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# **The queer coat: Konstantin Goncharov's fashion, Russian masculinity and queer world building**

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## **Abstract**

I re-assess Russian sartorial economics of the 1990s by examining fashion by Konstantin Goncharov, who was credited for styling Russian rock stars and making costumes for artistic projects. I focus on the relationship between queer masculinity and sartorial practice. The former relies on a visual code encompassing a range of multi-platform, cross-media strategies and a network of references. The latter refers to a community of individuals engaged in the production of a characteristic style across different sites. The article proposes the concept of queer world-building, which brings together object-oriented and community-oriented practices. Central to Goncharov's world is 'the queer coat', a costume designed for his clientele and a historically grounded metaphor for Russian society. It designates the process of creative re-modelling of pre-Soviet and Soviet aesthetics, producing a complex cultural exchange challenging dominant notions of masculinity. Goncharov's cross-platform and intermedial work captures the spirit of multi-centric cultural activity of the 1990s.

## **Keywords**

queer world building  
masculinity  
homosexuality  
Konstantin Goncharov  
Timur Novikov  
New Academy

## **Introduction**

Arthur Elgort's photograph for the 1991 US edition of *Vogue* captures the emergence of a new fashion, aesthetic and sociality in St. Petersburg during the period of neo-liberal reforms and dissolution of the USSR (Figure 1). It shows how a poor Soviet interior is being re-modelled for the new capitalist era by placing a collage on the wall and painting the door to the room with a decorative ornament. Both the collage and the ornament convey a sense of change, fluidity and instability. Soviet kitsch – the *Pravda* newspaper and metal tea cup holders – is out of focus, whilst the bright sofa spread and bold fashion designs are in focus. This shift in optics signifies a change in the Russian cultural landscape, on the one hand, and western economics of attention, on the other. The photograph features three individuals, from right to left: Christy Nicole Turlington Burns, an American model who represented Calvin Klein's Eternity campaign in 1989; Irena Kuskenaite, a Soviet model, socialite and film actor who appeared in the cult film by Sergei Solov'ev *Assa* (Assa, 1989); and Konstantin Goncharov, a fashion star of the early 1990s who was responsible for styling the stars of the Russian alternative cultural scene of the period. Their postures, the direction of the gaze and their relationship to the interior, all suggest an emergence of new sartorial practices and forms of subjectivation in the post-Soviet context, including emphasis on the direct transatlantic, that is, Russian-western cultural exchange. It is the figure of Goncharov that will provide me with focus in my exploration of the transformations of fashion and masculinity, particularly the role of queer masculinity, in the new Russia.



**Figure 1:** A photograph of the cover of the 1991 US edition of Vogue featuring Arthur Elgort's photograph of fashionistas in St. Petersburg.

Russian men's fashion of the 1990s was diverse in terms of stylistics, orientation and structure. It consisted of the following: the conservative style of the Soviet establishment, including grey suits and fur hats, often stereotyped and mocked in western popular culture; the aspirational style of Russian youth, which was predominantly derived from recent western fashion; and the assertive style of Russian entrepreneurs, who, whilst lacking the sartorial sophistication of their western counterparts, spent fortunes on their dress. The majority of Russian men acquired clothes in two ways. They would either buy clothes in boutiques in Moscow and abroad (the elite consumer) or buy knockoff brands, made in China, Poland and Turkey, in markets and in second-hand shops (the mass consumer). There were some established male designers active at that time – for example, Vyacheslav (Slava) Zaitsev and Valentin Yudashkin – who were rumoured to be gay. However, little is known about small designers and the grassroots phenomenon of men's fashion and fashion produced by men emerging at that time. It is important to assess their role in terms of producing new identities and sociality, including that of queer masculinity.

My discussion is simultaneously a reflection on and a reconstruction of a period that is often disregarded in studies of Russian culture (e.g. Franklin and Widdis 2006; Gorham et. al. 2014; Mead et. al. 2001; Strukov and Hudspith 2018). The period is framed, at one end, by the announcement of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika, which eventually paved the way for neo-liberal reforms and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, and at the other, by the financial crisis of 1998, which devastated the Russian Federation (the RF, hereafter) and enabled the establishment of the neo-liberal authoritarianism associated with the leadership of President Vladimir Putin. Thus, the 1990s is a specific period in recent Russian history that requires investigation in terms of new economics, sartorial practice, masculinity and queerness.

The 1990s are remembered as the period of rapid changes and the coexistence of Soviet-era socialist and new Russian neo-liberal consumer practices (Goralik 2015). For example, the old practice of adapting, customizing and upscaling clothes coexisted with the new practice of mass market, throw-away fashion. Men used the increasingly diverse sartorial styles to (re-)define and express their masculinity. Aleksey Balabanov's 1998 *The Brother (Brat)*, one of the most popular movies of post-Soviet Russia, captures these transformations. The film is about a young man called Danila (Danila Bagrov) who arrives in St. Petersburg in search of a better life. Danila wrongly believes that his elder brother will provide him with support and moral guidance; instead, he gets Danila involved in the criminal activities of the local gang. The film portrays a range of Russian masculinities, using costume as one of the principal means of expression. The dominant type is the confused angry man exemplified by Danila and his associates. As Danila's character develops, his sartorial style changes too. From a confused and socially awkward young man, he evolves into a confident and merciless killer (Figure 2). Danila's transition from one style to another is not just a feature of a criminal thriller but a symbol of rapid transformations of identity too. The strategies of trying new styles, being in disguise and adopting a completely new personality were particular to

the 1990s, the decade of experimentation with identity, including sexual identity, possibly thanks to the dissolution of the USSR.



