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Queering the Mainstream: Anna Melikian's *About Love* (2015)

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ABSTRACT

About Love (2015), Anna Melikian's fourth film, is her first attempt at mainstream cinema. Mimicking the form of an almanac film, it comprises five apparently discrete but intimately interconnected short films, or novellas, all set in Moscow. Their most obvious link is the film's central thread: a lecture about love at the Strelka Institute, attended by the protagonists of some of the novellas and delivered by one of them: an expert on the topic, played by Renata Litvinova. None of the novellas directly addresses non-heteronormative sexualities, through focussing on same-sex relationships. However, the centrality of Litvinova – arguably Russian cinema's most prominent queer icon – introduces an unignorable note of the queer. On closer viewing, moreover, it becomes clear both that the film does depict queer identities, subjectivities and relationships and that it is queer in other ways. Drawing on various queer and feminist theoretical approaches, this article therefore argues that *About Love* depicts post-2013 Moscow as a place that can accommodate and celebrate queerness, demonstrating that Melikian's representation of love challenges the ostensible narrative assumptions of heterosexual normativity and offers, as a queer counterpoint to the mainstream, a range of compelling non-normative representations of love and the self.

KEYWORDS

Anna Melikian; Renata Litvinova; cinematic Moscow; cosplay and crossplay; women's cinema; Russian queer cinema

Introduction

This article – like the others in this special issue – sets out to show that in the decade after Vladimir Putin signed the so-called 'gay propaganda law', on 30 June 2013, certain filmmakers working in the Russian Federation (RF) continued to examine questions of identity, sexuality and personal relationships, without excluding the 'non-traditional'/queer identities, sexualities and relationships said to pose a threat to 'traditional' Russian values and targeted by the law. While, as Artyukh and Forman (2018, 302–303) note, '[i]n contemporary Russian cinema, few wish to tackle the subject [of "alternative models of sexual relations"] openly, knowing that films containing alternative sexualities will not be distributed',¹ post-2013 Russian cinema therefore did remain a space in which queer identities and sensibilities found expression, adding to the existing body of pre-2013 Russian queer cinema. Foremost in this endeavour, of course, were arthouse films, such as Ivan I. Tverdovskii's *Zoology* (*Zoologiya*, 2016), which offers – through the experience of the "non-normative" protagonist' Natasha (Mesropova

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2017) – a ‘stark [depiction] of Otherness as occupying a central place in the constitution of contemporary Russian identity on screen’ (Wilson 2020, 193) and even, perhaps, as Elena Prokhorova (2017) suggests, ‘a social commentary on Russia’s anti-gay laws and the growing societal intolerance towards any form of otherness and dissent’;² Kirill Serebrennikov’s *The Student* (*Uchenik*, 2016), in which Veniamin, the eponymous protagonist, brutally murders Grisha, a gay male student who develops a crush on him, and Elena Krasnova, the biology teacher accused of ‘propagandising [...] about same-sex relationships’, teaches her high-school students that there are ‘different sexual orientations’ and that ‘homosexuality is a normal part of our life’ and wonders aloud to her PE teacher boyfriend whether Jesus and his disciples might have been gay;³ Natal’ia Merkulova and Aleksei Chupov’s *The Man Who Surprised Everyone* (*Chelovek, kotoryi udivil vsekh*, 2018), which – as Birgit Beumers (2019) outlines – has been read, mostly by commentators based outside Russia, as a critique of entrenched homophobia, transphobia and transphobic violence (Poglajen 2018; Prestridge 2019; Young 2018);⁴ Kseniia Ratushnaia’s *Outlaw* (*Autlo*, 2019), characterised by Dinara Garifullina (2021) as an ‘unabashed depiction of transgender and homosexual characters and stories [and an] exploration of transgressive sexualities’; Kantemir Balagov’s *Beanpole* (*Dylda*, 2019), nominated for the Queer Palm at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival and described by Lilya Kaganovsky (2020) as ‘a film about queerness and the possibility of [...] a queer world in which women could live together without men, without being forced to be incubators for a future generation or the genocidal state that requires their bodies for its perpetuation’; several films from Il’ia Khrzhanovskii’s DAU project, inspired by the (queer) life of the polyamorous Soviet physicist Lev Landau, such as the following, all co-directed with Jekaterina Oertel: *DAU. Sasha Valera* (2020), about two men in a homosexual relationship (in ‘real life’ and in the ‘film’), *DAU. Nikita Tanya* (2020), in which Nikita attempts to convince his wife Tanya of the legitimacy of polygamous relationships, and *DAU. Katya Tanya* (2020), which explores (up to a point) female subjectivity and sexuality through the eponymous women’s (fictional/constructed) lesbian relationship and which might perhaps be ‘an attempt by the filmmakers to normalise the cinematic representation of lesbian relationships’ (Morley 2022a, 2022b); Renata Litvinova’s *The North Wind* (*Severnii veter*, 2021), in which ‘bisexuality [...] runs through the [matriarchal] family supported by Eternal Alisa’ (Mukhortova 2021); and, most recently, Serebrennikov’s *Tchaikovsky’s Wife* (*Zhena Chaikovskogo*, 2022), in which the title character, unable to accept her husband’s homosexuality, gradually loses her mind.

The focus of this article, however, is queer Russian mainstream cinema, approached through an analysis of Anna Melikian’s film *About Love* (*Pro liubov’*, 2015).⁵ Explicitly conceived in the vein of commercial cinema, billed as a comedy, and aspiring to wide distribution in the RF, *About Love* premiered in June 2015 at the 26th Sochi Open Russian Film Festival – also known as Kinotavr, the country’s most prestigious film festival – and opened in cinemas the following December, in time for the New Year holiday. With a budget of 55 million roubles (Ruzmanov 2015), including financial support from the Ministry of Culture of the RF (Novikov and Golubchikov 2015), the film earned US\$750,000 at the Russian box office, more than tripling the US\$240,000 made by Melikian’s first full-length film, *Mars* (2004) (Strukov 2019b, 18). Indeed, *About Love* – Melikian’s fourth feature film – is her most successful work to date, no small feat considering the long list of prizes that her earlier films had won. *Mars* premiered at the Berlinale and was awarded the Special Producers’ Prize at Kinoshok, the Open Film Festival of the CIS and Baltic countries.

Melikian's second feature film, *Mermaid* (*Rusalka* 2007), consolidated her reputation overseas, winning a string of prestigious international awards, including the FIPRESCI prize in Berlin, the Grand Prix at Sofia and Yerevan International Film Festivals, the Independent Cinema Prize at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, and the Sundance Film Festival Directing Prize, with the latter leading to her being named (along with Ben Affleck) as one of *Variety's* '10 Directors to Watch' (Ross 2008). *Mermaid* also brought her wider recognition in the Russian Federation when it was selected as the 2008 submission for the best foreign-language film Oscar. Melikian's third film, *The Star* (*Zvezda*, 2014), continued this run of success, winning the Best Director Prize at the 2014 Kinotavr. The following year, however, *About Love* went even further, winning not only the Kinotavr Distributors' Jury Prize, awarded to the film judged to have the best chance at commercial success, but also – apparently to the director's great surprise (Sattarova 2016) – the Grand Prix, making Melikian only the second woman to achieve this honour.⁶ *About Love* also went on to win the 2016 Golden Eagle (Zolotoi orel) in the main category of Best Feature Film, and in 2017 it was awarded the inaugural Moscow Mayor's Prize, worth 50 million roubles (then the equivalent of around US\$1,000,000), for the best image of Moscow in film art (Krasnova 2017). As Bezenkova and Leontyeva (2016, 233) note, 'as a rule, Russian mainstream films do not receive prizes at leading festivals'. One could therefore argue that the film's extraordinary success itself makes *About Love* queer.

In just over a decade, therefore, Melikian – director, screenwriter and producer – established herself as one of the most popular and successful filmmakers working in the Russian Federation.⁷ She is also one of the most well-connected, professionally. Her marriage in the early 2000s to the influential Russian-Armenian television and film producer Ruben Dishdashian doubtless helped in this.⁸ Her winning the Golden Eagle with *About Love* is one mark of her standing within the Russian cinema industry. Founded in March 2002 by Nikita Mikhalkov, 'the undisputed official head of (largely) state-controlled cinema in the Russian Federation' and the leader within cinema of the so-called 'Putin majority' (Condee, Prokhorov, Prokhorova 2021, 4), the Golden Eagle is, to use the film critic Viktor Matizen's words, Mikhalkov's 'pocket prize' (*karmannaia premiia*), awarded to those whom he favours, including himself (Anon.2015).⁹ The fact that all Melikian's films, including *About Love*, have received state funding from the Ministry of Culture of the RF is also significant, as is her ability to attract the most popular and well-known actors. While her first three films largely featured non-professional and/or little-known actors, *About Love* has a dazzling all-star cast: Renata Litvinova, Evgenii Tsyganov, Mariia Shalaeva, Iuliia Snigir', Aleksandra (Sasha) Bortich, Ravshana Kurkova, Iurii Kolokol'nikov, Aleksei Filimonov, Vasili Raksha, and the veteran actors Mikhail Efremov and Vladimir Mashkov all have leading roles. Indeed, minor and incidental parts are also taken by well-known actors, among them Aleksandr Robak and Maksim Lagashkin as the peripatetic policemen who pop up at various points throughout the film; Anna Kotova as an unsmiling hotel receptionist; and Aleksei Makarov, Sergei Murav'ev and Nikolai Orlovskii, as three of the six dates arranged by a young Japanese tourist. In interviews, Melikian often recounts how she secured Mashkov – or 'Vova', as she refers to him (Sindeeva 2015) – simply by calling him up after the actor originally cast in the role of the businessman Viktor Borisovich, in the film's second novella, pulled out of the project the day before filming began (Gevorgian 2016); Mashkov apparently agreed on the spot and did not even ask to see the script before accepting the part (Novikov and Golubchikov 2015; Sindeeva 2015).

Anna Melikian as queer filmmaker

Yet despite her establishment credentials, Melikian likes to present herself as existing on the fringes of the Russian cinema industry, often characterising herself in interviews as an outsider, based on her biography. Born in Baku, Soviet Azerbaijan in 1976 and of Armenian descent, when the violent ethnic conflict broke out there in 1988, Melikian moved with her mother and brother, first to Yerevan, Armenia, and then, five years later, when she was 17, to Moscow. One year later, she entered the Gerasimov State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK), joining the department of feature-film directing, in the workshop of Sergei Solov'ev and Valerii Rubinchik. In an in-depth interview with Natal'ia Sindeeva of TV Rain (*Dozhd'*) in October 2015 (part of her pre-release promotion of *About Love*), Melikian talks about her time at VGIK and describes how she felt that she was different from her well-connected fellow students, as if 'from a completely different world' (Sindeeva 2015).

