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Forum — Reviews

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Slavic Queer Studies welcomes the submission of manuscripts for peer-reviewed articles and short essays for the editor-reviewed thematic *Forum* section as well as translations, conference reports, reviews of scholarly books, films, and novels. An updated list of works available for review can be found on the journal’s website.

Slavic, Underrepresented, and “Minor:” Queer Interventions into Czech Literary Marginality

Alexander Wöll, Universität Potsdam

Abstract: This article interrogates the intersecting marginalities of Czech literature and queer writing, reframing their position within the contested category of “minor literatures.” Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of *littérature mineure* from *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (1975), it argues that “minor” should not be understood as merely peripheral or subordinate but as a site of aesthetic, political, and affective subversion. Revisiting the genealogy of the term—its translation history, its geopolitical implications, and its critical reception—the article highlights how “minor” is charged with questions of power, dependency, and epistemic difference. This framework is reinterpreted through a queer theoretical lens, emphasizing sexuality, embodiment, and affect, dimensions largely absent from Deleuze and Guattari’s reading of Kafka. The analysis positions Kafka not only as a linguistic or ethnocultural outsider but as a figure whose erotic ambivalence, bodily anxiety, and aesthetics of shame destabilize heteronormative, bureaucratic, and nationalist orders.

By situating Czech queer and queer-adjacent writers, such as Richard Weiner, Jiří Mordechai Langer, Otokar Březina, and Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic, within this theoretical constellation, the article demonstrates that Czech “minor literature” serves as a space of deterritorialization that is linguistic, sexual, and spiritual. These authors enact queer opacity, coded homoeroticism, mystical reconfigurations of identity, and decadent hypervisibility, thereby refusing assimilation into dominant aesthetic, sexual, and national paradigms. The article concludes that “minor” should be read not as a deficit but as a generative modality that resists universalization, dramatizes estrangement, and enables the formation of alternative collectivities. In doing so, it reclaims the queer potential of minor literature as a textual commons for the displaced, the migrant, and the queer, linking early twentieth-century Czech modernism to contemporary theories of nomadic subjectivity, queer temporality, and non-sovereign literary space.

Czech literature is frequently situated under the problematic label of “minor literature,” a term subsumed within the spatial and ideological coordinates of “East Central Europe.”¹ When we introduce the already marginal category of “queer literature” into this framework, we amplify the outsider status of both the subject and the scholarship devoted to it. Yet this double marginality—Slavic and queer—should

¹ Hereafter I jettison the quotation marks around minor literature.

be understood not as a deficit, but as a generative site of resistance and resignification. This becomes evident when we revisit the concept of *littérature mineure* as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their seminal 1975 text *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*. While their theory of minor literature has long been invoked in studies of peripheral literatures, it rarely receives a sustained queer critique. This oversight is particularly acute in the case of Franz Kafka (1883–1924) himself, whose life and work embody complex negotiations of sexuality, language, and power. In what follows, I use minor literature in the Deleuzian sense, and “minoritarian literature” for its queer-theoretical expansion.

Deleuze and Guattari's theorization is based on the French translation of Kafka's diaries by Marthe Robert (1954), which itself was based on the Max Brod edition of 1951. Crucially, Robert renders Kafka's term “small literatures” as *littérature mineure*, a translation that shifts the semantic field from “small” (*petite*) to “minor” (*mineure*)—a word charged with implications of inferiority and subordination (from the Latin *minor*). This slippage reveals how translation mediates both geopolitical and sexual anxieties: minor indicates not merely a measure of size or visibility, but of structural dependence and epistemic otherness.

This queer potential of minor literature—as a site of destabilization, not simply marginalization—is overlooked in Deleuze and Guattari's canonical reading. While they emphasize the revolutionary linguistic potential of the minor writer—an immigrant producing deterritorialized language from within the dominant tongue—they largely bracket off sexuality as an explicit analytical category. Their Kafka is an ethnolinguistic subject, not a queer one. Yet Kafka's own writings brim with erotic ambiguity, bodily anxiety, and the uncanny performativity of desire. His letters, diaries, and fiction (especially *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *In the Penal Colony*) stage forms of gendered and sexual displacement that are anything but incidental. They can be read as articulating what we might call a proto-queer critique of bureaucratic, heteronormative, and nationalistic orders.

Queerness and the Politics of “Minor Literatures”

To situate Czech literature within this framework is not to diminish its cultural specificity, but to recognize how its formal and thematic idiosyncrasies resist hegemonic aesthetic models. When reread through a queer lens, Deleuze and Guattari's framework offers a way to understand minor not as lesser, but as a position of radical subversion. Their language—invoking collectives that queer gender, class, and ethnicity—gestures towards queerness, yet stops short of engaging with sexuality as a structural force in literature. Kafka's work, however, can be read as a corpus that stages precisely this entanglement of minoritarian identity and queer embodiment.

Kafka's “liveliness”—a term he uses in his 25 December 1911 diary entry to describe the “literature of a small nation”—is not simply an aesthetic judgment. It signals affective surplus, a queer excess that overflows national or linguistic borders (Lowell 2010, 352 and 368). Yet critics, such as Pascale Casanova, misread this vitality. In *The World Republic of*

Letters (1999), she appropriates Kafka to argue that peripheral literatures acquire value only concerning the “world literary space”—a gesture that reinscribes the center-margin binary characteristic of world-literary hierarchies. Galin Tihanov rightly challenges this stance, suggesting that so-called small literatures gained significance not through cosmopolitan validation but through the emergence of parallel public spheres and synchronous literary modernisms (Tihanov 2014, 173).

Here, queer theory can sharpen our reading. The notion of multiple publics—overlapping, transient, and often underground—resonates strongly with queer modes of cultural production and circulation. Czech queer literature, even when not thematically queer, often enacts a formal queerness: it interrupts, reconfigures, or refuses the dominant codes of national identity, linguistic purity, and sexual normativity. In this sense, the queerness of Czech minor literature may reside not only in its characters or plots but in its refusal to “scale up” to the dominant metrics of literary value.

For Kafka, the Yiddish writers—whom he sympathetically engaged with but never counted himself among—did not constitute an independent German-language literature capable of rivalling the canonical authority of what was considered “great German literature” (Lowell 2010, 367). As Stanley Corngold has argued, Kafka does not write in a distinct “Prague German dialect,” countering the claim made by Deleuze and Guattari that Kafka’s language was a form of linguistic deterritorialization (Corngold 1994, 89–101). Rather than being a provincial or minor expression within a dominant linguistic system, Kafka’s German is deeply literary, precise, and self-consciously constructed—thus complicating his status within the Deleuzian model of minor literature.

However, Deleuze and Guattari’s framework remains productive when applied beyond its linguistic dimension, particularly in contexts of migrant and queer literatures, where deterritorialization extends to the body, desire, and psychic life. In this theoretical landscape, the act of writing in a dominant language becomes a violent and incomplete process of cultural assimilation. For many exilic and migrant authors, language acquisition is experienced as a form of trauma—a condition of exile that creates an unending tension between articulation and alienation. The major language is no longer simply a tool of communication, but a domain of struggle, shame, and persistent outsiderhood. In this light, Kafka’s writing may be understood not as rooted in national identity or linguistic community, but as a constant negotiation with linguistic estrangement—language as both a mask and a site of psychic injury (Tuckerová 2017, 433–53).

This notion resonates powerfully with queer readings of Kafka, particularly through Britta Kallin’s assertion that “the pain and injury of the flesh represent the deeper psychological wound” in Kafka’s work—a wound that may be read as a figure for shame, disidentification, and psychic displacement (Kallin 2020, 56–74). Kafka’s ambiguous sexual identity, his conflicted masculinity, and his well-documented neuroses around embodiment and authority give his texts a queer valence. The famous metamorphosis into an insect, for instance, can be read as an allegory of bodily dysphoria, of queer abjection, or of the radical otherness of the queer subject in a normative familial and social

world. Saul Friedländer's characterization of Kafka as "the poet of shame and guilt" is thus not merely psychoanalytic but profoundly political: shame is queerness rendered affective and dislocated, neither hidden nor disclosed, but suspended in the grotesque visibility of Kafka's literary imagination (Friedländer 2013, *passim*).

This queer optic reframes Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature. Rather than serving a revolutionary political function in a Marxist or anticolonial sense, Kafka's reterritorialized writing emerges as a queer practice of negation and opacity. It resists codification, refuses normative forms of desire, and exposes the foundational instability of identity itself. The minor becomes not merely a sociopolitical category, but a modality of existence, a structural queerness that inhabits Kafka's syntax, characters, and narrative structures.

Contemporary minoritarian literature—especially that produced by queer migrants, stateless individuals, disabled authors, and racialized subjects—extends this deterritorialized aesthetic into the 21st century. These narratives do not aim to develop alternative national canons or enclosed traditions, but instead perform hybridity, fragmentation, and the refusal to belong. The figure of the nomad in these texts is no longer metaphorical, but existential: a subject who lives within the borderlands of multiple cultural, sexual, and linguistic regimes.

Thus, minor literature today operates as a utopian project in which exilic, queer, and bastardized texts imagine collectives outside the capitalist-nationalist paradigm. This literature forms a radically inclusive archive of the marginal, a textual commons inhabited by cosmopolitan migrants, immigrants, trans and nonbinary persons, precarious gig workers, and others who exist at the periphery of late capitalism's globalized circuits. These figures are not simply victims or outsiders, but agents of literary and conceptual reimagination. Their authors, like Kafka before them, use literary form to expose the violence of normativity and to propose new, bastardized grammars of subjectivity.

In this context, the value of Kafka's work lies not in its potential to be nationalized, canonized, or universalized, but precisely in its unresolved estrangement—its queerness in language, form, and identity. It anticipates and legitimizes contemporary literary experiments that articulate a subjectivity irreducible to citizenship, family, gender, or language. Rather than offering redemption, Kafka and the literatures that follow him dramatize the impossibility of ever arriving 'home,' and in so doing, turn exile, shame, and disidentification into sites of aesthetic and political potential.

The four case studies that follow—Weiner, Langer, Březina, and Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic—are essential for illustrating how Kafka's queerness, deterritorialization, and alienation are not isolated phenomena, but part of a broader spectrum of early-twentieth-century Central European literary strategies that resist assimilation into majoritarian language, sexual normativity, and national identity. Each case study highlights a different configuration of deterritorialized identity, showing how these authors—not unlike Kafka—work at the threshold of languages, sexualities, religions, and political

imaginaries. These case studies help trace how such postmodern concepts as hybridity, borderlessness, and nomadic subjectivity were prefigured in modernist Czech literature.

Richard Weiner: Migrant Homelessness and a Transnational Queer Space

Richard Weiner (1884–1937) represents the homeless migrant, a queer outsider whose exile is both literal and poetic. His Cubist aesthetics, coded metaphors, and estrangement from the Czech petty-bourgeois literary establishment make him a paradigmatic figure of what Deleuze and Guattari would call a minor literature: one in which the tension between private trauma and collective expression becomes visible through fragmented form. Weiner's work is thus a literary enactment of deterritorialization through linguistic and sexual opacity. His oeuvre articulates migrant homelessness, linguistic exile, and disidentification with national literary norms in a distinctly queer register, positioning Weiner within Czech modernism as a paradigmatic figure of minoritarian estrangement. As Jindřich Chaloupecký notes, Weiner was largely ignored or disowned by Czech literary culture, which in the early 20th century gravitated towards “petty bourgeois” values. In this context, Weiner becomes a literary renegade—not simply because of his physical migration to Paris, but because of his deep aesthetic and affective alienation from the ideological heart of Czech literary nationalism (Chaloupecký 1947, 85).

Weiner's displacement from Czech space is not only geographic but also existential. His rejection of normative family structures, his flirtation with silence and erasure, and his embedding of homoerotic and Jewish identity within densely metaphorical prose all signal a queer refusal of cultural legibility. Like Kafka, Weiner employs strategies of concealment, crafting a poetics that obscures while simultaneously signaling its occlusion. Indeed, the female pseudonym “Filína” under which he published journalism further underscores his investment in gender fluidity and identity dissimulation—a subversive act in a culture that demanded clear demarcations between public and private, male and female identities (Langerová 2000, 20).

His long-term relationships with the French early 20th-century group known as the *Simplistes*—the poets René Daumal, Roger Vailland, and Roger Gilbert-Lecomte—offer a further glimpse into a transnational queer network in which homoerotic friendship, poetic experimentation, and anti-bourgeois rebellion were deeply intertwined. The poetic collection *Mnoho nocí* (*Many Nights*, 1927) captures this resonance, offering a Cubist textual surface that resists stable interpretation (Sacher 1986, 156–61). Just as Cubism fractures visual perspective, Weiner's prose disrupts temporal and narrative continuity, offering a queered temporal architecture that refracts and multiplies experience. He thereby not only avoids closure but destabilizes the very idea of a coherent subject—especially one aligned with nationalism, Catholic morality, or heteronormative family structures.

Rather than addressing Jewishness or homosexuality overtly, Weiner's texts render these themes spectral, haunting the surface of the prose without appearing directly. This rhetorical strategy aligns with what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the “epistemology of the closet”: an articulation of queerness through codes, silences, and structural

instabilities rather than declarative identity. Reinhard Ibler's view of Weiner as a "predecessor of postmodernism" is thus wholly apt, for Weiner anticipates the postmodern valorization of fragmentation, irony, and textual self-reflexivity, not merely as aesthetic choices but as survival strategies for a queer migrant subject in cultural exile (Ibler 1995, 266). Martin C. Putna reads Weiner as one who uses symbolism, obscure or allusive imagery, spiritual or mystical language, and possibly aristocratic stylization to encode homo- or homo-affective themes (2011, 98–103).

Weiner's central queer text, "Uhranuté město" (The Haunted Town), from the collection *Šklep* (*The Grimace*; 1919) exemplifies this orientation. Here, two outsiders—a tourist from the French town of Rodez and a student returning from abroad—penetrate the self-enclosed identity of a provincial Czech town. Their very presence introduces a disruptive queer temporality, fracturing the town's circular, repetitive time. Weiner's concept of "rectifying the circle" (narovnění kruhu) becomes a metaphor for queer liberation from heteronormative stasis: not a revolution, but a subtle realignment that allows for departure, difference, and movement beyond the 'own,' i.e., the familiar, the familial, the national.

In the end, these strangers do not assimilate; rather, they form a silent, affective alliance, built not on speech but on gesture and gaze. Their union, neither romantic nor familial, prefigures a queer collectivity that refuses assimilation yet offers solidarity in exile. The conclusion of the story gestures towards a new home, not grounded in territory but in shared estrangement, a fundamentally queer mode of world-building that transcends the state and its borders.

Thus, Weiner does not simply represent a marginal voice in Czech literature. He stands as a queer transnational subject, articulating a poetics of resistance to rootedness, family, nation, and normative desire. His estrangement from Czech space and language becomes a condition of possibility for entering a broader field of world literature, one in which silence, artifice, and ambiguity become tools for navigating the exclusions of modernity. In this way, Weiner is not only a figure of minor literature but also a prophet of queer world-making, speaking from the haunted interstices of nationalism, modernism, and sexuality.

Jiří Mordechai Langer: Queer Mysticism and Homoerotic Subversion in Czech Modernism

Jiří Mordechai Langer (1894–1943) brings into focus the intersection of queerness and Jewish mysticism. His work rewrites homoerotic experience in the language of Hasidic spirituality, thereby queering both religious tradition and national identity. Unlike Weiner's, Langer's deterritorialization is spiritual and cultural rather than aesthetic. He radically reconfigures Judaism as a space of queer affection, making his writing a precursor to modern queer theology. His work illustrates how minor literatures generate alternative epistemologies and resist hegemonic national or religious norms, not by opposing them, but by infiltrating them with hybrid subjectivities. As a queer Jewish author and mystic writing in interwar Prague, he offers a profoundly subversive voice within Czech modernism. His life and work resist assimilation into normative national,

religious, and sexual categories, marking him as a pioneering figure of queer Jewish subjectivity in European literature. A close associate of Kafka, Langer was born into an assimilated Prague Jewish family and educated in a secular bourgeois milieu. At age nineteen, he radically broke with this environment, undertaking a spiritual migration eastward into the Hasidic community of Belz (Yiddish: בעליזא) in Eastern Galicia north of Lviv. This movement was not only a return to religious roots but also a form of queer escape from Prague's heteronormative constraints—a rejection of modernity in favor of mysticism, masculinity, and homosocial intimacy.

