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Theory of Queer Identities: Representation in Contemporary East-European Art and Culture

Abstract: Starting from the general theory of identity, gender theory, queer theory and theory of bio/necropolitics, as theoretical platforms, in a few case studies I will analyze the Pride Parade as a form of manifestation of gender body and queer body representations in visual arts, and gender and queer body representations in mass media. My hypothesis is that the key for understanding the chosen case studies is in understanding the relation between their aesthetics, political and social interventions. This will consider political involvement, social injustice, alienation, stereotypes on which ideological manipulations are based etc., as well as the creative strategies used for moving the borders of visual art in searching for authentically-performed creative expressions and engagements. In the time we live it is necessary for the politicization of art to use queer tactics, which work as political strategies of subversion of every stable structure of power. Queer tactics, in my opinion, are weapons in disturbance of the stable social mechanisms, which every power tries to establish and perform over any 'mass', in order to transform it to race, gender, tribe, nation or class.

Keywords: queer, homonormativity, homonationalism, pride, pinkwashing, postsocialism

Queer Genealogy

When I started my PhD studies, six years ago, queer for me was still just slang for homosexual, which could be heard in American movies, among other places. During my BA and MA studies in music pedagogy, I had been trying to enjoy my life. When I was 25, I had such a guilty conscience, because I was so far from any kind of activism – others were fighting for me to have a good life.

The first time I heard *queer*, as any kind of deviation on the dominant cultural model of monogamous heterosexual relations, was in the lectures of prof. Miško Šuvaković. After I met prof. Marina Gržinić, queer started to transgress from its primary sexual to secondary political, collecting under its umbrella not only the sexually marginalized, but also racially, professionally, etc. In other words, queer was the term to describe radical academic disciplines of non-normative identities and politics – i.e. anti-heteronormativity, but also anti-homonormativity.

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Heteronormativity is the belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders (man and women) with natural roles in life. It asserts that heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation or only norm, and states that sexual and marital relations are most (or only) fitting between people of opposite sexes. Systems of heteronormativity would be, for example, systems of discrimination against the queer population, by marriage, tax codes and employment. When I was a teenager, in high school in Belgrade, my girl friends used to tell me I should have my hair cut, because they liked when boys really look like boys. If only I had known about Judith Butler then, I would have told them, simply: “Well, if other people see me that way, than that’s what I am.” And I would manage to keep a smile on my face.

Much more interesting, of course, would be the term of homonormativity, created by Lisa Duggan in 2003, in her book *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and Attack on Democracy*, where she writes:

Homonormativity is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.¹

In other words, the depolarization of the gay subject is, actually, its de-radicalization – it is not that subject who protests against the treatment of gay people in front of the government, but rather a capitalist one, who wishes to buy fancy clothes and go to clubs, like in the television shows *Will & Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, and *Modern Family*. When I was a student, and finally brave enough to start going to gay clubs on Fridays and Saturdays, my boyfriends used to tell me I should have my hair cut, because they liked when guys really look like guys. If only I had known about Judith Butler then, I would have told them, not so simply, that we are always what other people see, that others are the eyes from which we see even ourselves. And I would manage to keep a smile on my face.

A step forward from homonormativity would be homonormative nationalism, or homonationalism – when the mainstream queer community supports the national politics of the country. The term homonationalism was constructed by Jasbir Puar, in 2007, in her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*,² where she pointed out the increase of national consciousness in pride parades in the US after 9/11, when we could, for the first time, see the American flag – which means that queer subjects started to identify with US politics, or, in this case, Islamophobia. Puar also claims that homonationalism grows from homonormativity – from the

¹ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, Boston, 2003), 50.

² Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

previously mentioned commercial access, which means that gay people are expected to be proud of being members of a particular nation. This example is specially connected to the US, because their citizens are very much aware that they live better than most people in the world, also that they benefit from the most people in the world which is, for example, obvious in the signing of bilateral memorandums with some countries regarding the exemption of their soldiers from the possibility of international trials (they can be tried only in the US).³ If we look at Western Europe, as Gabriele Dietze writes in “Occidentalism”, *European Identity and Sexual Politics*:

In the last few years homonationalism is very much connected, I’m quoting, the figure of the ‘homophobic (Muslim) migrant’. While discourses of naturalization pretend to protect the occidental consensus on tolerance, the case is different for the homosexual community. In their view the ‘homophobic immigrant’ is a figure prone to violence and ideologically/religiously-motivated gay bashing.⁴