As Anzhelika Artyukh and Justin Wilmes (2020, 174) remind us, 'interviews are an important element in the fashioning of an auteur's brand'. This apparent paradox in Melikian's self-presentation makes her an intriguing figure – a filmmaker working at the very heart of the Russian cinema industry, a member of Moscow's cultural elite, whose films are routinely funded by the Ministry of Culture and almost all set in Moscow, Russia's ideological (and imperial) centre, but who nonetheless identifies as an outsider.¹⁰ This outsider sensibility also finds expression in Melikian's films, however, suggesting that it is more than a marketing ploy: it is present in the way she represents Moscow, in the types of protagonists she writes, in the music she selects for their soundtracks, and in her vibrant and individual visual style. For, in addition to being one of the most successful filmmakers working in Russia in the 2000s and 2010s, Melikian is also one of the most distinctive. Her directorial signature, legible in all her films, can be discerned in their tone, which combines 'light-heartedness' with a quirky sense of humour that is both warm and ironic (Goscilo 2019, 90; 93), but which at times (often towards the end of the film) gives way to a darker mood; their playful visual style (Sattarova 2016); their 'esoteric' use of 'a new, more appealing cinematic language', which often draws on features familiar from popular social media platforms, dating apps and other means of electronic communication as 'an ingenious way to engage with the stylistics of contemporary living' (Strukov 2019b, 17); their complex, non-linear narrative structures; and their themes, which are always carefully grounded in the contexts and realia of contemporary Russia: 'female love in today's Russia' (Goscilo 2019, 90), 'gender, identity and memory [. . .], especially female identity' (Strukov 2019b, 17), male constructions of femininity, and a recurrent interest in the perspectives of her young women protagonists, who are also usually positioned as outsiders in various ways, for example socially, in terms of their class and/or gender, or emotionally, through their sensibility.¹¹ Thus, Melikian's films invariably privilege outsider perspectives, and this often shades into the queer, in various understandings of this term, by enabling peripheral viewpoints to be brought to the fore. *About Love* is no exception to this general rule. As Anton Dolin puts it, in this film – which he considers to be one of the best Russian films (Maska 2016) – '[Melikian's] gaze drifts from the permanent wonder of a being from another planet to the cosy embeddedness of the insider' (Dolin 2015).

This article therefore proposes an alternative approach to Melikian's work, arguing that she is also distinctive by virtue of her being one of the few women directors working in

the Russian Federation in the decade post-2013 who can be considered a queer filmmaker, in that she makes films that express queer identities, queer perspectives and queer experiences. What differentiates Melikian's queer cinema from that of other women directors who could be considered to have made queer films in the RF in this decade – Renata Litvinova, Natal'ia Merkulova, or Kseniia Ratushnaia, for example – is that Melikian sets out to queer the mainstream.¹²

Queering love

The film's title introduces its broad theme. While not, strictly speaking, an almanac film (*kinoal'manakh*), *About Love* mimics the form of one, being composed from five discrete but carefully interconnected short films, or novellas, which each tells a story about love. The most obvious link between them is the thread that runs throughout the film and gives it its title: an open lecture about love at Moscow's fashionable Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture and Design, which is attended by non-actors – members of the public – but also by the protagonists of some of the novellas, and delivered by one of them: an expert on love, played by Renata Litvinova, who is also the protagonist of the film's fifth and final novella.

Deeming *About Love* 'more conventional' than Melikian's earlier films, Helena Goscilo describes it as comprising 'three [sic] different narratives about heterosexual relations, embedded in a frame [...] about the nature of love' (Goscilo 2019, 93–94). This description is supported by a surface-level reading of the novellas' plots. The first follows Lena and Igor', a young couple with a shared interest in Japanese manga and anime, who have been in a relationship (without knowing each other's real names) for six months; the second focuses on twenty-somethings Liza and Grisha, whose long-term relationship is tested when Liza's rich, middle-aged (and married) boss offers to pay her for sex; the third follows Megumi (performed by Miyako Shimamura), a Japanese tourist obsessed with Russian culture, who has travelled to Moscow to find a Russian boyfriend, but who ends up with Yoshi, the young Japanese man who, besotted with Megumi, has followed her there; the fourth is built around the love triangle that pits Sasha, the teenaged partner of a thirty-something graffiti artist named Boria, against Mila, an older woman with whom he is also in a relationship; and the fifth involves the lecturer herself: her work done, she sets out to meet an unknown date for sex, only to find that she has been summoned by her ex-husband, who is infatuated with a much younger woman and seeks her opinion about whether their relationship will work out.

None of the love stories developed in the film's five novellas directly addresses non-heteronormative sexuality, through focussing on a same-sex relationship, therefore. Likewise, the text of the lecture does not include explicit mention of non-heteronormative relationships.¹³ However, this ostensible focus on the heteronormative – on 'heterosexual relations', as Goscilo (2019, 94) puts it – is only surface-deep. Despite the film's apparent privileging of the normative and its superficial conventionality, on closer viewing it becomes clear that Melikian does depict queer identities, sexualities and relationships and that they do sometimes come openly to the narratives' fore (Figure 1). Artyukh and Forman acknowledge this up to a point, describing Melikian as 'bold enough to play around the limits' of the permissible and to 'allude' to what they term 'alternative models of sexual relations'. In their view, however, Melikian makes these allusions 'in an



Figure 1. The lecture about love: a queer moment during a ‘scientific experiment’. Still from the film.

ironic key’ (Artyukh and Forman 2018, 303; 302). It is my contention that they are sincere and, moreover, central to the film’s meaning and its worldview.

Drawing on a range of theoretical and analytical approaches, including queer theory and feminist/lesbian film theory, and focussing primarily on the film’s representation of queer identities, sexualities and relationships, while also indicating, as relevant, additional ways in which this mainstream film is queer, this article will therefore argue that *About Love* depicts post-2013 Moscow not as a place that accommodates and celebrates queerness only at its margins, but as a space that is inherently queer. To this end, in my conceptualisation of queer, I draw on several broad definitions. First, David Halperin’s: ‘Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant [...] it demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative’ (Halperin 1995, 62). Thus, in what follows, ‘queer’ is similarly understood as a position, or a perspective, and ‘queering’ as the act of questioning dominant modes of thought and challenging conventions regarding dominant norms, which may be, but are not necessarily, related to heteronormativity. Second, I borrow from Joshua Trey Barnett and Corey W. Johnson, who – writing in the same year that *About Love* was released – define the act of queering as ‘a complicating of the taken-for-granted heteronormativity of everyday practices, spaces, and discourses’ (Barnett and Johnson 2015, 582). As I shall show, this is precisely what Melikian does in *About Love*. Indeed, in these definitions, the terms ‘queer’ and ‘queering’ stand as appropriate translations of two words that Melikian uses repeatedly in interviews to describe her approach in *About Love* (Grigor’eva 2015; Korsakov 2016; Kuznetsova and Saponova 2015; Novikov and Golubchikov 2015; Sindeeva 2015; Tuula 2015), namely the noun *khuliganstvo* (hooliganism) – used in Russian to refer to violations of public order and open expressions of disrespect for the established norms of society – and the related verb *khuliganstvovat’* (to commit acts of hooliganism). The actor Luliia Snigir’, who plays the secretary Liza in the film’s second novella, also uses this term in interviews: recounting how she was initially scared to accept the role because of the novella’s provocative nature, she explains that she subsequently decided she was ‘ready to commit some acts of hooliganism’ (Kuznetsova and Saponova 2015; Ruzmanov 2015). Thus, rather than simply imposing others’ definitions of ‘queer’ onto Melikian’s film, I seek also to describe how she constructs her film and her viewpoint as queer, identifying repeated techniques and devices through which Melikian transforms *About Love* into

a film whose representation of love is more capacious, diverse and inclusive – and, in the Russian context, more rebellious and non-conforming – than a surface-level plot summary suggests.

Queering Moscow

In a chapter that surveys the representation of Moscow in Russian and Soviet films made between 1924 and 2014, Birgit Beumers (2016, 472–473) concludes: ‘Moscow is a blank page that awaits its new face to be drawn’. In the context of her filmography, Anna Melikian gives the city a ‘new face’ in *About Love*, a fact of which she herself is aware; she notes in an interview: ‘As usual in my films, Moscow plays a special role, but unlike, say, in *The Star*, it’s very swish, beautiful, festive, sunny’ (Tuula 2015). The film draws a ‘new face’ for the city in other ways, especially in the geo-political and domestic context of the mid-2010s.¹⁴ Anzhelika Artyukh has argued that in *About Love*, Melikian represents Moscow as an ‘open’ city, advocating ‘an open-world point of view’ and offering the audience ‘a dream about multi-cultural cities’. Her ‘cosmopolitan gaze’ displaces the patriarchal ‘imperial gaze’, she argues, making Melikian’s cinema ‘a kind of a counter-cinema in this country where modern politics are resurrecting a binary “Russia vs. the West” opposition from the Cold War era’ (Artyukh 2016). In addition to promoting the ‘cosmopolitan gaze’ discerned by Artyukh, however, in *About Love* Melikian also privileges a queer gaze. In Karen Tongson’s formulation, the queer gaze is a particular ‘vantage point’ that can ‘help decenter what we prioritize in storytelling, decentering where stories usually happen and finding them in places we don’t usually look’. It is a vantage point, she contends, that ‘plays out in both tangible and intangible ways, perhaps most notably in instances of desire on screen’ (cited in Anderson 2018).

While present in all Melikian’s films, the concept of ‘decentering’ is particularly appropriate to her approach in *About Love*, where it emerges as a recurrent queering device.¹⁵ While each novella focuses closely (is centred) on two or three protagonists at most, the protagonists of the other novellas invariably crop up in the background (‘places [where] we don’t usually look’) of the novellas of which they are not the focus, or the centre. These peripheral appearances distract (decentre) the viewer’s attention from the protagonists to these incidental appearances. This serves as another means of linking the film’s different novellas and creating a coherent, over-arching narrative, but there is more to it than this. It also functions as a way of highlighting – or offering a different ‘vantage point’ on – aspects beyond the parameters of each novella’s main storyline.¹⁶ Invariably, the elements, moments and protagonists highlighted in this way are queer. Decentering thus emerges as one of the devices through which Melikian both queers the usual format of the almanac film and incorporates into *About Love* various forms of queer experience.

