

From high camp to post-modern camp: Queering post-Soviet pop music

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Abstract

This article examines the post-Soviet transformations of Russian popular music culture (*Eстрада*), arguing that its aesthetics can be analysed from the perspective of camp, by looking at two cult music performers bridging the Soviet and post-Soviet realm – Valery Leontiev and Filipp Kirkorov. The analysis is grounded in a close reading of the artists' career trajectories, selected videos and – to a lesser extent – textual analysis of their lyrics and public statements. The article argues that their performative personas are rooted in a particular version of camp with differing modalities of subversiveness – each responding both to their respective cultural and political climates, audience expectations, and also in accordance with their individual embodiments of (*post*)-*Soviet camp*. While Leontiev demonstrates a more earnest commitment to high drama, Kirkorov continues his ironic experimentation with transgression, ambiguity and excess, thereby participating in the queering of post-Soviet popular culture. The article concludes that their appropriation of camp is strategic, as it responds to the temporal, national and global trends such as global gay culture and neo-camp in Russia.

Keywords

Camp, popular music, post-Soviet cultural studies, queer studies, Russia

Camp goes East

Russian popular music and entertainment, dating back to the Soviet Union, is dominated by popular figures that embrace aesthetics of high drama, flamboyance or camp in a

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manner that may read as being characteristic of queer sensibilities while simultaneously enabling the disavowal of any non-normative content or intention and remaining firmly in the mainstream. The amalgamation of the legacy of Soviet Estrada – a particular tradition of popular music performance characterised by both aesthetic and, at times, sexual excess – with recent regional and global music trends produces complex, ambiguous representations of sexuality, beyond the heteronormativity so often associated with Russian culture. This article will examine these ongoing post-Soviet aesthetic transformations by looking at two performers bridging the Soviet and post-Soviet realm – Valery Leontiev and Filipp Kirkorov. While Leontiev's style involves a type of camp originating in Soviet times (late 1970s–to date), Kirkorov's successful utilisation of post-Soviet aesthetics of excess (1990s onwards) makes him a post-Soviet artist.

The article argues that the post-Soviet transformations of Estrada aesthetics can be exposed to camp as a lens and reading strategy, particularly when taking into account recent intensification of intercultural flows and an increasing circulation of queer visual aesthetics. This lens reveals that Kirkorov's appropriation of camp is much more strategic and post-modern, as it responds to various trends such as the growing popularity of global gay culture (Martel, 2018) and neo-camp in Russia (Engström, 2019). In turn, Leontiev's stage persona has undergone fewer mutations, but is equipped with an inherent theatricality and physicality that transcended stylistic trends and political regimes. Throughout, the article highlights the value of conducting a close reading of post-Soviet pop music, as it demonstrates something larger – how queer visibility has become an accepted commodity in Russian popular culture (Strukov, 2019), all the while coexisting and at times interacting with Soviet and post-Soviet camp.

While the notion of camp is Anglo-centric or at least Western – broadly understood as a predominance of style over substance, playfulness and ironic distancing – this analysis offers an example of a productive engagement with Russian and post-Soviet incarnations of camp, as well as commenting, where appropriate, on possible limitations of the concept. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates how meanings related to non-heteronormative sexualities in Russian popular music challenge, subvert and at times attenuate mainstream discourse. This is particularly relevant in the light of the so-called 'anti-gay propaganda law' passed by the Russian Duma in 2013, which marks a cornerstone in the possibilities of representation and visibility of non-heteronormative sexualities in Russia.¹

While homosexuality was decriminalised in the Russian Federation in 1993, it continues to be presented as a foreign threat, alien to Russia's civilising mission (Baer, 2009). An active restoration of paternalistic, conservative attitudes is evident in Medvedev's (2010) manifesto 'Go Russia', the Pussy Riot scandal (Brock, 2016), Putin's (2014) Valdai speech and 2020 address to the Federal Assembly.² This increasingly conservative nation-building agenda reinforces the message that alterity will not be tolerated in Putin's Russia. Subsequently, camp sensibilities can form a part of the same (negative) associative chain involving 'all things Western'.

The discussion starts with an exposition of Soviet and post-Soviet pop music, in particular the genre of Estrada, followed by a brief exploration of *camp* and some initial intuitions of how to apply this to the two singers' performative careers. The article analyses a set of reoccurring images, voices and tropes from relevant music videos (such as

Leontiev's *Night Call* and *Island of Fortunate Women* and Kirkorov's *The Mood Is Blue* and *Ibiza*). This close reading of the artists' selected videos is supplemented with analysis of their career trajectories. These readings elucidate that Leontiev took the aesthetics of Estrada and made them his own, with a strong emphasis on drama and corporeality, with the focus on the body also providing the key to understanding what made his performative style so inherently *queer*. In turn, Kirkorov's versatile stage persona is built on ironic and imaginative experimentation with transgression, ambiguity and excess, playing on sexual subversiveness while simultaneously mainstreaming queer visuality in post-Soviet popular culture.

