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## **Lesbian love stories and online popular culture: The case of web series**

### *Introduction*

This chapter analyses grassroots symbolic productions associated with Russian LGBTQI+ communities<sup>1</sup> by focusing on the web series genre that is currently rapidly developing in Russia.<sup>2</sup> Web series are one of the most influential genres of digital storytelling (Aymar 2018); they enable people whose stories and identities are usually excluded from mainstream cultural industries to participate in, challenge, and appropriate well-known conventions of popular culture for their own use. Contrary to traditional TV series, web series are characterised by community-driven and participatory production models within convergent culture (ibid., see also Jenkins 2006). Web series are made in various genres and circulated via horizontal networks to different communities of viewers and fans. Globally, the ‘queer series’ involving characters with non-heterosexual, non-normative, and non-binary sexual and gender identities is the most widely circulating sub-genre of web series (Christian 2018, Terrace 2015).

This chapter investigates the Russian-language segment of this global online culture, focusing on lesbian-themed web series. My discussion in this chapter is thus located at the dynamic intersection of digital information flows, global popular culture, and the local negotiations of the political and cultural visibility of the Russian LGTBQI+ community. Although lesbian web series are scarce and marginal from the point of view of the Russophone digital media sphere as a whole, I maintain that their analysis will provide new tools to understand the ways popular culture’s conventions – including stereotypical representations of gender and sexuality – are creatively reused in the grassroots domain and moulded to meet the needs of domestic community-oriented storytelling.

My case study introduces a close textual analysis of two web series titled *Steklo* (Glass, 2013) and *Eto proiskhodit riadom s vami* (It’s Happening Right Next to You, 2015, hereafter *EPRSV*). Both series were made by independent cultural workers and released via online video streaming platforms around the time the Russian law against the ‘propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors’ was enacted. Both series have an age rating 18+, and they introduce an ensemble of lesbian characters who are not closeted but practice their sexuality freely and pursue new romantic (and sexual) relationships in the different public spaces of Moscow and St Petersburg. The series includes characters from all different walks of life, including a filmmaker, a visual artist, an actress, a sound editor, a taxi driver, a waitress, and a hairdresser. These different professional fields bring forth the variety of backgrounds, life-choices, and aspirations of the fictional characters. Most importantly, the narration of both series centres around romantic love, which is sometimes affected by societal and political pressures related to the Russian LGBTQI+ community.

Through a close analysis of the content of these web series, the contexts in which they were circulated, and the intertextual links they draw to various global and domestic cultural texts, this chapter advances our knowledge of how grassroots creative production negotiates the symbolic language, societal norms, and values underlying discourses on gender and sexual identities in contemporary Russia. By focusing on the web series genre, I will question the role of formulaic and genre-specific popular culture for this symbolic production, namely: what innovation can this type of

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<sup>2</sup> Web series have very recently been established as a professional field in Russia (for popular and currently new Russian web series productions, see Maliukova 2019; Barchenko 2019. For an analysis of amateur web series from the perspective of post-legacy TV, see Ratilainen 2020).

fictional storytelling offer to the cultural representation of Russian lesbian identity? I further ask: how is the symbolic space provided by web series empowering these identities? As part of the analysis, I elaborate on the reasons as to why queer web series are not developing as dynamically in Russia as some other alternative forms of digital storytelling that are also important for LGBTQI+ visibility.

Thematically, my analysis will concentrate on the symbolic production of the love relationship in these series. As an object of analysis, the love story is understood here as both a cultural narrative reproduced and proliferated via formulaic storytelling patterns and a cultural representation of a personal experience involving strong emotions, the sex drive, and a fundamental need to bond with another person.<sup>3</sup> In other words, love as both feeling and storyline functions in these web series as an important point of identification through which the viewers can experience the ups and downs of female same-sex relationships set against the urban backdrop of modern-day Russia.

In popular fiction, love stories are often supported by melodrama's 'cross-generic modality', which accentuates emotions and individual experiences, often in excessive ways (Gledhill and Williams 2018). Melodrama in narrative fiction also has the capacity to 'reveal the work of emotion in social and political processes' (ibid., ix). Remarkably, melodrama came to the fore in Russian and Soviet cultural production (literature, film, TV) at times of market and/or cultural relaxation, such as the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Khrushchev Thaw of the 1950-60s (Goscilo and Holmgren 1999, McReynolds and Neuberger 2002). In global TV, melodrama is often perceived as a 'feminine genre', targeting female audiences in familial settings, but, as some feminist TV scholars assert, it can be perceived also as a 'feminist' genre (Modleski 1979, Kaplan 1983). For instance, Tania Modleski argues that those entertaining and pleasurable forms of female anger and desire that prevail in televisual melodrama provide useful tools of expression for feminist cultural work across genres and art forms (Modleski 1979, 18). In this chapter, melodrama provides an important methodological framework for the analysis of the paradoxical use of popular culture's conventions to both challenge the heterosexual norm in Russian society and claim new spaces for romantic representations of female same-sex relationships.