That this strategy is queer is also apparent in the paradox that it embodies: this film that repeatedly ‘decentres’ is set firmly in the centre: the Strelka Institute (founded in 2009) is located on Bolotnyi Island, on the bank of the Moscow River, opposite the re-built Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, just down river – ‘a five-minute walk’ (Shteyngart 2011) – from the Kremlin and just up river from Zurab Tsereteli’s imposing 98-metre-high monument to Peter the Great, erected in 1997 at the western confluence of the Moscow River and the Vodootvodnyi Canal. The film’s action is thus set firmly in the heart of the capital of the Russian Federation, surrounded by state buildings and state-funded monuments, some of which were (re)constructed as part of the process of *blagoustroistvo* (the

improvement, or beautification, of urban public infrastructure), instigated by Iurii Luzhkov, the powerful mayor of Moscow from 1992 to 2010, and continued under Sergei Sobianin's mayoralty (2010 ongoing) (Lähteenmäki and Murawski 2023). The Strelka is also, however, right next door to the Red October (*Krasnyi oktiabr'*) creative complex, once the factory that produced the famous Alenka chocolate, but since 2007 home to restaurants, bars, exhibition spaces, shops, studios and other creative industries and known as one of Moscow's most liberal and progressive spaces. TV Rain, founded in 2010 and a known supporter of LGBT rights (Andreevskikh, cited by Strukov 2022, 145), was located there for a time. It was also home to *Kommersant'*, a liberal newspaper focussed on business and politics, and to *Snob*, an international Russian-language glossy magazine funded by Mikhail Prokhorov, whom Gary Shteyngart (2011) describes as 'one of Russia's more progressive oligarchs'.¹⁷ According to Shteyngart 'people of all sexual orientations form[ed] its staff'. For a time in the early 2010s, the magazine's Deputy Editor was the Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen, who identifies as non-binary and trans, and who left Russia for the United States, with their partner and three children, in December 2013, after several prominent Russian politicians spoke about the need to remove children from same-sex families (Gessen 2013). In 2013, a branch of the barber's shop Boy Cut, founded by the 'queer hipster' Aleksandr Gudkov and his associates Andrei Shubin and Nazim Zeinalov, also opened there (Strukov 2022, 147). 'This is the weirdo class', Gessen apparently said of their team at *Snob*, while of the Red October complex as a whole they noted: 'If they want to bomb all of enlightened Moscow, it would be very easy' (Shteyngart 2011). The film's setting, then, becomes a microcosm of its method. On the surface, it is located in the politically and ideologically 'straight/non-queer' heart of Moscow; look more closely, however, and the queer world that exists alongside this official/traditional Moscow is also visible.

Queer celebrity: Renata Litvinova and queer world building

The centrality to the film of Renata Litvinova, as the sex expert who delivers the lecture about love, introduces – right from the opening sequence – an unignorable note of the queer, which runs throughout the film and comes to the fore in the fifth and final novella, of which Litvinova is the protagonist. Litvinova's celebrity, and her cultural significance, cannot be overstated. Ubiquitous in Russian culture since the early 1990s, first as a screenwriter and then as a cinema and theatre actor, a director and producer of music videos, concert and feature films, the author and host of numerous television programmes, and, in 2005, as one of the cinema-star voices used to replace the anonymous announcements on the Moscow Metro's Red Line, in celebration of the network's 70th anniversary (Condee 2009, 84), Litvinova is now also recognised as one of contemporary Russian culture's most prominent queer icons and is also well-known for being 'involved in queer practices' (Strukov 2017b, 2021). Her queerness is a feature of her life, on account of both her ethnic background – her father was a Tatar Muslim; her patronymic is Muratovna – and her intimate, 'rumoured amorous' relationship with the rock star Zemfira, herself a Volga Tatar, born Zemfira Talgatovna Ramazanova (Strukov 2017a, 147; see also Sarajeva 2011, 66; Wiedlack and Neufeld 2015, 160; Strukov 2021). It is also the basis of her cinematic persona, developed through her association with the queer films of the Kira Muratova, such as *Three Stories* (*Tri istorii*, 1997), for which she wrote the

screenplay of the second story, 'Ophelia' ('Ofeliia'), in which she took the role of the nurse Ofa,¹⁸ and her roles in other queer films based on her stories and screenplays, such as *Land of the Deaf* (*Strana glukhikh*, dir. Valerii Todorovskii, 1998), an adaptation (by Iurii Korotkov and Valerii Todorovskii) of Litvinova's story 'To Possess and To Belong' ('Obladat' i prinadlezhat'; Litvinova 2007) and Marina Liubakova's *Cruelty* (*Zhestokost'*, 2007).¹⁹ Both these films focus on intense female friendships, based explicitly on a hatred of men; in both the women joke about being mistaken for lesbians, and – in *Cruelty* – they are also referred to as such by a man they meet in a restaurant. Litvinova's screen image also, as many commentators have noted (Condee 2009; Mukhortova 2017; Stishova 2003; Tsyrukun 2006), draws on those of the 1930s Hollywood actresses Marlene Dietrich, famously bisexual, and Greta Garbo, described by one of her biographers as 'technically bisexual, predominantly lesbian' (Paris 1994, 249).

While commentators who write in Russian do not usually use the term 'queer/kvir' when describing Litvinova, they invariably use words and phrases that can be understood as its equivalents. For example, Anzhelika Artyukh (Artiukh 2004, 66) characterises her as 'insistently cultivating the signs of a unique female strangeness that would allow her to create an image unlike anyone else – her own among strangers, a stranger among her own in a world of female beauty and experiences'; for Nina Tsyrukun (2006, 352) she is 'a woman woven from strangeness'; and Irina Shilova (2008) describes her as having created a persona that is 'counter to existing templates' and 'fantastically alien', invoking her 'otherness', her 'foreignness', her 'independence from moral norms [...], a boundless indifference to prescribed ethical values', and her determination to preserve for herself 'the right to be strange'. The inclusion of Litvinova in the film's central role can therefore be read as a deliberate act of 'queer world building', defined by Strukov (2021) as 'a practice [in which] queerness is carried out across different platforms and beyond the actual films'. In other words, it is a technique that consists in bringing into the film world queer elements that exist outside the film's diegesis, in the world beyond.

Olga Mukhortova, citing Litvinova's 2003 formulation of the significance of personhood – 'One's individuality is everything' – has further described the essence of Litvinova's 'star persona' as residing in the fact that she 'openly performs the importance of defining oneself as an individual in post-Soviet Society [...] bring[ing] back to the screen the individuality that had been politically unachievable and culturally unacceptable in Soviet Russia for decades' (Mukhortova 2017, 23; 20). Litvinova's centrality is not a subtle gesture, therefore, not a hint at the film's 'queer possibilities'. Rather it is a direct declaration, announcing one of the film's main themes: the right to be the (queer) self that one wants to be.

Queering identity: Cosplay, crossplay and dancing

This theme runs throughout the film's first novella, which revolves around twenty-somethings Lena (Mariia Shalaeva) and Igor' (Vasilii Raksha), whose relationship is built on their mutual interest in cosplaying Himeia and Taito, the young lovers from *A Dark Rabbit has Seven Lives* (*Itsuka Tenma no Kuro Usagi*, dirs. Takaya Kagami and Yuu Kamiya, 2008–2013), a Japanese light novel series that inspired manga and anime adaptations. The term cosplay, a portmanteau of the words 'costume' and 'play', refers to the practice of taking on both the external appearance (clothes, hair, eye colour, make up) and the gait, mannerisms,

gestures and attitudes of a fantasy character, often drawn from Japanese manga and anime series, but also from films and computer games. There is a growing body of scholarly literature devoted to this practice in different national contexts (Fung and Pun 2016; Gn 2011; Jacobs 2013; Kirkpatrick 2015; Lamerichs 2011, 2014; Mason-Bertrand 2019; Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Hei-Man Cheung 2012; Tompkins 2019; Winge 2006, 2019), with most commentators agreeing that cosplay, a form of performance art, is an inherently queer practice, because it enables its practitioners to experiment with alternative identities. As Craig Norris and Jason Bainbridge have highlighted: ‘Crucial to this idea is the notion of “play” as central to the pastime of cosplaying’; thus, as a practice ‘cosplay [. . .] has significant implications for gender play and gender disruption’. It is an act of “queering” gender roles and stepping outside heteronormative behaviours through the assumption of fictional identities’ (Norris and Bainbridge 2009). Moreover, the characters favoured in cosplay often have an ambiguous or androgynous appearance that challenges the essential differences of the conventionally gendered body.

Cosplay in the Russian context has, as yet, received less academic attention.²⁰ An online article titled ‘The History of Cosplay’ (‘Istoriia kospleia’), posted by a profile named Bender77 on 15 August 2015, contains some information, suggesting that cosplay emerged in the RF in 1999, the year in which an article on the practice was published in Russian by Valerii Korneev (1999) in the gaming magazine *The Great Dragon* (*Velikii drakon*). Recent videos posted on YouTube show cosplayers walking across the Patriarchal Bridge, which connects the Bersenevskaja Embankment, where the Strelka Institute is located, to the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.²¹ The work of the Russian photographer Mariya Kozhanova (b. 1986 in Kaliningrad, now based in Berlin) is also noteworthy. In ‘Declared Detachment’, a series of 23 portrait photographs taken between 2012 and 2014, she represents the experience of young Russian adults – ‘a generation [. . .] born in times when well organized society and established identity fell apart’, who declare their identity through cosplay (Kozhanova 2012). Unusually, however, her subjects are captured in the ordinary spaces of their homes. For example, in ‘Witch’ (2012) and ‘Teenage Princess’ (2013), young women sit, dressed in their respective costumes, on divans covered with patterned bedspreads pushed back against carpet-covered walls. In ‘Pink Hair’ (2012), a young woman sits cross-legged on her bedroom carpet, dressed in ordinary clothes but also wearing white angel wings and combing a long pink wig that recalls the one worn by Lena/Himea in *About Love*. In ‘Super Mario 4’ (2014) the eponymous cosplayer stands in the drab staircase of his apartment building, as do the young women captured in ‘Staircase’ (2013). In ‘Tap and Roots’ (2012), a young man dressed (complete with latex elf ears) as Link, the queer eternal teenager of the video game series *The Legend of Zelda*, sits on a ladder in a cellar of the Mariners’ House of Culture in Kaliningrad. Cosplayers usually pose against white backgrounds and adopt the attitudes of the characters they have chosen to embody, but Kozhanova refuses to separate her subjects from the backdrop of contemporary Russian reality. This approach functions to suggest a sense of their being out of place in the ‘real’ world, of their failing to fit in. They are outsiders. This is not a negative position, however. As Kozhanova puts it, they are depicted as a ‘beautiful inlay to our ordinary world!’ (Instagram, @mariyakozhanova, 7 September 2017). Melikian also speaks in interviews of having seen groups of cosplayers in Moscow and being struck by their beauty: ‘It was an incredibly beautiful sight: suddenly, a crowd of people dressed in costumes/in masquerade (*tolpa*

riazhenykh) came out of a club. [...]. They're looking for truth in Japanese culture' (Novikov and Golubchikov 2015; Sindeeva 2015; Tuula 2015).

