lesbian club, I suppose that they would go to one of the closed clubs or parties.

Sasha’s strict separation of the different spheres of her life can be seen as a part of her own class aspirations. On several occasions, she had talked about how harsh life was in Moscow. She had told me how Moscow was the cultural and economic centre of Russia and how hard people had to work to make it there. It became quite clear that even though she came from St. Petersburg and not from the provinces, success still demanded a lot of work and she had set her mind on “making it” in Moscow. She wanted to get a good job, establish herself and stay in the city. Her aspirations in terms of social status were also clear: a well-paid position, an apartment, and a car. Thus in her behaviour within the subculture she was trying to emulate the behaviour of successful lesbians she had met or recognised. For instance, she did not “come out” to a woman at work—a woman she herself had read as lesbian—because she assumed that women in higher positions would never do such a thing. As to her desire to maintain a clear separation between the different spheres of her life, her logic seemed to be the following: “If successful lesbians are not open, then in order to be successful one must not mix the different parts of one’s life”.

Her logic also followed the structuring of social spaces inherited from the Soviet past, where obvious, explicit and open to everyone equalled low, and hidden and closed equalled high. To be able to enter where others were barred was a well-established sign of distinction in many cultures. This equation also led to the straightforward assumption that people who socialised in parks outside not only had nowhere else to go, but were forced to be where anyone could be and were therefore of low social status.

Another example of a less committed relationship to the lesbian subculture was the social network around Natasha. She was twenty-one years old, worked at a publishing house and had a substantial network of friends, both homosex-
ual and heterosexual who she hung out with at bars, cafés and clubs. Despite her fondness of gay-friendly places, she appeared only sporadically at explicitly lesbian spaces, preferring unofficially lesbian spaces such as Maki Kafé and other venues. Her primary critique against most lesbian clubs was that they were ugly and trashy, and so was, in her opinion, the majority of the customers. She preferred to meet with her close friends in trendy cafés and clubs that did not have any particular target clientele. It should also be noted that Natasha did not let the assumingly heteronormative rules of the space hamper her behaviour in the least. Natasha celebrated her twenty-second birthday at an ‘ordinary’ club with all of her friends, some of which were tema while others were not. Apart from eating, drinking, and dancing the night away, she spent a considerable part of the evening seducing, and eventually making out with, the girl she was in love with. By the end of the evening the couple was seriously preoccupied and oblivious to any spectators. This did not provoke any negative reactions, and not even the waiter who could not get her to tear herself away from her girlfriend long enough to pay the bill, voiced any objections. He just stood next to the couple smiling in a polite, friendly and slightly sheepish manner, as if communicating the thought, “Oh, girls in love.” The logic of the situation was, she was not rude, she was not imposing on anyone, and on the contrary she was footing quite a hefty bill; it was her party, and she could do pretty much what she wanted. This was not the only example of Natasha’s public displays of affection that I witnessed, and while Natasha was of a frank and straightforward nature that was matched by few among my informants, I seriously doubt that she was one of a kind.

Staying away from tema could be done both to protect one’s reputation, that is to hide the fact that one was a lesbian, as it was done in Sasha’s case, but also as a class distancing strategy, as in Sasha’s case. The more economically successful of my informants, and people who I only heard of as friends or friends of friends were the ones who preferred to keep their involvement with the lesbian subculture to a minimum. At the same time, more affluent members of the lesbian subculture could afford to create their own social spaces where they could spend their leisure time, even if these places often were temporary and to a certain extent clandestine. Capitalism, coupled with homophobia perhaps, not only created gay and lesbian spaces, as it was supply and demand that dictated

59 The fact that it was two young and cute girls who were making out was probably a large contributing factor to the accepting atmosphere. Had they been boys, or slightly older the situation would have been very different. The well-established girl-on-girl fantasy, prolific in straight pornography and occasionally used to promote pop groups such as t.A.T.u., can occasionally work to the advantage of “real” lesbian couples.

60 Ethnicity was never explicitly mentioned or acknowledged. Over the course of my fieldwork I met a handful of women whose features showed that they were not ethnically Russian but this was never discussed. One explanation could be that the relationship between the Russian majority and various ethnic minorities, both in Russia and in various former republics, was such a loaded topic that it was never brought up as it would have placed the person outside the circle of belonging, outside of svoi.
the availability of gay and lesbian clubs and cafés, but it also allowed people to
opt out of the gay and lesbian scene. In a way then, capitalism both enabled and
disabled the subculture. People needed gay and lesbian clubs to escape homo-
phobia, but also chose not to go to these venues because they would divulge
information they would rather keep secret. When some informants talked of
not going to lesbian places it was with a certain satisfaction with being self-
reliant and capable. The network of friends that I accessed through Natasha
was not lacking for lesbian or open-minded company; they were constantly
shifting in their preferences for places to hang out and were constantly on the
lookout for new cool cafés and bars. Just as this was a rather commonplace way
for people to spend their free time, irrespective of sexual preference or age, in
this particular case it became obvious that these kinds of networks could, and
to a large extent did, almost subvert an established subculture or at least func-
tioned quite independently from it. And in the case of post-Soviet Russia, the
lesbian subculture, with its occasional cries to unite behind the cause of liber-
tion and activism, often faintly echoed the imperatives of the Soviet party, for
everyone to unite behind the proletariat and the building of communism, or the
current party politics of a united Russia against the world, neither of which
entailed very much freedom or improvement on the quality of life of the people
in question.

Conclusions

This mapping and juxtaposition of lesbian meeting spaces in Moscow brought
together a variety of spaces that, even though dissimilar, all belonged to the
lesbian subculture. This mapping was a way to “locate—physically, and concep-
tually—social relations and social practice in space” (Low 2000:127).

Access to these spaces was in all cases based on the knowledge that they
were out there, or on an awareness that they could exist. While in the case of
KSP and the Archive, the practical knowledge of where to go or who to contact
was crucial, in the case of the unofficially gay and lesbian spaces, such as
Pushka or Maki Kafé, it was by belonging to, or knowing of, the lesbian subcul-
ture that one could recognise the distinguishing elements of the social space.
With the ability to read the visual codes of the lesbian subculture, a seemingly
random gathering of people could become a meaningful assemblage. This un-
derlines that subcultures are what Hannerz (1992a, 1996) refers to as habitats of
meaning. The sharing of codes enabled parallel social worlds to exist in the
same physical place, where some social worlds are accessible only to those in
the know or who had friends there. The ability to recognise lesbian spaces was
not only used to seek them out, but sometimes also to avoid them. It was a
recognition that while there are many lesbian women out there, and many dif-
terent spaces, any given individual did not necessarily have that much else in
common with the subculture other than sexuality. While lesbian women appre-
ciated gay and lesbian places and crowds, to restrict one’s social life only to such establishments was often seen as a little narrow-minded. There was a constant balancing between belonging to a community and remaining independent from it. In a way this was an expression of the desire to put oneself beyond the reach of powers that could hamper one’s individual freedoms. The lesbian subculture was perceived to be a collective like any other and would surely impose its rules and limitations. Belonging even to this collective was almost always maintained with a caveat. The ideal, as seen by many of my informants, was not only to increase the number of places where gays and lesbians could feel safe and interact without constraints, but also to make certain that they were not isolated from, or in opposition to, mainstream society.

Many of the lesbian social worlds continued the Soviet tradition of private-public spaces. While during Soviet times people avoided the official-public spaces and instead socialised in private spaces, during my fieldwork many different places were turned semi-private by social exclusion, like the tactics commonly employed at places like the Pushka or at the concerts of lesbian artists. These tactics created parallel worlds, where lesbian women, although in the same physical space with other people, could still be in a lesbian environment. The multilayered nature of the public and private spaces enabled people both to meet and socialise in spaces that were not explicitly lesbian but also negotiate to what degree they were a part of the subculture, in this way guarding their own choices and options.
Chapter 4: Walk the walk and talk the talk

Lenok phoned me on a rainy summer evening and asked if I was free. Lenok was a woman I met during one of my first visits to the club Udar. She was thirty-three years old, originally from Astrakhan, where her parents and her two-year-old son still lived. She had moved to Moscow on her own to try to get a job and build a life. She was renting a room quite far from the city centre, making money as a courier and a real estate agent. She would occasionally call me if she was bored or out on the town. This particular night she was having a beer in a bar in the centre of town and wanted some company. When I arrived at the bar, Lenok had already started a bottle of vodka in the company of a young girl, Kristina, whom Lenok had also met at the lesbian club Udar. Kristina was just seventeen years old. Inspired by a few shots of vodka, she shared with us a short version of her way into tema. This was a common way to describe things. *Tema* was something you found your way into, and something you could be part of, irrespective of whether you had had same-sex experiences or not.

Kristina grew up in St. Petersburg, living with her father, who was very strict but loving. In fifth grade she had a brief romance with her best friend in school. When the friend’s parents were away for a few weeks Kristina had stayed at her house and they had lived together. “We were together. Almost like a couple. Sleeping in the same bed and all.” The parents returned, however, and Kristina went home to live in her own house. After a little while her friend decided that that kind of relationship was not “her thing” and she began dating a boy at school. For a long time Kristina was heartbroken. She tried winning back the love of her best friend by proving how good she was, proving to her that their love was a good one, but the girl did not listen. Kristina was sad and depressed for a long time and in the end her friends became fed up with her depressed state and her fruitless attempts to win back a girl who clearly was not interested. To get Kristina’s mind off the lost love they took her to a place in town where there was a greater possibility that she would find someone who was interested. In St. Petersburg, there was a lesbian hangout near Kazanskii Cathedral. It was located in the very centre of town, on Nevskii Prospekt, just a few blocks away from Jekaterininskii Park, the local *pleshka*. Kazanskii Cathedral had a colonnade, which provided shelter from the occasionally bad weather and the square had a few grassy spots where people relaxed in the summer. After a while Kristina heard about a similar, but much bigger place in Moscow—the Pushka—and she made her way there. At this point she worked part-time in a jeans store and spent most of her time on the Pushka where she had
met many girls such as herself. Her father had no idea, of course, but she figured that maybe she would tell him in the future. Having found a place where she belonged, she was eager to spend a lot of time there. At this point in her story, before she became entirely incoherent with drink and passed out, Kristina turned to me and Lenok and said with urgency, “I didn’t know that I was a lesbian. I didn’t even know there was such a word. I am only now learning what it means, to be [a] lesbian.”

Assumptions that people on the street, acquaintances, or friends belonged to the lesbian subculture were not based on knowledge of intimate practices or relationships. Curiosity was awakened by small details: looks, hints, or something intangible. To become a part of the subculture was to learn how to recognise these codes and styles as well as the ability to utilise them to make yourself recognisable.

[Cultural identification is conferred through dress codes and skin colour ... but it is also conferred through language (use of patois, Asian languages gay and lesbian language such as parlare and “code names” in lesbian and gay culture), accent, sentence construction, badges, signs, walk, pose, mannerisms, “the look” etc. (Allen 1995:76).

In this chapter I will explore the various spheres of recognition, and how subtle visual and stylistic signs and linguistic cues are used to communicate a female same-sex interest or inclination. Another level of the stylistic and linguistic cues was to convey or position oneself not only as tema, but also as a particular kind of tema by articulating aspects of identity on a fluid scale of available lesbian genders.

Visibility: to see and be seen

Almost all aspects of culture have salient visual components. We rely on our sight to “read” everything from complex texts on quantum physics to the everyday assessment of the mood of our partner. “The visual is such an important component of human cultural, cognitive and perceptual processes that it can be relevant to all areas of anthropology” (Banks and Morphy 1997:2-3). The development of aesthetic preferences within a subculture (Hebdige 1988) is a way to distinguish between members of the subculture and non-members. When talking of visibility within the lesbian subculture three different aspects immediately come to mind: first, visibility to anyone, perhaps especially to people outside the subculture; second, visibility to or within the own group; and third, visibility that consists of using signs such as wearing certain discrete markers that are contextually redundant, and are therefore primarily directed at oneself. The first, to be recognised by people who are not part of the subculture, is the widest and most politically charged form of visibility. In order to make homo-
sexuality visible in this way in Moscow, one would have to wear a t-shirt with
the word “homosexual” or “lesbian” printed both front and back, and even
then some people would surely not quite believe what they read, perhaps per-
ceiving it as a kind of twisted sense of humour. Pride parades and other kinds
of public demonstrations are the best real-life examples of this kind of visibility,
where the main political motivation is to undermine the assumption that there
are no gays and lesbians just because they are not easily recognised. This kind
of visibility requires a closed semiotic circuit, a simultaneous presentation of
signifier and signified. During Pride parades and similar celebrations there is
not only a superabundance of signs such as rainbow flags, pink triangles, and
interlinked Venus or Mars signs, but there are also people to whom these signs
refer: gays, lesbians, bisexuals, etc. As gays and lesbians march with symbols
that signify homosexuality they decode these symbols and establish their mean-
ings in the vocabulary of the wider public. As the symbols gain wider circula-
tion, signs that were mainly used in “in group” communication become readable
to a wider group of people, for better or for worse. One commentator to the
news about the Moscow Pride Parade 2006 lamented that now that the
rainbow flag was ‘outed’ he would no longer be able to wear his favourite rain-
bow-coloured belt until people had forgotten what the rainbow meant. As visi-
bility increases, so does homophobic violence. During our talks, Elena Grigo-
revna mentioned more than once, that “when homosexuality was thought not
to exist, when it was invisible, it was on the one hand very difficult to live, but
on the other hand it was also safer. People would leave you alone simply be-
cause they did not know that there was such a thing as a lesbian. Now they do,
and it is not necessarily always a good thing.”

A far less politically charged and consciously directed form of visibility is
that which exists between the members of the subculture, which in this context
can also include other people who are aware of the subculture. This involves a
fundamental question: What exactly is it that is recognised or recognisable? Is it
an innate lesbian essence that somehow registers with people who are “like
you”, or is this ability to see and make yourself visible acquired through interac-
tion in a social environment that is organised around an idea of a shared sexual
identity? But this is not an either-or question. Some people remember “being
different”, and being recognised as such, from early childhood, while in other
cases one’s personal style shifts and varies with identification and stages in life.
Here I focus on the latter: proliferation of certain styles and mannerisms that
had become “signs” of belonging within this particular subculture.

The “lesbian look”

When walking down the street, a friend could notice a girl of an appropriate
appearance, nod in her direction, smile and say to me: “Oh look, tema” and that
would be that. She would have indicated that the girl was “one of ours”, a
friend. Most often this recognition was based on nothing more than general appearance, clothes, haircut, or simply: the recognition of a particular style. Visual recognition, whether while within or outside the subculture, was to a large extent based on shared stereotypes, ideas of how a typical lesbian woman was supposed to look and/or behave. At times the typecasting that occurred outside the subculture mirrored some of the stereotypes recognised within the subculture. There was a Russian joke about the “lesbian style” that simultaneously made fun of it and assured its existence:

Three women are eating ice-cream. The first sucks on the ice cream, the second licks the ice cream and the third bites the ice cream. Now guess which one is the lesbian? (pause) The one wearing military print cargo pants, a t-shirt, with a crew cut and a ring on her thumb. Who’d you think?

This joke is of course an exaggeration; far from all lesbians that I met sported crew cuts and military clothing, but it did contain a kernel of truth as it contained the idea that there was a lesbian style and that lesbians could be visually recognisable, even if far from all lesbians followed this stereotype. Subcultures are often articulated and communicated by choice of style (Hebdige 1988; Pilkington 1994; Pilkington 1996; Schofield and Schmidt 2005). Walker notes how in the late 1980s a particular style that consisted of hiking boots, jeans and untucked flannel shirts was closely associated with lesbians, if not exclusive to them (Walker 2001). In contemporary Moscow there was also a style often taken as an indication of same-sex interest, even though it did not belong to tena exclusively but was similar to a somewhat androgynous, sporty look prevalent among youth. It was summarised in the joke quoted above: pants, t-shirt, short hair, lack of make-up and a minimum of jewellery. Rather than being expressed in a very obvious style such as the “all black” uniform of goths and the torn and tattered outfits of punks, most everyday lesbian communication in Moscow used cues on a much subtler level.

A certain “look” was not always created by a presence of particular signs. In some cases it was just as much a question of their absence. A girl may not adhere strictly to the lesbian uniform described above, yet be recognised by the simple absence of lipstick, long hair, long nails and high heels. A non-traditional femininity translated into an indication of a non-traditional sexuality. Women who have opted out of the heterosexual market do not strive to maintain a traditional femininity. Jacobs (1996) notes that members of hidden groups learn to identify each other based on subtle cues. Rather than a straightforward style it was a question of being attuned to the familiar and unfamiliar which involved not just seeing what was there, but also what was not there. One of these absences would for example be the absence of social posturing to attract males.61

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61 A similar point is made by Clark, who argues that “lesbians have a long tradition of resisting dominant cultural definitions of female beauty and fashion as a way of separating themselves from heterosexual culture, politically and as a way of signalling their
To Masha the lesbian style was not so much an established or coherent aesthetic but rather an avoidance of what heterosexual males look for. "To a man a woman has to have a 'haired' and 'legs'. It is not a question of her not having hair or legs anatomically, but that they are maintained and displayed. It even doesn't matter what kind of haircut, colour or style she has, nor the shape and condition of the legs, but rather, that they are presented. Cutting your hair short, and not having a “do”, choosing pants before skirts significantly reduces the attention from the male population. Avoiding attention from one group attracts the attention of another group." Manoeuvring in this way within the performative space of femininity created a contrast between lesbian women and heterosexual women through lesbian women’s avoidance of male attention.62

Small signs

Many subcultures develop a repertoire of signs and symbols that are used as means to signal not only affinity, but also certain preferences and interests. Such sign codes are often the object of speculation and interest of the yellow press. Revealing secret codes of minorities and hidden societies has always been a way to titillate the reader and to increase sales. Occasionally, it was such publicity that spread the knowledge of the code within the subculture. Most of the signs that were used in Moscow during my stay were either colour codes or items worn in a particular way. To wear a ring on the thumb was a recent fashion; older informants told me that in earlier times the ring was to be worn on the smallest finger. As far as colours and symbols went there were several other variants and themes. голубой (light blue) was a well-established expression for male homosexuality in Russian, both within gay and lesbian circles as well as in Russian society in general where the expression “he is голубой (light blue m.)” is synonymous with “he is gay”. In analogy with this expression the colour pink (розовая) was sometimes used as code for lesbianism (rather than being a derivative of historically established symbols such as the pink triangle).63 Unlike lesbianism to other women in their subcultural group” (Clark 1993:188). See also Painter 1981.

62 The ideal of beauty that was demanded and enforced by the Soviet state was one of neatness, practicality and modesty, which meant no excess, extravagance or even slightest embellishment. During Soviet times women strived to be beautiful outside of the Soviet mould. This was to be something other, something more, than a worker and a builder of communism. To acquire cosmetics and fashionable clothing during this period required a considerable effort, but it was an effort that benefitted the individual and not the collective or the party and was therefore a statement of existential independence. For more on beauty and cosmetics in Russia and the Soviet Union, see Azhgikhina and Goscio 1996.

63 I base this conclusion on the fact that light blue is a well established expression while the triangle is seldom used as an everyday symbol or reference, even though it does come up in the names of organisations, such as the Trigolnik that was founded by Debrinskaia in the 1990s.
the expression *goluboi, rozavaia* was rarely used as a descriptor of identity and the expression “she is *rozavaia*” was much less common than the expression “he is *goluboi*”. While the colour was occasionally used in symbols such as pink triangles, it was far more common in names, such as the club Pink Fly, the Internet site Pinkstar, and in jokes.

Early in my fieldwork, I observed that small signs, symbols and colour codes were widely appreciated: a Venus sign as a pendant on the mobile phone, a business suit with a subtle pink pinstripe worn to the office, rainbow-coloured socks. These occasionally tiny details were shown off and complemented. Sometimes their visibility was scrutinised in relation to different audiences in different settings, such as colleagues at work or strangers in the street. Tatiana and Maria, a couple I was acquainted with, had just finished a renovation of their apartment and they had painted their bedroom pink. A girl who visited them could not help but smile when she recounted her first tour of the new apartment. “When I entered the bedroom I exclaimed, ‘it’s obvious that two lesbians live here, the bedroom is pink!’” Everybody laughed and people began to enumerate the different “lesbian” things they had in their possession. Tatiana, a psychologist, who worked in a respectable firm, proudly described a pink coffee mug with a rainbow that she had at home. Jokingly, she proposed that she should take it to work and see how people would react. She liked her mug and was apparently a little proud to have one but at the same time she did consider it a risk. Tatiana was unsure of how widely known the symbolism was, who would understand and how they would react. Her partner Maria suggested that if someone started to ask questions or react in the wrong way she could always pretend that it was just a cute coffee mug. While Tatiana did like the idea of taking her favourite coffee mug to work, she still wanted to be able to control the extent of her own visibility, and have the choice to be visible to some people but not others. As she opened up the possibility to be recognised as a lesbian, there was a need to create paths of retreat since the visibility could also entail unpleasant consequences.

At the time of my fieldwork, the rainbow flag had just made its way into the vocabulary of Russian gay and lesbian symbolism and had cropped up among accessories such as key chains, scarves, pins, jewellery and hats. Yet it had not become a universally recognised symbol within the subculture itself. On several occasions I witnessed how people revealed the “new” symbol to friends and acquaintances, saying that the rainbow is “our” sign. Many informants took pride in being “in the know”, that is, being so well-versed in the subculture that they could not be considered newcomers. They seemed to enjoy having another “secret” sign to share. A considerable part of what people recognised as *tema* images around them were not necessarily produced with that intention. When the aesthetic of a particular image converged with the subcultural aesthetic, a woman with few explicit markers of femininity, i.e., the “do” (as in elaborately styled hair and make-up) or “legs”, or a revealing outfit, they could easily be interpreted as being *tema*. Pointing to a Samsung ad, featuring a dark-haired girl
in black cargo pants and a black tank top, Natasha recounted that her friend in a media and publishing company had in fact verified that this ad was done by “one of ours”, though not intentionally catering to the subculture. Yet the general image of the woman depicted was close enough to one of the subcultural styles. Images could also be interpreted on purely thematic cues, as when Botsman insisted that one of the ad signs in the Metro had a clear thematic connection.

Two young and beautiful women in Metro uniforms were standing next to each other and one of them had a hand on the other woman’s shoulders. The camaraderie of co-workers was reinterpreted into female friendship. There are many images that, while not necessarily intended to depict or refer to lesbian relationships, can be read as such (Clark 1993:194). This form of resorting to images that are not intentionally or explicitly lesbian should not be taken only as a proof of the invisibility of lesbians in the Russian media. This should rather be taken to underline the multivocality (Turner 1995 [1969]) of signs and images and the act of recognition practiced beyond the immediate sphere within the subculture. Also, a firm establishment of the explicitly lesbian images would, after all, be the establishment of only one or a few images.
That the rainbow flag had not yet been established as a sign of homosexuality meant that finding and acquiring items that incorporated the rainbow was often considered a special feat. This is not to say that items that were produced as LGBT symbols were less appreciated, but items that unintentionally incorporated gay and lesbian symbols were perhaps even more appreciated, as if this unintended inclusion of homosexuality mirrored a reality where gays and lesbians existed in Russian society despite the official standpoint that they did not, or should not, exist at all. Finding unintended gay or lesbian symbols sometimes evoked a gleeful, even secretly triumphant joy. “They don’t know it, they may be convinced of the contrary, but we’re here.” Even though the rainbow flag was not a widely recognised sign of gay pride, recognition could sometimes crop up at unexpected moments. It was and is, of course, widely recognised in the West.