My data comprise the two pilot episodes of *Steklo* available on Vimeo<sup>4</sup> and all episodes of *EPRSV*<sup>5</sup> available on YouTube (five episodes of the first season).<sup>6</sup> These data are supplemented with the YouTube channel of the director of *EPRSV* and promotional texts and interviews with the creators and actors of *Steklo* that were published on *Steklo*'s website around its launch in 2013. These secondary materials constitute an important paratext, i.e. a textual environment surrounding the two series and their release. It is nevertheless important to note that the *Steklo* website has since been removed from the internet; it was retrieved for the purposes of this research through the internet archive Wayback Machine (<https://archive.org/web/>). I will discuss the possible reasons for the ephemeral nature of *Steklo*'s online visibility further in this chapter. Both series were circulated mainly to the Russian LGBTQI+ community and shared in online social networks of Russian web series enthusiasts (see Ratilainen 2021). In addition to online distribution, they were screened to live audiences in nightclubs targeting predominantly lesbian customers.

In addition to contributing to the existing yet small body of academic research on the symbolic representations of lesbian love in the Russian cultural context, my chapter fills a gap in current scholarship focusing on *female* bodies and *female* agency as an important locus of queer politics. The binary understanding of gender and sexuality embedded in this focus might at first seem counterintuitive to the core ideas of queer studies, committed as they are to challenging any binary identity category, such as homo/heterosexual and female/male, as hierarchical and oppressive (Hall and Jagose 2012).<sup>7</sup> Aware of this contradiction, I maintain that the representations of distinctly lesbian identities and female same-sex love in a novel web series format contribute to 'queering' some of the

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<sup>3</sup> Love understood both as romance and erotic love, eros, and more abstractly as togetherness and communion, see hooks 2002.

<sup>4</sup> <https://vimeo.com/66995538>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTQE2rfFANdt2ODMCStNqgg>

<sup>6</sup> One episode from the first season (episode 5) and the entire second season (2 episodes) are currently missing.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the term 'queer' in the Russian and post-Soviet context, see Essig 1999; Kondakov 2016.

central cultural categories and institutions deemed foundational to Russian traditional patriarchal society.

Consequently, my discussion involves both the *poetics* (an analysis of the aesthetic and narrative means of the series) and *politics* (responses to the anti-gay law and links to LGBTQI+ activism) of the two series in question. In the following sections, I first present a brief literary review of previous scholarship on representations of lesbians in Russophone culture and global TV. From there, I move on to analysing the symbolic meanings of female same-sex love in *Steklo* and *EPRSV*. The section dedicated to *Steklo* untangles the complex network of intertextual and communication links involved in the (failed) launch of the first Russian L series. The following section on *EPRSV* considers intertextuality through the trope of St Petersburg and its importance to the lesbian community. In the concluding chapter, I bring together the most important findings and summarise how lesbian web series contribute to queering Russian media and culture.

### *Local and global frameworks of lesbian culture*

The intersection of gender and sexuality central to my analysis highlights the doubly marginalised female experience of non-normative and non-conforming sexuality (Wilton 1995). This is particularly relevant to the Russian context characterised by the Soviet legacy of the ‘working mother’ being basically the only legitimate gender identity for women (implicitly defining women’s sexuality solely through reproductive sex), and treating female homosexuality as a physical and mental illness (Haley 2001, Stella 2015). As, for instance, Francesca Stella notes (2015), the exclusion of female same-sex sexuality from both the civic and legal domains resulted in the greater invisibility of lesbian women in Soviet society than was experienced by male homosexuals.<sup>8</sup> Simultaneously, and somewhat paradoxically, it gave lesbian women more freedoms, especially within the private sphere (ibid.).

Russophone cultural discourses over different time periods developed a distinctive symbolic language and terminology around female homosexuality. Sexual transgression was embraced by writers, poets, and intellectuals at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In their work, inspired by Ancient Greek mythology, lesbian women were referred to as *amazonki* (Amazons) and lesbian desire as ‘Sapphic’ (Rubin 1994; Zhuk 1998).<sup>9</sup> Later in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, the Russian-language subcultural slang introduced expressions such as *rozovye* (pink), *tema* (theme), and *devchenki* (little girls) to address lesbian and queer women (Essig 1999, Healey 2001). These terms were used at least partly to avoid associations with Western gays and lesbians, who were deemed in the Soviet public consciousness to be the embodiment of deviant bourgeois societies. These domestic discourses persist and provide important tools for cultural self-identification for contemporary generations of queer and lesbian women (Afanasyev 2018, Lukinmaa 2020). At the same time, contemporary discourse on non-heteronormative female sexuality is changing rapidly under the influence of current trends in intersectional and queer feminism and the proliferation of various online resources. *Lesbianka*, for instance, is a widely used Russian term on online platforms that female members of the Russian LGBTQI+ community identify with, only sometimes reluctantly in the absence of a better term.<sup>10</sup>

Previous scholarly works focusing on cultural representations of lesbian women in the Russian (and Soviet) context are sporadic and methodologically diverse. They include analysis of ‘Sapphic themes’ in Russian Silver Age poetry (Burgin 1994),<sup>11</sup> female same-sex relationships within avant-

