

Sexual Dissidents: Russian Slash Fiction Community as a Form of Social and Political Resistance

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Abstract

In this MA project I focus on Russian slash fiction community as a form of social and political resistance in the field of sexual normativity. Contemporary Russian public and political discourse remains increasingly heteronormative and homophobic. On this background, a virtual community dedicated to slash fiction, which is written predominantly by women, has created a space for a more flexible discussion about sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular. Despite the fact, that slash fiction community is diverse and not unified, I will argue that it is a form of real sexual resistance, even though it doesn't resemble common, visible and traditionally accepted protest forms. Unlike similar communities in other countries, Russian community opposes a complex, state-imposed regime of normative attitudes towards gender and sexuality. My project demonstrates how resistance could be seen in forms, which are hidden from public discourse, performed by subaltern social groups, and remain significant and influential. My main argument is that slash community is far from being a minor side-effect of media production, in Russia it is a form of contemporary online sexual dissidence, a way of confronting the hegemonic structure of aggressive sexual normativity and subverting the moralistic, nationalistic and religious public discourse.

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Introduction

My MA thesis explores Russian slash fiction community as a form of social and political resistance in the field of sexuality. From the beginning of the XX century fan-authored parodies and revisions of famous stories, like *Alice in Wonderland* (Bangs, 1997) and *Sherlock Holmes* (Itzkoff, 2010) were published and this signified the beginning of the trend of fan writing. The desire to contribute to the amateur production of literature and media, create new stories in the given realms and develop characters further, mostly due to the sci-fi TVseries *Star Trek*¹, resulted in a massive cultural phenomenon – fanfiction. Catherin Tosenberger gives one of the most common used definitions of fanfiction as a “fiction that utilizes pre-existing characters and settings from a literary or media text” (Tosenberger, 2008: 185). It formed most distinctly in 1960s around the same *Star Trek*. Fanfiction flourished as a field of creative writing from then on, rapidly gaining popularity after the invention of the Internet. As researchers point out, fan fiction since 1967 has been rather gendered: 83% of authors are female (Ellen, 2002). Among others, a peculiar genre emerged in the *Star Trek* fan community in 1970s (Bacon-Smith, 1986), which gained the name “slash-fiction”, or simply “slash” (I will further refer to it as to as ordinary term, without quotation marks). The term refers to the slash punctuation mark in between the names of the characters in the potential couple (Kirk/Spock). Slash represents romantic and/or erotic relationship that is not apparent in the canon (original media), written predominantly by women and dedicated exclusively to the development of male homosexual relationships between characters of the existing stories.

From *Star Trek* slash gradually moved to other massive cores of popular culture (*Starsky and Hutch*, *The Professionals*), but after the introduction of the Internet it

¹ Star Trek - an American TV-series, film series, CBS studios, on air: 1966 – present.

immediately occupied multiple kinds of culture products all over the world, including classical literature, historical personas and celebrities. A group of fans gathered around a particular interest, e.g. *Sherlock Holmes* stories, *Lord of the Rings* is called a “fandom.” Each fandom rapidly develops its own insider’s culture and slang that is shared online through social networks, groups in journals and forums, various picture and video stocks. Nevertheless, the offline culture has not faded. On the contrary: Internet brought much more fans together and made it much easier to organize conventions and so-called “slash cons” all over the world. There are annual slash cons in Moscow², Las Vegas³, Tynemouth (UK)⁴ etc. They include music and video performances, contests of stories in different categories, conferences and gift-shops. In the general fandom, as statistics shows, slash parts usually occupy 10-25% of all fan fiction (Ellen, 2000).

Slash stories touch upon more issues, than just homosexuality, for slashers have created an environment for writing and publishing fiction with a variety of types, subgenres and categories. For instance, romantic and sexual relationships between siblings and close relatives or between adults and minors are a common part of almost every fandom. Elaborated and positive representation of homosexuality, incest or cross-generational relationship in slash stories signifies an unusual attitude of the slash community towards social and sexual taboos of various sorts, and is inseparable from such attitudes in the society, where members this community live their “offline” lives. Heteronormativity and homophobia are key factors to which slash presents an oppositional view.

Slash fiction is written predominantly by women, a notable number of them are queers (homosexual, bisexual, transgender), in the society with patriarchal structure, heavy religious influence and an ongoing debate around sexuality and sexual normativity in the political

² Moscow slash con, official website, access: <http://slashcon.ru/>

³ ConStrict, official website, access: <http://www.randomadventures.com/constrict/>

⁴ Connotations, official website, access: <http://www.connotations.org.uk/>

discourse. Here is where I'd like to justify my choice of the country. Russian slash community adopted fandoms from English and American communities when the internet became widely available, performing a huge amount of work in translation. Currently, slash fiction occupies a noticeable place in each fandom and continues to gain popularity. Unlike UK and US, where slash communities are also contesting homophobic and heteronormative attitudes, in Russia slash community can be considered as an opposition of a different category. In case of Russia slash community does not oppose separate groups of homophobes or religious extremists, rather it opposes a state-imposed regime of aggressive homophobia and hate-speech, shared and supported by the absolute majority of the society.

My research question will be: does slash fiction community functions a form of social and political resistance to homophobia and heteronormativity in Russia? Let me introduce a brief description of current situation with homosexuality in Russia. The most notorious part of the discourse is a new law on "homosexual propaganda"⁵. Law imposes heavy fines and possible imprisonment for the "propaganda of homosexuality (not homosexuality, law-makers are using an old, medicalized soviet term) among minors". The law does not specify what is understood under the key term "propaganda" and what will constitute the criminal deed. It is currently implemented in 11 regions and continues to expand. Apart from it, public hate speech (for instance calling homosexuality a "disgusting perversion"⁶) from the top-rank politicians is encouraged nationwide and actively supported by Russian Orthodox Church. Anti-homosexual marches by religious homophobic organizations (Love Against Homosexuality) are allowed⁷, while gay parades are banned for a 100 years⁸. A young man

⁵ Закон о запрете пропаганды гомосексуализма вступил в силу в Петербурге, news from 30.03.2012, access: <http://ria.ru/society/20120330/609834303.html>

⁶ "Единая Россия": Гомосексуализм это половое извращение, article from 06.04.2011, access: <http://love-contra.org/index.php/expert/issue/758/>

⁷ Патриарх: РПЦ никогда не признает однополые браки, article from 23.05.2013, access: <http://love-contra.org/index.php/news/issue/1148/>

⁸ Гей-парады запретили на 100 лет, article from 07.06.2012, access: <http://www.utro.ru/articles/2012/06/07/1051454.shtml>

was recently brutally murdered for being gay⁹, and the majority of commenters to the articles on murder support the killers. However, it must be said that homophobia and heteronormativity are merely flowers on the graveyard of human rights in Russia. To begin with, the government established after the fall of Soviet Union continued to silence the Human Rights Declaration, adopted in 1948, from the citizens of Russian Federation¹⁰. In addition, the only official and published document – Yeltsin’s “Declaration of rights and freedoms of a citizen”¹¹ (1991), differs from the one adopted by UN, most of the standards are lower. Nothing was done in order to spread the information about the fact that people in Russia actually have human rights and can protect them. This allowed systematic and continuous violation of rights by the officials, policemen, even courts. Concerning political opposition, Russia presents a truly paradoxical example: scholars argue that most of the “technical” oppositional parties/organizations/unions are either powerless or actually support the existing government (Miroshkina & Udalova, 2012: 59). The only aim of such opposition is to gain power, so it doesn’t care about people, only about elections. Power, in its turn, belongs to elite only and does not allow any accidental democratic changes in its structure (2012: 60). In other words, there is no real political or social opposition to the existing regime of Putin, so he can afford to continue his authoritarian approach to holding power and imposing aggressive nationalism, social and sexual normativity and anti-European way of development.

On the background of such socio-political discourse, I will argue that slash fiction community is a form of real sexual resistance, even though it doesn’t resemble common,

⁹ Убийство в Волгограде, article from 12.05.2013, access: <http://www.pravmir.ru/ubijstvo-v-volgograde/>

¹⁰ СССР и принятие декларации о правах человека, article, access: <http://www.hrights.ru/text/b11/Chapter5.htm>

¹¹ Постановление ВС РСФСР от 22 ноября 1991 г. «О Декларации прав и свобод человека и гражданина», article, access: <http://www.democracy.ru/library/laws/federal/resolution.html>

visible and traditionally accepted protest forms. It is a hidden counteraction to a complex regime of normative attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Russian slash community has never been studied from the academic viewpoint and its existence and development weren't considered in relation to the social environment and political implications. The main significance of my research lies in the exposure of a relatively invisible non-heteronormative community on the territory of contemporary Russia, which signifies the existence of alternative views on gender and sexuality. I will use slash to expose one of the possible forms of resistance on the Russian territory, where other forms are being silenced, censored and shut down. I will show that relative invisibility allows such communities to grow and develop, contesting normativity, without being targeted by the governmental surveillance apparatus.

Theoretical Framework

The main concepts I intend to build my argument around are based on the works of number of theorists, whose concepts I'll outline in this part. To begin with, I would like to talk about the notion of *community* per se and its relation to virtual community in the understanding of existing scholarship. Heller argues that main characteristic of the community lies in the “relational interactions or social ties”, which draw people together (Heller, 1989: 2). Gushfield adds that a researcher should always distinguish between geographical communities and relational ones (Gushfield, 1977: 23). He notes that relational communities are not necessarily located in a particular place, and could cover any type of relations, including hobbies and religion.

In order to demonstrate the significance of *imaginary* life for social reality I would like to turn to works of Appadurai Arjun. *Imagined* lives, he notes, explain dreams and aspirations of certain communities, their self-perception and self-construction on the background of the given social reality. I suppose his argument about the play of imagination is at best explained in the next quotation: “More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms. That is, fantasy is now a social practice; it enters in a host of ways into the fabrication of the social lives for many people in many societies.”(Appadurai, 1991: 198) I think the concept of an *imagined narrative* contributes greatly to my understanding of slash community as the one living the imagined life online. I think generally, *virtual community* can be used almost interchangeable with an *imaginary community*, at least in the case of slash fiction.

The notion of the *virtual community* allows communities to have connections without geographical proximity of any kind; hence, they are included into the relational group. Wellman and Gulia describe how physical boundaries become vague and are easily transgressed by the means of Internet, creating new opportunities for unions (Wellman &

Gulia, 1999: 170). Joon Koh and Young-Gul Kim refer to a number of scholars, who give various definitions of a virtual community and its features. The one I'd like to bring in here is by Fernback and Thompson, who define it simply as a set of relations between people that is created in cyberspace and remains within a particular boundary (for instance a website, or a number of forums dedicated to one theme) (Fernback and Thompson, 1995, cited in Koh & Kim, 2003: 75). They also cite Preece who argues that a virtual community has particular components, main of which are common purposes and rules (Preece, 1999, cited in Koh & Kim, 2003: 76). I find this definition and description useful for my understanding of virtual communities in the given project, since it makes an emphasis on the existing limitations and rules inside slash community. The existence of rules shows that building an argument about slash fiction as a liberating practice is not accurate, since it means to omit its crucial characteristic. Koh & Kim also analyze terms I'll use in my work, which are a *sense of community* and a *sense of virtual community* (2003: 76-77). If merged, all the explanations they present for it could be simplified to the acknowledgement of belonging to the group, an ability to have influence on it, and an immersive or addictive behavior during navigation in the virtual community. In his book *Coming of age in second life* Boellstorff claims that virtual life is profoundly human: "It is not only that virtual worlds borrow assumptions from real life; virtual worlds show us how, under our very noses, our "real" lives have been "virtual" all along. It is in being virtual that we are human: since it is human "nature" to experience life through the prism of culture, human being has always been virtual being" (Boellstorff, 2008: 5). *Virtual community* as a concept could be compared to the *imaginary community* due to its existence online.

Now I would like to describe one more feature of slash community that is particularly significant for my project as demonstrates how slash is a form of agency. Media production is a center of Matt Hills' argument about fan cultures and their specialties. Hills talks about a

performative consumption, grounding on Jonh Austin's and Judith Butler's terms (Hills, 2002: 159), as a way of consuming with an implied message in the process itself, by the very fact of the type of the product. If we turn to the source of his argument, and examine in more details what is understood by performativity in Butler's works, we arrive at an even more useful explanation. The performative *act* has a spectator to be observed, it needs to be noticed, shared, evaluated (Butler, 1988: 523). This is why slash fiction grew so fast online, because writing fan stories is not made for oneself; it's made for demonstration, for sharing with a community. This is how *performative consumption* works with slash fiction – by sharing the mutual non-heteronormative perception of the media product, by creating a discourse around it and feeling praise and support in this process of queer reading.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, what distinguishes Russian slash community from other similar communities around the world is its relationship with the dominant narrative of sexuality. While the world dominant narrative is also heteronormative, Russia, unlike US and UK, does not allow and punishes any objections to it in any form. Now I will carefully outline how this relationship can be understood as a form of complex and ambiguous opposition. To begin with, I should explain my position and argumentation concerning viewing slash as being socially and politically important. In article about fan activism Earl and Kimport claim that any online or even offline activity of fans and fan groups is a “purely cultural” protest (Earl & Kimport, 2009: 230-232). In my project I will contest this approach, since I argue that culture is inseparable from politics, especially if it touches sexuality and gender, which have always been in the political spotlight. I'm building my own argument on the ideas about resistance and “invisible” politics, which I will map out through the ideas of Michael Foucault, James Scott, Matt Hills and Jeffrey Goldfarb.

