

**Makeover Television in Russia:
Imagining Queer Through Post-Soviet Aphasia**

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Abstract

Through the analysis of the 2012 episode of the beauty makeover program *Fashion Verdict* (*Modnyi Prigovor*), Channel One (Pervyi Kanal), that features two lesbian women as participants and makes over one of them into a conventionally feminine woman, this thesis argues against oversimplifying interpretations of this show as homophobic. Drawing, theoretically, on the concept of queer visibility, the thesis argues that the ‘queer’ makeover episode should be seen from within the post-Soviet historical, political and cultural context due to the specificities of multiple cultural forces working in the post-Soviet discursive field, including the field of sexuality. In the context of the laws prohibiting the ‘propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations’ among minors passed in several Russian regions by 2012, the airing of the episode cannot be explained without discussing the work of some key media actors on Channel One, including CEO Konstantin Ernst, as it allows to see the *Fashion Verdict* episode in a perspective.

Through the critical discourse analysis of the episode, the thesis claims that the show is offering its queer participants strategies of survival in an increasingly homophobic environment by means of adjusting their appearance to the norms of conventional femininity. These strategies, it is argued, are embedded in the Soviet discursive fields of queer experience and thus constitute what Serguei Oushakine has called post-Soviet aphasia. Post-Soviet aphasia offers a way of understanding how the post-Soviet subjects, due to the lack of a new discourse, are making sense of the dramatically changing reality drawing on the familiar discursive tools taken from a Soviet cultural period. The show deploys Soviet visual and discursive strategies of articulating queer lived experience, and offers them as a way of survival in the Putin regime, which strives to exclude non-heterosexuals from the nation’s physical and political well-being. The show, however, redefines the nation and invites the queer subjects to join the national project through the symbolic figure of the Child, discursively framed as the lesbian participant’s future baby.

Declaration of original research and the word count

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

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Signed _____ (*Olga Kazakevich*)

(Signature appears on the hard copy submitted to the library)

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Introduction

On August 29th 2012, the beauty makeover program *Fashion Verdict* (*Modnyi Prigovor*¹) on Channel One on Russian national television aired an episode entitled “The case of Tania and Natasha” (*Delo o Tane i Natashe*, 2012). The episode presented two women guests, Tania and Natasha, who said that they had been a couple for nine years and were planning to have a baby soon. Tania, a 35-year-old freelance photographer wearing mostly pants and overalls, was brought to the show by her partner Natasha who critiqued her for not wearing skirts and dresses and for being not feminine and mature enough. By the end of the show, Tania was transformed into an exemplar of conventional femininity. Throughout the program, the friendly and benevolent attitude of the TV presenters towards the lesbian participants was in remarkable contrast with the regular ways of treating makeover participants in makeover programs in general and in *Fashion Verdict* in particular.

The show caused an immediate response in the media: gay and lesbian websites reacted to it in short entries with different kind of responses: from a critique to celebration (LGBT-Grani, 2012; *V programme “Modnyi Prigovor” pokazali lesbiiskuiu paru*, 2012). On the opposite end, on August 30, 2012, the Orthodox information agency “The Russian Line” (*Russkaia Liniia*) published a letter signed by Yurii Bondarenko, president of the *Vozvraschenie Foundation*, in which he demanded that Konstantin Ernst’s contract as the CEO of Channel One should be terminated because of his attempt to “demolish the cultural code of Russia” (*razrushit’ kul’turnyi kod Rossii*) and “turn Russia into a tolerant Western society” (*prevratit’ Rossiia v tolerantnoe zapadnoie obshchestvo*) (Bondarenko, 2012). Although there has been no official reaction to the letter from Channel One, two days later the video was deleted from its

¹ Throughout the thesis, I have adhered to the Library of Congress transliteration system.

official website as well as from YouTube (yet the video can be still found on the official website of the program).

What is striking here is that the episode was aired in the period of very intense debates around (homo)sexuality in Russia. To give a few examples, by August 2012, a number of regional laws against so called “propaganda of homosexuality” to minors passed in several regions in Russia, including Saint Petersburg, and a year after resulted in the federal law (Kondakov, 2014). The Pussy Riot trial took place in the summer of 2012 and their performance was widely discussed in terms of their feminist and LGBT-agenda both in Russia and abroad (Sperling, 2014a; Turbine, 2013). In Putin’s rhetoric, the discussion of homosexuality tended to be reduced to the issues of national security in which ‘non-traditional sexual orientation’ was considered a ‘weapon’ from the West (Mole, 2014). In addition, the overall shift of the mainstream official discourse to ‘traditional values’ (Muravyeva, 2014; Wilkinson, 2014) could not be seen as welcoming a positive representation of queer² people; in fact, the cultural context for featuring lesbians on national television could barely have been worse. At the same time, the reaction to the program from LGBT-people in Russia has been mostly critical: it has been argued that the show plays out a heterosexual script, makes lesbian women invisible and is, thus, overtly homophobic (see Lesburi.com, 2012).

The main research questions that guide my analysis are: (1) How can the emergence of such a program within the homophobic contemporary mainstream discourse be explained? (2)

² When addressing female homosexuality, I will be using the term *lesbian* and *queer* interchangeably when referring to women desiring women. I realize that the term *queer* does present some challenges, especially when applied to non-heterosexual identities from the non-Western contexts. Yet, as I shall elaborate in this chapter, homosexuality, historically, is not conceived of as identity in post-socialist countries hence the adoption of the terms ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ seems no more justifiable than the application of the term ‘queer’. Their interchangeability is further underscored by Mizielińska and Kulpa (2011), who contend that the post-Soviet space of the non-West exists in a different, ‘knotted’ temporality. So, keeping in mind all these challenges as well as the academic tradition in post-Soviet sexuality studies, for the purposes of my study I will be using both *lesbian* and *queer* when referring to women desiring women for the sake of brevity and intelligibility. It is important to stress that neither term refers to sexual identity but rather to sexual practice. When citing other authors, I will be using the terms they employ in their research.

What discourses are deployed in this makeover program and why? and (3) What kind of ideological work does the program perform? The argument I am presenting in this thesis is that the show should be read as a cultural product bringing the Other (queers) to the space of normalcy and providing its queer viewers with the strategies of coping with the increasingly precarious conditions in contemporary Russia. As such, it must be situated not only within the makeover discourse in which the genre originated, but also within the media politics of Channel One in which it has been aired as well as within a broader political, social and cultural context of post-Soviet Russia and its specific history of queer visibility.

Theoretically, I draw on Serguei Oushakine (2000) concept of post-Soviet aphasia – the concept that allows to understand the attempts of post-Soviet subjects to make sense of the collapsing reality that undergoes dramatic structural changes (as was the case with the fall of the Soviet bloc). Due to the lack of discourse to articulate the new emerging Symbolic order, the only instruments they have are those rooted in the previous discursive field. Applying this concept to the makeover program, I show how what might be considered regressive and homophobic from the Western perspective, is, in fact, ‘empowering’ and ‘liberating’ if looked at from within the specific history of Russian and Soviet sexuality. In other words, this show represents a gap in a seemingly cohesive narrative of state homophobia articulated through state-controlled media.

My research is embedded in feminist and queer scholarship as well as in post-Soviet studies. It brings those bodies of literature into conversation informed by the critical postsocialist perspective that questions and challenges presumed Western hegemony in defining and measuring ‘success’ and ‘progressiveness’ of non-Western queer politics according to ‘universally’ applicable Western norms. I problematize the universality of concepts such as visibility, and stress “the importance of interpreting the present in terms of *both* change and continuity with the socialist past” (Stella, 2015, p. 135, italics in the original).

The thesis is structured as follows: in Chapter 1, I first provide a background to the history of homosexuality and its relation to the political climate in contemporary Russia, as homosexuality in post-Soviet Russia must be understood in relation to the Soviet moral discourse on gender and sexuality. Then I move to situating my analysis in current academic debates around the politics of visibility, vulnerability and precarity. In the last section of this chapter, I examine the particular examples of queer visibility in Russia in the beginning and the mid-2000s, and look at the consequences of this new visibility for queer subjects. In Chapter 2, I locate the ‘queer’ makeover episode within the post-Soviet media landscape by looking, first, at the media politics of Channel One; second, at the recontextualization of the makeover genre on Russian television and, third, at how this recontextualization has affected *Fashion Verdict*. Throughout the chapter, I pay particular attention to how the Soviet narratives are mobilized on today’s Russian television and what purposes they serve. Finally, in Chapter 3 the analysis of the makeover episode is presented, in which I examine the manifestations of queer precarity and how they are suggested to be self-governed. Through the framework of visibility, I focus on the symbolic sites in which the debate on safety is played out, as well as at the rearticulation of the nation within the makeover so that the lesbians could be included.

Chapter 1. Queer (In)Visibility

The main goal of this chapter is to situate my analysis in current academic debates around the visibility of queer subjects in different social and political contexts to locate my ultimate concern with the conditions of appearance of the ‘lesbian’ on the mainstream cultural landscape of popular television in the 21st century post-Soviet Russia. For this purpose, I introduce and discuss the analytical categories on which I draw my analysis of *Fashion Verdict*, namely visibility, vulnerability, and precarity. Then, I briefly outline the political, social and cultural context of contemporary Russia, and look at the meanings around those concepts in a non-Western context. Finally, in light of this theoretical framework I examine the politics of representations of queer women in post-Soviet popular culture.

1.1 Queers’ Condition under Putin’s Biopolitical Turn

The problem of homosexuality in post-Soviet Russia cannot be understood separately from the Soviet moral discourse on gender and sexuality that still informs the current discourse (Baer, 2013). Male homosexuality was criminalized in Soviet Russia (decriminalization happened in 1993 while female homosexuality, being considered a disease, not a crime, was subject to cure in mental institutions (Essig, 1999).

Homosexuality was conceived as deviant, infectious, and dangerous, and this way of perceiving it had a lot to do with the Gulag prison system which a majority of Russians had an experience with either directly or indirectly (Baer, 2013). In Gulag, the disgust over homosexuality was used amongst the inmates as an important tool to keep an *intelligentsia* identity safe and dignified. That is, it was crucial to demonstrate the affective disgust over the allegedly vulgar, overtly sexualized homosexual for the heterosexual inmate to distinguish

oneself as an educated political prisoner, a member of the intelligentsia. Homosexuality evoked associations with brutality, violence and power hierarchies in Soviet prisons.

As Baer (2013) concludes, Soviet cultural imagination offered no grounds “for the representation of homosexuality as an identity, as a stable subject position through which one might assume a voice in the Russian public sphere” (p. 38). Homosexual identity as political identity did not form, mainly because “under the Soviet regime, identity was not a major organizer of social and political actions” and “few persons felt the need to engage in the endless process of publicly self-identifying, in part because few identities were publicly “allowed” in Soviet Russia” (Essig, 1999, p. 56). Toward and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a moment, as Laurie Essig (1999) writes, when different public identities began to emerge, and even the ‘Russian Stonewall’ was expected to happen as well as an LGBT movement, but this mass movement on the basis of sexual identity never happened. Sexual practices, thus, did not form fixed identities but rather ‘free-floating subjectivities’ (Essig, 1999, p. 125). What it means is that there has been no basis for organizing and making political claims. Indeed, after decriminalization that was imposed from above, not demanded from below, “same-sex sexualities have been largely tolerated if discreet and confined to the private sphere, and on condition that sexual subjects do not become political subjects” (Stella, 2015, p. 41).

Historically and politically conditioned, the erasure of homosexual visibility from a spectrum of identities now serves as a tool of performing post-Soviet Russian identity vis-à-vis the global Western Other. In fact, the very comparison “of the material(istic) West vs. the spiritual East” goes deep into Soviet history (Oushakine, 2000, p. 1004). It was established as common sense assumption that “collective behavior—at least for the Soviet population—was preferable to the greed-driven, Western capitalist ideal that lauded individual success” (Sperling, 2014b, p. 64). Everything connected to the images of individual success, not to mention individual rights, was perceived as a threat for the Soviet political system.