**Unexpected recognition**

Sometime during the late fall 2005, I walked into the fruit and vegetable stand where I habitually made my purchases. The vendors in this particular stall were all young boys in their early twenties or younger. As I became a regular customer we began to engage in amicable banter, and sometimes they tried to guess what I would buy and then scold me because I was eating too little, which was a local variant of flirting. In the beginning of October, the temperature had dropped and I was wearing my leather coat with a rainbow triangle on its lapel, something I had quite forgotten about. Occasionally some friend or informant
noticed and commented upon it, but no one else seemed to see it. At one point I noticed that the young man who was wrapping up my purchases fixed me with quite a serious stare. His gaze went back and forth between my lapel and my face. When he asked me, “What does it mean?” I decided to be coy and play the fool. “What does what mean?” I asked. “That”, he said and looked at the triangle. “Are you referring to the pin or to the fact that I’m wearing it?” It turned out that he did know. He had another customer who was “like that.” His face was quite serious, and as he handed me my change he said in a grave voice that he would not tell. To be honest I was not at all prepared for the fact that the sign could be read in this situation, especially not by a person who was there on semi-legal conditions and not at all part of a strata or group that I assumed to be particularly aware of the internationally recognised symbols of the gay community. Most of the time, the triangle on my lapel remained unnoticed by “outsiders”, while “insiders” took pride in recognising it and telling others. But just as there are situations for sharing, there are also times when you do not tell.

Signs are inclusive to those who can read them while they exclude those who cannot. A wink, for instance, can say: “I know that you know and you know that I know and we both know that they do not.” A friend of mine recognised another woman at work whom she suspected to be tema. They were shooting footage for a television programme outdoors and it was expected to rain. As it began to drizzle, someone brought out the plastic raincoats that had been bought for this eventuality. One of the raincoats happened to be pink and as a joke my friend offered the woman she thought could be gay this particular coat, suggesting “Maybe the pink?” The immediate answer was “Oh no, not the pink!” and they both laughed. The rest of the crew did not get the joke, and some crewmembers began asking what the joke was about. The women just kept laughing, saying “Nothing”, well aware that there was something. In this context “pink” served as a password that affirmed the shared knowledge of a context where the colour holds a particular significance. The women may have read each other correctly from the very start, but the short interaction affirmed their interpretations and solidified it. It also effectively excluded those who did not know, reversing the exclusionary tactics of heterosexual society. The colleagues who asked about the colour were not told its significance, which could have been done without implicating the identity of the women, but telling would let other people in on the secret. The use of symbols can, in this sense, be used to exclude mainstream society from the homosexual space, a sort of a taunt, making explicit something that the ignorant, straight person was obviously unable to see. This is the second, and far more quotidian, form of visibil-

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64 The overwhelming part of the people who cleaned the streets, worked at construction sites and the various markets in Moscow were guest workers from the Caucasus region. They provided cheap labour but lived in under somewhat murky conditions and were often subject to public scorn and institutional violence.
ity: making yourself visible to “one’s own kind,” to be able to recognise and be recognised by those who are “like oneself.”

Signs are of various forms and origins. The significance of the colour pink was a derivative from “light blue”, a well-established Russian idiom, but lesbian signs could come from a variety of sources. During my fieldwork the television show The L Word premiered on Russian television and, perhaps more importantly, became available in pirated DVDs and on the Internet. An acquaintance told me of a situation very similar to the one about the pink raincoat. A group of lesbian friends were attending an evening class of photography where the instructor was strongly suspected to be lesbian as well. Neither she nor they made any advances to clarify the situation, avoiding the subject, almost like a game, waiting to see who would give in first. One day the instructor’s phone rang and the puzzle was instantly solved: her ringtone happened to be the theme tune of the television show The L Word. These signs need not be only images or sounds. They can also be linguistic. Speech and signs, such as certain topics of conversation and certain words that were used both within heterosexual and gay and lesbian culture but held a specific coded meaning in the latter, enabled gays and lesbians to communicate in ways that were unintelligible to the people around them (Chauncey 1997:21).

The third kind of visibility was the visibility to the self. Just as much as signs are directed outwards for others to see, they are directed back at ourselves, we reveal ourselves, we see ourselves and we see ourselves be seen. Sasha, the woman who scolded me for taking her to a gay venue when she was wearing her work outfit, had, on a later occasion, the chance to demonstrate her “lesbian outfit.” We had made plans to go to Udar, and she promised that I would have the chance to see her alter ego, the “silly macho”, as she jokingly called it. Interestingly enough, the difference was not that great, at least not as great as she had made it out to be. She did wear her hair differently, more spiky, and she did wear a ring on her thumb, but that about summed up her transformation into her “lesbian persona.” Since we were already headed for a lesbian space, she would by her mere presence be assumed to be a part of the subculture. In this way the visual signs directed at other people were superfluous, she chose to wear these little items of signification as a sign to herself. A sign that meant that she was not in an everyday setting and not her “working self” but in a lesbian setting, for which she had transformed herself appropriately. The fact that she as a matter of course found her way to a well-hidden, sparsely advertised lesbian club immediately established her belonging to the place. I interpret this use of signs in situations where they are largely redundant as primarily a performance to oneself, living out, being what one does not dare to be in ordinary circumstances. The small signs were a part of her performance of her lesbian self, props that helped her distinguish between the different spheres of her life. It was apparent that Sasha had very firm ideas of what was appropriate and ensured her “in place-ness.”
The Gaze: where the eyes roam

When my informants told me of ‘tells’ and signs, of how to see, they still were not able to convey the tacit knowledge of how they were seeing. “This type of knowledge is not only transmitted and acquired non-linguistically, it is stored non-linguistically as well . . . When put into language, the nature of this knowledge is transformed so that the resulting information only has a distant relationship to the knowledge referred to” (Lindquist 1995:7-8). A part of the socialisation into the field is to explore this knowledge through participant observation and trial and error until one can acquire some of the same cognitive models.

In almost all conversations about recognition, people came to the final and often most significant sign: the gaze. When all other factors proved inconclusive or perhaps showed nothing at all, it was how people looked at the world, what caught their interest and how they met your gaze that revealed if they were “one of ours” or not. A woman may be dressed like tema and still not be tema, just like a woman may be dressed just like every other girl, but still not be actually like every other girl. Healey notes that, already at the beginning of the twentieth century, “the significant glance” was “the most widely acknowledged form of discreet self proclamation” (Healey 2001:37). Many of my informants supported this. During one of our long talks about the particularities of gay and lesbian culture, Lena Kidanova noted that paying attention to where people look could be quite revealing. “A straight woman would pay attention to men around her, but if a girl pays attention to other girls, well, that’s a different story, isn’t it?” “Where the eyes roam” was an important sign of recognition that went beyond any items of dress or presence of gay or lesbian symbols (Jacobs 1996 see also Shelp 2002). Another telling “sign” was not only looking, but also returning the gaze. Nicholas (2004) distinguishes between different kinds of communicative gazes: the direct stare, a prolonged eye contact which lasts longer than the ordinary eye contact with strangers, and the broken gaze where eye contact is broken and re-established as a recognition that there was a connection. Kidanova also told me that being seen and recognised was quite telling too, by the way you meet a person’s gaze. “Sometimes when I’m on the Metro, or somewhere, I catch a gaze that is so frank that I almost blush, it is quite amazing. It can be a very ‘straight-looking’ girl, frills, trinkets, make-up and heels, but then she gives me a look, and everything becomes obvious.”

This can be contrasted with the debates on femme-visibility that have been prominent in gay and lesbian subcultures in the Unites States, and to a certain extent gay and lesbian studies. Walker (2001) notes that as a feminine woman was mistaken for straight not only by heterosexuals, but also met with suspicion from other lesbians, and that she felt marginalised within the lesbian community because of her preference for a feminine style. In Western gay and lesbian

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This kind of recognition is not in any way unique to lesbian or homosexual subcultures for that matter, but is rather a form of communication that develops within stigmatised or marginalised groups that can pass for the non-stigmatised majority.
culture explicit visibility is a highly esteemed quality, especially because it is perceived to be the antidote to being closeted and ashamed of your sexuality or identity. In this cultural context a feminine style is mistaken for attempts to pass for straight, and by extension being closeted and ashamed or not a real lesbian. In the lesbian subculture in Moscow, however, there was no premium on being visible and therefore immediately recognisable, therefore there was no particular stigma attached to being a feminine lesbian and there was an agreement on the fact that a woman interested in women could look exactly like a straight woman.

**Learning how to see**

The ability to see and recognise what you were looking for was a sense that became honed with time, and it was an integral part of socialisation into the subculture. Within American and other English-speaking gay and lesbian communities, the ability to identify other gays and lesbians on sight is referred to as “gaydar” (Shelp 2002; Nicholas 2004). Visual recognition and communication is an integral part of culture, especially so in a context where there is tension, even hostility, in social interaction. In Northern Ireland the concept “telling” refers to the “reading of the bodies of strangers to tell whether they are Catholic or Protestant” (Kelleher 2003:12). Just like “gaydar” is about seeing and being seen, telling is both about telling who you are and interpreting others.

Learning to see was a continuous and gradual process that was not only a part of my socialisation into the field, but also a part of my own development as a researcher. As Anna Grimshaw puts it, “fieldwork ‘is not just about observing the world around oneself. It involves learning to see in a visionary sense . . . which may transform the fieldworker from a mere enquirer or observer into a seer’” (Grimshaw 2001: 53). One evening I was asked to demonstrate this ability at a gay club. The young gay man who had taken me there was fascinated with the idea that one could “recognise” a lesbian and he wanted to know if I could do this. His own ability to recognise other gays remained rather “natural” and unquestioned, however. We were at Dushi Telo, one of the larger gay clubs, which had a dubious reputation. As we walked around on ‘dyke alert’ my friend was soon bored. Every time a girl walked by he pulled my arm or my shirt and hissed “What about her?” into my ear, barely able to contain his curiosity. Almost all the girls at the club seemed to have come there with their gay male friends, ‘girlfriends’, to have a “girl’s night out.” Long after my friend had tired of the “spot the dyke”-game I noticed one girl conspicuously moping at the edge of the dance floor. She was not wearing a tight, revealing or spectacular outfit, no elaborate hairdo and no purse. She was wearing a t-shirt, her hair was short and she had no visible make-up. It felt like I had found “the token

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From a generalised feminist perspective dressing can be interpreted as objectifying oneself before the male gaze and being subservient to men.

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124
lesbian” in the club. I was, of course, not too keen to check whether I had been correct in my assumptions; after all, I had plenty of informants whom I would not have guessed correctly about. Nor was checking particularly interesting to my companion, since for him it was the endeavour itself that was entertaining—that I could see what to him was invisible.

Even though most gays and lesbians I met in the field considered “gaydar” to be a trait that remained within the subculture, it could be present outside the subculture where this ability could also be acquired quite unconsciously and without intent. One of my acquaintances, Misha, had a female friend, Irina, who was quite obnoxious, rowdy and masculine-looking, and apart from her he had no other contact with either the gay or the lesbian subculture. One night we were talking about the topic “funny things that happen on the subway” and he recounted how he had, by coincidence, been sitting opposite a group of girls and suddenly a thought had struck him: “Now why wasn’t Irina in that group”. Misha found this recognition quite amusing, and he was amazed that he had been able to see something that he usually did not recognise, or even think about. Through the interaction with his lesbian friend, and occasionally some of her friends, he had become attuned to the ‘lesbian aesthetic’ and was now able to recognise it. “A given bodily text can convey its intended meaning only if its readers read it in the way the author requires. ‘Family resemblances’ can only be spotted by those who know the ‘family’” (Holliday 1999:486). Codes and communicative practices develop within the subculture as a sphere of social interaction, and it is the social interaction within this sphere that enables people to acquire this knowledge.

(Mis)Recognition and identity

To recognise is to interpret. Actions and items of clothing or jewellery are interpreted as signs of a gay or lesbian identity. Of course, the signs can be misread. “Gaydar” can be a device not only for identification but also identity attribution (Nicholas 2004:65). Irrespective of whether a woman was lesbian or not, she could be ascribed lesbian status if she was perceived to be using lesbian signs. On the other end of the continuum, there were also people who were recognised as gay long before they entered the subculture. Olga Krauze came into the subculture at the age of twenty-five by a chance encounter in the Metro. She had been aware of her own attraction to women since early childhood. “I had no idea that there were others like me. I lived with my girlfriend, that is true, but I thought that I was alone like that. Then one day, I was on the Metro and a woman came up to me and said ‘I know who you are.’ She didn’t mean my name or any such thing, but that she knew my kind and others like me.” The journalist David Tuller (1996) recounts his despair when he, as a young boy, was recognised by other gay men long before he was willing to admit his sexual preference even to himself.
These two vignettes indicate that there may be something that is not necessarily acquired or learned, something that can be recognised by others before it is consciously known. This is not necessarily a question of an ‘essence’ but a matter of cues that can only be recognised by those who know what to look for. Just as some women can be visible as lesbians without having had any contact whatsoever with the subculture, there are also women who are mistaken as lesbians because of their style or behaviour is similar to the established styles within the subculture. Natasha told me that when she first saw her boss, she was sure that the woman was gay. “We were on some photo shoot out in the woods. She had recently shaved her head, and her hair was just growing back, she was wearing cargo pants and with the piercings and tattoos. . . I just thought, hmmmm, tema. Later I found out that I was wrong, that she had a boyfriend and everything.” Such misrecognition shows that some of the behaviours and signs that are considered to belong to the lesbian subculture are not restricted to it exclusively.

Wordplay: blurring gender with words

One evening Alena, one of the regular visitors at the Archive, was sitting in the kitchen at the Archive together with Elena Grigorievna, discussing her work and her poetry.67 She had given some of her poetry to her singing instructor. She had worried about how the teacher would react to some of the content, but the teacher had rather matter-of-factly noted that it was strange that Alena occasionally wrote in the masculine, saying nothing more. When I asked her why she did so, she fell silent for a while, and then she simply said that it was because she thought that the masculine verbs were more distinct than their feminine counterparts. “They feel different, more clear, more distinct.” That was all she had to say on the matter.

On another occasion, a hot sunny evening in the middle of summer, Elena Grigorievna expected the Archive to be slow, since many would probably prefer to be outside in a shady park. However, the evening was not uneventful. The young, and very beautiful, American PhD student Anastasia from San Francisco was among the first visitors to the Archive that evening and immediately became the centre of attention. She spent a good while talking (actually, mostly listening) to Botsman while the latter elaborated on her dream organisation, a lesbian community centre where there would be regular poetry readings, theatre classes and all sorts of activities open to anyone willing to join.68 After

67 Alena was in her mid twenties, I did not get to know her that well, all I knew was that she worked with computers, had a child and liked to read and write poetry.
68 In this idea Botsman was without a doubt influenced by the story of the LGBT centre in San Francisco that Marina from Labrys Sbp had told about at the conference Oma+Ona in November 2003. But there may have been an emulation of the Houses of Culture from Soviet times.
spending some time with Botsman and Elena Grigorievna, Anastasia retreated to the kitchen. Once we were alone, she cautiously asked me if Botsman was a transsexual, and whether s/he preferred to be addressed with 'he' or 'she'. Being from San Francisco she was well aware that this was a sensitive subject, and that the wrong pronoun could be both hurtful and offensive. Anastasia’s question was based on how Botsman looked, spoke and acted: in pants and a striped navy shirt, talking loudly and gesticulating. From the point of view of United States identity politics, particularly relating to transsexuality, Botsman could be either a woman wanting to be a man, or a man who wanted to be a woman. My answer was that with Botsman any gender would do. She was a woman and identified herself as a lesbian, but when it came to pronouns it did not really matter. Some people told me that she liked to be called ‘he’, and other people claimed the opposite. I myself had heard both pronouns used, both in direct and indirect speech, without any sour faces or remarks. Anyone who had spent time with Botsman was aware of the fact that she did not see herself as a man or a transsexual, but as a woman and a lesbian and that she was strongly opposed to any male presence at her club KSP and strongly disliked mixed gay and lesbian venues.

Besides the aesthetics there may be several different motivations for switching grammatical gender. In Anastasia’s entirely logical line of reasoning, a switch in grammatical gender was connected to gender identification. Den, a female-to-male transsexual, told me that until he had accepted that he really wanted to be a man he had avoided gendered constructions altogether and used passive constructions as far as possible. Periodically, when he was trying to live like a “normal person”, he had forced himself to refer to himself in the feminine, but even then the masculine would occasionally slip through. Only when he finally decided that he wanted to change his sex, did he irrevocably switch to the masculine. This was experienced both as an achievement and as a relief. The change of grammatical gender was a struggle and a process with deep psychological roots. To Den it was not a question of poetry or taste, but a fundamental aspect of his identity; the masculine and the feminine grammatical genders were not an approximation to the metaphysical feminine or masculine aspects, but a pivotal part of his flesh and blood, tipping the scales one way or the other. In that situation grammatical gender was neither a joke nor a trope. It was a part of constructing an identity and searching for ways of expression. As I mentioned earlier, in order to understand the uses of grammaticalised gender as a communicative form, as it was used by both Botsman and Alena, it is nec-

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69 This is not to say that the correct gender is not a sensitive subject when the person in question is a transsexual.  
70 Instead of saying “I bought milk today” (segodnia ia kupil/a moloko’) and be forced to pick a gender, he said, “today milk was successfully bought” (“segodnia udalos kupit moloko’”). If practiced throughout this would be quite cumbersome in any language, but it solved the immediate problem of choosing a gender.
essary to look at what one can express with a switch of grammatical gender, both within the lesbian world as well as outside of it.

**Gender in the Russian language**

Switching to the masculine in reference to a female is not out of the ordinary in Russian. Switching gender occurs in everyday speech of people who have no relationship whatsoever to the gay and lesbian community. I have occasionally been referred to in the masculine, long before I entered the lesbian subculture in Moscow. In order to untangle the many different possible meanings of a grammatical gender switch, let me say a few words about gender switch in the Russian language in general. First of all, Russian has a highly grammaticalised gender, which means that it has a “pervasive obligatory use of gender agreement with antecedents . . . means that grammatical gender . . . is expressed many times throughout a text” (Doleschal and Schmid 2001:257). This means that gendered constructions prevail both in first person, second person and third person constructions. While in English one is almost forced to speak in third person, as in “she is always late,” or actually call someone a woman, as in “hey girlfriend,” in order to express gender, this is not necessary in Russian where a gender switch can be done in the first person through verbs and suffixes.

Like in many other languages, in Russian there is a dominance of the masculine. Alena’s explanation of her use of the masculine is supported by the fact that in Russian “the masculine base is semantically gender neutral” while the feminine is not (Doleschal and Schmid 2001:259; a similar point is made about French by Livia 1997). This is also manifest in professional nouns, such as doctor, professor, architect, most of which are in the masculine only. French feminists have attempted a feminisation of the French language by introducing feminine variants of masculine professions as a way to mend the dominance of the grammatical masculine. However, this tactic is open to the risk that the introduced feminine word becomes a “lesser” variant of the proper word. “In Russian high prestige is connected with masculinity (in a social sense), therefore female counterparts of personal nouns denoting prestigious occupations are avoided. When addressed or referred to by a corresponding feminine form, women feel downgraded or not treated seriously” (Doleschal and Schmid 2001:260). Their feminised versions are usually ridiculing or in some other way diminishing. The feminine gender is, in fact, often used in a derogatory manner.

The application of the masculine gender to a feminine subject should not automatically be seen as a transgressive or subversive practice. While it does

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71 On the relationship between poet and poetessa see Boym 1993. Even though that strict opposition is no longer as valid, it illustrates very well the different meanings of a feminine variant of a profession.
bend the established rules for language, it in no way undermines the gendered presuppositions or values implicit in language. First of all there are instances where the Russian language creates an automatic gender-switch especially since the relation between grammatical gender and referential gender are such that masculine personal nouns denote males, but may also denote females, while female personal nouns can never refer to males. There is therefore a considerable difference between purely grammatical gender switches, which are not used to communicate any meaning, and the intentional gender switch of pronouns, adjectives and verbs, where the switch is intentional and therefore carries information. There is a whole range of possibilities and nuances.

Uses of gender-switch

Terms of endearment present a good way to exemplify the fluidity and the different degrees of the shifts of grammatical gender. For example, a woman can, as a term of endearment, say “my little fish” (moia rybka) to her husband or boyfriend. While the gender of the fish is not specified, “fish” in Russian is grammatically feminine and thus indirectly feminises the husband or boyfriend. Since this incongruity of grammatical and real gender is a consequence of the grammatical gender of the word ‘fish’, it can be assumed not to carry any meaning. A linguistic practice that is closer to an intentional gender switch is the use of the masculine in diminutive form. Saying malysh (little one) in the masculine to a girl, while not very common, is not all that strange. Asking a woman, “Are you hungry little one?” (Malysh [m] ty golodnaia? [f]) would also slip by rather unnoticed. Such terms of endearment would hardly be categorised as gender reversal, but they are out of the ordinary. It is possible to underscore this gender switch by forming a completely masculine sentence, using both a masculine noun, malysh rather than malyshka, and a masculine verb, golodnyi rather than golodnaia which would complete the sentence as an address to a masculine subject. Such a considerable revision of gender would stand out from established language practices.

On the other hand, a masculine address to a woman can also be done as a way of implying that she is behaving in an unfeminine or mannish manner, critiquing her femininity. In the same vein men can be called feminine as a form of insult. Imperatives such as, “Oh, come on girls! Can’t you run any faster?” are not completely out of the question in homosocial contexts such as sports or the military. Female-referential derogatory terms such as ‘slut’ (blyad’) or ‘bitch’ (suka) are intended as especially insulting since they imply that the man is weak like a woman (James 1998:411). Elena Grigorievna recalled that at the end of the nineteenth century, the phrase “I’m a fool (f)” (ia takaia dura) was a common expression for men who wanted to admit that they had been not only stupid but also exceptionally stupid. In this case the switch implicitly mirrors and reiterates a strictly gendered world view, where men are strong and capable and women are silly and weak. A switch to the masculine gender is thus often
perceived as underscoring neutrality and clarity while a switch to the feminine is derogatory, making the person appear silly and feeble. In these cases the gender of the word adds to the meaning of the statement: men are not only stupid, they are stupid like women, which is supposedly worse.

Gay and lesbian language

The search for a “gay accent” or “gayspeak” has been a popular, but often criticised, research topic in gay and lesbian studies as well as in queer linguistics (Livia and Hall 1997; Kulick 2000; Cameron and Kulick 2003; Campbell-Kibler et al. 2002). It has been pointed out that some of the interest in exploring “gay speech” may be based on fundamentally flawed assumptions. When people communicate within one community, in this case the gay and lesbian subculture, they often communicate across the boundaries of other communities such as class, age, and ethnic background (Barrett 1997). The idea of gay or lesbian speech implies that sexuality, or rather homosexuality, would have a greater influence on individual language than gender, class and race. Since there are no corresponding theories that would make “straight” people linguistically recognisable, the connections between language and sexuality are more complex than one of direct correspondence. The first linguistic studies of gay and lesbian subcultures were primarily focused on vocabulary and slang, shifting focus to phonetic markers that set the homosexual apart from the ‘normal’ person. Since the 1990s the interest has shifted from the assumption of a more or less stable gay and lesbian language connected to a sexual identity, to an interest in how language is used to communicate sexuality in general, and gay and lesbian sexuality specifically (Harvey and Shalom 1997; Cameron and Kulick 2003).

Switching grammatical gender was a quite common tactic among homosexual men in Russia and was not necessarily restricted to transsexuals, female impersonators and drag queens (Newton 1972) or transsexuals (Livia 1997). In my own experience it was in certain contexts quite common among homosexual men to refer to themselves and to each other in the feminine gender, and to use feminine pronouns and feminine intonations.\(^{72}\) Within the lesbian community the gender switches are much less frequent. However, during my stay in Moscow, I heard girls and women speak of themselves in the masculine gender in many different contexts. While the masculine form is easily interpreted as generic, in this way perhaps obscuring the intent to communicate masculinity or a lesbian identity (Livia 1997), the fact that a statement can be taken for generic by some listeners does not preclude the possibility that it may be recognised by other listeners as a linguistic cue. Bucholtz and Hall underline that while lesbians do not have their own language, “language users both draw on and create

\(^{72}\) Anna Livia has noted that English-speaking gay men often use the female pronoun ‘she’ when referring to other gay men (Livia 1997:359). It should be noted that a self-referential gender switch is not as easily accomplished in English as it is in Russian.
conventionalised associations between linguistic form and social meaning to construct their own and others' identities” (Bucholtz and Hall 2004:478). This point is reiterated by Queen who underscores that it is through the “re-contextualisation and re-appropriation of particular features found in various styles that lesbians create new conventionalised meanings and associations and, thus, a unique lesbian language” (Queen 1997:242).