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<sup>8</sup> In the Soviet Union, male homosexuality was criminalised through the 1934 anti-sodomy law. Female homosexuality was in turn subject to punitive practices through medical institutions and social stigmatisation (see Haley 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Sappho was translated into Russian at that time (Zhuk 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Lesbian-themed YouTube channels, particularly video blogs by lesbian couples, are a rapidly growing segment of digital media in Russia. See the discussion of the term ‘lesbian’, for instance, KsenyaInfinity. #neshow (April 2, 2019), Bezymiannye istoriia liubvi dvukh zhenshchin (February 12, 2020), Two Girls Can (March 20, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> The writer Lidia Zinov’eva-Annibal and poets Lidia Gippius, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Sofia Parnok wrote about lesbian desire. Parnok, however, was the only openly lesbian Silver Age poet also in her private life. Tsvetaeva’s influence on later generations of lesbian artists has been particularly important. See Polyakova 1983; Zhuk 1998; Burgin 1994; Afanasyev et al. 2018.

garde culture (e.g. Zhuk 1998, Matich 2005), lesbian subcultures in the Soviet period (Zhuk 1998) and the visibility of lesbian (political) identity in rock and pop music of the early 2000s (Wiedlack and Neufeld 2015). Additionally, literature and film scholars have identified the trope of lesbian sexuality as an aesthetic means for expressing anxieties in relation to the changing gender order during the economic transition of the post-Socialist society (Baer 2011; Goscilo 1996). These works suggest that in Russian high cultural discourses (both pre-Revolutionary and post-Soviet), lesbian desire is conceptualised as an exotic other, a social and sexual anomaly, something that is essentially foreign to Russian culture – it is pathologised and submitted to the heteronormative ‘male gaze’ (Burgin 1993, Mulvey 1989). A few studies, however, show that popular culture, especially pop and rock music of the 2000s, developed a more inclusive take on lesbian identities and brought some elements of lesbian subculture into the mainstream (Wiedlack and Neufeld 2015).

Today, a variety of popular cultural representations of lesbian relationships related to the lived experience of the LGBTQI+ community are widely available on the Russian-speaking internet, for instance, in the format of fan fiction, sci-fi and fantasy literature, and weblogs. This realm of activism, fan, and grassroots-driven culture remains under-researched, and there is no previous scholarship investigating the role of Russophone queer communities as creators of popular culture for digital platforms. As a result, the analysis of *Steklo* and *EPRSV*, which originate in this dynamic domain of digital culture, is crucial in terms of providing an up-to-date understanding of the various cultural discourses around female same-sex desire available in Russia.

*Steklo* and *EPRSV* are also a rare encounter with a Russian adaptation of the global L series genre, made famous worldwide by *The L Word*, an American TV series from the early 2000s about glamorous lesbian and bi-sexual women based in LA (McCabe and Akass 2006).<sup>12</sup> In many respects, both *Steklo* and *EPRSV* follow *The L Word*’s cultural agenda of ‘balancing between the popular and the radical’ (Aaron 2006: 34). They create versatile and empowering representations of lesbian women who are comfortable with their sexuality and whose stories are interesting beyond their sexuality. At the same time, the visual style, especially of *Steklo*, seems to conform to mainstream popular culture’s feminine beauty ideals, which ultimately target the patriarchal male gaze (Mulvey 1989). For instance, the characters of *Steklo* appear frequently in softly pornographic sex scenes. In *EPRSV*, in turn, the St Petersburg lesbian community provides an important social context and emotional space (a ‘second family’) where both romance and friendship take place.

In terms of new media studies, my case study thus offers insights into the contradictory nature of the web series format, especially its L series segment, which exists between the traditional and new generation, mainstream and minority media. In the case of lesbian web series produced in contemporary Russia, it is also of particular importance to frame this media genre both as a newly emerging space of ‘televsual innovation’ (Christian 2018), marked by a tendency to create radical and subcultural stories with the help of mainstream culture’s storytelling tools, and as a creative response to the 2013 anti-gay law.

Although the leading contemporary web series creators in Russia deem LGBTQI+ and queer themed shows culturally important and in demand by the online viewership, professionally made queer web series have remained unfinished until very recently.<sup>13</sup> As it appears, their productions were blocked or delayed mostly for economic reasons, as potential sponsors both within the industry and those participating in grassroots crowdfunding practiced economic (self-)censorship. For instance, scriptwriter Yelizaveta Simbirskaja describes in an interview how she was pitching a new queer series *Ia idu iskat*’ in 2019 to a sponsor who then responded, ‘very good, but not in Russia’ (Belikov 2019). *Ia idu iskat*’, which brands itself as the ‘first Russian queer series’ and introduces a male protagonist, was finally released on YouTube in November 2020 after a long period of fundraising (VKontakte,

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<sup>12</sup> *The L Word* aired on the American cable network Showtime from 2003 to 2009 for six consecutive seasons. It is noteworthy that *The L Word* returned after a ten-year break with new seasons in December 2019 – during the writing of this paper – but rebranded as *The L Word: Generation Q*. The new seasons are available also through HBO’s streaming service.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, the VK group dedicated to *Ia idu iskat*’, a queer web series that piloted in 2019.