Furthermore, in relation to homonationalism would be the term pinkwashing, proposed by Sarah Schulman, which means using queer rights to mask other injustices. In her study *Israel and “Pinkwashing”* from 2011, she points out how in 2005 Israel started the campaign *Brand Israel* – propaganda in which the country was presented as modern, liberal,⁵ and with gay tourism.⁶ Schulman, who identifies herself as a secular Jew, keeps contacts with many Palestinian organizations and she is one of the persons who supports academic and artistic boycotts of Israel. In other words, she appeals to the queer population not to go to Israel to academic conferences and not to take part in queer festivals, if they are organized by the country,⁷ especially after the big scandal in the *New York Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center*, when it was decided to deny access to the Palestinian group, after the protest against the occupation of Palestine.⁸

³ Jasbir Puar, “Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times,” <http://www.scribd.com/doc/174901431/Jasbir-K-Puar-Terrorist-Assemblages-Homonationalism-in-Queer-Times#scribd>, accessed February 3, 2016.

⁴ Gabriele Dietze, “Occidentalism, European Identity and Sexual Politics,” https://www.academia.edu/12152077/_Occidentalism_European_Identity_and_Sexual_Politics, accessed February 26, 2016.

⁵ One of the examples of the commercial campaign for *Brand Israel*, with the accent on gay liberation, would be the video *No Wonder We Didn't Make It to the World Cup...* in which handsome guys, who play football at the beach, can not concentrate on the game because of the hot girls, but also hot guys. (“No Wonder We Didn't Make It to the World Cup...,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wf5IyvclZ8>, accessed February 3, 2016)

⁶The second World Pride was awarded to Jerusalem in 2006. Sarah Schulman, “Israel and ‘Pinkwashing,’” http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/opinion/pinkwashing-and-israels-use-of-gays-as-a-messaging-tool.html?_r=0, accessed February 3, 2016.

⁷ Here it is important to mention that the boycott is not toward Israel generally, but toward all those who are not against the occupation of Palestine.

⁸ The Palestinian group was the only one denied, and after that, to calm down the situation, the decision was made not to discuss anything in relation to Israel, which is very ironic if we look back to the historical part

Or something that is more close to our Balkan context – when the Serbian prime minister recently named a lesbian as a minister in a new government. Here, in my opinion, it is certainly not about having a lesbian in the Serbian government, but about those who, under the mask of fighting for equality, provoke systematic inequality.

Finally, the last in a chain of ‘pink’ terms in relation to the political queer would be pinkwatching, mentioned in 2012 by Puar and Maya Mikdashi, in their essay *Pinkwatching and Pinkwashing: Interpenetration and its Discontents*. Pinkwatchers would be people who watch pinkwashing – for example, people who support Palestinians, but they are too focused on Israel, ignoring the American responsibility as much as the European responsibility in war terror.⁹ Or, imagine me, an activist for human rights, freshly showered, in a nice perfumed summer outfit, sitting in a fancy café near the central bus station in Belgrade, eating some tasty nougat cake and drinking cinnamon mocha grande, while texting to my friends that I feel so sorry when I see those poor migrants who, 50 meters next to me, sleep in tents and wash themselves from the taps at the bus station – I would be a perfect pinkwatcher.

Functions and Effects of Pride Manifestation in Postsocialism

Postsocialism is the second world in transition – postcommunist cultures and societies in renewed or finally realized national states, cultures and arts. Postsocialism means transformation of the blood relationships and tribal roots to a ‘modern’ nation, on the one hand, and the approaching of that global neoliberal country to the world of new imperial assumptions of the EU and US.¹⁰

If we talk about Prides in contemporary Eastern Europe, according to Peter Tatchell:

In these countries, unreconstructed puritan communists have joined forces with ultra-nationalists, neo-Nazis and religious fundamentalists to orchestrate a homophobic backlash against the claims of their lesbian and gay citizens for equal rights and non-discrimination. The issue that has ignited this backlash is the refusal of gay people to remain in the shadows, invisible and ashamed. Their out and proud claim on public space and for the right to protest has prompted the banning of Gay Pride marches, from Riga in the west to Moscow in the east.¹¹

of that center in a changing society and in the struggle for human rights. (“Palestinian Queers Respond to NY LGBT Center’s Decision to Cancel ‘Party to End Apartheid,’” <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/778/palestinian-queers-respond-to-ny-lgbt-centers-deci>, accessed February 3, 2016)

⁹ Jasbir Puar and Maya Mikdashi, “Pinkwatching and Pinkwashing: Interpenetration and its Discontents,” http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6774/pinkwatching-and-pinkwashing_interpenetration-and, accessed February 3, 2016.