A similar visual device to that adopted by Kozhanova in her photographs is used by Melikian in her film, when she shows Igor' and Lena walking along Moscow streets and travelling home on the metro. They stand out because of their brightly coloured wigs and clothes, and the intensity of their conversation. Details of mise-en-scene also highlight their queerness: in one shot they walk past an advertising stand that features a rainbow, the universal symbol of gay pride (Julian Graffy, pers. comm., 19 July 2023). Moreover, in some crowd scenes, passers-by pull away from them, as if fearful or disgusted, which highlights the sense of their difference and hints at their social isolation. This is not, however, the perspective encouraged by the film. Their bright costumes – further enhanced by the clever use of filters and lighting – ensure that they engage our attention, by comparison with the drab grey people who surround them. This recalls a similar approach to costume, colour and lighting in Valerii Todorovskii's musical film *Hipsters* (*Stiliagi*, 2008), in which the group who, as Stephen M. Norris notes, 'wear garish clothing, adopt outrageous hairstyles and call themselves "American" names such as Fred or Bob' (a Thaw-era form of cosplay?) are contrasted positively with the Komsomol members, whose grey uniforms do not allow any expression of individuality. In the final sequence of *Hipsters*, the 1950s setting is suddenly brought into the present of the film's making, as the protagonist Mels finds himself on contemporary Tverskaya Street (one of the longest and widest Moscow boulevards, which runs from the Garden Ring to the north end of Red Square and the Kremlin), where he is joined by scores of young people from other youth cultures – 'punks, hip hop artists, skateboarders, gamers, and so on' – thus 'turning Tverskaya Street into a giant celebration' (Norris 2014, 122) and emphasising the contemporary relevance of the film's message of 'freedom of choice and the right to be different' (Isakava 2009).²² *About Love's* first novella opens with a sequence that might initially seem to parallel that with which *Hipsters* ends. A door covered in posters advertising concerts and theatrical performances, one of which appears to be titled (in Latin script) 'Stigma' or 'Stigmata', bursts open, 'releasing a cavalcade of boldly made up, extravagantly coifed, and brightly garbed youngsters onto the streets of Moscow', as Melikian stages what Artyukh and Forman describe as 'an aesthetic protest' (Artyukh and Forman 2018, 303). Unlike in *Hipsters*, however, the cosplayers do not remain on the streets for long. The sequence's celebratory tone shifts, and it becomes clear that they are running from the building in fear, in order to escape a police raid on the club they frequent. The chase is filmed in slow motion to a soundtrack of Schubert's *Ave Maria*. Many of the people who feature in this sequence are real cosplayers, invited by Melikian to take part (Tuula 2015), and this knowledge adds an extra-diegetic relevance to the sequence. Thus, while the sight of the Moscow riot police attempting to apprehend Spiderman, Disney's Princess Jasmine, the Inquisitor, and other fantasy characters from manga and anime is undoubtedly amusing, it is also poignant, if not tragic, on many levels.

First, for example, the viewer can see in this sequence submerged references to numerous well-known instances of police and state repression in Russia in the two to three years before the film was made, associated in particular with protests against electoral fraud and Vladimir Putin's controversial election/reinstallation as President for a third term in May 2012. While none of the cosplayers wears a balaclava, their colourful

costumes and both the full-face masks and the mask-like full-face make up worn by a number of the cosplayers might for some viewers evoke the feminist punk group Pussy Riot, founded in August 2011 and soon famous for their provocative and unauthorised performances of oppositional punk songs about feminism and LGBT rights, staged in high-profile places, such as Moscow's Red Square (opposite the Kremlin) and, most famously, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (which occupies a prominent place in the film's cityscapes), where they pleaded, on 21 February 2012, for Putin to be driven away (Borenstein 2021; Jonson 2016).²³ Likewise, the cosplayers' colourful costumes make one think of gay pride marches, banned, in June 2012, from taking place in Moscow for at least 100 years (Brocklebank 2012). The sequence could also be read as alluding to the police response to the Bolotnaia Square protest held on 6 May 2012, an event widely considered to have been the catalyst for Putin's decision to 'tighten the screws on Russian society' and to crack down on the protest movement and society more broadly (Baczynska 2014; Taylor 2013); Anton Dolin (2015) alludes to this when he describes how in this sequence 'a "white ribbon" rally is turned into an innocuous carnival'.²⁴ It is surely no coincidence that the costumes of many of the cosplayers include white ribbons in various forms. The range of allusions to non-normative events contained within this sequence clearly highlights the extent to which this film is queer socially, politically and culturally.²⁵

The extradiegetic use of haunting classical music adds a melancholy note that contrasts sharply with Melikian's light-hearted tone in surrounding sequences, and the slow motion allows viewers to take in the range of young people involved in the gathering, and to focus not only on their costumes, but also on their increasingly fearful faces, as they realise that they will be punished by arrest for expressing themselves in this way. This is also the function of the subsequent sequence in the police station, when the camera moves along the line of detained cosplayers, who all state their character name, their age, and their real-life occupation. The detainees (aka Demon, Inquisitor, Silva, Hadja and Ama Ruri), who range in age from young teenagers (14) to twenty-somethings (28), come from all walks of life: there is an economist, a salesperson, a student, a delivery guy and an appraiser. They do it because they like it, because it is their hobby. One offers more information about why they engage in this practice, however: 'I'm a girl, but I identify as a guy (*paren'*)'. Thus cosplay is explicitly shown also to enable crossplay, defined by Jessica Ethel Tompkins (2019) as 'dress[ing] up as a fictional character of a different gender than the cosplayer's self-identified gender'.²⁶ While the personae adopted by the protagonists at the centre of this novella do not disrupt gender conventions, therefore – indeed, Taito and especially Himea are almost aggressively heterosexual in terms of their behaviour; the first time we meet them they are having sex, and Taito complains about Himea's infidelity with multiple partners as they wait to be processed in the police station – those who appear at its edges do. The sequence concludes with the crossplayer ruefully stating (in what is clearly meant to be perceived as their response to a follow-up question): 'No, I haven't been beaten up yet.' In this way, the film refers to both the existence and the difficult experience of trans people in Russia. As Alice M. Underwood notes, in a discussion of the non-normative body in public performance art in Russia: 'every time a transgender person goes out on the street in Russia, they face an element of risk: will they be beaten, killed, or left alone?' (Underwood 2022, 88). For Underwood, '[t]he weight placed on conformity means that the non-normative body [in public performance art] almost automatically takes on a level of political commentary' (Underwood 2022, 88). Thus,

when Lena and Igor' walk through the centre of Moscow dressed as Himea and Taito they are making a political point as clearly as Lena does when, after being told that they cannot leave the police station because they do not have their ID cards and therefore cannot prove who they really are, she challenges the police officer about why he can play act and wear a costume (his uniform) but they cannot, breaking the fourth wall to add, with an expression of wide-eyed innocence that fools nobody: 'We haven't done anything wrong. We live in a free country!'

This novella also includes the first example of Melikian's 'decentring' device, whereby the viewer's attention is drawn away from the novella's main storyline and protagonists by a peripheral event that both works in a self-contained way as a queer allusion and prepares the ground for the queer subtexts of the novellas in which the peripheral characters become the narrative focus. This occurs in the middle of the novella, after Igor' and Lena have agreed to meet each other out of costume, as 'ordinary/normal people' (their words), at a nightclub in the Red October complex. When Igor' arrives, he has to push his way through the crowded dance floor to find a table. As he does so, he looks around, seeking out Lena, and the camera adopts his perspective. As Artyukh and Forman note, this sequence – which gathers scores of young people – provides viewers with the opportunity 'to consider "the other" in modern Moscow and to see that conservative definitions cannot encompass true sexuality'. Look closely, they encourage, as 'a careful viewer might even spot a reference to the gay leather subculture' (Artyukh and Forman 2018, 303). As Igor' scans the crowd, however, his attention is instead caught by two young women, whom we see from his viewpoint: one blonde, one brunette; one wearing a light-coloured dress and sleeveless denim jacket, the other a black sundress. They are standing on a table, and are thus raised above the crowd on the dancefloor, dancing and singing along to the music (Figure 2). Our attention is further drawn to them first by two editing cuts, which emphasise that this is no longer Igor's perspective, as after each cut the women are framed more closely than in the previous shot, and second when we notice that the blonde woman is played by Aleksandra (Sasha) Bortich, newly famous from her powerful debut performance as the precocious teenager Sasha in Nigina Saifullaeva's *Name Me* (*Kak menia zovut*, 2014), which won a special prize 'For Light Breath and Artistic Integrity' at the 25th Kinotavr. As we watch, the young



Figure 2. Novella 1: As Igor' looks for Lena in the Red October nightclub, he catches sight of two young women dancing together. Still from the film.

women reach out their arms to each other and entangle them, each pulling the other closer.

This brief dance sequence is a quintessential queer moment and a recurrent strategy, often referred to as ‘subtexting’ (Kabir 1998, 185), employed in Soviet and recent Russian cinema to represent queer relationships. In her Instagram- and Telegram-based project *Kvir-ekran* (*Queer Screen*), Stasya Korotkova sets out to catalogue films made in Russia and the Soviet Union in which there are what she terms – in an echo of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s ‘potential queer nuances’ – ‘traces of a queer sensibility’, ‘queer motifs’ that express ‘non-normative sexuality or gender expression’ (Korotkova 2021). In one post, she shares a clip from Oleg Frelikh’s film *The Prostitute* (*Prostitutka*, 1926), in which two brothel workers pass the time as they wait for clients by dancing with each other (Instagram, @queer_screen, 16 June 2021). This brief episode has no significance at all in plot terms and the women whom we watch dancing together do not play any part in the film beyond this. But such moments, in which two women dance together – referred to in Russian as *sherochka s masherochko*²⁷ – often appear in films that have no other references to lesbian desire, either in the storyline or the visuals, enabling moments of intimate contact between two women to be pictured on screen and thus acting as potential moments of lesbian recognition. There are similar sequences in Larisa Shepit’ko’s *Wings* (*Kryl’ia*, 1966), for example, when Nadezhda Petrukhina and Shura, the beer-house waitress, dance together – an exhilarating moment in which Petrukhina genuinely lets herself go and which is brought to an abrupt close when the women become aware that they are being watched by a bemused crowd of men who are waiting for the bar to open; in Radomir Vasilevskii’s *Dubravka* (1967), about a teenage girl’s obsession with an older woman; and in Todorovskii’s *Land of the Deaf*, when Iaia and Rita return, exhilarated, from an evening out together during which, they comment, they might have been mistaken for ‘lesbians’. These sequences (of which there are doubtless many more examples in the history of Russian and Soviet cinema) work against the respective films’ normative narratives, raising the possibility of emotions and experiences that are ‘at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant’ (Halperin 1995, 62) and offering viewers a glimpse of an alternative – queer – perspective that is denied direct representation. As Shameem Kabir (1998, 185) puts it, subtexting offers viewers ‘a resistant position’, enabling them to ‘read in [queer] desire at the margins of [films] which are at least prima facie about straight desire’. As in all these films, the dance sequence in *About Love* is over in moments (six seconds, in fact); the camera cuts away from the two young women and re-centres its focus, returning us to the novella’s protagonists and Igor’s search for Lena. But we remember this moment. It also, moreover, sharpens our awareness of the fact that there are other female couples in the club, in the background, some also dancing together, some sitting chatting, and one couple, by the bar behind which Lena works, embracing.