Yet, this Soviet homosexual non-identity, through the means of disgust it evoked, keeps assisting in post-Soviet Russian identity building. It explains the lack of affiliation with gay rights politics among Russian politicians and, broadly, among “educated Russians in their rejection of gay activism as somehow uncultured, vulgar” (Baer, 2013, p. 48). In today’s rhetoric, the figure of the vulgar Soviet homosexual (even though there was no political identity of a homosexual, there was the figure of the homosexual functioning in the Soviet cultural imagination) has been replaced by the Western one, but the purpose this disgust serves today is pretty much the same – namely, to help perform Russian classed identity against the vulgar Western gay. In other words, what plays a key role in the production of Russian identity is the elimination of homosexuality as a political identity because gayness and Russianness are profoundly incompatible (Baer, 2013). A variety of Soviet and pre-Soviet cultural scripts are mobilized in this process, which demonstrate “traditional Russian ambivalence over the place of individuality and sexual pleasure in the public sphere” (Baer, 2013, p. 50). And yet, as one can see, non-heterosexuality serves as a platform against which to perform post-Soviet Russian identity, and therefore is essential for nation building. However, the main binary is not “gay versus straight (...) but rather Russian, imagined as universal, spiritual, and intellectual, versus Western, imagined as egotistical, materialistic and vulgar” (ibid.).

The anti-Western rhetoric has been recently intensified within what has been called a biopolitical turn in post-Soviet Russian politics. Andrey Makarychev and Sergei Medvedev (2015) use this concept to refer to the shift towards traditionalism in Putin’s third term as president. Drawing on the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics as a set of strategies aimed at regulating human beings as species (for example, through the domains of sexuality, health, birthrate, mortality), they suggest that the shift towards traditionalism in Russian politics started in May 2012 with the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s third term of presidency and is exemplified in a number of state initiatives adopted to regulate and discipline human bodies, including the

infamous anti-gay propaganda law prohibiting the so called ‘propaganda’ of ‘non-traditional sexual relations’ among minors (Federal’nyi zakon, 2013), the anti-adoption law prohibiting the adoption of Russian children by US citizens (Federal’nyi zakon, 2012), and a number of other legislative initiatives.

These and other examples of the biopolitical turn mark “the extension of state sovereignty into the private lives of citizens, and is part of the authoritarian drift of the Russian political regime that marks its definitive rupture with the international standards of human rights” (Makarychev & Medvedev, 2015, p. 46). Since 2012, Makarychev and Medvedev argue, the moralizing biopolitical turn has intensified the anti-West rhetoric, allowing space to present Russia as a country of moral standing with ‘traditional values’ as opposed to the ‘tolerant’ and (therefore) disgusting West. This biopolitical turn, they argue, is about the nature and boundaries of Russian political community, through which the ideological conditions of belonging are articulated. The key element in the debate of belonging is necessarily the figure of the other – in this case, the West – against which the safety of boundaries should be maintained. As they write, “biopolitical discourses – different interpretations of the whole set of relationships between the state and human beings – are at the core of the Russian identity-making narrative contrasting a positively “conservative Russia” with a supposedly malign “liberal West”” (p. 50).

This 2012 biopolitical turn, of course, did not happen out of nowhere. It was a result of continuing political efforts since the mid-2000s, and this shift to ‘traditional’ values and the conservative rhetoric has been widely discussed in academic circles (Sperling, 2014b; Zhurzhenko, 2004). Moreover, the anti-Western rhetoric also can be found in Putin’s political speeches from the beginning of his political career. As Alexandra Novitskaya (2017) shows in her analysis of two Putin’s national addresses from 1999 and 2013, this tendency towards juxtaposition of Russia and the West has always been present in his politics. As early as in

1999, in a speech that was called *Millennium Manifesto*, Putin proffers a way of ‘making Russia great again’ through “a renewed social unity based on the ‘traditional Russian values’ of patriotism, social solidarity, statism, and the belief in Russia’s role as a great global power” (p. 7). The speech delivered in 2013 at the Valdai Discussion Club (the club established as a space for a dialogue between Russian and international intellectuals) continued Putin’s rhetorical tradition of presenting Russia as a defender of morals and had as its purpose to outline once again the new imaginary geopolitical boundaries. Even though in the latter speech, the ideas expressed in the *Millennium Manifesto* continued to be articulated, a new feature appeared: Russia’s exceptionalism has been fully confirmed. In light of more and more prominent achievements for LGBT people in the West, Russia, according to Putin, from now on must be seen a keeper of traditional Christian values (p. 9).

The Valdai Address is especially striking in regard to the use of emotional rhetoric and helps explore the discursive shift in the rendering of Russia in opposition to the West. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s theory of political life of emotions, Novitskaya (2017) traces how “[Putin’s] speech ‘sticks’ the positive emotions of love, pride, and strength onto the notions of the nation, national identity, national history, collectivism, and patriotism”, while “‘degradation’, ‘primitivism’, and ‘profound moral crisis’ are figures of Putin’s speech that (...) ‘stick’ to the Western values in general and end up ‘displaced’ in the non-heterosexual Russians” (p. 10). Russian queer people thus are the figure of the ultimate other, completely excluded from Putin’s vision of the nation, as they exemplify everything associated with the image of a threatening West, which, retroactively is to legitimize the 2013 law banning the ‘propaganda’ of ‘non-traditional sexual orientations’.

1.2 Critical Engagements with Queer Visibility

Having outlined the contemporary Russia' political and social context, I now turn to the specific configurations of the politics of visibility. In many postsocialist contexts, unlike the USA, queer visibility did not enable queer activism, and the politics of queer visibility has very different functions and effects on contemporary postsocialist societies (Fejes & Balogh, 2013, p. 3). I will first attend to the ways in which Western feminist and queer scholarship has conceptualized the notion of visibility, and then come back to the post-Soviet context to address the workings and effects of visibility in a specific non-Western frame. However, by doing so I do not imply that the 'West' should or do serve here as a norm according to which the progressiveness of others on the scale of queer advancements should be measured. My intention is simply to reflect on the fact that even though non-Western queer politics are conditioned by specific sets of political, social, cultural and historical circumstances, it is unreasonable to deny the influence of Western, mainly American, queer politics on non-Western countries.

Drawing on the works of Rosemary Hennessy, Lisa Walker, Sabine Fuchs, and Judith Butler, I have identified three angles through which to explore the concept of lesbian (in)visibility. The first one is visibility as political agency; the second one is visibility as a matter of epistemology; while the third one is concerned with visibility as the framing of the visual(ity), and will be explored through the engagement with lesbian appearance.

Visibility as an analytical tool presents a set of challenges, even though in Western epistemology visibility is tied to political agency and hence rendered progressive and empowering. The issue of visibility has been a political one from the very beginning of Western LGBT movements, where fighting for visibility meant fighting for recognition and served as a ground for empowering and civil rights claims, argues Rosemary Hennessy (1994). The main point about visibility as a strategy of identity politics until the 1990s was privileging and

celebrating visual signifiers of (sexualized) difference: what once made people subjects of discrimination, now is celebrated and becomes a ground for claims for inclusion in social justice. Similarly, contends Lisa Walker (1993), in academic debates, visibility has become conceptualized as “the locus of political agency because of its potential to deconstruct foundational categories of identity such as race, gender, and desire” (p. 868).

Meanings of visibility have changed after the shift from LGBT-activism with its focus on visibility as a claim for inclusion and belonging, to queer activism with its claim on challenging the normative. Western queer activism was twofold in terms of its relationship with the idea of visibility: it tried to make nonheteronormative identities visible, but not in order for them to be included in the normative (as LGBT-activism did) but in order to challenge the normativity granted through naturalizing who/what is *allowed* to appear on mainstream cultural and political landscapes altogether (Hennessy, 1994). So, the aim was to simultaneously render visible both non-heteronormative subjects and practices and the heteronormative social order itself. Those strategies of queer activism did not go without critique though: for Hennessy, even if the increase in queer visibility is a result of the activists’ political fight, now for her this visibility in the West is tied to commodification, it is about money and cultural capital rather than about liberation (Hennessy, 1994). In her critique of the Queer Nation activist group’s strategy of queering public spaces, especially through their interventions to the heterosexually organized production of desire in late capitalism, her main concern is that “disclosing the invisible heterosexual meanings invested in commodities... is a very limited strategy of resistance” (Hennessy, 1994, p. 53). This kind of resistance is highly questionable for her, as it cannot actually *queer* the capitalist heteronormative order, but instead only reduces social change to the issues of cultural representation of particular lesbian bodies. It is a strategy that does not challenge the privileged position of commodity in late capitalism, but rather works

towards its reinforcement since as a “cultural signifier, the commodity remains securely fetishized” (Hennessy, 1994, p. 52).

Sabine Fuchs (2002) also insists that visibility should be understood as knowability but she takes issue with how visibility is only applied to the realm of the visual per se, which can be problematic when, as in the case of the femme lesbian, the visual display of the body does not provide any clues about her non-heterosexuality. What Hennessy refers to as ‘frames of knowing’ thus conditions what can be seen; and that which can be seen, in turn, becomes a ground for recognition, which depends on the system of visual codes that can be recognized: ““recognizability,” the presence of codings, is restricted to “visibility,” visual representation” (Fuchs, 2002, p. 44). In other words, Fuchs is preoccupied with problems that arise from the usage of the term visibility in identity politics, when the insistence on visibility implies ‘being out’, but in practice visibility is reduced to the visual signs of difference (ibid.).

Along similar lines, Lisa Walker (1993) in her critique on how the concept of visibility is used for political reasoning suggests that as long as certain signs of difference, or signifiers, are politically charged and valued as signs of resistance, others that do not conform to the call of subversion are not recognized as signs of difference whatsoever. According to this politics of visibility then, the butch lesbian is to be appreciated due to her ‘visible’ subversive potential, while the femme is rendered once again invisible and her style is “perceived as expressive of her subjection to heterosexual definitions of femininity” (p. 883).

To sum up, in the Western epistemological regime, visibility works according to the established systems of codings that have to be enacted and identified in the visual display of the body in order to be (self-)recognized as conventional or subversive/transgressive political signifiers of difference. Analytically, then, the concept of visibility can be useful only in so far as one understands its limits and the exclusionary work it does. Otherwise, there is a danger of naturalization and reiteration of hierarchies (Fuchs, 2002, p. 48).

In case of Russia, the silence around homosexuality in the mainstream discourse of the Soviet times resulted in a situation in which, in the 1990s, a new queer visibility in fact was conceived of as a new, alien, phenomenon for the country. Furthermore, this allegedly new phenomenon got a name – ‘non-traditional sexual orientation’, which reinforced the alienation (Stella, 2015). In short, the new visibility of non-heterosexual subjects not only did not serve purposes of empowerment, but was rather a constant source of fears, anxieties, and uneasiness, once associated with political demands (ibid.). Elaborating on the current discursive regime on homosexuality in Russia, Baer (2009) observes that the time when post-Soviet queers gained a relative liberation and visibility coincided with the chaotic times after the collapse of the Soviet block and loss of Russia’s self-understanding as superpower which became discursively framed as a crisis of hegemonic masculinity. The relations between the increasing queer visibility and the crisis of masculinity did appear as relations of causality in a public imagination (Baer, 2009, p. 10). In his work on gay visibility in post-Soviet Russia, Baer addresses the issues of (in)visibility through historicizing and contextualizing the very politics of vision that renders something visible/invisible. Baer argues that, paradoxically, in Soviet Russia homosexuality once visible was a problem because it was perceived as a threat to the social order, yet when invisible it was no less of a problem: Post-Soviet Russia has a unique ‘politics of vision’ where “homosexuality is construed as a threat to established values and identities both because it is too visible and because it is potentially invisible” (Baer, 2013, p. 39). In this paranoid logic, the threat is there in either case, be homosexuality visible or invisible. Referring to the Russian gay ‘propaganda’ law, Baer points out that the paranoid fear of gay invisibility requires that homosexuality must be in constant control in order to be made visible.

The specificity of Russian context is, as history demonstrates, probably that the concept of queer visibility operates according to a different logic, in which visibility leads not to empowerment but to backlash and anti-queer measures on the state’s side. These particular

political conditions expose the link between visibility, vulnerability and precarity. For example, far-reaching consequences of the recent ‘gay propaganda’ law include, among other things, the growing vulnerability of particular social groups, such as HIV-positive Russians and non-heterosexual children (Novitskaya, 2017). However, while in Russia, there are no official data about the living conditions of LGBT people, the statistics provided by the Russian LGBT-network (Dubrovskii & Kozlovskaiia, 2013) suggests that, for example, more than 27% of gay and bisexual men have experienced hate crimes, which means that the violent effects of the law are not limited to HIV-positive people and non-heterosexual children.