The central idea of my thesis is an idea of *resistance*. I will use Michael Foucault's notions of repression of sexuality and our “revolting” opportunity to talk about it out loud, as

well as his understanding of resistance and power. He argues that our understanding of power in relation to sex and sexuality has always been extremely limited, since we see it as a unified negative force of censorship and prohibition: “Power as a pure limit set on freedom is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability” (Foucault, 1978: 84-86). Foucault talks about revolting against this repression as a myth that we enjoy as it gives us a sense of progress and liberation. He says that sexuality is just another shift of power play that moves the emphasis from reproduction to the body and its sensations (1978: 6-7). From this perspective, slash is a coherent continuance of the development within the framework of the repressive hypothesis, where authors consider themselves a minority that is able to deny social norms. They write slash because they feel the strings of control, but they never actually break them, only subvert or invent new ones. While Foucault does not deny the omnipresence of resistance per se, as a necessary component of power, he claims that resistance is never exterior to power, never separated from it (1978: 95). From such perspective sexuality is always already in the discourse of power, and slash is always simultaneously confirming the existence of norms and contesting them. I will analyze slash stories and slashers in order to see how they view themselves in this debate around sexuality in Russia, in the regime that imposes homophobic attitudes as an obligation of a nation and each individual. I will use his argumentation in my analysis to see the connections between the slash fiction community and public discourse around gender and sexuality in Russia, demonstrating that the existence of slash is neither accidental nor insignificant.

However, invisibility of slash community for the majority of Russian society and its underrepresentation by mass media evokes questions about the correlation between visibility and significance. I will argue that despite this inconspicuousness, or rather, due to it, slash is highly important for Russian society. In order to do it, I’d like to turn to the idea of a *hidden transcript*, presented by James Scott. By hidden transcript he means “the discourse that takes

place ‘offstage’, beyond the direct observation by powerholders”. (Scott, 1990: 4) Unlike the public transcript, which is official and visible, hidden consist of practices that can contradict those, accepted in public, while remaining undercover. Scott calls this phenomenon an *infrapolitics* – that invisible part of politics, that doesn’t happen on the streets, although remains not less significant and real in any sense. His ideas about the realm of influence of the everyday culture contradict Earl and Kimport with their more limited understanding of political importance. Slash fiction, by being ignored by Russian media and separated from the general fan culture, represents a peculiar example of such hidden non-heteronormative transcript of perception of media products. In my project I will argue that the existence of slash fiction as an alternative complex of attitudes is a highly significant matter for the Russian social reality.

However, Jeffrey Goldfarb in his book “The Politics of Small Things” talks about the notions, somewhat similar to the *infrapolitics* and the *hidden transcript*, which he calls an “alternative cultural system”. He claims that by simply opposing views to the generally accepted, a community can have “an immense potential” for social changes. His description of the symbolic opposition to the Soviet-imposed order in Poland appears to be applicable to slash community: “Acting as if one lived in a free society created freedom dramatically” (Goldfarb, 2007: 45). I find his argument contestable, but useful for the given project. Contestable because slash fiction does not create a liberated society and even does not present an idea of a total revolution, since most of the stories include the notion of homosexuality as different and opposing to the accepted type of sexual behavior. But Goldfarb’s ideas could be useful, since establishing new attitudes thought the texts and the community contains immense potential to change our understanding of normativity. Slashers do not create a sub-society, where homophobia doesn’t exist, but they create an online, *imaginary*, but still real, community, where homosexuality is accepted, and moreover, preferred.

Methods/Research Design

My research consists of several major parts. First part is the analysis of the online community through a number of sources, such as main Russian-speaking slash websites (fanfics.ru, slashfiction.ru), lively online communities on diary.ru, livejournal.com and popular blogs of slash writers. For this part I intend to use discourse analysis, comparing texts from the websites to Russian political discourse. I chose websites, blogs and forums based on the quantity of visitors and members, selecting the liveliest and most frequently updated. Apart from general (combined) websites, I turned to specific slash websites of the biggest fandoms, such as Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and Star Wars.

From these sources I have collected information about the specific traits of the community, their attitudes towards gender, sexuality, sexual taboos, representation of gender roles and stereotypes. Forums of the communities frequently contain “off-topic” sections, which I was particularly interested in, dedicated to non-slash concerns, such as opinions on the new Russian law against the propaganda of homophobia, gender/sexuality articles and studies etc. This analysis joined with the analysis of the written slash fiction was chosen to obtain the basic information about online form of the community, before turning to field research.

Field part of the research was conducted through a combination of individual semi-structured, in-depth interviews, 1.5-2 hours length, a focus group and a round table on the Slash Conference, joined with participant observation. Individual interviews in the number of 10 were conducted via Skype, and had a few main advantages as a method. First, an individual interview via Skype reveals personal attitudes and beliefs in the most convenient way for the respondent, since he/she usually (exceptions possible) feels most comfortable and safe at home. Interview can be easily recorded with a program and contain video footage for the analysis, unlike the usual audio recording available during offline interview. I conducted

most of my interviews from Budapest and Kiev, and my respondents were from different regions of Russia, not limiting me to Moscow citizens.

My sampling was restrained by the accessibility of the respondents and their desire to participate in my project. I have created a post on the main forums with a call for interviewees, explaining my research goals. Since I got more volunteers than I could interview, I have evaluated all the applicants and made an attempt to cover the widest range in their characteristics, trying not to interview too many similar respondents, giving preferences to those with different features from previous. My respondents were predominantly females, identifying as females; one female, identifying as male; one male and one gender-switch female, as she presented herself (I will describe this term in more details later). The age of the respondents varied from 20 to 37 years, and they have been interested in slash fiction from 3 to 18 years. My focus-group consisted of four people, all females, identifying as females, ages 29, 30, 35, 26. I consider it significant to note that two of my focus-group respondents are identifying as radical feminists, and are actively involved in the feminist activism in Moscow.

Participant observation was held during the Spring SlashCon, which lasted for one day and consisted of the conference part and an entertainment part. I had a chance to observe a rare occasion of a mass offline gathering of the slash community, their interaction and discussions, questions and presentations on the conference, contest and performances during the entertainment part. My roundtable represents the most complicated part of my analysis due to the number of participants. The round-table was thematic and dedicated to the subject “Why do we write slash?” The main complexity of conducting this roundtable was that the number of participants wasn’t limited and the process appeared slightly chaotic. Round-table on slash con took part in the open-spaced part of the club, consequently, anyone, who expressed interest, could join or leave anytime they lost it. The discussion itself was video-recorded, but even with the recording it’s hard to distinguish every separate answer to the

questions I asked in the process. Due to the number of participants from the very beginning (above 20) I made an instant decision to skip the introductory block of questions I introduced in the interviews and focus-group (name/nickname, age, occupation). The absence of this data does not allow the analysis of my participants as a social group, since without it they appear homogenized as “females who write slash in Russia”. On the other hand, the unexpectedly high quantity of participants resulted into a thriving discussion with much more points of view than I could expect obtaining in the frame of this project.

The main limitation of this research is the selection of representative sources and respondents. Russian Slash fiction is a highly diverse virtual space and drawing conclusions from one conference, a dozen of people and a number of forums is drawing relatively vague conclusions. Due to this a considerable part of the community will be neglected and my field results will only uncover stories of “socially active” slashers, who expressed the desire to participate and who are active on forum discussions. The experiences and perception of the slash as a phenomenon on Russian territory varies dramatically from person to person, that is why had to apply efforts to find trends and common sides. I only had a couple of days in Moscow to conduct everything I planned, which might have lowered the quality of the obtained data because of the fuss.

I also have to make some specifications concerning the material I’m going to present. When I’m talking about slash fiction it is by default male-male slash fiction, unless it is specified as fem-slash (female slash – lesbian stories). I am working with those fandoms, which are popular, have a considerable number of participants and stories in order to be able to identify trends. I’m not touching upon fandoms on Russian books and movies, although they exist – *Nochnoy Dozor*, *Obitaemiy Ostrov*, *Gardamarini* – because I’m currently interested in the intercultural dialog between the American/British fandoms and Russian community.

My position in this research as a Russian-speaking slasher also brings in limitations together with benefits. On one hand I am unable to distance myself from the experience I had as a slasher, which complicates the process of creating a neutral and unprejudiced writing. On the other hand, I'm well acquainted with terminology, humor, internal contradictions, trends and fandoms, which will considerably simplify the field research.

All of the interviews and a focus group were audio-recorded by me, round-table was audio- and video-recorded by the organizers of the SlashCon, and later the recording was sent to me directly. My participant observation is presented in the form of field notes from the conference. For convenience and confidentiality matters I will use the first letter of the nickname to identify the respondent (in case of repeated letters – the first three letters). I will use my field notes without the names of respondents, since there was no procedure of introduction during the round-table.

The Structure of the Project

My work consists of three main chapters. In the Chapter 1 I will present a literature review. There I will outline the existing scholarly discourse around slash fiction and fan cultures in general, and will situate my research in Russian context through studies on sexuality, queerness, LGBT-movements hetero- and homonormativity, homophobia, and gender-based stereotypes.

Chapter 2 contains an outline of the textual analysis of slash fiction, including fanfic stories, comment sections and forum discussions. I will outline similar trends in characters development and representation, visible in various fandoms. I will argue that while slash fiction seems a liberating practice, that surpasses common restrictions around sexuality, it still contains a number of rules and limits, accepted inside the community. I will also argue that, nevertheless, the slash community presents a relatively unique online space, where the discourse around sexuality is more opened and more flexible than in Russian society in general, which indicates its social significance.

In Chapter 3 I will map out the results of my field research, including the analysis of the interviews, focus group and field notes from the conference. I will create a multiple portrait of a Russian slasher and demonstrate the social diversity of the community members. I will argue that slashers view themselves as social and political opposition to the existing regime of sexual normativity.

In Conclusion I will join the analysis of the two chapters, creating a set of intertwined results from both offline and online community in order to observe a larger picture and also include possible directions for the future research in the given field. I will show how both online and offline representations of Russian slashers could be regarded as a new form of

sexual dissidence, which subverts the strict and authoritarian public discourse on sexuality.

Chapter 1.

The Phenomenon of Slash fiction: Heteronormativity and the Russian Context

In this part I will make an outline of the existing questions in the scholarly fields connected to slash fiction and fan communities, inscribing them into Russian social reality by mapping out studies on contemporary Russian sexual normativity and its relation to public discourse. The key issues of the whole debate around popular culture and such phenomenon as slash fiction lie in the binaries between consumption and production, and the significance of eroticized homosexual stories written by women. On the broader scale of media and popular culture, scholars disagree on the place of fan cultures in relation to pop culture products, trying to figure out to what extent fans perform particular kinds of agency and not merely consume product. On the smaller scale, which concerns studies on slash fiction, scholars investigate the phenomenon of women who read and write eroticized homosexual literature, and debate around the reasons behind the very existence of slash.

1.1. Consumption vs. Production

Schouten and McAlexander have invented a term that I find rather useful for the description of a slash fandom – a *subculture of consumption*. They define it as a “subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity” (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995: 43). In case of fan cultures, consumption activity is watching, reading and identifying oneself with a particular fandom or a number of fandoms.

However, there is a debate between fan culture scholars about the very idea of pure consumption and can it be applicable to fan fiction and slash fiction in particular. Before I proceed to them, I would like to address a classic sociological approach by Pierre Bourdieu,

in order to present a broader argument. Bourdieu notes that: “In the cultural market, the matching of supply and demand is neither the simple effect of production imposing itself on consumption nor the effect of a conscious endeavor to serve the consumers’ needs, but the result of an orchestration of two relatively independent logics, that of the fields of production that of the field of consumption” (Bourdieu, 1984: 230). Bourdieu argues that there is no such notion as pure consumption, which doesn’t have an influence on the production and is not productive itself. However, he constantly argues that a conscious selection of a particular product, engaging with it and performing this productive consumption is restricted to dominant class (1984: 231). John Fiske criticizes Bourdieu for attempts to limit the ability of productive consumption to a particular class (white, educated, male) and for homogenizing and disregarding all the others. He argues that the creative potential of the popular culture should not be underestimated and Bourdieu omits all forms of production that thrive outside and frequently against the official cultural capital. (Fiske, 1992: 32) I think slash fiction can be an iconic example of his argument: produce predominantly by females, about male homosexuality, against the seemingly heteronormative, male-produced official script.

From this perspective we could see how Michael De Certeau’s ideas are applicable to slash fiction community. For instance, he describes “an entirely different kind of production, called ‘consumption’ and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation ...[], its tireless but quite activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility” De Certeau (1984: 31). For him, consumers are always already *users*. And as users they are capable of agency instead of passive consumption.

In the opinion of Catherin Tosenberger (2008: 185) fanfiction writing is as well a refusal to “merely consume media” and a desire to engage with it, elaborate it and change to your own preferences instead. She claims that it brings fan writers the ability to become authors themselves and express their own views on the characters and the given story. It’s an

opportunity to write a story you would like to read about the characters you are already interested in. She argues that the role of the author is traditionally reserved for cultural elite and is unavailable to young fans and admirers.