Queering desire: Dating, more dancing and a ménage à trois

This decentring strategy recurs in the film’s second novella, which focuses on the story of Liza (Iuliia Snigir’) and Grisha (Aleksei Filimonov), a couple in their late twenties who live together in a cramped apartment which looks out onto busy highways. Unemployed for three months already, Grisha passes the time playing war games

and destroying tanks on his desk-top computer, while Liza works as an office girl for Viktor Borisovich (Vladimir Mashkov), a rich and ostensibly happily married businessman (he has the obligatory photographs of his wife and two children on his desk), whose company is struggling on account of the 'economic crisis, sanctions, war, economic stagnation'.²⁸ Having fired his entire staff, to stop the company from going under, he is left wondering what to do now that he is alone in his large office. 'Fuck Liza', he concludes, and he makes it his mission to have sex with her. In return, he will not only agree not to fire her but will also pay all her expenses and buy her an apartment. The novella's main storyline – a conventional retelling of the age-old normative tale of a powerful, upper-class man (one who has a reproduction of Ernst Lipgart's 1900 portrait of the Emperor Nicholas II on his office wall and a bust of Napoleon on his desk, moreover) who uses his money to acquire sexual favours from a younger, lower-class woman – is interrupted, however, when we are briefly introduced to Boria (Evgenii Tsyganov), who will be the central protagonist of the film's fourth novella and our attention is once again 'decentred' from the normative to the non-normative.²⁹

A thirty-something, skateboarding, promiscuous, commitment-phobic graffiti artist, Boria is on a crusade to cleanse Moscow of all 'ugliness'. His battle is expressed in two main ways. First, through his campaigning against Zurab Tsereteli's monument to Peter the Great, which involves handing out leaflets calling for its removal and collecting signatures on a petition – actions that be read both as a dig at the political passivity of certain sections of Russian society, who fixate on a statue and overlook the real issues ('economic crisis, sanctions, war, economic stagnation') and as a political statement about the impossibility of agency in Putin's Russia. Second, through his obsession with adorning the bare grey walls of buildings, bridges and other sites of urban wasteland with spray-painted portraits of women, which constitutes his own (queer) version of Sobianin's *blagoustroistvo*. As we learn in the fourth novella, however, these portraits are also a record of his sexual conquests: as his teenaged common-law wife, Sasha (Sasha Bortich), screams when she finds him spray painting a huge portrait of another woman, 'You never paint "abstract" chicks! You fucked me before you painted me, Boria'.³⁰

Melikian's knowing references to the controversy caused by the Peter the Great monument make the viewer (and especially the Muscovite viewer) laugh out loud; but her 'in-joke' masks some additional significances. Melikian also uses Boria's promiscuity, his eventual (implied) polyamory, and his hatred of Tsereteli's Peter the Great to position him as a protagonist with a queer viewpoint. It was, after all, Peter the Great who first attempted to regulate homosexuality in Russia, when he signed a law in 1716 – 'Russia's first secular statute' – prohibiting same-sex relations among soldiers and sailors, as part of his drive to introduce 'new forms of social control [and] discipline' (Healey 2001, 22). Boria's fight against Peter's monument can therefore also be seen as a much more significant fight against the imposition of such norms.³¹

In the second novella, this comes to fore, briefly, in a decentring moment. As Liza sits in a cafe, trying to decide whether to accept Viktor Borisovich's offer and become his kept woman, Boria (who is linked by name to the abusive businessman) joins her (uninvited) at her table, when he notices her taking a photograph of the Peter the Great monument and posting it on social media under the hashtag '#Beauty'. Lecturing her about its ugliness and opining (in a direct address to the camera that again breaks the fourth wall) that the

monument constitutes a 'crime against humanity', that 'our surroundings define our life and form our mentality' and that 'we must strive for beauty, we must live in it, create it. Otherwise, we are not people but slaves'. The serious tone then switches when he turns his attention back to Liza, tries out his chat-up line on her ('Would you like me to paint a portrait of you, naked, on a wall?') and is dismissed by her as an 'idiot'.³²

However, Boria's infidelity/promiscuity might be felt to achieve the same end as his hatred of Peter's statue, albeit via different means, in the film's fourth novella. From the outset, this novella is structured around a love triangle – conveyed through clever use of split screens and repeated parallel sequences showing Boria's morning routine with two different women – that positions Sasha, the much-younger woman with whom Boria has been in a relationship for three months, and Mila (Mariia Daniliuk), the older 'other woman', as rivals for Boria.³³ Sasha discovers the affair when she comes across a photograph that Mila has posted online of a graffiti portrait that is clearly by Boria. Driven by jealousy, Sasha tracks down the portrait, confronts Boria, and returns at night to paint over it. She is, however, disturbed by Mila herself, who goes from threatening her with a gun, to pleading with her not to destroy the portrait and, finally, begs her to hit her instead of painting over it. Sasha obliges and knocks Mila to the ground. The next sequence – which lasts almost one minute and has Siuzanna Abdullah's 2013 hit song 'Crumbs in the Blanket' ('Kroshki v odeiale') as its soundtrack³⁴ – therefore surprises: it shows the two women out on the town together in central Moscow, flashing their knickers at passing cars, drinking sparkling wine from the bottle and laughing so much that they fall to the ground, in the middle of a busy road, where they roll around, in hysterics, reaching out for each other. Brushing off a solicitous motorist (significantly, a man), they help each other to their feet and set off running down the road, arms around each other's waist, holding hands, laughing with joyful abandon. The next shot, a medium close-up, shows them caressing each other and kissing in an overt expression of their sexuality. Another editing cut, and the camera has panned out, enabling us to see more of their surroundings. We realise that we are in a setting that we have seen before, in the first novella: the young women are dancing together, on a table, in the Red October nightclub (Figure 3). As they dance, they embrace and then they kiss, a detail that was not shown in the first novella (Figure 1). Another editing cut and we then see Igor' (the protagonist of the first novella), looking around him. He sees the women, walks over to greet them and we realise that we are back in the same timeframe as the first novella, watching the same event we then saw only in passing; dressed in his 'normal/ordinary' clothes, Igor' is on his way to his 'real-life' meeting with Lena, whom we also see, anxiously waiting to find out whether Igor' will recognise her.

The development of this queer (lesbian/bisexual) relationship is also cued in the film through another example of queer world building. As Boria gets ready to leave Mila's apartment to go and paint her portrait, he turns to look at her: she is sitting on a chair, dressed all in black, including high-heeled shoes and a black fedora. Her pose and her attire approximate those favoured by the German actress Marlene Dietrich (already alluded to, as noted previously, through Litvinova's presence in the film), who was famously open about her bisexuality.³⁵ According to Mary R. Desjardins and Gerd Gemünden, in early film scholarship on homosexuality and Hollywood cinema, Dietrich's 'lesbian allure' – in films such as Joseph von Sternberg's *Morocco* (1930), in which she kisses another woman – is acknowledged but usually either dismissed as 'an "exotic" touch likely meant to arouse the male spectator' or as 'abandoned in the films'



Figure 3. Novella 4: Sasha (Sasha Bortich) and Mila (Mariia Daniliuk) kiss while dancing in the Red October nightclub. Still from the film.

overwhelming advancement of the ‘male plot’ (Desjardins and Gemünden 2007, 12). As Andrea Weiss has, however, correctly argued, such ‘isolated moments’ are much more powerful than these normative readings suggest; in fact, ‘they pose a threat to the “male plot” and to heterosexual renderings of homosexuality as *exotica*’ (cited by Desjardins and Gemünden 2007, 12).

This sequence of female bonding, which culminates in Sasha and Mila caressing and kissing each other as they dance together in the nightclub – and which we see not once, but twice, thanks to Melikian’s strategy of building connections between the novellas and decentring our attention from their main plot by referring outside each story and across the film as a whole – is similarly powerful and expressive. In her 1987 article ‘Desperately Seeking Difference’, which set out to address the question of ‘the specifically homosexual pleasures of female spectatorship’ that had thus far been ignored by the vein of spectatorship theory launched by Laura Mulvey (1975) in her article ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, the feminist film theorist Jackie Stacey argued that there is a very strong connection between lesbian films and films that feature narratives of female bonding and friendship (Stacey 1987, 48). In other words, there exists – as Karen Hollinger puts it – a ‘*homoerotic component*’ in films about women with strong intimate friendships (and especially those that border on obsession), even if there is no explicit homosexual contact between the female characters and their friendship/obsession is not explicitly sexual (Hollinger 1998, 3).³⁶ As Teresa de Lauretis (1994, 120) memorably argued, ‘it takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian’.

The sequence concludes with a bird’s eye shot of the Red October night club, followed by aerial shots of Moscow at night: the camera swoops over the Krymskii Bridge, then cuts to a vista that foregrounds Peter’s monument, along with other landmarks associated with state power: the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour and, just visible in the distance, the Kremlin. The next shot is a split screen: on the left, Boria lies alone in bed; on the right, a close-up of the Peter monument, around which the camera slowly circles. Love triangles were often used in Soviet cinema as a subtexting device to make non-heteronormative desire visible on screen.³⁷ And this is also the case here. When the women return together from their drunken night out to the apartment that Sasha shares with Boria, the love triangle (Sasha-Boria-Mila) that had seen the two women competing for one man evolves into a *ménage à trois*. The women announce to

Boria that they have agreed that they should live together as a threesome (*vtroem*), a decidedly 'non-traditional' set up (Artyukh and Forman 2018, 303), thus making explicit that relationships in Moscow – even those that unfold under the watchful eyes of Peter the Great, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin – can be queer. 'There's nothing painful in this. It only hurts when you're deceived', says Mila, 'When everyone is honest, it's beautiful, incredibly beautiful', making it clear that this can be read as a polyamorous relationship, rather than (or as well as – each viewer will read this relationship as they wish) a story of male infidelity or a stereotypical male fantasy of sex with two women, to which Sasha alludes, as she teases Boria: 'What else does a man need to be happy? Do you have enough inspiration now, Boria? Let's find you a red-head. You'll have the whole collection, and you'll be like Meladze!³⁸ The sequence concludes with Mila, now alone on the bed with Sasha, complimenting her: 'You're so beautiful. Like an angel. Your eyes are so pure, so clear. You're so young, so full of light and tenderness'.

These powerful visual and verbal statements combine to ensure that the viewer is unconvinced, when in the next sequence the women (breaking the fourth wall and speaking to the camera) each in turn protests that they cannot stand the other, criticises their appearance and restates their rivalry for Boria with which their relationship began. 'She's so stupid', says Mila, 'It's obvious that he's not going to live with her and that we'll be together (*vmeste*)'. 'Ridiculous! She's 35. She probably has a saggy backside', counters Sasha. 'He'll calm down, forget about her, and we'll go back to living as a couple (*vdvoem*)'. In this way, Melikian forestalls any accusations of inappropriate 'propagandising' by concluding the novella with a return to the normative, not only socially but also cinematically. The theme of friendship between women is common in contemporary Russian women's cinema and the standard treatment of that theme shows that close female friendship, or the potential for such friendship, is invariably undone by the women's rivalry over and competition for a man. Valeriia Gai Germanika's *Everyone Dies But Me* (*Vse umrut, a ia ostanus'*, 2008), Avdot'ia Smirnova's *Kokoko* (2012), Saifullaeva's *Name Me* (2014) and Nataliia Meshchaninova's *Hope Factory* (*Kombinat Nadezhda*, 2014) all reflect this dynamic. Indeed, it is also present, in miniature form, in *About Love's* third novella, when Megumi excitedly breaks the fourth wall to inform the viewer that the unsmiling hotel receptionist (Anna Kotova in a cameo role) dislikes her, because she senses that she has come to Russia to steal her man. The final shots of the sequence counter this return to the normative visually, however: the screen splits three ways, positioning Boria in the middle and one of the women on either side of him. They all three stare defiantly into the camera (Figure 4). When Boria also begins to speak, the viewer expects that he will comment on the situation, but he instead repeats his hatred of the ugly Peter the Great Monument. Thus, Melikian deflects via humour the visual image of the ménage à trois that appears on the screen.