Moreover, in 2013 activists from the group AΓOPA pointed out that there was a noticeable shift in a number of hate crime reports. LGBT victims of hate crimes refuse to report the crime. According to AΓOPA, if previously the main reason was a fear of coming out, recently it has changed, and now the main reasons include the refusal of the police to accept the report about the crime, improper police work with the report, illegitimate refusal of instituting criminal proceedings, and improper categorization of the actions of the suspects (Dubrovskii & Kozlovskaiia, 2013).

Increasing precarity is shared by all queer Russians as an effect of what Judith Butler (1990) calls normative violence. The concept of normative violence refers, among other things, exactly to such cases, when the state institutions refuse to engage properly with hate crimes because homophobia is an officially imposed discourse. Normative violence refers to the violence of the norms themselves and “both enables the typical physical violence that we routinely recognise and simultaneously erases such violence from our ordinary view” (Chambers & Carver, 2008, p. 76). As Michael Warner (1993) points out in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*,

[E]very person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and

national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. (p. xiii)

What he lists here are exactly the examples of normative violence performed by heterosexuality. To put it differently, those forms of violence are results of precarity as a political arrangement, and precariousness as a shared socio-ontological mode of being in contemporary neoliberal capitalism (Lorey, 2015). The concept of precarity has been introduced as an analytical category that captures a refusal to “accept contemporary forms of living” (McCormack & Salmenniemi, 2016, p. 6). In these modes of living neoliberal biopolitical governmentality operates through rendering particular groups of population less ‘deserving’ protection and security than the others (Lorey, 2015). Unevenly distributed across the population, precarity mostly targets those who are in a position of not being able to cope with neoliberal conditions; in other words, precarity must be seen as a tool of domination that works through othering and involves certain arrangements of insecurity (ibid.). The difference that Butler’s (2015) approach makes is her move to link precarity with vulnerability directly, theorizing a state of vulnerability as exposure to politically imposed conditions of physical and other forms of violence which constitute precarity. She argues that those who have always been designated for precarious conditions are the poor, the homeless, stateless, people with disabilities, racial and religious minorities, and gender and sexual minorities, “who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment, pathologization, and violence” (p. 34).

1.3 Politics of Visibility: Imagining Queer in Post-Soviet Popular Culture

In this section, I provide a brief overview of the lesbian visibility in post-Soviet popular culture. My focus will be on the local products rather than on the proliferation of Western ones, yet, as

Anikó Imre (2013) argues, it is rather difficult, and, moreover, not always necessary, to distinguish between the global and local images in the postsocialist cultural arena, as they are “always in the process of foregrounding and rendering artificial the boundaries between the two” (p. 224). They are intertwined and overlapping, and thus must be seen as ‘glocal’ practices of representation, constituting new glocal postsocialist media economies.

The main arena for the emergence of lesbian visibility in the beginning of 2000s was a local music scene. Remarkably, the establishment of the lesbian scene within Russian popular culture in the early 2000s was rather a result of the work of local actors than a direct effect of the artists and audiences’ encounter with Western cultural hegemony. For example, the well-known TV drama *The L Word* was broadcast on Russian MTV in 2005-2006, when lesbianism as a political identity has been more or less established, or at least introduced to the general public mainly through the performances of lesbian pop- and rock-singers, such as Zemfira, Mara, Nochnye Snaipery, Tatu, Butch. Yet this visibility did not mark the beginning of identity politics – it just provided room for identification for those audiences who understood the codes (Stella, 2015).

Wiedlack and Neufeld (2015) argue that the process of gaining lesbian visibility in mainstream Russian culture started around 1999 and continued till around 2006 when the music and music videos produced by lesbian identified or lesbian coded female artists created a space for the articulation of lesbian desire. Coupled with a heated public debate on homosexuality, it resulted in the establishment of lesbianism as political identity. Artists such as Zemfira, Nochnye Snaipery, Butch, and Tatu all contributed to the legitimation of lesbianism within popular imagination through the rearticulation of the image of the lesbian as a criminal or deviant (the legacy of the Soviet rhetoric on female homosexuality). Not only did they explicitly use in their work their own gender non-conformity in physical appearance, but they also made use of topics evoking lesbian desire in their lyrics and video clips. What allowed this, Wiedlack

and Neufeld (2015) suggest, was the absence of lesbianism as political identity (unlike in the West), and hence an indifference from the authorities, and disparaging yet indulgent attitude of the mainstream audience. However, by 2006, the increasingly homophobic state rhetoric along with the established visibility of lesbian artists as well as lesbian audiences, made it impossible for the artists to sustain the same openness, and forced many of them to renounce their lesbian identification (if any).

Over these few years, lesbian visibility brought about by popular culture led to lesbian *recognizability* (although not *recognition*). Russians finally learned the word, the cultural codes and the reality associated with it. This is a paradoxical story of queer visibility in post-Soviet Russia. Unlike in the West, it was not a result of activist and academic struggle. Instead, queer visibility has appeared through the channels of popular culture, and then, once it was considered a threat in the mainstream political discourse, it was relatively easily erased in a centrally controlled media industry (Wiedlack and Neufeld, 2015).

The specific situation of queer visibility in contemporary Russia forces us to rethink the progressivist rhetoric behind the allegedly universal Western causality *visibility – recognition – rights*. In fact, even the fact that the state at some point might have recognized lesbianism as a sexual identity, did not, as Russian history of representation politics shows, result in political recognition and granting rights. As the case with the lesbian coded pop-duo *Tatu* demonstrates, lesbianism was mobilized strategically for political purposes and served very particular state interests, yet no political gains for queer subjects have been achieved.

Established in 1999 of two fourteen-year-old girls Yulia Volkova and Lena Katina, the duo became the largest Russian success on the international music scene (Heller, 2007). The band, whose name in Russian means “та [любит] ту” (this one [girl] loves that one [girl]), performed explicit teenage lesbian desire on stage and in their music videos. Their first album, *200 по встречной*, was released in Russia in 2001, followed by the English language version,

200 km/h in the Wrong Lane, in 2002. In 2003, when the duo was selected to represent the Russian Federation at the Eurovision Song Contest, it was clear that the state took the contest seriously enough to nominate Tatu in spite of their by that time well-known inclination to break the rules of ‘normal’ behavior both on and off stage as well as their typical “tendency to mock the presumed cultural hegemony of the West, as well as the social and spiritual health of the countries that sought to sanitise the teen group’s image” (Heller, 2007, p. 198).

Nevertheless, it is crucial to keep in mind that Tatu’s lesbianism has never been taken seriously in Russia where they did not even hide that they are ‘normal’ girls with boyfriends (Heller, 2007). In the West, on the contrary, this lesbian fleur was taken seriously (Cassiday, 2014; Heller, 2007; Miazhevich, 2010), which in turn was used by the band and its producers to test and mock the boundaries of assumed Western progressiveness and openness when it came to the issues of sexuality. As such, the pop duo exposed the limits of Western acceptance of homosexuality, allegedly proving it hypocritical and false – for example, when some Western media refused to provide space for Tatu performance because it allegedly promoted child pornography, or ‘censure’ the girls’ behavior on stage due to the same reason. In Tatu’s Eurovision performance, “Russia’s fundamentally ambivalent eye on Europe would match a European gaze that at once desired and disparaged Russia’s t.A.T.u.” (p. 201).

It is also instructive to note that Volkova and Katina were invited and accepted the invitation to take part in the opening ceremony of the Sochi 2014 Olympics as a message for the West that gay rights are not under threat in Russia despite the recently adopted law against homosexual propaganda. Interestingly, the producer of the opening ceremony was Konstantin Ernst, the CEO of Channel One that broadcasts the ‘queer’ episode of *Fashion Verdict*. He made a decision to use Tatu’s famous song *Nas Ne Dogoniat* (Not Gonna Get Us) for the opening performance (Ernst, 2014). What is even more interesting, both events caused some indignation among Russian conservatives. In case of *Fashion Verdict*, the foundation

Vozvrashchenie wrote a letter demanding to fire Ernst for “a direct propaganda of homosexuality as an alternative to the traditional family and traditional way of being” (Bondarenko, 2012). In case with the Sochi Olympics, conservative Russian parents (All-Russian Parent Gathering, *Vserossiiskoe Roditelskoe Sobranie*) circulated a letter with the demand for Ernst to leave the office on the same grounds – that he has engaged in propaganda of homosexuality (*Rossiiskie roditeli vystupili protiv poiavleniia gruppy Tatu na Olimpiade*, 2014). In both cases Ernst ignored the letters. In the next chapter I will elaborate on role of Konstantin Ernst’s media politics as the CEO of Channel One and as a powerful cultural intermediary.

Now, having established my theoretical perspective, I would like to establish my methodological framework. To explore the workings of queer visibility in the post-Soviet context, I will conduct a critical discourse analysis of the program. As Norman Fairclough (2003) argues, communication is only possible in so far as it is grounded on shared meanings, and each statement is made meaningful on the horizon of intelligibility as it is articulated out of a dialectic of said and unsaid but assumed utterances. To establish the horizon of intelligibility, I build several interpretive contexts necessary to explore the meanings produced in the program. The concept of interpretive context “refers to the social setting in which a particular discourse is located” (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 249). Drawing on this, the first interpretive context I am building in this thesis is the one of the academic discourse on queer visibility; the second one is the context of contemporary Russia with its specific history of queer visibility and the current state rhetoric around homosexuality; the third interpretive context is the one of makeover television as a particular genre with its own conventions and logic, as well as with the changes occurred on the move from the West, where the genre originated, to Russia. Furthermore, by deploying the ideological analysis of television, I am particularly interested in

sites in which “the expression even of dominant ideology necessarily includes tensions and contradictions” (White, 1992, p. 179).

Chapter 2. Media Landscapes in Post-Soviet Russia

In order to fully understand the functioning of the ‘queer’ episode of *Fashion Verdict* in the current Russian discursive regime, one needs to situate it within the contemporary Russian media landscape. For this purpose, I first briefly outline how television in Russia has changed since the demise of the Soviet Union and what the political, economic, social and cultural conditions of its operation are now. In the second section of this chapter, I discuss the cultural phenomenon of makeover television, mainly in terms of its conceptualization in the Western scholarship, and move to the discussion of the recontextualization of the makeover genre on Russian television. I zoom in then on *Fashion Verdict* in particular. As the postsocialist perspective I draw on in this study requires looking at the postsocialist in its complex interconnectedness and dialogue with, as well as change from, the socialist past (Stella, 2015), I will look at these changes and continuities both in terms of the media market and media politics in post-Soviet Russia, and in terms of Soviet experiences, narratives and anxieties played out in the contemporary Russian media. The latter, indeed, to a large extent engages – even if unwittingly – with the symbolic structures from the Soviet past.

2.1 Post-Soviet Television and Channel One: Moments of Disruption

In the USSR, all media (television, press, radio) were owned and ruled by the state. However, towards the end of the Soviet era, Michael Gorbachev implemented some reforms aimed at decreasing the Party control over the media (Mickiewicz, 2000). When Boris Yeltsin came to power, the change continued – first two private TV companies appeared, NTV and TV-6. By 1998, the Russia’s TV market had four key actors: ORT (which was renamed as Channel One) and RTR, both state-owned, and two private broadcasters NTV and TV-6 (Mickiewicz, 2000).

In terms of freedom of speech, the first post-Soviet years indeed brought about the crucial changes in the Russian media landscape by providing space for different opinions and voices, in other words by providing choice, and it is argued to be the main achievement of this period (Mickiewicz, 2000).

Those times of pluralism and relative freedom of press, however, did not last. When Putin came to power in 2000, he brought about a very distinct media politics by taking over the control over media (Oates, 2007). According to the Freedom House's report, "opposition parties were co-opted or marginalized, the leading television outlets were taken over by the state or loyalist businessmen, academic freedom was restricted, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were hemmed in by bureaucratic and legal obstacles, and the justice system was used to punish critics of the regime" (Puddington, n.d.). By the mid-2000s, television channels were owned either by the state itself or by state-owned companies, or by oligarchs close to the political establishment, which means that the state has been exercising either direct or indirect control over the media. In other words, the state has become the main actor on the Russian media market (Degtereva & Kiriya, 2010). As such, it exercises informal censorship – as officially censorship is forbidden by the Russian Constitution – over mass media. Even though officially censorship in Russia is forbidden by the Constitution, continuous Freedom House's reports confirm the abuse of power over media (for example, in 2015 the estimated freedom of press in Russia scored 83 out of 100, where 100 is the worst, see *Russia, Freedom of the press*, 2015). Studies based on anonymous interviews with key media actors show dependence of the media on Kremlin politics, dependence which is maintained through various instruments of pressure used by the Kremlin (Hutchings & Tolz, 2015; Naoumova et al., 2012; Oates, 2007).