(Post-Soviet) Estrada, glamour and camp

The Calvert Journal's 2018 publication 'When Russia came out – 10 gay music videos inspired by the fabulous 1990s' features links to faux lesbian group t.A.T.u., boy band Na-Na, and one of the protagonists of this excursion into (post)-Soviet camp, Valery Leontiev (Zinatulin, 2018). While mostly preoccupied with artistic and stylistic shifts after the collapse of the Soviet Union, what strikes the casual (Western) spectator is how many of these artists – whether explicitly referencing (their) sexuality or not – rely on the aesthetic vocabulary of camp. This is remarkable not only because of a certain cultural isolation that took place in the Soviet Union, which meant that artists developed their own stylistic repertoire, but also because of the public taboo, as well as curtailment, on expressions of (non-normative) sexuality.³

Because of this seeming absence of representations of alternative sexualities in public life, ethnomusicologist Stephen Amico (2014) was surprised, as he observes in his 2014 book, that

[T]his cloud of proscription, resulting in a void in lived, quotidian life, seemed not to have settled upon the realm of popular music; for, as immediately as I had noted the lacuna of visible walking, talking, living homosexual men [. . .] I had also been almost instantly stunned by the number of apparently 'gay men' who *were active (and popular) popsa and èстрада singers*. (p. 66, our italics)

In order to contextualise Amico's statement, as well as the discussion as a whole, a foray into the landscape of Soviet and post-Soviet popular music is necessary. Indeed, Estrada as a particular phenomenon is virtually unknown in the West, or non-Slavic world, and 'includes pop music but also applies to modern dance, comedy, circus art, and many other performances not on the "big," classical stage' (MacFadyen, 2002: 3). The key elements of Estrada are sentimentality, theatricality, aesthetic excess and '*Lichnost*' (star power, persona). MacFadyen (2002) in particular highlights the importance of visual aspects to Estrada's 'sentimental worldview'. Significantly, and in contrast to Amico's observation, MacFadyen, across two books, makes no reference to camp and sexuality when discussing Estrada, both Soviet and post-Soviet.⁴

While Soviet Estrada's frequent displays of homoeroticism and corporeality were in sharp contrast with the lacuna of publicly acceptable manifestations of sex and sexuality,⁵ its post-Soviet transformations occurred in the context of the sexual liberalisation

and liberation following the abolition of censorship in the 1990s (Borenstein, 2007). According to Irina Roldugina, Russian pop culture offered ‘symbolic liberation from the hypocritical socialist morality concerning sexuality and the body’. However, she continues, ‘this destabilisation was of a playful kind: the queer implications in the songs of the 1990s did not address such concepts as “tolerance,” “equality,” “identity” and “civil rights”’ (Roldugina, 2018: 15). With the loss of state cultural funding, many performers initially struggled to retain their popularity. Eventually, video clips gave them a new medium to express their penchant for theatricality and sentiment.

With the emergence of the ideology of *glamour*⁶ in the early 2000s, performers more adept in employing it came to the fore (Kirkorov representing the latter cohort). As appearance and display became foregrounded over substance, Estrada’s theatricality and excess became even more pronounced. The basic semantics of the songs – predominantly unsophisticated romantic love stories – were supplemented with performative extravagance. The videos boasted artifice, over the top aesthetics and aberrant glitz.⁷ An abundance of gay performers in contemporary Russian *popsa* (popular music) was combined with a muted stance on their sexual orientation, with the notable exception of Boris Moiseev, who later retracted his ‘coming out’. Amico (2014) explains this disjunction between everyday ‘absence’ and pop music’s proliferation of alternative sexualities using the notion of ‘phantom faggot’: ‘the diseased limb of (visible) homosexuality’, which was cut off from “the body politic” in the Soviet Union but distinguishable sonically and ‘on a textual level, circulating around and emanating from certain performers’ (p. 70).

A ‘dialogue’ with Western camp aesthetics can be illustrated through Russia’s European Song Contest (Eurovision) entries. This contest serves as one common cultural reference point, as many Estrada performers represented Russia over the years. At that time, Estrada’s legacy did not easily facilitate a straightforward emulation of the Western cultural performative canon. Kirkorov’s 1995 and Pugacheva’s 1997 Eurovision performances ‘appeared overly sentimental and even vulgar to Eurovision aficionados, who judged them as having crossed the line from self-conscious camp into unwitting kitsch, in other words, utterly naïve camp’ (Cassiday, 2014: 10). Since then, Russian entries have demonstrated a more sophisticated and strategic engagement with camp, as later compelling Eurovision entries mastering a recognisable idiom of Eurotrash such as (faux) lesbian duo t.A.T.u in 2003, and Dima Bilan’s ‘exaggerated homosexual eroticism’ of 2006 and particularly of his 2008 top-scoring performance (Miazhevich, 2010). In this respect, there is a shift from naïve to a more deliberate camp, or unintended versus purposefully bad taste. In order to tie the current discussion to the overarching concerns of this article, the next section will turn to camp, before linking it to Estrada.

Do concepts travel? The case of camp

Queer culture, and particularly queer theatricality, have long been associated with the ‘campy and *the trivial*’ (Butt, 2009: 90, our italics), with the former being equated with the latter. For Fabio Cleto (1999), ‘the queer aspect of camp is in this instability and ambiguity’, as well as ‘sabotage, demystification and deconstruction of the oppressive binarity of the dominant culture’ (pp. 13, 15). For these very reasons, camp as a particular

'sensibility' (Sontag, [1964] 2018) also proves to be an elusive and difficult notion to define.