**Figure 2:** Danila wearing a ‘killer’ coat. Still from Aleksey Balabanov’s *Brother* (1998).

In the post-Soviet Russian pandemonium of fashion and masculinity, was there room for sartorial expression of queer masculinity? How did it manifest itself socially and aesthetically? Were homosexual men involved in the construction of queer fashion? What objects and practices came to symbolize queer masculinity? Were they relegated to underground bars and night clubs or did they occupy a central position on Russian cultural scene, especially in local contexts? How did queer masculinities connect to Russian masculinities generally?

To answer these questions, I explore the case of Konstantin Goncharov (24 April 1969–17 May 1998), aka Kostya Goncharov, a fashion designer who was based in the late 1980s and the early 1990s in St. Petersburg. He was queer in the sense that he was a practising homosexual and that he made fashion that queried the dominant sartorial, cultural and aesthetic discourse. In addition to making queer styles, Goncharov was involved in the production of a queer community in St. Petersburg, which, as I show below, had a social and cultural dimension. In the first instance, Goncharov was responsible for producing queer sociality. In the latter, he contributed to the construction of Russian queerness across different historical periods, that is, he established Russian queer tradition by re-visiting and re-assessing the Russian cultural canon (Figure 3).

Together with his lover Aleksey Sokolov, Goncharov founded a fashion label named A Strict Young Man, which was inspired by Soviet cinema. He designed clothes for the new elite of the St. Petersburg cultural scene and their friends in Europe and elsewhere. He is credited for styling Russian rock performers including Zhanna Aguzarova and Viktor Tsoi.<sup>1</sup> Goncharov made costumes for the *Leda* and the *Swan* ballet and for a photographic project based on *The Golden Ass* (*The Metamorphoses of Apuleius*). His work has been shown in museums in Denmark, Hungary, Poland, Sweden, the United States and other countries. His items have been acquired by leading Russian museums such as the Hermitage and the Russian Museum. Despite the artistic, curatorial and institutional appreciation of Goncharov’s work, his queer creativity has not been accounted for in Russian and western research.



**Figure 3:** Konstantin Goncharov and Timur Novikov. Courtesy of Aleksey Sokolov.

Goncharov made coats for his friends, associates and some Russian and foreign clients who were ‘friends of friends’.<sup>2</sup> Making and selling clothes was a way to express himself artistically and to build a community consisting of people who appreciated his work and were gay or gay-friendly (Andreeva 2016). Goncharov’s circle of friends was the first instalment of what was to emerge later as the Russian creative class (Kuleva 2018) that from the very outset was transnational in nature. It was also a means to create and propagate the specific sartorial style of the New Academy of Fine Arts, a loose association of artists, performers, musicians, curators, researchers and so on, including Georgy Gur’yanov, Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe, Bella Matveeva, Ol’ga Tobreluts, Olesya Turkina and many others. They were brought together by Timur Novikov (1958–2002), a curator, art manager and promoter of ‘new academism’, a type of art and life practice (Andreeva 2013). Owing an aesthetic debt both to the French academy and to Andy Warhol’s Factory, the New Academy existed in opposition to the style of socialist realism and its deconstructivists such as the Moscow Conceptualists. Novikov bestowed on his associates titles of Professors of the New Academy, thus formalizing their informal network.

Goncharov’s fashion conveyed both excitement and anxiety about the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s. These feelings were expressed in the queer coat, a costume designed by Goncharov for his clientele and a historically grounded metaphor for Russian society. Using a monochrome palette and baroque architecture, Goncharov re-interpreted the military trench from the nineteenth century. Against this ‘colourful’ background of Russian everyday fashion of the 1990s, Goncharov’s coats were radical in their monochrome austerity: the conservative choice of colours and patterns was subversive. His coat was a symbol of continuity in the discontinuous world of the 1990s. It conveyed a sense of stoicism, diffidence and self-respect, and so he re-invented the austere, strict man in contrast to the fastidious, angry man of the period. Some elements of design invited tactile exploration of the piece that accommodated fear, vulnerability and physical intimacy. They were an expression of queer masculinity.

Goncharov laid the foundation for a relationship between queer masculinity and sartorial practice in the Russian post-independence context. My purpose here is not to suggest that Goncharov’s oeuvre invites exclusively a reading through the prism of ‘gay art’ and ‘gay experience’, but rather to suggest that his oeuvre extends our knowledge about gender and sexuality in Russia. Indeed, Dan Healey (2001), Brian Baer (2009) and Aleksandr Kondakov (2017) focus on providing a historical account of homosexuality in Russia, on studying gay motifs in literature and assessing levels of discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities. However, they are not concerned with the experience of a homosexual man of the 1980s–90s and how his identity was conveyed in artistic and sartorial terms.

Central to my discussion below is an analysis of Goncharov's designs alongside the analysis of their cultural significance and relation to the community of homosexual men who were active on the cultural scene in St. Petersburg in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> My purpose is not to provide a panoramic survey of Russian fashion, or to map the 'gay scene' of the 1990s. Equally, it is neither to engage in the discussion of Russian masculinity in crisis,<sup>4</sup> nor produce a taxonomy of Russian queer visual codes. These should be objectives for another set of research publications. Rather, my main objective is to document and analyse the work of the designer and his associates and thus enrich the discourse about (Russian) queer culture of the 1990s. My additional objective is to identify the inspirations for Goncharov's design and to reveal their cultural significance. The latter allows me to provide a conceptualization of artistic and social practice through the notion of 'queer world building'.