Greg Taylor (1999: 161) goes even further, claiming that “fans are not true cultists, unless they pose their fandom as a resistant activity”. From this perspective fan communities are both productive and resistant to mass culture. However, Matt Hills, whom I mentioned earlier in my theoretical framework, criticized Henry Jenkins, whose ideas I’ll discuss a little later, and John Fiske for trying to expand the idea of a productive fan onto every fan, arguing that not all fans produce fiction or media materials, most of them merely consume it, without any agency (Hills, 2002: 30). But what about the case of a slash fan in this paradigm? Does a consumption of a non-canonical and non-heteronormative, even “inverted” (if I can apply this term here) products around fandom indicate agency? In my project I intend to show that it does: by consuming (reading) and producing (writing) slash fiction, fans already demonstrate a particular attitude, which is different from dominant in the fandom and in Russian society, using slash in for this purpose.

De Certeau also talks about the usage of tactics in response to strategies by those, deprived of power. In strategies he sees the general idea behind production of spaces that conform to existing dominant models (De Certeau, 1984: 29). For instance, for a writer a strategy would be to write a fantasy novel, publish it and earn money and/or fame. Tactics are for the weak, for those, who cannot influence the novel itself, or its publication, but instead, can write a slash fanfiction with subverted characters, that the original writer would have no power over. As soon as the product is out and the copyrights are kept, producers lose power over what is done to their characters and how they are being read. As Henry Jenkins calls fans a “powerless elite”, who can’t change the content of the product, and instead reshapes it by a specific perception (Jenkins & Tulloch, 1995: 294) In other words, their influence on the

product is limited to the way, how they perceive it. Slash fans gain agency by seeing products in a non-heteronormative way. I think it could be useful to look at slash fans as those, who resort to tactics of subversion in order to resist the general strategy of production.

1.2. Eroticized Content in Slash

From the idea of production, I would like to turn to the idea of a non-heteronormative production in particular. One of the most significant issues about fan fiction in general and slash fiction in particular is the highly eroticized or even pornographic content, written by mainly female authors. Let me briefly explain why: women who write pornography are already expressing their views on sexuality and sexual normativity, hence, women writing non-normative (not heterosexual, for instance) pornography, such as slash fiction, express a non-normative view on sexuality, which is a public statement.

The analysis of female writers and female literature already constitute a huge body of scholarship. Any attempt to dig into this vast field would be superficial and insufficient, and with this in mind I will narrow down my examples to the scholars who analyzed specifically erotic women's literature and slash fiction itself, and on those who focus on particular implications of the given eroticism, which is useful of my further analysis of slash community.

To begin with, there is an edition in three volumes titled "Pornography and Sexual Representation" and consisting merely of references to erotic American literature (slash is originally an American phenomenon after all). Since 1960 nearly half of all these references are to female writers, who created erotica of all sorts, targeting working class women, housewives, "intellectual elite" and students (Slade, 2001: 829-30). So it would be unfair to claim that writing erotic or pornographic literature is something exclusive and unusual for women, although slash fiction far from traditional female erotic novel since it's dedicated to male homosexual relationship.

To understand what constitutes “traditional/popular female erotic literature” I would like to turn to authors, who did a thorough examination of erotic and romantic female literature: Modleski and Radaway. While introducing the analysis of Harlequin Romances – a mass published editions of women’s erotic books Modleski spots a number of trends in them, such as complete heteronormativity (none of them contains any homosexual relationships between male or female characters; masculine, successful, physically attractive protagonist; female character sacrificing her pride, interests, dignity for the man (Modleski, 1988: 30-34). She tries not to make any strict conclusions about the roots of such features, offering mainly compulsory heterosexuality and internalized rape culture (1988: 37, 44, 48). Janice Radway complements this approach with her ideas about the imaginary and real narrative as a female fantasy: “...the popular romance simultaneously collapses the distance between its fantasy world and the real, and slyly admits their disjunction. It thus demonstrates that the story is realistic, even though it is also a literary fiction” (Radway, 1987: 192). She then proceeds to argue that it’s the romance itself that creates the desired narrative for women, and while they realize its improbability, their imagination keeps drawing these stories upon their own lives. I think the romance is a classic example of an imagined life. However, from this point I would like to demonstrate how scholars have analyzed the fact that the desires/imagined life for female slashers is a male homosexual romance.

In order to do this I’d like to turn to a study by Sharon Cumberland “Private Uses of Cyberspace: Women, Desire, and Fan Culture” (2003). She argues that with an invention of a cyberspace as online reality, women got access to “permissive and transgressive spaces”, where there is accepting, though anonymous audience, and their own identity is not revealed. Cumberland calls it “a cyberspace paradox” – the immanent mutually intertwined existence of publicity and anonymity. In other words, you get recognition, community, even friends, and yet, you are constantly safe and distant, on the other side of the screen. Cumberland asked a

few “popular” (whose texts got high numbers of positive responses and comments) slashers about the importance of the community and got unequivocal answers – if there was no audience, authors wouldn’t write. Cumberland states that slash fiction is a unique way of exposure and expression of the long-repressed female sexuality, projected on male bodies and emotions. It’s a way to get access to the restricted space of masculinity and deny its canons by introducing the emphasis on emotional bonds and relationship development. There is another opinion of Catherin Tosengberger, who also talks briefly about the contemporary research on the women’s motives, noticing that “most fandom scholarship presents slash as a potential site for women to resist the dominant ideologies of patriarchal, heteronormative culture.” (Tosenberger, 2008: 189)

While Cumberland’s study illuminates a lot of relevant issues, it has a number of flaws, described by other academics in later studies, which illuminates a series of ongoing debates around some of the features of slash communities. Henry Jenkins (1998: 6-7) in his article lists common academic fallacies concerning slash fiction writers: slashers are not always heterosexual females (Cumberland claims the opposite), in fact, people of all possible sexualities and gender identifications practice writing and reading it; slash is not that unique, it should be analyzed in the framework of its relationship with “other forms of commercial fiction and traditions of rewriting and retelling within folk culture”; slash is not a static genre, it’s constantly changing, it’s norms and traditions as well; authors and readers of slash don’t have one common motive for it, no theory can unify the diversity of reasons and ways through which slash fiction represents itself in the lives of fans.

His arguments contribute greatly to my understanding of slash and its features. In my analysis, I will frequently refer to the idea that slash community is not homogeneous, not unified and could not be simplified to absolute definitions or descriptions. There is a significant conclusion following from these statements: Russian slashers could only be

considered a community with similar views, opinions and aspirations to a certain extent, in order not to subject my project to overgeneralization.

1.3. Writing Slash in Post-Soviet Russia

From this point I'd like to turn to the studies of post-soviet Russia and the construction of the notion of gender and sexuality in the public/political discourse, and how the existence of slash fiction community fits into such circumstances. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Russian political discourse can be characterized as extremely nationalistic, traditionalistic, religious (orthodox only), normative, and remains authoritarian, silencing and shutting down any visible opposition to the dominant point of view. Naturally, normativity concerns sexuality and gender in particular, mentioned in any kind of printed and/or published literature and media sphere.

In the article "Perestrojka and literature" Heller and Swiderski talk in details about the notion of *literaturniy byt*, which they translate as a "literary mode of existence" (Heller & Swiderski, 1990: 190), although it's not exactly accurate, the closer etymological translation would be "literary routine", the everyday construction of the reality around writers and poets, that influenced their works and ideas. They talk about censorship, poverty, general attitudes towards specific topics, inability to get published if what you write is incompatible with new trends. They describe how literary routine affects each person, who tries to write, whether he/she wants it or not. How does it all apply to the new age of self-publication online, of anonymity and acceptance in the virtual community? I argue that the production of literature, even in the form of slash fiction, cannot be completely detached from the social reality that writers and readers live in. Now I'd like to show how this social reality was analyzed and described by scholars.

Brian James Baer, who made a broad overview of Russian attitudes towards sexuality in his article "Russian Gays/Western Gaze: Mapping (Homo)Sexual Desire in Post-Soviet

Russia”. He shows how public opinions on homosexuality in 1989 (a few years before the fall of the USSR) varied from “they should be liquidated” to “they should be isolated” (Baer, 2002: 513). In 1993 homosexuality was officially decriminalized and these opinions have slightly changed, according to recent polls. Russian Center of Public Opinion has recently published a number of results from polls on the subject of the new law, adopted in St. Petersburg “Banning homosexual propaganda”. 86% of respondents support the law, although only 6% say they have ever faced “homosexual propaganda”.¹² The abstract and unidentifiable fear of homosexuality persists to exist on a national level. Nationalistic discourse itself is a problematic issue, since sexuality has been inseparable from it in Russia especially in the recent decades. As Michele Rivkin-Fish notes in the article “From Demographic Crisis to Dying Nation” the economic crisis of the 90th provoked a demographic hysteria, it was called “a national catastrophe”. To survive the “catastrophe” Russians were encouraged to create families and breed. Sexuality is still framed in the ideas of a reproductive heterosexual couple only, to which homosexuality (among others) poses a direct thread (Rivkin-Fish, 2006: 158).

As Baer notes, low level of and American-type LGBT-activism on the terrain of post-soviet Russia is not produced by any sort of fluidity of experience, tolerance or acceptance in the society, but discrimination and violence. He also noted that the subject of Russian sexuality has frequently been omitted by Western scholars, which leaves a huge gap in knowledge (Baer, 2002: 520). Most acclaimed and productive Russian sexologist of the last decades, Igor Kon, describes social and political background of post-soviet homosexuality in Russia, explaining why the hostility didn’t subside after decriminalization. And why Russia remains one of the most homophobic countries in the world. “Soviet society performed an extreme hostility toward any kind of difference, but homosexuals were the most stigmatized

¹²Russian Center of Public Opinion (ВЦИОМ), 19.04.2012, “Homosexual Propaganda: An Imaginary Thread”, <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=112718>

of all” (Kon, 2001: 88) He says that after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian LGBT-community made a number of political mistakes by joining slogans about homosexuality with legalization of prostitution and drugs, which provoked scandals and reinforced the stigmatization. He draws clear parallels between the perception of homosexuality and nationalistic discourse. Kon cites numerous newspapers who “uncover” homosexuals in the government, presenting them as dangerous to the nation and treasonous. He adds that in such inimical circumstances Russian queers (or anybody, who was interested in the subject) could only get positive information about homosexuality from the internet. And significant part of the informational work and discussions were held online (2001: 89-90). From such perspective, appearance and development of slash fiction seems to fall into logical continuity of an internet-based discourse on homosexuality, which contested the dominant public discourse.

All the studies I have introduced show how ideas about sexuality and homosexuality in particular are formed and aggressively, sometimes violently, imposed on Russian society. They allow me to build my argument about slash as a practice that is clearly resistant to this process. There have been a great number of studies on slash fiction, but none of them concerned Russia. This is where my research will provide an overlap of the two gaps, by investigating Russian slash community and constructing an image of a “Russian slasher” and what it means to be one in a country, where the federal law on “homosexual propaganda” is ready for adoption on the federal level, homophobia remains on the high level and public discourse about sexuality stays increasingly nationalistic and heteronormative. My project will view Russian slash community as an opposition to (not a complete liberation from) the above-described sexual normativity, as a community of women who write eroticized literature and dedicate it to highly debatable and criticized subject of male homosexuality.

Chapter 2.

Slashers online: The invisible world

In this chapter I will present an analysis of the online part of the subculture. The chapter contains two main parts: text analysis of the slash fiction itself and the discussion sections of the slash forums. These blocks joined together will present a broader view on the slash community online. However, before I discuss slash stories themselves, I'd like to take a brief look on the contemporary media products and see what slash fiction is being created in reaction to. I do this in order to introduce the cultural media space in which Russian slashers exist and create.

2.1. The Media Predisposition: What Slashers Write About

The gradual movement towards more and more flexible and equivocal (in terms of characters' sexualities) stories among popular movies, books and TV-series is rather apparent in the recent years. Such trends are inseparable from the notion of fan-service. Fan service is any material created and added to the product with a firm intention of pleasing the fandom. It's a term commonly used by a number of pop culture scholars. Green and Bodle¹³ talk about fan-service as a part of a routine production of anything that has a target audience and a thriving fandom (Green, 19).

Currently fan-service involves not only the product itself, but all the media support for it: interviews with actors and writers, articles, conferences etc. Slashers recently have noticed how this media support part has become increasingly non-heteronormative, even if the product itself has no hints, visible to the general audience. Authors of numerous TV series and movies accept slash part of the fan community as inevitable. "Maybe we'll do a slash fic episode and sell tickets." said in 2010 Jeff Eastin, the creator of a US TV drama series *White*

¹³ Green, D., Bodle, A. 1995. Living in a TV timewarp, *Focus*, December 1995, pp. 16-20

*Collar*¹⁴. Joan Rowling, the author of *Harry Potter* announced on the conference that Dumbledore is gay and his whole life was in love with Gellert Grindelwald¹⁵. After *X-men: First Class* were out the slash activity on the Internet was so high, in a couple of weeks a number of newspapers published articles titled “James McAvoy calls 'X-Men: First Class' a love story between two men”¹⁶ Moreover, in one of the interviews James McAvoy offered his own names for pairing him with Michael Fassbender: “Fassavoy, McBender”¹⁷, which are exiting names of the pairing, showing that he’s either good at guessing, or acquainted with the fandom. He also admitted that the most common question he hears during every interview is: “How many times did you have sex with Michael Fassbender?” Interviewers built their questionnaires on the demands of the audience of their news station/website, and if this is the question they most frequently tend to ask, we can make conclusions about the demands. Two seasons of *Sherlock* series contain so many statements from different characters about the presumed homosexual relationship between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson that at the end John actually stops objecting (or starts believing?). All these examples are a tiny bit of this quasi-homosexual discourse around fandoms and are reminiscent of de Certeau’s *tactics*, used not change the original message, but to accept it in a different way, to subvert it by creating the non-heteronormative media discourse around it.