Langer's embodied mysticism reframed Hasidism as a homoerotic utopia. In *Die Erotik der Kabbala* (*The Eroticism of the Kabbalah*, 1923),² he explicitly interprets the tactile, affective relationships between young male Talmudic scholars not merely as a spiritual brotherhood but as a sacred homoerotic communion. Love between men is not simply tolerated within Langer's vision of Judaism, but is sanctified (Halper 2011, 189–231). He constructs a model of Jewish masculinity rooted in desire, intimacy, and erotic gesture, which contrasts starkly with both liberal bourgeois rationalism and traditional Jewish legalism. Langer thus queers both religion and modernity, forging an identity grounded in sexual mysticism, sacred aesthetics, and homosocial affect. Putna highlights Langer's position at the crossroads of Jewish cultural revival and the modern European homosexual imaginary: he is both inside Jewish religious tradition and outside normative national/sexual narratives. Putna reads this double marginality as enabling Langer to generate hybrid identities, diasporic, queer, and religious (2011, 137–9). Mark Cornwall (2013) relies on the work of Hans Blüher³ to show intellectual transfers across borders: German-language theories about male erotic bonds were read and debated in the multilingual space of the Bohemian lands (Czech, German, Jewish publics). That is why Blüher matters for a Czech history of homosexuality, even though he was a German-language author, for his ideas contributed to debates and practices in the region. On the one hand, his writings were cited by some early-20th-century sexual reformers and youth-movement protagonists; on the other hand, his rhetoric was taken up selectively (and sometimes in a distorting manner) by different political currents ranging from homosexual emancipation campaigns to reactionary nationalist thinkers (2013, 178–88).

As Shaun Jacob Halper has shown, Langer is unique in that he was the first modern Jewish author to articulate a homosexual identity using the internal categories of Judaism. He was not simply a Jewish homosexual, but a homosexual Jew: his queer subjectivity was inseparable from his spiritual Jewishness. His innovation lies in

² Jiří Mordechai Langer employed different languages according to genre: he wrote scholarly studies primarily in German, composed poetry in Hebrew, and published most of his prose and essayistic writings in Czech. For this reason, *Die Erotik der Kabbala* was written and published in German.

³ In his intellectual positioning, Jiří Mordechai Langer distanced himself from Magnus Hirschfeld's sexological model, which conceptualized homosexuality within a framework of gender inversion and intermediate sexual types. Langer instead showed greater affinity with the ideas of Hans Blüher (1888–1955), whose writings—particularly *Wandervogel. Geschichte einer Jugendbewegung* (2 vols., 1912–1913)—celebrated male homosocial bonding and framed homoeroticism within a discourse of masculine heroism and spiritualized male community. The latter should not be confused with Karl August Blüher (1865–1914), the mayor of Dresden associated with the so-called “Blüher trials.”

translating the emerging language of modern sexual identity—psychoanalysis, sexology, homoerotic desire—into the symbolic grammar of Kabbalah and Hasidic mysticism, creating an unprecedented synthesis of theology and sexuality. In so doing, he anticipated later queer theorists' emphasis on the erotic as epistemological, a site where language, desire, and sacred power intersect.

In *Devět bran. Chasidů tajemství* (translated as *Nine Gates to the Hasidic Mysteries*, 1937), Langer's most celebrated Czech-language work, the poetics of queer exile is again central. Framed as a mystical travelogue, the text traces the journey of "a young man from Prague" into the inner sanctums of Hasidic life, passing through nine narrative "gates," each devoted to a different *tzaddik* (righteous man). These gates function symbolically as stages of queer initiation: from alienation and foreignness to intimacy and erotic knowledge. Each encounter with a *tzaddik* is simultaneously theological and affective, marked by a desire that is both sacred and sensual, mediated through storytelling, gaze, touch, and shared meals.

Unlike Martin Buber's literary stylization of Hasidic tales, Langer's oral narrative mode emphasizes embodied speech and gestural communication. The narrator whispers, turns his head, and modulates his tone as storytelling becomes a performance of intimacy. This queer aesthetic of orality constructs the tale as a ritual of seduction and shared revelation, a performance in which language itself is eroticized. Langer's poetics is thus anti-modern in its religious conservatism, but radically modern in its performative destabilization of identity, normativity, and narration.

One of the most striking stories in *Nine Gates*, "Převrácená miska" ("The Overturned Bowl," 1937) exemplifies Langer's use of Hasidic myth to dramatize queer spiritual resistance. A cosmic connection is drawn between Rabbi Elimelech Weisblum in Lizhensk (Polish: Leżajsk) and Emperor Joseph II in Vienna: when the rabbi knocks over his soup bowl, the emperor's inkwell spills and prevents the signing of a conscription order for young Jewish men. The chain of events is magical, affective, and embodied, resisting state power through bodily gesture. In this scene, queer desire and religious power are aligned against the violence of the state, suggesting an erotics of resistance that transcends reason, legality, and empire.

Moreover, Langer's legends subtly critique heteronormative Jewish theology. In Hasidism, women are often either invisible or demonized; Langer queers this absence by replacing the woman with the young male disciple as the object of love and spiritual exchange. The act of a *tzaddik* sharing his food with a devoted male follower—food sanctified by the rabbi's mouth—becomes a quasi-sacramental act of queer intimacy. This convergence of eros, mysticism, and pedagogy echoes ancient Greek models of erotic mentorship, refracted through the mystical lens of Kabbalah (Koschmal 2010, 273–85).

Thus, Langer's work should be read not as nostalgic or folkloric, but as radically experimental, both aesthetically and ethically. He resituates Jewish storytelling as a queer practice of identity formation, combining mysticism, eroticism, and linguistic performance into a vision of Jewish queerness that is neither secular nor heteronormative. In Langer's world, the homosexual Jew is not a tragic outsider but a mystic initiate, one

whose journey through sacred gates leads not to assimilation but to a queer sanctuary at the heart of tradition.

Langer's contribution to Czech queer modernism is therefore foundational. Alongside Kafka and Weiner, he maps the intersection of minor literature, sexual marginality, and religious estrangement, forging a transnational queer poetics that speaks both from and beyond the Czech-Jewish experience. His work expands the horizon of what queer literature can be: not merely confessional or activist, but sacred, performative, and mythic—a literature of the wandering mystic, the embodied soul, the erotic scholar in exile (Halper 2023, *passim*).

Otokar Březina's Queer Self-Suppression and Minor Literatures: A Mystical Aesthetic of Belonging and Withdrawal

Otokar Březina (Václav Jebavý, 1868–1929) illustrates how queer energies can be embedded in abstraction, metaphysics, and visionary poetics. While his writing avoids explicit thematization of homosexuality, his homoerotic philosophical friendship model and ideal of male spiritual brotherhood echo Nietzschean queer ethics and aesthetic elitism. His symbolic, metaphysical poetry constructs an atopic empire of light, language, and Logos, showing how minoritarian subjectivities can shape grand, cosmological visions. Březina embodies the spiritual dimension of deterritorialized identity: a queer metaphysics that defies both nationalist realism and normative eroticism. In the context of Czech literature, Jewish writing is often characterized by forms of migrant homelessness and the poetics of exile. However, another salient but less explored tradition is that of rhetorical silence, ecstatic sublimation, and spiritualized withdrawal, as embodied by Březina's Symbolist poetics. Widely regarded as the foremost representative of Czech Symbolism, Březina offers a unique case of queer literary self-fashioning, the intensity of which lies not in erotic disclosure but in the radical abstraction and displacement of queer desire into visionary mysticism, spiritual metaphysics, and homosocial sublimity. Martin C. Putna (2011, 93–98) places Březina in the context of other late-19th/early-20th-century authors who practiced forms of sublimation, stylization, or camouflage; he emphasizes (a) the use of symbolic/metaphysical language to displace erotic content, (b) the formation of homo-affective 'spiritual friendships' rather than overt erotic narratives, and (c) a preference for aesthetic and aristocratic distancing that converts desire into visionary, metaphysical, or anti-biological forms. Putna employs the notions of mask and signal, whereby Březina conceals the depiction of homosexuality but simultaneously signals its presence (2011, 28–9). He situates Březina's masking not as mere personal evasiveness but as a cultural practice—a response to moral/legal constraints and to a Symbolist aesthetics that valorized spiritualized forms of desire.

Although Březina never explicitly thematized sexuality in his work, his poetic and personal biography reveals an estrangement from normative heteroerotic structures. The

poet never married, no romantic relationship with a woman is known.⁴ Such intimacies as that between Březina and Pammrová, while veiled, are not invisible. Rather, they are transmuted into the ecstatic language of Symbolism, where queer subjectivity finds indirect but powerful expression.

Březina's five volumes of poetry, composed between 1895 and 1907, mark a spiritual and aesthetic evolution from pessimistic decadence to metaphysical idealism. The third cycle, *Větry od pólů* (*Polar Winds*, 1897), resides at the center of this transformation, offering an elaborate metaphysical system wherein the lexeme “light” (světlo) appears sixty times in just nineteen poems. Light functions here not merely as a symbol of divine illumination, but as a queer signifier: radiant, incorporeal, ungraspable, and intensely affective. Logos becomes the medium through which spiritual and aesthetic longing is both articulated and deferred. Březina thus creates a poetics of radiant absence, in which the ineffable beauty of the male soul eclipses the possibility of physical consummation.

Březina's aesthetic program must be situated within a Nietzschean matrix of sublimated desire, heroic individualism, and spiritualized masculinity. Following Nietzsche's dictum in *The Gay Science* (1882, followed by a second edition in 1887) to “become who we are,” Březina's poetry enacts a kind of queer becoming that rejects both heterosexual normativity and effeminate decadence. Instead, he cultivates a virile, mystic brotherhood, a homosocial order of “temple builders” devoted to the sacred tasks of art, ethics, and transcendence. Willow Verkerk's reading of Nietzschean friendship as an eroticized pedagogy grounded in rivalry, virtue, and sublimated aggression maps well onto Březina's male homosocial aesthetic: “a manly fellowship [...] which rejoices in sharp vigorous exchanges just as love rejoices in bites and scratches which draw blood” (Verkerk 2014, 281). There are clear similarities here to the German poet Stefan George and his male circle of initiates.

Rather than expressing queer desire in carnal or overtly affective terms, Březina adopts a strategy of theological abstraction. The father-God of *Větry od pólů* is not a nurturing presence, but a terrifying power whose polar breath erases individuality and evokes the dread sublimity of Old Testament justice. Yet this figure also becomes the object of spiritual eroticism, a divine masculine ideal whose violent beauty necessitates both worship and withdrawal. The poet's soul is made “radiant and white,” not through romantic union, but through submission, self-purification, and ecstatic silence (Keilson-Lauritz 2005, 207–30).

The poetics of silence in Březina's work is not merely thematic but also performative. His metaphysical lexicon—dense with oxymorons, paradoxes, and synesthetic overload—resists the clarity of confession. Instead, desire is deferred, redirected, and encrypted in a mystical language that obscures as much as it reveals. This rhetorical

⁴ In this context, one might mention Anna Pammrová, who was what vulgar colloquialisms call a fruit fly or fag hag. Unhappily married, she spent over 45 years of her life in seclusion, corresponding intensively with Březina and cultivated deeply emotional, spiritually-tinged friendships with younger men, most notably Jakub Deml (Wöll 2006, 223–52). Jindřich Chalupecký provocatively described their relationship as a “love affair,” implicitly recognizing the queer erotic energies circulating within Březina's life and poetics.

strategy aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's minor literature as a mode of writing from the margins that deterritorializes language, disorients meaning, and articulates political and erotic desires obliquely. Březina's work, while couched in Czech, draws from German philosophy, French Symbolism, and religious universalism, making it a paradigmatic case of a minor literature emerging from within a "major" tongue.

If late decadence in Czech letters often ends in sterility or withdrawal, Březina offers a paradoxical alternative: the sublimation of queer desire into theosophical futurity. Even as his work retreats from corporeal reality, it imagines the collective body as a cathedral, the brotherhood as sacrament, and language itself as the erotic site of transcendence (Kraß 2016, *passim*). His final poetic silence after *Ruce* (*Hands*, 1901) is not a failure of voice but a withdrawal into the sacred, a queer renunciation of the discursive that paradoxically affirms the unspeakable depth of longing.

In this sense, Březina prefigures later queer-modernist figures such as Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen, whose surrealist projects also refract identity through spiritual alienation, abstraction, and erotic mysticism. Březina's queerness, while not biologically inscribed or biographically confessed, becomes aesthetically foundational. He does not merely write poetry; he constructs a queer metaphysics in which the erotic, the divine, and the aesthetic coalesce into a radiant order of sacred withdrawal. His work invites us to read queerness not as lack, but as luminous surplus—a condition of exile that becomes the very medium of visionary art.

Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic: Open Queerness and Imperial Positionality in Czech Decadence

Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic (1871–1951) represents the openly queer militant whose aesthetic of excess, perversity, and symbolic estrangement establishes an oppositional stance towards normative imperial culture. Putna treats Karásek as one of the central fin-de-siècle figures whose life and work are inseparable from homoerotic cultural practices, a kind of Bohemian Oscar Wilde who staged an aristocratic, decadent persona and cultivated a visible homo-aesthetic milieu (2011, 140–4). His decadent poetics refuses heteronormative legibility, not through concealment, but through hyperbolic visibility: camp, paganism, satanism, and necrophilic motifs rupture the bourgeois sexual imaginary. Unlike Weiner's coded trauma or Březina's sublimated mysticism, Karásek's enactment of a theatrical defiance aligns with Lee Edelman's notion of queerness as the death drive—non-reproductive, future-negating, and anti-social. Yet he simultaneously embodies Muñoz's "queer utopianism" through mythopoetic invocations of lost civilizations, erotic sublimity, and self-invented aristocratic identity. Karásek's work deterritorializes Czech literary tradition by fusing erotic negativity with decadent classicism, situating his authorship at the volatile crossroads of minor literature and radical queer visibility. He remains one of the most militant and openly homosexual figures in Czech literature, whose literary and editorial activity offered a bold provocation to fin-de-siècle heteronormative respectability.

Co-editor of the *Moderní revue* (*Modern Review*, 1895–1925)—the primary publication of Czech Decadence—Karásek forged an unapologetic aesthetic of sexual dissidence and

metaphysical revolt. Especially in Vienna, he lived his openly gay life without restrictions from his Czech home country. Today, while he is remembered for his novels, essays, and art criticism, his poetic oeuvre, spanning eight anthologies from 1884 to 1946, stands as the most sustained queer intervention in Czech Decadent writing. Karásek's editorship of periodicals, his collecting practice, and his role as a salon figure were culturally decisive. They helped institutionalize a particular aesthetic and created audiences who consumed and produced decadent and, at times, erotically charged art and literature. Therefore, Alena Petruželková situates Karásek not only as an author but also as an organizer of cultural circulation (2011, 135–80). Jan Seidl likewise presents Karásek as both an author and the *spiritus agens* of a queer-inflected cultural milieu in Prague: a collector, salon host, and founder of a private library/gallery whose holdings and exhibitions created a material infrastructure for homoerotic and decadent tastes (2012, 74–86).