I understand queer world building as a complex process of employing multi-platform, cross-media strategies and a network of references to articulate particular visual codes, convey values and put in place patterns of consumption. This process also involves building and engaging a community of individuals in the production of a characteristic style across different sites of cultural activity. Finally, queer world building defines the process of counteracting hegemonic discourses through the subversion of heteronormative sexualities and through building and enabling alternative communities working both synchronically in the local context and – in art and imagination – diachronically in a transnational context. The conceptual framework of queer world building implies that queer masculinity emerges as a concept greater than that of 'identity', 'practice' and 'a type of embodiment' (see, e.g., Halberstam 2005). It signifies a way of inhabiting urban space and making networks. Following Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt (2016), I propose to consider queer world building as a different way of being in the world and, more than this, a process of creating different worlds.<sup>5</sup> In the subsequent sections, through tracing social and cultural interconnections, I explore queer world building by orienting my discussion, first, towards the object, and, later, towards the community. These two ways of orienting my discussion reveal the composition of Goncharov's queer world, on one level, and on another, shed light on the changing fabric of the Russian economy, culture and society in the 1990s.

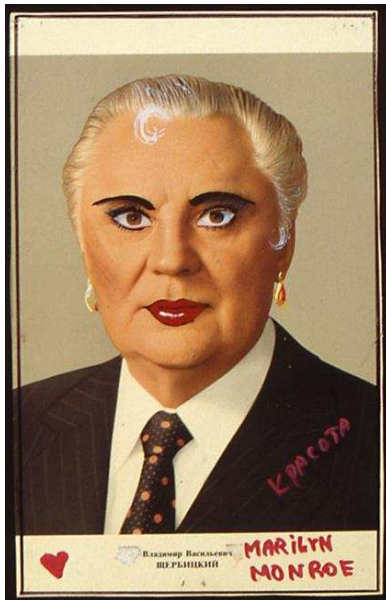
### **The queer coat**

The 1990s have been conceptualized as a transition period from socialism to capitalism. At first, the label 'post-Soviet' was meant to emphasize the process of disassembling Soviet economic and political structures such as the planned economy, one-party system and censorship. Later, the term came to signify late-socialist practices that had been carried over into the new era such as corruption, clientalism and authoritarianism. For some, the 1990s is the first decade of the new Russian century; for others, it is the concluding decade of the Soviet century.<sup>6</sup> In fact, nowadays how one understands the 1990s reveals their political and cultural outlook. It was an unusual, ambiguous period, a decade in-between, and even, I argue, a queer decade.

Male homosexuality was de-criminalized in 1993; however, homophobia was rife in the RF, following decades of oppression and stigmatization. Female homosexuality and other forms of non-heteronormative sexuality had never been criminalized; however, they were seen as a 'deviation' and 'disease'. Researchers have commented on the absence of the western-style 'gay liberation movement' in the Russian context (Healey 2001), meaning that queer identities and practices were conceptualized in a different way. I argue that it is through grassroots initiatives and networks such as Goncharov's fashion label and his queer coat that Russian queer communities gained some visibility a long time before the terms 'gay' and 'LGBTQ+' were introduced into the Russian mainstream discourse under Putin. Sartorial designs and social networks that appeared due to Goncharov's fashion were object- and network-oriented articulations of queerness in a society that was going through a major shift politically, socially and economically.

For example, in 1990 Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe, another member of Novikov's New Academy, produced a series of works entitled 'Members of the Politburo' (Figure 4). He etched and painted over official photographs of the Soviet government, which at that time consisted of white

heteronormative men. On one level, Mamyshev-Monroe makes use of the familiar ways of queering patriarchal masculinity. He applies makeup, changes the hairstyles and facial expressions of Soviet politicians so that they appear as men in drag. On another level, Mamyshev-Monroe challenges the social and economic structure exemplified by these men. By ‘decorating’ the members of the Politburo, the artist criticizes the consumer culture of the late socialist period, or rather the very lack of consumer goods. He acknowledges that basic items such as lipstick and face cream were available to the Soviet elite but not to the ordinary Soviet citizens who had to make-do with whatever was available by engaging in shadow economics of informal networks.



**Figure 4:** Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe’s Politburo. A fragment.

In the USSR, the connection between consumer culture and queerness was established in such a way that being a conspicuous consumer meant to be a challenger of the Soviet regime. In popular Soviet culture, the consumer – both female and male – was conceived of as a sexual predator or delinquent.<sup>7</sup> In the newly formed RF, the points of attitudes were reversed so that the consumer and consumption attained a new symbolic status, that of the promoter of neo-liberal reforms that, like in the West, included the privatization of public services and national resources, but on an epic scale. In fact, in the 2000s consumption was employed as the new state ideology of the Putin government (Goscilo and Strukov 2011).

Being cognizant of these transformations in the political, social and cultural attribution of consumption, Goncharov aimed at producing fashion that did not simply respond to the changing environment of the 1990s but looked beyond it as a new kind of avant-garde. The Russian avant-garde of the 1920s was radical in rejecting the cultural norms and aesthetic forms of the previous era. For example, Varvara Stepanova invented the utilitarian dress, the purpose of which was to despatch with the late-tsarist economics of fashion and conceptualization of gender. The utilitarian dress symbolized the central position of the Soviet woman in the system of economic and symbolic production, including a new relationship to body and embodiment. By contrast, Goncharov was involved in the reinvention of the tradition, not in the rejection of it. In the literature on Russian politics, this strategy has been described as a conservative turn, or even conservative revolution.<sup>8</sup> Arguably, Goncharov’s interest in the tradition was part of the broader postmodern aesthetic celebrating (historical) imitations and reinvention of styles (Hutcheon 1988).