28 Oct, 2020).<sup>14</sup> Against this backdrop, *Steklo* and *EPRSV* can be seen as pioneering web series productions that have paved the way for newer and more distinctively ‘queer’ web series, such as *Ia idu iskat*, made by and for the consumption of millennials, i.e. the contemporary generation of progressive and liberal-minded ‘Russian hipsters’.

### *Global lesbians and intertextual melodrama*

*Steklo* advertises itself as the ‘first non-commercial L project’ (*pervyi nekommercheskii L-proekt*), ‘dedicated to the [depictions of] lives of young women with a non-traditional sexual orientation’ (*posviashchennyi zhizni devushek s netraditsionnoi seksual’noi orientatsii*). It indeed has a lot in common with the American series *The L Word*. For example, some characters in *Steklo* resemble quite closely those of *The L Word*, and together, the six main characters illustrate six different queer female types, which is also one of the factors that made *The L Word* a world-famous TV series. This intertextual link is most obvious in the case of *Steklo*’s character Sasha. Through her name, appearance, and her emotionally reserved but sexually promiscuous behaviour, she is reminiscent of Shane McCutcheon, one of the most iconic characters from *The L Word*.

In addition, intertextual connections between the two series take place on the level of televisual narrative techniques. For instance, the second episode of *Steklo* includes a dreamy episode, which depicts the inner world of another central character, the visual artist Lilia, and it brings to mind a sequence of similar scenes from *The L Word*’s second season that depict the imaginary world of the character Jenny, an aspiring fiction writer. These phantasmagorical scenes in both series play with allusions to the famous children’s novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, thereby evoking the tropes of girlhood and adventure, and the power of imagination as part of identity work. In *The L Word*, these imaginary scenes also depict the ways Jenny strives to come to terms with her childhood trauma, but in *Steklo* the deeper meaning of these aesthetically very similar scenes remains unclear, as Lilia’s story only gets started in the pilot episode but does not get a chance to develop further. At this point, these scenes merely frame Lilia as someone who lives in-between her dream world and the everyday world, and whose fascination with adventure translates into her relationships with women.

From the point of view of these intertextual links, *Steklo* definitely appears as the ‘Russian version’ of *The L Word* and a well-designed effort to plant the global genre of the L series in the Russian soil with the help of new web series technology. In addition, this degree of intertextuality can also be interpreted as a tribute to the Russian-speaking fans of *The L Word*. As a number of sources discuss, *The L Word* has over the years become a cult text for multiple generations of queer consumers of popular culture. For example, Sarah Warn describes how literally since day one, when the series was only starting on American cable TV, the LGBTQI+ community gathered online to reflect on how the characters and their stories related or did not relate to real-life queer identities (Warn 2006, see also Anderson Minshall 2006). A web series like *Steklo* would thus offer an opportunity to continue this tradition of queer female identification with and community-building around popular culture, and, with a renewed focal text, create a local platform for the Russian-speaking community of lesbian women.

Internet history, however, tells us also that this goal was not entirely achieved. In other words, the makers of *Steklo* did succeed in creating the concept and launching it in the form of two self-funded but otherwise professionally made pilot episodes, but the continuation of the project failed. *Steklo*’s homepage has now disappeared and only some remnants of its content are accessible through the internet archiving tool Wayback Machine. From what can be found, we can see that a certain amount of hype was created around the release of the pilot episodes in the spring of 2013. Public screenings were organised in lesbian nightclubs in Moscow and St Petersburg, and the promotional materials directly targeted potential supporters: ‘the fate of the series depends entirely on financial

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<sup>14</sup> See the post on the VKontakte page of the production house: <https://vk.com/herecomeseries>.

sources'. When making the pilot episodes, the actors worked without pay and therefore the entire budget of the series relied on crowdfunding.

The audience was invited to participate in creating the future episodes' content: 'you have a chance to make an impact on how the stories develop'. This participatory strategy is characteristic of contemporary web series and engages the audience also in the later stages of production, i.e. marketing and distribution through personal online networks. Regardless of these versatile methods of starting a new web series, the 'digital footprint' of *Steklo* remains surprisingly small.<sup>15</sup> Very little commentary and feedback can be found on social media forums and different platforms that specialise in TV and film reviews.

Another layer of this complexity can be fleshed out from an interview with one of the actors published on the *Steklo* website in 2013. In the interview, the actor describes how she generally found working in the production 'awesome' (*ofigenno!*). She felt she gave her all to the role but got 'three times more' in return. At the same time, somewhat contradictingly, she says that she dislikes and feels alienated from her character, Vasia (the diminutive of the Russian female name Vasilisa). Vasia is an androgynous butch type lesbian who is trying to get into the Theatre Academy for the third time. She enjoys clubbing and sexual adventures with random partners. In another interview, also published on the website, one of the two screenwriters describes Vasia as 'a living caricature of the Russian lesbian'. In turn, the actress playing Vasia says that *Steklo* 'ruined her life' and that she is not offered acting jobs anywhere else after working on *Steklo*. She does not explain these negative experiences in any more detail. We can, however, guess that acting in a queer role, even in a marginal small-circulation web production, can be both inspiring and alienating for a young actor at the beginning of her career. She can feel conflicted about her role because the 'stigma' of having played a queer part can affect her future in the job market, as the actress specified in the interview. These complexities nested in institutionalised homophobia could have been part of the cause for the early termination of *Steklo*.