Sarah Oates (2007) goes as far as to argue that Russia's current model of mass media can be described as a neo-Soviet one. She claims that now, under the Putin regime, the neo-Soviet model of mass media can help to conceptualize the nature of the contemporary media

sphere in relation to the Soviet past. In other words, it can help to explain the failure of the post-Soviet media to help build civil society. As she contends, democratic institutions have not developed in Russia, and what appears to be democratic institutions – media included – is, indeed, only appearance, not a content. Media do not function to provide a space for debate about crucial issues for Russian society but rather to voice the Kremlin agenda (Oates, 2007).

Oates's key argument is concerned with the function of the media audience within both Soviet and neo-Soviet models. She shows that in both cases, the audience is well aware of the nature of information products promoted by the media. The audience does know that the media content is biased and is built on the exclusion of the voices of political opposition as well as on the interpretation of the events that benefit the Kremlin. In short, the audience is critical of the information it receives via media (Oates, 2007; see also Mickiewicz, 2000). What is striking, however, is that both Soviet and post-Soviet audiences try to rationalize and justify this kind of media politics by governmental needs to keep the country going. In the Soviet era, what was valued most was not the content itself but the idea *behind* the content, and the idea was that the news should not simply describe but 'lead'. Oates writes, "The media sent a clear, unambiguous message about Soviet values, giving the audience a sense of contentment and pride in their society" (Oates, 2007, pp. 1295-1296). The continuity between the Soviet and post-Soviet audience's perception of the media content manifests itself in the fact that contemporary Russians "value the fundamental role of the media as an institution that guides (rather than questions or undermines) the nation" (Oates, 2007, p. 1296). The rationale behind this position is that the critique and challenges the media could present to the state are not desirable as they can lead to "instability and chaos, a view they often have of their experience under President Boris Yel'tsin" (ibid.). Another point Oates is making concerns the changes that did occur in the media environment after the breakup of the Soviet Union and how those changes mark her proposed model as 'neo'-Soviet. For her, those changes have to do with, first, new ways of

control over journalists, including direct harassment and violence, and, second, with the introduction of the market economy in post-Soviet Russia (Oates, 2007, p. 1297).

Even though I do not totally agree with Oates' uncritical use of such categories as 'democracy' or 'civil society', or with homogenization of the post-Soviet media landscape that runs the risk of applying her model as a self-explanatory tool, I do, however, appreciate the analytical possibilities the neo-Soviet media model offers. To name a few, it indeed opens up a space for engaging with the collective memory and habits of approaching state-controlled information. It also allows to trace down the continuity of the tradition of critical thinking and resistance to mainstream media narratives.

However, as I have already mentioned, this model runs the risk of totalization, namely that of applying the model for the sake of the model. In other words, it is assumed in advance that contemporary Russian media lack a democratic element and provide a totalizing state-defined mainstream discourse. The application of the neo-Soviet model simply aims at confirming those assumptions that it is meant to explain. Instead, what would be more epistemologically productive as well as more critical, is to look at the media discourse in all its complexity and heterogeneity, with all its ruptures and inconsistencies.

As Emil Persson (2015) rightly argues, the dominant media discourse is being constantly challenged by the alternative media that provide space of appearance for other, alternative, images and narratives. He bases his analysis on the ways in which those alternative media subvert the mainstream narrative about LGBT-issues. However, I would like to complicate matters even further and show that even *within* the mainstream homophobic media discourse there are inconsistencies and ruptures which can be conceived of as examples of media actors' agency. Persson shows how alternative media actors intervene into the dominant narrative; I will show how some actors mobilize counter-narrative from *within* the dominant one. I consider "The Case of Tania and Natasha" an example of such a rupture.

Indeed, a number of studies demonstrate that television in contemporary Russia is far more complex than it might seem (Beumers et al., 2009; Hutchings & Tolz, 2015; Persson, 2015). To begin with, the influential TV actors (management, presenters, journalists) have a sufficient amount of power to influence TV politics (Hutchings & Tolz 2015); sometimes it is a kind of politics that cannot be explained within the framework of self-censorship as it goes against the dominant discourse. The Kremlin undoubtedly has a power over the TV news agenda; yet, due to the lack of a guiding ideology there are also spaces of uncertainty and ambiguity in the ways in which Russian television operates and in the messages it generates (Beumers et al., 2009; Hutchings & Tolz, 2015). It can be applied mostly to the genres other than news and political talk-shows: movies, serials, sitcoms, game shows – genres that might seem politically innocent and uncritical, yet they can articulate “sets of cultural, ethical and other values and world views not always reconcilable with the Putin agenda” (Hutchings & Rulyova, 2009, p. 11). This thesis draws on this argument and shows that the ‘queer’ episode of *Fashion Verdict* cannot be fully understood if only looked at as another example of the state-homophobic discourse at work.

In order to further situate the makeover episode, I turn to the analysis of Channel One on which the episode has been broadcast and the work of its CEO Konstantin Ernst. Channel One is a state-owned broadcaster – the state share is 51% (Degtereva & Kiriya, 2010). What distinguishes Channel One from other major Russian TV networks that operate under the Kremlin control as well, is the policy of its general director, Konstantin Ernst. Ernst has been working as the CEO of Channel One since 1999, and is treated as one of the most controversial media actors in contemporary Russia. He is referred to as a Putinist, yet even his opponents admit that his television policy is much more sophisticated than the ones of the other two main TV channels – Rossiia and NTV (Yaffa, 2014). Ernst clearly follows Kremlin orders regarding

the coverage of crucial issues of Putin's politics³; nonetheless, his approach is "more sober[ly]" than on two other channels (ibid.). Furthermore, Ernst's politics concerning programming, especially entertainment, is strikingly different than on other channels. I want to briefly show some examples of his work that in a way go against the mainstream media discourse both in terms of formats/genres and content.

Firstly, it was Konstantin Ernst who introduced new formats and genres to the Russian audience, including, but not limited to, the late-night and day time talk-show and the singing competition "American Idol"-style. Secondly, it was him who brought to Russian television programs that were "far rougher and edgier than what had previously been shown on state airwaves" (Yaffa, 2014). Among those are "The School," a highly controversial series about teenagers produced by Valeriya Gai Germanika. Ernst is also famous for his choices of foreign shows he brings to Channel One, of which "Mad Men" (2007-2015) and "House of Cards" (2013-) are bright examples (Yaffa, 2014). Thirdly, in 2013 – only one year after broadcasting the controversial 'queer' episode of *Fashion Verdict* – Konstantin Ernst makes the decision to broadcast on Channel One the TV series *Thaw* (2013) by famous Russian director Valerii Todorovskii. *Thaw* is remarkable because one of its main characters is a homosexual man living in the 1960s. The show was widely discussed in social and alternative media alike, with the common impression that broadcasting the serial was a "decent civil gesture" (*blagorodnyi grazhdanskii zhest*) on the side of either [Todorovskii] or Konstantin Ernst" (Taratuta, 2013) precisely because of the timing – six months before the series was shown, Vladimir Putin signed the law prohibiting the propaganda of 'non-traditional' sexual relations among minors. Fourthly, on broadcasting the 2015 Eurovision Song Contest, Channel One did not erase the

³ In his recent interview to Gazeta.ru, Ernst, answering the question whether new forms of censorship had been implemented, said, "I did not feel any new restrictions. This is true". Clarifying his answer, he said, "There exist, of course, some restrictions, but they are not legislative, they are conceptual (*poniatiinye*)" (Zabaluev, 2016).

episode of two gay kisses, even though both were shown in ‘children’s time’, that is before 11 pm (Smetanina, 2015).

All these examples, taken separately, would not make much sense. However, brought together, they constitute a certain pattern of disrupting the ‘traditional’ narrative of Russian television that might be considered “a typical gesture for Ernst, who has strived to retain the air of a risk-taking auteur even as he has ascended to the highest circles of power during Putin’s rule” (Yaffa, 2014).

Ernst admits that it might have been easier for him to “make Russian HBO” but, he says, there are more important things he shares with his fellow citizens, mainly memories about the Soviet times (*sovok*): how boiled sausage tasted, what was the smell in the entrance to the Soviet *krhushchiovka* (an apartment building), and how much the beer cost. It is the memory of all these things that he shares with “99% of [his] fellow citizens, at least with those who are above thirty years old”. According to him, these shared experiences unite him with other Russian citizens much stronger than movies and books that might separate them (Levkovich, 2013). Ernst adds that he is responsible for the vast majority of decisions regarding the content Channel One airs: “It’s always me who decides, because I’m carrying all responsibility” (ibid.).

Given all these, the ‘queer’ episode of *Fashion Verdict* does not seem to be completely out of place in Channel One’s program politics. Rather, it must be seen as another example of a “systemic” television product that, as Ernst has put it, “explains the time” (*vsio sistemnoe, ob”iasniaiushchee vremia*) (Zabaluev, 2016). As I show through my analysis in the next chapter, the show tries to provide its queer participants with strategies of survival in the increasingly homophobic times through a complex interconnectedness of ‘Soviet’ and ‘Western’ narratives – the interconnectedness that I call, following Serguei Oushakine (2000), post-Soviet aphasia. Drawing on an imaginary shared experience of Soviet people, the show is trying to situate relatively ‘progressive’ messages regarding queerness within the familiar

Soviet tropes concerning the experience of queer people in Soviet times. It does so out of absence of appropriate discursive tools to speak about queerness (“to explain the time”, following Ernst), but at the same time this strategy allows both to make the show intelligible and readable for post-Soviet viewers and to ‘pass’ the homophobic radar of conservative-oriented viewers (yet this attempt failed, since the conservative viewers critiqued the program for precisely what it was – the positive representation of same-sex relations, see Bondarenko, 2012).

This kind of ruptures in the mainstream discourse that Ernst allows and even promotes on Channel One might, it is argued, lead to his downfall. If Putin’s aggressive fundamentalism will require more and more frantic loyalty, it is unlikely that Ernst’s media politics will be further tolerated (Yaffa, 2014). Whatever the future brings, what is important for my argumentation is that the queer episode of *Fashion Verdict* can be firmly situated within Channel One’s disruptive politics at the time of its airing and, as such, allows for a more complex understanding of messages it is supposed to convey.

2.2 Russian Makeover Television: Recontextualizing the Genre

Fashion Verdict was introduced to Russian viewers in 2007. It was not the first makeover show on Russian television – in 2004, the makeover program *Take It Off Immediately!* appeared on STS Channel. The early and mid-2000s were exciting times for TV in Russia for various reasons, but mostly because these were times of relative stability, when Russian television experienced a profound shift from 1990s with its abundance of locally produced military, police, and criminal series. In the beginning of 2000s, and especially after the beginning of Putin’s second term in office in 2004, an increasing economic and social stability finally allowed ordinary people to enter the scope of television in a number of ways – an opportunity

they were denied until the Gorbachev era (Hutchings & Rulyova, 2009). The difference with television under Gorbachev was that in 2000s, the ordinary life, not only ordinary people, appeared on screen in different genres – in talk shows, in sitcoms, in TV serials.

As Beumers (2009) notes, since 2002, what has become the main topic on Russian TV was normality. It is remarkable that the rise of interest in normality on Russia's TV coincides with the emergence of makeover formats, for which, as for 'ordinary television' in general, normalcy (or, indeed, the illusion of normalcy) plays a crucial role (Bonner, 2003). Makeover television is a relatively recently established domain of Russian popular culture: its history goes back to 2004 when the makeover show *Take It Off Immediately! (Snimite Eto Nemedlenno!)* appeared on the commercial channel STS, as an adaptation of the British makeover *What Not To Wear*⁴. Since then, Russian television has been demonstrating an increasing fascination with makeover programs such as *Fashion Verdict (Modnyi Prigovor)* on Channel One, *Cinderella. Restart (Zolushka. Perezagruzka)* on TNT Channel, *The Beauty Embassy (Posol'stvo Krasoty)* on Yu Channel, *Fashion Inoculation (Modnaia Privivka)* on STS, and many others, not to mention Western, mostly American, programs translated into Russian broadcast on Russian TV, as well as other types of makeover programs focusing on, for example, remaking apartments and dachas (country houses). All of them became a source of what 'normal' everyday life could look like for the newly emerging middle class, for which the question of the quality of life replaced the one of survival, which has been crucial in the 1990s. Vera Zvereva (2010) directly links the increasing number of lifestyle TV programs with the rise of the new Russian middle class.