Indeed, Goncharov re-installed practices that had been rejected by Russian consumers. In place of western-sounding labels such as Levy’s and Mavi, Goncharov coined a label using the Russian language and Cyrillic alphabet – ‘Strogii yunosha’ – the meaning and cultural significance of which I discuss below. At a time when Russians were obsessed with mass-produced clothes

because they symbolized the kind of affluence, quality and freedom not available during the Soviet era, Goncharov placed emphasis on handmade, unique pieces. Whilst for many Russians being fashionable meant carefully imitating western styles, Goncharov tapped into the national tradition, especially the Tsarist period. And in terms of individualization, Goncharov invested in the production of subjectivity through community whilst the market celebrated ‘individual identities’ available through a re-combination of pre-determined forms. Finally, whilst Goncharov’s contemporaries were responsible for the deconstruction of styles and silhouettes – as was the case, for example, with Katya Fillipova’s dresses that were meant to deconstruct Soviet institutions such as the army and the police – Goncharov turned his attention to the construction of one of the most conservative items in a man’s wardrobe, the overcoat (Figure 5).

Produced in black, grey, dark green or white, Goncharov’s coats communicated symmetry, order and affluence at a time when the RF was going through a turbulent time including the rapid dissolution of socialist social institutions, mass protests, hyperinflation and so on. Russians expressed a sense of a world coming down around them through a style that included a bold – and some would say, tasteless – mix of colours, patterns and textures. For example, a neon-coloured shell suit could be worn with a fur hat. These choices were partly determined by economic hardship and the unavailability of consumer goods, and partly by the return of the folk tradition of dress. By folk tradition I do not mean the revival of the ethnic or national component, although some of it was evident, too, but rather folk in the Bakhtinian sense (1984), as a celebration of the world in its organic, unfiltered and unorganized form. This type of tradition spoke from below in terms of aesthetic choices, the means of production and the distribution of wearable goods. It was clandestine in the sense that it freely mixed and matched whatever was available and came up with practical solutions in the most unpractical, impossible situations. It was about being in the world and about constructing new worlds.

On one level, Goncharov maintained this Bakhtinian spirit insofar as he worked without schedules whilst freely interpreting his clients’ wishes (Sokolov 2015). On another level, Goncharov invested in creative research and his own aesthetic paradigm: against the ‘colourful’ background of Russian everyday fashion, Goncharov’s coats were radical in their monochrome austerity. Maria Engström (2012) defines this aesthetic orientation by using the terms ‘conservative ritualism’ and ‘ceremonialism’, with which the New Academy opposed the fluidity of Russian social life post-independence. To confirm, with Goncharov’s fashion, the conservative choice of colours and patterns was effectively subversive. It was described by his contemporaries as ‘epatazhnyi’, which translates as ‘eccentric’ and ‘subversive’. The term has also been used to mean ‘queer’ and ‘non-heteronormative’ (Baer 2009).

Goncharov made coats for men that could be worn by women. The coat that I analyse here was, in fact, worn by a woman – Ekaterina Andreeva, an art curator and a member of Goncharov’s circle. Goncharov made use of heavy, wool-rich fabric that he organized around large elements such as straight frontal panels, thus effectively disguising a woman’s breasts. At the same time he decorated the coat with pentagon-shaped pockets and large buttons that evoke female genitalia. A notable detail of his design is the use of a wing-shaped shoulder pad, which is a reference, on the one hand, to military epaulettes, and, on the other, to the figure of the angel. The cut produces the simultaneous effect of a military uniform and monastic robes. The latter, in the Russian religious tradition, is a form that speaks to the abstract notion of femininity, or the eternal Sofia.

Goncharov’s image of a woman contrasted with the sexualized, clichéd image of Russian women propagated in media and popular culture. For example, Petr Todorovsky’s 1989 film *Intergirl* (*Interdevochka*) told the story of a woman who turns to sex work to sustain herself during the period of radical economic reforms. Indeed, Slava Zaitsev had produced a militarized coat that was meant to empower the Soviet woman. Here, however, Goncharov wishes to protect and empower the Russian man, that is, he conceives of the Russian man as desiring and requiring empowerment through sartorial practice. Goncharov’s gender-bending reflected the spirit of the time when Russians responded to economic and political reforms by staging ambiguous gender and sexual identities. His construction of masculinity was at odds with the contemporary articulations of



manhood that exploited the idea of a strong patriarch whose power was revealed precisely through the lack of a need for empowerment.



**Figure 5:** Goncharov's coat. Courtesy of Ekaterina Andreeva.

To achieve the desired effect of the military uniform, Goncharov applied particular colours, shapes and texture. To enhance the effect, the designer re-purposed fabrics that were originally produced for the Soviet army and Soviet schools. This was in line with the widespread trend of re-purposing available materials, structures and ideas inasmuch as under Gorbachev whole Soviet industries would re-orient themselves from the production of items for the military-industrial complex to the production of consumer goods, a process known in Russian as 'konversiya'. In fact, Gorbachev's perestroika was an exercise in re-purposing western neo-liberal reforms for the Russian context. Goncharov goes farther by queering the very nature of these processes. He does so by re-appropriating available materials and styles, and by simultaneously revealing and concealing the identity of his wearer. His intended wearer – a young man who steers through the chaos of economic, social and political changes – is strong, yet vulnerable.