Switching gender, switching identity

One evening just after the newly printed copies of the Anthology of Lesbian Prose (2006) had been delivered to the Archive and some of the authors were there, I decided to return to the topic of gender switching: Why and when do girls, or people in general, switch gender? I recounted to those listening the explanation spontaneously given by Alena, that masculine expressions were shorter and simpler. I added that I had actually measured and compared them and found that the masculine form was not always shorter, and thus not necessarily a more economic way to speak. Alena’s answer had explained some uses but far from all. Elena Grigorievna gave me a little smile and said that Alena may have answered more slyly than truthfully. Switching gender was a well-known literary tactic of masking lesbian passion in poetry; many female Silver Age poets, such as Tsvetaeva and Parnok, both of whom wrote love poetry addressed to women, used a male voice. Boym calls this gender switch “aesthetic misogyny”, explaining that it is “a prejudice against writing in the feminine that structures our whole aesthetic value system and therefore perpetuates a certain understanding of gender and sexuality” where the active person always needs to be masculine (Boym 1993:172).

During the conversation at the Archive Elena Grigorievna further elaborated on the links between linguistic and social patriarchy. “Women who have grown up in a very patriarchal and misogynist society and have seen the advantage of being male, may consider it advantageous to position themselves closer to the male identity”. Women who achieved success in work and established a career often adopted masculine intonations, speech patterns and gestures to correspond to their position. In revolutionary Russia, women who dressed in men’s clothes and took on masculine attitudes of resolute agency and strength were not considered problematic, but looked upon as heroes of the revolution, women of the new society (Healey 2001). Using the masculine in reference to

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73 Burgin presents a similar interpretation when she speaks of the work of Parnok who does not adopt a masculine persona to avoid being labeled a “female lyricist” (Burgin 1993:203).

74 Such practices of masculinisation were problematised in the 1970s. The leading lady in Riazanov’s comedy Office Romance (Sluzhebnyi Roman) is a director of a big organisation. She wears practical clothes and big, sensible but completely unfitting glasses. Her lack of family, children, feminine finesse and style are portrayed as sad and somewhat pathetic. As it often goes in romantic comedies, she falls in love and restores her femininity through the attention of a male colleague.
yourself did not necessarily mean wanting to be a man or like a man, but rather a refusal to be a certain kind of woman, to take on the traditional feminine role, or to be silly, weak and in need of protection.

In many ways the inversion of grammatical gender was similar to other gendered attributes, such as clothes, where a balance needed to be maintained when combining masculine and feminine attributes in dress and style. Often masculine attributes or styles were used to create a distance from the problematic sides of femininity, especially assumed negative traits such as weakness, submissiveness and foolishness. In business and other male-dominated spheres, women always had to prove their worth, both in word and deed. They had to prove that they could adapt to and perform in such contexts. One of the ways to distance oneself from femininity was by appropriating masculine attributes and styles of dress (McDowell 1995). But if you borrowed too much, you transgressed the boundaries and put yourself at risk of being ‘mannish.’ While decisiveness, rationality and clarity were seen as masculine qualities, women were not completely precluded from them. In assigning a masculine verb or pronoun or adjective to a feminine subject, the established categories of both the masculine and the feminine were stretched. At the same time the very same appropriation maintained the division. It reproduced the idea that decisiveness, resoluteness and neutrality were actually male qualities and that to hold them or display them, women had to become a little bit masculine. If you overdid it, you became a challenge to the men around you instead of just proving that you were not weak, submissive and intuitive. A balance had to be maintained between distancing oneself from certain kinds of femininity and actually taking on masculinity. But, men had much less freedom with language. Feminine traits, mannerisms, intonations and attributes branded and stigmatised men, linking them to the very same feminine traits that women tried to avoid by switching to the masculine.

One of the authors featured in the recently published Anthology of Lesbian Prose overheard the conversation about switching linguistic gender and decided to join. According to her, she used predominantly masculine constructions in reference to herself, even though I did not particularly notice this while she was talking to Elena Grigorievna. The girl had thought about the subject quite a lot and reached the conclusion that she felt like an individual of the intermediate sex, neither man nor woman. Even though she could, theoretically, use the neutral grammatical gender ‘it’ (ono), she found this a bit strange. To her, the masculine was far easier to use and far more neutral than the feminine. She told me about a friend who spoke of herself in the masculine almost automatically. This had become so natural to her that she quite frequently addressed women around her in the masculine, which many found quite offensive. Another of the girl’s friends, this time a young man, consistently used the grammatical neutral in reference to himself, which she, as she had said earlier, found a bit strange. Another young women present who had overheard the entire conversation noted later that among “ordinary people” such practices would probably sound
strange and provocative. She also noted that consistent gender switches could only be used freely in informal situations or in small group settings where one did not encounter superiors. In other contexts they might seem strange and really mark people off as different. Within her group of friends, language, and grammatical gender in particular, played a central role in the construction of identity. The gendered aspects of language articulated the relationship to masculinity and femininity, the two poles between which identity was negotiated.

Language, sexuality and desire
I was wandering about at the Pushka one evening when I happened to notice Oksana, whom I had never seen at the Pushka before. She was talking to some girls. When she saw me she walked over and said hello. We had barely exchanged the initial pleasantries when she began talking at a rapid pace, explaining how annoyed she was. Apparently some sixteen-year-old girls had been quite persistent in their interest in her. Beside their insulting assumption that she would be interested in a “child” (Oksana’s oldest daughter was thirteen) they angered her by insisting on calling her ‘he’ even though she had corrected them several times. “I know that I don’t look all that feminine right now”, she said referring to her robust frame, t-shirt and pants, short hair and complete absence of make-up. “But men always were, and still are attracted to me, no matter what kind of style I have. I just feel like dressing like this right now. The girls simply categorised me as a butch straight away, without even talking to me, and kept calling me ‘he’ even when I asked them not to. These young girls were probably interested in an experienced, active lover”, she reasoned. “If they want to experiment and to play lesbians for a little while, well that’s fine by me, but why can’t they find someone of their own age?” She continued raging on the subject for a while until she accidentally dropped her mobile into a puddle and had something else that she could be annoyed with for a while.

The incident had upset Oksana for many different reasons. The label butch comes not only with a stereotype of style and social codes but was often marked linguistically by use of the masculine gender. VolgaVolga calls this “a little weakness that we should forgive them” (meaning butches). This not only exemplifies the way people use gender switches in relationship to gender, but also in connection to the constellation of gendered roles within relationships and desire. In this situation the gender switch placed Oksana not only in the masculine of the masculine/feminine dichotomy of mainstream culture but also in the butch or aktif categories within the lesbian subculture. The butch and aktif were perceived to be especially common in low-status circles such as the Pushka, where this incident took place. Oksana felt that being referred to in the

75 Taken from “From the lives of butches and femmes: Classification of lesbians. Reading not recommended for people without a sense of humour.”
http://www.lesbiru.com/style/butch_klava.html (Russian only)
masculine gender by the young girls not only reduced her to the butch stereotype, which she had no intention to accept, but also placed her as the aktif/butch party in a sexual script, where the girls positioned themselves as klava/fem. Implicitly or not, she was confronted with a request for a certain type of sexual relationship with girls that she saw as too young for such interaction. The girls on the other hand were expressing not only the desire to be seen as a particular kind of person, but also proposing a specific form of interaction and exchange. Rather than seeing this only as an example of “how lesbians speak” it also illustrates how desire and sexuality are communicated through linguistics (Cameron and Kulick 2003).

The elusive and fluent aspect of gender switches enabled people to maintain ambiguity about what was said, and they consistently refused to take the political stance. Even though the gender switch was not completely outside politics or power, it provided a certain space of freedom and playfulness, avoiding a clear opposition to the system by making a life within it while minimising its impact. The reliability of different linguistic resources to index homosexuality or lesbian identity varies greatly. Livia notes that the fact that an expression can be taken as representing generic language by some listeners does not preclude the possibility that it may be recognised by other listeners as giving a more specific linguistic cue. “Grammaticalized gender, which many feel acts as a trap to limit people in their gender roles, also provides linguistic devices to express gender fluidity . . . Speakers may use the conventions of linguistic gender to create different gender identities” (Livia 1997:363). The numerous possible interpretations of a reversal of grammatical gender made it a flexible practice, which gave the speaker the opportunity to communicate something, while leaving open the possibility that they had not said anything at all or something completely different. This was both a strength and a liability. A girl who wishes to appear as coquettish may, to her own dismay, be perceived as uneducated. Besides functioning as cues or clues to a non-heterosexual sexuality, the gender switch is an example of the “ludic aspects of linguistic gender” which can point in the direction of lack of adherence to norms, be it in terms of gender or sexuality (Livia and Hall 1997:14).

Two dichotomies of lesbian genders

The first time I came across the word klava it had been used in reference to me. In November 2003, I participated in the conference Ona+Ona in Moscow, organised by Olga Suvorova. During one of the psychology workshops, or “trainings” as they were often called in Russia, the participants were asked to do an exercise where they were instructed to wear paper headbands with different social roles written on them. A person was thus walking around with ‘alcoholic’, ‘mother’, or ‘old lady’ literally written on their foreheads and while everyone could clearly read what was written on everyone else’s headband, no one knew
what was written on their own. The point of the exercise was to figure that out without relying on verbal communication. When the first attempts to explain klava proved unsuccessful, the girl who was doing the explaining quickly scanned the crowd, promptly turned the guesser in my direction and pointed, smiling triumphantly. At the time I had long hair, was wearing a little make-up and a relatively low-cut blouse. Recognition was instantaneous and the participant went to the coordinators to get a new role so she could continue playing. This seemed simple enough. Klava appeared to be a local term describing a feminine woman corresponding to the term femme in the butch/femme dichotomy in American lesbian culture. However, reality proved to be far more complex, not to mention interesting.

What I refer to as lesbian genders are specific reconfigurations of gender within the lesbian community. At the time of my fieldwork, two separate but interrelated sets of categories were used to describe stereotypes or subcategories of lesbian women in terms of looks and sexual preferences. The first was the distinction between aktif (актив) and passif (пассив), which referred primarily to sexual preference but were occasionally expanded to include other qualities. A distinction between the sexually active and passive partner is encountered in many gay and lesbian subcultures, referring to differentiated sexual roles and social expectations (Alonso and Koreck 1993; Bereket and Adam 2006; Newton and Walton 2000). In Russia the aktif/passif dichotomy has a longstanding history dating back to the medical and forensic literature of late nineteenth century (Healey 2001). The main interest of medical and forensic experts of that period was to identify the different types of homosexuals correctly. Most important was to differentiate between the “congenital pederasts” and the “acquired pederasts” in order to be able to assign juridical responsibility (Healey 2001:85). “The division of pederasts into active and passive types . . . resonated in Russia with the deep cultural divide between men and women and the mechanistic understanding of lust as a masculine drive to which women submitted passively” (Healey 2001:146-7). The ideas of the sexual roles aktif/passif survived through the Soviet years and had to the time of my fieldwork retained some of their linkage to same-sex relationships within the prison and camp system, as some informants dismissed them to be “prison terminology”. Sometimes the term universal was added as a middle category creating a middle ground between the aktif and the passif.

The second set of categories consisted of the terms butch/fem/klava where butch (буч) referred to a masculine-looking woman, and fem/klava (фем/клава), referred to a feminine type. While these terms are, in a general sense, fairly synonymous with the terms butch and femme prevalent in United States and

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76 Aktif/passif does not specify whether a person is sexually active or not, but rather to what role one assumes in sexual intercourse (penetrator vs. penetrated).
77 I use the word fem and to distinguish it from the homonym femme of the American dichotomy.
Western Europe, they do not have exactly the same meanings as they do, for instance, in the United States. The most common description of a butch was a girl or woman who preferred short hair, comfortable men’s clothes, baggy pants, t-shirts and comfortable shoes. Butches were thought to use foul language, to occasionally refer themselves in the masculine, and to know nothing about make-up. The fem, or klava, had long hair, long nails (indicating once again her sexual passivity), long eyelashes, high heels and lots of frills, bows, and a general overabundance of glittery accessories. Klava was sometimes used as a Russian synonym for fem, though often people also assigned the term a slightly different connotation, distinguishing the klava from the fem in terms of class and education. A klava was often described as cheap, vulgar, of low social status and intellect. Her lack of cultural refinement was revealed by her cheap and often shrill outfits and her preference for trashy detective stories. Just like the aktif/passif dichotomy was expanded by the middle category universal, the butch/fem/klava dichotomy was often expanded to a trichotomy by inserting the term daik, a transliteration of the English word dyke, as a middle category. The daik is something between the two extremes butch and fem, an androgynous-looking girl, often in a t-shirt and pants, with a short haircut and very little or more commonly no make-up at all. It should perhaps be noted that while the universal in the aktif/passif dichotomy implied that the person could take on both passive and active roles in bed, the daik is associated with an androgynous aesthetic rather than switching between a masculine and feminine style.

The origins of butch/fem/klava categories

Upon learning of the terms butch/fem I was immediately intrigued; the convergence with terms used in the United States as well as parts of Western Europe inevitably prompted further investigation. But when I asked around among my informants no one could quite remember where these terms had come from. The majority agreed, however, that they were a quite recent addition to the subcultural vocabulary and had probably originated on the Internet, maybe on forums or in chat rooms. I was often referred to a few articles on VolgaVolga’s site lesbiru.com, most of which were translated from unknown English originals dated 2003-2004. One informant, a woman who had been trying to impress me, proudly recounted that she and VolgaVolga invented that entire classification one night in her kitchen. They had devised it as a joke, something for the youngsters to play with, and it was later placed on Volga’s portal and has spread from there.

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78 When I tried to verify this story through a person who had been a part of that social circle for a while, I was told that VolgaVolga had always been very good at picking up trends and ideas that were floating around and passing them off as her own. Irrespective of where the terms came from, the articles on VolgaVolga’s site lesbiru.com were the most recently referred sites.
No one among my informants were aware that the Russian words butch and fem were very close to the categories butch and femme prevalent in many Western lesbian subcultures, originating from lesbian bar culture in the 1950s in the United States (Faderman and Timmons 2006; Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis 1993; Nestlé 1992). The explicit use of the categories was argued to be restricted to the youngest cohorts of the subculture, especially those who spent a lot of time online, and on the Pushka. The categories were also tainted by the low status shared by these spaces and groups. Associating \textit{butch//fem//klava} categories with the Internet was also a way to indicate their low social status. This triad was mutually incriminating: girls were ‘bad’ because they hang out on the Internet and the Pushka, the Pushka was bad because of the girls who hang out there, and the Internet was bad because young girls who also frequent the Pushka go there.\(^{79}\) This overlap made it unclear whether these categories originated online or within the youth culture. It is entirely possible that the more recent dichotomy \textit{butch//fem//klava} was a linguistic marker of a generational shift within the subculture. As every score of teenagers inevitably devises a new slang vocabulary, rendering the one of the preceding generation obsolete, these terms were more recent incarnations of the older terms \textit{aktif//passif}. One support for the theory that the \textit{butch//fem//klava} categories originated among the younger cohorts, was that it was primarily young people, especially my informants on the Pushka, whom I could ask questions about these terms, and also the categories \textit{aktif//passif}, without initial apologetic clauses. With these informants my questions were not automatically met with ridicule, but rather with an attempt at a serious answer.

\textbf{Butch//fem//klava in a cross-cultural context}

Because of the similarity between the Western concepts butch/femme and the Russian \textit{butch//fem//klava} there is a temptation to see the latter as a translation of the former. As the concepts themselves as well as the majority of the research on butch and femme identities are of American or Western European origin, there was also a risk that the Western concepts “butch” and “femme” become decontextualised analytical categories that the Russian \textit{butch//fem//klava} are compared with. But my explorations of lesbian genders, roles and identities are a part of a wider interest, namely the intersection of gender roles and female same-sex practices in different cultural and historical settings. It is therefore much more fruitful to consider both the Russian \textit{butch//fem//klava} and the American butch/femme categories as examples of culturally specific “gendered sexualities” (Gagné and Tewksbury 2002) or a “gendering of lesbian relationships” (Weston 1993:342), as are, for example, the studies of toms and dees in

\(^{79}\) This marginalisation parallels the situation in the United States where butch/femme culture often has been connected with working class and low status (Crawley 2001, Faderman and Timmons 2006).

137
Thailand (Sinnott 2004), of tombois in West Sumatra (Blackwood 1999), and butches and femme lesbians in Jakarta and Lima (Murray 1999). Blackwood and Wieringa note that “one possible way to think about transgendered expressions of desire would be that they are based on a range of psychobiological “scripts” that can only be “known” in specific sociocultural settings” (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999:18). There is a considerable body of literature that focuses explicitly on butch/femme roles spanning over historical and ethnographic studies (Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis 1993; Nestlé 1992), psychological studies of development of lesbian genders (Lewitt, Gerrish and Hiestand 2003; Levitt and Hiestand 2004a; Levitt and Hiestand 2004b; Levitt) and gay and lesbian, gender and queer studies (Butler 1990; Halberstam 1998; Munt and Smyth 1998; O’Sullivan 1999). This literature is anchored in the American context, in regard to both ethnography and theoretical premises. This becomes particularly obvious when one considers the established critique against butch and femme roles. With the second wave feminism in the late 1960s “woman” became a political identity and to be the right kind of woman, both in terms of style and behaviour, became a question of loyalty with feminist convictions in the United States. Strict lines had to be drawn between liberated, loyal feminists and those who were part of the oppressing system. Since traditional femininity and masculinity were seen as an intrinsic part of the patriarchal order, adhering to either was perceived as treason against the feminist movement. Butch-femme couples were perceived as politically incorrect as they adhered to the patriarchal structure of domination and exploitation (Feinberg 1992). A considerable part of the American literature on butch/femme identities is therefore a reclaiming or revalidation of these identities against that initial feminist derision. In the early 1990s it became possible to theoretically defend butch and femme roles by way of the same theories that were used to frame feminist, gay, and lesbian critiques of society.

Cultural imperialism interrupted?

This obscurity of origin can be perceived as both a strength and a weakness. If the imported terms and categories lost their link to the West they also lost the glamour associated with the West. As some of my informants put it, the categories were perceived to be a part of “the perpetual stream of nonsense that makes up 99.9% of the Internet”. Anonymity of the Internet can make cultural imperialism more insidious by hiding the origin of concepts, terms and ideas. Even though there was much more information available about gay and lesbian lives at the time of my fieldwork compared to Soviet times, resources were still rather limited. Organisers such as VolgaVolga, Suvorova and Mishin, who all

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80 Even though gender is not the same thing as sexuality they are often closely connected. Heterosexual roles are, of course, strictly divided by gender and have strictly prescribed sexual scripts.
maintained web pages or portals of varying sizes, became information brokers who mediated information from American, Western and international discourses to Russian gays and lesbians. It was, however, difficult to assess the influence of individual organisers, or the impact of the translated materials. For example, the texts about butches, fems and klavas on VolgaVolga’s site became neither immediately intelligible nor influential in the Russian context by their own right. They were evaluated based on the reputation and standing of the individual organiser and their cultural relevance to the new settings in which they were re-contextualised. Nevertheless, some words and concepts from the American gay and lesbian culture did make their way into the subcultural vocabulary of lesbians in Moscow, but not in a simple or straightforward manner and they definitely did not replace the existing Russian terminology. Rather, the imported terms were incorporated and used to elaborate on the already existing terms. Different sets of categories created the possibility to create divisions between inside and outside, to manage the contradiction of a feminine soft sentiment with a crew cut and men’s trousers.

Gender roles in Russia

In the discussions of butch/fem/klava and the categories aktif/passif, the reference was often made to an abstract masculinity and femininity. When the butch category was used with disdain, it overlapped with a failed, or at least a lower class masculinity: uncultured, rude, loud, bawdy, heavy drinking. This category was paired with the category klava that contained aspects of lower class femininity, akin to a lesbian variant of the baba, a crude woman with little taste or refinement. The connection between butch/femme identities and lower class that have been observed in the United States and Western Europe (Faderman and Timmons 2006; Crawley 2001) were also to a certain extent valid in the lesbian subculture in Moscow. There was also a considerable convergence of stereotypes between the discourse on butch/femme/klava identities and the general Russian discourse on gender. The stereotypes or widely held perceptions were most apparent in the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality, that is in descriptions of how men and women should behave, rather than they actually were behaving. During Soviet times the ideal of masculinity was structured around the man’s role as a breadwinner, implicitly the sole breadwinner. Even though this ideal was a practical impossibility during the Soviet times, and even more so after, the idea of the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the keeper of the hearth remained the most accessible tropes to describe the ideal relationship between men and women. Especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union there has been a revival and re-emphasis of gender in Russian society, both in behaviour and aesthetic (Kay 2006). There was a general notion of how a man and a woman should be, but there was also recognition of how they have failed (Ashwin 2000; Kay 2006). The categories butch/fem/klava and aktif/passif were based on and elaborated upon these broad simplifications.
Relationship between the two dichotomies

These two sets of categories were often used synonymously, *buteb* equalling *aktif*, *fem* or *klava* being *passif* and *daik* implying *universal* thus collapsing ideas of gender in social and visual presentation and in sexual roles. As I began investigating these categories I soon became aware that a direct question about the meaning of the terms *buteb*, *klava* or *fem* would almost instantaneously give a negative response. People often considered an explicit adherence to these roles or the use of the terminology as a sign of low social status, class and intellect. This difference was often generational; few of my informants over thirty took these categories seriously from the start, and it was my younger informants who were more likely to use the terms in conversation. The categories *aktif/passif* and *buteb/fem/klava* were rarely the centre of a serious discussion, but were often slipped by in jokes or as a tongue in cheek description of a person. The jokes were, by the way, the easiest and most straightforward way to get a grasp of the sexual connotations. For instance, the statement “Hello I’m *klava*, where do I lay down?” (Здрасте, я клава, куда лечь?) implied not only that a *klava* is sexually passive, but also promiscuous. Interestingly enough, I encountered a very similar expression in two texts on butch/femme identities. A Chilean woman identified as butch recounted the common reaction to feminine couples in Chile. “When there’s a couple of feminine muchachitas [young girls], everybody laughs; they say: What do they do in bed? Play with dolls?” (Rimpau and Gammon 1992:150). This implies not only that the femme/femme relationships are not real, but also that they are childish. There is a similar joke from North America: “What do femmes do in bed? Not a lot, they’re waiting for the other one to make the first move” (Carolin and Bewley 1998:119). These jokes can be seen as a continuation of the ontological impossibility of a female sexuality that exists independently of male presence. The most established definition of sexual acts was one that included a penis. In some cultures what goes on between women cannot be counted as sex simply because of the lack of this crucial detail. The impossibility of sexual agency between femmes is the application of the rule of the masculinity of sexual activity onto lesbian relationships. According to this rule sexual acts without a man, or in this case a masculine partner, are considered, if not impossible, then at least highly unlikely and slightly comic. Just as there were jokes about *klavas*, there was a corresponding sexual joke or rhyme about butches: “In a temper, a *buteb* (accidentally) fucked another *buteb*” (Буч буча, трахнул с готяча), implying both that butches are of a rash temper and that only under exceptional circumstances are butches the receptive partner, in this way creating a correspondence between the sexually active-masculine and the sexually passive-feminine.81 Just as implied in the *klava* joke above, the two sets of categories overlap completely, implying that a masculine demeanour is completed by a masculine frame of mind or behaviour.