Russian slashers are predominantly focused on American and British fandoms and described fan service around them is a double-sided phenomenon: it stimulates slash-themed stories and discussions, simultaneously being partly a response to the existing ones. There is

¹⁴ We can live in hope. 2010, blog article, access: <http://www.whitecollarfixation.com/2010/08/we-can-live-in-hope.html>

¹⁵ “Rowling Says Dumbledore Is Gay”, 15.10.2008, The Daily Beast Newswk, access: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newswk/2007/10/15/rowling-says-dumbledore-is-gay.html>

¹⁶ “James McAvoy calls 'X-Men: First Class' a love story between two men”, 23.02.2011, The Examiner, access: <http://www.examiner.com/article/james-mcavoy-calls-x-men-first-class-a-love-story-between-two-men>

¹⁷ McAvoy+Fassbender Favourite Interview Moments, June 27, 2011, access: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsyHJOHobNY&list=LLNfNZFJvEkI0wFjB-FKOsyw>

an ongoing process of arguing about characters' sexualities, and the very presence of it is inseparable from slash community.

2.2. Stories From the Inside

In this part I will turn to the actual analysis of the slash stories that are published online. Taking into account what Baer and Kon were saying about sexuality in Russia and the invisibility of gay identity in its "Western" form, slash fiction poses itself on the opposite side of the common attitude, creating stories similar to one of the highly acclaimed Russian fan fics in *Harry Potter* fandom that has a quite relevant title "Yes, I'm gay, and I don't give a damn about your opinion". It maintains the general tone of contempt and rebellion, all in the name of being true to one's *nature* and desires:

*"I need him, because he showed me who I am, who I have always been. Last month made me feel like chains have fallen from my feet and I am a free man. Unlike all of you, bounded by your cheap ideas."*¹⁸

These are thoughts of a young Anakin Skywalker, from *Star Wars*, about Obi-Wan Kenobi:

*"You are still young, young, only a dozen years older than me, but it is I, who feels older, for I have known the most mature feeling in the Universe – love. I've left all I had behind, following the nature I did not recognize then. I don't care what they call it, you – are my destiny."*¹⁹

We may see how a common trope of essentialism ("who I have always been", "following the nature") is used here, and as numerous scholars have pointed out (Frost, 2011:70), it is dangerous to resort to essentialism, but it does seem to be working on the political arena in terms of claiming rights for the LBGT (Kon, 2001: 83). Given quotes also

¹⁸ Yes, I'm gay, and I don't give a damn about your opinion , 2004, author: magnia, access: <http://hogwartsnet.ru/mfanf/ffshowfic.php?fid=55621>

¹⁹ Star wars: the episode that never existed, author: Skyoutcast, access: <http://slashfiction.ru/story.php?story=583>

show the idea of liberation, the voice of the authors is seen through the lines, demonstrating their attitude towards the social acceptance of the love they write about. Picturing character as gay is expressing what one has to say about being gay, a way of transmitting ideas and opinions into the published (online) text. However, slash fiction is not that liberating as it wants to present itself, or even as it's perceived by the community.

2.3. Gender Binaries and Masculinity

I would like to begin with the most fundamental characteristic, which is gender representation. As I noted, diversity of slash community complicates this task, although some particular tendencies could be traced. It seems logical that in the non-heteronormative stories that frequently contain such happenings as men's pregnancy (shortened as MPREG) and cross-dressing, gender binaries would be at least blurred, although it's not exactly accurate. As a matter of fact, I would argue that they are kept and reinforced. Masculinity remains an icon in the development of character, up to the point that slashers have invented the idea of a "canonic OOC". OOC stands for Out Of Character, term borrowed from theater and role-play, is an important indicator for the authors if they think they have transgressed the image of the character in their work. For instance if Sam from *Lord of the Rings* suddenly becomes evil, that would count as OOC. Canonic OOC is an incredible oxymoron that implies that authors (of the original story) are violating the image of the character themselves, or, to be more precise, treating them inconsistently with what fans expect them to be. Frequently this refers to a particular behavior, and masculinity is an important part of it. Slashers accuse other slashers and even authors of the originals when a male? character acts non-masculine, feminine, weak and powerless, perceiving such behavior as improbable and, moreover, undesirable. Example from the same *Star Wars* story I recently cited:

I want your love, I want your full attention. Tender or fierce, cruel or sensitive, I just need you to be real. ...[]... My knees are shaking when I see you, I'm dying to touch you.

On one of the forums received the next comment:

Oh, come on! He's a Jedi, not a sensitive little girl! Why does he behave like a fifth-grader [feminine form of the word grader is used]²⁰?

This reinforces masculinity as a positive trait, equating it with strength, courage, intelligence, while denouncing femininity, associating it with exaggerated emotionality, cowardice and even stupidity. Here is an example of a comment on one of the slash stories with Harry Potter/Draco Malfoy pairing:

*"There is once scene that seemed really weird to me, it's a fight between Scabior and Grayback. Draco there is so...feminine, I don't even know, was really hard to grasp."*²¹

Such reaction is widespread, because characters need to remain masculine, otherwise they will be labeled as OOC. Kon described Russian society after the fall of Soviet Union as still extremely traditionalistic and demanding, especially in respect to gender and sexuality. In other words, in order to comply with the requirements of society, individuals were supposed to perform a very traditionalistic behavior. He argues that after a brief outburst of subcultures and an obsession with the "West", Russia experiences retraditionalization and a rise of nationalism (Kon, 2001: 127). I suppose, normative gender representation is directly connected to the social reality of slashers and the fact that, due to a number of reasons they are able to challenge homophobia, but not always notice gender normativity.

Another aspect of perpetuation of the gender-specific stereotypes and some sort of misogyny (however complicated it is by the fact that slashers are predominantly women) is a notable absence of female characters in slash stories. However, it could be explained by the

²⁰ Star wars: the episode that never existed, author: Skyoutcast, forum discussion, access: <http://slashfiction.ru/forum/index.php?topic=4600.msg77466#msg77466>

²¹ "The Storm" by alter-sweep-ego, 2011, comment section, <http://www.fanfics.ru/index.php?section=3&id=43266>

fact that female characters are explored in fem-slash. What is problematic in slash is that it tends to give a rather misogynistic representation to women. Female characters are often limited to the roles of friends, former girlfriends, minor and insignificant characters, they seldom appear in the list of characters etc. If females are shown as evincing affection for the protagonist, they are frequently negatively counterpoised to him as attempting to break his relationship with the second male character, and pictured as hysterical, emotionally unstable, cunning, often homophobic and “typically feminine”. Here is a typical example from Harry Potter/Draco Malfoy fanfiction:

- *I don't want anything to do with you! – She screamed, - I hate you and everyone around you, especially him! – She pointed on Draco, burst into tears and ran away.*
- *What was that? – Draco quirked an eyebrow.*
- *That's what happens, when you try to explain something to a woman.*²²

I will not make speculative conclusions about the internalized misogyny performed in this bit, but only note that such depictions of female characters are not a separate case, rather a generally accepted way.

2.4. Brothers' Romance: Incest and Relationship With Minors

Within the framework of homosexuality slash goes further, challenging restrictions of blood ties and relationships between adults and minors. I'd like to focus on these subjects since they usually occupy an ambivalent place in fandoms: readers divide into “love is love” group against “this is too much”. For instance, one of the slash forum branches starts with a phrase: “I'm used to chen-slash²³ and incest, but I can't imagine character X as a cheap prostitute.”²⁴

²² Vicissitudes of life, Chapter 6, 15.08.2005, author: Azura <http://www.fanfics.ru/read.php?id=52&chapter=6>

²³ Relationships with children (usually 9-14 years old)

It might sound disturbing, although it is slash reality - incest in all of its forms is widely represented in various fandoms, as well as cross-generational relationship (most of *Harry Potter* fandom is based on it). Some fandoms are built around incestuous pairings, like a highly popular “Supernatural”²⁵ fandom. The storyline of this American TV series is based on two brothers who fight otherworldly forces, like demons and ghosts. Naturally, the chemistry between the handsome and masculine main actors attracted millions of slashers and was instantly formed in the huge Sam/Dean network of stories, sequels, videos and artistic creations. The pairing gained so much fame, that it was actually referred to in one of the episodes²⁶ of the series in the short dialogue between Sam and Dean about their fans. This reference is one of the few obvious (words “slash fans” are used by characters) responses to the slash community in the canon, instead of usual semi-visible fan-service. Sam spokes out the general opinion of slashers on the fact of their brotherhood: “Doesn’t seem to matter”. There are numerous similar examples. For instance, here is a part from the Faramir/Boromir (*Lord of the Rings*) fic. This pairing is easily developed from Tolkien’s reference: “Yet between the brothers there was great love, and had been since childhood”. This line is the header of the biggest blog, dedicated to the pair²⁷, from which the next quote is withdrawn:

“What harm is there when we both wish for this?”

“Harm uncounted. You are young. Go find someone who is more suited for your love.”

Boromir was shaking his head, his brows knitted with obvious pain. Faramir found himself suddenly angered by the sad dismissal. “There is no truth in your words,” he said, stepping backward, dislodging Boromir’s hold on him. “You do not mean them. I know you do not.”

“Whether or not I mean them should not be your concern, brother. This is unlawful, surely you know that.”

²⁴ Не верю! (Станиславский), access:

<http://www.hogwartsnet.ru/hf2/index.php?s=e3de14fb9eeb57e1668d2e318e6460f3&showtopic=4008>

²⁵ Supernatural – an American TV series, on air: 2005 – present.

²⁶ Supernatural, USA, Season 4, Episode 18, aired: Apr. 2, 2009.

²⁷ Faramir Fiction archive, access: <http://www.faramirfiction.com/pairings/boromir>

Here we may see how author speaks through Faramir's anger against the laws that seem so wrong, since "they both wish for this". We see how our incest taboo is projected onto the imaginary law of the Middle-earth realm and, further, violated and despised by characters' actions. The theme of brotherly love also appeared in *Glee* (Blaine/Cooper Anderson) and *The Avengers* (Thor/Loki), *Harry Potter* (Bill/Charlie, Fred/George Weasley), *X-men* (Alex/Scott Summers) fandoms occupying a firm position in each, as one of the so-called "classic pairings".

And here is an example of Charley Weaseley trying to persuade his brother not to marry a woman. This type of reasoning occurs often in brother/incest fiction:

*"You know where you belong. Deep down, you know. You're just too thick-headed to stop lying to yourself. We both know it. We've known it since we were young. I just don't hide who I am. Not like you. I don't need to have a nice normal life that's a complete lie."*²⁸

In this bit a common trope is used again: the idea of essentialness, truthfulness, obedience to society and internal contradictions. Admitting one's sexuality and defying social anticipations of heteronormative reproductive life in slash is a way of manifesting against the structure that imposes these anticipations. Loving your brother is only transgressing one more line of restrictions that have, as was mentioned earlier, a set of typical aims: control, reproduction, sameness.

Also brothers are commonly paired in the field of RPS (real person slash) – these are mainly music or TV stars: musicians Jared/Shannon Leto, actors Chris/Liam Hemsworth. Another popular incest pairing is a twincest – intimate relationship between homozygote twins – two most recent waves of it were in the fandoms of *Harry Potter* (Fred/George Weasley) and members of the German teenage rock band *Tokio Hotel* (Tim/Bill Kaulitz). In the case of twincest justification of love between brothers is frequently narrowed down to the

²⁸ "Retro Rescue", author: luvshcharlie, published 2011, access: <http://slash-weasley.livejournal.com/?skip=10>

ideas of one soul in two bodies and the complementarity of the characters. For instance here is quote from one of the twincest stories, where George Weasley describes his love for brother to his family:

*“... that kind of love that can only emerge between the two twins, when there is no space for anyone else, when there is only two of us and two of us can be. [] .. People are constantly looking for their other halves, we were lucky – we were born a whole.”*²⁹

And another similar opinion:

*“The pure joy of finally breaching that normal human personal space that should never, ever even exist between twins overwhelmed him.”*³⁰

If we consider social construction of the incest taboo, we may understand how brotherly love gets sexual shade in the same way as heteronormativity is undermined. Slashers deliberately speak about sex and sexuality where it must have no place – between siblings. On this matter, I feel obliged to unpack a few features about incest pairings in slash fiction. First, on the imagined hypothetical plane with blood relations matrix, where vertical connections represent parental-children relations, and horizontal – siblings, slash is usually situated on the horizontal line, such as brother/brother, or close relatives of approximately one age. Vertical incest (father/son) appears to me as an extremely rare topic. I, personally, out of all the fandoms known to me, have met it once, in the *Harry Potter* fandom (Lucius/Draco Malfoy). Anna Meigs and Kathleen Barlow in their article “Beyond the Taboo: Imaging Incest”³¹ argue that incest taboo has always been a core of anthropological inquiry, since it’s one of the universal cultural bans. They claim, though, that incest was apparent and widely practiced throughout the history, co-existing with the taboo. Meigs and Barlow argue that

²⁹ “The swans have this one law”, author: Joe, published: 2008, access: <http://forum.fanfiction.ru/index.php?showtopic=3203>

³⁰ “Appearances”, author: rebecca_selene, published: 2011, access: <http://slash-weasley.livejournal.com/?skip=10>

³¹ Beyond the Taboo: Imaging Incest / Anna Meigs and Kathleen Barlow / American Anthropologist, New Series, Vol. 104, No. 1 (Mar., 2002), pp. 38-49

society imposed certain restrictions on sexual behavior to separate civilization from the savages, who had no prohibitions, and, hence, no culture. In this article they focus mainly on vertical and heterosexual incest, looking for its causes in the structures of the nuclear families, psychoanalyses, behavioral fallacies. They regard vertical incest mainly as traumatic abuse, while horizontal intimacies are seen as mutually cohesive. I think slash fiction writers unconsciously share this opinion, which is reflected in the apparently uneven proportions of horizontal/vertical incest pairs and stories. Second, incest here loses its genetic danger, since is not reproductive even potentially. This could also be one of the reasons of a positive attitude of slashers. Finally, slash gets more recognition in the non-realistic universes (*Tolkien, Rowling, Supernatural*).