In this respect, as part of the process of re-assessing the Russian cultural canon – the cultural 'konversiya' that the New Academy is known for – Goncharov makes a reference to Nikolay Gogol's 'The Overcoat' (1842), a story about a man who is ostracized professionally and socially, a type that, in the Russian cultural traditional, has been known as the 'little man' ('malen'kii chelovek') (e.g., Epstein 2018; Steiner 2011). In the story, the conflict revolves around the man's desire to obtain a new coat and thus achieve a greater social standing. He is destroyed when in a street fight, the newly made overcoat is stolen; after the man's death, his ghost wanders in the streets of St. Petersburg. Haunting stands for a repressed sexual desire, and – taking into account Gogol's other works such as his *The Nose* (1836) – for a repressed homosexual desire. Goncharov's take on the homosexual desire is within the Russian philosophical tradition. It was articulated, for example, in the works of Nikolay Berdyaev,<sup>9</sup> whereby to queer the subject is to place emphasis on morality and sublimation (hence my earlier suggestions that the cut of the coat evokes monastic robes). Similarly, in his landmark queer reading of Gogol's oeuvre, Simon Karlinsky 'charts the path of one who starved himself to death rather than acknowledge his body and desires' (Costlow et al. 1993: 10). Goncharov's coat is a sartorial monument to those who had 'starved themselves to death'.

Another possible interpretation of Goncharov's evocation of Gogol's story is that of someone being afraid of coming out of the closet/throwing away the coat and revealing himself. Indeed, in terms of the wearer's identity, Goncharov's coat reveals inasmuch as it conceals. However, Goncharov does not want his subject to disappear/to be hidden in the folds of the fabric either. Instead, he compels him to embrace ambiguity and to reveal queerness, not the queerness of the self but of the very closet. Goncharov comments on 'queer times', that is, the sense of the end of time felt by many after the dissolution of the USSR. He does so by presenting a man in an overcoat, walking along the Nevskii Prospekt, as a symbol of continuity in a discontinuous world (Figure 6). Goncharov's designs conveyed a sense of stoicism, diffidence and self-respect at a time when people were focused on instantaneity, urgency and the imperativeness of being.



**Figure 6:** A model wearing Goncharov's coat at a fashion show in St. Petersburg. Courtesy of Aleksey Sokolov.

Whilst the idea of austerity is conveyed through the outer layer, the inner layer of Goncharov's coat conveys a completely different sense of the self. He contrasts the monochrome surface with the vibrant colours and patterns of the silk lining. This was a radical departure from the kind of lining used in coats produced for the mass market and by coat makers of the time. These coats would always feature polyester lining in grey and blue, maintaining a decorative parallel with the outer layer of the coat and affirming the external and internal masculinity of the wearer (Figure 7). By contrast, for a black velvet coat, Goncharov used luxurious green silk with a floral pattern in turquoise and light purple. This kind of silk could be used by a Russian woman as a shawl or a headscarf.

During interviews, Sokolov (2015) and Spitsyna (2015) commented excitedly on the lining, saying that 'the lining is to be revealed for the coat to be understood', that 'the lining communicated mystery' and that 'only those who understood fashion would pay attention to the lining'. Here, the lining represents internal vibrancy that is not to be seen by many but to reveal the playful, soft side of the coat wearer. It is through the revealing of the lining / the private self that the wearer can invite and be invited to a particular – exclusive – social group in search of liberty. It is only those 'in the know' who can fully appreciate the quality of Goncharov's design, a supposition that reveals new freedoms and emerging (in)equalities in Russian society.

This type of language and practice of community building was characteristic of circles of homosexual men of the time ('byt' v teme'), which has been accounted for in the literature on homosexuality in Russia (e.g., Healey 2001; Baer 2009). Thus, Goncharov makes and un-makes the new Russian man as someone who possesses a brilliant interiority in addition to his external austerity.



**Figure 7:** Goncharov's coat. An element of internal detailing. Courtesy of Ekaterina Andreeva.

For the lining Goncharov sourced fabrics at markets, antique shops and second-hand shops. He preferred silks made in Central Asian Republics. They were sold off as they had lost value after cheap merchandise designed in the West had become available (Sokolov 2015). The use of silk lining meant that, following the classical Italian design, Goncharov aspired to create garments of the highest possible quality. Ideologically, the combination of 'western' design – the architecture, look and touch of the outer layer – with 'eastern' concepts such as interiority, fluidity and submissiveness reveals the 'Eurasian' quality of his work. It speaks simultaneously of processes of orientalizing, de-orientalizing and self-orientalizing whereby Russia is believed to be simultaneously western/European, non-western/colonized by Europe, and a colonizing agent itself (Condee 2009). This new re-orientation of creative processes vis-à-vis the West and the East was characteristic of the 1990s following the dissolution of the USSR and the re-emergence of postcolonial discourse. With Goncharov, the East and West are understood as fluid concepts: they are to be re-invented and re-created as a playful feature of postmodern eclecticism (Hutcheon 1988). Goncharov records what, in relation to Russian cinema of the period, Nancy Condee has called 'the imperial trace' or 'the social and political conditions of the imperial imagination' (2009: 5).