¹⁰ Miško Šuvaković, *Pojmovnik teorije umetnosti* (Beograd: Orion Art, 2011), 572.

¹¹ Peter Tatchell, “The Pride of Eastern Europe,” <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/may/25/theprideofeasterneurope>, accessed February 4, 2015.

According to Zorica Mršević, in postsocialist countries it is also the case that sovereignty uses the practice which is in theory defined as “power of denial and denial of the power” – traditional denial and the ignoring of discrimination and violence toward queer subjects by institutions. Their non-reacting is usually justified by a total denial of the existence of the problem, then realizing that there is a problem but that there is nothing we can do, and finally, by denial of the responsibility of the institution:

All three levels of the power of denial manifest in the behavior of the institutions in those countries in which Prides face bans or other problems of denials of providing adequate protection of the demonstrators. In this situation, it is obvious that we need the intervention of the international community – European Court of Human Rights, or some other types of the political pressure.¹²

For example, in the case *Bączkowski and Others v. Poland* from 2007, The European Court of Human Rights held unanimously that there had been:

- 1) A violation of Article 11 (freedom of association and assembly) of the European Convention on Human Rights;
- 2) A violation of Article 13 (right to an effective remedy) of the Convention; and
- 3) A violation of Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination).

So, Tomasz Bączkowski and 4 other people were the main persons in the organization of Warsaw Pride 2005, which was banned by the government. The explanation given by the Mayor of Warsaw was that propaganda about homosexuality is not tantamount to exercising one's freedom of assembly.¹³

It was the same case with Russian activist Nikolay Alekseyev in 2010, who was suing the Russian government for banning three prides in 2006, 2007 and 2008. The Court said that the risk of demonstrations and conflicts is not enough reason for a ban, so Russia broke the rules of the European Council (in which it has been taking part since 1996), and the Court held that Russia was to pay to Mr Alekseyev 12,000 euros (EUR) in respect of non-pecuniary damage and 17,510 euros for costs and expenses.¹⁴

In 2012, after the Moscow city court upheld a decision to turn down the queer activists' request for permission to hold Pride for the next 100 years, Alekseyev admitted that he and his comrades never hoped to actually receive a license for the Pride but simply needed a formal excuse to turn to the European Human Rights Court. In his words:

¹² Zorica Mršević, *Ka demokratskom društvu – sloboda javnog okupljanja, pravo svih* (Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka, 2007), 104.

¹³ “Chamber judgment *Bączkowski and Others v. Poland*,” <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1126449&Site=COE>, accessed February 8, 2016.

¹⁴ “Repeated unjustified Ban on Gay-Rights Marches in Moscow,” <http://www.lgbt-ep.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/ECTHR-judgment-Alekseyev-v-Russia-21-10-10.pdf>, accessed February 10, 2016.

They refuse our requests every time, but in Strasbourg they recognize these rulings as unlawful. But time does not stand still, we ask for a new event and again they refuse us.¹⁵

When it comes to Serbia, after the bloody Pride we had in 2001, the event was banned five times: in 2004, 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2013. After so many bans, it has become clear that the police CAN deal with the violent provocateurs, if there is a will to do so, but, instead of the will to protect the citizens there is a will to allow the threats of physical elimination happen without penalty, in case the gathering does take place.¹⁶

Thus, I think that the main function of postsocialist Pride is identical to those missions of revolutionary happenings from the 70's – promotion of queer rights, and total race and class liberation. That was the Stonewall vision – that Pride should be the product of the authentic rebellion of marginalized queer groups, and those other discriminated groups should join and then fight together for acceptance in everyday life. Cooperation with institutions would be a step forward to the previous approach. However, although state power has a monopoly on our lives, can it actually abolish some constitutional rights such as the right to free assembly?¹⁷

Originally, Pride is the manifestation of the act of resistance – rebellion against police raids that happened in New York's Stonewall Inn in 1969, and resistance to police brutality and violence against the queer community. The rioters at the Stonewall Inn did not bang their hands thinking whether the representation is proportional, what their resistance means to the wider public, and whether their system of decision-making is a democratic one – the only option was the resistance to police repression: yes or no.¹⁸

So, in 2013, in Belgrade, we organized a conference “Pride and Politics”, where we discussed those issues. The key question according to one of the main Serbian queer activists, Dušan Maljković, was: “Pride? Yes, but whose?” – who should be the agent of Belgrade Pride's realization, whether it is Belgrade, Brussels or the very domestic queer community? According to Maljković:

Official Belgrade is trying, on the one hand to send a message to the Euro-Atlantic sphere that it is liberal and respects ‘gay rights’, while on the other hand it is attempting to position itself in the local political scene, counting on conservatism, as the one who has the power to ban the ‘western anti-Serbian import’, as it is often qualified on the right. In the

¹⁵ “Moscow bans gay pride for century ahead,” <https://www.rt.com/politics/moscow-city-court-gay-247/>, accessed February 10, 2016.