Camp is fuzzy, fluctuating and not limited to a particular category or mode (Cleto, 1999), which enables its ongoing interaction, revival and resistance to the mainstream. Indeed, originating from a marginal subculture, it stood in opposition to hegemonic forms of cultural expression – even as it employed these very forms, in a heightened, excessive or dramatic manner. Gradually, however, camp with a capitalised letter 'C' was transformed into camp with a lower case 'c' – a less radical, apolitical and more conventional and post-modern phenomenon (Robertson, 1996: 19). This highlights the complexity of the relationship of camp with power and various societal structures. While it borrows from the mainstream, especially when cultural products lose their dominant power (Ross, 1988), it can also be appropriated by it, undermining its subversive nature and, in turn, revitalising that very mainstream.⁸

Camp as a form of sexual and gender dissidence can be a political act that demonstrates, 'however inconsistently, the skilful crafting, artifice, unpredictability and possible ruptures, within those culturally fashioned, fragile, oppositional markers of heterosexuality' (Segal, 2008: 382–383). Yet its slippery nature means that it seemingly dips in and out of political gestures at will. Still, in *How to be Gay* (2012), David Halperin (2012) argues in favour of the aesthetic-as-political: 'camp culture engages in its own kind of anti-social critique, its own uncompromising defense of fantasy and pleasure, and thus its own brand of political resistance' (p. 237).⁹

The abovementioned tension between resistance to and appropriation of the camp by the mainstream is closely linked to the dilemma of camp's arguably unfulfilled potential for subversiveness. For the purposes of the present discussion, the twofold question is therefore whether camp in a Russian context is (still) subversive, but also whether a country undergoing a 'conservative turn' isn't *just* the place for such subversiveness, especially in an environment of widespread homophobia and the 2013 legislation banning so-called 'gay propaganda'. It evokes such questions as to what extent this subversiveness is possible in an environment where resistance cannot *legally* be visible, where the ideological context combines proliferations of glamour with post-2013 directives, and camp aesthetics 'speak' only to a certain part of the community.

A final question, which exceeds the remit of this article, is whether one can speak of a public 'queer culture' in the USSR. After the experimentation and liberalisation of the 1920s, no equivalent of the gay liberation movement, or queer identity politics emerged, and 'muzhelozhstvo' (i.e. men having sex with men, or sodomy) became a criminal offence potentially leading to imprisonment or forced psychiatric care (the latter more common for women, for example, Gessen, 1994). While there are persistent disagreements on whether one should expose forms of sexual and gender dissent in Soviet Russia to 'queer readings', Dan Healey (2017), in one of the most reputable, historical overviews of gay or queer subjectivity in Soviet Russia, uses the term 'queer' interchangeably with LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) (p.20). Definitionally, things get somewhat easier as one reaches the 1990s, when Western-style gay liberation met underground forms of sexual dissidence.¹⁰

Overall, this discussion follows the call by scholars such as Dan Healey to destabilise notions of (hetero)sexuality by offering queer readings of Russian and Soviet art,

focusing on popular music. As this article strives to demonstrate camp may actually have more portability via its links to Estrada. Implicitly, we are also encouraging an application of this ‘reading strategy’ to other Soviet and post-Soviet genres and performers. The next section puts the translatability of *camp* to the test by conducting a close reading of two artists’ selected videos, lyrics and public statements. As they span the Soviet and post-Soviet period, they also provide an illustration of the transformations of (popular) queer theatricality since the 1980s.

Methodology

This article is informed by cultural studies and musicology (Amico, 2014; Hawkins, 2015; Lawrence, 2011). The study considers text in its broadest meaning (including song lyrics, soundscapes, images, gestures, gaze, appropriation of the stage, etc.) and accounts for temporal differences (e.g. see Hawkins’ (2015) exploration of the temporal-specific listening and biographic-oriented viewing). Consequently, the ‘kinds of semiotic resources and patterns available for communication in the sounds, images and worlds of popular’ (Machin, 2010: 3) can be peculiar when applied to pop music across a considerable timespan. We also take recourse to Carol Vernallis’ (2004) extensive body of work, in particular on the music video, and supplement it with the singers’ performances with ‘concert footage, music videos, television interviews, and profiles’ produced in popular media (Shugart and Waggoner, 2008: 3).

Importantly, a queer reading is not necessarily applicable to the lyrics of a track, or located in them. Incidentally, this also potentially makes Amico’s reliance on their decipherment somewhat moot. Instead, queerness is located in the soundscapes created, as forms of ‘affective sound rather than discursive meaning’ (Lawrence, 2011: 238). Finally, we also examine this article’s two protagonists as ‘stars’, who embody prevalent preconceptions of cultural and historical ideology, articulating historical specificities of class, gender, race and sexuality (Dyer, 1998). It could be said that through their embodiments of camp, both Leontiev and Kirkorov have confirmed social hegemony by contradicting its forms, all the while weathering multiple transitions in careers which, in the former’s case, commenced in the Soviet Union in the 1970s.

Valery Leontiev – the Soviet Bowie?

This section argues that Valery Leontiev is the *Soviet* camp icon *par excellence*, one of the most extravagant stars of Soviet and post-Soviet music, representing Sontag’s ([1964] 2018) definition of camp as a ‘[p]roper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate and the naïve’ (p. 23). Amico speaks of him as ‘implicitly or explicitly highlight[ing] the corporeal, almost carnal component of sexual relations’ (Amico, 2014: 80). Leontiev has been called, only *somewhat* sardonically, ‘our’ Bowie because ‘we may never understand this hero: Leontiev’s personality and charisma hardly fit any one category. His almost manic need to be different from others, which has on several occasions threatened his career, has made him truly unique’ (Alekseev, 2019, authors’ translation).