His first volume, *Zazděná okna* (*Walled Windows*, 1884), already signals the thematic architecture that would define his work: a Symbolist cult of color and sensation, cast in the decadent mode of Baudelaire's *forêt de symboles*, but shot through with a sense of existential confinement and erotic frustration. Karásek's innovation lay in contaminating high formalism, especially Lumírist prosody and strict stanzaic structures, with images of moral decay, queerness, and bodily pathology. Against a social order anchored in bourgeois discipline, Karásek performs a stylized marginality, donning the mask of the dandy and *poète maudit*, resurrecting Romantic spleen as a vehicle of sexual and spiritual heresy.

The radical break in his poetic project comes with *Sodoma* (*Sodom*, 1895; republished 1905), subtitled *A Pagan Book*, a daring gesture that collapsed the line between personal identity and aesthetic militancy. Explicitly homoerotic and pansexual in its ambition, *Sodoma* was censored upon publication and later defended in the Viennese Reichsrat by socialist MP Josef Hybeš—a symbolic moment uniting political dissent and sexual nonconformity under the imperial gaze. In these poems, dreams are elevated as a privileged site of transgression and revelation, echoing Henri Bergson's valorization of intuition over materialist rationality. Yet the dream, for Karásek, is always tinged with erotic dread—Deleuze and Guattari's deterritorialized desire of a minor literature: intimate, visionary, and dangerously opaque to the hegemonic, norm-setting imperial codes of Empire.

Influenced by Stanisław Przybyszewski's cult of Satanic sexuality, Karásek's poetics merges fin-de-siècle antinomianism with Nietzschean transvaluation. His *Kniha aristokratická* (*The Aristocratic Book*, 1896) invokes not merely sexual taboo but a whole metaphysics of the perverse: homosexuality, orgiastic rites, sadomasochistic imagery, and pagan spectacle converge in a delirious counter-history of the body. These classical allusions are not nostalgic but deeply queer appropriations: Rome and Greece are reimagined not as harmonious idealities, as in Jaroslav Vrchlický or Josef Svatopluk Machar, but as zones of Dionysian collapse and sexual delirium filtered through a decadent Nietzschean lens.

This anti-idealism finds its most violent articulation in *Sexus necans. Kniha pohanská* (*Sexus necans. A Pagan Book*, 1897), where Eros and Thanatos are locked in ecstatic conflict. Here, death is not merely metaphorical but eroticized—often through necrophilic images or sacred violence—revealing the deeper metaphysical program of Karásek’s aesthetics: the overcoming of the self through sublime disintegration. If Symbolism generally sought transcendence through aesthetic form, Karásek radicalizes this drive by fusing spiritual ascent with bodily desecration.

Despite the frequent use of historical and mythical masks (Icarus, Narcissus, Endymion, Hyacinth), Karásek’s figures never stabilize into allegory. Instead, they become queer avatars—transhistorical emblems of exile, ecstatic suffering, and sublime isolation. *Endymion* (1909) and *Ostrov vyhnanců* (*Island of the Exiles*, 1912) extend this logic, collecting figures who resist or are exiled by normative moral orders: martyrs, madmen, cross-dressing monarchs, and suicidal artists. Their inclusion affirms not only the poet’s identification with the queer outsider but stages a minoritarian archive of failure, excess, and resistance (Lishaugen 2006, 372–80).

Significantly, Karásek offers no traditional love poetry. As a self-declared disciple of Arthur Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, he viewed sexuality not as a site of romantic fulfilment, but as an illusion of the species—a biological trap that diverts the will from its spiritual task. Thus, while eroticism saturates his poetry, it never crystallizes into romantic union. Instead, we find a high Symbolist dualism: Platonic Eros as transcendent longing, pitched against the animalism of the flesh, which brings with it not pleasure but decay. In this schema, sex functions as both *pharmakon* and apocalypse: simultaneously a lure towards sublimity and a symptom of metaphysical rot.

This radical sexual negativity also helps to contextualize Karásek’s recurrent misogynistic tropes. Women in his poetry rarely appear as autonomous subjects. Rather, they are reduced to two archetypes: the prostitute or the mystic. These are not merely gendered clichés but tropes in a broader queer cosmology that seeks to eliminate heterosexual reproduction, sentimental coupling, and domesticity. In his poetic universe, the erotic is only meaningful when wrested from reproductive utility and reconstituted as a spiritual ordeal—available most clearly, perhaps exclusively, to male bodies sublimated into art.

Karásek’s homoeroticism is structural. His literary project constructs a queer counter-world in defiance of Austro-Hungarian norms and Catholic morality. It should be read alongside the contemporaneous efforts of other fin-de-siècle homosexual authors—Stefan George, Joséphin Péladan, Oscar Wilde—not for superficial comparisons, but because all articulated a metaphysical politics of queerness, one that made visible not just marginal desire, but alternative structures of time, beauty, morality, and being. Karásek’s work does not seek toleration or visibility within the imperial order; rather, it enacts what Muñoz might call a “queer utopia”—a refusal of the present in favor of erotic futurity, mythic time, and aesthetic sovereignty. The main character in his novel *Manfred Macmillan. Kniha první trilogie Tři kouzelníků* (*Manfred Macmillan. Book One of the Three Magicians Trilogy*, 1907; English translation by Carleton Bulkin in 2024) embodies the

trope of the “outsider intellectual” who wields forbidden knowledge. He is both alluring and alien, a queer subject who cannot be assimilated into bourgeois society. The magician’s knowledge and charisma mirror those of the decadent queer dandy, who reconfigures marginality as a position of power and aesthetic superiority. This sameness aligns Karásek’s character with contemporary European fin-de-siècle queer figures, such as Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *Des Esseintes* or Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*.

Karásek’s poetic silence after *Poslední vinobraní* (*The Last Grape Harvest*, 1946), as with Březina before him, may be interpreted not simply as exhaustion, but as a withdrawal from a world unable or unwilling to accommodate the ontological burden of queer art. Where Březina sublimated desire into metaphysical radiance, Karásek exposed it in the form of decadent collapse. Both, however, belong to a Symbolist genealogy that queered the very conditions of literary subjectivity, making possible a Czech minor literature of which the ghosts still haunt the margins of Europe’s cultural history.

Queer Minor Literature from the Czech Periphery: Karásek, Weiner, Langer, and Březina in World Context

The Czech writers Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic, Richard Weiner, Jiří Mordechai Langer, and Otokar Březina form a singular constellation within the broader field of modernist and queer literary traditions. While deeply embedded in the cultural and political matrix of Central Europe at the turn of the 20th century, these authors also speak to a wider aesthetic and epistemological formation that can be meaningfully situated within both the framework of minor literature and the evolving corpus of gay world literature. In diverse ways, those literary works foreground non-normative forms of embodiment, eroticism, spirituality, and subjectivity, thereby positioning queerness not only as an identity but as an ontological dissonance, a mode of writing, and a form of resistance.

Deleuze and Guattari define minor literature not by the nationality of its authors but by its structural position, as a literature written in a major language by a minoritized subject, characterized by deterritorialization, the politicization of private life, and collective enunciation. In this sense, Karásek, Weiner, Langer, and Březina represent a queered Czech literary modernism that subverts dominant national, linguistic, and epistemic orders. Writing from a position that is at once inside and outside the imperial culture of Austro-Hungary and the newly-forming Czechoslovak identity, they deterritorialize the Czech language and unsettle its presumed heteronormative and Christian underpinnings.

Karásek’s oeuvre exemplifies the aesthetic transgression associated with French decadent literature (e.g., Jean Lorrain, Huysmans) and the wider European decadent tradition (including Wilde), yet it radically localizes this gesture within the Czech cultural milieu. His flamboyant homoeroticism, obsession with bodily decay, and violent rejection of bourgeois Christian values align his work with a “queer negativity” (in the sense theorized by Leo Bersani and Edelman) reminiscent of Bersani’s claim that sexuality “shatters the self” (Bersani 2010, 28). Karásek’s stylistic excess—his formal experimentation, exoticized pagan references, and inversion of classical genres—enacts

queerness as both a thematic and structural disruption. His disdain for reproductive futurism and romantic normativity resonates strongly with Edelman's *No Future* (2004), which theorizes queerness as an opposition to the heteronormative temporality of social continuity. Karásek's queerness operates as a strategic refusal of coherence, productivity, and moral legibility, foregrounding excess and negativity as aesthetic principles.

Langer's writing occupies a radically different, though equally subversive, space. As both a devout Hasid and an openly homosexual intellectual, Langer queers Jewish tradition from within, blending Kabbalistic longing with homoerotic sublimity rather than rejecting spirituality altogether. His use of Jewish mysticism as a framework for articulating non-normative desire offers a prefiguration of Muñoz's theory of queer utopia, in which queerness is imagined as a spiritual and affective horizon beyond the present. Langer's sacred eroticism aligns with a diasporic queer temporality that resists assimilation and embraces multiplicity, marginality, and ecstatic disruption.

Weiner's prose and poetry, deeply influenced by his experiences in World War I and his encounter with French modernism, manifest a fragmented and often traumatized subjectivity that resonates with both Kafka and Jean Genet (Wöll 2020, 189-99). His queerness is encoded in linguistic deformation, broken syntax, and narrative incoherence. For Weiner, queerness is not only a matter of sexual identity, but also a form of existential estrangement. His work enacts what Edelman describes as a "refusal of narrative closure," resisting all attempts to stabilize meaning through heteronormative or nationalist frames (Edelman 2004, 4). The aesthetic of opacity and brokenness in Weiner's texts opens a space for what Bersani might call the anti-social thesis of queerness, where the subject dissolves into affect, silence, or non-meaning.

Březina, often read as the most spiritual of Czech modernists, sublimates erotic and bodily experience into a metaphysical and symbolic register. His visionary poetics draws upon German idealism, mysticism, and universalist philosophy, yet it is haunted by a queer desire for union that defies normative gendered binaries. Though not explicitly erotic, Březina's poetics of cosmic love, death, and transcendence exhibits a queer ontology in line with Sedgwick's notion of queer performativity (Sedgwick 2003, *passim*), where desire is located not in objects but in affective intensities and uncontainable yearnings. Březina's queerness is thus cosmic, spiritual, and diffused, operating in the interstices between metaphysics and embodied experience.

From Margins to World: Czech Queerness and Global Comparisons

When considered within the broader context of gay world literature, these Czech writers reveal both affinities and disjunctions. Karásek shares decadent and aestheticist motifs with Wilde, Lorrain, and Péladan. Langer anticipates James Baldwin's intersection of race, religion, and homosexuality, while also echoing Marcel Proust's sublimated eroticism. Weiner aligns with the alienated and fragmented prose of Genet, Kafka, and Samuel Beckett. Březina's metaphysical sublimity finds echoes in Hart Crane and Rainer Maria Rilke. Yet, what distinguishes these Czech authors is their intricate interweaving

of queerness with imperial positionality, linguistic marginality, and metaphysical speculation.

Unlike much of Western gay literature, which often centers confessional or romantic paradigms of queer identity, Czech minor literature at the turn of the 20th century frequently negates or defers sexual identity, staging queerness as a force of dissolution, aesthetic disruption, or mystical transfiguration. This is not a simple repression but a structurally embedded resistance to normalization. The relevant writers' queerness is neither identical to nor easily integrated into Western gay canons. Instead, it troubles the very categories by which queerness is understood—sexual, linguistic, spiritual, and political.

To read Karásek, Weiner, Langer, and Březina as a queer minor canon is to expand the parameters of both Czech literature and gay world literature. Their writings articulate queerness as an aesthetic revolt grounded in metaphysical yearning and textual excess. Rather than assimilating into teleologies of progress or liberation, these authors queer time, language, and desire independently of familiar paradigms. As such, they contribute to a global queer archive that is profoundly Central European—fragmented, mystical, exilic, and singularly resistant to capture.

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Queers in Polish Film: From Legal but Diminished to Recast and Differentiated

Helena Gosciło, Harmony Fund

Abstract: A necessarily selective glance at queerness in Polish film from the interwar period to the 2020s reveals, unsurprisingly, increased explicitness in the depiction of onscreen queer personae during the last quarter-century after their virtual absence during the crime-ridden, macho 1990s. Examining crossdressing, homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, and transgender experiences, this overly compact survey focuses on the 21st century as it tracks the departure from the tired and tiresome identification of homosexuality with effeminacy, the comparative scarcity of films about lesbians, and the refreshing diversity in recent portrayals of queerness.

'Queer' not as being about who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but 'queer' as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.

bell hooks, "Are You Still a Slave?" (2014)

Defining Queer

Like Sara Ahmed (2006) and bell hooks, I conceive of queer as denoting a heterogeneous category of individuals who consciously or otherwise do not conform to mainstream social conventions, which traditionally exercise power through created norms. Accordingly, in the context of sexuality/gender, queerness comprises homosexuals (male gays and lesbians), bisexuals, transvestites/crossdressers, and transgender individuals/transsexuals.¹ Moreover, I subscribe in a modified form to Adrienne Rich's concept of a sexual continuum (1980) along which everyone may be located provisionally, some moving away from hetero to homo or the reverse, while others maintain a fixed position at either end of the spectrum or fluidly occupy more than one location on it simultaneously. These convictions inevitably underpin my selective glance at queerness in Polish films released primarily, though not exclusively, during the last quarter-century. Constraints of space and anticipated readers' (im)patience limit my commentary on earlier screen representations of queerness to several brief mentions. Anyone interested in that period who understands Polish, however, can consult Sebastian Jagielski's meticulously researched scholarly tome *Masquerades of Masculinity* (*Maskarady męskości*, 2013) and the journalist-activist Krzysztof Tomasik's popularizing *Gejerel: Sexual Minorities in PRL* (*Gejerel: Mniejszości seksualne w PRL-u*, 2018) and *Homolobby: Actors in the Second Polish*

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¹ For an elaboration of referential possibilities of the term "queer" see Doty 2000, 6-7.

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<https://sqsjournal.org>

*Republic (Homolobby. Aktorzy II RP, 2025).*²

Pre-WWII, under Soviet Oversight, and the 90s

In 1932, Poland legalized homosexuality,³ which underwent decriminalization in the US from the sixties onward, in the UK in 1967, and as late as 1994 in West Germany. Regarding same-sex intimacy, France (1791), Holland (1811), and Italy (1890) proved three of the most enlightened nations in Western Europe, while Poland was decades ahead of other Slavic countries. As anyone familiar with the relationship between law and everyday experience knows, however, an abyss often yawns between the two. Views of queerness in Poland during the interwar period and especially the forty-odd years of its membership in the Eastern Bloc as the Polish People's Republic (PRL: Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, 1947–89) illustrate the discrepancy between paper legality and lived reality.⁴ And an appreciable disparity likewise characterized the portrayal of queerness in domestic feature films from one decade to the next.

The 1930s in Poland witnessed a lively symbiosis between film and cabaret—a genre of intimate entertainment originating in Paris (1881) that combined risqué innuendo, popular music, audacious costumes, and subversive topical satire.⁵ In cinema, the extraordinarily prolific and adaptive gay director Michał Waszyński (1904–65),⁶ famous for his many melodramas, comic actor Adolf Dymśa (1900–75), and especially screen/cabaret star Eugeniusz Bodo (1899–1943) became associated with (sometimes musical) comedies coalescing around a romantic plot that involved **crossdressing**—women



Figures 1-2. The indefatigable Eugeniusz Bodo with his beloved Sambo; Bodo in *The Floor Above* (*Piętro wyżej*) as the busty Mae West.

² The Second Polish Republic (II PR) was the interwar period, lasting from 1918-1939. Some useful comments also may be found in the chapter on Czech and Polish masculinity in Mazierska 2010, 177-213.

³ As elsewhere, the law addressed men's sexuality, not lesbianism.

⁴ For basic information about LGBT rights in Poland from the nineteenth century to the present, see <https://www.equaldex.com/region/poland>.

⁵ Beth Holmgren examines specifics of that synergy. For a somewhat gossipy and popularizing but informed and informative history of Polish cabaret from its earliest days, see Koper 2023.