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81 One-liners are a very common feature in leisurely Russian interaction, usually from films or cartoons, but they often refer to lyrics and anecdotes.
Galina from the Pushka, who was quite interested in sexuality, both in a practical and a theoretical sense, told me that she had undertaken a small investigation on her own. She had been curious about the relationship between the categories \textit{butch/fem/klava} and \textit{aktif/passif} and conducted a small survey among her friends at the Pushka comparing what people (said they) did in bed with where they placed themselves on the \textit{butch/fem/klava} spectrum. Because I was also interested in this question she was happy to talk about her findings. “In most cases it was actually opposite to what one would assume from the looks of the couple. \textit{Fems} were more often than the \textit{butches} the active parties in bed, which just goes to show that things are not always what they seem.”

Mixed breeds: playing with the categories

The two sets of categories overlapped, but were also used to describe different domains of reality where \textit{butch/fem/klava} referred to social roles, regulating dress and behaviour, and the \textit{aktif/passif} categories referred to sexual and sometimes psychological preferences. While the two sets of categories were often used synonymously, they were also used in combination to create middle or composite categories to suit particular identifications. There is always a balance to be struck in the use of any kind of categories or labels of identity, just as familiar dichotomies and types provide a framework for being and for relating to the world, making it in some senses both ordered and familiar. At the same time, the familiarity and applicability of these terms depend on their stability, i.e. closedness, which means that they by necessity impose constraints on the behaviour of people who use them. This tension was the main motivating force behind the constant manipulation and re-negotiation of the categories \textit{butch/fem/klava} and \textit{aktif/passif}. Once again we return to the tension between safety and freedom, this time closer to an individual level, where people attempt to reconcile what they perceive as their inner reality—sexual, psychological and mental—with an outer reality—behaviour and appearance.

One evening at the Pushka I decided to take Stas up on her offer to elaborate upon and explain to me the correspondence between the systems \textit{aktif/passif} and \textit{butch/fem/klava}. Rather than venturing into a description or analysis, Stas illustrated her explanation through an example of a couple within the immediately present group of friends. “Take a look at Olga and Zhanna over there. You might think that Olga is the \textit{aktif}.” She made an emphatic pause and looked at me smiling, as I looked over at the couple a few meters away to try to fit Olga into the concept of a \textit{fem}. While neither of the aforementioned girls were small in frame, or explicitly feminine in their dress or behaviour, Olga would make most men I know look scrawny. She was at least 1.85 meter tall and built like a blacksmith, with a square jaw and her thick curly blonde hair in a crew cut. Dressed in men’s clothes, either because of taste or necessity she looked nothing like a \textit{fem}, as the category was most commonly described. As I took in the view, Stas delivered the well-prepared punch line: “Well she isn’t.”
And Stas had been right, had I been left to my own devices I would have given a different answer. I would have guessed that Zhanna was the fem/klava/passiv. “It might be hard to believe, but Olga is not the butch, she is the klava. She would much rather stay home, and cook. In that couple it is Zhanna who is prone to be out with friends, spending time on the town, coming home late, banging her fist on the table and bellowing ‘Where’s my dinner!’ Besides, Olga gets really hurt when people assume that she is a butch. She says that it is not her fault that she used to do rowing on the elite level. And she is not really a butch, nor can she really be called klava either. She is what you call a butche-klav, both a butch and a klava. There are many possible categories: butche-klav, klava-butch and butche-daik.”

Rather than using the categories in an overlapping fashion, the two sets of dichotomies also make it possible to separate behaviour and appearance. What one does or feels like on the one hand, and what one looks like on the other. When speaking of hyphenated Americans, DeVere Brody noted that “[h]yphens locate intermediate, often invisible, and always shifting spaces between supposedly oppositional binary structures” (Devere Brody 1995:149). The hyphenated terms form subcategories or intermediates, allowing greater flexibility within the system without discarding it. The hyphenated identity was a way to get around the impossibility of not looking like what you are.

Butch/fem as Yin/yang

Despite the common criticisms, few of my informants were willing to say that dichotomies were erroneous altogether. Most underlined that their veracity or applicability was a matter of degree. Just as there are fundamental oppositions such as active/passive, masculine/feminine, dark/light, very few things in the world belonged exclusively to one category. In a similar way, butch and fem/klava were somewhat simplistic formulations of these fundamental dichotomies, viewed through a very specific cultural lens. The direct correspondence between butch/fem/klava, aktif/passif and masculine/feminine were often seen as too simplistic and naïve, representing a worldview that has not developed any further than basic categories and did not take into account complex combinations or nuances. The primary critique against the butch/femme/klava dichotomy in Russia was not, as was the case in the United States in the 1970s, that women copied the behaviour of heterosexual couples, in this way perpetuating the oppression of patriarchy, but that the dichotomy was too simplistic. What could be considered to be masculinity was not restricted to clothes, mannerisms or sexual acts, but was a rich variety of qualities of different forms. On many occasions people would put forth the argument that no matter if you were a man or a woman, you could be more active or more pas-

82 The butch and klava in the hyphenated terms are spelled differently for phonetic accuracy.
sive as a person in all expressions in life. Many of my older, and also better-educated informants, quickly diverged from the purely sexual interpretations of the dichotomy aktif/passif for a wider, more esoteric interpretation that drew heavily on the idea of yin and yang.

When I asked Masha, the editor of Labrys Msk literary almanac, about aktif/passif and butch/fem/klava, she too preferred to state her explanation in the form of an example. Interestingly enough, her example was the classic script of the heterosexual seduction. “The interrelationship between aktif and passif is basically a question of agency. A woman lets a man know that she wants him, she lures him in and then surrenders. The active party is not the woman, who initiated the event, but the man who does the ‘taking.’” The man sees, the woman sees herself be seen, she sees herself be desired. A relationship between the subject and object.”

Moving on to the arena of sexual behaviour, Masha added that the actions of a pure aktif are determined by a simple algorithm of see-want-take. “In the end it is the taking and not sexual satisfaction as such that is seen as the goal of the process. For the pure passif it is the being taken that is the ultimate goal.” Masha concluded by saying that in reality there were very few people who were pure aktif, or passif for that matter, most people were a mix, or a little bit of both. A butch on the other hand was just a person who either leans toward the aktif pole of the continuum or simply prefers the masculine social role. The universal was a person who could alternate, do and be both. “In the end this is not only a matter of what people do in bed, but a disposition in life in general, a question of who takes the initiative in a relationship, who is the leader. There are people who cannot function if they’re not the ones calling the shots. They just can’t follow. Then there are others who can follow, but who need to lead some of the time. There are also people who really don’t mind either way. These would be the universal, and of course this goes all the way to the other end of the continuum to the absolute passif.” Such an analytical and intellectual approach is not all that common but not surprising considering that it was given by an editor. From her perspective the butch/fem/klava were social roles that engendered the basic contents of the aktif/passif categories that in turn encompassed far more than just the sexual realm or who wore the pants in the family.

Finding the right words

Long after my conversations with Stas and Masha I was sitting with my friend Vladislava on a bench in the park Kolomenskoe. The clouds that had just delivered a downpour had not yet desisted with the drizzle. We had not seen each other for a long time and were determined to make the best of it, even if

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83 Here the aktif/passif overlap completely with the ideal heterosexual scripts where the female partner is inviting but ultimately passive and the man is responsible for the agency.
Mother Nature was not in a particularly cooperative mood. As we sat and chatted, a photographer nearby was doing his best to shoot romantic wedding pictures under conditions that were far from perfect. The bride was striking different poses in her gown with wide billowing skirts whilst at the same time attempting to stay out of the rain and keep her white dress as white as possible. We watched how the girl tried to realise the ideas of the photographer, throwing her head back, raising the skirt and showing her legs, leaning in various ways against the trunk of a tree. “When I see girls like that I usually feel my butchy habits acting up”, said Vladislava smiling slyly. I could not help but raise an eyebrow as she was about 1.70 metres tall, weighed around 50 kg, and was often forced to shop for clothes in the children’s department because of her slight frame. She usually wore her long black hair that reached down below her buttocks in a ponytail, adding to the (oh so false) impression of innocence. Here it should be noted that the long and thick plait was a traditional Russian symbol of femininity. I was slightly thrown off by this contradictory use of terms.

Quite some time after the rainy day in Kolomenskoe I asked Vladislava to explain her views on butch and fem to which she responded by stating that the aktif was the hunter and the passif was the keeper of the hearth, thus completely overlapping with the traditional division of labour between men and women. Butch in her view was just another word for aktif. Maybe it did refer more to a fashion or the habit to look in a certain way, but it really did not matter—if a girl was butch she was butch no matter what clothes she wore. Vladislava associated the categories butch/fem/klava and aktif/passif not so much with masculine and feminine social roles, i.e., the requirement to open doors, pull out chairs, etc., and even less to physical appearance, but rather with the mental and psychological characteristics attributed to different genders, where masculinity stood for strength and reason and femininity for weakness and irrationality. Vladislava’s interpretation of the categories made clear how she used these dichotomies to underscore her own independence and strength and to make a difference between herself and her own perception of feminine women whom she considered to be “ninnies and halfwits incapable of logic, reason or punctuality”.

Vladislava stood by this interpretation despite the fact that the content of the categories had to be shifted and rearranged. This redefinition of categories was perhaps more easily done because butch and femme are quite new to the Russian context, and they are therefore much more malleable than the established ideas of masculinity and femininity. The obvious incongruity between appearance, sentiment and behaviour was resolved by disregarding the categories as prescriptive of any kind of “look”. While Vladislava’s identification as butch is

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84 Vladislava also referred to herself with the masculine form, but with her looks this could hardly be perceived as something other than a diminutive. See earlier section on gender switch in language.
quite incongruent with the “common sense” interpretation of the word, it is not an invalid position, and it demonstrates one way to manipulate the available categories and concepts to make sense of oneself and others. In their most basic form, the categories aktif/passif, butch/fem/klava were a way to understand and delineate social roles: a way to organise what to do, to whom and how.

**Butch//fem/klava categories and sexual scripts**

While some theorists underline that butch/femme relationships are not modelled on heterosexual roles (Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis 1993), in Russia the categories as they are most commonly understood are, if not determined, then at least based on the main gender structure of Russian society. The similarity of the categories butch//fem/klava and aktif/passif to heterosexuality, is that they deal with relations between two basic, while at the same time culturally and historically contingent categories: masculinity and femininity. This pervasive relevance of these categories can be interpreted as an indication that the gender stereotypes of the wider heterosexual society continue to be valid even when heterosexual men and women are absent. The strong shoulder on which one can cry, and the arms to hold and protect you, now belong to a butch and not a boyfriend. The dichotomy masculine-feminine is a part of a widely available and immediately understandable framework of scripts for agency, both social and sexual. Such scripts are pervasive throughout the entire culture and society and are easily accessed. They are willingly applied to understand the world and one’s place in it, and related to different aspects of the self, be they looks, personality traits or behaviour. It was a familiar family of scripts, easily slipped into by both parties or objected to as in the case of Oksana who, despite her protests, was labelled as butch.

The two sets of dichotomies of lesbian genders butch//fem/klava and aktif/passif, either separately or in combination, were attempts to come to terms with the various possible configurations of sex, sexuality and gender. In their description of a more precise sexual vocabulary, Newton and Walton (2000) outline four different preferences: sexual preference, whether one prefers men or women; erotic identity, the social roles available to both lesbian and straight women; erotic roles, how one imagines oneself to be an erotic object (or subject) and erotic acts. The category ‘erotic identity’ could perhaps in this context be more immediately comprehensible as gender preference, a preference for masculine, feminine, or androgynous women. While the range of possibilities of Newton’s categories is ensured by their analytical clarity, by separating sex, sexuality and gender, it was the fluidity, or perhaps lack of a clear definition, of the Russian dichotomies that rendered the latter pliable enough not to be too constricting.
Conclusions

People who came into the lesbian subculture in Moscow found themselves in a social world with its own styles, fashions, systems of communication and signification. Apart from the knowledge of where to go and what to do there were ideas of how to recognise “your own”: the skill to manipulate dress and language, and to interpret gender ambiguities were all part of the subcultural cultural capital. Much of this knowledge was picked up unconsciously, as a part of social interaction, and became an integrated part of the subculture. Just as people come to adopted the right look or manner, a certain turn of speech became natural and the ability to ‘see’ was developed with time. All of the practices described above treaded the fine line between being and doing, they are ‘being in doing’, a perfect paraphrase of Butler’s (1990) performativity, perhaps. People were searching for an expression of themselves, but not as a tactic of political subversion. Rather, the basic categories of masculine and feminine were perceived as abstract ideas used in the search for the expression of personal identity and in the search for a comfortable way to exist in this world.

Despite the fact that the categories butch/fem/klava and aktif/passif were considered to be youth culture, and therefore a bit simplistic or rough, they were nevertheless widely understood. Many of my informants said that when they were younger they had adhered to more fixed ideas of who did what (often referring to what one does in bed). With time they had realised that things did not have to be set in a fixed pattern. With the person you loved, you could be who you wanted and do what you wanted without any reference to a particular code.

An overly categorical match of the two sets of categories, i.e., making a direct link between appearance, behaviour and sentiment was often considered naïve, even among my youngest informants. Ways around this were to create composite categories and hyphenated terms or to insert middle categories, such as the universal or the far less frequent daik to soften the categorical divided. The most unusual option was to redefine the categories themselves or to interpret them on a more abstract level. All these manipulations simultaneously maintained these categories and moved beyond them. But irrespective of the ingenuity with which people combined and used the different dichotomies in innovative ways in order to make them serve their own purposes, the categories were nevertheless restricting. While the butch/fem/klava and aktif/passif were a way to incorporate or reject traits or qualities that were categorised as masculine or feminine, the validity of the categories masculine and feminine remained unquestioned. The multilayered interpretations of the different categories of les-

85 In an online discussion where these categories and the permeability of the boundaries between them were discussed, several girls lamented that they were passif and that they wished to be universal or at least be able to be in the aktif role but that they just did not know how do this (http://erogen.ru/topic3822.html Russian only)
bian genders had a lot in common with the gendered attributes of the Russian language. The almost neutral status of the masculine gender in Russian made it possible to use ambiguously or alternatively gendered expressions to communicate a same-sex interest in general or a more specific lesbian gender identification in particular. The negotiation and communication of identity through linguistic gender switches relied on a pervasiveness of grammatical genders in Russian, that is, the strict division between masculine and feminine. So despite their rigour the categories of masculine and feminine contained enough complexity for people to subvert them and express alternative identities, which put queer identities squarely within a dichotomous system rather than outside of it.
Chapter 5: Trials and tribulations of Moscow Pride 2006

It was the day of the fated Moscow Pride parade and I had made my way to the square around the statue of Yurii Dolgorukii. I climbed the base of the statue in order to get a view over the small plaza. It was thick with people. Protestors were making their way from Manezhnaia Square by the minute and the riot police were working the crowd. The visiting delegation from the French lesbian television station were standing ten feet behind me. Other than them, there was not a single familiar face. I had no idea what was going to happen next, but at least by then it had stopped raining. A heavyset woman in her late thirties was standing a few feet away. The tall skinny man next to her was fiddling with an archaic video camera. A teenage boy, also skinny as a rake, was slouching on her other side. They were gazing out over the crowd. In an annoyed voice the woman posed the rhetorical question, “So where the fuck are the fucking pederasts? Why didn’t they show up?” The boy mumbled something inaudible, shuffling his feet, looking like he wished that he were somewhere else, or at least in better company. What this woman did not realise was that the ‘freaks’ she had come to see were standing right next to her, looking perfectly normal, some of them in outfits that she could never dream to afford.

In this chapter I will focus on how a globalised cultural tradition of Pride parades was received within the Russian cultural and historical context. The processes of adaption and re-interpretation revealed both the cultural underpinnings of the globalised form and the new cultural setting. The Pride Parade in Moscow in 2006 was a complicated and contradictory affair as it exacerbated and illuminated not only the conflicts within the gay and lesbian subculture, but more importantly revealed the clashes between the cultural logic of public parades and the cultural and historical context in Russia.

Taking to the streets in Russia

In Russia the Pride Parade must be considered within the wider social practice of public marches, a context that differs markedly from the United States or

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86 I have chosen not to clean up the language, to at least partially show the foul nature of the statement. In Russian, the effect is much worse than this English version.
even most of Western Europe. Public rituals in Soviet times were grandiose ideological shows that were not intended to incorporate the opinions or desires of individuals, but to display the success and progress of the socialist state. Even at the time of my fieldwork, most celebrations, such as May First, City Day and The Day of Victory (the day the treaty ending World War II was signed), were orchestrated by the state in every detail.

Little more than a week before the Parade I was sitting and talking about it with Lena Kidanova at Indigo, the store of www.gay.ru. We our discussion turned to the related subject of public demonstrations in Russia. Because I had left the country as a child my recollections of First of May parades consisted almost entirely of lollipops, and balloons that escaped into the sky if you did not hold on to the string. The political aspect of the celebration had not dawned on me. Animated by my ignorance, Kidanova ventured into a long and lively description of how things were done in Soviet times, and how they were done to this day. “Today, if a crowd is needed somewhere, at a sports event or some kind of rally, phone calls are made to organisations and factories and a number of employees are assigned to the task. They will stand with the necessary plaques wearing United Russia buttons, freezing their asses off, but they will be there.”

Participation in parades and political marches in Soviet times was never a question of personal choice, but a mandatory presence at a strictly orchestrated political mass ritual. The demonstrations on the First of May and honouring the October Revolution were not spontaneous expressions of enthusiasm of the people. The pressure to conform to the official ideology left no space whatsoever for people to express their own opinions.

Looking at the mass political holidays, it is common knowledge that participation in its central ritual, the procession-demonstration, is organised from above. Each work collective selected for participation in the demonstration during a particular year mobilises as many of its employees as will make up a contingent. Usually enough volunteers can be found, but occasionally some pressure may be necessary (Lane 1981:55).

In his impressions of two major Soviet holidays, Lane underscored “the gigantic scale of events; the State-managed nature and the uniformity of the procession; the lack of spirit and passivity of the participants of the demonstration” (Lane 1981:188). Individual opinions were not what the public space was for: the celebration was a demonstration of power and strength of the state. The monolithic image of these demonstrations can be interpreted in different ways. One interpretation was that just as the parade as a form was forced upon people, so were the banners and signs bearing slogans forced on the demonstrators. The extent of this coercion is unfortunately a common misunderstanding among Western researchers. Just because people carried signs with slogans didn’t necessarily mean that they were forced to agree with them, and just be-
cause they could not express their opinions in public did not mean that they did not have any opinions or that they did not express them somewhere else. Similarly, even though people marched in the parades they did not necessarily feel a personal commitment to it. According to Kharkhordin, the united front in public rituals was not produced by adherence to the party line, where all other opinions had been weeded out, but was instead a façade of dissimulation. People acted along in the ritual despite the fact that they did not believe in the slogans or the celebration itself, preserving their true opinions for other occasions (Kharkhordin 1999:270ff).

Yurchak (2006) points out that this incongruity in political rituals does not necessarily entail lying and deception or the belief in the meanings expressed. The rigorous control of the political and ideological discourse in public rituals was so extensive that it became a repetition of established phrases and images. Just as people became adept at speaking in a politically uncontroversial language, they carried out the necessary actions in order for the political performances to be successful. The rigidity of the language and ritual created a possibility for people to create their own understandings of political slogans. This freedom was of course dependent on the smooth and convincing surface of political rituals. By late Soviet times,

The parade was simply one more celebration where you met your friends and acquaintances and had fun. It was not really experienced as an ideological event. Revolution Day, Labour Day, and many other celebrations became meaningful as rituals that reproduced the belonging to the massive publics of the ingroup, referred to in Russian as svoi, ours. On these occasions people had celebratory dinners at home, with collective drinking, eating, and singing with relatives, friends, and colleagues (Yurchak 2006:122).

Conformity in public was the price that had to be paid for nonconformity or freedom in other domains in the Soviet Union. Public space never belonged to the individual and was not an arena where personal or group interests were articulated. During 2005 I had witnessed, or rather, like all true Muscovites, avoided, the massive celebrations of the 60th anniversary of Victory Day on May 9th and City Day, or more precisely I had witnessed the massive preparations for the festivities but not gone into town for the actual celebration. Both Victory Day and City Day were state celebrations with the mandatory participation of a well-established Soviet tradition. “The power of ritual to represent has meant that it has remained at the centre of modern politics. Ethnic and national groups, as well as state, utilise different forms of rituals, from carnivals to fu-

87 David Tuller (1996) has noted that even though the Russian language lacks a word for privacy this does not mean that people were unaccustomed to guarding their private issues. The desire of the Soviet state to know and control everything precipitated the development of the private-public spaces. However, these were always at risk, since sometimes colleagues and friends became informants. Keeping your own secrets and letting others keep theirs was often a mutual agreement.
erals, to represent the community (Bryan 1999:21).” It is perhaps not at all surprising that many of the contemporary Russian state rituals have borrowed heavily from the Soviet ones, both in form and execution, albeit under a different flag and somewhat different slogans.

Pride parades: history and context

The Pride parade and other similar celebrations such as Coming Out Day and Mardi Gras have a longstanding tradition in the United States and in many major cities around the world. In most recounts of the history of Pride parades, the first was held in San Francisco in June, 1970, in commemoration of the riots at New York city’s Stonewall Inn during the previous year. While this event is often seen to mark the beginning of a new era in gay and lesbian politics, many of the tendencies that have been attributed to the new gay and lesbian movement were actually already present before the Stonewall rebellion (Jagose 1996; Ambjörnsson 2006; Graham 1998). Faderman and Timmons, for instance, place the first ever public gay march in Los Angeles in 1966, when a long line of honking cars with signs were a part of the “First National Homophile Protest” to end the ban against gays in the military (Faderman and Timmons 2006:153). The Stonewall Rebellion more accurately marks the breakthrough of the new ideals of pride, defiance, and visibility that with time came to dominate public gay and lesbian activism (Kates and Belk 2001:395). Ward notes that “[P]ride events are many seemingly contradictory things at once: disco parties; arts and crafts fairs; drug dens; health expos; high security cages (many events are surrounded by chain-link fence or other barriers); sites of protest; ecstatic fun; and utter boredom” (Ward 2003:88). This span of possibilities often creates tension around the meanings and goals of gay pride events, especially concerning kind of change Pride events should bring about and how they should go about it. This is also a conflict between, on the one hand, the aspiration to demonstrate that gays and lesbians are “normal,” and on the other to celebrate the difference of gay and lesbian subcultures. This difference is most easily represented through of a number of exotic individuals/groups such as drag queens in feather boas, leather dykes, and in general lots of bare flesh and sensational outfits (Kates and Belk 2001).

In the history of the San Francisco Pride celebration, there has been over time a shift from politics to entertainment. “Early parades and festivals, not far removed from the collective memory of the Stonewall Rebellion, were organised around themes that called for specific action, such as coming out. Today, in the context of a mainstream equal rights agenda, festivals make use of more abstract themes such as ‘pride odyssey’ or ‘pride . . . the next generation’, disconnecting the original relationship between pride events and protest” (Ward 2003:71). Ward also notes that there are local histories and preferences in the Pride movement: the Pride parades in San Francisco are often far more political.
than the Pride festivals in Los Angeles (ibid.). As Pride parades and other similar events gain popularity and attract an increasing number of sponsors and participants, there will be an increasing focus on “polish, professionalism [and] style” (Ward 2003:90). Stockholm Pride has been criticized for being too commercial, mainstreaming the uniqueness of the LGBT community in Stockholm. The cultural, sexual and socio-economic heterogeneity of the group of people, for whom Pride parades are organised, creates a space for an infinite number of critical positions, that the Parade is “too mainstream”, “too extreme”, “too commercial”, and “too politically correct”. In opposition to the criticism that the Pride parades have become corrupted by the public appeal and commercial interests and completely lost their meaning as political marches for the rights of gays and lesbians, there is the criticism that parades single out gays and lesbians from the rest of the population and thus reinforce the notion of heteronormativity (Johnston 2005, Waitt 2005).