The wearer of Goncharov's coat is not just a sophisticated urban flâneur but also an imperial flâneur, that is, one who transcends the internal and external borders of the imperial realm. The coat points to the cultural flows of globalization powered by the imperial exchange. The outer layer of Goncharov's coat symbolizes visible globalization (western patterns), whereas the inner layer signifies invisible globalization (the actual circumstances of production). Goncharov does not simply contrast these flows and modes of exchange but brings them into one, and in this process of mixing and re-combining, he accentuates the multiplicity and ambiguity of notions and modes of signification, including the production of subjectivity. The postmodern rhetoric of multiplicity is evident in Goncharov's understanding of the self too. The design of the coat is to be revealed gradually as the subject transcends public and private realms. For example, Spitsyna (2015) described the joy of revealing the inner lining of the coat and getting the attention of others. She spoke about the delight of a transformation manifested, among other things, by a change in the line of conversation at a party, which allowed the possibility of staging oneself in a new way ('pokazat' sebya'). These were the 'queer moments' of subjectivation when the self finds itself in relation to the object that speaks of the self and about the self.

Goncharov emphasized this type of subjectivation by conceiving the coat as a capsule containing elements of other epochs and cultures and versions of the self. For that, he would sew in secret details, pockets and ornaments (Figures 8–9). Only the wearer would be aware of them, thus supplying the subject with the power of knowledge and shifting the attention from the issue of identity (the outer layer) to that of the inner self (‘the secret gems’). I argue that the queerness of Goncharov’s coat is in how the subject transfers between different realms of knowledge whilst this process is linked to embodiment. In fact, Goncharov would ask his models to wear the coat on the naked body, thus emphasizing the contact between the creator and the user and between the skin and the silk lining. The lining would work like lingerie in terms of status (luxurious silk) and intimacy (the silk touching the body whilst the actual touch remains invisible to others).

Some of these ‘secrets’ would be placed on the external surface, meaning that Goncharov would queer his own system of relations between the outer and inner layers, between the visible and invisible, and between different forms of embodiment. Goncharov would arrange mini-displays of flowers, toy-soldiers, seashells and other small objects on the outer layer of the coat. These displays were, of course, a sartorial allusion to a children’s game when in a place only known to themselves, a child would bury small objects under a piece of glass and would invite their friends to admire them in secret. This reference affirms the community-building potential of the coat (‘byt’ v teme’) and its queerness: in the USSR, it is predominantly girls who would play the game of burying secrets. Goncharov’s displays would be placed behind a textile membrane such as lace so that the relation between layers and modes of visibility would become ambiguous. These displays would appear like small openings on the main body of the coat. This placement and displacement of objects on a surface would re-interpret the coat as a perforated screen on which other elements are superimposed/projected through an exploratory/penetrating gaze.

The elements placed on the outer layer of the coat invited exploration, that is, a tactile engagement with the piece so that the coat would emerge as an encounter between individuals. This could be an actual touch – a hand or a finger tracing the contours of the veiled objects – or the haptic gaze – the eye would glance over the objects actualizing the ontology of the coat and of the gaze itself (Marks 2002). This exploratory touch/gaze was queer insofar as it alluded to a different kind of encounter, one that accommodated fear, vulnerability and physical intimacy – all that codifies homosexuality. Indeed, tactile self-exploration and self-admiration are oft-used strategies of expression of queer masculinity (Benvenuto 2016). In the subsequent section I explore these encounters as a way of being in the world and of constructing worlds.



**Figures 8–9:** Goncharov’s designs. Elements of detailing. Courtesy of Ekaterina Andreeva.

## The queer network

In the literature on late-socialist and Russian fashion, considerable emphasis is placed on the issue of self-expression vis-à-vis state controls. Writing about Soviet fashion, Djurdja Bartlett notes that ‘belonging professionally to a system that preferred class over gender, and loyalty to the party to any expression of femininity, their (political activists’) space for manoeuvre was limited’ (2010: 61). In other words, in the spirit of transitology,<sup>10</sup> Russian culture is frequently assessed in terms of its capacity for self-expression, less so for community building. For example, in the famous case of Pussy Riot, research has focused on the limitations to self-expression (Morris 2018; Wiedlack 2018; Zikrata 2018), disregarding the fact that their performance was instrumental in the creation of new communities, namely, transnational associations of male and female feminists (Strukov 2013). Goncharov’s case allows me to consider a period when self-expression was not only ‘allowed’ by the government but existed irrespective of any form of governance. In fact, Goncharov’s self-expression was queer because it undermined any form of authority. In addition, I argue that, during this period, community building was a means of counteracting hegemonic discourses and was ultimately an ideal form of self-expression. I demonstrate how community building overlaid with world building, including worlds of associations, friendships, mythologies and aesthetic traditions, stretching synchronically (across the RF and other countries) and diachronically (across different historical epochs and societies).



**Figure 10:** Aleksey Sokolov and Konstantin Goncharov in a St. Petersburg park. Courtesy of Aleksey Sokolov.

Goncharov started experimenting with clothes design in the late 1980s. In the 1990s, through his partnership with two men he reached a new level of creativity, craftsmanship and self-expression. The first was Aleksey Sokolov, Goncharov’s long-term lover and creative assistant. The second was Timur Novikov, Goncharov’s occasional sexual partner and creative mentor (Figure 10). To confirm, my purpose here is not to explore personal relationships in Goncharov’s inner circle. Yet for the purposes of my argument it is important to acknowledge openly that Goncharov was a homosexual man who was a member of a network of homosexual men in St. Petersburg centred on the figure of Novikov. Novikov dominated the scene intellectually – he was the founding member and principal philosopher of the New Academy of Fine Arts – and impacted it sexually: according to Sokolov, Novikov contracted the HIV virus on a trip to the United States and passed it over to other men, including Goncharov and Sokolov. While Sokolov survived, Goncharov and Novikov died of AIDS-related complications in 1998 and 2003, respectively.