⁶ Between 1929-39 he directed forty films, later worked in Italy, and participated in major American films. For a brief but invaluable essay on his life and works, see Kowalczyk 2022.

as boys or little girls and men as women (Holmgren 2023, 39–81). Most notably, in Leon Trystan’s musical comedy *The Floor Above* (*Piętro wyżej*, also known under the title *Neighbors*, 1937), Bodo, typically cast as an object of female desire (though in real life apparently preferring his dog and his mother to romantic dalliance), created a sensation singing a pioneering drag number titled “Sex Appeal” while dressed as Mae West (1893–1980) (figures 1, 2). As the epitome of flaunted hyperbolic female sexuality renowned for her audaciously *outré* witticisms (e.g., “A hard man is good to find,” “Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before”), West ignited a perception of her as part male, part female (queer) precisely because of her overripe enactment and articulation of sexually insatiable womanhood, which became her screen signature. She acquired the status of a gay icon, not unlike Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, both of whom wore male garb and crossed gender boundaries in their films,⁷ which, in contrast to West’s, largely eschewed humor.

Dietrich’s early career was in cabaret, and as the cabaret vamp Lola Lola in the musical drama *The Blue Angel* (*Der blaue Engel*, 1930; dir. Josef von Sternberg) she eventually caused a professor’s tragic demise. Luchino Visconti’s *Damned* (*La caduta degli dei*, 1969) linked the crossdressing Martin’s performance as cabaret-Dietrich to a weightier, historical tragedy—the 1930s rise of Nazism in Germany. Whereas intertextual crossdressing in Visconti augured dire events, transvestitism in Polish cinema of the 30s was playful and campy, appearing solely in comedies, though according to at least one source, queerness was a mode of style during the decade (Jagielski 2009, 223).⁸ Yet, though the endings of films that featured crossdressing may have reassured viewers that “all’s well that ends well,” the sheer presence of onscreen men in women’s clothing carried intimations of transgression that lingered. Conventional clothes, after all, serve to reinforce gender binarism (Garber 1992; Benstock and Ferriss 1994; Wilson 2014), and violation of established vestimentary codes—before unisex outfits appeared on the scene—court/ed speculation by implying **queerness** (Dyer 2002, 211–17).⁹

Onscreen crossdressing resurfaced four decades later, in Stanisław Bareja’s comedy *Looking for Man-Woman* (*Poszukiwany, poszukiwana*, 1972/1973), doubtless inspired by Billy Wilder’s *Some Like It Hot* (1959). Both deal with protagonists’ cross-dressed flight from reprisal in the context of crime. Whereas Wilder’s musicians Jerry aka ‘Daphne’ (Jack Lemmon) and Joe aka ‘Josephine’ (Tony Curtis) witness a Chicago mobster killing, Bareja’s museum worker Stanisław Maria Rochowicz aka ‘Marysia’ (Wojciech Pokora) is unjustly accused of theft and goes undercover (figure 3).¹⁰ All three spend much of the

⁷ Both women likewise favored an androgynous style offscreen.

⁸ Jagielski here is citing Czesław Miłosz. See footnote 42.

⁹ In his excellent article about cinematic queerness during the 30s, Jagielski speculates that the actor/director/producer was homosexual, given his bravura performance in this sequence, his reported use of makeup in everyday life, and his cohabitation with his mother, who remained the greatest love of his life (Jagielski 2012, 266–71). The sequence following the song “Sex Appeal,” in which Bodo as Henryk entices an older male neighbor who lives on the floor above him in the apartment house anticipates the Jerry (Jack Lemmon) plotline in Billy Wilder’s *Some Like It Hot* (1959).

¹⁰ About the difficulties of casting a man whose physique could credibly pass as a woman’s, see Skotarczak 2022, 129–37.



Figure 3. Richowicz as the domestic Marysia in Bareja's *Looking for Man-Woman* (*Poszukiwany-poszukiwana*).

two films masquerading as women, but whereas the memorable last line of Wilder's film, which teems with temporary adopted identities, suggests that 'Daphne' and his besotted older swain will share an intimate life in the future as a queer couple, the conclusion of Bareja's film reasserts a heteronormative status quo. Under ho-

mosocial Soviet supervision in the PRL even comedies had clearly defined heteronormative limits.

Apart from the maverick Bareja's gender-bender offering, postwar Polish films proved less ludic and sooner conceived of queerness in all its forms as a sociopsychological problem. That some of the most famous and respected Polish writers were **homosexual** nevertheless was a widely known fact that never interfered with their popularity, as evidenced by Maria Dąbrowska, Aniela Gruszecka, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Miron Białoszewski, Witold Gombrowicz, Jan Lechoń, and others. And Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, a married 'family man' with two daughters, decorated by the government for his sundry political services, was **bisexual**.¹¹ No one advertised her or his sexual proclivities, for, as Tomasz Basiuk argued recently, the ritual of coming out (*de rigueur* now in the West, especially Hollywood) was alien to Poles, as well as considered superfluous. In Poland, Basiuk observes, "Coming out is often seen as a cultural import, a gesture for which there is no established protocol and which can easily turn into embarrassment for those who attempt it and those being addressed" (Basiuk 2018, 5). Such a viewpoint, I believe, slights differences between generations and the seismic revolution in communication during the last few decades, as well as entertaining a narrow definition of what coming out entails. Contemporary directors (e.g., Tomasz Wasilewski, Olga Chajdas and Kasia Adamik—a married lesbian couple who enjoy the blessing of Agnieszka Holland, Adamik's mother), actors (Hubert Miłkowski, Piotr Trojan), and film commentators (Bartosz Żurawiecki),¹² neither hide their queerness nor make ritualistic public announcements. Earlier *Kulturarbeiters'* circumspection presented no obstacles either to public awareness of their

¹¹ For a discussion of literary queerness in the sexual and more general sense, see Hutchens 2022, the first chapter of which treats Iwaszkiewicz and Gombrowicz.

¹² A writer and journalist as well as film critic, Żurawiecki authored a book-length study of HIV in Poland, ironically titled *Ojczyzna moralnie czysta: Początki HIV w Polsce* (*The Fatherland Is Morally Pure: The Beginnings of HIV in Poland*), Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2023. In it he openly refers to his husband, Maciej Kucharski.

queerness or to their status within mainstream culture. Iwaszkiewicz's fiction, in fact, attracted many highly respected film directors, especially Andrzej Wajda, but also Jerzy Kawalerowicz, Stanisław Różewicz, and Jan Rybkowski, among others.

One of Poland's most popular and internationally successful films in the 70s, Wajda's *Promised Land* (*Ziemia obiecana*, 1975), stands out by virtue of an unambiguously **homosexual** character as one of its major personae. Wajda's vivid adaptation of Nobel laureate Władysław Reymont's novel (1899) with the same title dramatizes the ambitious activities of three male friends in the accelerated industrialization of Łódź, now Poland's cinema city, but then the heart of the country's textile production. Of the three—Polish nobleman Karol Borowiecki (Daniel Olbrychski), German business heir Max Baum (Andrzej Seweryn), and Jewish businessman Moritz Welt (Wojciech Pszoniak)—Borowiecki is the universal object of desire not



Figure 4. The political kiss as the realized metaphor of ideological bedfellows (2016), by street artist Mindaugas Bonanu, photograph by Petras Malukas/AFP/Getty Images.

only for three women but also for Welt. Throughout, the latter demonstrates no interest whatsoever in women, gazes spellbound at Borowiecki, carries his photograph in his wallet, and kisses him on the lips in a paroxysm of uncontrollable enthusiasm (predating Brezhnev and Honecker's socialist smooch, which was reprised in a contemporary masterpiece of wall art by Lithuanian Mindaugas Bonanu likewise literalizing the metaphor of "ideological bedfellows" in its depiction of Putin and Trump osculating!).¹³ (figure 4) Moreover, Wajda had Welt wear several gaudy rings and underscored his Jewishness, which, given the Jewish Lucy Zucker's relentless sexual appetite for Borowiecki, aligned Jewishness with sexual 'anomaly' in the film's system of values, doubtless accounting for various accusations of antisemitism against Wajda, especially in the West (figure 5).¹⁴ Additionally, not unlike other Polish directors who cast Olbrychski in swash-buckling roles (e.g., Jerzy Hoffman in *The Deluge* (*Potop*, 1974)), Wajda himself fetishized his protagonist's athletic body sufficiently for viewers to regard his treatment of Olbrychski/Borowiecki as queer.¹⁵

¹³ The original photograph of Brezhnev and Honecker inspired Dmitrii Vrubel's painting on a fragment of the Berlin Wall in 1990, which in turn apparently stirred the imagination of Bonanu in Vilnius. For the politics of the kiss in the contrasting context of queerness, see Baer 2009, 25. Not irrelevantly, a recent study headed by Matilda Brindle, an evolutionary biologist at Oxford University, confirmed that near-derthals osculated, as do albatrosses—a fact that might illuminate the habit of Soviet leaders (Watkins 2025).

¹⁴ For a discussion of Welt's and others' sexuality in the film, see Jagielski 2013, 268-308.

¹⁵ On the repeated exposure of Olbrychski's upper body, see Goscilo 2024, 237-69.

During late PRL, however, screen homosexuals were relatively scarce, though individuals whom some film critics have interpreted as queer in a broader sense were frequent, especially in secondary roles (Jagielski 2013, *passim*).¹⁶ Narratives about queers virtually vanished during the chaotic 90s, when guns as blatant phallic symbols overran Polish cinema, reflecting the economic freefall and social disorder that accompanied the country's convulsive transition to democracy and market. With criminality, corruption, and greed posited as the norm, Hollywood-cloned action films directed by Władysław Pasikowski (b. 1959) and Maciej Ślesicki (b. 1966) showcased rampant violence and an improbably macho protagonist (above all, Bogusław Linda) in features that acquired unexpected popularity even as cinema's audiences shrank dramatically. These misogynistic



Figure 5. Throughout *The Promised Land* (*Ziemia obiecana*) Welt changes rings several times, an atypical habit for men, who, moreover, may wear a wedding band or signet ring, but not three rings on one hand.

homosocial box-office hits (e.g., *Kroll* 1991, *Psy* 1992, *Psy 2* 1994; *Tato* 1995, *Sara* 1997) often portrayed young females as witless admirers of older men for whom lethal weapons mattered more than women in compensatory scenarios that cemented **gender binarism** with a vengeance. Onscreen dominance of assertive masculinity that drew sizable audiences left scant room for queer scenarios. Although the decade's end witnessed the release of an intelligent, pessimistic treatment of the decade's lawlessness—Krzysztof Krauze's *Debt* (*Dług*, 1999), based on real events—regrettably, it also adopted the 90s' addiction to ironclad gender binarism. In fact, the cover of Feliks Falk's *Debt Collector* (*Ko-mornik*, 2005), a thematic holdover from typical 90s fare, bore the label "Masculine / Men's

¹⁶ Together with Kalinowska (2009), Kurz (2009), and other Polish critics, Jagielski sees the eighties as a decade in which screen sexuality and nudity exploded. From today's perspective, that period's relaxation of censorship strikes me as rather tame.

Film" (*Męskie kino*), presumably as a selling point for the envisioned consumers of fantasies about salvatory macho omnipotence.

*The 21st Century: Queerness from Multiple Perspectives*¹⁷

Fortunately, the 21st century brought diversity and thoughtfulness to, as well as increased engagement with, the concept of queerness, elaborated by both female and male directors. Not so, however, in the first year, which witnessed the premiere at the Gdynia Film Festival of Mariusz Trelński's *Egoists* (*Egoiści*, 2000).¹⁸ One of the best-known and most contentious films that year, with a sensationalist scenario scripted by the director and two colleagues that depicted Varsovian elite's *dolce vita* (frenetic parties, drugs, booze, sex) during the unbridled nineties, it resorted to the musty cliché equating homosexuality with effeminacy and at film's end culminated in a "pansy's" suicide upon being abandoned by his lover.¹⁹ As



Figure 6. Trelński's bewildering regression to the stereotype of the homosexual Filip as effeminate and immature, if not downright infantile in *Egoists* (*Egoiści*).

Anita Piotrkowska phrased it, viewers witnessed cynical materialists "revelling in easy money and hedonistic debauchery" (2010, 122) in a testament to ill-judged efforts at novelty. A prominent, prize-winning and controversial opera, theater, and film director²⁰ whose commitment to originality misfired in *Egoists*, Trelński opted for an unmoored, operatic treatment of a stale stereotype, in which the

successful architect Filip (Jan Frycz), ditched by his young military lover, immolates

¹⁷ For an extended list of all films that contain personae who may be considered queer, however peripheral, see "We Have Gay People in Poland Too," <https://letterboxd.com/mumciur/list/we-have-gay-people-in-poland-too/>.

¹⁸ Gdynia is the northern city in which Poland's annual film festival takes place, with ceremonious awards for best film, best actress, etc. Until 1987, the event was held in Gdańsk.

¹⁹ Poland has fewer derogatory terms for male homosexuals than some other Slavic countries: *ciota*, *homoś*, *inwers*, *lala*, *pedał*, *pederasta*, *pedzio*. *Gej* and *kochający inaczej* (loving differently) are neutral.

²⁰ See Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim, "Mirror, Mirror," *The New York Times*, Jan. 21, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/25/arts/mariusz-trelinski-brings-iolanta-and-bluebeards-castle-to-the-met.html>.

himself in a melodramatic fire—moreover, wearing a corset and clutching a doll (figure 6)!²¹ Whereas Cio-Cio-San's suicide upon abandonment in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, which Treliński directed in several countries at that time, is convincing, the specifics of Filip's self-immolation in the operatically excessive *Egoists* render it lurid and laughable. Treliński's reliance on a similar though less extreme aesthetic in *Farewell to Autumn* (*Pożegnanie jesieni*, 1990), his earlier adaptation of the febrile novel (1925) by Polish modernism's *enfant terrible* Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939) likewise envisioned homosexuality reductively as an aspect of decadence, and decadence in the perception of many generally signals the erasure of caveats and boundaries in the enactment of so-called perversity.

After such an inauspicious start to the 2000s, the subsequent proliferation of Polish films about queers constituted a welcome antidote to trivialized portrayals insofar as both female and male directors placed queer protagonists at the very core of their narratives and attentively explored their experiences as individuals rather than near-caricatures. Two original, vastly different features, each a milestone in its own way, appeared just a few years after *Egoists*: Izabella Cywińska's *Lovers from Marona* (*Kochankowie z Marony*, 2005/6)²² and the prolific Piotr Matwiejczyk's indie short titled *Homo Father* (2005).²³ An adaptation of Iwaszkiewicz's autobiographical novella (1961), *Lovers from Marona* offers a credible (and creditable) psychological examination of a love triangle comprising a heterosexual female teacher (Ola [Karolina Gruszka]) in the provinces, a homosexual who regularly visits the area (Arek [Łukasz Simlat]), and the married bisexual object of their desire (Janek [Krzysztof Zawadzki])—a tubercular patient housed at the local sanatorium. Simultaneously evoking Shakespeare's comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, with two male friends as rivals for the same woman, and the “star-crossed lovers” Romeo and Juliet in Verona, both novella and film revise the gender of the beloved and replace Romeo's suicide with Janek's fatal disease. A theater director who briefly served as Poland's Minister of Culture (1989–91), Cywińska (1935–2023) opted for persuasive restraint, implication, and eloquent performances by the cast to convey romantic love as *Liebestod* (the two equally powerful forces according to Ola) while registering the psychological complexity of the focal trio.²⁴ Although the two men's intimacy belongs to their past, Arek's inability to stay away from Janek, their physical gestures, and Arek's integration into Janek's family convey the strength of their evolving intimacy (figure 7). As Janek remarks,

²¹ The corset as a marker of homosexuality likewise was worn by Frycz as Jerzy Wawicki in Andrzej Barański's earlier film, *Horror in Wesole Bagnisko* (*Horror w Wesolych Bagniskach*, 1995/6). See Jagielski 2009, 219, ft. 24.