⁴ Even in the most comprehensive studies of Russian lifestyle television to date, the question of copyright of these programs is never raised. Zvereva (2010) calls them "clones" of the existing Western programs (p. 270); Lerner and Zbenovich (2013) call these programs "adaptive imitation[s]" (p. 828). As far as it can be established, lifestyle programs on Russian TV did not buy the copyright but simply adopted the genre to the Russian context.

Western makeover programs (mostly British and American) also engage with everyday life as they aim at “ordinary people” who are now invited to learn that they also can become part of the makeover culture by transforming their appearance (Featherstone, 2010). According to Featherstone (2010), transformation, which lies at the heart of Western modernity, become the central concept for the makeover culture. He claims that, not surprisingly, the idea of transformation continues to be highly influential in consumer culture in the 20th century. However, as with modernity itself, in which the narratives of progress, development and reason decenter the narratives of devastation, decline and inhumanity, there are two sides of the coin, and the space for transformation is highly policed and allows access only for particular subjects and on particular conditions. To be allowed to enter the space of transformation, according to the consumerist logic of meritocracy, means to prove that one deserves a transformation and can be considered worth of transformation in the first place, and some subjects are expected to try harder than others to deserve a transformation (Raisborough, 2011).

After deservingness has been proved, however, the very conditions that helped to render the subject worthy of makeover experience are there only to be erased in the process of the makeover. With the help of the example of the well-known American TV show, *Extreme Makeover* in which mostly working and low-middle-class women are featured, Heyes (2007) shows how their class background as well as the past that has left traces on their faces is erased “*as if it never happened*” (p. 98, italics in the original). The new ethical self that appears as a result of a transformation is shown as something that in itself can solve problems of living under challenging conditions (Wood & Skeggs, 2004). The very process of transformation, therefore, is presented as a set of coping strategies of empowerment, and this is how makeover programs not only bring the everyday on television, but they also bring the makeover logic into daily life as this provides the opportunity to promote makeover norms and rationality (Ouellette and Hay 2008b). This, in turn, allows to disseminate the ideas of neoliberal governmentality on which

the makeover logic is based (Ouellette & Hay, 2008a; Ouellette & Hay, 2008b; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Weber, 2009).

As Rosalind Gill (2008) argues, it is neoliberalism that “requires individuals to narrate their life story as if it were the outcome of deliberative choices” (p. 436). In its makeover incarnation, neoliberal rationality demands individuals to take full responsibility for what is defined as their life ‘choices’, thus overshadowing the systemic conditions of inequality. Interestingly, as the makeover mostly work with women, Gill (2008) claims that, in a way, “neoliberalism is always already gendered, and ... women are constructed as its ideal subjects” (p. 443). Similarly, Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) show that in the makeover discourse the feminine is invested with connotations of unlimited choices and opportunities and so becomes a space for exercising intensive neoliberal interventions.

However, the makeover genre, when transferred to Russia, must be considered not only from within the genre conventions developed in the original context, but also from within the new context to which it is adopted, as in the process of recontextualization new sets of belonging, desire, and anxieties are articulated. When implemented into the post-Soviet Russian context, the makeover genre is informed not only by the neoliberal rationality with its focus on self-governmentality and self-improvement underlying the makeover logic but also by the Soviet imaginary. The latter lies at the heart of post-Soviet popular culture in a form of collective memory and is mobilized as cultural narratives and paradigms from the Soviet past (Barker, 1999). Importantly, this engagement is partly a way of disidentification with the past, signifying what Anna Krylova calls “the lost position of the Soviet subject” (cited in Barker, 1999, p. 31).

To examine the workings and effects of the Soviet imaginaries in contemporary Russia’s culture, I am deploying Serguei Oushakine’s concept of post-Soviet aphasia. Oushakine (2000) suggests that at times when the discursive field is experiencing dramatic structural changes (like

the ones after the collapse of the Soviet Union), subjects' capacity to occupy a certain subject position is compromised and "results not so much in speechlessness and/or silence but rather in activation of different, substitutive modes of signification that have been formed and shaped to a large degree by the previous cultural period" (p. 994). He contends that what in the cultural field seems to be nostalgic is not so, but is, instead, a form of coping with the disorder in the Symbolic that has been damaged in the process of change: in a situation when new signifiers are absent, the only available discourse is the one from a previous era, which, in case of the post-Soviet, is the Soviet past (Oushakine, 2000). Those familiar Soviet discursive instruments thus become sites of comfort and rest which allow the subject to postpone or even avoid dealing with the troubling shifting discursive regime (ibid.). It should be once again stressed that this is not nostalgia as the mobilization of Soviet tropes does not connote a desire to bring the Soviet past to the present. As Oushakine (2000) puts it,

[I]nstead of being involved in production of *new* mythical narratives able to encompass the ongoing changes and to embrace individuals in a collective entity, both public discourse and individual speech in post-Soviet Russia demonstrate a different dynamic. ... It is in this de-contextualisation, in this dissociation of a cultural text from the place of its origin, in this dissolution of a binding effect of the Soviet meta-language, that the 'post-Soviet aphasia' makes itself apparent. (p. 998)

As a result, he argues, the post-Soviet Russians have been 'locked' within the Soviet Symbolic, and this proves the inability of the emerging discursive field to provide an adequate symbolic framework for living and thinking the new reality.

The concept of post-Soviet aphasia is one of the central concepts for this thesis as it allows to analyze and make sense of the makeover episode I am dealing with. In the previous section, I looked at how the work of Channel One's CEO, Konstantin Ernst, reflects his beliefs that the shared experience of the Soviet past brings him closer to his viewers and allows them to speak the same language. Looking at his words through the perspective of the post-Soviet

aphasia, one can see how much he relies on the familiar Soviet tropes and narratives and what ideological work this reliance does: it locks viewers within the old ideological framework experienced as ‘safe’ and thus prevents both itself and them from working on the new discourse that could incorporate the changes in political, cultural and social system.

Before I move to the analysis itself, I would like to look at how this mobilization of the Soviet discursive tools works within contemporary Russian popular television culture. Vera Zvereva (2010) in her study of Russian lifestyle TV demonstrates that the ghosts of the Soviet past are either explicitly mentioned and referred to or kept in the background of the program’s discourse yet are constantly at work. Hutchings and Rulyova (2009) in their analysis of the changes in TV content in the first decade of the 2000s show how the cultural anxieties concerning the Soviet past and the present that is becoming increasingly pro-Western despite the official anti-Western mainstream rhetoric, are played out. According to them, it is through the integration of familiar Soviet narratives signifying the Self with Western narratives signifying the Other. On the example of the talk-show *School of Scandal* (*Shkola Zlosloviia*) they demonstrate how the pro-Western ideas are mediated and made less threatening by the means of the spatial organization of the studio: “The act of mediation transformed the domestic intimacy of the setting and discourse mode into the novel and unfamiliar value system of western free speech” (p. 95).

Another important point Hutchings and Rulyova (2009) make is concerned with interpreting the appearance of some topics within the post-Soviet discursive field. They analyze one episode of the talk-show *Domino Principle* (*Printsip Domino*) and look at how the topic of a well-earning woman is framed. They suggest that if looked at from the Western perspective, the show might seem conservative as it is constantly stressed that the well-earning woman’s main responsibility is first and foremost to take care of and help her husband. However, they claim, the Western approach does not help here. Looked at from within the post-Soviet context,

the very emergence of such topics in the mainstream discourse signals that there exist cultural anxieties around those issues that need to be addressed. From this perspective, the mere fact that such issues find their way to the mainstream media articulates the rupture from the old discursive regime (Hutchings & Rulyova, 2009). Similar ways of mediating new ‘Western’ values through local scripts can be found in Russian makeover television: for example, elsewhere I have argued that a distinguishing feature of the Russian makeover discourse is a unique combination of the neoliberal rationality lying at the heart of the makeover genre, with specificities of the cultural legacy of the Soviet gender regime (Kazakevich, 2016).

2.3 *Fashion Verdict* at the Intersection of Western and Soviet Discourses

Fashion Verdict appeared on Channel One in 2007 and since then has been aired daily (from Monday till Thursday) at 10.50 am. It is an example of a uniquely Russian makeover program that nevertheless complies to the norms and logic of Western makeover television. Each episode of *Fashion Verdict* is set as a court hearing, which stresses a didactic nature of the show that distinguishes it from its Western origins where didactic intentions are not that obvious (Rajagopalan, 2010). The anchorperson plays the role of a judge. Initially, this role was performed by Viacheslav Zaitsev, Russian couturier who left the show in 2009 and gave his spot to Alexander Vasil’ev, fashion and art historian, stage designer, lecturer, and writer. His role is to moderate the show as well as to talk to participants informally, often making jokes or even mocking them, but always in funny ways. Alexander Vasil’ev – even though it has been never articulated – is implicitly coded as gay given his extravagant way of dressing, manner of speech, etc. It is interesting that in adopting the makeover genre, Channel One went as far as to adopt a popular figure of a ‘gay’ man as a host. As Brenda Weber (2009) notes, the makeover indeed can “imagine a place for the gay-coded but rarely gay-announced male stylist” (p. 12).

There are two other hosts in the show: the prosecutor and the lawyer. The role of prosecutor has been performed by Evelina Khromchenko, journalist, anchorperson, art curator and writer who had been an editor-in-chief of the Russian edition of the French fashion magazine *L'Officiel* for thirteen years and also took part in the organization of various fashion events in Russia. Her function in the show is to bring her expertise in fashion. The role of the lawyer is to defend the participant, and throughout the history of the program it has been performed by different actors, mostly by female writers, singers, journalists, and actresses. In 2007-2013 the position of lawyer was taken by journalist Larisa Verbitskaia. There is also a team of stylists who actually work on the participants' makeover although never introduced to the public, as the makeover happens behind the close doors, and the studio audience (as well as a TV one) is only presented with the final result.

At the beginning of each show, Alexander announces the topic and introduces the participant which is followed by a short 'home-made' video about the heroine. Normally, this video presents the participant in an unfavorable light in terms of her appearance and lack of taste thus proving the makeover necessary. Then, in the studio, the plaintiff – the one who brings the heroine to the 'court' and 'accuses' her of her bad choices of style – has an opportunity to explain why she or he thinks that the makeover is necessary for the participant and then gets asked questions from all the three hosts. This is followed by the examination of the participant's wardrobe that is brought into the studio and displayed at stage. After that the makeover participant is invited to the bench and is asked questions about her life, work, and style.

Once 'interrogation' is over, the next part of the program begins, which is the section about fashion advice. Every section is devoted to a particular problem: how to wear denim, how to hide a belly or how to be a well-dressed mom. These recommendations are always visualized through the fashion parade: three female models present their look for the audience while Evelina gives short historical overviews of a particular element of garment and gives her

recommendations on how to wear it. After that, the makeover participant and the plaintiff allegedly go shopping and are supposed to purchase three sets of clothes in order to later present them on stage⁵. Then the participant presents all three outfits and is expected to justify her choices before the hosts and the studio audience. As a rule, she fails to choose good outfits.

The final part of the show is when the makeover itself takes place. The participant is invited to surrender to the team of stylists to be ‘transformed’, and then demonstrates three new outfits selected by the stylists, as well as new makeup, hairstyle and hair color. This time the fashion show is normally greeted with ovation and flattering comments. After that, Alexander asks the happy woman which set of outfits she likes better – the one she has chosen herself or the one the stylists have given her. In most cases, participants choose the stylists’ work, which she is allowed to keep.

It is acknowledged that Russian makeovers, and *Fashion Verdict* among them, do follow their Western originals in the way they dismiss structural conditions of inequality that often result in participants’ incapacity to dress appropriately (Rajagopalan, 2010; Zvereva, 2010). Moreover, the aspiration towards a middle-class everyday life promoted by local makeover programs in fact means that the ideal habitant of this new desirable world is the one whom Vera Zvereva (2010) calls a “European citizen or a citizen of the global world” (p. 275). This ‘European’, or ‘Western’ identity is supposed to be performed by ‘ordinary’ post-Soviet people on screen, whom, in turn, TV viewers can identify with. As Zvereva claims, the reference to Soviet everyday life can serve for viewers as a key for identification with participants as the Soviet is still understood as a “reliable identifier” (Zvereva, 2010, p. 274). Nonetheless, makeover programs do not set as their ideological task to present the Soviet in exclusively positive ways. Rather – coming back to the metaphor of the post-Soviet aphasia – they use these familiar shared cultural scripts to accommodate new meanings emerging as a result of changing

⁵ ‘Allegedly’, because this shopping is happening before the studio shooting takes place, but in the program narrative shopping is shown as if it takes place after the fashion advice section).

reality. Indeed, Zvereva (2010) explains that the incorporation of Soviet discursive forms allows to link people's traditions and memories with the new social and cultural reality.