While a fundamental tension in these events lies between entertainment and politics, it is important to note that the two are not mutually exclusive. Gay pride events have often strived for political goals through aesthetic or entertaining means, poking fun at the established rules with entertainment, by means of outrageous costumes, and celebrating being different. Festivals and celebrations in general almost inevitably have a political aspect, either overt or implicit. Shows that claim to be pure entertainment may still contain subversive elements, for instance drag shows (Westerling 2006) and modern dance (Wulff 1998).

A relevant comparison can perhaps be made with carnivals. It is partially the form of the public celebration that allows it to incorporate political motives, but as Cohen notes that “a carnival generates such a powerful experience and passion for people that it is always and everywhere seized upon and manipulated by political interests” (Cohen 1993:4). Political movements often utilise aesthetics and emotions to engage participants. In the 1960s the Soviet state introduced a number of rituals and institutions in order to try to take political and ideological advantage of the emotional power of ritual (Lane 1981).

Much of the controversy around the Pride parades is rooted in representation. Within the gay and lesbian subculture the controversy is about how the participants of the parade would represent the whole gay and lesbian population.

Rituals play a fundamental part in the creation of a sense of ‘community’. But it is important to understand that in helping to ‘create’ or ‘imagine’ the community – the ‘labour of representation’ – we do not see ritual as simply functioning to bind an unthinking group (Bryan 1999:20).

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88 In 2001, there was an alternative festival, Stockholm Shame that was supposed to create a space where less commercially viable and politically correct facets of the gay community could gather, inviting the anarchist and radical left as well as holding panel debates on the rights of sex workers.
There is therefore no simple way to separate the representation of communities and the creation of communities, both imagined as well as real. This may explain why Pride parades continue to be controversial within gay and lesbian communities after they have become accepted by mainstream society and even become established as a political platform. Gay Pride events have, since their inception in 1970, gained considerable acceptance and popularity. In Sweden the Parade has become a mandatory feature of political campaigns and politics in general. Both in 2006 and 2007 several of the leaders of political parties in Sweden participated in the Stockholm Pride Parade. In 2007 Hilary Clinton made an appearance at New York Pride. This development underscores the fact that, rather than being a conservative social institution, “ritual may do much more than mirror existing social arrangements and existing modes of thought. It can act to reorganise them or even help to create them” (Moore and Myerhoff 1977:5).

Previous “Parades” in Moscow

Despite Nikolai Alekseev’s aspirations to be a pioneer of gay and lesbian sub-culture, the Moscow Pride Festival 2006 was not the first gay and lesbian public event in Russia. Different organisations and events have in different ways and contexts incorporated gay and lesbian themes. Another event that was dubbed “the first Moscow Pride”, at least by the resource www.gay.ru, took place on the 22nd of August 1998. A float organised by the gay club Khameleon was a part of the celebration of the Day of the National Flag. The celebration graced the corner of Novyi Arbat and the Garden Ring throughout the day starting at noon. This is in contrast to the events of May 2007, which were held just a stone’s throw away from the Kremlin. The float was parked on the street Novyi Arbat, simply New Arbat, was a street close to (what is now dubbed ‘Old’) Arbat street which was the bohemian centre of town. “In the 1990s… Arbat has become the first commercial street of Moscow where totalitarian kitsch is for sale” (Boym 1994:95). There were people in leather, in feathers, holding flags and balloons. The banner on the side of the stage read “Free love to a free Russia”. The only information I have been able to find out about this event is an article on gay.ru, a reprint of an article in Moskovskii Komsomolets from 30th August 1998. According to the author, who was a consultant to the organisers at the municipality, at one of the first meetings someone had expressed a desire for something “fun and informal”. The author suggested that they invite gays and lesbians because “there are many of them here and they are a fun lot”. The suggestion was initially met with disdain. “It’s enough that people say God knows what about the President, now pederasts walk in the streets!” These events took place before the carnevalesque presidency of Yeltsin was replaced by a so(m)ber Putin and the political return to grace of the Orthodox church. However, only twenty-four hours before the event, the organisers had a change
of heart and the club was able to organise a colourful platform that became part of the celebration. According to reports, passersby enjoyed the festivities. A grandmother apparently asked for a pretty and colourful (rainbow) flag to take home to her grandson. A couple of foreign businessmen near the hotel Metropol were watching the gay platform with astonishment. Besides the rainbow-coloured flags and balloons, and the proclamation of free love, there were no indicators of the theme of homosexuality.

**Moscow Pride 2006**

The controversy over Moscow Pride and the rights of gays and lesbians to march through the city became both a national and an international issue. The plans to organise a pride event were announced by Nikolai Alekseev and Evgeniia Debrianskaita at a press conference on June 27th 2005. The Parade was to be held the following year on May 27th, which would the 13th anniversary of the repeal of Article 121, and thus commemorate the day that homosexuality was decriminalised in Russia. The following day the mayor said to a journalist that such a parade would not be allowed. Quite soon a number of religious leaders of various persuasions followed suit and spoke out against the event. Simultaneously a parallel controversy erupted within the gay and lesbian community, in which the majority of the organisers and activists voiced criticism against the plans. There were three main concerns (which I will discuss in more detail below). The primary concern was safety for the participants. The second concern was what the event meant to achieve for the gays and lesbians. Finally, the motivation of the organiser was questioned. A march through the streets of Moscow was considered both unsafe and provocative. No amount of wishful thinking or invocation of the constitution by the main organisers would change the fact that Russia was not anything like Western Europe or North America. Too little time had passed since decriminalisation and the opinion of the general population on sexual minorities was yet too negative. Russian people were considered to be too prejudiced to be trusted not to react violently. Aggression and violence was seen as more or less guaranteed. Furthermore, no one could foretell how the state would react. Even if, against all odds, the city powers did allow the Parade, and nominally promised protection, many did not consider that to be a guarantee of any real safety. The entire announcement was seen as a personal public relations campaign for the main organiser, Nikolai Alekseev who had until then been an unknown figure. The controversy over the march died down after a few weeks. There was little news of the Parade until the issue

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89 The press conference, incidentally, was held to express indignation and protest against the execution of two Iranian youths for alleged homosexual behaviour. The organisers chose a press conference that was taking place on an imagined global stage where they made public their plans to hold an event that not only originated beyond the borders of Russia, but was also, as it turned out, aimed at a public abroad.
resurfaced in the media in late April of 2006. Several right wing groups had discovered the announcement of the gay and lesbian festival Rainbow Without Borders, organized by Olga Suvorova, which was unrelated to the Moscow Pride Festival but mistaken for it.

Events immediately preceding the Parade

Here events took a radical turn. The ultra nationalist right wing group RONS (Российский ОбщеНациональный Союз, the Russian All-National Union) had posted the details about Olga Suvorova’s Rainbow Without Borders festival on their own website, urging people to ‘stop the march of the pederasts’. By the end of April, the organisers of the Rainbow without Borders festival had received enough threats to decide to either cancel or postpone the festival indefinitely. On the night of the first of May, a group of demonstrators gathered outside the club Renaissance Club and tried to sabotage the party that was to be held that evening.90 The demonstrators blocked the entrance and the exits and had the club under siege for several hours. According to eyewitnesses and reports on different Internet sites, the protesting crowd was from fifty to a hundred people, composed mostly of young men, some skinheads and a group of women with kerchiefs, holding lit candles and icons.91 There was also an Orthodox priest blessing the protestors. The demonstration had been organised by RONS. The following night there was another demonstration outside the gay club Three Monkeys. This time the police had held the demonstrators back. Once again the anti-gay protestors had been composed of a combination of young men shouting homophobic slogans and old women with icons and candles who were singing hymns.92 About forty demonstrators were arrested for smashing up cars as they were running away from the club, but not for the picketing itself. They were all soon released, however, charged only with hooliganism. A few days later, it became official that the art club TemAtik had been burned down. RONS took the credit and in photographs online featured young men urinating into the windows of the burned-out locale.93 The word of what

90 Until this I read the news I had never before heard of the Renaissance Club and could not track down any further details online.
91 The kerchief is a sign religious belief. According to strict Russian Orthodox women have to cover their hair before they enter the Church. There is also an old Russian tradition that an unmarried young woman can walk with her long plat plainly visible, but once she marries she will cover her head. In modern times, if a woman covers her hair outside Church, she is making it visible that she is either a devout Christian, but possibly also lives according to old (and truly) Russian traditions.
92 This information is pieced together entirely from news reports online.
93 I was acquainted with the girls who organised TemAtik and therefore heard another side of the story, one that was less known to the wider public. Apparently there had been some friction between the landlord and the previous tenants, involving debts and stolen equipment, and their parting had not been entirely amicable. There was speculation whether this was e a more credible motive, even though RONS had taken the
was happening spread fast. At clubs, at KSP and at the Archive I heard friends and acquaintances talking of being careful when walking in the city. Rumours about what had happened where and to who, were told and retold, often in the familiar form of “a friend of a friend heard”. There were debates about whether going to openly gay and lesbian venues was safe or not.

However, I should make it clear that not all of my informants were panicking. The information about the Parade and the rumours of attacks spread through social networks, both IRL and online, but people who were only loosely or sporadically connected to the networks of tema could remain completely unaware of what was happening. This became apparent when I met up with Natasha, who often avoided the organised lesbian subculture, for a leisurely coffee just two days after the Parade, and she was oblivious to the entire controversy. As I briefly recounted the events she simply said, “Yeah, I heard that someone was planning something and then I was busy, but was that now?” She was demonstrating once again the almost active disinterest in the collectivising aspects of the subculture.

Making sense of the Parade

The anti-homophobic violence did not change the interpretative framework considerably within which gays and lesbians tried to make sense of the Parade. Nevertheless the violence did fuel conspiracy theories and speculations around who was the main agent and what was the goal of the enterprise. In August 2005 only a handful of people had paid attention to rumours of a meeting that Aleskeev claimed to have had with the administration of the President. In May 2006 speculations had gained momentum and people could state offhandedly that he was not the main man behind the operation and that it was pretty obvious that someone had paid good money to have the Parade arranged without any further commentary being necessary.

These discussions of the Parade and the potential forces behind it reveal the conceptual framework within which the Parade was interpreted. Both after the announcement in 2005 and just before the Festival, discussions about the Parade focused on safety. Almost equal in importance were questions about “Who wants this?”, “What for?”, and “What will be the outcome?” Below I will give an overview of the issues interwoven into the debate over rights and wrongs of a public march, and about how the Parade was interpreted. Most of credit for the attack, there were doubts whether homophobia was the premier motive, or at least the only one.

94 The data was gathered primarily through informal interviews, but also from the forums on gay.ru, gaynews.ru and gayclub.ru, and interviews online. After every news item on these different sites, there is an opportunity to leave comments. In the case of gay.ru there were several hundred of such comments about the Parade. Most pages were moderated and the comments on gay.ru were moderated by the editor of the site, Ed Mishin, who had voiced quite strong opinions against the Parade. There was no way to ascertain how many entries were taken out, though there were occasional instances
the contributors were men, as only a handful of women commented on the Parades online, which reflects that gay.ru was a site aimed primarily at men and not women. While the posts may not be representative of the entire gay and lesbian population in Moscow, they provide a forum where people who have actually thought extensively on the matter and who cared enough to respond have written down their opinions. The opinions expressed about the parade, both immediately after the announcement and during the weeks preceding it, were very much the same standpoints as those I read in the comments to the news items. The substantial difference is that written text allowed the commentator to structure his or her argument and expresses more complexly formulated ideas than was possible in conversation.

In discussions about the Parade, both competing and complementary interpretations were presented and weighed against each other. Scenarios of motives, goals and outcomes were drawn up and judged for their respective credibility and desirability. In these scenarios there was a continuing comparison between “here” and “there”, constantly relating what Pride events are abroad to what they could or should be in Russia, and even if they should be anything at all. Opinions were not as simple as “Pride is Western, and therefore good” or “Pride is Western, and therefore bad”; but rather, global and local interconnections were made on many different levels between Russia and the West, on both sides of the argument. However, the overriding problem seemed to be whether the parade was going to be allowed or not.

From the day of the announcement many considered it unlikely that the municipality would allow it. Although Mayor Luzhkov had stated that he would not allow such a parade, the Mayor’s Office commented only a few days later that they had not received any applications for such an event, but that such an application would be processed like any other. Both Debrianskaia and Alekseev were convinced that there were no constitutional grounds to ban a parade. They also noted that after his initial comment, Mayor Luzhkov, and his administration, had been completely silent, and interpreted this as an indication that the mayor had been reprimanded for his promise to ban the Parade. If the Parade was banned both Debrianskaia and Alekseev anticipated an outcry from the democratic communities worldwide and Russian politicians would be forced to permit the Parade to save face internationally. This re-connected the Parade to its Western, almost deterritorialised global origins and placed a considerable amount of trust in the democratic nations to amend and prevent injustices.

where the commentator explicitly stated a post had been deleted, assuming that the motivation that the voiced opinion contradicted the opinion of the moderator. There are also answers to entries that had been removed. Judging from the replies, some original entries must have been homophobic. Almost no homophobic posts remain, nor posts that “incite violence”.

157
A parade: pros and cons

While this was a “time will tell” question, safety was a primary concern of almost all of my informants and commentators online. Many considered the Parade a provocation, as Russian society was not considered ready for a sexual minority to march through the streets of Moscow, regardless whether the march took the form of a festive carnival or a sombre political procession. Not only was homosexuality still considered a disease by the overwhelming majority of the Russian population, but the hardships of life in Russia were considered a serious contributing factor to violence. A demonstration of this kind would only rouse anger by bringing attention to a “decadent” problem at a time when people were starving and dying. Singing out gays and lesbians as deserving democratic rights, often perceived as “special’ rights”, would be perceived as trivialising other issues. Some argued that in all likelihood people would consider the march a transgression, and rather than pay attention to any claims made, people would seize the opportunity to vent their anger and frustration by lashing out on a minority that was practically unprotected by the law. The probable violence against participants might be considered justified. The standpoint that the violence was provoked by the transgression of public space and that “they only have themselves to blame” would nullify the victim status of injured gays and lesbians (Richardson and Hazel 1999).

Another issue that was often raised was the purpose of the march. In his arguments for the Parade, Alekseev himself oscillated between describing the Parade as a “constitutional right that will draw attention to the problems of gays and lesbians and the need to fight homophobia” and a “celebration like it is in other countries”. His adversaries, on the other hand, argued that if the aim of the Parade was to fight for the rights of gays and lesbians, this tactic was dubious at best and perilous at worst. It was more likely to achieve the absolute opposite, increasing homophobia and victimisation of gays and lesbians because people might take advantage of a minority that made itself visible to the public and open to attacks. To present the Pride Parade as a colourful carnival was perceived as naïve, as there was nothing celebratory about throwing oneself into an angry mob. The carnivalesque plans of the Parade also entailed another risk, namely that only the most marginal individuals within the subculture would show up: feminine men in make-up and masculine women. This would fuel the stereotypes against gays and lesbians as being freaks and on the margins of society. The argument that followed was that any “normal and successful” individual would not want to participate in order to avoid being associated with that kind of crowd. The idea that whoever marched the streets would represent the entire population of gays in Moscow was frightening to many.95 Some of my informants found the entire idea of a parade revolting, irrespective of the form and how well mannered the participants would be.

95 As I mentioned above, struggles over meaning and representation do not decrease as the Pride parades and festivals become established and uncontroversial.
I was at KSP, sitting on something that once upon a time may have resembled a couch, quietly sipping my tea, when a heated argument suddenly erupted. The conversation had died down and in order to get people talking again, or maybe out of curiosity, Botsman asked, if the Parade was allowed, whether anyone present was intending to join it. A girl in her early twenties, who had been quiet most of the evening, spoke out quite harshly against any participation and the Parade in general. “I don’t want to be associated with a circus like that. I don’t support it, I don’t want people to think that that’s what lesbians are.” Botsman tried to assure her that people would be quite sober and properly clothed. “We would just walk down the street, wave some flags and then go home.“ “No”, the girl said emphatically. “I’ve said what I think of it, I’m not changing my mind. Maybe people abroad want a commercial freak-show, but I want none of it.” In her eyes the Parade would pollute the image of homosexuality, as if yet another distortion was necessary on top of the already existing ones. She was a normal person. Normal people did not go out and scream about who they sleep with.

The parade was also placed in yet another, specifically Russian context. Especially after the homophobic protests, the Parade was increasingly interpreted as a provocation staged for a hidden political purpose whose scope was far beyond minority rights. Already in August 2005 Alekseev had been compared to the Russian Orthodox priest Gapon who, in 1905, led people to hold a dialogue with the powers that be. The participants were viciously executed and the event was henceforth known as Bloody Sunday. In the United States mass political action, often of a radical political nature, has throughout the twentieth century been an integral part of all major social movements, such as the civil rights movement, the second wave of feminism, and not least the gay, the lesbian and queer movements. In Russia, people interpret mass political movements and radical politics in general within the political and historical framework, which includes the Russian revolution and the radical economic reforms of the 1990s. These are events that have brought unfathomable suffering upon the Russian people, while sparing the initiators. The use of force in dramatic, revolutionary mass action to demand rights was not a course of action judged appropriate in the Russian cultural and historical context. The words “radical” and “revolution” were often said with an odious acidity and made people visibly cringe and offer comments such as “No more revolution, thank you very much. We’re still cleaning up the mess from the last one”, and “Radical action and shock therapy? Not for me, but I can tell you where to put it”. As a tactic to foster tolerance, a public march of gays and lesbians was perceived as inherently flawed. It was often equated with forcing upon people information and opinions that they were not ready for. This would quite rightfully be perceived as an act of violence and the retribution would undoubtedly be repaid in full measure. What might be perceived as radical or subversive in the United States or Western Europe, was often perceived as moronic or suicidal in Russia.
After the initial announcement, the Parade may have been perceived as possible, even if unlikely, to take place. After the right wing attacks on gay and lesbian clubs and the homophobic propaganda on different forums and Internet sites, the idea of a gay parade was seen as both foolish and dangerous. Many of my informants saw no other possible gain in it than simply a personal PR campaign for the main organiser. The campaign was seen as his attempt to place himself in the national and international limelight as the leader of Gay Russia. Alekseev’s plans to hold Moscow Pride were compared to Mishin’s 2004 attempt to register a homosexual marriage with Duma representative Murzin at a Marriage Registry office. The important difference was that while Mishin did not involve anyone else, Alekseev was promising the presence of other people and claiming to speak on behalf of the entire gay and lesbian community. Some called Alekseev brave, admiring his willingness to embark upon such a risky endeavour, yet this admiration was often diminished or neutralized by the risk his plans posed for the subculture. The critique was exacerbated by the fact that Alekseev did not live in Russia, but supposedly with his rich boyfriend in Paris. This, it was said, was how he got the money and the connections in the first place. Elena Grigorievna noted that this distance was revealed more than once during a television show when Alekseev misspoke using the pronouns “you” rather than “we” when he referred to the Russian gays and lesbians, in whose name he was speaking and whose lives he was risking.

In the end there were too many details concerning the Parade that did not make sense to my informants. A public march was not the way to improve relations with the majority population; the streets of Moscow were not the place for a carnival of feathered drag queens and dykes; very few in the subculture were actually in favour of the Parade; and after the pickets and the vandalism of gay and lesbian venues and the threats against both organisers and ordinary gays and lesbians, Alekseev was no longer considered to be the main agent behind event. It was suggested that he was being used: someone wanted this event for some reason, and Alekseev was either ambitious or greedy enough, or both, to put other people in danger to build his own career as a “leader of Russian gays and lesbians” on the international stage. It was never quite clear who was pulling the strings. In a few cases, it was implied that Western gay activists, en masse, who, in the well established manner of cultural imperialism, wanted to spread “their” particular type of gay culture and had found a fool they could pay to do it for them. But far more frequently the finger of blame was pointed at the Russian government. A little more than a week before the Parade I was having coffee with Masha from Labrys Msk and asked for her view on the situation. She immediately drew my attention to the group that had taken responsibility for the burning of the art café TemAtik and the people who picketed clubs. “Look at these boys! They aren’t organised, they don’t have anything. They come from the lowest classes. The only thing they can organise is a bottle of vodka for the evening. They’re simply paid off to do this. And the
interesting thing is, I found out, that they get their money from a church organisation. And they in turn get their money from the FSB. This is of course not widely known.” When I asked her to further elaborate on who had done this and for what purpose she took another slow puff on her cigarette, made a long dramatic pause, and simply concluded: “Somebody wants it”. This was the final innuendo of most conversations on this subject.

The role of the Orthodox Church as a co-conspirator in the anti-gay violence follows a long and troubled relationship that the Church has had with both Russian tsars and the Soviet government. Peter the Great brought the Church under the direction of a bureaucrat of the Tsar and the Soviet regime unleashed a war of repression almost immediately after it took power. During World War II, Stalin, who apparently felt he needed help in rousing the troops, briefly revived the Church but the persecution was re-launched again during the leadership of Khrushchev (Gessen 1997). The Church was in a subservient position to the state and most of the people in the Church hierarchy were affiliated with KGB. In 1991 and 1992 when the archives of the KGB were opened, several such affiliations became public. The relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and state power took another turn when in 1995 Patriarch Alexei II was given his own quarters inside the Kremlin. In the 1996 presidential race, all the major candidates identified as Russian Orthodox believers and promised that they would make Orthodoxy the state religion (ibid.). The church became an instrument of the Russian government officials to establish authority and to differentiate themselves from Soviet leadership linking themselves to earlier Russian rulers. Today all of the lavish church rituals at Christmas and Easter are televised, often showing the presence of state officials. The church and the state have become allies in the re-establishment of authority through an appeal to “tradition”, in this way strengthening the reactionary tendencies in Russia.