²² An earlier screen version of the novella, by Jerzy Zarzycki, appeared in 1966.

²³ The title evokes Max Frisch's German novel *Homo Faber* (1957), which also investigates identity and paternity, as well as moral responsibility for one's decisions. The independent director Matwiejczyk (b. 1980) specializes in shorts that tackle a wide range of social and psychological issues. For a catalogue of his films, see <https://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?osoba=1143753>.

²⁴ For a lengthier analysis of the film, see Goscilo and Holmgren 2021, 265–68.



Figure 7. Rhyming names in *Lovers from Marona* (*Kochankowie z Marony*) underscore what the film's narrative implies—that, Janek's wife and his recent heterosexual liaison notwithstanding, past lovers Janek and Arek are bonded

aura of the film, which parallels death in nature, the animal kingdom, and humanity, increases as the narrative proceeds, love binds all three major personae in sequences that emphasize the emotional rewards of profound feelings and commitment to others. And gay love unquestionably carries a positive valency, no less significant than its hetero variant. A comparison of Cywińska's film with the 1966 version by Jerzy Zarzycki, which omits all references to same-sex love, indexes just how attitudes toward homosexuality in Poland continued to change over decades, as accurately observed by Ewa Mazierska (2010, 207).

Contrastively and unapologetically explicit in its portrayal of two gay lovers with a child, Matwiejczyk's 58-minute *Homo Father* nonetheless resembles Cywińska's film in three respects: its psychological orientation, its envisioned fluidity of sexuality, and its inclusion of a woman alongside the male couple (figure 8). Whereas in Cywińska's scenario Ola is Janek's new love interest, in *Homo Father*, Natalia (Goria Kornyluk) belongs to Gabriel's (Bodo Kox) past. Three years earlier their one-night stand resulted in a daughter, Amelia (Amelia Matwiejczyk), of whose existence he has no knowledge until forced to parent her temporarily with his lover, Robert (Dawid Antkowiak), when Natalia leaves the child with them and disappears for three months. Not the

"He always comes back... comes back to me." And when Janek feverishly fantasizes about a bright future shortly before his death he first mentions Arek, then Basia, his wife. Ola and Janek's explicit bodily intimacy, which originally suggests a future, appears to hasten Janek's death, inasmuch as it soon follows their sexual intercourse. Janek seems to love everyone but possibly no one, presumably including his wife and son—essentially hearsay characters whose future wellbeing he entrusts to Arek. While the elegiac

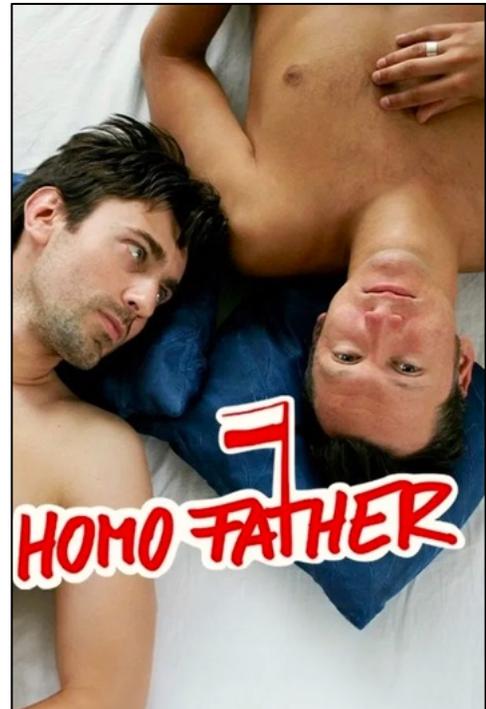


Figure 8. *Homo Father* DVD cover, which accurately reflects the two lovers' contrasting perspectives.

child, but conflicting attitudes toward making their relationship known to the outside world is the crux of the male couple's dilemma and the film's plot. Basically, *Homo Father* confronts a key issue in queer culture that Basiuk downplays: maintaining privacy (Robert) versus public disclosure (Gabriel). The two men's dissimilar personalities determine their preferences: unemployed, domestic Gabriel is garrulous, emotional, and outgoing, whereas fear of discovery renders the professionally ambitious Robert reticent and undemonstrative. Although aspects of Gabriel's appearance and activities align him with standard notions of womanhood (long hair, cooking, frequent talk about feelings, etc.), in fact, his is an integrated nature that embraces irony and is completely comfortable with being gay.

Matwiejczyk has the sense and sensibility to portray the male duo as simply likable, caring men whose notion of homosexuality fundamentally diverges: for Gabriel, love is paramount, whereas Robert internalizes the heteronormative view of gayness as 'abnormal'—a mechanism the film neatly conveys through repeated shots of Robert gazing at his reflection in a mirror as he adjusts the tie that is part of his formal wear at work throughout the film. After two homophobic neighborhood neanderthals beat up Gabriel and he lands in hospital, Natalia collects Amelia. Once a changed and chastened Robert declares his love at Gabriel's bedside and confesses to the fear of 'outing,' they return home, whereupon the film concludes with an inspired shot: Gabriel pulls at the netting that earlier he had placed over the door to discourage flies, and as it lands over his head when the two men kiss, it serves as an informal wedding veil. In short, as Gabriel argues throughout, *omnia vincit amor*,²⁵ be it straight or gay (figure 9).



Figure 9. Finally in complete harmony as they return home, Gabriel and Robert symbolically enjoy a "marriage of true minds" (*Homo Father*).

Just how attitudes toward homosexuality in Poland had evolved by the 2000s also may be deduced from *Homo Father's* Independent Film Award at the country's annual film festival in Gdynia (2005) and from Robert Gliński's HBO-produced documentary *Homo.pl* (2007), in which gays speak frankly about their lives.²⁶ With each passing year, Polish films about queers not only became bolder but also shifted emphases and acquired greater intricacy, nuance, and varied contexts. With a few exceptions, notions of

²⁵ The words are Virgil's, but they express Gabriel's conviction.

²⁶ In her coverage of Gliński's life and works, including a filmography, Małgorzata Fiejdasz makes no mention of the documentary. See culture.pl, 2007/2011, <https://culture.pl/en/artist/robert-glinski>.

effeminacy and abnormality ossified into relics of the past.²⁷ Illustrative of this trend, Magdalena Piekorz's portmanteau *Torpor/Drowsiness* (*Senność*, 2008) marked a huge leap forward. Juxtaposing two gay men's love with two mainstream marriages, the film fear-



Figure 10. While seemingly a ruffian like his gang of street mates, the skillful skateboarder Bystry proves a loving partner with Adam in the privacy of the latter's apartment—and bed—in *Torpor/Drowsiness* (*Senność*).

lessly presents the former relationship in an unequivocally more favorable light. Piekorz raises pragmatism, class issues, and the familiar contrast between town and country, but, above all, lays to rest the thoughtless equation of homosexuality with effeminacy in the persona of Bystry (Bartosz Obuchowicz)—a skateboarding member of a 'rough and tough' street gang who falls in love with Adam (Rafał

Maćkowiak), the young doctor who treats his injuries. After a brutal beating by his thuggish 'buddies,' Bystry happily joins Adam in a move to the countryside next door to the latter's parents. Hardly a proponent of sexual utopianism, Piekorz shows the lovers forced to negotiate the contemptuous enmity of Adam's father (Andrzej Grabowski) while, as usual, the mother (Dorota Pomykała) shows greater acceptance. Yet the men are united in a mutual love absent from the heterosexual marriages that the film depicts in somewhat exaggerated scenarios bordering on parody of noxious heteronormative couplings.

Torpor/Drowsiness demonstrates originality in two sequences formerly unthinkable in Polish film: in the first, when Adam returns late to his apartment and joins Bystry in bed, the camera focuses on the two men sleeping intertwined (figure 10), while the second sequence contains a brief shot of Bystry's frontal nudity when Adam opens his apartment door to see his father standing outside in an unannounced visit.²⁸ Within the context of both European and American film (pornography excepted), male frontal nudity in a sustained shot appears extremely rarely, and its occurrence here constitutes a cinematic landmark.²⁹ Moreover, the film does not flinch from exposing ignorant prejudice toward gayness from two sources—social circles and the family, with the first threatening physical harm, the second imposing psychological pressure. The couple's commitment in the

²⁷ In that respect Marek Koterski's prize-winning comedy *Dzien świra* (*Day of the Wacko*, 2002) proved regressive.

²⁸ Additional commentary on the film may be found in Goscilo and Holmgren 2021, 268-70.

²⁹ Though not prolonged, the shot is long by comparison with fleeting glimpses of male genitals in films during PRL and later. Moreover, Bystry stands motionless, making no effort to shield his lower body, but faces both Adam's father and the viewer.

face of two-pronged adversity demonstrates their quiet stoicism, which the film acknowledges without positing an unalloyedly happy ending to their future life together.

Three years later Jan Komasa's *sui generis* solo screen debut, *Suicide Room* (*Sala samobójców*, 2011), offered an unexpected take on queerness that depicted (in a dark vein that in retrospect seems prescient) the young generation's wholesale embrace of the historical advances in technology, especially social media (figure 11). Although the film's overriding concern is the power of peer pressure and the internet, the starting point of the narrative, which moves to a tragic conclusion, is the suspected queerness of a young student, Dominik (Jakub Gierszal), who during a wrestling session with a classmate in the school gym manifests

physical arousal. Hounded and ridiculed by his fellow students on social media, he retreats to a cyberworld where he encounters a chatroom administered by the young woman Sylwia (Roma Gąsiorowska-Żurawska) for the suicidally inclined and, ultimately, commits suicide, to his neglectful parents' shocked incomprehension. With a bravura performance by Gierszal in an early role, the film suggests, if only briefly, how in a heteronormative milieu gayness can elicit social ridicule or ostracism that eventually culminates in radical and fatal actions. The novelty of the film's social and psychological perspective, however, primarily concerns the expansion of the internet and, more generally, failure at genuine human communication, with queerness partly relegated



Figures 11 and 12. An extended shot captures the young generation's addiction to the internet, especially social media, which eventually results in tragic consequences. And Dominik's physical appearance externalizes his alienation from his classmates. Both in *The Suicide Room* (*Sala samobójców*).

to the subordinate function of plot generator, diminishing after the initial part of the film. Those early sequences nonetheless establish the ultimately destructive repercussions of appearing queer within an intolerant youth culture (figure 12).³⁰

Debatably, Polish screen queerness reached its apogee in what remains, without question, one of the two most intrepid and uncompromising treatments of the topic, both by Małgorzata Szumowska. The first is *In the Name of...* (*W imię...*, 2013), which took the unprecedented step of exploring homosexuality within the Catholic Church—historically, the holiest of holies in Poland. A pioneer in this regard, the film predated Wojciech Smarzowski's *Clergy* (*Kler*, 2018), a naturalistic one-note exposé of Catholic priests' sexual abuse of children, and Tomasz Sekielski's documentary titled *Tell No One* (*Tylko nie mów nikomu*, 2019) about the same phenomenon. While registering the Church's tradition of concealing "errant" priests' peccadillos by transferring them from one location to another, Szumowska has two weightier goals—to decry Catholicism's irrational and inhumane insistence on priests' and nuns' celibacy, and to differentiate between two modes of gay sexual praxis.

These concerns and all events in the film revolve around the charismatic priest Adam (Andrzej Chyra), redirected to the provinces because of his homosexuality, where he takes over a parish and supervises the successful center for maladjusted youth that he founded. Popular among its members, he responds positively yet circumspectly to the pursuit of a local young man, Łukasz aka Dynia (Mateusz Kościukiewicz). After a report to a bishop by the husband (Łukasz Simlat) of a frustrated woman, Ewa (Maja Ostaszewska), who unsuccessfully attempts to seduce Adam, however, the priest is sent to yet another parish. When Dynia follows him, Adam succumbs, and the two spend the night together. After an unspecified temporal lapse, the film ends with a silent sequence showing Dynia in liturgical vestments as one of several priests in conversation outside a church (figure 13).

Szumowska's film is remarkable on several fronts, arguably the most original being the analogy between Adam and sundry religious figures, including Jesus Christ: Adam struggles against his homosexuality, just as religious texts narrate Christ's difficulties with his mandated role of self-sacrificing redeemer; like Christ, he devotes himself to 'saving,' inter alia, not only those marginalized by society but also the physically incapacitated; and in Dynia, he finds the disciple who follows his precepts. Furthermore, the sequence in which Adam acquiesces to Dynia's request that he teach him to swim resembles a baptism (figure 14). Finally, Szumowska takes pains to portray Adam as an agent of love by contrasting, on the one hand, his final intimacy with Dynia in a remarkable shot of what constitutes smiling, face-to-face, 'heart-shaped' unity the morning after, to, on the other hand, the mere act of buggery when the cold-blooded Adrian/Blondyn (Tomasz Schuchardt) penetrates another youth, the latter's face unseen. In short, through cinematographic antithetical juxtaposition Szumowska showcases religious principles by

³⁰ Komasa's subsequent *Hater* (*Sala samobójców: Hejter*, 2020) further explored the nefarious misuse of the internet to disseminate misinformation, unleash hatred and violence, and ruin people's lives, with gayness a minor aspect of the film. For the director's interview about the film, see Jan Komasa, "Banalność zła," *Kino 4* (2020): 22–24 [Interview with Jakub Moryc].

affirming the power of love versus the alienation of lust. Not queerness, but instrumentalizing others for one's own ends receives short shrift in a film that could hardly present its central gay persona more appealingly—a role that the director cleverly entrusted to one of Poland's most popular, talented, and versatile actors.³¹

Anyone automatically assuming that only male queers are capable of portraying homosexual men knowledgeably and in an equitable fashion would benefit from comparing Cywińska's and Szumowska's films with Tomasz Wasilewski's *Floating Skyscrapers* (*Płynące wieżowce*, 2013), which he inaccurately proclaimed the first film to address gay



issues “seriously.” A retrograde and formulaic outing, it teems with the clichés that Jack Cullen catalogued in *The Guardian* after attending the BFI festival of gay shorts that year.³² Wasilewski's subsequent Polish-Swiss production, *United States of Love* (*Zjednoczone stany miłości*, 2016), its various awards notwithstanding, performed a similarly hapless (and misogynistic) operation on female desire, whereby women emerge as pathetic slaves to unrequited love—both hetero and homo, in which shots of naked bodies repeatedly and for the most part gratuitously expose (especially but not exclusively) male buttocks and genitals. These, presumably, were intended to signal enlightened daring even as the film's notions of womanhood evoked the medieval era. A diminished view of humanity

At film's conclusion, Dynia's choice of calling reflects Adam's impact on him as the disciple who may continue Adam's work; Szumowska casts a requested swimming lesson as a symbolic baptism (*In the Name of ... [W imię ...]*).

³¹ For a lengthier examination of the film, see Goscilo and Holmgren 2021, 271-73.

³² More about Cullen's commentary and a discussion of Wasilewski's film may be found in Goscilo and Holmgren 2021, 273-75.

blights the film, which would have benefited from the omission of the brief, risibly unconvincing lesbian element.³³

While in the 21st century women directed two of the best features about male gays, onscreen **lesbians** attracted few directors, either male or female. Two settings that conventionally ‘naturalize’ gay relations are prisons and sports facilities, where common showers reveal naked bodies and potentially conduce to sexual interaction. Yet *The Last Stage* (*Ostatni etap*, 1948) by Wanda Jakubowska, set in the notorious Auschwitz concentration camp during WWII, displayed women’s solidarity under calamitous conditions, but not mutual erotic attraction. Similarly, almost four decades later Ryszard Bugajski’s *Interrogation* (*Przestuchanie*, 1982), despite kissing between female prisoners, lacked sustained queer intimacy. Interestingly, the same year saw the famous Polish actress Grażyna Szapołowska (b. 1953)—repeatedly cast as an object of sexual desire³⁴—in the major role of the married journalist Livia involved in a queer liaison, but the film was Károly Makk’s Hungarian *Another Way* (*Egymásra nézve*). A year later in a sense Szapołowska reprised that role by playing a sadistic lesbian prison warden in Wiesław Siniawski’s *Custody* (*Nadzór*, 1983/5), which left no doubts about her sexual orientation, but eschewed explicitness. Increased screen sexuality during Poland’s 1980s generally favored its hetero variant.