Furthermore, on the discursive level, as Lerner and Zbenovich (2013) observe, there are multiple discursive frames in *Fashion Verdict*, all of which are rooted in the idea that self-transformation is necessarily linked to and can only be achieved through the talking. However, discursive regimes of talking that are brought together in the program (psychotherapy session, comrades' court, kitchen talk and fashion show) are coming from different contexts. The format of a psychotherapy session has been adopted from the Western cultural vocabulary while three others, but comrades' court and kitchen talk especially, are rooted in the Soviet past. The mobilization of these familiar Soviet discursive frameworks signals the need for "translating the new discursive form of therapy", and the established frameworks work toward grounding new meanings in the local cultural context (pp. 847-848). The post-Soviet cultural context, originally, was not familiar with therapeutic culture which is one of the key features of late capitalism that has been called "emotional capitalism" (Illouz, 2007).

As I have discussed above, the main concern of lifestyle television is the promotion of particular norms of everyday life, the promotion of normality itself. The genre conventions of makeover television serve exactly this purpose: by focusing on the everyday life of 'ordinary' people, they bring this ordinariness with all its commonness and calmness closer to the viewer. In a way, the makeover is a 'safe' format that makes others closer. However, in the same way in which the task of proving one's worthiness to undergo a makeover is unequally distributed, the option to appear in a makeover program and claim one's 'normality' is not offered to everyone. Russian lifestyle television in general has no interest in representing diverse social groups of which Russian middle class consists; rather, it is focused on particular sets of familiar social types (Zvereva, 2010). The Other, thus, is unlikely to enter the space of appearance. However, what the 'queer' episode does is exactly brings the Other to the space of the normal

in which people are shown in their ordinariness and everydayness. As I have discussed, for post-Soviet television it was a breakthrough when the ‘ordinary’ people appeared on screen. Similarly, I argue that in 2012 it was a breakthrough for Channel One, as well as for Russia’s television in general, to feature two queer women in a day time show as simply ‘ordinary’, ‘just like you’ people, especially considering the political context and the patterns of media coverage of LGBT-issues (see Pronkina, 2016). The Other, as it were, is ‘domesticated’ and brought right into viewers’ homes. Given the political context, to present the queer subject as ‘normal’ indeed must be seen as an intervention in, and subversion of, the state-ordered mainstream media discourse. From this perspective, the ‘queer’ intervention of *Fashion Verdict* is unique not only in the history of Russian lifestyle TV, but also for makeover television as such. As Brenda Weber (2009) notes, “the lesbian is an unannounced and, indeed, mostly unmentionable topic on makeover TV. (...) makeover refuses to acknowledge sexuality outside of heteronormative scripts” (p. 155).

Chapter 3. “Tania and Natasha’s Case”: post-Soviet Aphasia at Work

In this chapter, I develop my argument that the ‘queer’ episode of *Fashion Verdict* reproduces the post-Soviet aphasia by providing queer subjects with tools of survival in the increasingly hostile political, social and cultural environment – the tools that are taken from the Soviet discursive regime surrounding queer experience. I will look at (1) the (in)visibility of queer bodies expressed through the clothes the participants of the episode are wearing on arrival and the ones they are suggested to wear; (2) what might be called an act of coming out, or disclosure of their sexuality in public, and, in a broader context, a matter of safety; (3) the relationship between the lesbian, the family and the nation in the makeover discourse.

3.1 Managing Precarity through Contesting Visibility

The purpose of any makeover, Tania’s including, is to bring about more gender dichotomous population: “The makeover creates (more) feminine women and (more) masculine men. (...) These forms of femininity and masculinity are always mediated through heterosexuality” (Heyes, 2007, p. 97). In Butler’s terms, the makeover aims at making gender *intelligible*. Intelligible genders are those that inaugurate and maintain “relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire” (Butler, 1990, p. 17). In case of post-Soviet Russia, however, it is more important to project an intelligibility that signals a coherence between sex, gender and heterosexuality than to display heterosexuality *per se*. In other words, it is not that important to ‘make’ Tania heterosexual as it is to make her *appear* as heterosexual. And as long as there is no lesbian identity as political identity in contemporary Russia, Tania cannot be granted recognition on the basis of her queerness. And, as viable subjects are those who “...work themselves into specific relations of recognition” (Raisborough, 2011, p. 164),

to make Tania recognizable as a viable subject within the post-Soviet cultural discourse means to make her occupy the symbolic site of a feminine subject.

This is why it is important not to focus exclusively on what might seem ‘violent’ practices of the makeover but instead to situate the makeover and the cultural meaning of post-Soviet femininity in relation to the history of the gender regime in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. From this perspective, one can see that excessive femininity can be conceived of as a result of cultural trauma in the Soviet cultural imagination when Soviet women were denied access to beauty products, cosmetics, fashion clothes and so on (Azhgikhina & Goscilo, 1996). So this might be not about Tania being a homosexual at all but rather about her being identified as a lacking female subject who is helped to achieve a mature feminine position within the (post)Soviet Symbolic order.

It is instructive to note that this process of rendering Tania intelligible must not be read through the hegemonic Western paradigm of visibility, despite how tempting it might be. What could easily (and mistakenly) be seen as an exercise of oppression, unfolds as a more nuanced strategy of management queer life in precarious conditions of state-sponsored homophobia. Due to the absence of the ‘lesbian’ as an identity and hence the absence of homonormativity (Stella, 2015), the boundaries between the ‘lesbian’ (*lesbiianka*) and heterosexual (*naturalka*; ‘*natural*’) are blurred. Soviet and post-Soviet ‘lesbian’ women alike could have sex with other women and still consider themselves heterosexual (*naturalki*) as long as their appearance complied with the norms of conventional femininity (Essig, 2014). That is, in case of Russia, sexuality is more about gender display than about sexual acts.⁶ Looked from this perspective, what the show does is brings Tania’s gender display in accordance with the norms of conventional femininity, not necessarily with the norms of heterosexuality. Because in Russia,

⁶ Remarkably, neither Tania and Natasha nor the hosts pronounce the word ‘lesbian’ (*lesbiianka*), signaling an awareness of the fact that this word indeed is not popular among Russian queer women for a variety of reasons (Stella, 2015; Zelenina, 2007). The only term used in the show is ‘non-traditional orientation’ (*netraditsionnaia orientatsiia*), which is indeed a common way of referring to non-heterosexual subjects in Russia.

conventional femininity has historically been inhabited by queer women as well (who, importantly, did not consider themselves queer in terms of identity), this makeover should not be seen as an act of (symbolic) violence. Nor should it be considered a gesture of hiding the allegedly ‘authentic’ post-Soviet non-heterosexual subject behind the heterosexually coded appearance – exactly because this conventional femininity is part of how the non-heterosexual subject has been produced. In other words, through the makeover, the show provides Tania with tools that may help her to live safely as a queer woman without jeopardizing her work and personal life and without exposing her to the hostile public gaze.

It is important to note that in the episode there are constant – either explicit or implicit – references to the West. While fashion systems vary over different contexts, they all engage in production of the social body through producing particular clothed bodies as tools of self-management (Craik, 1994). Therefore, it is particularly important to attend to a specific interplay between ‘Western’ and (post)‘Soviet’ fashion and sexual discourses within the episode. According to my reading of the show, the positioning of participants in the episode signals (or they are positioned to signal) a rather pro-Western attitude to fashion and sexuality, while the hosts occupy what might be called a ‘Soviet’ discursive position. It might seem that this positioning (which reflects the power hierarchy ascribed to actors in the show) serves as an act of abjection of queer people, played upon popular Soviet and post-Soviet mainstream rhetoric about the ‘hostile’ and/or ‘alien’ West as a danger to the country, and homosexuals as products of Western cultural decay (Baer, 2013; Boym, 1994; Novitskaya, 2017; Sperling, 2014b).

Nevertheless, I argue that while throughout the Soviet history, non-heterosexual people were indeed conceived of as ‘Westerners’ and ‘foreigners’ with negative connotations, in the episode the signs are changed sufficiently. Subsumed by the fashion discourse in which, historically, everything associated with the West has been perceived with enthusiasm and

respect, the lesbian guest's queerness, framed from within the logic of fashion, acquires rather positive connotations. Indeed, despite the official Soviet rhetoric against the West, in ordinary life the West was an object of fascination rather than disgust (Bartlett, 2006; English, 2000; Gurova, 2009; Vainshtein, 1996; Zakharova, 2010).

Observing Tania's clothes displayed on stage in the beginning of the program, Evelina points out the lack of skirts, while simultaneously noticing that the whole range of trousers from previous and current fashion seasons is present there. Ironically, then, Tania is positioned as someone who knows of and follows fashion trends.

This observation about fashion is confirmed by Evelina when she concludes:

We have to admit that our heroine is a stylish young woman; there are no charges in the lack of taste. Everything she is wearing belongs to a very clear framework. She knows what she wants to purchase and she combines things beautifully. Her clothes are very stylish and well thought through.

Evelina calls what she sees a tomboy style, thus inscribing Tania's style into a global Western fashion trend which implicates Tania's style 'westernness'. Remarkably, though, Tania is criticized for her dressing choices; instead, she is praised for them. Surprisingly, what Khromchenko is preoccupied with first is not the lack of skirts in Tania's wardrobe but a lack of a classic man's black suit that would accomplish the wardrobe stylistically. Yet, eventually the major concern by the fashion expert is a lack of 'diversity' in Tania's clothes for her profession: the wardrobe is "so narrow for such a creative profession as a photographer", says Evelina. Clearly, the results of Evelina's examination – her *fashion verdict*, so to speak – is overall positive. Western fashion has been dominating the Russian women's imaginary since long ago (Bartlett, 2006), and it is therefore not a surprise to see that Tania's style is assessed in terms of a Western dress-code, and that it seems to serve to her advantage. In other words, there is nothing negative in being a fashionable stylish young woman who knows Western fashion trends and follows them. Yet, it is problematic if they are judged 'narrow'. It is in the

context of the ‘change’ that we shall learn that those trends may connote questionable articulations of femininity.

Those choices must be ‘subtly’ corrected – and the show demonstrates how to transform the Western tomboy style in the Russian context. In every episode, there is a special section devoted to fashion advice from Evelina Khromchenko which I described in the previous chapter. In the episode I’m examining here, this section of the show is about the military style (*stil’ militari*). Even without explicit references, Tania’s tomboyish style is then linked with a military imagery. According to Evelina, the military style is always trendy and ‘military’ should not be reduced to the particular colour of *khaki* but can also be enacted through silhouette, cut and decoration. While three female models present their military outfits, she comments on their outfits with words such as ‘(military) jacket’ (*kitel’*), ‘jodhpurs’ (*galife*), ‘cavalry’ (*kavaleriia*), ‘officer boots’ (*ofiterskie sapogi*), ‘brutality’ (*brutal’nost’*). Even though their style is visibly ‘feminine’, the dominance of the war metaphors neatly, or rather ‘naturally’, couples ‘tomboyism’ with the semantic field of ‘military style’, ‘aggressive’, ‘forceful’, and ‘brutal’, indicating the need for a change in Tanja’s appearance. The show offers very clear strategies of ‘taming’ tomboyism and the military style through the means of feminine silhouette (i.e., the accentuated waist line), tight dresses and skirts, and high heels.

All these means mark a degree of rebellion against conventional gender norms yet in the performance of femininity. Alexander Vasil’ev associates Tania’s tomboyism with a left-wing guerrilla political fight, when, in response to her makeover, he adores her new look through recalling that “she used to be just a little bit of a tomboy, an admirer of Che Guevara”. Early I have shown that the hosts do view western stylish tomboyism as deserving respect. However, the reference to Che Guevara is not accidental: as I have stressed earlier, in the state-sponsored homophobic discourse homosexuality is conceived of as a ‘Western’ liberal idea “corrupting the nation’s youth and fueling opposition to [Putin’s] rule” (Mole, 2014). The hosts,

being aware of these connotations of tomboyism/lesbianism with political protest (an awareness signaled in the reference to Che Guevara), are trying to rework them. To accomplish this, they offer a politically ‘safe’ version of the tomboy style exemplified by three young models who demonstrate the military style on the podium.