Leontiev represents sensuality, athleticism as well as a Liberace-esque penchant for flamboyant costuming, big hair and make-up, and later on in his career, cosmetic surgery,

in other words: an attention to the body and bodily desire, and to being the object of a desiring gaze and the one who desires (Glick, 2009). His performative and sartorial styles have in some ways retained a remarkable consistency, but it is only in the 1990s that a more openly sensual persona emerged, acquiring Leontiev the ‘reputation of a sex symbol’ (MacFadyen, 2001: 192). At the same time, he has been labelled as ‘one of the most closed personalities of the pop world’ (Boikov, 2004, in Amico, 2014: 76). To Leontiev, a performer that insists on the mystery attributed to divas across the ages, this reticence is essential: ‘one should never tell everything about one’s self . . . without enigma, a star is not a star’ (Amico, 2014). His statement can be read both as an effect of the status of non-heteronormative sexuality, particularly in the Soviet Union, and as an expression of a performer’s unwillingness to be pinned down or defined in any rigid manner – rigidity being the very opposite of his fluid, hypermobile stage presence. Leontiev himself speaks of his ‘internal freedom’: ‘A freedom of thought. Of the spirit. The freedom to look both in life and on stage the way I want to’ (quoted in MacFadyen, 2001: 188).

Before embarking on a close reading of his performances over three decades, we will provide a brief biographical sketch: Leontiev was born in 1949 in Ust-Usa in the Komi Autonomous Socialist Republic in the Soviet Union, and has been active as a performer since the 1970s, while only finding success in the 1980s. Many know him for his hit song *Deltaplan* (Leontiev, 1983), which was awarded the honour of ‘Song of the Year’ that same year. He gave his last performance in 2019, thereby retiring officially at the age of 70 years. He is a recipient of numerous awards and merits, including the title of *People’s Artist of the Russian Federation*. Early in his career, after having moved to Moscow, he struggled to be accepted by the entertainment establishment, largely due to his flamboyant and hyperactive performance style. According to MacFadyen, he would alienate conservative Soviet cultural critics with his dramatic appearance, while another frequent point of critique was that ‘no songs in his repertoire [were] about the Party, Motherland, or komsomol. [As well as his] Unsoviet costumes’ (MacFadyen, 2001: 188). *Moskovskie Novosti* summed up his appearance as that of a ‘melancholy clown’ (cited in MacFadyen, 2001: 191). However, what in fact marks Leontiev’s stage persona is not mockery or clowning, but sincerity.

Although as a performer he appears not unaware of the irony that is at the heart of any performance, and of life *as* performance – as explicated by Halperin (2012) in his reading of camp and irony – this marks a contrast with Filipp Kirkorov’s persona, as will become clearer later on. Instead, what is immediately evident is the overall drama of his performances and the utter commitment to his art, athleticism and aesthetics: ‘I like to work in a state of rapture, until I’m hoarse, to give my all’ (quoted in MacFadyen, 2001: 187). The following sections highlight three iconic performances – the first for TV, the next live as part of a concert tour, and the third a full production shot especially for the songs. Paraphrasing Vernallis (2004), we approach these with the following questions: What desires or anxieties do the videos elicit in the viewer? How does the star look and what do they convey performing the lyrics? Are there other characters in the video, and what is their function? And, finally, how does the video appeal to particular viewing communities, and why?

Queering the diskoteka. In a TV performance of ‘Green Light’ (1984)¹¹ Leontiev uses the entirety of the stage, while remaining in a kind of flirtatious relationship with the

camera's gaze. One eyebrow raised mockingly, he seems aware of his effect. His dance is athletic, acrobatic, with his legs and hips doing most of the moving. He never stands still, making the viewers and the camera go after him, pursue him – at times the camera seems to fail to catch up with the hyperactive entertainer. In fact, his body movements seem beyond his control, as if the music and rhythm act as puppet master making of his body what they wish. At the song's climax, he mock collapses to his knees in exhaustion, only to pick himself up with renewed energy. The costume is red and figure hugging, with glittery elements, seemingly anticipating the up-market sweatsuit or athleisure trend of later years. Indeed, it is said that Leontiev frequently designed and tailored his own costumes. He also sports a variant of his trademark shoulder length mop. Leontiev can be said to have introduced queerness into mainstream culture through a form of 'affective communication', through his movement and aesthetic more than through verbal forms of expression. Nothing is avowed, but other possible forms of self-expression are offered to the audience. Sound and movement speak of joyful becomings – not trauma, but triumph (Lawrence, 2011).

Trapped in desire. Commenting on Leontiev's eye-catching attire in a mid-1990s live performance of *The Island of Fortunate Women*,¹² Zinatulin (2018) observes: 'It's almost impossible to imagine Valery Leontiev without his creaky leather shorts – like yin and yang, the two things do not exist in isolation from one another. Calling himself 'a reincarnated Casanova' and a national heartthrob, Leontiev stole the hearts of millions of Russian women and men alike with his signature moves and voluptuous sighs'. This video was chosen here not only because it represents one of Leontiev's most iconic performances, but also because to make oneself an almost feminised object of desire for the public is inherently queer. The fact that his song and his sensual dancing involve women is beside the point – his outfit and physique invite everyone to think about sex, and sex with the performer in particular.