An analysis of Goncharov’s creativity in the context of the HIV epidemic of the 1990s must be the focus of another study. Here I wish to focus on how Goncharov used his fashion for queer world building, which, to remind the reader, I understand as a different way of being in the world

and, more than this, a process of creating different worlds. The conceptual framework of queer world building implies that (queer) masculinity emerges as a concept greater than that of ‘identity’, ‘practice’ and ‘a type of embodiment’ but rather as a whole economy of symbols and meaning encoded through individual and social practice.

In the beginning, Goncharov and Sokolov used their network to set up their enterprise. They rented spaces from other men, including the attic in Novikov’s apartment where homosexuals used to meet. Eventually Goncharov and Sokolov started renting a section of commercial premises on Avstriiskii Square that they had found through their network too. Goncharov’s studio was organized on the basis of the late-socialist informal economy: they rented the space from friends, they used an existing network of friends as their client base and they did not pay taxes. However, they differed from other startups in that they thought of their project primarily in artistic terms.

Both Sokolov (2015) and Tobreluts (2016) have confirmed that for Goncharov, setting up the studio and starting a label was an artistic endeavour. When it turned out that it could also pay his rent, he was very pleased. Sokolov explains that making and selling one coat would provide him and Goncharov with the means ‘to live well for a whole month’ (2015). My interviewees also acknowledge that the boundaries between business and creativity were blurred so that fashion occupied a transient space. In the studio, Sokolov was responsible for procuring fabrics, making accessories including buttons and helping Goncharov with sales. Goncharov hired a Soviet-era seamstress to help with essential production. He was in charge of creating designs, making patterns and overseeing all aspects of production.

As I demonstrated above, the inspiration for Goncharov’s fashion came from literature and cinema, and also from opera and ballet. He frequently attended performances at the Mariinskii Theatre, and his queer coat makes references to the costumes created for classical operas, including Boris Godunov. Some elements of Goncharov’s queer coat go back to the design of the boyar fur coat such as the large cuffs, wide shoulder pads and various ornamental details (Figures 11–12). Goncharov’s interest in the opera was both artistic and social insofar as going to the opera was a common pastime for homosexual men looking for opportunities to meet. Indeed, in 1989, Rudolf Nureyev returned to the Mariinskii with a few masterclasses, and this story was widely covered in local and national media, providing Goncharov with a role model of a famous artistic homosexual (Sokolov 2015).



**Figures 11–12:** Goncharov’s sketches. Courtesy of Aleksey Sokolov.

Goncharov launched his label in 1994. The concept and the logo, created by Sergei Spitsyn, was inspired by the title and aesthetics of an early Soviet film directed by Abraham Room (Figure 13). Titled in Russian ‘Strogii yunoshka’, which translates as ‘A strict/austere /severe youth’, the

film was made in the 1930s. After an initial release the film was banned in Ukraine by the Republic's authorities. The ban was maintained elsewhere in the USSR despite the fact that its original intention was to articulate the values of the new Soviet state. Maria Belodubrovskaya argues that 'the problem with the film was not that it was an avant-gardist project but that in his focus on making a formal masterpiece, Room disregarded political purpose and produced an anticommunist work' (2015: 312). Belodubrovskaya bases her argument on the assumed opposition between 'socialist realism' and 'formalism' as two different political projects. However, the articulation of political visions for the USSR is not the most controversial topic in the film.



**Figure 13:** Goncharov's label. Courtesy of Ekaterina Andreeva.

I argue that central to the film is the issue of queer masculinity. Room shows how in the future masculinity will be perceived as a style/an object of desire, a supposition that challenges the dominant notion of the Soviet man whose purpose was to realize communist projects and to be a hero (Kaganovsky 2008) (Figures 14–15). The film features a group of young people who engage in conversation (Socratic discourse), introspection (Stoic reflection) and exercise (Olympians). Here, the Apollo element, that is, references to Roman ideals of beauty, is bigger than the visual aesthetic and social code identified by Engström (2012). It is, in fact, an element of queer world building, that is, an attempt to create a new society after the chaos of revolutionary change: with Room, it is the Russian Revolution of 1917, and with Goncharov the neo-liberal reforms and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

Indeed, Room moves away from the abrupt style of Sergei Eisenstein's revolutionary cinema towards a style that makes use of figuration, symmetrical displays of objects, long takes allowing the viewer to appreciate the beauty of human form and dialogue that remains abstract even when the characters converse about their personal dramas. The film's protagonist is a young sportsman Gregory (Dmitry Dorlyak), who falls in love with a middle-aged woman called Masha (Ol'ga Zhizneva), the wife of an outstanding scientist, Ilyan Nikolaevich Stepanov (Yury Yur'ev). Their ménage à trois was too radical for the conservative regime, which promoted patriarchal values after three decades of liberal attitudes to gender and sexuality (the late Imperial period and the Bolshevik period). The film is also subversive in that it objectifies Grigory: he is often in the nude when exercising or being photographed standing next to classical sculptures. This provides the film with a homoerotic tonality.