The reason for it may be found in the ways, through which incest is frequently justified in the texts, which I will now introduce. The *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* universes are exceptionally representative in this case. Original series pay little attention to the romantic relationships, social structure, religion, sexuality, restrictions and taboos, connected to them. In addition they both have a huge amount of relatively undeveloped characters. All the suppressed subjects have found an outlet in slash. Dwelling on the grounds of a convenient magical world, where nothing is explicitly spoken about sex and sexuality, while characters are (or slowly growing into) sexualized objects for the readers, slashers developed a highly elaborated sequels and stories with all possible combinations, crossing borders of species, ages and blood relations. In these stories new norms acquire a possibility to be established. Norms around ages are of interest for me in particular, since they also touch upon a problematic site of social/sexual reality.

Foucault in his interview “Friendship as a Way of Live”³² talks about homosocial societies as a utopian space for relationships free from class and age segregation.

³² Foucault, Michael. 1997. “Friendship as a Way of Life” in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, Vol. 1., The New Press, New York, pp. 50-57.

Homosexuals living together must not seek to conform to heteronormative notions, but resist them in order to have relationships aimed on mutual pleasure. Slash fiction presents a new perspective on the cross-generational behavior, which is kind of reminiscent of this Foucauldian idea. Incorporating the omnipresent feeling of violation of the taboo of the homosexual relationship between an adult and a minor, most of the stories tend to focus on the emotional bond between characters to justify it. Most popular pairings in this category are situated in Harry Potter's universe, due to the high number of teenage characters. Similar trends could be noticed in the *X-men* series and, basically, any saga with underage characters. The simplest and simultaneously the most complex explanation to the existence of the cross-generational relationships in slash is that authors deny particular boundaries (sex with minors), while keeping the others (masculinity, gender stereotypes). Slash fiction as an online community is in a way locked in itself, meaning that it has no aim in getting approval from the general part of the fandom (who writes heterosexual fanfiction) or, moreover, outside it. Roughly saying, there are technically (officially) no rules in pairing, but pairs that break too many norms (involving gerontophilia or interspecies, or vertical incest etc.) usually don't get popular, probably because they go too far from accepted sexual norms.

There are three types of cross-generational slash stories known to me and each transmits a particular disposition between the protagonists. First: eroticized adult. These are written with detailed descriptions of mature bodies, usually from the view of the younger character. Here is a classic depiction of a strong, aggressive adult in such stories (Harry Potter/Sirius Black):

A strong callused hand gripped his upper arm and pulled him quickly into a deserted alleyway. He was shoved roughly up against the dirty wall of a rundown building and a firm, hot body pressed against him, pushing him further into the brick. Harry's hands came up reflexively and rested on Sirius' sides. He felt the muscles underneath his fingertips ripple

*with tension through the thin material of Sirius' pullover. Sirius leaned in close until their foreheads were pressed together and his other hand clamped down hard on the nape of Harry's neck.*³³

Second type resembles Nabokov's "Lolita": longing for a young, still childish body and behavior, suffering of the older character and an innocent lecherousness of the younger:

*Lucius leaned against the heavy oak doors and watched his son for a moment; Draco's hands were in the pockets of his trousers and his shirt was unbuttoned halfway down his smooth chest. The boy was scrunching his toes in the thick pile of the rug and Lucius smiled. He was perfectly aware of how sensitive to touch his boy was.*³⁴

This bit, which is also a rare case of a vertical incest (Lucius/Draco Malfoy) that I mentioned earlier, perfectly represents still childish, but already sexualized minor. Similar moment from *Star Wars*, this time from Quai-Gon, who watches young Obi-Wan falling asleep:

*Young boy looked charming. Obi-Wan have always tried to look stronger, braver, tougher than he was, to prove he deserves a master like Quai-Gon. But at the moment he was so trustful, helpless and...inviting.*³⁵

Same trope of an attractive and trustful young character with a wise, experienced adult is frequently repeated throughout these types of stories. I don't believe it is possible to make any kind of clear assumptions about the authors of the given stories, since fantasy is not always a projection, and virtual personalities are hard to examine. So I will only use the stories to see how the possible combinations of relations between characters represented in them, and the most interesting for this analysis would be the third type.

The third type is ignoring and bypassing the age difference. Authors merely pretend that it doesn't exist and the only things that matter are the complexity of relationship, the

³³ Found Wanting. 2004, author: anise_anise, access: <http://sirry-slash.livejournal.com/18304.html>

³⁴ Hidden and Sought. 2011, author: feanix, access: <http://malfoycest.livejournal.com/114816.html>

³⁵ One night, 23.01.2012, author: Синий ирис, access: <http://star-slash.diary.ru/p172074619.htm>

drama and the plot. The society's reaction is usually conveniently omitted in this kind of stories in order not to break the illusion of suddenly vanished double taboo (both homosexuality and relationships with minors). Just as in cases with incest and simple homosexual erotica, authors build an imaginary world of relationships free from the obligation to conform to established sexual norms. Here is a bit from Harry Potter/Severus Snape fiction:

*For years, Severus had accepted that Harry would dictate their relationship to each other. When it had pleased Harry to regard Severus as his enemy, Severus obligingly assumed that role. When, in short succession, Harry decided to play along with Dumbledore's machinations and treat the potions master as a reluctant mentor and then a comrade-in-arms, Severus had, without hesitation, discarded his villain's mask. Now, Harry had decided to relate to Severus as a lover. This incarnation of their ever-changing relationship promised to be as superficial and fleeting as the others had been.*³⁶

The reader may observe the drama, emotions, suffering and no mentions of the age difference or homosexuality as a potential obstacle. In my opinion, this is the only type of slash fiction that actually can be considered as existing out of the framework of sexual norms. Disregarding the taboo instead of confronting it is breaking the rules of the game, since there are norms and one can either obey them or rebel against them, one is not supposed to simply bypass their existence and ignore them as insignificant. This type of reasoning has huge social and political potential, as an example of looking at the social structure from outside of its boundaries. There is another example of such breakout, which is so-called EIG³⁷ fan fiction – Everyone Is Gay. In such stories authors don't present any justification for characters' homosexuality, making them gay by default, denouncing presumed heterosexuality of the majority of population. However, while authors and their opinions

³⁶ Forethought. 2005, author: ellipsical, access: <http://ellipsical.livejournal.com/1479.html>

³⁷ Слэш-терминология, access: <http://slash.3dn.ru/forum/4-78-5>

could be studied through texts, it is more authentic to refer to their opinions spoken on forums, not by the means of characters, and that is what I will do in the next part of this chapter.

2.5. Online Community: The Slasher's Code

This part of the chapter will be dedicated to the diversity of opinions and perceptions of slash fiction among its readers and writers. To figure this out I will turn to discussion sections of the most popular slash forums on Runet (local name for the Russian-speaking part of the internet). I'd like to begin with some numbers to show the quantity of slashers and their average level of activity online. All the figures I bring here are taken from the latest statistical data of 2012-2013. Forum of one of the biggest portals, originally dedicated to *Harry Potter* fandom, but later turned into an multi-fandom space – hogwartsnet.ru – lists 31 151 registered members with 380 133 published messages. Out of those – 8 533 messages are specifically in the topic called Slash, but each forum's branch has slash references and publications. Another, this time specifically slash-themed website, slashfiction.ru lists 6 934 registered members and 87 854 messages in 5 050 topics. Livejournal.com has a list of 42 communities dedicated to various slash fandoms and pairings. On the main page of fanfics.ru statistical data shows that there are 2505 heterosexual stories and 2397 slash stories – almost equal! I introduce these figures only to show the average attendance rates of such websites, which indicate a constantly growing interest in the subject, and a considerable percentage of slash fiction in comparison to het fanfics.

Forums and discussion sections are usually divided by fandoms (if it's a multifandom web) and separate branches that are not dedicated to fan fiction itself. To explore the general attitudes and opinions I'll turn to these branches in particular. Among them topics as “Why do women like gays?”, “Everyday life of a slasher”, “What does being a slasher mean to you” (I actually also had this question in my interview guide). I'd like to focus on them in particular.

For instance, here is one of the answers in the discussion section with a title question “what is slash for you?”:

*It means not just noticing details in movies and books, it means feeling as a part of smart, talented, educated and interesting people. It means looking at the subjects of gender, sexuality, any queerness wider than the civil³⁸ society. Diverse your intimate life and consider yourself a part of the gay culture.*³⁹

Another similar view from the same branch:

*Slash for me is a community of creative, thinking and artistic people in the first place, and only after – of people interested in slash or writing it.*⁴⁰

We can see a rather distinct sense of community, which has particular traits in the imagination of its members. It doesn't mean that all slashers possess these traits, although I could judge from my personal experience as a slasher with 9 years of reading and writing it, that intelligence, education, high literacy, broad vocabulary and generally sophisticated attitude towards life have always been valued among slashers. People who write simple, cliché stories with superficial characters don't get attention, or, as on fanfics.ru portal – don't even get published (it is stated in the rules of the portal), since moderators deny them, usually stating the reason for such decision. Another answer in this branch contains irony, but expresses an important point⁴¹:

Being a slasher for me is a moderate demonstration of a moderate marginality and partial freethinking.

³⁸ Civil here is used merely as a closest translation of the term “цивил” that is commonly used in subcultures and fan cultures to describe “ordinary” people, who don't belong to any special subculture and don't stand out of the majority in their views.

³⁹ Опрос о слэшерском сообществе, answer from 13.11.2010, access: <http://slashfiction.ru/forum/index.php?topic=6110.0>

⁴⁰ Опрос о слэшерском сообществе, answer from 04.02.2010, access: <http://slashfiction.ru/forum/index.php?topic=6110.0>

⁴¹ Опрос о слэшерском сообществе, answer from 04.12.2010, access: <http://slashfiction.ru/forum/index.php?topic=6110.0>

This answer correlates with my point about slash as a practice of freethinking, although commenter claims that it's partial. Perhaps, such perception is connected to the limited transgressiveness of slash stories, which contests one kind of restrictions, while keeping others.

One of the topics on Hogwarts.net forum is titled "Today he reads slash, tomorrow he'll dance naked"⁴² which is a recognizable inversion of the famous soviet phrase about people who dared to listen to "Western music" – "Today he plays jazz, tomorrow he sells his homeland", which was synonym to treason. The discussion in this topic is focused around humorous self-perceptions of slashers and their reflection on how they are seen by society as weird, dangerous, perverted and threatening to norms and traditions. They joke about sleeping with war enemies and selling motherland to homosexual West, figuratively trying on the position of war time intellectual elite, persecuted by the Soviet state. In his article *Imaginary West* Alexei Yurchak describes a complex relationship of the Russian anti-Soviet youths to the concept of the "West", which was so unreachable that appeared non-existent. Young people were left to the ideas and images they got from music and movies, while enduring constant hostility and threats from pro-soviet citizens. He argues that it didn't really matter for dissidents, rockers and stilyags whether their image of the West is true or not, it was their way of confronting Soviet reality. (Yurchak, 2006: 159, 172-173). In the same way, Russian slash community doesn't care much about pro-gay movies and series (*Queer as Folk*, *Brokeback Mountain*), but writes homosexuality, where it's not apparent. It is their way of confronting heteronormativity that they experience in Russia every day, their way to declare the possibility of homosexuality for the heteronormative canon, and, possibly, change the canon, even if only for themselves. Slashers, similar to soviet rebels, feel that the general society disagrees with their views, and feel the threat of punishment, which provokes such

⁴² Сегодня он читает слэш, а завтра пляшет без одежды, accessc
<http://www.hogwartsnet.ru/hf2/index.php?showtopic=8199>

discussions. Yurchak notes one particularly interesting feature of the Soviet times: “It [transformation of the society] concerned the evaluation of cultural and artistic forms as correct and incorrect from a political standpoint” (2006: 163). I believe it could be rephrased that there was also a correct and incorrect form of evaluation of these cultural forms. It applies neatly to the idea of slash fiction as a form of an inappropriate evaluation/consumption of the cultural product. A decent Russian citizen is supposed to read *Harry Potter* and either merely enjoy it or complain about the plot points. This decent citizen, especially being a female, who has to be generally busy with cooking or raising children, is not supposed to fantasize about homosexual relations between the characters, and moreover – publish it online. The very protest of slash fiction, that resembles dissidence, lies in this inappropriate consumption, indecent reaction, improper acceptance and further production of these improper materials.