In this live performance, the sexual excesses following the removal of censorship in the 1990s (Borenstein, 2007) are supremely evident in Leontiev's hypersexual performance. While some elements – like his dripping in sweat, matted hair and more controlled, smaller body movements – seem to be the consequence of a long night of performing, others, like his extra-short black leather shorts, black mesh top, black boots and fingerless gloves, are there by design, to evoke and convey desire, and with more than a nod to the leather subculture. The gyrating of his hips and sensual dance with his backup singers merely serve to highlight this effect. His sculpted body both desires and seeks to evoke desire – indeed, the song's story of a hapless sailor shipwrecked on an island of 'cheerful girls' who keep taunting him despite protestations to stop ('konchaite') speaks of his appeal. Indeed, subtext is very much text here, and sexualised readings of the song and performance are encouraged, Leontiev's moans underscoring this. While the sexuality and sensuality are very real, however, a sense of irony is not missing, either. The song is ostensibly directed at the island's 'girls', but the performance and image seem to encourage a collective command to orgasm – after all, and notoriously – 'konchaite' can also be read as a command to reach orgasm ('finish'), en masse. In comparison with the less sexual and more humorous, lively performance of 1984, this is clearly a post-Soviet piece, of the 1990s.

A work of haunting. *Night Call's* (*Nochnoy Zvonok*)¹³ video, which was released in 2004, 20 years after 'Green Light', is Leontiev at his most melodramatic and *camp*. There is a haunting quality to the video, which characterises it along with an utter commitment to the performance. The physical exuberance of earlier performances has been harnessed to achieve a more intimate dramatic effect, though his commitment to sensuality remains. This is a fully produced video clip and performance, with a number of costume and set changes. It is lush and flamboyant, but in terms of narrative, minimalistic.

However, Leontiev's intensity and utter commitment, together with his costuming and prop work, make this a prime example of *post-Soviet high camp*. The video consists of a number of set pieces or scenes that either feature Leontiev, gyrating, emoting the words of the song or handling a number of props such as the obvious telephone, a throne, a number of close-ups of burning candles in a boudoir, as well as a topless Leontiev seemingly doused by indoor rain. Many Leontiev staples are present, from the extravagant, figure-hugging or revealing clothes, to the display and use of his sculpted body, to his trademark hair, cheekbones and facial structure¹⁴ that embraces the feminine and the masculine. Vernallis' observation that video settings are not only classed but also gendered is also relevant here. Certain *kinds* of bodies can be found in certain kinds of settings, and the 'domestic sphere', including bedroom scenes, were traditionally reserved for female singers (Vernallis, 2004). An oral history of the video's 'making of' details how Leontiev's vision was apparently to highlight that suffering and love affect everyone, rich and poor, which the different set pieces were meant to illustrate. This disjuncture between his vision and the flamboyant result illustrate Sontag's ([1964] 2018) statement that 'camp is seriousness that fails' (p. 23).

The lyrics suggest Leontiev being haunted by a former lover to whom he had hoped to establish some distance. It is this quality of hauntedness that is most in line with the figure of the 'phantom faggot' postulated by Amico. Leontiev is not merely haunted by the accoutrements of camp, he is *sonically subversive*:

Music is, at once, the least material yet most physically effecting of all the arts; it is often experienced on a level in which the reflexive and conscious coalesce; it inherently questions the passage of linear, objective time, repeats making presents of pasts; and as voices. (Amico, 2014: 101).

The next case study will turn to an artist representing a different incarnation, and transformation of Estrada; a singer whose ironic self-references and uses of intertextuality make him a more appropriate fit for a post-modern age: Filipp Kirkorov.

Filipp Kirkorov – 'The King of Russian Estrada'

Filipp Kirkorov – nicknamed 'The King of Russian Estrada' (Zhaivoronok, 2018) due to his exceptional and sustained popularity – is known for his strategic use of irony and subversive aesthetics that allow him to blend various styles, genres and *amplua* (theatrical characters). This part of the article will focus on Kirkorov's career progression and two recent videos contrasting his previous stylistics – *The Mood Colour Blue* and *Ibiza*. They challenge the conventions of cultural production in contemporary Russia and can

be read as queer interventions through which Kirkorov and his production team introduce camp aesthetics to the mainstream.

Kirkorov's artistic career took off during the upheaval of the early 1990s. Born in Bulgaria in 1967 in a family of Armenian descent, he studied at a prominent Moscow music school (1984–1988) before marrying Soviet (gay) icon, Alla Pugacheva.¹⁶ At that time Kirkorov was still establishing his own style, capitalising both on (homo)erotica and sexuality, as well as on Pugacheva's social and cultural capital (Partan, 2007).¹⁷ The videos of his first hits – *Sky and the Earth*, *Atlántida* and *You*¹⁸ – conveyed heteronormative love and his stage image was, in some respects, similar to that of other Estrada artists. It featured a bare chest, long curly 1980s-style bouffant hair, shoulder-pads, tight revealing trousers and the like.