¹⁶ Goran Miletić, “Poštovanje prava pripadnika LGBT zajednice u Srbiji 2008–2013,” in *Debata “Parada i politika”*, ed. Nebojša Milikić (Beograd: Fond b92, 2014), 30.

¹⁷ Stanimir Panajotov, “Prajd: između dozvole i otmice,” in *Debata “Parada i politika”*, ed. Nebojša Milikić (Beograd: Fond b92, 2014), 70.

¹⁸ Tatjana Greif, “Roba iz uvoza,” in *Debata “Parada i politika”*, ed. Nebojša Milikić (Beograd: Fond b92, 2014), 48.

end, it seems likely that Brussels and Washington are using this as means for putting pressure on Belgrade, based on the exchange principle – you can ban Pride, however, but you will have to make other concessions, such as those regarding to Kosovo. One only needs to remember the official Brussels' statement prior to the last Pride that did not take place, saying that they supported the manifestation, but that the road to EU was open even without it.¹⁹

Furthermore, Maljković gave a perfect example of pinkwashing: the forced displacement of the Roma people, initiated by ex-Belgrade mayor Dragan Đilas, who had opposed the Pride manifestation, but still did not ban it, and after that he illegally and with force displaced Roma people, masking his racism by supporting queer rights and cooperating with certain organizations in this context. It is also very important to note that not even one queer organization stood against Đilas' politics towards the Roma.²⁰

Despite the brilliant historical example about the help and support that queer activists gave to minors in Vales in 1984 and 1985, what we could see in the film *Pride* from 2014, in Belgrade, unfortunately, was no reflection on the issue of class, for example, in the demands made by Pride in 2012, and the relation of the leading figures of Pride towards the social demands, such as those made by raspberry farmers or military reservists. No attempts have been made to interconnect these protests – although the right to freedom of movement was banned for both raspberry farmers and the potential Pride participants.²¹

Finally, postsocialist Pride would be somewhere in the middle between two ideologies – global capitalism (if it is seen as a part of the actual political system which includes Euro-Atlantic integrations), and local nationalism (if it is seen as a part of the dominant moral system). The second – normalization of the subversive politics of 'not-normal' – can be read in prepared slogans for the banned Belgrade Prides 2011 and 2012. Banned Pride 2011 used the term "NORMALLY/NORMAL", in order to mainstream and normalize queer, denying it revolutionary potential and the potential political subversiveness of the margin. Next year, in 2012, the slogan was along the same lines, even going a step further: "LOVE, FAITH, HOPE", a slogan borrowed from Christian discourse, which could also be interpreted as an attempt to pander to the Orthodox majority population.²²

My conclusion will be, again, something very personal. Approximately two years ago, Dušan Maljković and I started to go to the gym. Not to the same one, but we often had a lot of fantastic material for discussion, in conjunction with a team

¹⁹ Dušan Maljković, "Prajd? Da, ali kakav i čiji?." in *Debata "Parada i politika"*, ed. Nebojša Milikić (Beograd: Fond b92, 2014), 20–21.

²⁰ Ibid, 21.

²¹ Ibid, 22.

²² Ibid, 23–24.

from the gym (as Dušan would describe it – a place where gay and straight people meet every day: gays in their hope that they will put on some weight and gain the heteronormative ideal of a macho man, and straight men in the hopes that they will sculpt their body and gain the homonormative ideal of the perfect ancient body). If I remember correctly, as he once described a situation – one straight guy approached him, uninterested in the identification of any hetero/homonormative elements on him, and started talking about Pride: that he had nothing against it, only that gays not ask to get married in his church and if they would not insist on adopting children.

Is this a step forward in relation to 2001? Absolutely. Should I be happy? We had three successful Prides, I defended my Ph.D. in queer theory at a Belgrade art university. What is it that I need now? Lacan would say that it will not be my happy period because my wish came true. After partially-fulfilled achievement I do not feel anything. The gap. Or what Marina Gržinić would call postsocialism.

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