This representation of a 'non-traditional' relationship serves a further function. It leads the viewer to look back at the film's third novella – about Megumi, the young Japanese woman who travels to Moscow to indulge her deep love of Russian culture, but also to meet a man – and to consider it in a different light. Over the course of her visit, Megumidates six different Russian men, all of whom she has met through an online dating site. These dates are consecutive temporarily, occurring one after the other; but as in the fourth novella's concluding shot – which evokes and restates visually the verbally disavowed Sasha-Boria-Mila ménage à trois – so Melikian contrives to align them both

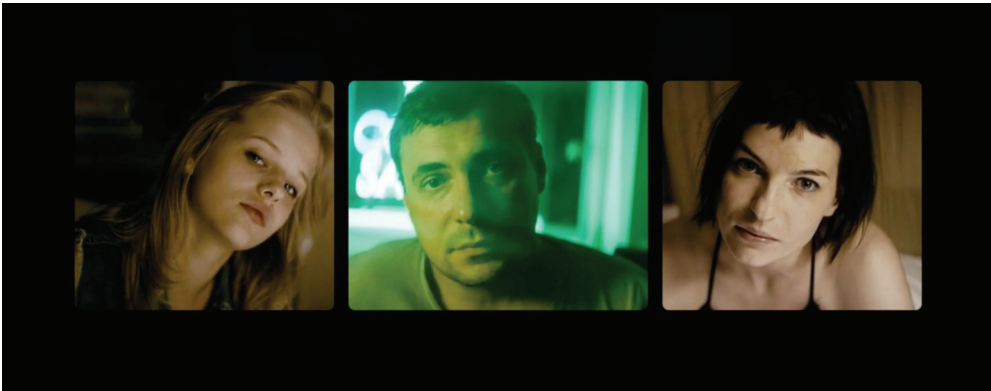


Figure 4. Novella 4: Sasha (Sasha Bortich), Boria (Evgenii Tsyganov) and Mila (Mariia Daniliuk) stare defiantly into the camera, asserting their right to live in a *ménage à trois* (*liubov' vtroem*). Still from the film.

spatially and visually, creating a split screen that features head shots of all six men. In this way, this story about internet dating can also be read as a queer story about polygamy (Figure 5). This reading is also encouraged by the fact that Melikian cast Iurii Kolokol'nikov in the role of the date with whom Megumieventually elects to spend the night. Kolokol'nikov would be familiar to viewers from his role in Merkulova and Chupov's 2013 film *Intimate Parts* (*Intimnye mesta*) as Ivan, a polyamorous photographer who lives in a *ménage à trois* with his agent, Svetlana, and his housemaid, Saiana, and whose penchant for photographing people's genitalia provides one of the meanings present in the film's title.³⁹

Queering the body: All about his girlfriend

The film's overarching theme of the right to be the (queer) self that one wants to be is declared again in the film's final novella, which focuses on the lecturer's after-work

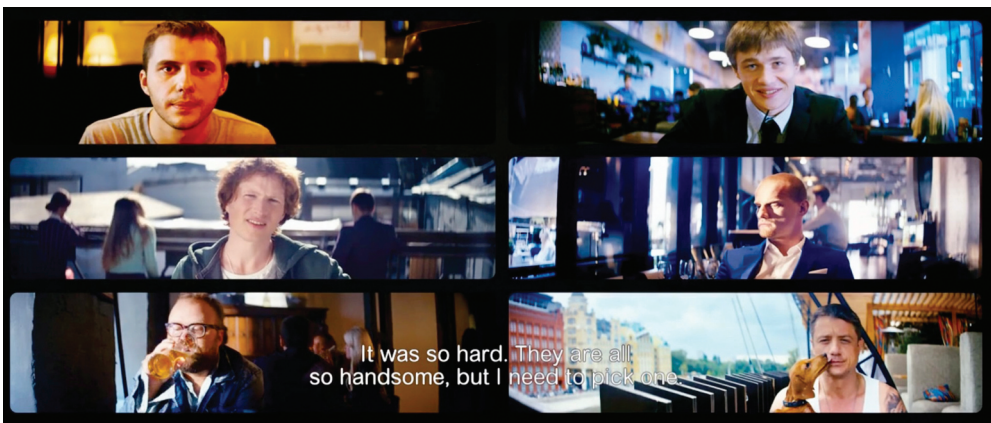


Figure 5. Novella 3: A queer story about polygamy? Still from the film.

lifestyle and in which she is finally recognisable as Litvinova the queer cinema icon: bleached blonde hair, bright red lipstick, white face powder, scarlet nail varnish. Dressed in a trench coat, cinched tight at the waist, and black stilettos, she is walking through the city after dark, guided by a series of text messages to an assignation – for sex – with an unknown man. This is one way in which this novella queers the norms: a liberal, free and independent woman, she roams the Moscow streets, at night, in search of sex.⁴⁰ Once arrived at her destination, however, she realises that she has been lured there by her former husband, who wants her to provide a ‘psychological portrait’ of the 21-year-old women with whom he, a man well into his fifties, is in love and due to marry. Acquiescing only after she learns that he is prepared to pay well for this service, Litvinova delivers a semi-improvised, semi-comic monologue which deconstructs the socially constructed norms of femininity and male views of the perfect woman (many of which are evidenced in this novella and across the film as a whole), raises important questions about identity and, through its overt intertextual references to other films, functions as another act of queer world building. Her ex-husband, who has drugged the young woman with a high dose of Phenobarbital, usually used to treat epilepsy, so that Litvinova can ‘analyse’ her, offers her a dreamy account of how they met, represented through a soft-focus, slow-motion, sun-drenched flashback that opens with a close-up of the young woman’s chest, in a low-cut T-shirt. The shot reminds us of the question posed to Liza by Viktor Borisovich in the film’s second novella, ‘Are your breasts real?’ (*nastoiashchii*).⁴¹

‘This body here is your love, yes?’ Litvinova asks. ‘Don’t make fun of me. I’ve never seen anyone so natural and pure’, her ex-husband replies. But Litvinova then proceeds to deconstruct the young woman’s body, itemising the cost of each beauty treatment she has had, from the superficial and merely ornamental (French manicure, 2,000 roubles; eyelash and brow tinting and maintenance, 3,000 roubles, pedicure 4,000 roubles, waxing 3,000 roubles) to the more extreme and fundamental: hair extensions (40,000, just for fitting), new breasts (5,000–7,000 dollars), teeth veneers (30,000 Euros) and, most expensive, a Beverly Hills nose job (at least 15,000–20,000 dollars, not including the airfare, accommodation, or meals).

In addition to deconstructing the male view of the norms of feminine beauty, however, this novella is also an extended allusion to, or quotation from, a key sequence from near the end of Pedro Almodóvar’s Academy Award-winning film *All About My Mother* (*Todo sobre mi madre*, 1999), in which Agrado, a trans woman (played by Antonia San Juan), delivers a theatrical monologue – both serious and comic – about her life story and her quest for an authentic self.⁴² Undoing the buttons on her cardigan, she invites audience members to leave now, if they do not wish to listen. A few do so. ‘I’m very authentic’, Agrado begins, before listing all the cosmetic procedures she has undergone and itemising their cost: almond-shaped eyes: 80,000; nose: 200,000; two breasts (‘I’m not a monster!’) 70,000 each; numerous pints of silicone (at 100,000 per pint) in her lips, forehead, cheeks, hips and buttocks; jaw reduction: 75,000; complete laser depilations: 60,000 a session. ‘It costs a lot to be authentic’, Agrado concludes, ‘and you can’t skimp on such things, because you are more authentic the more you resemble what you’ve dreamed of being’. For viewers who know Almodóvar’s film, its relevance to the themes of *About Love* is clear. As Almodóvar advocates in this work for ‘subject positions excluded from the dominant social and symbolic order’ (Gutiérrez-Albilla 2018, 75), so Melikian stresses that people have the right to be the (queer) person they want to be, regardless of

what others dictate, and regardless of whether it is a Russian Emperor, a Moscow policeman, or the President of the RF laying down the law.

The film ends with a brief sequence in which Boria encounters Litvinova in the street; she is happy to have acquired a large sum of money from her ex-husband but disgruntled at having her plans to have sex ruined. We have already seen Boria finishing off a large spray-painted half-naked portrait of her on the side of a building, however, and this tells us all we need to know about what will happen next. However, the soundtrack to this sequence is Zemfira's 'By a Dream' ('Mechtoi'). Its use is another act of queer world building, introducing Litvinova's assumed partner into the world of the film, but it also establishes, via the film's aural plane, a new queer relationship between Litvinova, Boria and Zemfira, thus complicating one last time the heteronormative narrative and queering the representation of place; according to Katja Sarajeva (2011, 66-67) and Zemfira's concerts have been described as creating 'lesbian spaces' in Moscow (Wiedlack and Neufeld 2015).

Conclusion

In August 2016, while in Yerevan, Melikian was posed an interesting question by her interviewer, Lena Gevorgian. Instead of the predictable 'What is love?' – which has, as Melikian notes, been put to her in almost every interview since the June 2015 premiere of *About Love* – Gevorgian asked whether she had learned anything new about love since making the film. Melikian responded as follows:

You know, we're shooting *About Love 2* right now. Five different directors are working on the film. Before my trip to Yerevan, we were all sitting together, discussing storylines and characters. I thought that I wouldn't be able to come up with any new formulations about what love is. The director Pasha Ruminov was sitting with us, and he suddenly said: 'You don't understand; love is acceptance'. I thought to myself: I've never heard such a formulation before. I absolutely agree: love is when you don't try to change or adjust a person to suit you, but simply accept them. (Gevorgian 2016)

Despite Melikian's claim that the concept of love as 'acceptance' had never occurred to her before, this formulation encapsulates the overriding theme of *About Love*. Filmed in August 2014, almost exactly one year after the promulgation of so-called 'gay propaganda' law, which sought to strengthen the sense that Russian society was constructed around a normative framework of 'traditional' values, *About Love* demonstrates and encourages acceptance of the non-heteronormative, representing queer identities, sexualities and relationships in a positive and affirmative manner, sometimes on the fringes of the novellas' central narrative lines, but at other times through their main storyline. This film therefore shows that despite the 'drastic' conservative turn in all areas of Russian state policy, including cultural policy (Jonson 2018, 14), Russian cinema continued to be a space in which queer identities and sensibilities found expression, even in a state-funded and state-lauded mainstream film set in the heart of Moscow. 'Love is a great gift', Litvinova announces at the end of her lecture. It is a gift that comes in many forms, Melikian shows. Thus, the film's queer moments accumulate and combine to ensure that, through its references to sexual, gender and social dissent, this explicitly commercial film challenges

its ostensible narrative assumption of heteronormativity and offers, as a queer counterpoint to the mainstream, a range of non-normative representations of love and the self.