Furthermore, in the postsocialist spaces, male garment worn by the female could easily evoke an asexualized femininity in the name of gender equality imposed from above during state socialism, where masculine clothes were identified with a working-class status rather than with gender subversion (Bartlett, 2010). Even though in late socialism trousers on women were considered a scandal, especially during the back-to-femininity campaign (Bartlett, 2006), it is more likely that in the postsocialist cultural imaginary Tania’s tomboyism would be more likely associated with a working-class status than with homosexuality. As Bartlett (2010) points out through her analysis of the perception of the overall, this kind of female dress overtly signaled a working-class status (p. 103). From this point of view, it totally makes sense when the judge observes a shift in Tania’s status after the makeover, pointing out that “she used to be just a little bit of a tomboy ... and now she has become more glamorous, more of a higher status, more elegant lady”. In the show’s discourse, tomboyism is not considered a threat in itself (as long as it is accompanied by diligent and tasteful consumption practices); it is rather just a possible stage in a woman’s development that better to be abandoned when the woman reaches a certain age. Yet, some playfulness with this style still remains an option, as long as it signals an appropriate social status.

3.2. Negotiating (Queer) Safety

The issue of safety in the episode is brought up by Evelina. Observing and commenting on Tania's wardrobe consisting of pants, T-shirts and jeans, she notes: "Right now, she is very unprotected (*ona ochen' ne zashchishchena*)". Later, Natasha picks up the notion of safety and confirms that the clothes Tania likes wearing is "an attempt to protect herself from the world". Then, when it is her turn to be in the dock, Tania explains to the court her choice of clothes in terms of her need to 'hide': "I guess, yes, I'm hiding. I'm hiding from people (*ia priachus' ot liudei*)". It is instructive to note, though, that this explanation follows the story she tells about being a victim of a gang rape at the age of seventeen. It is unclear from the show how Tania looked like before the rape, yet we can conclude from what she says that at the time of rape she looked exactly the way she looks now. As she says, "I've had this image since school. Recently, there was a reunion, and everyone changed but me. I was told that my style hasn't change".

Towards the end of the show Evelina Khromchenko sums up the position of the makeover team over the question of Tania's way of communicating with the world through her clothes as follows:

I am thinking about what Natasha have said about your clothes, and I would put it differently. Natasha is saying that you are hiding behind these clothes, that this is your armor. I, on the contrary, am confident that in your situation in these clothes you are basically naked. You are telling everything about yourself. And the only way to hide, indeed, to feel safe, to feel out of focus, is to do what your friend (*podruga*) is suggesting you to do [*to undergo a makeover to become more feminine – OK*]. Probably she makes this suggestion intuitively, trying to protect you, and probably she has never thought of the real reasons of this urge. But actually, if the two of you together think about what I'm saying, you will understand that this is the case.

One can see that even though both the participants and the stylists understand safety as dependable upon a woman's appearance, they take two different positions regarding Tania's

safety as a woman and, more importantly, as a lesbian. What Tania's and Natasha's accounts of Tania's safety hold in common is a shared view on her current clothes as protection, despite the terrible experience she had. Basically, for them, Tania's unfeminine style is what keeps her safe, allowing to "hide from people" (in her own words). However contradictory this may sound taking into account the rape, it is made clear that, in their view, Tania's tomboy image is what helps her feel secure from the (heteronormative) male public gaze. The hosts of the show do not dispute the need for protection but they see the danger coming from elsewhere. They insist that it is Tania's tomboy style that makes her highly visible and vulnerable, unprotected as a 'lesbian' woman. What they suggest through her makeover is that if she really wants to feel safe in public what she has to do is to 'go feminine'. Therefore, we should explore what the concept of safety comes to mean in the makeover discourse as a matter of visibility.

Tania and Natasha are clearly concerned with their safety in public spaces as queer women. They articulate their concerns out of their lived experience of being different and being exposed to physical and, most probably, symbolic violence (examples from the show include the rape and the episode in which Tania was denied a job because of the ways she looked). Through a tomboy image articulated as a Western trend in fashion, Tania is distancing herself from her everyday, by implication non-Western, post-Soviet Russian environment of dress code for women. There is seemingly a paradox here: on the one hand, she feels a need to hide and protect herself behind her tomboy style and this is what gives her an illusion of safety; while on the other hand, she obviously understands that this style marks her as different, and this is her deliberate choice. This paradox, I think, can be resolved to some extent when situated relationally to all potential gazes at play at the same time: the dress code of her choice allows her to be hidden from the heterosexual male gaze (her clothes are an 'armor', in this regard, indeed) while staying visible and recognizable as a lesbian for other potentially interested women as dress is important for manifesting 'other' sexualities (Entwistle, 2000).

The makeover hosts, however, seem to be preoccupied simultaneously with both participants' (lesbian) safety and with public moral: "In these clothes you are basically naked. You are telling everything about yourself." Nudity in public space is apparently a matter of moral concern. However, not all forms of nudity. As Sudha Rajagopalan (2010) in her study of *Fashion Verdict* notes, in another episode the participant is told that she fails to be "an effective dresser because what she wears tells us little about her" (p. 98). Clearly, for a heterosexual woman it is rather required to tell more about herself by a means of her clothing, while for a queer woman it is exactly the opposite – too much disclosure is problematic, challenging and unsafe. Thus, it is a symbolic 'queer nudity' that is sanctioned in the name of participants' alleged 'safety'. Tania's 'nudity' comes to be heterosexualized when the fashion designers change the dress code she is to wear into one that is 'safely' feminine. Contesting Tania's style as a means of self-protection, the makeover deletes queerness on account of being a way of self-exposure, and by doing so presents itself as considerate and caring about the needs of queer women (within a repertoire of available normalizing makeover instruments).

From this point of view, an act of disclosure of participants' sexuality again renders them 'Western' in the discourse of the show. The very act of disclosure, which Natasha commits at the beginning of the program by saying "To begin with, Tania and I are a couple. We have been together for nine years", tempts to be narrated as an act of *coming out*, a Western practice developed in the era of gay liberation in the USA and presented as "the central narrative of positive gay experience" (Plummer, 1995, p. 84) that is important both for political purposes and individual freedom. In her discussion of the coming out paradigm in the post-Soviet context, Francesca Stella (2015) argues that the idea that the personal is political was not greeted with enthusiasm in Soviet Russia: as I have already discussed, it is rather *hiding* the personal was a condition of survival. Stella shows that in the interviews she has conducted with Russian lesbian women in the mid-2000s, it was rarely mentioned that coming out brought a sense of

empowerment or relief. Importantly, Stella warns, the rejection of coming out must not be seen as necessarily hypocrisy or internalized homophobia. She argues that it is exactly strategies of self-management with a complex set of negotiations about whom to disclose oneself to in every particular context, including job, study, home, friends, etc., that give women a sense of being in control of their sexuality and agency (Stella, 2015). So, what Natasha does at the beginning of the program is indeed unusual for Russian lesbians, and refers to an explicitly western practice.

Curiously enough, while Tania's and Natasha's willingness to expose themselves as 'visibly' queer subjects is rather pro-Western as it does not reflect the queer experience of the Soviet times (see, for example, Stella, 2015, p. 74), the hosts' attempt to 'hide' Tania's queerness behind conventional (understood as heterosexual) femininity seems to be rooted in the Soviet past and corresponds well with the Soviet lesbian women's practices of navigating their private and public lives. Importantly, the hosts' position is not *exclusively* concerned with the public safety for which it is required to exclude queer visibility, but it also reflects their wish to take care of queer women by offering them a common strategy deployed by queers in the Soviet past. The tendency of Russian lesbians not to exposure their sexuality through dressing and other means of covering the body is indeed widespread (Zelenina, 2007). It has also been expressed by Russian lesbian women that conventional femininity helps them to pass as heterosexuals and thus to hide from the public gaze (Stella, 2015). It should not be assumed, though, that this preferred invisibility must necessarily be read as conformity. On the contrary, in case of Soviet and post-Soviet queers, invisibility "was perceived as enabling and subversive" as it allowed to escape the public surveillance and create spaces of solidarity (Stella, 2015, p. 129).

An understanding of invisibility as liberating and allowing for the subject to be in control, coupled with the view on visibility as not empowering and liberating but rather as

dangerous and restricting as it involves a high risk of violence, is deeply rooted in Soviet history (Baer, 2009; Baer, 2013; Essig, 1999; Stella, 2015). What Oleg Kharkhordin (1999) calls ‘dissimulation’, an attempt to “close oneself off”, developed under the Soviet regime as a common practice, and it did not exclusively apply to non-heterosexuals (p. 271). It was exactly the most private spheres of one’s life that needed to be rendered invisible for the public gaze to provide at least an illusion of safety. Because of these specific subjectifying practices, the value of privacy was indeed too high. From this perspective, invisibility (a lack of disclosure) have been thought of in terms of “a privacy which was often seen as desirable, but not necessarily accessible” (Stella, 2015, p. 108). Indeed, in the Soviet era, the sphere of the private was free neither from state nor from collective (*kollektiv*) intervention (the latter in the form of peer surveillance). Invisibility therefore is a desirable form of privacy and, to a certain extent, a space of freedom, rather than ‘the closet’. The value of visibility is still being questioned and contested by post-Soviet queers, which also translates in the rejection of, and even disgust towards, LGBT-activism in post-Soviet Russia as unnecessary disclosure of the most intimate practices (Zelenina, 2007).

3.3 The Family, the Nation and the Lesbian

This section concentrates on how the lesbian is imagined both in relation to the family as an institute and to the nation. I continue to examine the meanings of ‘westernness’ which Tania and Natasha are positioned to represent in the show, but I go beyond the issues of in/visibility to address the ideological work performed by the discourse of parenthood, so vividly articulated in the show. Here I am extending the argument developed in the previous section and claim that what the show offers to its queer participants is not merely the ways of managing queer precarity but the inclusion to the nation.

As I argue throughout this thesis, the show must be understood from within the political and historical post-Soviet context. In 2012, this context has significantly shifted towards a neotraditional agenda (Muravyeva, 2014; Makarychev & Medvedev, 2015), culminating in the 2013 law prohibiting ‘propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations’ among minors. This law has been serving multiple political purposes, but most importantly, it was a tool to consolidate the Russian nation on the ground of an existential crisis it faces – that is, a danger of extinction due to the long-lasting demographic crisis. To ensure the survival of the nation, it is necessary, according to the rationale behind the law, to protect Russian children from the influence that might endanger their reproductive choices, hence the equation of the nation’s survival with banning homosexuality (Mole, 2014). The homosexual, then, becomes an enemy of the nation.

However, despite this well-articulated discursive framework offered to talk about homosexuality, *Fashion Verdict* does present lesbians in a positive way, mobilizing the same discursive tools that construct homosexuality as ‘Western’ and ‘hostile’ to Russian values, but turning them around and playing with them in order to offer a new meaning of (post-Soviet) queerness. The very fact that positive accounts of homosexuality find their way into the mainstream media discourse in a political situation that, to say the least, is not welcoming such accounts, is an indication of subversive intentions of the show.

Furthermore, it is crucial to note that the show not merely presents lesbians – it presents lesbians as future parents. The topic of their future child is omnipresent in the show, starting with the voice-over in the short ‘home’ video at the beginning of program (“Her [female] friend (*podruga*) worries: Tania is going to become a mother soon, yet she has no idea how to bring up a child without feeling like a true woman”) and to Evelina’s remarks about a new outfit Tania has chosen for herself (“It’s extremely telling that you’ve chosen exactly this kind of dress, exactly this empire line. Of course, it totally makes sense for Tatiana to get used to an extra high waste, to learn these forms, since these are the most popular dresses for an expectant

mother”). A significant amount of time is spent on a discussion of the women’s future parenthood, the ways in which they are going to bring up the child, and the division of parental duties within their family.

It is remarkable how the show structures the parenthood line so that the Western makeover conventions are met yet challenged at the same. They are met in the sense in which the makeover “never considers that a woman might not choose to be a mother” (Weber, 2009, p. 159). Indeed, Tania, when asked about why she wants to become a mother and why, says: “It’s been almost five years as I continually feel like it. But last year, it was very drastic... I realized that there is this lack... And this became my life purpose – to give birth to a child”. This is how the (Western) makeover conventions concerning motherhood are met – the tribute to the genre’s origin is paid, so to speak. Nonetheless, they are in fact challenged as the future mother is openly non-heterosexual. Given the makeovers’ almost exclusive commitment to heterosexual scripts (Weber, 2009), it is indeed remarkable that the homosexual participant is not merely invited to the program as *the* lesbian but is presented as a potential mother.