Against this backdrop, it becomes clearer how the particular goal of *Steklo* – articulated in the creators' willingness to change Russian society's attitudes toward LGBTQI+, as they stated on the website that was put up to promote the series – is a most challenging one and reaches deeply to the personal level of everyone involved. This goal also challenges the creators to engage with the personal experiences of as many of the potential viewers as possible and in this way 'balance between radical and popular'. Similarly, *Steklo* utilises melodrama to allow a variety of possibilities for the portrayal of female same-sex desire in the context of contemporary Russian society.

The two pilot episodes introduce a series of emotionally intense encounters between the six central characters that could have developed into diverse love stories had the series continued. The very first scenes depict in fast-speed narration how artist Lilia meets and falls in love with Kristina, how the relationship goes sour after an intense beginning, and how Lilia then abandons Kristina. The end of their relationship is marked with a melodramatic scene in which Kristina sets fire to a pile of Lilia's belongings. At this point, it is clear that Kristina's emotions will also continue to be unsettled after the break-up, fuelling further conflicts, and the love story between the two women will progress in line with numerous televisual melodrama plots.

The melodramatic mode in *Steklo* also helps bring together a group of meanings, which can be seen as commenting on the representation of queer women in different cultural and historical contexts. In other words, *Steklo* creates a dialogue between different systems of signification through which lesbian women are represented to wider audiences in different contexts through its multi-layered use of intertextual connections. Such an encounter takes place, for example, between Sasha and Vasia. In their relationship, the viewer can see an encounter between two characters that derive from different systems of the popular cultural framing of non-heterosexual female sexuality. Sasha and Vasia meet

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<sup>15</sup> Obviously, the current restrictions to LGBTQI+ rights contribute to the complexity involved in making and distributing lesbian web series in ways that go even deeper than the economic self-censorship described earlier. However, this discussion goes beyond the scope of this chapter.

in a nightclub where Vasia first lays her eyes on Sasha and wants to get to know her better. Although Sasha responds coldly, she takes Vasia to her apartment (where Vasia passes out on the sofa). In the morning after, Vasia wakes up to the Soviet children's song 'Khoroshyi ty paren' Natashka' (You're a good boy, Natashka) that is playing loudly on television. The song is about a tomboyish Natasha, whose gender identity causes discomfort among her peers (she is 'too' mischievous, strong, and resourceful for a little girl), until she is approved of as the object of heterosexual desire by a young boy. Juxtaposed with Vasia's butch lesbian character, the song simultaneously evokes the themes of non-conforming gender identities and the norm of heterosexuality as Vasia's immediate frame of reference.

This frame of reference portrays Vasia as a Russian lesbian who is caught in the more restricted semantic context, perhaps alluding to the Soviet culture of sexuality and the double marginalisation of lesbian women. Elsewhere in the two pilots, she is perceived by others to be of 'undefinable gender' or mistaken for her female friend's (Lilia's) son. These impressions of bystanders render Vasia infantilised and 'sexless' in relation to *Steklo*'s other characters. Vasia's character thus represents female queer identity that is inconceivable especially from the viewpoint of the patriarchal gender hierarchy and residual Soviet culture.

This Soviet-associated representation of non-heteronormative female sexuality is then immediately contrasted with the character of Sasha, Vasia's new love interest. Sasha is shown as literally escaping the Soviet frame and instead connecting with an entirely different field of signification. On the same morning, Sasha has gone to work where she self-confidently seduces her female co-worker, who in a later scene confesses that it was the first time she had had sex with a woman. There is no gender or sexual ambiguity involved, and Sasha comes across as an irresistible lesbian seductress. This is also exactly the kind of sexual encounter in which the character of Shane from *The L Word* repeatedly finds herself in the American counterpart of *Steklo*. Through these multi-layered references to both internationally circulating popular culture's representations of famous lesbian characters and the (Soviet) patriarchy-driven symbolic order, *Steklo* opens up an opportunity for narrative negotiations of female queer sexual identities in-between local and global symbolic orders: patriarchal repression and sexual liberation.

#### *Lesbian love as communion*

*EPRSV*, a web series filmed in St Petersburg, appeared on YouTube in 2015, roughly two years after *Steklo*. The episodes were released through the personal channel of the series' director, which she uses to store and share her work. At the time of writing this chapter, the channel hosts more than 300 videos filmed in different styles and genres. Thematically, most of the videos are linked to the Russian lesbian community and creative culture. For instance, the first clip, posted in 2011, is a fan-made music video to an acoustic song by Nochnye snaipery, 'Vsegda/V gorode moem' (Always/In my city). The video superimposes a multi-layered visual narrative to a song by one of the most iconic Russian lesbian rock bands (see Wiedlack and Neufeld 2015), starring the director herself, which is a combination of elements and themes that repeats in many other videos of the channel, including the six episodes of *EPRSV*.