Fickbook.net portal has a published research (it’s not academic, so the data is contestable) conducted by one of the members. She asked 200 authors of the portal about their motivation for writing slash and apart from simple answers like: “Because it’s interesting, because I like it”, there are some particularly interesting for my project:

I write slash because I think love has a right to be for everybody. For me slash is a challenge of the social stereotypes.

I write slash because it’s a special genre; characters mostly fight for their feelings, vindicating their right for the personal happiness, go against existing foundations. So when I read slash I develop this blind respect even towards fictional characters. This is what I find attractive in the genre.

*Slash constantly impresses me by the absence of predisposed social roles, there is no strict: hunter – victim. The character, who is led, can grow to be leading. That's what I write about*⁴³.

From these answers I could pick up the terms I find significant, such as social roles and stereotypes, existing foundations, challenge. They demonstrate that authors and readers fully realize that slash fiction is not merely a fan production based on a desire to write something about beloved characters, but it has much more profound aim – to undermine heteronormative structure, to question compulsory heterosexuality and to explore the possibilities of personal development, usually omitted by the dominant narrative of heterosexual lifestyle. Written predominantly by women (in this research 172 respondents were women) it gives voice to them, a plane for creation and a way of criticizing this narrative and re-writing it in the way they would like to see it. In the words of one of the respondents, by writing slash they turn *from those who are led into leaders*, demonstrating how consuming the pop culture products can have agency and becoming *users*, as De Certeau puts it. Fan fiction is a way to turn the top-down relationship between the producers and the consumers, and slash fiction is a way to do it in a non-heteronormative way. By means of slash Russian community declares its opinion on homosexuality and heteronormative public discourse, even online, with virtual personalities and safe anonymity of the global network.

⁴³ Почему мы пишем и читаем слэш?, access: <http://ficbook.net/readfic/403661>

Chapter 3.

An Imaginary (?) Subculture: Slash Community

Outside the Web

In this chapter I will present my analysis of the field data I have obtained during my interviews, focus-group, a round-table and participant observations on the Slash Fiction Conference in Moscow on the 2 of May, 2013. I'd like to quote one of the participants of the roundtable, who came up to me after the discussion and thanked for conducting it, since, as she put it: "No one talks about it out loud, but everyone thinks about it. I think we all learned a lot from it." With this in mind I can turn to the direct analysis of the offline community through the above listed sources.

3.1. Terminological Matters: Subculture or Fan-culture?

In the very beginning of my project I intended to consider slash fiction a subculture. However, I had to reframe my terminology in order to call it a community and a fan-culture, since it lacks visual representation and recognition to be a subculture. According to Ken Gelder such classic works as Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of style* "helped to establish style as key subcultural identifier" (Gelder 2005: 271). He then lists Fyvel, Mercer, Macdonald, Elias and Simmel among a number of scholars who insisted on style and visual key to be significant for subcultures (2005: 273-275). My research, surprisingly for me, on the contrary, brought me back to the term "subculture". I would like to explain why the given differences matter. Fan culture refers to media studies, evoking ideas of consumption/production, phenomena of fan obsessions and cults. It seldom has any kind of disagreement with the established norms. Meanwhile, a subculture is a more complex issue, which includes ideology, protest or denial of particular social norms. When I asked my focus

group respondents to justify their constant usage of this term⁴⁴ in reference to slash community they appeared genuinely surprised:

N: Well, it's not a main culture. First, it exists as an opposition, because slash is already rewriting classical literature, right? It's not a number one culture, it's a number two culture. Second, it's characterized by communities, meeting, discussions, this is very subcultural. It has cosplay⁴⁵, I think it's a highly significant subcultural indicator. It's like a literary game and a theater for yourself.

Int: But I thought that this term is hardly applicable, since there is no everyday visual signs/representation?

N: I think it's mainly because of these heteronormative married women⁴⁶. Teenagers are on a border social line, they can afford some visuals, but not these women. Or think about the chess subculture? Do all of them really need visual?

L: I guess common ideas are enough.

Int: That is why I have asked about common values and ideas. Do they exist?

L: There is one, the biggest one: homosexual relationships are equal to heterosexual, they have a right to exist. (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

I am not completely assured that a whole slash community (or, rather, subculture) shares this opinion, since there are some heteronormative slashers, but it does seem to be shared by the majority of slashers. Afterwards, N expressed an idea that the absence of visual code is a positive feature of slash subculture:

⁴⁴ In Russian they used субкультура (subcultura) – which is the exact translation and has the same connotations as the English term.

⁴⁵ Cosplay – dressing up as a character, sometimes involves short theatrical performances.

⁴⁶ It's a complex task to draw an improvised social map of subgroups of slashers, and it risks being speculative due to the virtuality of personalities. Hence, I avoid doing this in the given project, and will only draw my argument on the ideas of my respondents.

N: I like that slash doesn't have a visual code, because for instance lesbian masculine visual code really presses on me, I hate it, I want to wear what I want. I find feminine women who have high level of intellectual deconstruction of gender very inspiring. (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

More respondents argued in favor of this term in the interviews:

If you counterpoise slashers and "anti-slashers" then I feel a relation to slashers, true. There are common memes [jokes, insiders stories], but this is typical for any subculture. (Interview with T, from 20.04.2013)

B: Slash doesn't matter more than any other subculture.

Int: Why subculture?

B: There are common values, there are some identification signs⁴⁷, I would even say roles differentiation – on writers, artists, readers. Not too strict, but still. (Interview with B, from 22.04.2013)

Given answers prompt me to rethink my usage of terminology and reanalyze the term subculture. If we take a classic definition of subculture by Dick Hebdige as a group that subverts and criticizes normative social standards, that "poses a challenge to the world" (Hebdige, 1979: 91), then we arrive at a definition that can actually be applied. Subcultures are born and developed as intentional and conscience resistance to the dominant culture. As Sarah Thornton puts it: "Subcultural ideologies are a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character ...[]... They are not innocent accounts of the way things really are, but ideologies that fulfill the specific cultural agendas of

⁴⁷ In this case I'm not sure what my interviewee meant by "identification signs". The only further mentioning of visibility from all of my respondents concerned cosplay. However, I acknowledge the possibility that there are some visual identifiers that I'm not aware of.

their beholders” (Thornton, 1995, cited in Gelder, 2005: 185). In order to look at subcultures I would like to bring another classic functionalists theory that appears most relevant for the case. Travis Hirshi has developed a social control theory, which is commonly applied to the analysis of subcultures (although it was originally created for the analysis of juvenile delinquency) and their relation to the general society. The main idea of the theory is that escape from traditional values and social norms is possible for an individual, when his “social bounds are weakened” (Hirshi, 1969: 86). While usually “social bounds” were weakened by poverty, criminal acquaintances, drug use etc., here the virtuality is the catalyst for loosing these bounds. The freedom and the absence of punishment, granted by virtual subculture allow an escape from the pressure of heteronormative family members, friends and coworkers. I’d like to bring Adrienne Rich’s argument on normativity and compulsory heterosexuality: “I’m suggesting that heterosexuality, as motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution” (Rich, 1980: 182). She implies that if we consider heterosexuality of the majority of population not as a natural phenomenon, but as a social construct, we might see how we could contest it. Virtual world is a space through which habitual social control is can be challenged, and the new norms can be established.

It is particularly interesting that my interviewee B supposes that slash bears no more importance than any other subculture. The paradox of this opinion is that it appears to devalue the significance of slash, while actually putting it in one list with one of the most crucial social phenomena – subcultures. The influence of subcultures and their social value to the specific time and place, their manifestation against specific features of the decade, their rebellion against war politics, consumerism, obedience, imposed traditionalistic values, sexual modesty etc. – all these protests were numerous pointed out as incredibly significant by huge number of scholars (Gelder, 2005: 144-147). With her statement B makes a valuable point for my project, arguing that slash is as important, as any other subculture. Stanley

Cohen argues that a subculture in its contemporary understanding is no longer just a question of adaptation and frustrated aspirations. “The notion of resistance conveys – and is usually intended to convey – something more active, more radical and political than the equivalent phrases in old subcultural theory ...[]... It’s a collective historically informed response, mediated by the class-culture of the oppressed.” (Cohen, 1986, cited in Gelder, 2005: 161) Hebdige adds that sometimes, members of subculture do not even recognize themselves as resistant, even though they are from a theoretical point of view (Hebdige, 1979: 139). Pearson notes that a subculture always already bears a political significance in it, while it frequently doesn’t reflect on it (Pearson, 1976: 70). If slash can be considered a subculture, as my respondents insist, then the idea of social political resistance becomes an inseparable and inevitable part of it by default. But in the case of slash, and in the case of my sampling, it seems to be a highly self-conscious subculture, which declares itself important.

3.2. Slash in Russia – The Involuntary Union

L: I have this idea, that fandom is cool, but what really matters is people there.

Not the characters, but people.

(Focus group from 29.04.)

I have asked all of my respondents about the notion of a community and if it is applicable to slash, since I had to collect their ideas about the relations between slashers and their perception of the membership in slash community. I this I need to clarify the particular difference between the community and subculture for my project. In Russian the term *community* (сообщество) rather refers to a union with a feeling of relation to members, while subculture can have its adepts feeling rather distant from each other. As in the case of online community analysis, similar results were obtained: most of my respondents feel strong relation to slashers in general, based not only on friendship ties, but of the very idea of

sharing a common set of interests and values.

There are some people for whom a fandom – is a family. (Interview with B, from 22.04.2013)

We are all here members of a secret society. Slash masons ...[]... Slash community is a whole separate state, with its rules and roles, and worlds and realms. (Interview with K, from 26.04.2013)

Slash goes beyond what is permitted, it's not just about the sexual sphere, about the kink [fetish] sphere, it's...with slasher you can basically talk about anything. There are no moral codes in your conversation. What in our society is considered an unacceptable topic for discussion, something that should be hidden behind closed doors – it's all allowed when you talk to a slasher. (Interview with Tea, 19.04.2013)

This is a significant point, since it shows a purpose of the community, rather than just giving a description. We may see what slash is used for and in which cases. Tea pointed out the possibility of discussion around topics, and it coincides with my argument in the text analysis chapter: slash community is a place for a more controversial discussion of various topics on sexuality, where perception of homosexuality/incest/etc. can be different from one accepted in Russian public discourse.

I feel that we are a community: we like the same art products [books/movies], we keep together, we don't have gender stereotypes. (Interview with M, from 21.04.2013)

While, as I demonstrated in the chapter on text analysis, it's highly contestable that slash doesn't have gender and sexual stereotypes or misogyny, it is significant that slashers think it doesn't. Their opinion is built on a comparison to the level of these stereotypes in their social environment and public discourse in Russia (as I described it in the introduction), and on that background slash may appear truly progressive. Based on this approach they feel

the union and get the sense of community, where limits of “permitted topics” for discussion and analysis are moved much further than in their everyday life. I would like to introduce the quote that displays an interesting view on the sense of community and relation for slashers:

I think slash is an involuntary community. “Against whom are we friends?”⁴⁸ (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

What appears to be the unifying factor in here is the sense of a common enemy – homophobic state and society. It’s not about the similarity of interests, but a similarity of disagreement with heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality. Slashers may be a diverse community, but what they share is more significant for the feeling of relation.

3.3. Heteronormative Slashers: an Obvious Oxymoron

Despite the presumable positive attitude towards various sexualities that slashers are likely to develop in the process of their membership in the community⁴⁹ (see sub-chapter 4), significant number of my respondents claimed that they have met/know/heard of/read highly heteronormative or even homophobic slashers. Since given concepts need explanations, I will unpack them with quotes from my interviewees and participants:

My attitude towards a person doesn’t change automatically if I find out she/he is a slasher. Because I know that a lot of slashers are homophobes in real life [V identifies as bisexual], and this is much more significant for me. Well, not a lot of them, but they exist. When I meet a slasher, I can’t expect him to have a particular ideology; I don’t know if I can talk with him about myself, or should I be careful ...[] ... It always stuns me when I come

⁴⁸ “Против кого дружим?” (Against whom are we friends?) – is a rather famous phrase used by school children, who frequently unite in a group against an “enemy” group, even when they have issues in between themselves.

⁴⁹ Here and onwards I intend to use the term community due to the reasons of membership/union connotations that it has in Russian language. But I do perceive slash fiction as a subculture.

across these people [homophobic slashers], I try to avoid them. (Interview with V, from 17.04)

I don't like those people, those hypocrites, who read slash and then frown on gay couples on the streets. (Field notes from 02.05.2013)

The main question that occurs in the given quotes is how an individual can be engaged into writing and reading about elaborated same-sex relationship, including pornographically explicit stories, and remain heteronormative or preserve negative attitude towards homosexuality in real life? Some of my respondents have built their own theories after facing this phenomenon. Here is an opinion of N, who was talking of the Live Journal community dedicated to Severus Snape (Harry Potter character, professor of Potions) and slash fiction about him:

N: I have been to couple of Snape-fans meetings, but there I've faced the fact, I can't really talk to anybody, since feminism is unheard among them, there was no contact for me. I didn't feel like I could talk to somebody. What I met there was extremely gender-stereotypical views. They write very "straight", linear Snarry (Snape/Harry). Snape is masculine, Harry is a bottom, he is a child, such a "Pride and Prejudice" gay version: "Thank you, thank you, professor".