During the 'glamorous' 2000s – a time when Leontiev's popularity was declining – Kirkorov strategically utilised camp aesthetics involving transgression and excess. Kirkorov's 'trademark' stage outfits now incorporated pompous attire and massive head-gear embellished with feathers, glitter and stones. Kirkorov continues to constantly experiment with style, either exaggerating or simplifying elements of his image. This stylisation extends to his off-stage public presence such as his lavish lifestyle. For instance, being interviewed at his house (Sobchak, 2019), Kirkorov wore a pricey garish tracksuit and explicitly mocked his 'narcissistic consumption' (Goscilo and Strukov, 2011), thereby simultaneously denoting and disparaging elitism and glamour.

Unlike Leontiev, Kirkorov is *strategically* ambiguous about his sexuality. Throughout his career, Kirkorov's image has never complied with the usual male/female stereotypes (his extravagant costumes, make-up and wigs exist alongside a carefully groomed beard), creating the androgynous and ambiguous image¹⁹ of a camp diva. This is further heightened by his videos, such as *Snow* (2011),²⁰ featuring a Brazilian male model – bearing a resemblance to a young Kirkorov – who destabilises a heteronormative love story by creating a mirror image of the singer. This ambiguity enables an addressing of various audiences (Vernallis, 2004) and retaining popularity among middle-aged and older women who constitute his (and Leontiev's) core audience.

While Kirkorov has never openly aligned himself with sexual minorities, he frequently references them, thereby flirting with identity politics. During an off-stage outing in 2018 he wore a jacket displaying the message 'Queer is here' (Zhaivoronok, 2018), which caused public offence and furthered rumours about his sexuality. He tends to be similarly ambiguous on LGBTQ+ issues, which sometimes leads to controversies such as him denying any discrimination within the Russian community (Sobchak, 2012)²¹ or even mocking a transgender dancer from his own video *The Mood Colour Blue* on state TV.²² This video, which the article now turns to, constitutes a radical departure from his previous image, showing his ability to engage in a post-modern manipulation of genres, cultural symbols and sensibilities.

The Queer of Russian pop. Kirkorov's popularity skyrocketed after the release of the music video *The Mood Colour Blue* (*Tsvet nastroeniya sinii*) in 2018.²³ In stark contrast to his previous performances, *The Mood Colour Blue* (MCB) represents a shocking and grotesque expression of bad taste challenging various conventions. Everything becomes an object of parody and irony, even Kirkorov himself, as he lampoons his own diva

image, age and celebrity status. The video's subversive and ambivalent nature precludes any single reading of cultural references, as it is almost a pastiche. Its post-modern approach highlights the point that nothing is certain, everything is a game and a parody, and nothing is what it seems. The format of the video is challenged by the inclusion of metatext, as the video narrative is overlaid with gimmicky online chat between the actual production team.

MCB reveals the transformation of the 'The King of Russian pop' into a 'King of Russian Trash' (Engström, 2019), paradoxically immersing himself in something akin to *gopnik* subculture.²⁴ The video strives to destabilise various boundaries and norms, including, but not limited to, those of gender. The transgression is in everything, starting from a celebrity child drinking alcohol, celebrities pretending to be from the lower social stratum to the 50-year-old singer himself riding in a shopping trolley like a rebellious teenager.

Similarly, there are further subtexts and cross-references. For instance, the term blue in Russian stands for an alcoholic (*sinyak* – which is blue), a gay person (light blue or *goluboi*), a bad mood, Western culture (a reference to *One-way ticket (to the blues)*) and nostalgia. The Soviet song *Blue frost (Sinii inei)*, which is a remake of *One way*, is used for the refrain. There is mockery of vogueing, as the invited celebrities stare depressedly into the camera after having performed their absurd roles, and of the Russian music scene with the implied animosity between the old and new generations.

Kirkorov appears clean-shaven, wearing a brown bobbed wig and tracksuit, thus opposing his 'conventional' diva image and alluding to the famous Russian rapper, *Face*, and tapping into various alternative subcultures. The singer's heteronormativity is *destabilised* by multiple references to alternative sexualities. He is shown surrounded by young males and displaying a resolute rejection of his ex-wife's cameo under the pretext of absurdity. The queering continues, as the singer acts as a disenfranchised spectator narcissistically focused on himself, similar to his self-obsession in *Snow*.

Finally, this video alludes to excessive consumption and 'postmodern camp' (Robertson, 1996) bringing them all together under the umbrella of (self-)marketing. It is peppered with tongue-in-cheek product placements and allusion to various brands, from alcohol labels to Kirkorov's bomber jacket. The video is an unusual juxtaposition of working-class aesthetics with celebrity culture and glamorous lifestyles. By linking such aesthetics to marginalised queer subcultures, the issue of class stratification is demoted and simplified. Alternatively, the association of queer culture with working class may be seen as queering artistic Russian subcultures both from grassroots and elitist layers of society which thrive in grey areas of the capitalist economy, potentially undermining and subverting it, as Dyer (1995) observes.

Ibiza as a calculated provocation. There is a similar logic behind Kirkorov's video *Ibiza* (2018),²⁵ in which he co-performs with another singer, Nikolai Baskov. It questions established normativity – via ironic hyperbolisation and amplifies provocation through an assertive appropriation of bad taste. In doing so, it resorts to a grotesque parody of conventional gender and age scripts, cultural tastes and creative industries (Estrada, the Western music canon of the 1980s, youth pop culture). There is obscenity in imagery and

plot, involving unnecessarily graphic violence, torn body parts and excrement, swear words, overstated (homo)erotic desire and hedonistic lifestyle, even its title alluding to a colloquial vulgar term for the sexual act.