It also engages with the city of St Petersburg in a very meaningful way, which is also one of the most characteristic aspects of *EPRSV*. The song by Nochnye snaipery is a melancholic rock ballad, addressed to a former lover, whom the 'lyrical I' – i.e. the narrator of the song – still misses greatly. This narrative of lost love intermingles with both harsh and tender images of the city where the story takes place. As a result, the city appears as dear and magical in the eyes of the lyrical I as the former lover does, and these two entities are magically merged into one. In a similar manner as in this 'visual rock poem' created and shared by a young filmmaker on YouTube, the city of St Petersburg attains many lyrical meanings in the Russian cultural tradition. This field of signification with the added

meaning of St Petersburg as Russia's 'lesbian capital' and a western-oriented metropolis – a place where some members of the LGBTQI+ community feel they can be out more safely than in smaller regional cities – constitutes the most important interpretative framework for the second example of my chapter, the grassroots web series *EPRSV*.

*EPRSV* stands out from the rest of the channel's videos with two distinctive features. First, it relies on the genre conventions of narrative TV fiction, more precisely, romantic comedy and melodrama, and, second, it makes a political statement concerning Russia's anti-gay law. In essence, *EPRSV* is showing the kind of St Petersburg the anti-LGBTQI+ politics in Russia aims to conceal from the larger audience. It depicts a lesbian community that is fully integrated into the social matrix of St Petersburg through the professional and love lives of its members, and, most importantly, through the noisy and communal nightlife that spreads from within nightclubs to the most iconic spots of the city. This also means that in *EPRSV*, the local lesbian community is depicted in much more detail than in *Steklo*. In addition, the personal YouTube channel as the home of the series suggests that the community is also the primary target audience of *EPRSV*, although the fact that some episodes are dubbed into English implies that *EPRSV* was at some point produced also with the global LGBTQI+ audience in mind.

In other words, the fictional storytelling of *EPRSV* seamlessly intermixes with the other videos that are published on the director's channel. For example, the actors who play fictional characters in *EPRSV* appear as private people in many other videos, which further confuses the traditional viewer experience of TV drama and brings it closer to the more contemporary viewer experience of the internet's user generated content, such as personal video blogs. Therefore, also when analysing the different aspects of lesbian love stories in *EPRSV*, it is hard not to take into account its paratexts, i.e. the other videos of the director's YouTube channel. However, I think that through a close examination of *EPRSV* alone, we can find a key to understanding the overall cultural and political meaning lesbian love attains in this particular online context.

The same-sex female love story forms the centre of storytelling here as well in a manner typical of TV drama. The romantic plotline consists of conventional building blocks: the couple meets, falls in love, has doubts about each other's feelings, but finally reconciles and finds a way to be together. In addition, *EPRSV* conveys a typical 'St Petersburg love story' in which (almost in the manner of a more classical 'Petersburg text') the city itself is portrayed as an active agent contributing to the story in a number of ways. For instance, the iconic, often nightly silhouette of the city in the background of the key scenes at different stages of the love story serves as an aestheticising and intensifying component that can be interpreted as expressing the heightened emotional state of the two lovers. At the same time, St Petersburg with its forever surprising social life and architecture lays obstacles in the lovers' way, especially when they are trying to meet for the first time. In this process, *EPRSV* visually encodes several places in St Petersburg as lesbian-specific queer spaces where women can come together to meet their (future) lovers and socialise with friends. These lesbian spaces include a number of well-known St Petersburg attractions and activities, such as watching the bridges be raised on summer nights and taking boat rides along the historical canals. However, the most meaningful communal space is a nightclub where the young women are shown both as occupying different professional roles (as owners, managers, bartenders, DJs, performers) and maintaining a half-private, half-public space of togetherness and hospitality.

The lead romantic plot described above unfolds around the characters of Julia and Ira. However, an equally important storyline follows the evolving friendship between the three main characters, Julia, Oksana, and Samolyot (Russian for 'aeroplane'). Throughout the six episodes, the group of friends is shown providing each other emotional support, which emphasises the meaning of close collectives as a 'chosen family', an alternative social framework of care and intimacy that comes to replace more institutionalised social formations such as the nuclear family.