**Figures 14–15:** Stills from Abraham Room’s film *A Strict Young Man*.

When *A Strict Young Man* was re-released in the 1980s it became somewhat of a cult among the members of Novikov’s New Academy who were interested in transgressing the patriarchal norms of the time. It has been acknowledged by my interviewees that the film had a direct impact on Goncharov, particularly on his understanding of queer masculinity. In fact, Goncharov’s label evokes the title of the film directly. The film exemplified what Goncharov was most interested in: the austerity – or rather purity of thought, emotion and form that correlated with queer masculinity. Indeed, Andreeva (2016), Spitsyna (2015) and others emphasize Goncharov’s austere manner of communication, his ‘unwavering hand’ when making designs, his interest in the abstract form of communicating difference whilst maintaining the perspective of embodied discourse. Goncharov’s coat provides the subject with the materiality of queerness conceived of in abstract terms as a relation between different elements, internal and external layers, and so on. So, the link to the film should not be considered in terms of similarities of visual codes but rather in terms of deeper connections including the understanding of form and modes of social interaction, leading to queer world building.

Goncharov’s work, and the work of his associates, responded to, articulated and conveyed queer masculinity as a new mode of being in the fast-changing world. His oeuvre belonged to a community of homosexual men (the community-building dimension) and challenged patriarchal structures both of Soviet socialism and of Russian neo-liberalism (the world-building dimension). Goncharov’s death was a profoundly tragic event for the members of the New Academy, one that they find traumatic to speak about even today. The dark tonality of these events can be perceived in some works such as the imagery of a male martyr in paintings and collages by Tobreluts, and the interest in borderline states, death and transience displayed in the performances and photographic works of Mamyshev-Monroe.

Although some research has appeared in various publications (e.g. Andreeva 2013; Engström 2012, 2016; Khlobystin 2017), a history of the New Academy as a broader network in which Goncharov participated is still to be written. Similarly, the role of the New Academy in establishing new social and cultural regimes in St. Petersburg and the RF needs to be examined using methods of cultural anthropology and sociology of creative labour. More specifically, more attention should be paid to (a) how the New Academy challenged Soviet and Russian assumptions about gender and sexuality, and (b) how the work of those associated with the New Academy extended well beyond the mediums of painting, sculpture and music, and beyond the spaces of the museum and art gallery. This article, focusing on the figure of Goncharov and critically investigating and conceptualizing his sartorial designs, should be considered the first step in this direction.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have assessed Russian sartorial economics of 1990s by examining the fashion of Konstantin Goncharov. On one level, my research fills a gap in the literature on late



Soviet and Russian fashion (e.g., Bartlett 2010) by focusing on a grass-roots phenomenon, not on established fashion makers such as Zaitsev and Yudashkin, and by focusing on the intersection of art and fashion, rather than on the consumer culture of the late USSR and contemporary RF (e.g., Gurova 2015). On another level, it makes a contribution to masculinity and queer studies (e.g., Connell 2005; Gardiner 2002; Zsolnay 2016) by conceptualizing queer world building through an analysis of Goncharov's creativity and his creative milieu.

Queer world building is symbolized by Goncharov's overlapping object-oriented and network-oriented practice. It designates the process of creative re-modelling of pre-Soviet and Soviet aesthetics and the production of a complex system of cultural exchange that challenges dominant notions of masculinity. I have argued that Goncharov's cross-platform, intermedial and multi-disciplinary work captures the spirit of the non-binary, multi-centric cultural activity of the 1990s, and particularly, the experience of queer world building.

The concept of queer world building enables a new theoretization of post-Soviet Russian fashion and masculinity. It includes an analysis of sartorial expressions of queer masculinity, not only a reflection on the deconstructions and re-workings of Soviet fashion styles as has been documented in research so far. The notion of the queer coats points to social, aesthetic and economic expressions of subjectivity that transcend dichotomies of political orientation and cultural exchange such as pro- and anti-western, domestic and international. It invites a re-examination and re-appraisal of social spaces and aesthetic manifestations of queer subjectivity in the late-Soviet and early-Russian context.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Tsoi was the leader of the legendary band Kino until his death in 1990; his music continues to top Russian charts and he is considered to be a key figure of the cultural revolution of the period.

<sup>2</sup> To reveal the scope and dimensions of informal networks of that time, Olesya Turkina chose a title ‘A Circle of Friends’ for a New Academy exhibition in Calvert Gallery in London (2016).

<sup>3</sup> The article is based on a cross-platform research conducted in 2015–18 with the help of funding from {information to be added when the article is accepted for publication}. Research includes an analysis of Goncharov’s items, archival materials, exhibitions and interviews with Goncharov’s friends and partners. I thank Aleksei Sokolov, Ekaterina Andreeva, Bella Matveeva, Alena Spitsyna, Ol’ga Tobreluts and Olesya Turkina for their time and dedication.

<sup>4</sup> On this subject, see, for example, Hashamova (2007).

<sup>5</sup> The notion of queer world building relies on previous research on queerness. As has been proven in research, queerness differs from homosexuality and LGBTQ+ politics; it is circumstantial and contextual; and the issue of (not-)knowing is central to queer articulations (Butler [1990] 2011 and [1993] 2014; Halberstam and Halberstam [1998] 2011; Sedgwick [1990] 2008). It encompasses gender fluidity, and with queer articulations sexuality is always immediately and intimately perceived (Byrne and Yong 2018; Diamond 2008; Katz 2014; Merck 2013).

<sup>6</sup> I debated the difference in my recent monograph on contemporary Russian cinema (Strukov 2016).

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, gender-bending narratives of Leonid Gaidai's comedies and sex-ploitation movies of the chernukha period.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Laruelle (2012). The terms are often applied to Putin's third period but the ideology was in fact born already in the late 1980s.

<sup>9</sup> Berdyaev was a political and also Christian religious philosopher who emphasized the existential spiritual significance of human freedom and the human personhood.

<sup>10</sup> For a critique of this ideologically driven approach to the study of the Russian Federation, see Strukov and Hudspith (2018).