Ibiza diverges from *MCB* because of its extreme simplification, primitivism and binarity, leading to crude and clear-cut differentiations such as Kirkorov's monstrous/repulsive performativity in contrast to his usual stylised image. By surrounding himself with the elderly instead of young, glamourised, semi-naked bodies, the singer affiliates himself with multiple generations and their cultural consumption habits, as well as positioning himself outside of the age matrix. This approach endures when depicting sexualities. For instance, when the two singers happen to be lying on top of each other while fighting, there is an allusion to a kiss on the lips, which turns into a violent bite on the nose. Throughout the clip, they exaggerate their animosity and poke fun at the prescribed societal norms of sexual desires, of masculine conduct (effeminate, emasculated and hypermacho) and heteronormativity in general. However, instead of problematising gender bending, the prevailing narrative is of a fixed (gay) identity rather than transient masculinities, partially feeding into societal anxieties (Vernallis, 2004) linked to homosexuality.

Allegedly, the extent of negative publicity directed at *Ibiza* – evident in a phenomenal number of dislikes online – was not expected and a follow-up apologetic (yet ironic) just under 2-minute clip was produced by the duo.²⁶ When questioned about the provocative scenes in *Ibiza* Kirkorov denied any ill intentions (Sobchak, 2019), downplaying any monetary motivation ('we are just having fun') or strategic tapping into the youth market by 'toying' with genres and trends. This is in sharp contrast with Kirkorov's excellent commercial instinct, which he displays, for instance, as a producer of Russian Eurovision song entries.

Despite a tsunami of criticism and calls to strip both singers of their titles and awards, no further action was taken by the authorities. Furthermore, Kirkorov continued to be invited as a guest on prime-time state TV (e.g. *Vechernyi Urgant*). This might indicate that Kirkorov (in particular) represents an 'officially approved' version of queerness²⁷ or a 'necessary' transgression, which falls somewhere in between the placid and radical options. It mainstreams camp in allegiance with the establishment (meant here in a broader sense²⁸), thereby making alternative queer manifestations less legitimate. Similar to Kirkorov's previous on/off stage performance, the clip lacks any clear public or political stance. In a way, both videos introduce a version of Russian contemporary queer pop, which is presented as shocking.

The singer's subversive, flamboyant, ironic and provocative style assists his deconstruction of heteronormative scripts. On the face of it, Kirkorov's (queer, sexualised) performance ensures that certain cultural practices and phenomena (camp) are reprocessed for the mainstream. His stylistic evolution to a degree speaks to a larger aesthetic – though not yet political one – in Russian popular culture. At the same time, his emphasis on stylisation makes one wonder whether this is a superficial take on queerness, a 'hopping onto the bandwagon' just as global gay culture has found a stylistic footing in Russia.

Conclusion: Leontiev, Kirkorov and whence for post-modern Russian camp?

In her treatise on camp, Sontag ([1964] 2018) argues that ‘camp has ‘something propagandistic about it’ (p. 52). Beyond mere semantics, this seems pertinent in the context of the 2013 ‘gay propaganda law’. Indeed, in the post-2013 environment, the stylisation and other affordances of camp render it a one suitable vehicle for relating pop culture to politics. By advocating something close to, but not quite a pluralistic queerness (Taylor, 2013), Kirkorov in particular strikes a chord with multiple audiences, especially as his work is backed up by his significant social and economic capital. However, it is unlikely that his influence will empower marginalised groups or become a vehicle for a queer political agenda. As Robertson (1996) warns, ‘the mainstreaming of camp taste in contemporary culture may help articulate a queer subjectivity and coalitional politics, but it may also serve to obscure real difference and to reduce gay politics to a discourse of style’ (p.138).

An appropriation of camp as one element of queer style by the mainstream does not retract its marginal status. This is in part underpinned by the logic of capitalism, which turns camp as historically linked to queer culture into a new post-modern camp that is a marketable and profitable phenomenon, with ties to Western and global cultural forces as much as to local trends. Nikolay Baskov’s 20-minute video *Karaoke* (2019),²⁹ which is full of product placements and hollow self-aware performativity, constitutes a vivid example of camp without any agenda beyond a commercial one, which coincides with the establishment’s interests.

Furthermore, Kirkorov’s videos are possibly an endeavour to be ahead of the curve: a strategic response to the shifting demands of ‘staying’ true to Estrada’s aesthetics vocabulary versus ‘staying relevant’. In fact, the disavowed and haunted ‘phantom faggot’ element (Amico, 2014), which was present sonically and aesthetically in the music of certain Estrada performers, is now supplemented not merely by the aesthetics of camp, but by that of queer youth culture, or ‘neo-camp’ (Engström, 2019).

Recent examples of this type of avant-garde queer neo-camp are indie-pop bands *Shortparis*³⁰ and *Sado Opera*³¹ (both from the metropolitan setting of St Petersburg). The former’s bombastic, falsetto-driven commitment to drama and, at times, pretentiousness represents a more raw type of artifice, whereas *Sado Opera* is interested in a filthy yet profoundly humorous take on the extravagance of camp. The latter band’s songs are in English and aesthetically, they have more in common with Kiss or perhaps the Swedish pop group *Army of Lovers*, thereby seemingly doing without the cultural codes of Soviet and post-Soviet camp.