Thus, *EPRSV* is a representation of both romantic female same-sex love and female-centred collective love, which the feminist scholar bell hooks discusses through the concept of *communion*

and describes as an important space of empowerment in particular for women within patriarchal cultures. Communion, hooks argues, is an important counter-power to the dominant cultural narrative of romantic love through which women are socialised from an early age to become nurturers and take up passive and submissive roles in relation to men. Communion in turn, hooks goes on to explain, is a wholesome emotional and social connection felt in collectives; it refers to such human bonding that is actually based on those qualities that are culturally encoded as being feminine, such as care giving and work on emotions (hooks 2002/2016).<sup>16</sup>

These ideas of the chosen family and communion in *EPRSV* are contrasted with Ira's coming out story, which takes place within the nuclear family. Ira's story opens up a narrative space to tackle the tensions between sexual identity and the heteronormative idea of the nuclear family. In the second episode, Ira's mother finds out that the young women – Julia and her friends with whom she has shared a taxi and then brought to her apartment (to use the bathroom, as an act of commonplace Russian hospitality) – are lesbian. At this point, Ira's mother is not even aware of Julia's romantic interest in her daughter, Ira. However, the mother loses her temper and starts yelling, 'Stop, what girl [you're going to see], so you are *those*,' and goes on, 'You deviants! I will not permit anything like this in my house!' Ira's mother is using here the Russian word *izvrashchenka* to refer to the 'deviant' lesbian women. A literal translation of the word is 'woman behaving against social norms', and it can also be used to refer to prostitutes, so it is thus a very offensive insult. Through the character of Ira's homophobic mother, then, the nuclear family becomes a social context in which hostile and discriminatory discourses are reproduced. As another scene with Ira and her family shows, these discourses intertwine with the patriarchal expectations of an 'ideal' husband and a family, which mothers project onto their daughters. In a family in which the daughter does not match with the heteronormative ideals of the nuclear family, these expectations appear not only as restrictive to one's sexual autonomy but also deeply offensive.

The point of view of lesbian daughters is discussed more closely in a scene in which Julia and her friends have a conversation about Ira's difficult situation with her mother (by this point, Ira's mother has found out about Ira's sexuality and threatens to throw her out of the house). This prompts the group of friends to elaborate on their experiences with their own mothers. Both Julia and Oksana confess that they have not come out to their mothers because they do not want to cause them any trouble. Julia goes on to describe how hurtful it is for her to hide the truth, and how keeping secrets has alienated her from her immediate family. On the narrative level though, the family bond precedes the romantic one, despite the troubled nature the (biological) nuclear family has on the lives of the young lesbian women in *EPRSV*. So, Ira decides to stay at home in order to resolve the conflict with her mother instead of moving in with Julia as was originally planned.

Thus, *EPRSV*'s storytelling format – the serial TV drama – provides a culturally recognisable framework for a nuanced discussion of the multiple manifestations of homophobia in the family contexts of today's Russia. This innovative way of using TV's narrative formula for queer storytelling also suggests that there is no right or wrong way to confront homophobia within intimate family connections. *EPRSV* rather asks the viewer an open question instead of offering ready-made answers. This is the space of identification, a space in which everyone can imagine what they would do in a similar situation. Simultaneously, the family tension illustrated through the conflict between daughters and mothers in *EPRSV* is a reflection of contemporary Russian society as a whole.

The title *Eto proiskhodit riadom s vami*, 'It's happening right next to you', is in fact Ira's response to her mother, who is in denial about these issues, both in the family and in society. From this family setting, the narrative then moves on to make a more direct commentary on societal-level sexual politics, in particular, the recent federal anti-gay law. This starts with a scene in which Julia,

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<sup>16</sup> In religious discourse, as David Bakan notes, 'communion manifests itself in the sense of being at one with other organisms' (Bakan 1966, 15 cited in Jensen & Kolb 2002, 20).

Oksana, and Samolyot are planning to have a night out at the lesbian club. At the club's entrance, though, they meet the owners, who explain that 'a city official got offended' and the club is closed 'until things calm down'. Disappointed, Julia asks in response, 'what kind of government makes a law that violates basic human rights?'

From here, the narrative moves on to an embedded music video, which disrupts the fictional storytelling mode with a direct speech addressed to the viewer. As themselves, the actors perform a rap whose lyrics articulate a message in a language close to LGBTQI+ rights activism. The lyrics ask why the decision-makers have pressed for a law that is 'anti-love'. Why are there 'social mechanisms' that prevent certain groups of people from even dreaming about the things that to others are a natural part of life: family, home, and love? The rap criticises the dominant discourse of sexuality that labels non-heterosexual people as 'minorities' and heterosexuals as 'natural' (in Russian, *naturaly*). Instead, the song suggests in nature, each individual is equally unique, and that nature does not draw differences between 'us' and 'them'.

At the end, the rap invites everybody in the LGBTQI+ community to rise above these confrontations and polarisations characterising Russian state-level sexual politics and 'choose peace' instead of aggressively protesting against homophobic regulations, which can be read also as a subtle criticism of some vocal forms of LGBTQI+ activism that were rising in Russia at the time. Visually, the video very efficiently brings together and reshuffles already familiar images and scenes of St Petersburg and the lesbian community. Simultaneously, it provides an additional layer to the overall narrative, as the city of St Petersburg now creates a new (utopian) background for a peaceful co-existence of the polarising mechanisms of the state and the LGBTQI+ community, which is becoming even stronger in communion.

### *Conclusion*

My chapter has discussed how web series are a flexible format of video storytelling that provides video makers with the creative freedom to discuss gender and sexuality from a variety of angles. At the same time, it brings the politics of sexuality into the realm of symbolic production and connects it with globalised genres of television fiction, in this case, melodrama and, more specifically, the L series.