Conspiracy theories

Masha’s statement was in full agreement with a sentiment that was regularly voiced during discussions of the Parade. For some unknown, or unknowable, reason, someone wanted the Parade to take place, and the motivation was either to draw attention from other events or simply to stage an exhibition of strength. The imagined script was as follows: gays and lesbians would march into the streets, be beaten up either by fascists or the police, or both, and the general public would not consider them victims since they had no business flaunting their perversion in the public space in the first place. Irrespective of whether the state used force or demonstratively neglected to prevent violence, the outcome would be perceived as justified. This would have been done at the expense of gays and lesbians who would end up either in hospitals or cemeteries. Human rights agencies, LGBT organisations or other countries were not included in these theories whatsoever. In the words of one of my informants:
“The Russian government is sitting on the pipe that provides Europe with oil and could care less about the indignation of European democracies”. In the public discussion of the organisation of the Parade, its main organisers were often lumped together with established politicians and other actors of the political stage, assumed to be a realm almost fundamentally separate from ordinary people. Russia has one of the highest levels of mistrust against social institutions, especially politicians and democratic institutions and it is commonly stated that “democratic procedures are pure show business” (Shlapentokh 2006:157). These ideas not only illustrate the different frameworks within which people made sense of the Parade, but also the assumptions of the mechanics of politics and power. The speculations about the ultimate motivations and goals behind the Parade suggested that there was more to this than met the eye. These speculations about the ultimately unknowable mechanics of real power are what West and Sanders refer to as occult cosmologies, a “belief in a world animated by secret, mysterious, and/or unseen powers” (2003:6). It is a plea to take conspiracy theories seriously insofar that one accepts that invisible powers sometimes produce visible outcomes. In contrast to the calls for transparency in many democratic countries and organisations, in Russia there was an almost laconic resignation to the fact that real power will remain out of reach, and perhaps most importantly, out of sight. The ability of power to obscure itself is reiterated by Garsten and Lindh de Montoya who come to the ironic conclusion that transparency, a process intended to reveal the inner workings of organisations and governments, can in fact hide as much as it reveals (Garsten and Lindh de Montoya 2008:4). In Russia, and even more in Soviet times, many people believed that the truth and what was proclaimed as truth was not the same thing. Stories published in newspapers did not necessarily convey what had actually happened. Just as there were entire cities that were never placed on maps, there were events and motivations that were never disclosed to the public. With machinery as great and prolific as the KGB, and its successor FSB (Federalnaia Sluzhba Bezopasnosti, Federal Service of Safety) and other agencies, there were entire cities that were never placed on maps, there were events and motivations that were never disclosed to the public. With machinery as great and prolific as the KGB, and its successor FSB (Federalnaia Sluzhba Bezopasnosti, Federal Service of Safety) and other agencies, 96 Trenin notes that the Soviet Union worried more about its image than the leaders of Russia who have reconciled themselves with the fact that no matter what they do, Russia will get bad press, so why bother (Trenin 2006).
97 On trust and post communism see also Lovell 2001.
98 The relationship between the visible and the invisible that has a long and steadfast history in Russian culture where being visible is rarely equated with power, but instead with being vulnerable, or weak. It is the ability to make invisible, and in the end unknowable, that signifies true power. The dichotomy also has anchorage in superstitious beliefs widespread in Russia most notably the “Evil eye” is based on visibility coupled with envy and jealousy. The logic is that when people see your wealth or happiness, they will wish that you lost them. To parade your wealth, like it is done by the nouveau riche “new Russians” is not only in bad taste, it is also unwise. Elena Grigorievna once explained that when asked, “How are you doing?” smart people rarely say great or wonderful, even if things are really wonderful. Maybe it was superstition or maybe it was a heritage the forcefully equalised Soviet life, where attaining quality goods was hard and people were resentful to those who had it better than they had themselves.
most people considered that there was substantial evidence for the belief that
there are undisclosed forces and motivations operating in the world. Ledeneva
has noted that in line with the informal structures of Soviet times Russian poli-
tics and business use tactics that “downplay the rule of law and the principle of
fair game, relying instead on nontransparent rules of the game in order to main-
tain the manageability of its subjects” (Ledeneva 2006:73). Thus she reiterated
the point that politics and business are arenas separate from the general public,
and ruled not only in a non-transparent, but also a manipulative way. So rather
than urging the authorities and the media to disclose or reveal these forces,
people took for granted that they existed and preferred to distance themselves
from the field of events in order to not get caught in the line of fire. The logic
was that it was better to minimise participation in a game where the rules were
not disclosed and where you could easily lose your life.

Two diametrically opposite opinions about the Parade could be described
with the phrases “if there, then why not here”, and “there, and therefore, not
here”. According to the former position, Russian gays and lesbians should fight
for their rights just like Western counterparts, and in the same particular way.
Russia should strive to become a Western democracy where the rights of mi-
norities are respected and where everyone has a right to voice an opinion. The
second position held that what was acceptable, or possible, in the West was not
necessarily possible in Russia. This could be phrased in a more categorical way:
If you want to participate in gay pride parades, pack your bags and go abroad,
temporarily or permanently. Similarly, Alekseev was often compared to the
priest Gapon in his role of stirring up mayhem, yet as a counterpoint, one
commentator called his project “to be Peter the Great of gay Russia”. To this
epithet there were opposing interpretations. One was that Alekseev was aiming
to go down in history as a pioneer, Westernising Russia like Peter the Great had
done. Another, from a more practical point of view, was that he did not have
any qualms about stepping over dead bodies in order to realise his idea. The
discourse around the Parade reflected not only issues of trust within the subcul-
ture itself, among and between organisers and followers, but also towards the
Russian government, a slippery conglomerate of agents with ever-shifting but
obscured and self-gratifying objectives.

Guarding privacy

The harsh recriminations amongst organisers could on the one hand be inter-
preted as the inevitable bickering that seems to plague any kind of minority. On
the other hand they can be perceived as a way to punish Alekseev for deviating
from the established form of political discourse and action, as a considerable
part of the discussions inevitably was focused on what would be the appropri-
ate form of activism, which must be understood in the wider political history
and culture in Russia. The political slogan “the private is political [i.e. public]”
wields little power in a country where the private was abolished ninety years
earlier with the statement that “nothing is beyond the interest of the party.” What automatically counted as private space in other countries was not constituted as such in the Soviet Union. Not that there was no privacy at all, but rather that privacy was not equal to private space, but to a circle of people whom one could trust, svoi (Yurchak 2006; Tuller 1996). In public people dissimulated the private self, that was enabled to exist somewhere else. The Pride Parade presupposed that one would reveal one’s ‘real’, or private, identity on the street. This would not only bring the private into the public, but it would also disintegrate the private realm as such, granting anyone and everyone access to the most intimate details of life. The Pride Parade was also a direct interaction with the state, not to mention a provocation for a direct confrontation. It violated one of the fundamental principles governing the relationship between political discourse and everyday life, firmly established during Soviet time, which was the minimisation of entanglement with the state. The Pride Parade can be seen as a challenge to the tacit agreement of not rocking the boat. Kharkhordin notes that “In late Soviet society the refusal to play by the unwritten rules of dissimulation is an abnormality to be punished” (Kharkhordin 1999:277). This stance is also described by Yurchak (2006) who characterises many Soviet citizens being equally contemptuous of dissidents of the state system as to the state system itself. By their objections dissidents brought people to stand in opposition to a much greater enemy, making people’s lives even more miserable. Alekseev was the “dissident” among the gay activists who by openly confronting the state powers created problems for everyone else and got rich in the process.

The Moscow Pride Festival

Before I move on to the Parade, I will briefly outline the festival of which the Parade was a part. It was held in the five-star Swiss Hotel near Metro station Paveletskaia. The premises looked almost deserted when I arrived. After the sabotage, threats and vandalism against gay and lesbian venues, and the cancelled Rainbow Across Borders Festival, I had expected at least some kind of

99 It should be noted that dissimulation as a fundament of the constitutive divide between the public and the private sphere in the Soviet Union is an outline of how the public and private sphere came to be in the very specific circumstances of the early Soviet era. The data that Kharkhordin (1999) relies on is from the times of the purges and thus dissimulation was not only a question of privacy but of life and death. Dissimulation presupposes habitual lying in situations considered public.

100 For a more elaborate discussion on being outside the system see Yurchak (2006:128ff). Yurchak also includes an anecdote about dissidents that illustrates this point: “A big crowd of people are standing in a lake of sewage coming up to their chins. Suddenly a dissident falls in it and starts shouting and waving his hands in disgust: “Yuck!! I cannot stand this! How can you people accept these horrible conditions?!” To which the people reply with quiet indignation: “Shut up, you’re making waves!” (Yurchak 2006: 278).
ruckus. But there was nothing. I guessed that the disenfranchised youths and old women in kerchiefs had been scared off by the security staff strolling outside the entrance and by the bored militia in bulletproof vests. If that had not been enough of a deterrent, perhaps it was the phallic architecture or the $10 water in the bar in the lobby. There was no way to be sure. Men in suits with walkie-talkies were pacing the lobby. As I arrived I saw Evgeniia Debrianskaia, one of the organisers, leaving. In one of the rooms a session was being held. Forty to fifty people were in the room, most of them men. A quick glance around revealed that most were foreigners save for two girls in the row in front of me, shifting in their seats from boredom. They left after the very next intermission. I stayed to listen to the activists and ponder upon the connection between this session and the title “The day of Scandinavian Culture” that had been advertised in the programme of the day.¹⁰¹

There I was, in a five-star hotel, in a room full of foreign activists eager to fight for the rights of Russian gays and lesbians at an event that only a handful of locals had turned up for. But despite the best of intentions, calling this a globalised event was questionable. Even though the participants were from many different countries, similar to an international summit, this event was far from being straightforwardly globalised in its materialisation. While the event itself was multinational, far from all of its participants were multilingual. For instance, it turned out that there was nobody present who could translate directly from French to Russian which meant that one of the papers had to be translated twice, first into English and then into Russian, which, besides being immensely comical, made the text almost completely incomprehensible. Again this was a reminder that globalisation is not a straightforward process, and that the assumed cultural imperialism can be cancelled out by incomprehension. The following day Alekseev was informed that the district court had upheld the decision of the municipality not to allow the Parade due to security reasons. Now the organisers had to choose whether to give up on the idea altogether or to hold an unsanctioned gathering. The immediate reaction from other gay organisations was to issue a warning, advising people not to take part in the Parade. The final decision was to be announced at the press conference the following day before the scheduled Parade.

Re-framing the Parade

On the morning of the Parade, the press conference area was buzzing with anticipation and there were more journalists and crew than there had been par-

¹⁰¹During the intermission I decided to mingle with some of the participants. Ironically enough, the first person I happened to strike up conversation with turned out to be a student of political science from Lund University in Sweden. He had been in Russia for a couple of months, gathering material for his master’s thesis and just happened to be there in time for the festival, the Parade and all the controversy.
participants at the Festival, making this the main event. Nobody knew whether there was going to be a parade or not. Not only had the march not been allowed but RONS (Russian All-National Union) and other right-wing fascist groups had announced a counter-march in the central part of the city, to protect the city against this invasion of impurity. As the conference started, organisers and participants at the Moscow Pride Festival spoke in descending order of importance; first Alekseev, then Debrianskaia, and then various guests from Europe. Alekseev spoke of the rights of gays and lesbians and the fight against homophobia and prejudice. Before speaking of the Parade, however, he subtly changed the subject and began talking of his grandfather who had lost his life in the Great Patriotic War. He said his grandfather would have been appalled by the knowledge that the same people that he had fought, were now walking in the streets of Moscow. Gays and lesbians needed to protest against the rise of fascism in Russia, to demonstrate that the current events were not acceptable. He proposed that everyone who wished to do so, should join him and lay flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier by the Kremlin Wall. Alekseev underscored that this was an individual decision and an individual action. Debrianskaia also called out to all friends who had the courage, to go out into the streets of Moscow to join them, but added that she would surely understand if they did not.

This was a complete re-framing of the event. While the Parade had been planned to be in the centre of Moscow, the route outlined in the application had not followed any major street, let alone approach the ideologically sacred ground of a national monument. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier with the Eternal Flame is a memorial to the Great Patriotic War. On big national holidays the laying of flowers at this site is a rigorously orchestrated ritual. “The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the Eternal Flame were once associated solely with honouring the memory of fallen heroes but acquired with time a wider and deeper signification. In the official rhetoric it symbolises not only the sacrifice of the fallen soldier during the Great Patriotic War but also the sacrifices of the entire Soviet people, as well as the eventual triumph. As many other World War II monuments it underscores unity among the people and the sensation of invincible power after victory” (Lane 1981).102 References to the war were almost sacred, and so were the places of monuments.103 On one hand the change of plans could be perceived as a more benign choice, because gays were no longer marching for their rights, but protesting against the recent outbursts of fascism and right-wing violence. The move, however, was controversial po-

102 Even people who have left Russia at a young age and are not the least bit interested in Russian culture in any shape or form underline the unequivocal heroism of the Russian people, a victory that, in the eyes of many Russians, was achieved almost single-handedly.

103 Here I do not count the Poklonnaia Gora, a commemorative park that is ridiculed by almost all Muscovites for its horrid monuments by Mayor Luzhkov’s favourite sculptor Tsereteli.
The Great Patriotic War is one of the core symbols of Russian national identity, everyone knows about it, almost everyone has family members who fought or perished in the war or were in other ways seriously affected by the war. It is closely interwoven with ideas of Russianness, being the heroic feat of the twentieth century, a proof of the tenaciousness, undefeatable nature and willpower of the Russian people. The sites of commemoration are heavily laden with ideology. As noted by Mayo "[s]hrines and commemorative rituals are war memorials that emphasise sacredness . . . these spaces and artefacts become hallowed ground, and any blemish like trash or graffiti is a sacrilege to the persons whose memory is being commemorated" (Mayo 1988:63). This decision had also moved events to the very heart of the city. The gathering was to take place right under the wall of the Kremlin, the seat of power in Russia.

After the press conference the atmosphere in the conference room was marked by a sense of elation and anticipation; everybody knew that something was about to happen. This was the day. One of the delegates from ILGA (International lesbian, gay, bisexual and intersex organization) was walking around with the flag of the European Union tied around his neck as a cape. It was a very symbolic sight: the European Union as the superman who comes to the rescue of oppressed Russian gays and lesbians. In the hall outside the press conference one of the crew was handing out rainbow flags to the participants. The flag was not small but about a 40x60 cm, which would ensure that it was noticed. Since the action was supposed to look like a number of individual decisions, the instruction was to keep the flag hidden until one was actually placing the flowers at the grave. I placed mine in my pocket (where it remained for the duration of the day). Until the very last moment it had been unknown whether there was going to be a Parade, or where, and people who were not at the press conference, i.e., the overwhelming part of the gay and lesbian population in Moscow, had no immediate way of knowing what had been decided. The information slowly spread through personal networks by way of text messages and word of mouth.

104 He was also the one who was later attacked by a woman at the gates to Aleksandrovskii Park, and was arrested.
Figure 7. The view away from the gates of Aleksandrovskii Park as I was making my way across Manezhnaia Square. The militia and the OMON are there, but not particularly worried as the crowds are yet scarce and no one seems very sure about what is going on. (Photo by author)

The Parade unfolds

As I made my way across the open space of Manezhnaia Square to the gates of Aleksandrovskii Park by the Kremlin wall, it began to rain in earnest. The riot police OMON were standing in long lines or in groups, some of them joking and smiling, obviously not in a work frame of mind, or not quite yet anyway.\textsuperscript{105} It soon became apparent that the gay activists were not going to be allowed to lay flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the Eternal Flame, as the gates of the Alexandrovskii Park were closed and several police officers were posted outside. This was supposedly due to some kind of holiday and nobody was let in to the memorial site. The crowd outside the gates was a motley one: there were men dressed in white guard uniforms from the time of the Russian revolution, and others were dressed as Cossacks. Closer to the gates I recognised people from the Moscow Pride Festival and I assumed that somewhere in the dense bustle right by the gate, the organisers of the Pride festival, Nikolai Alekseev or Evgeniiia Debrianskaia, were making a statement before the swarming journalists who dominated the crowd. Most journalists were not able to get close enough to ascertain what was going on. They seemed to be unsure

\textsuperscript{105} The OMON (Otryad Militii Osobogo Naznachenia) is a special unit of the militia. It was founded in 1979 before the summer Olympics in Moscow. They are deployed in high risk scenarios such as “hot spots” in Chechnya and during various hostage situations.
whether they should stay there or if they might be missing out on action elsewhere.

Figure 8. The crowd outside the gate to Aleksandrovskii Park. Inside the tight circle of journalists was one or both of the organisers of the festival. (Photo by author)

I saw a man strolling back and forth at the edge of this restless jumble of journalists, spectators and participants. In one hand he held an umbrella and with the other he took out a small rainbow flag from inside his coat and waved it in front of him, cautiously, carefully, but smiling. As soon as the dynamics of the crowd changed and people began to move, he hid the flag quickly into the inside pocket of his coat, turned around and got lost in the crowd. A man waving a tiny rainbow flag amidst a crowd of journalists, police and gawking spectators, but being sure that he hid it again before too many noticed: the perfect peek-a-boo parade!

There was a brief bustle and Nikolai Alekseev was whisked away by the police. During the ensuing lull the crowd of journalists had begun to slowly dissolve, but then suddenly they were stampeding past me. While I had been paying attention to the crowd at the gates to Aleksandrovskii Park, a large group of protestors had gathered behind me. The journalists had just noticed this crowd too, and were eager to document this new development of events. By now the riot police had been put to work, separating groups of people to make the crowd manageable.

Again there was a lull while the journalists recorded their footage of the anti-parade protestors. As the crowd began to thin out at the park gates, some of
the gay activists who had stayed there had decided that, since they were not
allowed inside, they were going to lay the flowers they had brought for the
Monument of the Eternal Flame right there at the gates. This was noticed by
some anti-gay protestors who ran to this spot, almost like a charge, in defence
of the sacred site, chanting “Moscow is not Sodom!” and other homophobic
slogans. On the heels of the anti-pride protestors came the journalists, stam-
peding right back to the gates to document the confrontation, which beside
chants included some old women in kerchiefs who began throwing eggs and
tomatoes at the Western gay activists, who I recognized as representative from
one of the visiting organizations that had spoken at the Festival. It astounded
me that the women came so well prepared, and with a rather odd sense of hu-
mour, I noted that the tomatoes were really nice ones, some measuring larger
than a fist. A policeman was standing just a few feet away, conspicuously doing
nothing. I took a mental note of his relaxed posture and amused smile as he
watched the old women hurling their tomato missiles at the Western activists.
But one of the women was more heavily armed: she decided to throw a water
bottle at one of the gay activists. She then proceeded to shout at him and hit
him over the head. Some of the other gay activists screamed for the policeman
to intervene. The policeman did intervene, but by promptly arresting the gay
activist who was being targeted. I ran in to the activist in question much later
that day, and overheard him recounting that he had been held in custody for a
few hours and then released.\footnote{I ran into the activist at an underpass later that
day, he seemed quite all right but extremely annoyed.}

If I seem to be relating these events with an inappropriate measure of com-
edy this is only because they appeared as such to me at the time, and they reso-
nated with my dark sense of humour, as there was in fact a large dollop of trag-
dedy to the events. The day played out like a sinister slapstick comedy with a
strong undercurrent of malevolence. Hostility was flowing aimlessly in all direc-
tions, often verging on violence and chaos. By now it was raining hard, the
square was full of people and the crowds were separated by lines of OMON,
but since there was no natural centre of events, no plan as it were, people were
walking back and forth without direction, trying to anticipate what was going to
happen next, trying not to miss anything.

I was walking with Emil, the masters student from Lund, and Nick from
Minnesota, another gay activist that I had met at the press conference that day,
and as we made our way through the crowd a young woman with a kerchief,
fashionably tied behind the neck rather than under the chin as the old women
do, was trying to manage talking on the phone and hand out leaflets at the same
time. When she noticed me looking at the papers she was handing out she ig-
nored the phone and turned all of her attention to me. Looking straight into my
eyes she asked me with some urgency whether I knew of the work they were
doing. I honestly answered that I did not. And she handed me a leaflet. Of
course, she had no way of knowing that I belonged to the “other side” and as I took the leaflet from her hand I felt very much like a spy. As I was eyeing the leaflet, the woman went back to her telephone. A group of passing Cossacks were apparently in a hurry to make their way further up the street and I suddenly found myself amidst a sea of black uniforms. For several moments I was like a tiny rock in the middle of a black river, washed over from all sides by. Once again I felt like the one from the other side, acutely aware of my own vulnerability. My first thought was “What if they knew, what would happen to me then?” but I immediately realised that this was an utterly irrational thought. There was no way they could tell, but yet it felt creepy. 107 As I found my way back to my companions, Emil and Nick, I realised that they had found themselves in the very same situation, just a few feet away from me. After the black avalanche had passed, we had to joke about it to ease the situation. It felt good not being here alone; walking through these crowds together made this entire event much less terrifying. Looking back, I think that it was more than safety in numbers that made us stick together as we gave each other the opportunity to distance ourselves from the violence and hostility. We could talk to each other and comment on the events 'from a scientific point of view'. This enabled us to keep fear at bay, as the position of an observer or commentator was more detached. Thus we gave each other the opportunity to be commentators, and to ignore the fact that many of the protestors were actually protesting against ‘us’, which included numerous suggestions for more brutal action.

107 With the exception of the events of Moscow Pride 2006 there is very little mention in the dissertation of homophobic violence or even hostility. The primary reason is that with the exception of two drunken brawls at the Pushka, there were no firsthand accounts of homophobic violence in my research. There could be several possible reasons for this. First, people were generally quite careful not to be provocative and while girls and women would go hand in hand and kiss publicly they would take care where they did so as the central streets of Moscow were considered far safer than the residential areas on the outskirts of town. Also, the fact that I was studying women rather than men may also have been a contributing factor. Two women holding hands in the street attracted far less attention than a male couple. Apart from the immediate vicinity of the major gay clubs I never saw men holding hands, while for females this was not unusual. Two informants had been taken to doctors and psychologists when they came out to their parents. In both cases the doctors had told the mothers that “while lesbianism was unusual, it was “perfectly normal”. One of the mothers was not satisfied with this answer and sought out second, third, fourth and fifth opinions, all of which agreed with the first, before she gave up.
Multiple perspectives

There was no organized marching, nor were there any easily recognisable bystanders standing on the sidelines, booing or cheering. Gay activists, anti-gay protestors, journalists and the police were moving back and forth, and any small confrontations were almost immediately quenched by the police. There was division between participants and witnesses, and it was impossible to separate the audience from the event itself. Many of those who wandered around in the rain had come to see for themselves what was going to happen rather than participate. By doing so, they became part of what they came to watch. Moscow Pride as an event includes not only the planned march of gays and lesbians that did not happen, but also all of the other actors who played a role in the events of the day as well as their respective perspectives.
The event represented not only a struggle over the right to march in public space, but also a struggle over the framing of the event. All of the different sides had their own perspective on the situation: the anti-gay protestors were defending the sacred Russian soil from sin and debauchery that came in the guise of imperialist Western homosexuality; the Western gay activists were taking a stand against the homophobia in Russian society and the tyranny of the Russian state; the right-wing groups protested against the illegitimate march of gays and lesbians through the streets of Moscow. The journalists did not express any opinion in particular but by their mass they embodied proof that this issue was important and newsworthy. The uniformed and civil policemen as well as the large numbers of riot police were the ‘neutral’ forces of the state, who did not express an opinion one way or the other but rather performed their duty and functioned as human barriers to keep one side of the conflict away from the other. With the help of journalists and reporters the story made BBC, CNN and DeutscheWelle, presenting yet another perspective. All of these perspectives and struggles combined to shape the event as it played out, and the final event was the sum of these different opposing scripts and performances. The several different dramas fused into a complex performance of Russian identity, Moscow space and their relationship to democracy and global community.

Moscow as a sacred space

As I was slowly making my way up Tverskaia Street, I passed a group of men murmuring among themselves and shouting to passers-by, informing one and all about the appropriate course of action with people who were threatening the future of Russia. While their intentions to execute their plans were dubious at best, they specified their dream scenarios in no uncertain terms. The preference for punishment was equal parts medieval and Stalinist, fluctuating between the fairly straightforward gulag or bullet in the back of the neck to the far more spectacular action of setting on sharpened poles.

I moved away quickly, not wanting to hear further details. I then saw a man in his late thirties, wearing ragged black clothes, his long tousled hair flying into his face. He was holding a large beautiful icon with silver embellishments and his unshaven face was marked with anxiety and desperation rather than anger and hatred.
He was shouting out his protest to anyone who would listen, holding the large icon as a shield in front of his chest, as if to ward off the evil threatening him. Several different camera crews paused in front of him, prompting him to deliver a longer, and dare I say more coherent, presentation of arguments. I stopped, as did many others. “I have three sons to raise; they’re all teenagers. Life is hard enough as it is. There are drugs and violence, I have to struggle to keep my boys safe. Now this, all these foreigners, with their skimpy outfits,
their little t-shirts, preaching that debauchery is normal! I cannot allow it! We have to fight this! It isn’t Russian, it’s a disease.” I remarked to myself that the gays this man was so earnestly protesting against were at that moment not even visible to him. There were no trashy little clubbers in skimpy outfits marching down the street, waving flags or holding banners, and since the few gays that did show up looked nothing like what the anti-gay protestors had expected, they remained unnoticed. This led me to conclude that there are upsides to stereotypes; people who do not adhere to them pass unnoticed.