More recently, several Polish commentators interpreted Agnieszka Smoczyńska’s short *Aria Diva* (2007) in terms of lesbianism, whereas some of us view it not as a literal dramatization of two women’s sexual intimacy but as a metaphorical rumination on two diametrically opposed options for adult women’s self-fulfillment: maternity versus career.³⁵ Nonetheless, the women’s fleeting but intense bond with each other certainly may be read as queer, especially by anyone disappointed in the paucity of films devoted to full-fledged lesbianism and eager to see hints of it onscreen. And whereas features generally tended to bypass female same-sex love, two documentaries during the second decade of the 21st century gave Polish lesbians voice: Magda Westub’s *Yes, We Are* (2010), and *Coming Out Polish Style* (*Coming Out po polsku*, 2011, dirs.



Figure 15. An insightful and committed professional, the lesbian Jass outshines her colleagues in the complex serial *Mire* (*Rojst*).

³³ For a deservedly crushing, informative review of the film, see Zoe Aiano, “United States of Misery,” *East European Film Bulletin*, 66 (Summer 2016), <https://eebf.org/perspectives/tomasz-wasilewskis-united-states-of-love-zjednoczone-stany-milosci-2016/>.

³⁴ Szapołowska’s ripe beauty led to her roles as a sexual magnet in Filip Bajon’s *Magnate* (*Magnat*, 1986) and Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *Short Film about Love* (*Krótki film o miłości*, 1988) among numerous other films.

³⁵ Goscilo and Albarano 2026, 93-95; Wodzyński 2025, 52-59.

Sławomir Grünberg and Katka Reszke)—significantly, made for PBS TV, but financially supported by PISF (Polish Film Institute/Polski Instytut Sztuki Filmowej).³⁶

The second and third seasons of Jan Holoubek's complex three-part crime thriller *The Mire* (*Rojst*, 2018–24) on Netflix,³⁷ true to his avowed preference for women's roles, star an intelligent female investigator, Anna Jass (Magdalena Rózcicka), whose professionalism and integrity put her male colleagues in the shade.³⁸ Her lesbianism, which



Figures 16 and 17. The mismatched heterosexual couple seeking a surrogate birth mother; Nina, who discovers a new world of entertainment (and sexual possibilities), with Magda in a nightclub for queers. Both in *Nina*.

Nina cannot conceive (figure 16). With surprising speed Magda, who becomes enamored of Nina, woos her, takes her to a nightclub (figure 17), and the two grow intimate,

the series wisely treats as unexceptional, is at best incidental to the plot, which focuses on crime and Jass's relations with her colleagues, not her romantic/sexual interest (figure 15). A radically different treatment of lesbianism, however, finally premiered the year of *The Mire's* debut: Olga Chajdas's risky *Nina* (2018), a no-holds-barred paean to lesbian love, which belongs to the small number of narratives marking a protagonist's movement or 'defection' from heterosexual intimacy to a partner of the same sex.³⁹ Although such a transition occurs frequently enough in everyday reality to predispose viewers to accept its representation on screen, several aspects of *Nina* militate against the persuasiveness of Chajdas's scenario. Its triangle consists of Nina (Julia Kijowska), a teacher of French, her car-mechanic husband, Wojtek (Andrzej Konopka), and the young Magda (Eliza Rębec), a lesbian airport worker with an active sex life, whom the couple choose as a surrogate birth-mother for their child when it transpires that

³⁶ Additionally, Jan Kidawa-Błonski's *In Hiding* (*W ukryciu*, 2013) portrays the queer relationship between a young Polish woman, Janina, and the Jewish Ester, whom she hides from the Nazis during WWII and in the process falls in love with her. Not having seen the film in its entirety, I am omitting discussion of it.

³⁷ Available on Netflix, the critically acclaimed series comprises *The Mire* (2018), *The Mire '97* (2021), and *The Mire: Millennium* (2023–24).

³⁸ See the interview with Holoubek, which revolves around *The Mire* (Holoubek 2021, 33).

³⁹ To varying degrees, these include *Lovers from Marona*, *Homo Father*, and *Operation Hyacinth*.

discussing their relations in a bathtub sequence (pioneered in *Homo Father*) before one of Magda's former lovers interrupts the idyll, prompting Nina to flee. After a distraught Magda becomes drunk at a bar and is taken home by Wojtek, they have sexual intercourse. Subsequently Nina (accompanied by Wojtek) at her sister's wedding celebration suddenly realizes that, after all, she wishes to spend her life with Magda, whom she joins. Presumably, the two women will raise the baby Magda now carries. As in *Homo Father*, the closing scene suggests happy 'togetherness,' presupposing that Magda's amorous past will not affect the couple's future.

Problems with the film concern not lesbianism but inadequate editing and at least two unconvincing sequences: Nina's so-called work in the classroom, where she has no rapport whatsoever with her students and seems completely disinterested in teaching; and the couple's evening with Magda at their house, during which they try to persuade her to undertake the surrogacy by smoking dope with her (!). Moreover, nothing seems to underpin Nina's marriage to Wojtek, who takes care of household tasks and wishes to please her, but to whom she seems indifferent—as she does to much else, which makes one wonder what draws Magda to her. Some skillful cinematography by Tomasz Naumiuk, especially in color-saturated sequences of the two women's increasing mutual attraction signaled by effective *mise en scène*, do not fully compensate for *Nina's* disappointing flaws. At the same time, as the first contemporary full feature to place lesbianism at its center, the film was an important milestone especially commendable for avoiding the tiresome butch-and-femme formula.⁴⁰

The 2020s

With the sweeping victory in the 2015 elections of Poland's right-wing political party, Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość/PiS), its conservative agenda and close ties with the Catholic Church eventually resulted in the establishment of LGBTQ-free zones (*strefy*). While this homophobic rejection of LGBTQ rights in many regions carried no legal weight, the intolerance reflected attitudes of the government, the church, and a sizable portion of the provincial and rural population.⁴¹ Yet the campaign did not interfere with an increasing number of films sympathetic to queerness that starred popular actors, received positive reviews and/or awards, and reached international audiences. Netflix not only signed a special agreement with Poland (2016) and opened an office in Warsaw (2022), but began streaming Polish serials such as Piotr Domalewski's adolescent crowd-pleaser *Sexify* (2021–23) and offerings with queer content, such as Komasa's *Hater* (*Hejter*, 2020), Domalewski's *Operation Hyacinth* (*Hiacynt*), and Łukasz Kośmicki's *Queen* (*Królowa*). Similarly, Amazon made Łukasz Ronduda's *All Our Fears* (*Wszystkie nasze strachy*, 2021), *Queen*, and Kamil Krawczycki's *Elephant* (*Słoń*) accessible on Prime Video. And

⁴⁰ For more on the film, see Goscilo and Albarano 2026, 256-63, 282-83.

⁴¹ After the liberal opposition won the parliamentary elections in 2023, the zones were gradually abolished, a process completed by April 2025.

both *All Our Fears* and *The Suicide Room* appear on the free site Tubi. In other words, Polish onscreen queerness has joined an international community of directors relying on English subtitles (the current lingua franca) to reach huge audiences worldwide.

Winner of the Gdynia Film Festival's Golden Lion for best film of the year and four other awards, Łukasz Ronduda's *All Our Fears* (2021) features an extended episode in the life of the gay Polish artist Daniel Rycharski (b. 1986). A profoundly religious Catholic homosexual activist residing in a small village, Ronduda's Rycharski (Dawid Ogrodnik) sports ostentatiously bleached hair, a tracksuit with a rainbow trim that advertises his gayness, lives with his grandmother (Maria Maj), rides a motorcycle, and agitates for better conditions



Figures 18 and 19. Rycharski and his closeted lover, Olek, kiss in a recasting of the Garden of Eden, which, evoking the Biblical narrative, Jagoda's death transforms into a locus of mortality; in a sequence intended to underscore their emotional intimacy, Rycharski colors his grandmother's hair, unwittingly recalling the stereotype of the gay hairdresser. Both in *All Our Fears* (*Wszystkie nasze strachy*).

for workers in the area. Much of his art, some of it exhibited in Warsaw, is grounded in the realia of the local community. The focal incident that the film elaborates is the suicide of Jagoda (Agata Łabno), a lesbian friend who, hounded by a trio of local homophobes while out cycling, hangs herself from a tree. Her suicide inspires guilt in Rycharski and the desire to turn the community's attention to the tragedy of her early death and expiate his and everyone's guilt in her suicide. In Rycharski Ronduda created a fearless artist, whom the film's initial sequence shows having intercourse with his timorous lover, Olek (Oskar Rybaczek), in a setting originally resembling the Garden of Eden (figure 18). As a charismatic near-saint, Rycharski duplicates Christ's role by following the Way of the Cross—carrying along Warsaw's streets the cross he has fashioned from a local tree to commemorate Jagoda's "Passion." He loves his supportive grandmother (figure 19), his friends, and seemingly all aspects of Catholicism; with time his compassionate artistic

creations show promise in swaying the local population to tolerate LGBTQ individuals. At film's conclusion his timid lover joins him once more amidst nature, presumably having vanquished his fear of being outed. Since action rather than identity is Rycharski's *modus vivendi*, he incarnates Jean Paul Sartre's concept of existentialism, whereby existence precedes essence.

To some extent the film evokes *In the Name of...* and joins the later *Elephant* and lesser efforts in depicting homophobic rural aggression. What distinguishes it is the role of artistic creation as a means of honoring victims of cowardly hatred of queers. With that said, Ronduda's attempts to cover all aspects of Rycharski's life result in structural weaknesses: not so much the artist as the director abandons the topic of activism on the farmers' behalf; the small role of Rycharski's father (Andrzej Chyra),⁴² whom the artist visits several times but who ignores him until toward film's end when he suddenly and unconvincingly beats his son in the face, makes for incoherence; and Jagoda appears in the film so briefly as to verge on a hearsay character. In a basically laudatory review, Camillo De Marco puzzlingly declared, "The two directors give a fluidity and rhythm to the dramatic events that were not easy to find, even if in certain dialogues the complexity bends to excessive didacticism" (De Marco 2022). Fluidity, however, is precisely what the film lacks. One of its chief assets, nonetheless, is the camerawork by cinematographer Łukasz Gutt, sometimes listed as co-director, which splendidly captures the landscape, especially in nocturnal shots.⁴³ The other praiseworthy feature is the rich paronomasia of the title. *Strachy* is the Polish word for fears, and the film simultaneously depicts gays' fears of detection by homophobes (the cases of Jagoda and Olek), on the one hand, and, on the other, fears of those rendered insecure by alternatives to heteronormative constructs. A third meaning derives from Rycharski's metamorphosis of Jagoda's casual jacket, brought to him by Jagoda's formerly inimical mother, which he wraps around the cross carved in her memory and positions in a field. The result functions as an agricultural scarecrow (*strach na wróbli*), the plural *strachy* (also meaning "ghosts") referencing the many similar "scarecrows" that subsequently arise around his original. In short, Rycharski not only is joined by his lover at film's end, but has transformed the landscape of the village and some of its inhabitants' views of queers.⁴⁴

Ronduda's is not the sole film about gays drawing on Polish reality. Based on the official "Hyacinth" campaign by Polish authorities in 1985–87 to flush out all homosexuals in the country, presumably to blackmail them when expedient to do so, Domalewski's *Operation Hyacinth* (2021) recreates the unforeseen effects of that operation on the life of a young Warsaw policeman, Robert Mrozowski (Tomasz Ziętek).⁴⁵ Gratifyingly more complex than most of the films considered here, *Operation Hyacinth* seamlessly interweaves the state's political corruption and family dynamics into the focal drama of Robert's

⁴² Chyra, of course, was the gay priest in Szumowska's film, but here he does little other than glower and physically batter his son, who embraces him.

⁴³ At Gdynia he deservedly received the major award for cinematography.

⁴⁴ For a panegyric to the film, see Bartosz Stszczyżyn, "Fears – Łukasz Ronduda & Łukasz Gutt," *culture.pl*, March 3, 2022, <https://culture.pl/en/work/fears-lukasz-ronduda-lukasz-gutt>.

⁴⁵ For an analysis of the film as an instance of recent neo noir, see Goscilo 2026, 99-125.

unexpected sexual *volte face*. While raiding a ‘notorious’ venue for gay contacts during an investigation into serial murders targeting gay men, Robert encounters the student Arek (Hubert Miłkowski). He responds to the latter’s friendliness, initially to infiltrate the local gay scene, but soon begins to appreciate Arek’s considerable charm even as developments in the investigation reveal the duplicity of the police and higher-ups (figure 20). These include his well-positioned father, Edward Mrozowski (Marek Kalita), possibly blackmailing the closeted dignitary (Jacek Poniedziałek) who, it turns out, ordered the killings under investigation to elude discovery of his sexual proclivities. After a night spent with Arek, Robert seeks to warn him of the hired killer’s intention to eliminate all past attendees of gay gatherings at a local mansion who could reveal the dignitary’s participation. In the final sequence Robert manages to eliminate the hitman, to the sound of police sirens in the background that foreshadow his arrest, even as he persuades Arek to flee and promises to find him.



Figures 20 and 21. Robert and Arek at the wharf, their customary meeting place and where they part at film’s end. As a locus of constant arrivals and departures, the location symbolizes the social instability of their genuine emotional/sexual bonding. | When Robert in his professional capacity is forced to interrogate Arek under his judgmental father’s gaze, Arek steadfastly refuses to name anyone, including Robert, as a gay partner. Both in *Operation Hyacinth* (*Hiacynt*).

despite their uneasiness about being outed; and Arek, who seems utterly fearless and,

Especially rewarding—apart from uniformly excellent acting and outstanding cinematography by Piotr Sobociński Jr—are the film’s six different yet interconnected takes on queerness, five of which identify men with full knowledge of their sexuality: the middle-aged dignitary whose power enables him to dispose of those who could disclose his sexual praxis; the vulnerable married professor (Adam Cywka), who opts to commit suicide so as to avoid the ‘shame’ of revelation and, probably, loss of job; the random individuals interviewed by the police—determined to identify the killer, presumed to be gay, and using interrogation tactics evocative of McCarthyism; the group of gay students who gather at a party in Arek’s apartment to celebrate their friendship,

like Gabriel in *Homo Father*, comfortable with his sexuality (figure 21). Finally, the sixth is Robert, who in all good faith plans to marry Halinka (Adrianna Chlebicka), the record-keeper at the police station with whom he has (seemingly enjoyable) sexual intercourse, but who becomes sidelined once he discovers his passion for Arek as well as her conformism. These gradations, together with the mansion that formerly served as a hub for the city's gay men, point to the widespread nature of homosexuality that other films tend to localize.

Furthermore, in the span of 112 minutes, *Operation Hyacinth* marries the phenomenon of diversified homosexuality to such issues as governmental harassment, pervasive official unscrupulousness,

personal and professional integrity, and fraught family relations. As in Piekorz's *Torpor/Drowsiness*, marriage receives short shrift. Edward Mrozowski is distant, dictatorial, and apparently incapable of genuine interaction with either wife (Agnieszka Suchora) or son.⁴⁶ Robert's colleague



Wojtek Nogaś (Tomasz Schuchardt) treats his spouse as if she were a servant. And if Robert's relations with his fiancée, Halinka, seem promising early in the narrative, her compliance with compromised authority becomes



an obstacle to Robert's search for the truth. In short, the homosexual bond with Arek unexpectedly unites the men

Figures 22 and 23. Bartek's solitary early-morning rides represent his sole respite from work on the family farm and from his official employment in a bar. | With Dawid's arrival in the area, Bartek finds someone to love other than his horse. Both in *My End of the World* (*Mój koniec świata*).

through the shared values of love and honor. Compact and thematically resonant, the

⁴⁶ The emotionally incapacitated father also is overrunning current anglophone films. See Clarissa Cruz, "Fatherhood on Film: Dad Is Having a Rough Time Onscreen This Season," *The New York Times*, November 26, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/26/arts/film-dads-one-battle-after-another-ella-mccay.html?nl=The+Morning>.

film in its conciseness and inner dialogism validates the famous insistence of both Alfred Hitchcock and Roman Polanski on editing as the most important aspect of filmmaking.