Performers like Valery Leontiev and Filipp Kirkorov have provided a script, a language without words, and an avenue of carnivalesque escape from rigid societal and gender norms, offering glimpses of a more colourful quasi-utopia. Their songs and performances may lead us to rethink or expand our notion of what queer representation connotes. In Russia, queerness simultaneously retains its ties to the marginal and oppressed, while being part of a more global style evolution that appeals chiefly to younger people, who take full advantage of alternative spaces and sites occurring both on- and offline. This duality leads to silences and invisibility, and to forms of haunting

by what has been disavowed. However, what is often neglected in discourses that focus on absence and fragmentation is the joy and humour, artistic vibrancy and enduring corporeal and performative dissidence of (post)-Soviet camp, which was always available to those willing or needing to look for it.

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Notes

1. This law ('For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values') makes the distribution of 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations' among minors an offence punishable by fines.
2. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62582>
3. Dan Healey describes the Soviet gender and sexuality regime as being characterised by three distinctive features: 'discursive silence about sexuality, *beskonfliktnost*' (conflictlessness) in gender relations and *zhizneradost*' in the physiological arena' (Healey, 2008: 183). This discursive silence surrounding sexuality applied even more stringently to non-heterosexuality. This tendency became particularly evident since Stalin's ascent to power and a political crackdown on the homosexual community which had flourished to the a degree in the 1920 and 1930s (Roldugina, 2018).
4. Brian Baer, however, uses 'camp' when discussing some aspects of Russian Silver Age literature (Baer, 2009).
5. A further discussion of whether this excessive display of affect and sexuality encoded in (Soviet) Estrada was perceived as subversive yet permissible, either as part of a carnivalesque escape from cultural and social norms (Bakhtin, 1984), 'the circus roots of Estrada, the arts of the clowns and comics' (MacFadyen, 2002: 61), or was tolerated as part of artistic circles and elitist (*elitarnaia*) Russian culture (Baer, 2009), goes beyond the scope of this article.
6. Glamour as the (officially endorsed) cultural logic of post-Soviet capitalism embodies 'something different, flamboyant, and intentionally bombastic', focusing on luxury, allure and the presence of unusual qualities, which are there to both startle and appeal (Goscilo and Strukov, 2011: 2–4).
7. For example, Na-Na performing their single *Faina* scantily clad in 1992 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANCrv7eKZXQ>) and glamorously in the 2000s (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsVKLj4aOXA>)
8. The 2019's adoption of Camp as the theme for the annual Met Ball signals a final mainstreaming of queer culture present and past.
9. This discussion continues the somewhat problematic tradition of exploring camp by focusing on representations – and parodies – of masculinity. Scholars such as J. Halberstam (1998) offer important corrections.
10. Furthermore, retroactive queer readings, particularly in the more visual art forms, have been applied to the works of artist Aleksandr Deyneka, and filmmakers Sergey Eisenstein and Sergey Paradzhanov, the latter, in fact, having been imprisoned under sodomy laws.

11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fvIu5Hgxul>
12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSpOSoObaZI>
13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yoRRKPLbQnk>
14. The intentional alteration of his facial structure, most likely by surgery, merely serves to increase the feline yet sensual aspect of his features.
15. <https://www.liveinternet.ru/users/2458238/post255109998/>
16. They divorced in 2005.
17. Their duet allowed them to rebrand themselves experimenting with musical genres (e.g. a primitive rap-like song, Zaika Moya (My bunny)) and tapping into the public's nostalgia and cultural memory of Soviet Estrada.
18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMfk1BPN8oU>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aPtQJ071EY>, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_b2cuNlwe8
19. With his long curly hair, make-up and effeminate features displayed on his vinyl cover of the 1990s, Kirkorov was mistaken for a woman during the Vechernii Urgant show (2018).
20. https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=oRd_e_FoUdA
21. <http://ksenia-sobchak.com/sobchak-zhivem-filipp-kirkorov-11-iyulya-2012-goda>
22. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spn8mFOXVD0>
23. Vechernii Urgant show (2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAuzNXGmkL4>
24. This typically denotes a post/Soviet subculture of working-class, suburban youth.
25. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yy3DH0gfnhQ>
26. This clip mimics a rap video, by Kanye West and Lil Pump's *I love it*, and reiterates marginal, cultural codes of alternative sexuality, as the old lady reprimanding the singers signifies the pressures of heteronormative society (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPZXbaGqnDI>).
27. Julie Cassiday (Oxford, May 2019) asserts a different but a slightly overlapping point that drag performers are conventionally male in Russia, in a way replicating the society's hierarchical patriarchal structures.
28. Kirkorov's further alienation from the public is evident in his statement (January 2021) criticising supporters of Aleksey Navalnyi and backing up the establishment's response (https://www.znak.com/2021-01-21/kirkorov_prizval_splotitsya_vokrug_lidera_pered_akciey_protesta_v_podderzhku_navalnogo)
29. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcDsu10aKjw&list=LLed02zIZwyuBilybhJXy51Q&index=182>. This 20-minute (!) clip postures to ironise over the music industry (it is a parody of shooting a clip in a clip). Rather than being subversive, the clip represents an example of depoliticised queering where the market logic triumphs.
30. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUdteCBRX9c>
31. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-44300934>

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