This incident also pinpointed that the opposition to the Parade was to a large extent expressed through visual and symbolic means and all of the central symbols were easily recognisable from afar: kerchief, candle, and icon. These symbols turned the streets into a battlefield where the symbols of Orthodox Christianity became the primary symbolic weapons against homosexuality and Western influence. People were constantly on the move, in order to arrive somewhere or to stop someone else from arriving there first. Icons and candles were held up as shields, hymns were sung as if to ward off evil and impending doom as the religious protestors attempted to maintain the sacred purity of the streets of Moscow. The gay activists and the would-be Parade participants had no symbols with which to counteract this onslaught, first because they would then be effectively ‘outed’, but also because the only protective powers they could invoke were democracy and human rights, which have few easily recognisable and emotionally evocative symbols. The “reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers” (Turner 1995 [1969]: 20) in this case referred neither to ghosts nor spirits, but to morality, tradition, or democracy. In the Russian context the somewhat abstract notion of democracy, faintly verified by the Constitution of the Russian Federation and questionably guarded by the court of European Community, was wandering the streets, present in its influence, but far too ethereal to make a substantial contribution. Both the gay activists and the anti-gay protestors approached the public space as symbolically charged, almost sacred, to be either conquered or protected.

Pride as a media event

The centre of Moscow had become not only a sanctified space to be conquered or protected, but also a stage, where actors played their respective parts. The gay activists came, gave their speeches before the cameras and all parties responded, with the inevitable arrest that had been predictable from the start. After that, it was the anti-gay protestors’ turn to stand in the limelight, with their icons, slogans, and righteousness. The Pride parade was a media event

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108 This is also undoubtedly because there was no easily recognisable target upon which the brewing violence could easily be unleashed, which made the symbolic markers all the more prominent.
from the very day it was announced. Many of the major players who had ventured into the streets had done so with the intention of being on camera, or at least of being seen and photographed. This was true for the main organisers of the Parade as well as the anti-gay protestors. Media coverage was one of the motives behind it, as it would bring attention to the situation of gays and lesbians in Russia. The ensuing discussions and the controversies had played out in the papers, television, radio and online. Journalists played a significant role in the events of that day, not necessarily by promoting opinions or emotions either for or against any particular side, but by providing the seeing and documenting eye. Camera crews scurrying through the crowds of people and police, rushing from one huddle of people to another in order to catch the action, were a significant part of the events of the day. Through their very presence they provided a cue for performance, prompting people to sing, hold the icons a little higher or to extend their proclamations of views and opinions. Almost everyone was filming or taking photographs, be it with a camera or a mobile phone, which ensured that everyone was aware that the whole world could be looking. At the end of the day the reports on major news networks such as CNN, BBC and DeutcheWelle proved that the world had actually been watching and the visual documentation was not a by-product or an after-effect of public action, but a crucial component of it (Meyer 2006). The only familiar person I met during that day was Lena Kidanova. We suddenly recognised each other when I was standing by the crowd around the gates to Aleksandrovskii Park. She was soaked, but grinned broadly when she saw me, and said, “Thanks for the text, were it not for you we wouldn’t have known where to go.” Kidanova was one of the people who had sent me texts while I was at the press conference held by Alekseev and Debrianskaia. Like so many others who did not attend the press conference of the Moscow Pride Festival, Kidanova had no chance of knowing whether the Parade was happening or not. She told me that she had been trying to make her way across the square but OMON had already sealed it off. She and a friend were making a film about the Parade, but now the friend with the camera was somewhere in the crowd. I asked whether she had seen anyone else and she mentioned a few names and added, “They’re filming somewhere on the other side” and made a broad gesture toward Tverskai Street. She needed to find her cameraperson and we said goodbye. The amount of images from the events of this day was mind-boggling, and they would all be weaved into different stories, and different people were going to be pointed out as heroes and freaks, different people depending on who was telling the story.

The camera as many different things

The camera is not only a witnessing eye; sometimes it can also be used as a shield, a way to distance yourself from events. To be a witness is to exclude oneself from the category of victims. When I ran into Lena Kidanova at the
gates to Alexandrovskii Park she was wet and grinning. The progression of events had only begun to gain momentum and she was caught up in the excitement of getting it all on tape. She was seeing events, if not through an actual lens, then via a photographic frame of mind. Just a few days later that hyperactive drive had settled down and the reality of the event had begun to sink in. She was heading into a minor depression, she said, because of the fact that she saw how much hatred there was in this country and how much evil could be poured out against someone you did not know. She not only realised that what was said that day had been said about her, but also how hopeless that situation was, and how could anyone expect any progress with a people this stupid and hateful. She was glad that she had remained unnoticed, and wondered if gays or lesbians could ever walk the streets in Russia openly and safely.

Once again, the line between spectator and participant shifted, blurred, inverted and disappeared. Seeing the Parade in the frame of the news story, everyone who showed up on the streets was a participant, one way or another. “Spectacle includes its audience in very complex ways. It is affected by the nature of the audience, both the actual crowds who watch and those who are imagined to be observing. Furthermore, the audience is part of the spectacle, is itself spectacle, and its ways of participating—audience performances—may reconstruct the nature and meaning of the spectacle itself” (Aull Davies 1998:142). The crowds and the cameras were there to document, but this attention had been anticipated from the outset; it had been one of the fundamental ideas. Since the function of parades is to make something visible, to be seen, this of course requires ‘seers’. From the widest possible interpretation of participation, the Parade also included the people who were following or monitoring events from other parts of the globe, since it was organised to show both that there were gays and lesbians in Russia, but maybe most importantly that there was homophobia.

In the reports on DeutscheWelle, BBC and CNN the invisibility of easily recognisable gays and lesbians underscored the difficult situation for gays and lesbians in Russia. The footage from rainy and gray Moscow was implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, juxtaposed with images of rainbow flags, music, floats, and sunshine, images of what a Pride usually looks like, or more precisely should look like. The rainbow flags that had been distributed by the organisers of the festival immediately after the press conference had remained hidden away in pockets and bags throughout the day. The people who had been recognisable as gay, both to cameras and to the crowds were either activists standing at the gates of Alexandrovskii Park with flowers (and there was nothing other than the flowers that had made them identifiable), or the publically open organisers of the Parade. After the flowers had been thrown to the ground, there was nothing left. The only Russian gays who had been identifiable throughout were the main organisers: Debridskaia and Alekseev.

The parade was definitely over when the OMON had separated all crowds into splintered groups and blocked off the plaza around the statue to Yurii
Dolgorukii and left people little choice but to head towards the Metro. On our way back Nick and I were stopped by a camera crew. The Italian journalist asked us if we could say something about the events of the day and Nick stepped obligingly in front of the camera. As he was talking of his own motivations to be there and gay and lesbian rights in general Nick took out the rainbow flag that had up to that point been stashed away in his pocket and unfolded it before the camera. Just at that moment, for the first time that day, the sun broke through the clouds.

Figure 11. My last photo from Moscow Pride 2006 was one of one of my companions that day, Nick, smiling into the sunshine, holding up a rainbow flag in front of an Italian television crew. The most visible rainbow flag I saw that day. (Photo by author)
Epilogue: City day in St. Petersburg

It is interesting to compare the Moscow Pride Parade with the City Day celebration in St. Petersburg that took place on the very same day. If one overlooks the pouring rain, the photographs from the two events could not have been more different. The City Day celebration in 2006 was held on Nevskii Prospekt, the main street that stretches through the centre of St. Petersburg. This is the street that always gets a new coat of paint before any festive occasion, be it visits of heads of state, sporting events, or celebrations such as City Day. As a part of the general festivities a local gay club, Tsentralnaia Stantsia (Central Station) was staging a show. The stage was decorated with rainbow coloured balloons and flags. Young men with beautiful tanned bodies danced in the rain, dressed at times in skimpy outfits. They were background dancers for a variety of drag artists who worked at the club. Onlookers huddled under umbrellas and interchangeably gawked and enjoyed the spectacle. The art director of the club told me that when they had submitted the application to take part in the celebrations of City Day to the municipality, they had expected some kind of resistance, but the answer came back in two weeks without any fuss and they could promptly begin preparations for the show. One of the performers remembered that everything had gone surprisingly smoothly. “We could not take a car because the streets had been closed off. And that’s a good fifteen-minute walk. Before we even began the walk to the stage we had to wait a good twenty minutes outside the club. This in full drag! You know, wigs, make-up, everything. We were bantering and talking in an exaggerated feminine style amongst ourselves and there could not have been any doubts about our sexual orientation. But there was no aggression. People paid no heed, they were just happy it was a holiday and you could stroll on the main street drinking a beer. I remember that during the performance there was one drunk man who started yelling some kind of objections, but the rest of the audience shushed him, telling him that if he didn’t like the show, he could go somewhere else.”

The only criticism of the show came from the religious community. The reason was that, by a coincidence, the stage happened to be placed immediately outside a Catholic cathedral. As far as I was able to piece together information from the press and online forums, there was no homophobic violence, and no protests, spare some articles and discussions in Live Journal. On the online religious forums and sites people mostly expressed condolences for those Christians who had suffered from this kind of godless behaviour and the only response from the mayor’s office was that the organising committee of the City Day celebrations should perhaps be more careful when choosing entertainers next year. A correspondent of a gay website interviewed some of the onlookers. Their responses were by no means representative but contained some interesting answers. One of the onlookers objected to the fact that the show was allowed on the most central street of the city, in the very heart of St. Petersburg. The Parade should be allowed, he argued, but in a more appropriate place like
Tchaikovsky Street. The man was obviously linking his interpretation of geographical place to the composer’s sexual preferences, which have become widely known during recent years. This suggests that there was a perception of city space as heterosexual, with the exception of designated areas. Unfamiliar with the male gay culture of the city, the man was not able to pick the ‘right places’, and he did not know that since the late nineteenth century the Nevskii Prospect had been a locus of homosexual spaces in St. Petersburg (Healey 1999, 2001), and thus his choice was motivated by association.

The City Day Celebration in 2006 was very similar to the Day of the National Flag in Moscow in 1998 where a gay club was responsible for adding a colourful touch to a more general celebration. In both cases they were acting with the cooperation of the administration. As Pride parades these were ‘secret’, and only those in the know, who were able to recognise the signs, were able to read the situation. These two unofficial Pride events can be conceptualised as public performances of gay culture, perhaps more in the theatrical sense of the word. They were done without any direct confrontations, neither with the authorities nor with other gay and lesbian organisations. They incorporated some of the carnevalessque aspects of Pride parades, featuring drag queens, and men in excessive make-up, feathers, balloons and sometimes very little clothing which was very close to the imagery expected by people both within the subculture and outside it who were opposed to the 2006 Parade in Moscow. The two unofficial Parades were not serious events, nor were they particularly political. In both cases they passed without much notice in the national press, and no notice at all in the international press. The announcement to organise a Pride Festival in Moscow in 2006 was by contrast followed by a media storm that was only outdone by the media frenzy surrounding the Parade itself. Here I would like to suggest that it was the spectacularity and theatricality of the Pride demonstration during National Flag day on Novyii Arbat Street in 1998 and the City Day celebration in St Petersburg in 2006 that allowed these events to be so easily accepted and allowed with almost no notice. Both incorporated a division of space, separating stage and the audience which allowed the spectators to uphold several distinctions, first the one between themselves and the actions on stage and second the distinction between make-believe and real life. They could enjoy the spectacle while not being compromised by it (Savigliano 1995).

Conclusions

The invisibility of Russian gays and lesbians on the streets of Moscow was obvious both to casual spectators and in the news reports on the international networks. The lack of easily recognisable gays and lesbians can be taken as evidence in support of the statements of anti-gay protestors that homosexuality was not Russian. In its most simple form the statement was clearly erroneous. There were gays and lesbians in Russia, quite a number of whom were actually
on the streets during Moscow Pride. But the statement does make sense if one takes into account that the only people who were recognisable as gay were either not Russian, as in the case of foreign gay activists, or Russians with strong links to the West, as is the case of Alekseev and Debirianskaia. If one turned the argument around one could say that participants in the Pride Parade were imported, just as the Parade itself was an imported event. Furthermore, full participation seemed to have required prior experiences of similar events.

The Pride parade was a very controversial form of activism, even within the gay and lesbian subculture itself. The motives behind the event were questioned and its main organisers were accused of doing business rather than striving for progress or any benefits to the community.

Freedom, safety, violence and control were central issues in the debates over the Pride parade. In their everyday interactions within the subculture the freedom to be openly gay or lesbian was weighed against the awareness that the subculture imposed a certain level of constraint. In the case of the Pride Parade there was a more pressing concern about physical safety, both in the short and the long term, that made gays and lesbians choose to either stay away or attend the Pride incognito. The identity politics of lesbian movements in the Russian setting demanded crossing the boundary between ‘official-public’ and ‘private-public’ sphere. This was not only a move that was considered a transgression in terms of appropriate or inappropriate, but also in terms of safety and of everyday common sense. The prevailing opinion was “the fewer interactions you have with the state, the better”, and this logic ruled everything from everyday interactions to those with bureaucratic structures. The Pride Parade was a gay and lesbian political movement modelled on the tactics and strategies of the American and European counterparts. It was based on a visibility to state structures that fits uneasily within the logics of everyday life in Russia. The decisive point was that it was unclear for most of my informants for what purpose they were taking a risk and what consequences it might have in the future. The fear was not only of the homophobic violence from the general public or neo-fascist groups, it was also fear of the ambiguous position of the state and the unpredictability of its motives and future actions.
During the conference *Ona+Ona* in November 2003, Marina, a representative from the gay and lesbian rights organisation Labrys in St. Petersburg, recounted her experiences during a visit to San Francisco where she had participated in a workshop for LGBT organisations. She remembered the open and festive atmosphere of the Castro Day celebration, which consisted of a parade on the main street of the gay neighbourhood of San Francisco. She showed pictures of the parade so the listeners could fully grasp the difference between that locale and the one we were in. People were dressed in S&M regalia, lots of men were in leather or drag, and they were all smiling at the camera in the sunshine. We looked at these pictures as we sat in a cold basement in the midst of the cold Russian winter with wind howling outside. The difference in climate, both in terms of weather and politics, between “here” and “there” was not lost on the participants. Another exotic feature of San Francisco that fascinated Marina was something she referred to as the “Pink Pages”: a telephone directory that advertised companies owned and run by gays and lesbians. “If you want, you can call a cab or get a plumber from ‘your own’ people”. She also described with great delight the inauguration of the big, newly built LGBT community centre, underlining that the mayor of San Francisco was not only present, but also inaugurated the centre. This detail underscored that the gay and lesbian subculture in San Francisco had a relationship with the municipal/official powers that could hardly be hoped for in Russia. Marina summarised by saying that “this life does not exist here, but it is something we could strive for”, indicating a positive role model yet with a sense of unattainability. However, during an informal discussion later in the evening she elaborated on her view. Even though life was much more open in the West, she also perceived it as overly controlled and constricted. Marina had travelled to other Western countries, both on holiday and for sports competitions, and from what she had seen she had concluded that while all the practical aspects of life were well arranged and expedient, there was no way to get out of the system. “Yes, of course it is cool that you can call a lesbian plumber, but you will not be able to get a ‘special’ rate. You will be charged a bill that you have never dreamed of,” she said, “and there is no way to get around that. That’s the Western system; that’s how they live.”
Marina’s comments reveal that the same qualities that make the West appear as a model are the same qualities that make it undesirable to fully emulate. Depending on the context, the dichotomy between Russia and the West tended to switch polarities. What was desirable in one context could in another context easily become undesirable; good could become evil and then good again. In Russia, a lament over the lack of logic, reason and predictability could transform into a celebration of freedom, which could become an even greater lament over the boundlessness, violence and absurdity of life there. Yet the boundlessness could just as easily be perceived as a positive manifestation of the vastness of the Russian soul. This vastness was often compared to the vastness of the Russian soil, thus conflating geography and metaphysics. The practicality and orderliness of life in the West could also be perceived as a flaw, in which it was depicted as a suffocating cage where everything worked in straight lines and according to established rules, making life too ordered, predictable (read boring) and ultimately ‘dead’, whereas the quirky, mysterious and often chaotic everyday life in Russia allowed freedom for both thought and action. This freedom was often equated with a soulfulness, with an emphasis on feeling as opposed to thinking, being ruled by your heart rather than your head. However, the ‘Russian soul’ was not always perceived as a blessing; it oscillated between being a strength and a weakness as it not only made Russians complete human beings but also gave them irrationality and stubbornness, which precluded them from achieving what many Russians wistfully referred to as ‘normal life’ and order.

In sum the West was an Other that was continuously remodelled within somewhat determined parameters to serve as an opposite, a positive or a negative, depending on the requirements of the situation. Marina’s comments pointed to an awareness that the LGBT culture was not only a liberating movement that brought rights and protection against injustices, but that it also operated through a wider cultural logic that was, at least in part, alien to post-Soviet Russia.

Western LGBT culture was perceived to be based on implicit assumptions about the division between the private and public and the relationship between group identities and individual identities. This point is poignantly reiterated by Pilkington who notes that “while young Russians aspire to the Western standards of living, however, they do not seek to emulate the Western standards of ‘being’ and where spiritual life is concerned, young people remain firmly rooted to the local” (Pilkington and Bludina 2002:20). Here being ‘Western’ is what Russian youths perceive as Westernness rather than an actual Western way of life.
Globalisation

There have been many debates about the nature and implications of globalisation and global cultures. In many cases globalisation has, by and large, been used synonymously with Americanisation, or the cultural imperialism of the West. Globalisation as an unequal exchange between centre and periphery does hold some truth, but far from the entire truth (Hannerz 1996). To understand global cultural flows it is important to look not only at the origin and the direction of the flows, that is, how cultural products from a particular region end up in varying locations around the globe, but also at what actually moves and what stays put, and finally, at what these cultural products come to mean in their new settings and how they are interpreted and used. When it comes to the direction and force of actual cultural flows, the relationship between centre and periphery has often been depicted as one of coloniser and colonised. There is no doubt that the cultural apparatus and PR machinery of large corporations seriously outweigh the resources of local producers. But it is not only things and cultural forms that spread across the globe. So what is it that travels, and why do some things travel better than others?

Images can travel at the speed of a satellite signal or an Internet connection; however, the meanings and contexts that make images intelligible move far slower and less completely, if at all. These disjointed flows, or “scapes” theorised by Appadurai (1996), are a very useful idea, because they remind us that just because the same images crop up in all corners of the globe should not lead one to conclude that that they mean the same thing everywhere or are used in the same way. In this sense, an image can be akin to a symbol, perhaps even a combination of symbols, multivocal and open to different interpretations in different contexts (Turner 1995 [1969]). This does not mean that a symbol can be assigned any meaning, only that there are variations. One such travelling image is the Pride Parade.

As was exemplified by the controversy surrounding the Pride Parade in Moscow, it could be interpreted through vastly different frameworks. The representatives of the gay and lesbian movement were perhaps the most fervent proponents of the Pride Parade, and its form of globalised and globalising flows, while the Russian state and its citizens were taking a more cautious stance. The Moscow Pride Parade can be conceptualised both as the globalisation of a ‘generic’ Western gay and lesbian culture and as a conduit of a general globalising process. Gay Pride events have perhaps become some of the most flamboyant examples of globalised gay and lesbian culture. The Pride parade and other similar events have become something of a global franchise, almost like a calendrical rite of gay culture (Johnston 2005; Puar 2002a, b). Beside national Pride parades and Mardi Gras, events such as Europride, Worldpride and Gay Games are hosted by different cities internationally. Today there are hun-
dreds of events in over 140 different countries. The different events display many similarities, both in terms of symbols and their focus on visibility and “gay pride” as opposed to shame. Pride parades have increasingly becoming an economic and political event that attracts attention not only as a marketing event, as companies aim to attract the “pink dollar”, but also as a political platform where local and national politicians include gay and lesbian issues in their campaigns. Last but not least they are a marketable feature, in that a gay and lesbian subculture adds a trendy and even cosmopolitan touch to a city (Bell and Binnie 2004; Waitt 2005; Markwell 2002; Puar 2002a, 2002b). At this intersection of politics and commerce, Pride events have become something of a global franchise, similar enough to be recognisable while at the same time retaining a local flavour (Johnston 2005; Puar 2002a, 2002b).

Another aspect of the globalization of the Moscow Pride Parade was its news value, which was taken into consideration by its organisers from the very outset. Not only was the announcement of the Parade made at a press conference held to protest against human rights violations in Iran, but the organisers counted on the support, both moral and financial, from Western countries. The Parade was intended to make big news both within Russia and abroad. The main organisers hoped that a high level of media coverage would influence the Russian government to act in accordance with the democratic ideals, if for no other reason than to save their reputation in the international political community. In this respect Moscow Pride did not disappoint, as it was covered by CNN, the BBC, DeutcheWelle and other international news outlets and thus it became a part of the global news flow. Not only did the news of the Parade make it into the bulletins of gay and lesbian organisations, but it became a part of national politics as well. In Sweden, it was at the height of the campaigning by national parties for the upcoming parliament election and many Swedish politicians used the behaviour of Russian politicians as a juxtaposition to their own open-mindedness and commitment to core democratic values. These global and local flows all contributed to the shaping of the Moscow Pride Festival in various ways. While the supportive statements of Swedish politicians never made it back to any of my informants, it did place Moscow on the political map once again which was exactly the intention announced by the organisers of the Parade. The event also brought the world to Russia.

The numbers are taken from various listings of Pride events online. http://www.gaycityusa.com/pride.htm focuses mainly on events in the USA, even though it does feature other countries. Another similar resource is the List of LGBT Events on Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_LGBT_events.

How similar or different these events are in terms of meanings and experiences is a question that remains to be investigated.
Academics and activists

Although they were fairly inconspicuous in day-to-day life, the interest of journalists and researchers played a significant supporting role for the organisers and key figures within the gay and lesbian subculture in Moscow. Academic and activist interest in the subculture played an integral part in the Russian gay and lesbian movement since its beginnings in the early 1990s (see Chapter 2; also Essig 1999 and Tuller 1996). Western activists provided both the funding and organisational skills during the lesbian conference in Moscow in 1991 that sparked off the Russian gay and lesbian movement. During this period Western organisations provided the opportunity for activists to travel abroad, not only to show and tell, but also to see, experience and perhaps learn for themselves (Essig 1999). Some of these contacts were rather brief and more or less mercantile in nature, while other contacts have survived for several years and grown into long-lasting friendships.

The fact that both academics and journalists have text-based professions made the Archive an almost obligatory stop for visiting scholars, irrespective of whether people knew about the Archive before going to Moscow or if they found out during their stay. Elena Grigorievna’s language skills and personality, in combination with the considerable amount of literature and the easy network possibilities, made the Archive an international node for academics and activists, who played an important part in spreading a vocabulary and sometimes an ideology in a more intimate setting, but also in providing opportunities to re-conceptualise ideas about gay and lesbian identities and lives.

Lena Kidanova especially enjoyed the international visitors that occasionally turned up at the Archive. Since she had some knowledge of English she could understand and evaluate different ideas and interests as well as share some of her own opinions. Sometimes we discussed her conversations, comparing the usefulness of this or that analytical perspective and its applicability in Russia. When she organised a conference in 2005 she made sure to time the conference so that several of the recurring academic visitors to Moscow could attend and use the opportunity to extend their academic network while in the field. Olga Gert, the editor of the radical feminist magazine Ostrov, was another person who took pleasure in academic discourse, and has since my time in the field visited academics in the United States. In these instances the synergy of the global aspects of both the gay and lesbian subculture and academia created opportunities to foster transnational networks and friendships. The knowledge of, and connections to, Western gay and lesbian organisations, as well as the different social projects, and even the occasional talk of more explicit activism, are manifestations of a global gay and lesbian subculture, which is often conducted through the agency of individuals.

The Archive and KSP were spaces where global flows became available to ordinary people in a very mundane and unremarkable way. Through their interests and hobbies Elena Grigorievna and Botsman, the central figures of the two
spaces, drew the attention of their visitors outside Russia’s borders, creating windows to the world.\textsuperscript{111} It is not at all surprising that oftentimes it is a particular interest that brings people into contact with each other. Hannerz notes that transnational cultures, of which the gay and lesbian subculture is but one, serve as bridgeheads to further immersion into other cultures. The gay and lesbian subcultures can be conceptualised as “transnational cultures [that] are bridgeheads for entry into other territorial cultures. Instead of remaining within them, one can use the mobility connected with them to make contact with the meanings of other rounds of life, and gradually incorporate this experience into one’s personal experience (Hannerz 1996:108).