Notes

1. Cinema distribution certificates, or licences, are issued by the Department of Cinema and Modernisation of Programming, part of the Ministry of Culture of the RF. As Andrei Plakhov (2021, 116) outlines, 'According to the administrative regulations of the Ministry of Culture, grounds for denying the issuance of the distribution certificate can only be "scenes with public agitation for terrorist activities or with public justification of terrorism and other extremist activity"'. There are, however, multiple examples of the licensing system being used to prevent queer films from being shown in cinemas in Russia. For example, Liubov' L'vova and Sergei Taramaev's *A Winter Journey (Zimnii put'*, 2013) was denied a distribution licence in August 2013, just one month after Putin signed the 'gay propaganda' law (Wilson 2020). More recently, distribution licences were denied to four of Il'ia Khrzhanovskii's DAU films: *Natasha* (2020), *New Man (Novyi chelovek*, 2020), *Sasha Valera* (2020) and *Nora Son (Nora syn*, 2020) on the grounds that they contain 'materials that promote pornography' (Kartsev et al. 2019). Khrzhanovskii challenged the Ministry of Culture's classification, arguing – in a letter addressed to Russia's then Culture Minister, Vladimir Medinskii – that: 'The explicit scenes that occur in the films are there because they are part of the artistic image/representation and of the cinematic language, not as propaganda for pornography' (Morley 2022b); according to Russian law, Plakhov (2021, 116) explains, 'neither sex scenes nor obscene language, if they are part of the artistic context, can be grounds for a film to be banned'. Medinskii apparently responded that any DAU film not given a cinema distribution licence 'can probably be shown on Internet platforms with appropriate warnings' (Kartsev et al. 2019). However, further evidence of the Russian authorities' increasing intolerance of LGBTQI + themes in films and television programmes came on 11 November 2021, when the Federal Service for the Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor), the Russian executive agency responsible for monitoring, controlling and censoring Russian mass media, announced a proposal to prohibit the showing of films and TV series that feature same-sex relationships and scenes of 'sexual deviations' on Russian online cinema platforms, which, being outside the state financing system, had previously escaped the scrutiny accorded to cinemas and television (Morley 2022b; Shapatina 2021).
2. The film's ending to some extent undermines this stance, however. As Ellina Sattarova (2020, 105) notes, 'Tverdovskii, seemingly unflinching in his attempt to [...] challenge preconceptions about normativity, eventually "flinches" and lets the spectator off the hook at the end of [...] *Zoology*, which end[s] in [a gesture] reminiscent of the one that Tverdovskii set out to criticize – the banishment of what is presumed to be non-normative'.
3. As Sattarova (2020, 46) observes, it is striking that Grisha, the gay teenager whom Veniamin murders is 'one of [the film's] few likeable characters'.
4. Critics based in Russia (and the filmmakers themselves) understandably played down such readings, dismissing them as too literal. Anton Dolin (2018), for example, commented (in *Meduza*): 'The viewer who sees in Chupov and Merkulova's film a use of the LGBT theme will be in trouble [...]. He has not changed gender or orientation, has not "come out of the closet", has not discovered a passion for women's clothing'. Instead, Dolin reads it as an 'existential manifesto' about a person's decision to change their life, made in the face of a sudden awareness of their mortality. Likewise, Vasilii Stepanov (2018) muses rhetorically (in *Seans*), 'What is this film about? Certainly not about the problems of gender identity or tolerance in an isolated Siberian village'. It should be read 'more as a metaphor [...] about the changes you have to make in order to survive and, in general, about the ability to accept the need for change, about the fact that sometimes only fear can give you the impetus for metamorphosis. Perhaps one could argue that this is in a sense a film about Russia: a proud, brutal, patriarchal man with a gun must deny himself in order to step into tomorrow. Perhaps'. For

an alternative reading of the film that sees Egor's crossdressing as 'the enactment of a *couvade* [...], the "tradition of male participation in birth" [that] featured prominently in rituals and customs throughout Russia' and argues that it is part of the filmmakers' analysis of Russian folk beliefs about pregnancy, and the related themes of life and death, see Kaminer (2022, 37).

5. *About Love* can be viewed with English subtitles on Anna Melikian's Vimeo site: <https://vimeo.com/180967419>.
6. The first woman director to win the Kinotavr Grand Prix was Svetlana Proskurina, in 2010, with *Truce (Peremirie)*. Since Melikian's 2015 victory only two more women have won this award: Oksana Karas with *Good Boy (Khoroshii mal'chik)*, 2016) and Nataliia Meshchaninova with *Core of the World (Serdtshe mira)*, 2018).
7. Since *About Love*, Melikian has produced the almanac film *About Love. Only for Adults (Pro liubov'. Tol'ko dlia vzroslykh)*, 2017), which she also partly wrote. It comprises short films on the eponymous theme, directed by Pavel Ruminov, Natal'ia Merkulova and Aleksei Chupov, Nigina Saifullaeva, Evgenii Sheliakin, and Rezo Gigineishvili, again held together by a lecture on love, this time delivered in English by the American actor John Malkovich. She has also released two further full-length fiction films, *Fairy (Feia)*, 2020) and *The Three (Troie)*, 2020), which won the award for best cinematography at the 2020 Kinotavr. Her next feature film, *Anna's Feelings (Chuvstva Anny)* is due to be released in Russia in November 2023; it stars Anna Mikhalkova and has been funded by the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation (Instagram, @petta3399, 12 April 2023).
8. The couple divorced at some point after the birth of their daughter Aleksandra in 2006. Dishdishian co-produced Melikian's first three films. *About Love* was the first film that she produced alone.
9. The fact that *About Love* won this award adds additional irony to Melikian's inclusion of Mikhalkov among the Russian cultural figures Megumi wishes to discuss but cannot, as none of her six Russian dates have heard of him.
10. *Mars* is the only film that Melikian did not set in the capital. Even here, though, the protagonists long to escape the Black Sea coastal town of Marks and to travel to Moscow to see the Kremlin and Red Square and, in the case of the local barmaid, maybe even 'to fuck the President'. *Mermaid* continues where *Mars* leaves off, as early in the film Alisa, her mother and her grandmother leave their cabin on the Black Sea coast and move to Moscow. As Alisa explains, 'When people don't have anywhere to go, they go to Moscow'.
11. While class, money and power are important themes in *About Love*, as in all Melikian's films, and one of the means by which Melikian positions some of her protagonists as outsiders, detailed discussion of the treatment of class is outside the scope of the present article.
12. While *About Love* is Melikian's first explicitly mainstream film (Kostiukovich 2015), accessibility is also a feature of her earlier arthouse films. Larisa Maliukova (2021, 35) describes *Mermaid* as 'art cinema understandable to the masses [...] welcomed by festivals and [...] eagerly acquired by TV channels', an early example of 'consumer-centric art cinema, with its unique take on the ordinary world'.
13. The lecture does, however, include several queer moments. For example, in the section that falls between novellas two and three, Litvinova conducts a 'scientific experiment', asking the audience to smell each other; apparently, the brain's response to a person's scent reveals the level of sexual attraction a person feels for another. This 'fact' refers back to novella two, in which we have just watched Viktor Borisovich smell Liza behind her ear as he undresses her. During the experiment, some of the smelling takes places between heteronormative couples, but women do not only elect to smell men, and men do not only elect to smell women. Significantly, we see a smiling Mila lean over to smell her female neighbour. Yet more striking, however, is the reaction of an unidentified man; he first smells his female neighbour, but shows a definite aversion to this, as does the woman, who pulls a face when he leans in close to her. By contrast, when he then leans forward to smell a man seated in front of him, he appears to derive pleasure from this.

14. Melikian does not entirely gloss over this context. The second novella opens with the businessman Viktor Borisovich lecturing his staff about the difficulties facing his company, which include 'economic crisis, sanctions, war, economic stagnation' (presumably a brave reference to some of the outcomes of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, Ukraine, in early 2014, and the subsequent outbreak of armed conflict in eastern Ukraine that marked the start of the war that led to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022). Grisha also references the 'war' that is 'all around' them when explaining why he has not yet asked Liza to marry him.
15. Reading queer as 'decentring' enables us to suggest that Melikian has always been a queer filmmaker, insofar as she adopts the external perspective of someone who knows Moscow well, but still looks at it from outside; both her life story (as she presents it) and her first three films are indicative of this queer/decentred perspective. Discussion of Melikian's other films is, however, beyond the scope of this article.
16. This device is also found in Sergei Loban's *Chapiteau-Show* (*Shapito-Shou*, 2011), formed – like *About Love* – from separate but interconnected novellas (four of them), one of which bears the title *Love* (*Liubov*), and which shares other similarities with *About Love*, not least the emphasis on the queer tropes of carnival, performance and theatricality and the creators' love of 'hooliganism': *Chapiteau-Show*'s script writer, Marina Potapova, has been described as 'one of the boldest, most daring and witty hooligans of the 90s' (Grabovskaia 2022).
17. According to Elisabeth Schimpfössl (2018, 40–41), Prokhorov's involvement in *Snob* was an attempt to counter his reputation as 'a stereotypical playboy oligarch' and to project 'a new and mature image' to '[endear] himself to upper-middle-class intellectuals'. She recounts how, in 2007, Prokhorov was detained by French police, accused of procuring sexual services from a group of Russian women students whom he had flown to the Courchevel ski resort in France where he was staying with a group of male friends. He was never charged with any offence, however, and the French police ultimately issued an apology.
18. For a reading of *Three Stories* as a queer film, see Strukov (2021) and Žigelytė (2022). Piretto (2006, 491) notes that the film 'explores homosexuality' but makes no mention of the plot that features Litvinova.
19. For more information about Litvinova's wide-ranging career, see Mukhortova (2017, 20–21); for an account of her biography based on interviews, see Vasil'ev (2005).
20. Khalymonchik's (2019) PhD dissertation on 'The Influence of Japanese Popular Culture on Russian Youth Communities' currently offers the only extended scholarly analysis of cosplay in Russia. Unfortunately, I have not been able to access this work, as the thesis is still embargoed and my attempts to contact the author have been unsuccessful.
21. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8egLdu49xm8> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cAeFH3AGOY>, for example. Accessed 11 March 2023.
22. In both films, music also plays a significant role. The use of music in *About Love* is a subject worthy of analysis but is beyond the scope of this present article.
23. It is worth noting that the three members of Pussy Riot who were given prison sentences after this performance were charged with and found guilty of committing an act of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.
24. The white ribbon (*belaia lenta*) was used across Russia as a visual symbol of protest at the outcome of the 2011 elections from at least the autumn of 2011 (Vassilieva 2011).
25. Melikian's choice of allusion also illustrates both her queer visual sensibility, which imaginatively transforms the Bolotnaia protests into a colourful carnival, and the shift in political climate. Only two years previously, actual footage from Bolotnaia Square had been used by Sergei Mokritskii in *Protest Day* (*Den' uchitel'ia*, 2012), although Condee (2013) suggests that the scenes were used 'less for their controversial potential than for their place as a marker of recent historical experience'.
26. This is another major difference between *Hipsters* and *About Love*. Costume in the former assists in emphasising heteronormativity. On this, see Myzelev (2022).
27. This historical expression, which derives from Russified versions of the French words *chère* (dear) and *ma chère* (my dear) began to be used in Russia towards the end of the nineteenth

century to refer to young women who, lacking male partners for whatever reason, would dance together as a female-female pair. Today, the phrase can be used to describe people of any gender who are very close to each other.