There was this one woman, who was a head of the community, but I just couldn't find common language with her, she's too heteronormative. I think she's that kind of women in a hopeless nuclear marriage, and slash is one of the few points of socialization for her. That's my theory, but I guess this is a soviet type of women, who impose their family hierarchy wherever they go. She's got kids and family duties, and she writes this kind of compensatory slash, but the main thing is not slash, but the community for her. And it's a lot of them, women like her. (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

L continued her thought later:

L: There are plenty of them and they gather in huge groups. When there was a premiere of the 8th part of Harry Potter they occupied two big halls of the restaurant! They were predominantly married women in their thirties, as far as I'm aware, very few gays. [she later explained that she uses this term to cover both men and women]. (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

I would like to focus on this theory, presented by N and tie it to my earlier argument from Chapter 2 about slash fiction as not being completely transgressive. My respondents have also noticed reproduced heteronormativity both in stories and among their authors. In this case homosexuality of the characters is perceived mainly through the relationships that still create gender binary even with both characters being of the same gender, as in case with Snarry (some pairings get names, not traditional slash sign, like Wincest from *Supernatural*, Snarry, Harrydraco from *Harry Potter*). As a feminist, she tried to express her opinion on gender and sexuality, when she attended slash meetings of the described community, but was clearly misunderstood (possibly due to a higher level of social normativity among those women) and felt isolated. In her view, these women keep patriarchal structure and enjoy it, since even the “compensatory” stories they create have the same internal structure they experience in real life and consider normative. Heteronormative slashers in this perspective cease to be an exceptional case, rather turning into a sub-type of slash community. As L noted later in the focus group: “they must have their reasons”, and investigating them is not a priority in my current project. However, their existence cannot be omitted, otherwise I risk drawing a homogeneous portrait, not corresponding to reality. R argued that there people are not necessarily homophobes, they just separate slash fiction from “real-life” homosexuality. L described them like this:

L: This relates to the question about homophobic slashers. Shocking phenomenon, but it exists. They are usually not even homophobes; they are more like not interested in gays. They are only able to perceive their own projections, fantasies. Some of my friends who like slash have this neutral attitude towards gays, similar to all other people. They read everything, not just slash. But there are people, who only read slash but it never coincides with real-life gayness. It's just two different things for them. (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

Another story presented by R:

R: I have a gay friend, he is a boy, and he writes fanfiction. His writings are pretty good, he even won some contests. Once he decided to make an experiment. He decided to create a slash that would be absolutely truthful in relation to the psychological and physiological development of homosexual relationship. He just wrote as it is. He got bashed! Everyone decided that he is an ignorant girl, who knows nothing about homosexual sex and sent him to learn some stuff. Next time he wrote a similar story, but everything was embellished and brightened up – the audience was happy. (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

While it could be one-sided story, told only from the view of the guy-writer, and while I cannot argue about either of the stories, which I haven't read, but I could say that these opinions are interrelated with theories of female sexual fantasies and ideas about slash as a representation of a desired male behavior instead of real. I think here it is possible to see the roots of real-life homophobia: homosexuality in the way that corresponds to reality is not what this [particular] audience is anticipating. On the contrary, the further from everyday ordinary relationship a story is - the better. Perhaps, we might assume that slash does not expose male psychology; it exposes the psychology of its writers and readers; that is why displaying male homosexuality from male viewpoint is not a popular trope for slashers. "In the early days of slash, writers often made technical mistakes in their descriptions of male-

male anal sex (e.g., easy anal intercourse without lubricant), which suggests the possibility that they were not literally imagining [male] anal sex at all” (Salmon & Symons, 2004: 98). If we consider this approach to understanding slash then there is no discrepancy between being a slasher and developing homophobic attitudes, since slash in this form doesn’t have a direct connection with actual male homosexuality.

However, my respondents have argued that slash had a great influence on them and at least my sampling did not develop homophobic attitudes, as a matter of fact it was mainly the opposite.

3.4. Breeding Slashers: Acquaintance and Influence

I fully recognize that tracing influence is a particularly complex task, even when a respondent names factors he/she supposes to have inflicted the given influence. Still, I find it significant to bring the views of my respondents on the question of slash’s influence on their lives and personalities. One of the most frequent consequences ascribed to slash fiction community was coming into terms with one’s sexuality:

L: Slashers influenced both my opening [outing as a lesbian] and development, psychological and emotional. Socialization means a lot to me, so yes, slashers have influenced me very much.

R: My friends, who were slashers, were my first friends that I chose to be with, not like in school, you know, but a conscious choice. They helped me to get more liberated, and later – to open up. (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

When I read my first fanfiction it helped me to rethink my own sexuality and my partner’s [male]. Later it helped me to realize my own bisexuality and accept it calmly. (Interview with T, from 20.04.2013)

This correlates with my previous arguments about the inner needs that slash is able to satisfy to a certain extent. Giving the social environment of general hostility to homosexuality, slash fiction (at least those types of it, which do not reproduce heteronormativity) could present a possible positive image that allows non-heterosexual women accept their sexuality and make this process smoother and less traumatic than the one their non-slashers peers undergo. In addition, slash fiction, as was mentioned earlier works with various sorts of problems and psychological processes, including the process of acceptance of one's sexuality. It is one of the most common themes explored in the texts, as I mentioned in my second Chapter: slash contains numerous statements of characters sexualities (e.g. "Yes, I'm gay!", "Now I know, I'm gay!"), usually following a long process of acceptance. Since most of slash stories eventually contain the description of a homosexual relationship, not ending on a one-sided affection, rejected by the second character due to his heterosexuality, it develops a feeling of a possible happy-ending for homosexual relationships in general, which is significant for women, who come of age in a homophobic society. Slash fiction frequently displays the internal struggle of a character, who tries to realize his homosexual attraction, which is easily recognizable for individuals, who have gone through the process of recognition of their difference. The rapport is established with the reader, who is not only interested in male psychology, but seeks to explore her (and, occasionally, his) own gender and sexual identity.

Part of the answers was about the informative and enlightening function of slash community. My only male respondent noted that slash introduced him to feminism:

People I've met in the slash community later have broadened my views on politics in general. It is from them that I finally found out, what is feminism and why it is not a plot against a thousand-years-old Russian spirituality. (Interview with S, from 17.04.2013)

He also added that slash changed his perception of gender in relation to politics:

Now I know that such things as true man and true women are nothing more than a governmental attempt to control us and to inflict a more convenient position [for it] that is far from our interests. (Interview with S, from 17.04.2013)

B noted slasher supplied her with information about relationships:

I feel that it's easier now to talk about relationships and sex. Some things that used to be awkward now seem natural. I learned a lot about schemes and patterns of relationships. (Interview with B, from 22.04.2013)

R said slash changed her friends' attitudes:

R: A lot of my friend changed their attitude towards real-life homosexuality from negative to neutral or positive due to slash. For them it is now just a version of norm. (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

These two trends are clearly interconnected and caused by the specificity of slash texts as explicit, detailed, focused on relationships and homosexuality. The texts may not be applicable to reality in terms of physiology, psychology, behavioral patterns etc., although they open the field of information, otherwise conventionally omitted or presented in a negative form. They allow a discussion; they have a fandom around them to correct mistakes and to share ideas. My respondents mainly focused on the community when talking about influence, insisting on the significance of the fandom even over the texts. Feeling of the community support becomes more valuable for slashers with the growing amount of aggressive and non-restricted hate-speech in the public discourse, especially around the new law.

3.5. Homophobic Law: “It Used to Be Funny”

Int: “Do you consider Russia a homophobic country?”

N: “Do we even have to answer that, or is it rhetorical?”

L: “We could answer in a chorus!” (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

For slashers, homophobia in Russia is not questioned, it is taken for granted, which makes it a convenient foundation for the notorious laws and public hate speech (as I’ve mentioned in the Introduction). Some of my respondents described their social environment as extremely hostile to homosexuality. Here R, who is an opened lesbian now, talks about her adolescence:

I tried reading scientific literature about gender and sexuality, and it only confused me even more, it wasn’t as accessible as slash was. I lived in a small town, and you know how it is there [in terms of sexuality and being gay]: “A step to the left, a step to the right – jump and an attempt to fly.” (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

Here she is humorously reworking a famous Russian war-time phrase “A step to the left, a step to the right [from the formation/column] – shooting”. Literally it refers to war-time columns of people, which were escorted to prisons/camps under armed guards. If anybody was suspected of an attempt to run away – he was shot on the spot. The phrase is still frequently used in the meanings of heavy and instant punishment for the violation of the established order or discipline.. She is not using this phrase to exaggerate the reality, especially in the light of the recent homophobic murder in Volgograd⁵⁰, unthinkable in its brutality, or in the light of mass and unlawful arrests of LGBT-activists in Moscow⁵¹. Being a

⁵⁰ Arrests over 'anti-gay' murder in Volgograd Russia, article from 13.05.2013, access: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22509019>

⁵¹ Гей-парад в Москве разогнала полиция, article from 25.05.2013, access: <http://www.mk.ru/social/article/2013/05/25/859640-geyparad-v-moskve-razognala-politsiya.html>

slasher and being a woman-slasher is less punishable than being a homosexual male, mainly due to the fact that slash is a kind of behavior that is much less visible than opened homosexuality (and less comprehensible for the social environment). But since a notable number of slashers are homosexual, bisexual, or having a queer gender identity in their real, offline lives, they experience the same pressure or violating norms and anticipate same punishment in a variety of forms from social isolation and despite to violence and discrimination. In such conditions slash becomes a resource of information and a community for retreating from hostility and simultaneously rebelling against it.

Now I would like to turn directly to the reaction of slash community on the introduction of the law against homosexual propaganda. I must admit, that my respondents displayed a rather homogeneous attitude toward it. To begin with, a number of them expressed confusion about the term “propaganda” (as well as national and international law experts⁵²), questioning its applicability to the matter of sexuality:

It's not a new sports style, it's a question of who arouses you. I don't understand what propaganda one can even talk about in this case. (Interview with K, from 26.04.2013)

The only male respondent had one of the most negative reactions I've collected concerning the law:

My attitude is strongly negative, I think people who are trying to stretch their hands into other people's beds should be hit on the head with a heavy hammer. Figuratively, of course. (Interview with S. from 17.04.2013)

He expressed the most radical position, although other respondents agreed on either confusion/misunderstanding of the purpose and reasons behind it, or opened disagreement

⁵² Russia's anti-gay 'propaganda law' assault on freedom of expression, article from 25.01.2013, access: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/russia-anti-gay-propaganda-law-assault-on-freedom-expression-2013-01-25>

with the very idea of a legislation of this type. In the introduction I have cited results of the Russian poll on public opinion on the law, where the absolute majority supported it. Here we have the opposite situation: absolute majority of my respondent didn't. It signifies their difference from the majority of Russian society concerning this subject.

The most problematic site of the law is in arguing that homosexuality is socially dangerous and destructive. The ambiguity of the term "propaganda" and the constitution of the law itself were numerously pointed out by lawyers and human rights organizations, including the lecturer on the SlashCon, Tatiana Glushkova, a leading human rights activist and a lawyer in Moscow organization "Jurix"⁵³. Here are the reasons she introduced as "real reasons for the adoption of the given law" (words given in brackets were also a part of her explanation):

...Three reasons that are standing behind the anti-homosexual lobby: finding an internal enemy (distraction), marginalizing liberals (and all liberal parties), and insisting on the "special Russian way" of social development (banal nationalism). She said the law doesn't have anything to do with fighting homosexuals; it's only for shutting down public activity, inflicting constant fear on the activists and using it occasionally for those, who attract too much attention and are not bending to the government. (Field notes by the author from 02.05.2013)

As we can see, Tatiana, as many other experts considers this law populist and targeting mainly LGBT-activism, rather than homosexuality per se. But there is another side to the possible application of it: censorship of the informational space, and this side concerns slash fiction directly. If websites, which contain information with positive depiction of homosexuality would be censored or shut down, the first one after official LGBT-friendly and

⁵³ Jurix, official website, access: <http://www.jurix.ru/>

pornography websites would be slash sites and forums. The way to escape it would be to set an age barrier for entrance and access to site's materials, but knowing the ways in which laws in Russia can be implemented, some major forums and sites could be closed without warnings. My respondents expressed great concerns over this topic and R has brought up the next story:

R: There was this joking anti-utopian story that wondered around the net [internet] once. It was funny then, it's not funny anymore. It was about what would happen if slash was banned, you know, officially outlawed, and the joke was that we would pretend to be a beading [type of handcraft from bead] community. And we would pass each other our fanfics secretly, thought underground channels. There were stories about sending spies and so on. It's actually sad to read it now – it's not so imaginary, it's almost real. (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

The story is reminiscent of the example I brought in the text analysis chapter, since it has a similar association line of dissidence and secrecy under the thread of punishment. Here, similarly the actual realism of punishment is not as significant, as the self-perception of the community, who supposes that this punishment is possible. Slashers see themselves as threatening to social norms and expect sanctions to be imposed. The new law is unlikely to interfere with personal freedom of particular slash writers or readers; however, it could influence the community in general. I think, this is one of the indicators of slash being resistant to dominant political situation with governmental control of sexuality. I do recognize that the idea of resistance should be used carefully not to fall into the trap of oversimplification. I do not mean to argue that slash is a rebellion against sexual normativity, since such concept would generalize it as a liberating practice, and as I explained earlier in my theoretical framework and textual chapter, it is not (at least not always and not completely). What I am arguing is that slashers as a community do represent a particular

society with certain norms that vary from those accepted in their environment and this variety has a political tendency, since it concerns the norms, actively debated in the political discourse. In the terms of Gayle Rubin, slashers move further from the imaginary wall of normativity in the hierarchal segregation of sexual practice. Rubin has developed a continuum of sexual behavior with respect to its perception in society: from “good sex” (heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive etc.) to “bad sex” (promiscuous homosexuality, cross-generational relationship, fetishes) (Rubin, 1984: 282). But what prevents me from claiming them to approach the latter category (abnormal sex), is the fact that they don’t practice it (it is possible that they do, however, it is not a feature of slashers that I focus on), only read and write about it. Writing and committing are different kinds of engaging with social norms, and first one usually escapes punishment (Nabokov’s “Lolita” could be an example). But when censorship is performed, as a usual form of eliminating the disagreeable opinion in the public sphere in Russia, slashers feel the strings of social control and realize their place on the Rubin’s continuum as disapproved. This is how their positionality as an opposition could be understood: through the feeling of possible punishment and possible censorship imposed on their interests. I presume that the notion of an imaginary life as described by Appadurai would fit into this discussion. “What is implied is that even the meanest and the most hopeless of lives, the most brutal and dehumanizing of circumstances, the harshest of lived inequalities is now open to the play of the imagination” (Appadurai, 1991: 198). Later, he goes even further, claiming that imagination is inseparably connected with social life; imagination influences it constantly, forming social reality in a new way, inflicting actual changes. He argues there is no clear line between the imagination and realism (1991: 200). For Russian slashers imagination is a form of manifestation of their views and a way to change their own social reality.