\textbf{Individual cosmopolitanism}

Botsman took the enthusiasm for exploration and adventure that had been an important part of her whole life to a new level. This time it was not a question of geology, but of a transnational, even global gay and lesbian subculture. Often she spoke of her travels in the same terms used by the Soviet state when lauding the adventurous expeditions into the north during the colonisation of Siberia. When she recounted her travels, to Sweden and Norway for example, she often jokingly used the narrative tropes of an explorer: “establishing a route”; “conquer new territory”. In one way this vocabulary was almost ironic, but at the same time hiking and exploring remained a central part of her life. Botsman saw herself as something of an explorer of the gay and lesbian subculture. She often referred to the contact and connection she had with people in other countries as “our person over there”, in this way underscoring the overarching unity. These people were small beacons of light in a vast territory that was yet to be discovered. This thirst for discovery followed suit with both the romanticism of nature during the 1960s in Soviet times, which drew on earlier traditions of exploration, discovery, and adventure, as well as Botsman’s own interest in geology. Botsman’s desire to travel as cheaply as possible and live simply was at once a practical imperative, considering her modest means, and the result of a solid ideological conviction that true value in life cannot be bought with money. To be happy one needed little more than a good tent, a fire, and a guitar.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{111} I was from the outset particularly interested in ‘ordinary’ people, people who do not have high incomes or glamorous jobs that bring them into close contact with transnational or global networks and perspectives. Ordinary is of course a very relative term; and compared to the situation of gays and lesbians in other parts of Russia, my informants were very well-off, both economically and culturally. Moscow had quite a lot to offer in terms of the gay and lesbian culture and the availability of overall entertainment in general.

\textsuperscript{112} Unwittingly, Botsman has taken on at least a part of the ideology of backpackers and the preoccupation with authenticity within tourism. While backpackers consider avoidance of the big tourist places a way to experience a culture un-spoiled by the tourist
Botsman’s self-image as an explorer was also traceable in the video films she made of her journeys and screened at her club. These films were not tourist images like “Botsman and a statue of X”, “Botsman and a view of Y”, “Botsman eating typical food Z” and so on. They were rather akin to fractured glimpses of an explorer’s log: a short pan around the cabin at the ferry across the Baltic Sea, a shot of the bar on the same ferry, the rainy streets of Stockholm as seen through the wet window of a bus at dusk on a January afternoon.

All this could perhaps be more telling of Botsman’s proficiency as a filmmaker, but at the same time these images were not the film of a tourist. They were the images of an explorer, where the film required constant commentary to be intelligible. It was perhaps especially important that the travelling itself figured in the narrative, and this travelling was not spectacular in itself, as perhaps the sights and sounds of the airport in Singapore might be to a first-time traveller.\footnote{Here it might be prudent to insert a note on the fact that as a person who had lived a considerable part of her life in the Soviet Union, and as someone of modest means, both economically and professionally, and without good connections, Botsman may not have expected to have the possibility to travel abroad until quite recently. This partially explains her fascination with the documentation of her travels.}

At the same time, Botsman’s trips were also an inspiration to some of the women who came to her club. A somewhat unusual example was Nadia, one of my informants in Moscow whom I ran into at Stockholm Pride in 2007, a year after Botsman visited Stockholm. During Soviet times Nadia had been married to a South American and after the fall of the Soviet Union travelled to many different countries, at first as an entrepreneur and later sponsored by her children. Despite her considerable experience in world travel she had never dared to venture into local gay or lesbian cultures on her travels until she followed in Botsman’s footsteps, so to speak, to Stockholm. What Botsman’s trips to Sweden provided was not only an “established route”, something that I have no doubt that Nadia could have managed on her own, but also a few contacts and a possibility to utilise an already existing social network. Botsman had a contact in Stockholm, someone who was not only a friend, but also a part of the gay and lesbian subculture and thus coming out became redundant and unnecessary. While she was by nature a very cautious person, constantly wary of divulging her sexuality in any way, Nadia had nothing against using an established contact to find subcultural spaces. When I met her at the Stockholm Pride Festival, an accepting environment, she was open, sociable, and made new contacts and friends easily. As the event was quite established she not only felt physically safe, but also sheltered by the anonymity of the large crowds. Due to the popularity of the event and the prolific participation of the general public, not everyone was automatically assumed to be lesbian or gay. If Nadia had found herself industry, to Botsman simplicity is almost an existential conviction. Even though she never speaks of the soul or soulfulness (Pesmen 2000), I have no doubt that she considers songs sung around a campfire to be more “real” and enriching than anything experienced in a club with a drink in hand.
in a situation she perceived as compromising she could have claimed to be a curious spectator. Nadia posed an interesting example where the old, perhaps almost Soviet, reliance on contacts was coupled with the desire and ability to travel to new and places and meet new people. This had a lot to do with her age and the fact that she had concealed her sexuality her entire life. A reliable link was needed for Nadia to feel comfortable at the Pride Festival in Stockholm.

Subcultures as springboards for cosmopolitanism

To the four frames outlined by Hannerz I would like to add a fifth: the subcultural frame, which would allow to more closely capture the variation of connections and flows that are enabled and maintained through subcultures and social worlds. While the movement framework is at base political, the political forms are only one part of the subcultural movement and do not dominate it. Subcultures are highly receptive and conductive to transnational cultural flows and networks. Globalised cultural flows and Internet communication allows subcultures to draw on a wider variety of cultural repertoires. Images, music, film, and literature tied to specific interests have become globally available and are no longer bound to the national markets as they have become globally available. The development of information and communication technologies has enabled cultural networks to be maintained on a transnational, even global level, without entirely forfeiting their face-to-face mode of interaction.

While in some cases increased interconnectedness and faster communication simply increases the number of participants and contributors and thus the cultural flow, in the case of the gay and lesbian subculture, contacts with activists beyond Soviet borders was an important formative activity. The common interest is also the ground for social interaction as it easily provides the common denominator that facilitates communication. As subcultures spread over several nation states, perhaps even continents, the subcultures open up to both global influences and foreign local cultures, as people remain connected to their local and national networks. Through interaction within a subculture on a more general and globalised level there is therefore the possibility to connect to another local, more specific culture.

The globalised flows and influences, both specifically in the lesbian subculture as well as in Russian culture and society in general, varied between the easily recognisable to the subtle and almost obscure. On the one hand, it was the desire for something more or different than what was readily available that directed the searching gaze beyond the national borders. On the other hand, it was also the availability of the images or echoes of these other places within Russia that attracted the attention outwards. During my time in the subculture, the West was most often glimpsed through juridical developments or sociocultural trivia. In many cases the interest in how gays and lesbians lived somewhere else was not so much an interest in the other, as it was an interest in the
same, simply because there was often an underlying assumption that “we are lesbians and therefore similar”. It was more a question of envisaging your own life with slightly different circumstances, quite similar to the “home plus” (Theroux 1986:133 cited in Hannerz 1996:104). At the same time this initial curiosity could lead to a deeper engagement, either intellectually from a distance or more directly through travel or online communication. Here the seed of cosmopolitanism is not a “willingness to engage with the Other” (Hannerz 1991:239) but a willingness to engage with the Same, a Same that will with great probability be recognised as Different. The initial interest in “people like me” did not cancel out but rather opened up a path to curiosity, knowledge and appreciation of differences, a window to a cosmopolitan view of the world. The gay and lesbian subculture may be a special case, as it intertwined similarity and difference. At the base of the curiosity about the lives of gays and lesbians around the world was the assumption that there was a shared trait or circumstance that placed them apart from the surrounding culture. At the same time the difference of circumstance, the different countries and cultures often undermined the assumption of universality of gay and lesbian experience. As many of my informants came into contact with other gays and lesbians from around the world through the global networks of gay and lesbian subculture they became more aware of both similarities and differences. The gay and lesbian subculture, in its cumulative global form, provided possibilities both of a wider engagement with the world and of a more keen awareness of similarities and differences.

Concluding reflections

After my fieldwork was done and the dust had settled, in both the literal and the metaphorical sense, I embarked upon the complex task of writing up the final analysis of my findings. The stereotypical image of gay and lesbian subculture paired with the assumptions of what was and was not possible in Russia almost turned the phrase “a lesbian subculture in Russia” into an oxymoron, at least to the people I spoke to in the West before going into the field. However, just because it was not as visible as its Western counterparts did not mean that it did not exist or was heavily repressed. The goal of this work was to provide insight into the everyday life within the lesbian subculture in Moscow within the context of post-Soviet Russia along with the incorporation of increasingly available globalised images of gay and lesbian cultures.

The first chapters provided a short background and a general overview of the lesbian subculture in Moscow, its internal structure, and a report of everyday activities. This was followed by an exploration of unique practices and traditions within the subculture concluding with the influences of global cultural flows, both the spectacular and the mundane. The considerable heterogeneity within the subculture due to the wide variation in age, education, and interests
motivated the perspective that the subculture is a loosely coherent network of smaller social worlds (Strauss 1978, 1984; Unruh 1980). These smaller networks were centred around different interests and activities, several of which followed well-established Russian cultural traditions: Botsman’s small club, KSP, where women could meet and listen to music and poetry together, was a subcultural variant of the Russian singer/songwriter tradition; the Archive, a gay and lesbian library on the outskirts of town, was a modern continuation of literary salons and the Soviet kitchen; and the Pushka, the favoured hangout of the youngest cohort of lesbian girls, followed the general urban culture of hanging out in parks. These overlaps underscored that subcultures were not internally homogeneous, but rather had considerable overlaps with both the mainstream culture as well as other subcultures. The different social worlds had established meeting spaces and centres of social interaction and activities. While the social networks, geographical networks, and networks of information and communication were overlapping and interdependent, they were also to a certain extent independent of each other, and people could be involved in the subcultures to varying degrees. This, coupled with the variety of social worlds and smaller networks—spatial, informational, and social—made the subculture a flexible network of networks (Hannerz 1992b).

Despite the permeability of its borders and its heterogeneity, the subculture was occasionally perceived as homogeneous enough to be potentially oppressive. While it provided a safe haven from the homophobia prevalent in Russian society, the subculture was potentially equally restricting, though in a different way. There was a constant balancing between belonging to a community and remaining independent from it and outside of it, drifting in and out of the flexibly interconnected networks. While lesbian women appreciated gay and lesbian places and crowds, to restrict one’s social life to such establishments was often perceived to be narrow-minded, because it could be equated with a complete submission to a different collective.

During Soviet times most social life took place within the “private-public spaces” (Oswald and Voronkov 2004) with close-knit networks of friends. In 2005 gays and lesbians, aided by the free market, could meet anywhere they pleased, such as restaurants, cafés, clubs or parks, or they could organise their own clubs and activities. These possibilities were not available in Soviet times. Only occasionally did private spaces retrace the history of the Soviet kitchen and double for public meeting spaces. More often public spaces, such as bars or parks, became partially private because the social interaction within a group was only or accessible to outsiders only to a limited extent.

The existence or size of a subculture was not determined by its explicit visibility in public space and media. However, the visibility of a subculture did reveal its relationship to the state powers. The interest of the state in controlling and ideologically streamlining the public sphere in Russia was not as extensive as it had been during Soviet times. During my fieldwork the gay and lesbian subcultures were tolerated and, to a certain extent, accepted, as long as
they remained structured as private-publics. The relationship between gay and lesbian visibility, access to public space, and public political claims became especially apparent in the juxtaposition between the events of the Moscow Pride Festival and St. Petersburg City Day celebrations. The highly politicised claims of the Moscow Pride made the event very controversial and alienated possible participants, while the apolitical subversion and queering of public space during the City Day celebration went more or less unnoticed by the press and state powers though it attracted a considerable crowd of spectators and supporters. The subculture was easy to overlook, but also easy enough to find if one knew where to look or what to look for. Familiarity with the visual and linguistic codes of the subculture enabled members to recognise each other but remain relatively anonymous to outsiders.

Visual communication and linguistic cues within the subculture often retained a considerable level of ambiguity, which left the option to detract any statement or alter one’s position should one desire to do so. This was a crucial skill as homophobia was more or less taken as a given. “Russian people are very homophobic” was a blanket statement I heard many times, both in interviews and in interaction. However, while many of my informants were keenly aware of the risk of being a subject of hostility, and of the violence if they were not careful, they did not always ascribe this to pure homophobia. It was more often chalked up to ignorance and the lingering influence of Soviet misinformation rather than any actual opinions. Many of my informants explained that people in Russia had been pushed to the limit by economic and political crises, violent conflicts, and the sheer chaos of everyday life, but that there was no outlet for all this anger and frustration and it remained bubbling under the surface, threatening to spill out at any provocation. Gays and lesbians could easily become the target of violence, not necessarily because they were the most hated, but because they were acceptable targets. And as the events of Moscow Pride demonstrated, there was more than enough homophobia in Russian society, just as there was plenty of racism and sexism. The prevalence of aggression and hatred did not spur my informants to fight for a more tolerant society; rather, it made them even more determined to keep out of its way. The unspoken rule for dealing with the situation was to be discreet, that is, to pass as heterosexual, and the only widely accepted course of action was to patiently try to build up tolerance. The general attitude towards political activism within the gay and lesbian subculture was that one should not force one’s opinion on other people, nor should one expect people to be able to deal rationally and calmly with information that was completely alien and shocking to them.

114 A meagre consolation in all respects, this stance managed to unite pessimistic resignation with budding optimism. It was a resignation to the fact that the majority of people were idiots and brutes and that one should keep out of their way as much as possible, while at the same time a belief that this condition was not entirely their fault and could perhaps be changed.
Another contributing factor to the ill regard for gay and lesbian political activism was the fundamentally different attitude that was common among my informants towards political activism in general and politically motivated groups in particular. The evidence of the successes of provocative activism in other countries was outweighed by the suspicion towards confrontational and “revolutionary” measures and the Russian state as such. At the beginning of the twentieth century a minority violently overthrew the government in the name of an oppressed majority to build an equal and just society. However, this society turned out to be neither equal nor just, but rather violent and oppressive to the people in whose name the Revolution was staged. In Russia the prevailing attitude toward the state was as follows: “The fewer interactions you have with the state, bureaucrats, or officials, the better”. Any interaction with the state on political issues, whether as a group or an individual, was widely believed to have a potentially lethal outcome, because journalists and human rights activists had been mysteriously murdered.

Even as people gained access to new meeting spaces in cafés and restaurants, these tended to remain private-publics, accessed through social networks or social codes. I interpret this as a perpetuation of the Soviet division between an official-public sphere that more or less belonged to the state and private-public spaces where a large part of the social life took place. The slogan “the private is political”, which was used by the Western second wave of feminism, and later by gay, lesbian and queer activists, which brought matters previously considered private into the political debate, would in a Russian context be rather tautological, since Soviet private life was thoroughly politicised. In a post-Soviet Russia the phrase would be “the private is political – again”. This would be a step back rather than forward. From this division of spaces aggressive or controversial political activism was perceived as a re-politicisation of the private-publics and a potential threat to the future existence of the subculture. While the increasing influence of the market had created a multitude of possibilities for the gay and lesbian subculture to become established and grow, it had also imposed certain restraints, as to what was possible had become inevitably linked to what was economically viable. The short life span and migratory nature of many gay and lesbian clubs underscored the difficulty to maintain a venue; however, this was the case for all types of venues in Moscow, not only gay and lesbian ones.

During my fieldwork the situation within the subculture was continuously compared to and juxtaposed with situations in other places and times. The ‘elsewhere and elsewhen’ comparison was a way to illuminate a particular condition by contrasting it with similar yet different situations. The comparison between ‘here’, ‘there’, ‘now’, ‘then’ and ‘someday’ was not only a way for my informants to daydream and imagine their lives as different, and often better, but also a way to place the here and now in a cultural and historical context and try to find possible avenues of action. These possible actions were then, often implicitly, placed within an imagined trajectory of Russian national politics. If
the political developments were perceived as auspicious, there were grounds for optimism, and being a part of the lesbian subculture could perhaps become more like being a minority in a Western democratic society. However, if the political climate turned more totalitarian, and in Russia this assumption was more than justified, being outspoken or even merely a participant in the lesbian subculture could quickly become a liability, as something that was allowed one day could be frowned upon the next. The question of openness in relation to national politics was made acute in the controversy over Moscow Pride, where the power of Russia’s democratic laws were pitted against Russia’s totalitarian past, and at the time, the totalitarian past was perceived to have the upper hand. The future of gay and lesbian activism is closely tied to the political climate in Russia in general. It is doubtful that the attitude toward political activism within the subculture in general will improve radically, considering the already precarious position of minorities. This, coupled with the nascent totalitarian tendencies in Russia, give little hope for any openly political activism, or its success. However, since the first Moscow Pride in 2006, Nikolai Alekseev has organised two more Pride Parades both of which took place with far less attention both from the media and the subculture. There have also been other festivals, such as the Queerfest in St. Petersburg in 2009 and 2010. They were not widely publicised and did meet some resistance, but they took place nonetheless. While there is little reason to assume that the political climate as a whole will change, or that the Russian government will allow minorities or oppositional groups to gather freely, the various events continue to take place, even if they do so in the grey zone between public-private and private-public spaces. These events do make gays and lesbians visible to society in general, and perhaps most importantly to the younger and more open-minded cohorts of society.

But perhaps most importantly, the subculture continues to exist for the benefit of gays and lesbians, as flexibly interconnected network of networks, often operating through different layers of publicness and privacy, and spaces often being simultaneously open and closed. This was mirrored in the negotiations and articulations of identity, where a premium was placed on open-ended and multilayered positionings that could be read in different ways, sometimes retracted if they were interpreted in ways that were not intended. Living as a lesbian in Moscow often entailed living in multilayered places, negotiating open-ended identities and commitments. It involved being more or less constantly aware, even if it was in the back of one’s head, that tomorrow things could be different, that the subculture, the country, even one’s own identity and desire to participate or belong, could be quite different. It was with this possibility, that many chose to keep their options open. On the one hand this openness was similar to keeping a door open, in case of the need to flee, but more often it was more like keeping the window open to let in the fresh air.

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115 See queerfest.ru for more information.
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activism
   and competition among
     organisers, 71
   and pride events, 151
   and Western funding, 45
   avoidance of, 73–74, 159
     in a Russian context, 163
   aftarskaia piesnia, 85, 86
   AIDS, 42
   aktiff/passif, 26, 135, 136, 137, 139,
     140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146
Alekseev, Nikolai, 70, 72, 91, 153,
   154, 157, 158, 159, 160, 163,
   164, 165, 166, 168, 169, 176,
   177, 181, 194
Anderson, Benedict, 25, 52, 55, 76
Appadurai, Arjun, 184
Ashkenazi, Michael, 20
Ashwin, Sarah, 21, 31, 139
Augé, Marc, 102
BBC, 173, 176, 177, 185
Blackwood, Evelyn, 138
   blat, 35, 59
Botsman, 53, 71, 72, 74, 82, 84, 85,
   86, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 97, 99,
   119, 126, 127, 159, 186, 187,
   188, 191
Boym, Svetlana, 21, 32, 33, 36, 85,
   86, 89, 98, 128, 131, 153
Bucholtz, Mary, 130, 131
   butch//fem//klava, 26, 135, 136, 137,
   139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144,
   145, 146
   the relationship to
     butch/femme, 138–39
Butler, Judith, 138, 146
Butler, Ruth, 105
carneval, 180
CNN, 173, 176, 177, 185
conspiracy theories, 162
Cresswell, Tim, 97, 104, 105
daik, 136, 140, 142, 146
Debrianskaia, Evgeniia, 40, 43, 44,
   45, 64, 69, 70, 71, 117, 157, 165,
   166, 168, 176, 177, 181
DeutscheWelle, 176, 177, 185
dissidence
   common perception of, 37
Elena Grigorievna, 12, 17, 71, 93,
   94, 97, 98, 99, 106, 115, 126,
   129, 131, 132, 160, 162, 186
Engelstein, Laura, 28, 29
Essig, Laurie, 15, 20, 35, 43, 45, 67,
   68, 107, 186
Eurovision Song Contest, 14
ex-native, 17
flexible interconnectivity, 55
foreigner clause, 17
frames, 23–24
Garsten, Cheiatina, 11, 162, 216
gaydar, 124, 125
gender
   reconfiguration of roles, 30–31
glasnost, 40–41
   and sexuality, 41–42
goluboi (light blue), 57, 117, 118
grammaticalised gender, 127, 128
Grimshaw, Anna, 124

Halberstam, Judith, 138
Hall, Kira, 130, 131, 134
Hannerz, Ulf, 11, 14, 22, 23, 24, 51, 56, 84, 107, 111, 184, 187, 189, 190, 191
Healey, Dan, 20, 29, 30, 31, 33, 34, 39, 67, 123, 131, 135, 180
Hiestand, Katherine, 138
home plus, 190
homophobia
and class, 108–9
in Russia, 73
homosexuality
criminalisation, 29, 34
decriminalisation, 13, 15, 20, 22, 29, 154
House of Culture, 61, 71, 87
Humphrey, Caroline, 40
hyphenated identity, 142
Höjdestrand, Tova, 102
information and communication technology
and censorship, 39
Johnston, Lynda, 105, 152, 184, 185
Kharkhordin, Oleg, 32, 33, 36, 150, 164
kommunalka, 32, 33
Kon, Igor, 28, 29, 30, 32, 34, 38, 39, 42, 43, 45, 76, 94
KSP, 16, 53, 71, 77, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 99, 106, 111, 127, 156, 159, 186, 191
Kulick, 28, 130, 134
Lane, Christel, 40, 149, 152, 166
language
gay and lesbian language, 130–31
gender in the Russian language, 129
gender switch and sexual scripts, 134
gender-switch, 130
learning how to see, 125
misrecognition, 125–26
learning to see, 124
Ledeneva, 59
Ledeneva, Alena, 38, 66, 163
lesbian
"look", 115–17
lesbian spaces, 60
lesbianism
medicalisation of, 35
non-criminalisation, 29
Levitt, Heidi, 138
Lindh de Montoya, Monica, 162
Lindquist, Galina, 11, 36, 40, 123, 214
literature
as a medium for social change, 75
as a source of information on sexuality, 76
Livia, Anna, 128, 130, 134
Low, Setha M, 60, 102, 105, 111, 202
magnitizdat, 39
market
and freedom, 75
Markowitz, Fran, 20
marriage
as a tactic, 31–32
Mayo, James, 167
Mishin, Ed, 69, 70, 76, 78, 156, 160
Mishin. Ed, 138
Munt, Sally R, 138
Newton, Esther, 130, 135, 145
non-places, 102
official-public and private-public, 36–37
official-public and private-public and dissidence, 35–36
Suvorova, Olga, 69, 70, 72, 100, 134, 138, 155

tamizdat, 39
telling, 124

tema, 57, 58, 59, 81, 106, 107, 110, 113, 114, 115, 116, 118, 121, 123, 126, 156

dela, 57, 71, 76, 77, 84, 85, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 104, 105, 106, 111, 126, 131, 156, 186, 191

delthe Archive, 16, 44, 53, 71, 76, 77, 84, 85, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 104, 105, 106, 111, 126, 131, 156, 186, 191

delthe Great Purge, 33

delothe Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, 166, 168

Turner, Victor, 119, 175, 184

Udar, 62, 63, 65, 109, 113, 122

Valentine, Gill, 105
Valentine, James, 57
Walton, Shirley, 135, 145
Westernisers and Slavophiles, 45–47
Wieringa, Saskia, 138
VolgaVolga, 70, 72, 74, 76, 78, 133, 136, 138
Voronkov, Viktor, 21, 24, 36, 37, 96, 98, 104, 191

Yurchak, 39, 57, 91, 164
Yurchak, Aleksei, 21, 36, 37, 39, 41, 48, 49, 57, 85, 89, 91, 95, 108, 150, 164, 207
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