In the contemporary Russian context, an independent grassroots web series about lesbian women is a subversive media text on a number of levels. First, it appropriates mainstream TV's formulaic conventions to create new nonconforming representations of gender and sexuality. Second, an LGBTQI+ themed web series in the Russian context can be viewed as setting the cultural agenda for advancing LGBTQI+ rights in a restrictive political environment, and therefore they can also be seen as an alternative to direct political activism, such as street protest and campaigning. However, when interpreting the content, the relationship of the web series analysed here to the LGBTQI+ rights movement remains ambiguous. On the level of storytelling, the political agency of individual lesbian characters is questioned and revolting against the homophobic state is even subtly criticised. Instead, the melodramatic mode of the storytelling foregrounds community, everyday life, and love as domains of LGBTQI+ visibility and agency.

From the point of view of production management and technology, web series are high-stake and high-commitment projects, which differentiates them from a lot of other user-generated content available on video sharing platforms. The making of web series requires such resources that are difficult to secure as a grassroots actor. Filming even one whole episode takes several weeks and involves the collaboration of a group of people. To sum up, on the one hand, making videos for online distribution with contemporary technology is highly accessible and cost-efficient, but on the other, the production process of an entire web series – from screenwriting to acting to post-production – requires special-skill creative and production management resources. These factors limit the potential number of high-quality grassroots and independent web series available for free viewing.

In addition, the current political situation in Russia poses challenges to LGBTQI+-themed video productions, even though *Steklo* and *EPRSV* were made in and for the grassroots domain, outside state channels. Potential investors may be influenced by economic self-censorship and refuse to participate in the crowdfunding of projects that are politically sensitive, and also others who participate in the production of LGBTQI+ series can deem their involvement a threat to their future professional paths.

My case study thus suggests that in the current political situation, web series about LGBTQI+ and queer topics are difficult to make professionally, although the recent release of *Ia idu iskat* by the Moscow-based production house Fancy Production is a positive example that makes one expect more interesting future developments within this newly emerging branch of cultural production in Russia. At the same time, grassroots amateur series still offer more creative freedom, although they appear to be somewhat unpredictable from the point of view of the community viewership, since episodes, seasons, or other related material can disappear from the internet without prior notice. This was the case with both series analysed in this chapter as well.

The goal of my text analysis was to gain insights on both the *poetics* and *politics* of Russian lesbian web series. More specifically, I looked at how these series negotiate lesbian cultural politics through layers of symbolic work intersecting the locally oriented and global, as well as the Soviet and post-Soviet stereotypes involved in cultural representations of female same-sex relationships. In this respect, I found slight differences between the two series: *Steklo* focused mainly on romantic relationships between different individuals, whereas *EPRSV* expanded to cover multiple collectives, such as family, friends, and the local lesbian community.

I also analysed the ways both series draw important intertextual connections to specific texts of popular and high culture. In the case of *Steklo*, the most important intertextual connection is to the American TV series *The L Word*, which is further juxtaposed with the more 'local' Soviet and Russian tradition of representing lesbian desire. This dynamic produces new imagery of modern Russian lesbian women who live their everyday lives balancing between the individualistic urban culture and patriarchal Soviet and Russian stereotypes of gender and sexuality. In *EPRSV*, in turn, the well-known St Petersburg trope from both canonical literature and poetry and film and TV drama offers an important frame of reference. These representations participate in queering the historical meaning of St Petersburg as a main Russian city of culture and stories and emphasise its historical meaning as the stage for political protest, which the lesbian community is now stepping onto with its own voice.

All these layers of meaning can also be understood from the point of view of the ways in which lesbian women – their voices and stories – are made and can be made visible in contemporary Russian society. Lesbian web series are a creative channel for LGBTQI+ activism in which the demand for societal legitimacy and the cultural visibility of LGBTQI+ communities are embedded in storytelling styles familiar from both formulaic popular fiction and the Russian cultural tradition. As independent cultural products, however, they have greater longevity than the majority of other messages created solely for the purposes of online activism.

Finally, my case study shows that lesbian web series participate in queering contemporary Russian media and culture in at least three important respects. First, they propose a 'queer format' in which non-conforming and non-normative female gender and sexual identities can become part of the mainstream TV aesthetic. Through the re-use of the mode of melodrama, the series are queering cultural notions of female love: women take both active and passive, promiscuous and asexual, nurturing and destructive roles as agents of romantic love. Second, the love trope develops an understanding of collective love, *communion*, transcending the interpersonal and binary notions of love relationships dominant in romantic fiction. Third, and perhaps most importantly, my chapter uncovers a new queer middle ground in Russian media and culture: a grassroots-led digital space that exists in-between radical political art and state-aligned mainstream culture. The key to understanding this terrain is to pay attention to the creative ways of *re-using* cultural resources in symbolic production, and to the variety of contexts and communities the stories created in this way speak to.

Web series are a small fraction of this new cultural middle ground, which certainly deserves more attention in future research.

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