Following my argument in the previous section, I think that the signs of Tania’s and Natasha’s ‘westernness’ can be traced down in the narrative of parenthood. Their ‘westernness’ now is manifested through the concept of planned parenthood which can be identified in what they are saying about their future baby. Elaborating on her desire to become a mother, Tania explains: “I started medical examinations to prepare myself. We are going through this together with Natalya”. Clearly, the women express a responsible approach to giving birth as they are undergoing a process of medical examination to ensure that Tania is healthy. Moreover, at the beginning of the program Natasha says: “We are going to give birth (*rodit*) to a baby soon. It’s gonna be a girl”. Later, Larisa, the lawyer, picks this up wondering why the women are so sure that it is going to be a girl. Tania answers, “Yes, I want it to be a girl, I do believe it will be a girl. Because if it is a boy, of course I will love him – absolutely, but I do also understand that

I won't be able to raise a real man". So if we leave aside the rhetoric about the impossibility to raise a boy without a man in the family, the way in which the sex of the future baby is discussed hints at the possible way to conceive which, apparently, has to do with in vitro fertilization (IVF), and thus gives us another dimension of understanding the episode – this time, through the concept of planned parenthood.

The important thing to know about planned parenthood in Russia is that it has never been seen as desirable for Russian people, even at times when programs of planned parenthood were flourishing under Yeltsin because even then those programs and centers worked towards the promotion of 'traditional' family values and the nation viability (Rivkin-Fish, 2006, p. 164). Moreover, those programs and centers have always been seen by pronatalists and nationalists (as well as by a significant part of the population) as a Western weapon against Russia aimed at making the country weak (ibid.). In short, it is not an overstatement that the idea of planned parenthood is the worst nightmare of the official Russian conservative discourse, not to mention same-sex parenthood. As Laurie Essig (2014) claims, if in the Soviet project homosexuality was seen as something that could corrupt the entire society, now, in the 2013 law against 'gay-propaganda', homosexuality is presented mainly as a threat to children. Yet, not only does *Fashion Verdict* bring about homosexuality in the mainstream media discourse, it also presents two homosexual women as potential parents, thus positively colliding two narratives that have never been supposed to be collided with a positive outcome: the one on homosexuality and the one on parenthood. In the logic of the show, the lesbian is no longer an outsider to the nation – she is invited to contribute to its physical survival. The lesbian parenthood thus becomes a means for the inclusion of lesbians in the nation through the symbolic figure of the Child. On a critical note, this inclusion to the nation comes at a cost, which is that through the collusion of the nation with the state (Kalinina, 2017), the show teaches its queer participants to be loyal to the latter while contributing to the former.

In fact, parenthood is not the only concept through which a lesbians' relation to the nation is articulated. Another one is the concept of family. Nadia Nartova (2004) shows that there are no social and cultural traditions in Russian society according to which a lesbian long-term couple might be defined as a family. The program, however, ignores this lack and does refer to the Tania and Natasha relationship as 'family'. In fact, it is called a family not only by the participants themselves but by the hosts as well. For example, discussing the reasons why Natasha wants to see Tania in her 'femininity', Alexander asks her additional questions: "So, you want to give her a chance ... to present herself in a way in which she could not present herself in your family?". Both Tania and Natasha, in turn, refer to their family freely and frequently like, for instance, Natasha discussing her future role as a parent ("I will be, I guess, more like a father in the family") or Tania explaining why they want a girl ("I think a boy needs a father, while in our family there will be only two moms"). Thus, the show intervenes into the hostile official discourse by presenting a lesbian relationship a family. This intervention, however, has its limits, for not any lesbian relationships, obviously, meet the criteria of being treated as a family, but only those monogamous, long-term (Tania and Natasha have been together for nine years), and middle-class (although Natasha's profession is not mentioned, Tania, being a photographer-freelancer, signals not only her precarity but also a relatively privileged position as someone who can afford not merely a pregnancy but a pregnancy through the IVF).

There might be a temptation to analyze lesbian families in Russia through the lens of heteronormativity. I am not arguing that it should not be done, but I am saying that there are other ways of interpreting them. As Nartova (2004) shows, lesbians in Russia do not see the family as an imposed heteronormative norm but rather as "a universal construct which can help to create a satisfactory relationship and which can be invested with desirable meanings" (p. 300). Similarly, Zelenina (2007) has argued that her lesbian respondents invest a lot in their

intimate relationships and feel very confident and overall positive about their private lives. So, it can be argued that within the framework of the program, Tania and Natasha are not necessarily positioned to reproduce a heterosexual familial script – for example, in relation to how they describe the division of gender roles within the family – but rather they try to organize their live based on the available social forms that are perceived to be universal.

To sum up, when looked at from the assumed culturally hegemonic Western approach to queer visibility, agency, gender and sexuality, the show indeed appears to be overtly regressive. Yet, I argue that it is exactly this perspective that cannot suffice alone here. In order to see the big picture, the episode must be situated within the post-Soviet cultural context, and understood from within specific political, social and cultural conditions that have shaped the understanding of sexuality in Russia. In short, I argue that this show is unique for contemporary Russia in that it deliberately intervenes into a state-homophobic discourse by featuring queer participants in an increasingly homophobic context. I further argue that the intentions of the producers of the show are supportive and queer-friendly in a sense that the show offers queer subjects ways of coping with their precarity. Those ways might indeed be questionable from the Western point of view, but looked at from within the history of sexuality in Russia they make a lot of sense. As I have already mentioned in the previous chapter, I shall go along with Serguei Oushakine's (2000) position and argue that the show is an example of what he calls post-Soviet aphasia, describing a changing discursive regime after the collapse of the Soviet Union in which post-Soviet subjects experienced a lack of available discourses to speak about themselves and about their rapidly changing world. The only option available to them is to draw on the discourse from a previous cultural period, in this case – the Soviet one. Applying the concept of the post-Soviet aphasia to the 'queer' episode helps to bring to light how the positive intentions of the producers and, most probably, the Channel One producers do not find a relevant language to talk about queerness in the current discursive situation in Russia and thus

turn to the familiar Soviet narratives and tropes concerning homosexuality. This is indeed the only language available to them as Russian history of sexuality does not provide adequate tools of speaking (about) non-heterosexuality in an empowering way. Yet the supportive message they are sending is limited by the structural arrangements of the makeover genre that, as I have discussed above, is not ready to deal with non-heterosexual scripts.

By bringing together the discursive framing of the show with cultural and media activity of some crucial TV actors that have power to define the television politics, one could see the show, again, as an attempt to include the post-Soviet queer woman into the national project. In addition, because “the acceptance of public identity has never been an important part of the Russian history of sexuality” (Essig, 2014, p. 18), it simply cannot be argued that by ‘erasing’ Tania’s visual queerness, the show erases her queerness altogether.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have claimed that the episode of the makeover program *Fashion Verdict* in which two lesbian women are featured, should be read through the metaphor of the post-Soviet aphasia (Oushakine, 2000). In this reading, it is clear that the program is trying to offer ways of managing queer precarity and vulnerability in the increasingly homophobic conditions in contemporary Russia that has turned to ‘traditional values’, and for this reason the show eliminates queer visibility. But because of the absence of appropriate discursive tools to speak about queerness in empowering ways (due to specific history of sexuality and subjectivity in Russia that did not result in sexual identity politics), the program bases its rhetoric in the only available discursive regime – which is the Soviet one. The show deploys Soviet visual and discursive strategies concerning queer experience, and offers them as a way of survival in the Putin regime which cast non-heterosexuals to be outsiders to the nation’s physical and political well-being. This is what makes it tricky to identify those strategies as ‘non-homophobic’, but I suggest that this is the only way to make sense of this episode. Otherwise, the questions I asked at the beginning of this thesis could not be answered.

Throughout the thesis, I have paid particular attention to the interplay between Soviet and post-Soviet discourses on different levels of contemporary mainstream discourse, especially in relation to the Western and anti-Western rhetoric mobilized for different political purposes. I started with the history of Soviet homosexuality which was conceived of as deviant, criminal and ‘Western’, and in whose construction the binary ‘(materialistic) West versus (spiritual) East’ played a crucial role. In the construction of the post-Soviet Russian identity the figure of the homosexual as ‘Western’ continues to perform its ideological work. The anti-Western rhetoric has been intensified in the recent shift towards ‘traditional values’ in what has been called a biopolitical turn in Putin’s politics. The engagement with the concept of visibility

has demonstrated that queer visibility in Russia works in a different logic: unlike in the West, it does not lead to gaining political rights⁷. Thus, it is not a surprise that the makeover program ‘produces’ Tania, its queer recipient, as a feminine coded woman (aside the fact that any TV beauty makeover is programmed to do exactly this – to produce feminine women): there has been no history of visibility politics neither in the USSR nor in post-Soviet Russia, so the question of her erased visibility as a queer woman should not even be raised. On a critical note, though, by deploying the Soviet scripts of imagining a lesbian, the show implicitly demands its queer participants to stay within the confines of the private and not desire this private to be political.

I have also shown that this use of Soviet cultural scripts is present not only in this particular episode, not only on Russian makeover television, but on Russian television as well, and it has been very clearly articulated by Konstantin Ernst, who has admitted that shared cultural experience is what makes it easier for him as a cultural intermediary to work on cultural products that would ‘explain the time’. The concept of the post-Soviet aphasia can be clearly traced down here as something that enhances communication at times when other discursive tools are not available or not shared. I have also showed that in the *Fashion Verdict* episode, the binary *West versus Russia* is in a way turned upside down, partly because, even though Tania and Natasha, the lesbian participants, are presented as ‘Western’, they are treated with respect, which reflects unofficial Soviet discourse about the West. Their supposed ‘westernness’ does not preclude the show from inviting them to join the nation, which, again, speaks to ‘empowering’ implications of the program.

I am not suggesting that the reading presented here is the only possible reading of the episode. However, I believe that my reading does open up a space for critical engagement with the cultural sphere of post-Soviet Russia not limited to some often taken to be self-explanatory

⁷ However, as recent events in the USA and right-wing turn across Europe indicate, there can be no linear progressive narrative of ‘gay liberation’.

concepts such as visibility, homophobia, or empowerment. In adopting a critical postsocialist approach, I have showed how it is helpful in producing different understandings of the post-Soviet discursive field – understandings only made possible out of close engagement with the historical, political, social and cultural context in which the cultural product is produced. Again, I am not saying that we should completely abandon the ‘Western’ lens when looking at different contexts as it is indeed unreasonable to deny the huge impact of the global Western cultural imaginary on the development of queer politics elsewhere; importantly, I do not want to homogenize the ‘West’.

In other words, what I was trying to do is not to take a theory first and then find confirmation to this theory, knowing in advance what I want to prove. Instead, I went from the cultural text itself and then built interpretive contexts which would help to explain and make sense of the text. Basically, I followed Francesca Stella’s (2015) call for starting research with examining the postsocialist reality rather than with preexisting assumptions about how it should have been (which is *how it is in the West*). By questioning often taken for granted Western ideas about sexuality, identity, and visibility, this research demonstrates that there exist other optics that might provide new ways of looking at cultural fields, instead of assuming them to be merely ‘homophobic’. This study serves as a critical intervention into the scholarship on contemporary Russia’s homophobia, not stating that the mainstream media discourse in Russia is not engaged in homophobic politics but rather claiming that it is engaged in *different* politics, and there are some ruptures and inconsistencies in an apparently cohesive and linear homophobic media discourse which show the existence of counter-narratives even within the mainstream. Through critical engagement with the concept of visibility, I have showed how decentering Western-oriented epistemology proves useful for an understanding of the workings of post-Soviet politics of queer visibility.

Despite the fact that I have written around seventy pages about this makeover episode, I do not think this is an exhaustive research as there is so much more – more perspectives, more approaches, more angles through which to look at the show – that could provide additional resources for making sense of the program. To name just a few, audience research would shed light on the perception of the show among ‘straight’ and ‘queer’ viewers and examine the ways in which different audiences construct meanings around the program. Or, fashion studies might be another angle to look at the discourse of the show through a function of fashion in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Another possible topic might be to study what has been called “the makeover paradigm” (Gills, 2007) in contemporary Russia in the specific post-Soviet neoliberal conditions. I could go on with prospective research but my point is that this particular episode, as well as makeover programs on Russian television, offers almost unlimited opportunities for productive academic endeavors that could provide critical interventions into the current political regime in Russia.

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