In contrast to *Operation Hyacinth's* urban setting—consonant with noir film—Kamil Krawczycki's *Elephant* (Słoń, 2022) plays out in the remote foothills of the Tatra range (Podhal), following his earlier short about gay first love, *My End of the World* (*Mój koniec świata*, 2017/8).⁴⁷ Left in charge of the family farm and his alcoholic mother (Ewa Skibińska) after his father's defection and his sister's (Wiktoria Filus) departure for Norway with her boyfriend, young Bartek (Jan Hryniewicz) works at a bar and finds freedom in riding across the area's endless plains and hills on his beloved horse (figure 22). His life changes drastically with the arrival of Dawid (Paweł Tomaszewski), their neighbor's son, who returns 'home' after his alcoholic father suffers a fatal heart attack. The two young men draw close and ultimately become lovers (figure 23), unleashing the emotional blackmail of Bartek's mother and the aggressive prejudices of the conservative local yokels: the bar's owner fires Bartek; oafish neighbors paint "faggot" (*pedał*) in lurid red capitals on the wall of his house and rough him up. When Dawid declares his love and asks Bartek to leave with him for Iceland, Bartek initially refuses, but after Daria, his now pregnant sister, returns for good, he rethinks his decision, rescues the dog treated cruelly by his primitive neighbors, and heads for the airport, secure in the knowledge that Daria and his old friend Danuta (Ewa Kolasieńska), who earlier declared her affectionate devotion to him even if he were an elephant, will look after his mother and the farm.

Though even such sensitive critics as Ola Salwa found *Elephant* overly slow-paced,⁴⁸ that pace allows viewers to appreciate both the rhythms of the region and the multifaceted aspects of Bartek's daily humane generosity. Not only is he a full-time caretaker of an irresponsible parent, but he also shops for Danuta, takes Dawid's drunken father (Ireneusz Pastuszek) home when he becomes incapacitated, urges Daria to call their mother from Norway to improve her mood, and remembers to rescue the abused dog whom Dawid wished to help almost immediately upon his arrival. At the same time, he is an indefatigable physical worker, has warm relations with Danuta and male friends whom he meets in the bar where he works, and, in general, stands out as one of the most admirable men to appear on screen in a scenario that anathematizes ignorant prejudice. Like Ronduda's Rycharski, he constitutes an existential hero. Not a hint of effeminacy, hysteria, or other traits automatically ascribed to queer males impinge upon his image. Debatably, *Elephant's* importance for queer cinema resides in its geographical environment's confirmation that queerness is not confined to cultural centers subject to Western

⁴⁷ The most idiomatic translation from the Polish would be *My Back of Beyond*.

⁴⁸ Ola Salwa, "Review: *Elephant*," *Cineuropa*, 3 August 2022, <https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/428504>.

Calling the film "charming and modest" if not devoid of clichés, Salwa rightly notes that Bartek's "buoyant personality" lends originality to the film. Her conviction that *Elephant* "should resonate well with audiences who have an appetite for simple and warm love stories" ignores the fact that the so-called love story transpires in what is an intransigently anti-LGBTQ community. For a negative and somewhat condescending review of the film, see Igor Kierkosz, "Słoń," *Kino 11* (2022): 82. For an interview with Krawczycki in the same issue, see 30-33.



Figure 24. Sylvester Borkowski as a garishly made-up drag queen in the poster for the serial/film *Queen (Królowa)*.

woman in Poland and now in Paris publicly performing as a **drag queen**—but that role is inhabited by Andrzej Seweryn (b. 1946), one of Poland’s most revered actors (and the entrepreneur Max in Wajda’s *Promised Land* fifty years earlier) (figure 24). Moreover, even when the conservative party PiS was in power, the film originally debuted as a 4-part TV serial in Poland, available for ‘family viewing.’ Unfortunately, the promising opening sequences, which convey Borkowski’s Parisian life as a colorful gender-bending performer and the sedate owner of a high-end male clothing store, devolve into sentimental scenes played out in Poland, where he travels in response to the request of his granddaughter, with



Figure 25. During the day Borkowski works as the sedate owner of a chic clothing store in Paris (*Queen (Królowa)*).

influence, which is what political conservatives in Poland, as elsewhere, contend, as though queerness were a transient fad or style. Just as significant, however, is the sheer human attractiveness of the major character—morally impeccable, responsible, compassionate, and endowed with humor—traits that ally him with *Operation Hyacinth*’s Arek and Robert. The film also raises the perennial question of what offspring owe to their parents, especially those who fail to perform their parental function. Unlike queers, parents come off badly in *Elephant*, as also in *Operation Hyacinth*, *The Suicide Room*, *Torpor/Drowsiness*, and other current releases tackling sundry phenomena, according to a recent informative review in *Kino*.⁴⁹

As increasingly individualized representations of queerness gathered momentum in the 2020s, one of the most striking moments was the appearance of Kośmicki’s *Queen* (2022), which overturned expectations on at least two fronts. Not only is its protagonist, Sylvester Borkowski, an affluent gay man in his seventies—formerly married to a

⁴⁹ Sebastian Jagielski, “Triumf dobra?” *Kino* 11 (2025): 59-62.

whom he has had no contact, having left his wife when he emigrated to pursue a life devoid of hypocrisy. Despite the weakness of the longer segments set in Poland, the film's assets include its refusal to suggest that a gay man's choice to seek self-fulfillment abroad automatically symptomatizes absence of human generosity and capacity for love (figure 25). And the lively, vivid scenes of his Parisian friendships and nightclub act constitute the most engaging aspects of the film, which reminds viewers that the pleasure of an openly lived gay life and success as a drag queen are not confined to rebellious youth.



Figures 26 and 27. Andrzej in the slow, laborious process of transforming into Aniela. | Their happy shared life and children ultimately bring Andrzej/Aniela and his/her wife, Iza, back together. Both in *Woman of...* (*Kobieta z...*).

thanks partly to the wife who returns to her, and the eventual acceptance of her family members as well as some members of the community (figure 27). Spanning several decades but largely focused on the eighties, Szumowska's feature—its title evoking Wajda's internationally acclaimed *Man of...* films (1976; 1981)—emphasizes that the freedoms won by Solidarity and the country's final independence from the Soviet stranglehold did not encompass people's "inalienable right" to decide their own sexuality. At the same

Finally, approximately a decade after tackling homosexuality in the Polish Catholic Church, Szumowska in the Polish-Swedish coproduction *Woman of...* (*Kobieta z...*, 2023/4) turned to an equally controversial queer issue: that of **transsexuality**. An earlier documentary titled *Call Me Marianna* (*Mów mi Marianna*, 2015) had shared the harrowing experiences of a man who transitioned to womanhood, but so far *Woman of...* is the sole full-length feature to chart the same arduous trajectory. It dramatizes the unflagging struggles of a young man, Andrzej (Mateusz Więclawek), who, though in love with his wife and devoted to their two children, increasingly senses that his biological sex conflicts with his psychological self-identification as a woman (figure 26). His prolonged battle to align his body with his inner world must grapple with the temporary alienation of his wife, Iza (Joanna Kulig), his large family's incomprehension, and, as in several of the films discussed above, the hostility of a parochial environment, not to mention the local law. After forty-five years, Andrzej/Aniela (Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik) finally achieves her goal,

time, it acknowledges improved, if imperfect, conditions for transsexuals and transgender individuals in contemporary Poland.

The film hugely benefits from an outstanding performance by Hajewska-Krzysztofik and the fine work of Więclawek, who plays both young Andrzej and his son, Jasiiek, in adulthood. Both the actress and actor, without an excess of makeup, have an androgynous appearance that lends credibility to the transition. Moreover, the research that Szumowska and her codirector and cinematographer, Michał Englert (her ex-husband), conducted before embarking on the film rendered the various stages of the protagonist's metamorphosis convincing. Ultimately, though the film echoes the by now familiar concept of the provinces as stiflingly ignorant and references the issue of coming out, it succeeds in casting a light on a phenomenon previously untouched by Polish feature films about queers.⁵⁰

Conclusion

As my overly condensed, highly selective glance at queerness on Polish screens over almost a century suggests, concepts of queerness and attitudes toward it have metamorphosed in the last few decades, owing largely to an increasingly sophisticated and informed cohort of young directors alert to sociopolitical developments. Neither heteronormative agendas nor ironclad notions of what precisely sexuality entails and who functions as its legislators and guardians inform a sizable body of films that prefer to investigate rather than inveigh against the different versions of a love that finally "dares to speak its name." Queer bonds appear onscreen in scenarios that resurrect the past (*Lovers of Marona*, *United States of Love*, *Operation Hyacinth*, *Woman of...*); spotlight appealing individuals in universally recognizable situations (*Homo Father*, *Torpor/Drowsiness*, *Elephant*, *Queen*); posit love as the supreme value (*Homo Father*, *Torpor/Drowsiness*, *In the Name of ...*, *Nina*, *Elephant*, *Woman of...*); feature suicide as an escape from experienced or anticipated aggressive animosity (*The Suicide Room*, *In the Name of ...*, *Operation Hyacinth*, *All Our Fears*); convey the inner conflicts attendant upon leaving a hetero partner for a queer one (*Floating Skyscrapers*, *Nina*, *Operation Hyacinth*); depict adamant paternal intolerance (*Torpor/Drowsiness*, *Operation Hyacinth*, *All Our Fears*); and rely on gifted actors and actresses⁵¹ who unhesitatingly assume key roles in narratives that, regrettably, still

⁵⁰ For the codirectors' interview about the film, see Małgorzata Szumowska, Michał Englert, "We hope this movie can change something," VENICE 2023 Competition, Cineuropa, September 11, 2023, <https://cineuropa.org/en/interview/449638/> [Interview with Savina Petkova]. For reviews of the film, see David Rooney, "Woman Of..." Review: Malgorzata Szumowska's Affecting Character Study Rescues Polish Trans People From the Invisible Margins," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/woman-of-review-malgorzata-szumowska-michal-englert-1235585400/>; Jonathan Romney, "'Woman Of...': Venice Review," *Screen Daily*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/woman-of-venice-review/5185692.article>. For additional commentary, see Goscilo and Albarano 2026, 50-53.

⁵¹ These include not only the young Mateusz Więclawek (b. 1993), Eliza Recembel (b. 1992), Tomasz Ziętek (b. 1989), and Mateusz Kościukiewicz (b. 1986), but also middle-aged Joanna Kulig (b. 1982) Julia Kijowska (b. 1981), Łukasz Simlat (b. 1977), and the considerably older Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik (b. 1965), Andrzej Chyra (b. 1964), and Andrzej Seweryn (b. 1946).

encounter prejudice and hostility from proponents of inflexible gender binarism, as manifested in the (only recently eliminated) LGBTQ-free zones. One can only hope that this set of films and similar fare on Tubi, Netflix, and Amazon's Prime Video will gradually bring popular opinion about Polish queers in line with the country's elimination of legal persecution of those who love "differently" (*Inaczej*)—the title of a monthly publication (1990–2002) that targeted the queer community but should have been read by anyone not indentured to a straitened (pun intended), sociopolitically-dictated concept of sexual possibilities.

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Julie Cassiday, *Russian Style: Performing Gender, Power, and Putinism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023. 255pp.

Timely, provocative, and brilliant, Julie Cassiday's book begins from the premise that "Putinism was more style than ideology between 2000 and 2020" (56). Over five chapters, Cassiday dissects the various styles of Putinism, developing a sophisticated theoretical framework to explore the relationship between style, gender, and power in contemporary Russian culture. Her methodology draws on poststructuralist feminism and queer theory, especially concepts of performativity and drag. Cassiday's primary source base is refreshingly popular: pop music, self-help literature, viral videoclips, and the Eurovision Song Contest come to the fore.

For Cassiday, popular culture offers a "powerful means of transmitting the model of gendered and sexualized citizenship that emerged during Putin's first two decades in power" (6). With acerbic wit, she points out that "Russia's ideal citizen during the first two decades of the twenty-first century was a young, sexually available woman eager to shape herself in accordance with Putin's needs and desires" (xi). She illustrates this idea with examples from the girl group Poiushchie vmeste's "Takogo kak Putin" [A man like Putin] to the racy calendars that female students made for Putin's birthday.

However, Cassiday's major intervention lies in her argument that much Russian popular culture that appears superficially ironic, or even subversive, in fact ends up serving the status quo. She develops the theoretical underpinnings of this idea in Chapter 1, where she offers a genealogy of the ironic style in Putin's Russia. She enumerates seven different modes: charisma, camp, kitsch, *poshlost'*, *stiob*, *glamur*, and *travesti*. Cassiday carefully defines each concept, teasing out the distinction between concepts that are recognized globally (e.g., camp, kitsch) and those that are apparently homegrown (*poshlost'*, *stiob*), yet she rightly resists the urge to essentialize these differences. While Cassiday recognizes that style could be weaponized to challenge the current regime (e.g., in her discussion of Pussy Riot), she is most interested in how apparently ironic styles can in fact mark disengagement from politics, or reaffirmation of the Putin regime and its logics.

Travesti receives particular attention. Cassiday distinguishes between transgender travesti (where one performs a gender identity other than that assigned at birth) and cisgender travesti (where one performs a hypergender version of the gender assigned at birth). Chapter 2 makes a powerful case for cisgender travesti as a "central strategy for performing citizenship under Putin" (59). Cassiday locates the origins of strategy in the reaction against late Soviet anxieties about masculinized women and feminized men. In the post-Soviet period, women turned to hyperfeminine wardrobes as a kind of weapon, whereas men hid their physical and psychological scars behind hypermasculine garb. Cassiday supports her argument through close analyses of masculinity in three Soviet-Afghan War films: Bondarchuk's *9th Company*, Balabanov's *Cargo 200*, and Loban's *Dust*. Cassiday recognizes that cisgender drag retains the possibility of "slippage" (77), where

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the performativity of gender is unintentionally revealed, but she could elaborate further on this idea.

Chapter 3 turns to the more familiar topic of cross-gender travesti. Here the drag artist Vladislav Mamyshev-Monro is discussed at some length, especially his performances as Stalinist film icon Liubov' Orlova. Cassiday finds a curative potential in his work for resolving Russia's "crisis of masculinity" (81). However, she argues that Putin-era drag artists tend to reinforce, rather than challenge, the neo-traditional gender order. Cassiday considers Andriy Danylko's Verka Serduchka, Sergei Zarubin's Lora Kolli, and the *estrada* glamazons Aleksandr Peskov, Zaza Napoli, and Anatolii Evdokimov. Far from subverting the norms of Putin's Russia, these performers use travesti to make the "hierarchical and heteronormative gender regime" of Putin's Russia appear "'natural'" (95). The chapter concludes with a discussion of Conchita Wurst, the bearded drag queen who won Eurovision for Austria in 2014. For Cassiday, Wurst's performance truly did challenge gender norms, explaining why it caused a moral panic in Russia, deepening the apparent divide between decadent "Gayropa" and the traditional Russian Federation.

