

SHIFT-F2: THE INTERNET, MASS MEDIA, AND FEMALE-TO-FEMALE INTIMATE RELATIONS IN KRASNOYARSK AND NOVOSIBIRSK. *Summary*

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PREAMBLE: OUR SUBJECT, TERMS, AND EMPIRICAL DATA

The subject of our research is young women who are involved in intimate contacts with other young women. These contacts range from romantic reverence and eroticized friendship to sexual intercourse as a means of socialization, identification, or pure genital pleasure. The kind of shift we are dealing with is not a unidirectional shift from one type of intimate contacts to another (heterosexual to homosexual, or one type of friendship to another, one friend or lover to the other). The Shift-F2 movement is a fluid, indiscrete oscillation mediated by the virtual space of the Internet, print media, family or new/temporal home, public cafés, and appropriated urban sites. Our paper is the result of a modest pilot study based on twelve interviews taken in the summer and fall of the year 2007. Two interviews were completely anonymous, conducted online (through ICQ), the others were done face-to-face. Most of the contacts were established through the Internet, the others using the snowball technique.

For a number of reasons, the subject of our research is complex. One reason is the lack of both a scholarly and an everyday vocabulary for this kind of human experience. Although both male and female same-sex intimacies are the subject of moral and religious taboos, female sexualities are much less articulated.

The second reason why this subject presents conceptual difficulties is categorization. Most of our interviewees, though not all, deny a lesbian identity and avoid other categorizations, therefore we cannot call this heterogeneous group “lesbians”. In similar cases researchers use the term non-heterosexuals. However, since we are focused only on one gender a more appropriate term would seem to be “women who love women.” The problem with this term in our study is that it stresses love, which is not always a factor in the cases examined.

Sex for our interviewees is a source of genital pleasure not identical to love; our interviewees may or may not be in love with their partners. Sexual pleasure can have an independent value for them. Therefore, for our cases we are using the term “women who have sex with women” (WSW), coined on the model of the term “men who have sex with men” (MSM).

Our twelve WSW are currently living in Novosibirsk or Krasnoyarsk. Most of our interviewees have excellent narrative skills, though some of them were shy and felt constrained in the discussion of sexual issues. The interview guide included such topics as living with parents, first love, sexual début, and the shift from heterosexual contacts to F2 relations, i.e. same-sex intimacy. We also asked about their attitude toward social sites (clubs, discos, cruising sites) known as places for people of bi-, hetero- and homosexual orientation and also toward categorization using terms such as *butches*, *dykes*, and *femmes* (*fairies*).

MEDIA: SEXUAL VARIABILITY IN SEX DISCOURSE

The number of media targeting young women and promoting sexualized images of femininity is very large. Beside the Siberian version of *Cosmopolitan*, there are glamour journals with nationwide circulation as well as local periodicals. For instance, in the city district where we live there is a local magazine entitled *Academ-City: Academgorodok in a Glamour Format*, which tells young people what to wear, where to eat out, and how to interact with other people.

Judging by actual styles of clothing and behavior, in many cases the prescriptions of the magazines are accepted and followed. However, very often they provoke the opposite response. The narratives of our interviewees provide examples of cases where this normative ideal was repudiated by young women.

One of our interviewees, for example, rejects the norm that gender roles in a relationship should be divided and conventional. For her, relationships should be based on mutual respect. She is ready “to kiss the feet of a female sexual partner”, but not those of a man, since in a heterosexual relationship this practice would place her on a lower level. Yet although she currently entertains intimate relations with women only, she is not opposed in principle to having a relationship with a man in the future.

MEDIA DISCOURSE AND SEXUAL PLURALISM

Most popular media promote a heterosexual paradise and a range of sexist stereotypes about males and females. However, over the past ten years the media and mass culture have also promoted non-normative sexuality. On the Russian music scene there are some popular singers who either present themselves as WSW or are known as such (*Zemfira*, *Mara*, *Butch*, *Nochnye snaipery*). Most of our interviewees listen to Zemfira or Svetlana Sarganova and often enjoy their music together in a romantic setting or discuss it in the communication ritual of a first date. The public concerts of these singers are always sold out.

However, the mass media’s discourse on homosexuality serves only to spice up the regular recipes for male-female relations. We can only guess at how this message is perceived by readers. Yet although this media discourse on homosexuality clearly serves the commercial purpose of attracting a wider readership, we suggest that it also contributes to the subversion of compulsory heterosexuality. In addition,

parallel to the discourse on homosexuality, there is also a similar public discourse on bisexuality. According to our observations, “bisexual” is indeed the most frequent label women choose to designate their alternative sexual identity. As of April 26, 2008, the dating section of the website sibgay.ru has 1,877 entries. 956 persons declare themselves to be gay and 540 bisexual. The others call themselves lesbian, transsexual, or heterosexual.