28. Grisha's obsession with tanks might be felt to mock contemporary Russian cinema's obsession with tanks, tank battles and the patriotic blockbuster war film. In her article on new Russian patriotic *tresh* films, Svetlana Khokhriakova highlights this focus, sub-titling one section 'Tanks, Trains, and Flag Bearers' and another 'More Tanks' (Khokhriakova 2021, 57–59; 60–62).
29. The second novella offers another example of how Melikian weaves connections across the whole film. After Igor'/Taito and Lena/Himea are reunited at the end of the first novella, we rejoin the lecture in time to hear Litvinova explain that it is impossible to remain in love with the same person for longer than 30 months. She is interrupted by a striking-looking woman (well-dressed, short bleached-blond hair, forty-something) who tells her that she is talking 'nonsense': 'I've been happily married for 20 years, and I still love my husband as much as I did on the first day. I think that what you're saying is very harmful (*vredno*) for young minds'. 'Look', Litvinova says, 'Here we have an example of a happy love'. Cue the start of the second novella and fast-forward to the sequence in which Viktor Borisovich, seated behind his desk in his vast office, explicitly propositions Liza. When she asks how he can betray his wife, who 'loves you, probably', the screen splits to show Viktor Borisovich on the left and, on the right, a framed photograph of him and, we assume, his wife. The astute viewer recognises the woman in the photograph as the woman who had challenged Litvinova and proclaimed herself to have been happily married for 20 years. This is confirmed when we are shown a second photograph, this time of his wife and two children. In the rest of the sequence, whenever the camera adopts Viktor Borisovich's perspective, we see the family photographs on his desk (both in this sequence and in the sequence when Liza finally accepts his proposal). The second novella ends with Viktor Borisovich throwing a paper aeroplane from the roof of his office block. The camera follows it as it glides towards the Strelka and lands on the floor behind Litvinova. The first audience member whom the camera next picks out is his wife. This ironic crossover can be read in a range of ways: for example, as a subtle undermining of the traditional values, promoted by the state, that see the nuclear, hetero-normative family – here shown to be a sham – as the ideal/moral model and the norm, and/or as a comment on male infidelity. While detailed discussion of this aspect of the film is beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that although most male protagonists do not come off well in this film – the older men, in particular those played by Vladimir Mashkov and Mikhail Efremov, are shown to behave particularly badly, with the former betraying his wife and abusing his power, threatening to fire Liza if he does not have sex with him, and the latter drugging his young girlfriend (a scooter-riding, bubble-gum chewing student, just out of her teens) and presenting himself as her victim – and each novella undermines them and highlights their toxicity, the film's ending problematises this critical approach. As the closing credits roll, we watch the protagonists take part in the film's cheerful finale, dancing to the upbeat song 'I Love You!' ('Ai lov iu!' (2014) by the St Petersburg rock group Splin. While this occurs after the film proper has ended, the men (all the dancers, indeed) remain in costume as the characters they played. This perhaps suggests a reluctance on Melikian's part to judge them. I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer who suggested highlighting this point.
30. Boria's paintings of women also constitute another thread that, like Litvinova's lecture, runs through the film as a whole; they appear in each of the five novellas, usually as part of the street scenes. Making Boria a graffiti artist also enables Melikian to stress her film's absolute contemporaneity, by referencing the 2014 Artmosphere Street Art Biennale, as part of which around 150 murals were painted on Moscow walls, by 35 Russian and 25 international artists. Indeed, two of the murals created for this festival are shown in the film, namely the Australian artist Fintan Magee's mural of a girl dropping a message in a bottle into the sea on Rozhdestvenskaia Street (SilverKris 2017) appears in novella two and the Brazilian artist Eduardo Kobra's painting of the ballerina Maïia Plisetskaia on 16 Bol'shaia Dmitrovka, near the Bolshoi Theatre (Lerner 2021), is seen in novella four. It is

interesting that Melikian shows little trace of the ‘fear of contemporaneity’ (*strakh pered sovremennosti*) that Condee (2013) identifies as a key feature of filmmaking in Russia in the mid 2010s.

31. It is ironic that the monument – often dismissed by its critics as ‘kitsch’ (Goscilo 2010, 236) – might itself also be read as queer, for the way in which it ignores convention: it places Peter, the great seafarer, in a land-locked city that he famously hated, dressed as a Roman legionnaire, like ‘a big toy soldier atop a bunch of broken model ships’ (Gambrell 1997).
32. Boria’s obsession with ‘beauty’ and Liza’s dismissal of him as an idiot is doubtless an ironic reference to the famous mantra of ‘Beauty will save the world’, voiced by Prince Myshkin, the eponymous protagonist of Fedor Dostoevskii’s novel *The Idiot* (*Idiot*, 1868–1869) in which the concept of Christian love – for Dostoevskii, the highest ideal – is examined in the context of contemporary nineteenth-century society. This is developed in the third novella, when Megumi, the Japanese tourist, says – once she has selected the Russian man with whom she wishes to spend the night – that she plans to behave ‘recklessly, like Nastas’ia Filippovna’, the dazzling society beauty of *The Idiot*, whose scandalous behaviour shocks everyone and with whom many men are in love.
33. The love triangle is a theme that features in Melikian’s earlier films, *Mars* (Grigorii-Greta-Boris) and *Mermaid* (Alisa-Sasha-Rita), and she revisits it, in a considerably less interesting way, in *The Three* (Aleksandr-Zlata-Veronika).
34. Abdullah is another interesting outsider/queer figure. Born in Voronezh in 1994, she grew up in Kerch, Crimea, the daughter of a Russian-Ukrainian mother and a father of Arab and African heritage. Abdullah, who can pass as both black and white, shot to fame after she appeared on the Ukrainian version of the talent show X-Factor, performing Beyoncé’s hit ‘Halo’. She has spoken of how she grew up feeling different ‘both externally and internally’ and of how she was bullied for her appearance and her surname while at school (Anon. 2019).
35. Sasha might also at times be thought to be costumed in such a way as to code her visually as lesbian/bisexual. In the sequence in which she seeks out Boria’s portrait of Mila, she is dressed in denim shorts, a T-shirt and an untucked flannel shirt, which, according to Katja Sarajeva, were common items that made up ‘lesbian style’ in Moscow from the 1980s to the early 2010s (Sarajeva 2011, 115).
36. Adopting a similar position, Aliaksandra Ihnatovich (2022) analyses three Soviet children’s films made between the early 1930s and the early 1950s, offering queer readings of *Road to Life* (*Putevka v zhizn’*, dir. Nikolai Ekk, 1931), *Red Tie* (*Krasnyi galstuk*, 1948) and *Certificate of Maturity* (*Attestat zrelosti*, 1954) and arguing that, through their focus on male friendship and homosociality, they in fact subvert the very heteronormativity that they purport to represent.
37. The film that bears *Liubov’ vtroem* as one of its titles, Abram Room’s *Bed and Sofa* (best known in Russian as *Tret’ia Meshchanskaia*, 1926), also features the device of a love triangle (between two men and one woman), male friendship and a male-male kiss, which several critics have suggested enable queer readings of the film. See especially Zorkaia (1999). Consider, also, Room’s *A Severe Young Man* (*Strogii iunosha*, 1936), based on Iurii Olesha’s 1934 screenplay, which establishes another love triangle between two men and a woman, and which was banned shortly after its release. As Strukov has argued, this was likely because of its focus on ‘queer masculinity’: its visual representation of the protagonist Grigorii objectifies the young sportsman, depicting him as naked when exercising and positioning him next to classical sculptures, thus creating ‘a homoerotic tonality’ (Strukov 2019a, 96–97). As Strukov shows, Room’s film, which was re-released in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, had a direct impact on Konstantin (Kostya) Goncharov – a fashion designer based in St. Petersburg in the late 1980s and early 1990s, who was, according to Strukov, ‘queer in the sense that he was a practising homosexual and that he made fashion that queried the dominant sartorial, cultural and aesthetic discourse – and particularly in his understanding of queer masculinity’. In fact, Goncharov’s fashion label, *A Strict Young Man*, takes the title of the film as its name. Strukov analyses this ‘intertextuality’ as another example of ‘queer world building’, here defined as ‘a complex process of employing multi-platform, crossmedia strategies and a network of references to articulate particular visual codes, convey values and put in place patterns of consumption’ (Strukov 2019a, 85).

38. Sasha's reference here is to the Georgian-born, Ukrainian-Russian composer Konstantin Meladze, the co-founder and co-producer of the Ukrainian girl group Nu Virgos/VIA Gra, which is made up of three singers, one blonde, one red-head and one brunette. The group's line-up has changed many times since it was founded in 2000, but this feature has remained constant.
39. Melikian also shows this man to have an imperial mindset. As Megumi discovers after sleeping with him, he is interested only in ticking off Japan on his map of sexual conquests.
40. It is also notable that Melikian chooses to end Litvinova's lecture on love, which has adopted a clinical scientific approach to the subject, before the fifth novella begins, enabling the film to conclude with a scenario in which an alternative representation of love is set out. As with Rita and Alisa in *Mermaid*, Litvinova and the young woman both reveal themselves to be believers in love magic. This in and of itself might be considered a queering move. I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer for highlighting this point.
41. Consider also the revealing point-of-view shot in novella one, when the bemused senior policeman (Aleksandr Robak), examining the cosplayers they have just arrested, cannot detach his gaze from the ample bosom of one of them, and the other policeman's (Maksim Lagashkin) request to Boria that he paint a naked portrait of Sasha, at the start of novella four.
42. Litvinova's familiarity with Almodóvar's work is attested to by the fact that her second film as director, the self-funded *Rita's Last Fairy Tale* (*Posledniaia skazka Rity*, 2012), draws on his *Talk to Her* (*Hable con ella*, 2002) and on Joseph Mankiewicz's *All about Eve*, one of the recurrent subtexts in Almodóvar's *All about My Mother* (Plakhov 2012).

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