3.6. Russian Slashers: “No One Talks About Us, Yet”

The first thing I’d like to note is the fact that slashers demonstrated high motivation to express their opinion and participate in my project. They frequently argued that I’m doing a socially significant work and slash fiction community needs more attention from social science. In this part of the chapter I will analyze how slashers in Russia view their community’s place and purpose, how they imagine its future and its potential.

I would like to bring some statistical data: 9 out of 10 interviewees, 4 out of 4 participants in the focus group, and the absolute majority of participants in the round-table expressed a strong assurance in the social importance of slash fiction in Russia. These are the arguments they use to support their opinion:

L: When I first saw slash fiction and where it exists...England, France, US, Canada, Australia. I thought: “Wow! What strength!” But if there it is more of a fan thing and less of a social importance, here – it’s highly social, it’s highly political! It’s directly ties to homosexual equality, to gender equality. Slash is popular and it’s political. (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

When everyone around you says “you can’t!” the only thing you want is to do it. West pushes liberal values and tolerance, Russia stands for traditional values. We [slashers] stand for West, against Russia, hence, everybody tolerantly loves slash. (Interview with K, from 26.04.2013)

As I mentioned in the development of my theoretical framework, slash in Russia does not oppose separate groups of aggressive homophobes, it opposes the regime, the majority of society and the political trend. It is a complex task to investigate the reasons behind slash in “the West”, although my respondents seemed to be persuaded that for Russian reality it is placed in the different category. Slash can be written for fun, but it stops being mere fan

creation, when it challenges sexual normativity. The notion of a “game” rose up later in the discussion, elaborating this point:

R: I think feminism and gender equality are better digested through slash.

L: Yeah! Learning in a form of a game is always easier! (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

I find this quote core to my overall argument about slash fiction: even though it may appear an ordinary fan culture, where girls write about their favorite characters, in reality it is far more complicated and far more important. It's a way of expressing your views on gender and sexuality in a form and place that are not commonly used for these issues. It's a way of pretending to do reading and writing for the sake of the game, while realizing that such views are punishable outside of the community.

Slash breaks the template, it makes person see what is hidden under a patriarchal sociocultural constructs. (Interview with T, from 20.04.2013)

Slash in Russia is a special form of protest against the norms of society. (Interview with K, from 26.04.2013)

It's all about women, women who write it, they are not present publicly elsewhere, they don't have an agency. I think they are sealed in a very normative box, where they don't really fit. I think it's the most mass social movement that is not regarded significant. Feminism is present at least somewhere, but slash is just invisible for those in power. That's why I find it extremely potential; I think it's going to turn minds upside down. (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

... People are still buried in stereotypes. The existence of slash community giving the amount of homophobes in our country is already a sign of success. ... [] ... Perhaps later

popularization of slash will help LGBT-community in lobbying their rights. (Interview with M, from 21.04.2013)

L: It's always easier to take the beaten track, but we're all freaking Columbuses. And we'll beat this track, and break out, with all our sexist fellows and married housewives [among slashers]. And we'll show them new values and new meanings. (Focus group from 29.04.2013)

Naturally, some of these arguments are utopian to certain extent, although slash fiction as fiction is utopian a priori, since it creates the desired reality. However, social potential is visible in approaching slash fiction through the lens of rebellion and revolution, seen by those, who write it. The quotes I introduced demonstrate that even though slash is relatively underground, slashers do not see themselves as invisible or insignificant, on the contrary, they perceive slash as a conscience choice of disobedience, some of them believe slash will gain popularity or assist LGBT-rights. I would like to particularly focus on one phrase by N from the focus group: "slash is just invisible for those in power". My respondents seldom mentioned power structures, apart from patriarchy, although it's a key concept of my project. I argue that, while they avoid the term "power", a lot of their thoughts and expressions target specifically power structures. L talks about bringing "new values and new meanings", implying the disagreement with the existing ones, T argues that slash is able to break the template of sociocultural constructs, K talks about social norms – they all mean similar power relations between the society and the individual. It's a combination of governmental regime and political trends with an everyday surveillance. I think in this utopian ideas about the massive future influence of slash is a desire of visibility, a desire to switch from tactics to strategy, from infrapolitics to publicity. While there is a significant amount of reasons why slash is not likely to gain popularity (deeply entrenched homophobia and heteronormativity of the majority of the population, class restrictions, copyright issues), I find the very idea of such

possibility extremely powerful for Russia. And, naturally, the very fact of the existence of slash community, which identifies as a community, sees itself as resistant and politically significant, challenges (not all the time, not ultimately, but still) heteronormative sexuality in Russian society (which constantly attempts to strangle any kind of social resistance) is already a huge manifestation of power.

Conclusion

In the final part of my thesis project I intend to draw together the results of the two blocks of analysis: online representation of slash community through texts and thematic websites and offline community, obtained through interviews, focus-group and a round-table, in order to present my overall argument about the nature of Russian slash community and its social and specifically – political – significance.

The main conclusions from the analysis of the online community concerned the nature of texts and the self-perception of the community by slashers. Texts analysis allowed me to observe a number of particular patterns apparent in Russian slash fiction. To begin with, apart from homosexuality, slash explores such issues as cross-generational relationships and incest (although predominantly horizontal – brother/brother). It sometimes contains BDSM and a variety of fetishes, covering a vast scope of sexual practices that are perceived as debatable if not socially threatening. In other words, in their stories slashers do not restrain to only engaging with homosexuality, but touch upon other sexual taboos, allowing a discussion around these topics and questioning sexual norms.

However, Russian slashers are individuals, who grew in a particular society with a set of norms and stereotypes, which are rather persistent and cannot be so easily deconstructed. Thus, it is only expected that they consciously or unconsciously inscribe these norms and display learnt stereotypes to a certain extent in the texts they create. I have identified next issues present in texts: idealized masculinity, different types of misogyny, homonormativity in the depiction of characters intertwined with a specific kind of heteronormativity in the depiction of relationships.

Protagonists in slash stories have a tendency to be described as masculine both physically and psychologically (naturally in writer's understanding of masculine psychology,

which is usually socially determined), while their partners could be either as masculine or effeminized. In this case slashers reproduce two patterns: glorifying masculinity as a feature of a proper character or recreating a strict top-bottom role differentiation.

Misogyny in slash fiction has a number of manifestations. To begin with, female characters are rarely present in the stories per se. They remain secondary, undeveloped, lack attention and psychological depth. They are limited to the roles of friends, former girlfriends, minor and insignificant characters. If females are shown as evincing affection for the protagonist, they are frequently negatively counterpoised to him as attempting to break his relationship with the second male character, and pictured as hysterical, emotionally unstable, cunning, often homophobic and “typically feminine”.

The second way of misogyny’s manifestation in slash is the way of creation of the male characters. If the protagonist is shown as emotional, weak and uncertain, he might be labeled as falling out of character by being feminine. “Feminine” is the exact term used by slashers, who are predominantly women themselves, and used with a firm negative association. Glorification of masculinity and implied misogyny indicates the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. Slash focuses on issues of male homosexuality and possible variations of it, while perpetuating other gender-specific social and psychological problems.

In addition, a number of my respondents pointed out the existence of “homophobic slashers” as they called them, describing particular individuals, whose active participation in the community by both reading and writing slash, didn’t influence their homophobic attitudes in real life outside of the web. These slashers, in the words of my respondents, are mainly heterosexually married women, who only accept homosexual relations among fictional characters and draw a clear line between slash and actual homosexuality.

On the other hand, a prevailing number of my respondents and a majority of slashers online perceive slash fiction activity as a form of agency, accessible to women, which challenges the hegemonic heteronormative patriarchal structure of the society. Slashers in Russia recognize their social environment and current political situation and extremely homophobic and hostile to both homosexuals and social groups who support them (liberally-oriented organizations). Most of my respondents and slashers, whose opinions I obtained from forums, perceive slash as an opposition to the existing homophobic government, to the new law on homosexual propaganda and to aggressive nationalistic and religious groups and unions. Slashers view their community as one of the few resistant social groups and compare it soviet-time dissidence.

While there are substantial differences that this comparison misses, it is possible to see certain parallels in the activity of slashers and dissidents. For instance, the possibility of punishment for the performed activity: level of punishment is different, although for slashers it could be social isolation, hatred of violence (predominantly virtual), and, in the light of a recently introduced law, online ban or a fine. Another similarity is in the norms that slashers oppose and expect punishment for. In case of slashers these norms lie in the sphere of sexuality, which is rigorously controlled in Russia, mainly through nationalistic and religious public discourse. This puts slashers in the opposition to these discourses, which resembles the same notion of national treason that dissidents were casually accused of. This brings us to some conclusions about the possible sexual resistance in contemporary Russia. Homophobic public discourse (with government on the head of it) attempts to shut down all kinds of visible opposition, and perhaps, such underground rebellion that pretends to be apolitical, pretends to be just a fan culture, is one of the most powerful ways of resistance that those, who feel the need to protest, can resort to. That is why during the empirical part of my research I have moved from the term fan culture to subculture, due to the persistent usage of it by my

respondents. After the review of the terms I came to a conclusion that fan culture doesn't actually grasp the diversity of slash's functions, the influence it has on its members and the significance it presents to social structure. Slash fiction community in Russia provides simultaneously a site for non-heteronormative creativity and considerable psychological support for its members. It differs from similar communities in other countries, since here it does not oppose particular homophobic or extremely heteronormative individuals, but an elaborated state and societal regime of an aggressive homophobia.

The results of my project show that slash fiction in Russia is a form of infrapolitical, hidden sexual resistance, performed (predominantly) by a group of subaltern in the Russian society – women (but also all the people interested in imaginary male homosexuality). It's a way to exercise power and express an opinion, which is habitually omitted by powerholders – heterosexual males, homosexual males, governmental structures, human rights and LGBT-organizations, etc. A notable number of slashers are queer (homosexual, bisexual, gender-switch, identifying as males etc.), and slash fiction in their opinion was the key factor prompting them accept their sexuality or gender identity. There are few virtual and real communities in contemporary Russia where queer women don't experience discrimination and are able to share their opinions and works of art, whether they are formed in texts or visuals. Slash fiction is not just non-accidental, but highly necessary, as a plane for a non-heteronormative discourse.

The results I obtained highlight specific features of the community and views of particular Russian slashers, however, there are some questions and fields for future research that are unanswered and unexplored. For instance, I didn't go into details about the balance between slash and femslash, didn't explore the reasons behind the low popularity of the latter. I have also omitted the process, which determined Russian fandoms (based on Russian movies/books) to be relatively undeveloped, unlike their American and British versions. All

these questions were going beyond the scope of my project and have different focus, but nevertheless are highly important for the understanding of the community to the full extend. I believe, my findings and conclusions were considerably influences by these limitations and narrowed my view on the community, presented it as a more homogenous and probably, more simplistic than it really is.

My project demonstrates how resistance could be seen in forms that are hidden from public discourse; how it can be performed by subaltern social groups, and despite its invisibility, remain significant and influential. My respondents suppose that while slash fiction could originally be a mere fan culture, in Russia it must be considered a different category, it must be considered political. My project offers to broad the understanding of notions, regarded as political, and to rethink the impact of virtual communities on attitudes toward gender and sexuality. I argue that virtuality and anonymity of the global network allows the existence and development of communities like slash in countries, where otherwise a possibility of their appearance would be improbable. These communities create a distinctive space for establishing new norms and opening more discussions on debatable subjects like sexuality. My main argument is that slash community is far from being a minor side-effect of media production, in Russia it is a form of contemporary online sexual dissidence, a way of confronting the hegemonic structure of aggressive sexual normativity and subverting the moralistic, nationalistic and religious public discourse.

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