LEISURE SITES

Leisure sites are multifunctional. Restaurants, cafés, clubs, and “dancings” (discos) are not only leisure sites but also mating sites: traditional places to find partners for anything from a one-night stand to a long-term relationship. Various kinds of clubs, bars, discos, and bowling alleys proliferate in Novosibirsk and Krasnoyarsk. This scene is very dynamic and includes play stations and internet cafés. They open and close down, change their names, move. Some of them have a bad reputation. The majority of them are commercial fun clubs. Some of them are gendered or have special days allocated for patrons of one gender. The Novosibirsk *Cinema* has a regular art house movie night called “Light Blue and Pink” (the colors associated with male and female homosexuality in Russia), which features for example films by Pedro Almodóvar, and is frequented by both LGBT and straight men and women. The Novosibirsk nightclubs *Tochka* (Point) and *Nasha zona* (Our Zone) cater to both men and women of “alternative” sexualities. The local mass media aggressively advertise commercial leisure sites that charge entrance fees.

Our informants voiced a range of attitudes toward the “thematic” clubs, from a positive view of them as spaces free of suspicion and control to a perception as places of violence and aggression. Most of our interviewees do not feel comfortable in “thematic” clubs or at public sites.

Many our WSW stress their desire to stay away from the “thematic” parties and sites, though when they are single they are compelled to frequent public leisure sites. They contrast these *themed* public meetings with informal friendship ties, and reject overt displays of lesbian identity as an overly conspicuous form of public self-identification.

THE FRIENDSHIP-LOVE CONTINUUM

Our WSW consider intimate friendship an alternative to communication through public leisure sites. The configurations of sexual ties and friendship in the lives of our interviewees are complex and variable. Thus, one of our interviewees has two best friends, a man and a woman. The woman was initially a hated rival in a love triangle, but since she could not find a place to live, she moved in with the original couple. Later, when the interviewee’s relationship with the man ended, the two women became friends. Now, they are planning to move to a different city and live there together.

Sometimes former lovers constitute a circle of close friends. Thus, one of our

interviewees narrated a relationship that developed through neighborhood, intimacy, and sexual contacts, and ended in simple friendship.

INTERNET SITES AS AN ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION FACILITY

The alternative to physical urban non-heterosexual sites are virtual Internet sites. Every Russian Internet dating site has a section for “alternative” sexual preferences. Anonymous online communication allows users to indulge their curiosity without assuming a stigmatized identity through the relevant display and/or entering the stigmatized social space of a themed club or disco.

Many of our interviewees meet their partners and friends online. In an interregional online forum, we launched an anonymous discussion on sexual fluidity, and specifically on the transition from WSW to heterosexual intimacy. The responses were passionate and illuminating. The opinions expressed by forum participants were sometimes phrased like aphorisms: “Love has no gender”; “If you are happy, then it is the right orientation”. A similar discussion in a regional forum was not as wide as on the larger site, but very lively. The discussants shared their experiences and also told stories about their friends who switched from same-sex intimacies to heterosexual relationships. They also shared their experiences of partnership, discussing their duration and the problems encountered, as well as ways in which they negotiated roles.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For the WSW we interviewed, sexual relations have a special value and can constitute an experience separate from romantic love. Some of them practice sex without having a romantic attraction to her sexual partner.

Most of our interviewees proceeded from their initial heterosexual relations to F2 relations which they see as more intimate and romantic and also sexually satisfying. Some of them continue to regard female to male sex as a possible option and switch back and forth.

Although our interviewees practice female to female sex, they reject any categorization: they are unwilling to identify as lesbians and reluctant to classify WSW into butches, dykes, and femmes. “On the Internet I pass for a lesbian,” says one of them, adding that this is a relative and temporal identification.

Consumerist mass media and public show culture contribute to the growth of liberal attitudes to same-sex relations and expansion of the range of sexual pleasures. However, the media’s recommendation is to avoid assuming an openly lesbian identity and approach the new experiences as element of a new lifestyle. These media politics of desire appear to be a compromise between existing practices and heterosexual normativity.

Consumerist media and local entrepreneurs promote specialized club cultures where both men who are interested in men and women who are interested in women can date and have fun. However, our interviewees are critical of this club culture. Though they themselves visit urban sites appropriated by “alternative” gender groups, they are very critical about the atmosphere there.

Our conclusion is that since our interviewees wish to avoid being categorized as lesbians, they dislike spaces where they are required to present themselves as such, as well as markers of lesbian identity. The (excessive) symbolic self-identification is perceived as an imitation of the “authentic” essence which is sometimes questioned. These attitudes are probably rooted in a protest against the regulatory regimes which are normally grounded in categorization.

The switch to online dating sites provides an opportunity to avoid categorization and the marginalization and stigmatization that is implied by a lesbian identification. Internet communication changes the whole dating ritual and reinforces the scenarios we have described as Shift-F2.

Unlike in the West, where the evolution of an LGBT bar culture has led to open identity rites such as gay pride parades, we have not seen any similar developments in our cases. In the absence of such rituals, online dating becomes more important, encouraging the development of fluid sexual identities.