Chapter 4, focused on Queer Performativity, begins with the emergence of apparently LGBTQ+ content in popular music and film in post-Soviet Russia. For Cassiday, much of this work is only superficially queer. Again, Eurovision provides valuable source material: Cassiday offers an incisive interpretation of Russian entries by t.A.T.u. and Dima Bilan. Cassiday calls these "double-voiced performances" (108): to European audiences, they appear to be LGBTQ+ affirming, but Russians may read them as mocking, and knowingly capitalizing on, European acceptance. When discussing the "gay propaganda laws," Cassiday remarks that they not only affect LGBTQ+ citizens, but heterosexual and cisgender Russians, who are now required to prove their conformity. Paradoxically, these laws, in their very insistence of the threat of non-traditional sexualities, have subjected the country to "the unsettling epistemological and affective ambivalence associated with queerness" (128).

"Post-Soviet Postfeminism" is the subject of Chapter 5. Cassiday distinguishes between feminism as a "coherent ideology geared towards actual equality of the sexes" and post-feminism as a "less coherent sensibility that blends core feminist ideas with antifeminist assumptions" (130). Examples include Putin's Army, a group of young women who display their support for the President with sexualized YouTube videos. Cassiday suggests, the carefully curated image of Liudmila Putina also serves to promote the postfeminist agenda. Another example is "bitchology" [*stervologiii*] (139), a self-help movement that supposedly encourages women to be bold and bitchy, but actually reinforces the patriarchy, teaching women to accommodate and internalize its logic.

The war in Ukraine sits below the surface in most of Cassiday's book, the bulk of which would have been penned before the full-scale invasion. However, the conclusion brings the war to the fore, convincingly demonstrating how the logics that she has described are writ large in Putin's foreign policy and the horrors of war. She points out that while Putinist styles had appeared to many to be "fun and games" in the early 2000s, the war revealed that they had always been "dead serious" (177). This line resonated with

me as a scholar and a teacher, as I certainly have been guilty prior to 2022 of introducing students to material such as Putin's shirtless photographs or the *Poiushchie vmeste* song as an amusing curiosity, without stopping to consider the darker implications of where he was leading Russia.

The genius of Cassidy's monograph lies in her thorough exposure of how apparently playful, even subversive, performances can end up reinforcing hierarchies. Yet such an approach can seem relentless. While Cassidy mentions the possible ambivalence of popular culture, she focuses the bulk of her attention on how they reinforce the status quo. I would have welcomed more discussion of the slippages in these performances, and the unintentional exposure of the cracks in the gender order.

As befits a book about style, Cassidy's monograph is engaging and written with verve. One of her key points of reference is Susan Sontag, and her style also recalls Sontag's: unsparingly rigorous, yet accessible to a broad public beyond any one field. I found myself frequently underlining pithy observations for use not only in this review, but also in the classroom. The book also makes a substantial contribution to the field of gender and sexuality studies in contemporary Russia, complementing work by Alexander Kondakov, Emil Edenborg, Helena Goscilo, Valerie Sperling, and others. It is essential—and enjoyable—reading for anyone interested in Putin's Russia.

Connor Doak
University of Bristol

Queendom, directed by Agniia Galdanova, produced by Agniia Galdanova and Igor Myakotin (2023, France/USA). 1 h. 38 min. Russian with English subtitles.

Early on in Agniia Galdanova's new documentary film, *Queendom*, one of the supporting characters says, "Drag from the beginning has been political ... It draws attention to important problems." In a sense, *Queendom* presents a case study of drag performance as politics in Putin's Russia on the eve of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Largely observational in style, *Queendom* follows the life of the protagonist, Jenna Marvin, a twenty-two-year-old Russian from Magadan attending beauty school in Moscow. Marvin, who goes by Gena (short for Gennady) at the beginning of the film, expresses herself in spectacular ways and struggles to comprehend the hostile reaction her looks provoke in public spaces, especially in the provinces. In Magadan, a neighbor harasses her verbally and physically on the street ("You're a man! Act like one"); security guards at a shopping center eject her from the premises ("There are children and the elderly here. You can't be here dressed like that"). In Moscow, she courts attention to create content for her social media accounts and as a means of registering political dissent, notably in support of Alexei Navalny and against the war in Ukraine. Marvin's drag excursions into city streets, parks, stores, and public transit reveal an essential point *Queendom* makes as a documentary: much as the political realities determine this young person's journey of self-discovery, these realities—casual homophobia and police brutality chief among them—are secondary to the pursuit of creative freedom that this film captures so impressively.

Queendom is certainly about the dangers of doing drag and being queer in Putin's Russia. Marvin's insistence on the validity of her point of view as a citizen and an artist strains her relationship with the grandparents who raised her, gets her expelled from school, lands her in police detention, and ultimately forces her into exile. Yet the questions of visibility and violence that *Queendom* raises get subsumed into the larger inquiry about creating art and about the paradoxically tenuous relationship between art and life. In the visually stunning opening sequence, Marvin strikes a series of poses on a frozen beach for the smartphone camera handled by her friend. Marvin resembles a shard of ice sticking out of the winter seascape, wearing all-white makeup, lingerie, and a tulle ruffled collar, cream-colored corset, and a pair of elbow-length black gloves and shiny platform boots on treacherously high heels. She has no hair; her head is shaved and covered in white makeup inspired by Pierrot. She looks elemental, one with the glistening surface of the sea and the icy mountains on the horizon. It is her friend who looks out of place: she belongs to the world of humans who wear sensible shoes and practical clothes. Marvin's presence in this world of conventions, rules, and norms undercuts their authority and throws into relief the arbitrariness of what is deemed common sense.

Marvin's drag performance practice has very little in common with drag as female impersonation and the fast-paced, deliberately crude banter exemplified in Russia by Zaza Napoli. Marvin calls her drag persona an "essence" (*сущность*), which is perhaps

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an embodiment of her continuing aesthetic experiment. Her haunting costumes verge on the surreal and resemble conceptual artworks. Clad in them, she is unstoppable, personifying a liminal being. Marvin finds success as a model and a performer online and offline, but she is determined to walk not only in fashion shows but also in the streets, to protest the disappearance of freedoms. Visually striking without fail, the scenes of Marvin's encounters with the police are shot so skillfully as to seem almost staged. In one shot, Marvin in drag faces a policeman who asks her to leave the area around a park for her own safety. (Marvin had wanted to walk beside veteran paratroopers on the Day of Airborne Forces, which they infamously celebrate with very little restraint in cities across Russia.) As the policeman and the drag performer with an elaborate headpiece stare at each other, we see a giant billboard in the background advertising a mobile phone company with the slogan "Dreams of Freedom." The accidental *mise-en-scène* visualizes the fraught mis/communication between the state and its citizens as consumerism substitutes for civil rights.

The narrative texture of *Queendom* incorporates the familiar tropes of Russian repression into a moving personal story. An hour and a half of the film's running time covers two years of Marvin's life between Magadan and Moscow. The core of the film is devoted to Marvin's complicated but loving relationship with her grandparents. Her grandmother is steadfast in her support. The grandfather is clearly caring, but he channels and enforces societal demands for conventional success and conformity. To them, Jenna is Gena. During the shooting of the film, Marvin used male pronouns, though there is one moment in the film when her friends in Magadan use female pronouns in addressing her (this detail gets lost in English subtitles). Marvin's queerness is expressed mostly through drag performances, except in the film's final scenes. Following a stressfully suspenseful sequence of Marvin's frantic search for ways to escape from Russia after Russia invades Ukraine, Jenna makes her way to Paris. She is wearing a skirt and no makeup, seemingly at peace. In the closing sequence, Marvin walks on a street in nothing but underwear, covered in red paint head to toe. Away from Russia, she remains a Russian, a representative of a country waging a bloody war on its neighbor. Parisian streets are empty, however, and the occasional passersby are indifferent. Marvin is left one-on-one with the camera, and this marks the beginning of her life as an exile.

Roman Utkin
Wesleyan University

Ineta Lipša, Kārlis Vērdiņš, and Kaspars Zellis, eds. *Klusumā. Kvīri, padomju vara un sabiedrība Latvijā, 1954-1991*. (In Silence. Queers, Soviet Power, and Society in Latvia, 1954-1991). Rīga: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024. 351 pp.

My first trips to Latvia occurred months before and after the USSR's collapse. Like many of my colleagues in the diaspora who were attending conferences designed to establish professional networks and become familiarized with local scholarly practices, I grew less preoccupied with presenting than with packing scarce everyday items that Moscow's informal economic blockade of the secessionist Baltic republics had rendered luxury goods for my peers: toilet paper, aspirin, ballpoint pens, coffee, office sundries. Given these conditions of privation and limitation, I was surprised to spot a brief notice in a mainstream American magazine—I can't recall...*Out/Week? The Advocate?*—announcing a weeklong international gay and lesbian camping festival in the Latvian countryside featuring music, food, seminars, and, most intriguingly, “pagan massage.” Although my upcoming visit wouldn't coincide, I wrote the contact, hoping to expand yet another network, offer organizational assistance, and perhaps observe post-Soviet paganism. Weeks later, I met a young couple at Rīga's Freedom Monument and learned that there was no festival in the works, just two nineteen-year-old men hoping to find kindred spirits abroad. Nonetheless, I was taken to a pop-up queer disco in a factory canteen, where I met the editor of a new Saint Petersburg-based LGBTQ publication, who explained that he was visiting because he found Rīga's comparative openness energizing. I spent an afternoon interviewing an octogenarian alumnus of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo who shared backstage photos of Anna Pavlova and tales of assignations between male dancers and some of interwar Latvia's highest state and military officials, as well as the love story of two gays who survived internment in Stalin's gulag to then live a quiet domestic existence in a seaside resort. And I witnessed tentative but intrepid public displays of camaraderie among my young hosts and their small circle of male friends.

These heartening glimpses into a community, augmented later by my own research into Rīga's vital hippie subculture of the 1970s and an adjunct artistic milieu of nonconformists in the 1980s, formed assumptions about a world I fully expected to find analyzed anthropologically and sociologically in *Klusumā*, Latvia's first collection of scholarly essays devoted to non-heteronormative life during the Soviet occupation. Instead, it contains little material to suggest that even preconditions existed for this incipient, *fin-de-Soviet* queerness. Admittedly, 1991 is but the exceptional terminus of the book's 37-year scope. The volume's priority is to map four decades of one Baltic republic's post-Stalinist legal codes, official health policy, and prevailing medical attitudes with respect to sexual minorities, and then to determine the variable impact of these upon the policing of public behavior (and self-policing in the private sphere). It plots inconstant, relative processes of liberalization and regression within Latvia, correlates republican conditions with all-

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Union directives and laws elsewhere in the socialist bloc, and, most vitally, secures rapidly fading personal memories. In sum, this book presents an impressive initial effort undertaken by the first homegrown generation of Latvian researchers trained in issues of gender and sexuality, although, one year prior, this group had published a good portion of this material as articles in a special issue of *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls* [*Journal of the Institute of Latvian History* 120 [2024]], which also included pieces written by Estonian and Lithuanian peers, all with English translation.

An introduction by the co-editors soberly assesses the challenges of recuperating a mostly occult history. In two previous attempts by Rīga-based journalists to collect oral testimonies, one failed outright while the other resulted in a slender (though pioneering) volume in 2012 of thirteen interviews—twelve gay, one trans—with the vast majority of stories coming from the 1980s.¹ Extreme reluctance by subjects to share their life histories has been only minimally ameliorated during the intervening decade by growing public acceptance of LGBTQ individuals and, in fact, data collection was further complicated by the death of older potential interviewees and survivor’s continued resolve to shield reputations of the deceased. Nonetheless, approximately thirty new interviews were conducted in preparation for this book, although most of these were straight allies reporting from a certain remove. Attention is focused almost entirely on Latvian lives, an acknowledged imbalance in a Sovietized society eventually comprising 48% non-Latvians, which the authors claim results from heightened homophobia among Russophone populations—a premise that remains unexamined. Ultimately, the decision to proceed along a sequence of three very different routes sidesteps such impediments. The first part of the book devotes itself to documenting institutional discrimination against homosexuality, followed in part two by a critical study of autobiographical material generated by three widely-known personalities from the cultural sphere. The third section addresses broader terrain: public perceptions of lesbian desire and the presence and circulation of female couples within the social space, as well as the various forms that awareness and tolerance of dissimilar sexualities assumed in interactions between straight and queer communities.

Historian Ineta Lipša closely studies legal debates, prosecution records, public health initiatives, and epidemiological statistics, determining that the pervasive official culture of homophobia was less a consequence of overarching legislation than of highly specific, sometimes competing, sometimes contradictory, agendas of various governmental entities with their disciplinary biases—medical and law enforcement most markedly at odds in their responses to public manifestations of homosexuality. Whether in the form of a registry of alleged homosexual men subjected to periodic, compulsory STI testing or the more generalized menace and intrusiveness of “people’s volunteer order guards”—citizens deputized to patrol parks, beaches, and other neighborhood cruising venues—official measures were less motivated by puritanism than by the imperative of public order. In practice, these initiatives resulted in relatively few prosecutions that nevertheless

¹ Rita Ruduša, ed. *Pagrīdas citādība. Homoseksuāli Padomju Latvijā* [*Forced Underground. Homosexuals in Soviet Latvia*]. Rīga: Mansards, 2012.

served as an effective deterrent to the 15,000 men whose names were ultimately logged in the registry for a nation of 2 million.

Next, literary scholar Kārlis Vērdiņš contemplates patterns of queer domesticity based on the exceptional, long-term, connubial cohabitation of a theater director and his lover, as well as the opposite extreme: the chronic homelessness and emotional instability endured by queer underground poet Jānis Silenieks. However, it was the poet's participation in a happening with his male lover and other Rīga bohemians in which they transformed an emptied villa into a zone of liberated expression and fluid sensuality that Vērdiņš most compellingly abstracts into a vision of queer utopian possibility. Using textual analysis, literary scholar Jānis Ozoliņš examines the self-censored journal of film director Gunārs Piesis, showing how diary writing—euphemism, ellipsis, then fearful erasure—functioned in the construction of homosexual subjectivity for a person acutely attuned to institutional control over both his erotic and creative freedoms. The chapters in this section contain most of the book's photographs, and the contentment on these smiling, handsome faces seems partially, melancholically vacated by the essays' end.

In the penultimate entry, political researcher Elizabete Elīna Vizgunova-Vikmane takes on the nearly impossible, triangulated task of depicting female same-sex relationships in the Soviet period through her interpretation of observations gleaned from interviews with heterosexual women who were acquainted with female couples, whose first-person accounts, regrettably, remain unavailable. Building upon Lipša's earlier observation that the state guardians of social order in Soviet Latvia never regulated female non-heteronormative sexuality because it discounted the very notion of female sexuality itself, Vizgunova-Vikmane identifies local conditions of invisibility, contending that Western constructs of lesbianism, much less of lesbian community, are so at odds with pre-1990s Latvian experience as to be almost unworkable and meaningless in that context.

The final chapter, by historian Kaspars Zellis, aggregates the memory spaces of queer individuals whose sense of self-awareness was most often formed in utter isolation and inevitably refracted through the perceptions of contemporaries (family members, friends, coworkers, neighbors) who were cognizant of other sexualities in their midst but woefully under- or misinformed. Similarly, negative stereotypes and biases reproduced in literary depictions of homosexual characters became debilitating to individuals grappling with same-sex desire, and their life narratives sometimes imitated art. More cruelly, the widely-held, paranoid theory that homosexuals were in collusion with the KGB (rather than the actual subjects of surveillance) further marginalized individuals, arguably to an extent greater than any state-administered discriminatory measures.

Klusumā is an impressively successful endeavor, despite a paucity of first-person queer testimonials, a conservative reluctance to explore hearsay as historically-contingent and -operant material, and at least one instance of taking a provably uninformed KGB informant's report as factual. (I happen to know specifics of the incident in question.) The authors and editors clearly acknowledge the rudimentary stages of their research and accurately identify a number of lacunae, yet their fluency in discursive models and investment in stakes set by LGBTQ researchers and theorists elsewhere (both within the

post-Soviet cultural sphere and beyond) promise future work with startling revelations, acute insights, restorative connections, and broad implications for queer scholarship well beyond Latvia proper.

Mark Svede
The Ohio State University