

Videos in International Relations: Political Homophobia and Russia's 2018

Election Videos

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Abstract

Taking Russian political homophobia as its starting point, this paper explores the use of videos in the 2018 Russian presidential elections. It examines the anti-queer politics underpinning Russia's foreign and domestic policies as well as the construction of queer identities and cultures as security threats to the state and its citizens. Most specifically, how this is achieved through political (election) videos encouraging voters to go to the polls in order to prevent Russia from becoming 'homosexual'. The political election video has unique characteristics in that it must be fast-read and easily digestible by audiences of all demographics. The aim of the paper is to think about the methods we use to analyze videos like these in International Relations as well as the role they play in the construction of Self/Other, Friend/Enemy and, thus, security. Russia has adopted anti-queer policies, attitudes, and practices—defining queer sexual orientations and genders as insurgent identities that threaten the stability of traditional sexual relations and society—as a guide to the conduct of foreign and domestic policy. Understanding the role of and how this unfolds in its domestic election material is important to understanding how Russia constructs its Self identity (as the savior of 'Gayropa') in an international context.

Keywords

Russia, LGBTQ+, Queer, Videos, Visual Politics, Identity

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 2018 presidential elections in Russia, two videos urging voters to go to the polls appeared online. These videos focused on the potential consequences of not voting. One of which is the threat queer, that is non-heterosexual and/or gender non-conforming (Wilkinson 2017a,106), sexual orientation and gender identities (SOGI) pose to Russian gender norms, national identity and societal stability. This is not a sudden trend in Russian politics but part of a complex history with non-heterosexuality and series of anti-queer moves made by multiple governments. In 2013 Russia's stance on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) rights and homophobic violence came to global attention. After ten years of debate and growing homophobic sentiment (Healey 2018,9), the Duma passed the 'homosexual propaganda law' prohibiting information or communication that implies queer SOGI is normal/acceptable to minors. This means any act 'promoting' queer SOGI is illegal: holding hands with a same-sex partner or being a queer parent is propaganda and illegal (Gessen 2013,19–25). Media attention and international condemnation peaked during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics as concerns were raised for the safety of queer athletes and spectators. Then, in 2017, there was a 'gay purge' in Chechnya—part of Russia Federation—and the Ministry of Justice added images of a queered Putin to its List of Extremist Material, particularly targeting 'Gay Clown Putin' memes—a series of viral images depicting Putin in drag, made-up and superimposed on a rainbow flag or using its colours.

Motivated by these few cases from a pool of state-sponsored homophobia and four years of international attention, this paper focuses on the recent election videos and asks how we can analyse the way anti-LGBTQ politics has become part of the government's visual strategy to motivate the electorate to vote. Particularly important is how these videos construct: normal/perverse performances of Russianness and SOGI; and queerness as non-Russian and threatening traditional (family) values and Russia's socio-political-economic fabric. Speaking to this, I first look at visual scholarship and discuss how to study campaign videos that construct and essentialise discourses of inside/outside, Self/Other, ab/normal vis-à-vis political identities (Callahan 2015, 893,900; Weber 2011,8). Then, after outlining Russian political homophobia and providing context, I read two Russian election videos—'[The Nightmare Campaign](#)' (Boykov 2018) and '[Someone Chose for You](#)' (Rosvideo 2018)—through the lens of queer politics.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Communities/nations/Selves are constructed through an Inside/Outside dichotomy where an external Other is constructed as threatening to a collective Self (Campbell 1992; Walker 1993). The visual component of this is underemphasised. Given that the world is understood through its representations and those representations, particularly the widely consumed, constitute our social worlds (Neumann 2001,603; Nexon and Neumann 2006), it is important to consider the way SOGI is represented visually and how images are used to reify boundaries around national identity. Visual representations are "not expressive of

some prior reality” but constitute, reify and resist norms and beliefs about sexual orientation, gender and national identity (see McRobbie 1997,172; Hansen 2017,2). This paper examines two videos published between February and March 2018 before the Russian presidential elections. Both received domestic and international political and media attention, making them suitable for studying Russian identity politics (Hansen 2006,87, 2017,2).

Both are homophobic, prompting questions about the ways anti-LGBT politics interfaces with visual strategies encouraging people to vote. Visualising and making anti-queer politics easy to understand and widely distributed, they are an important part of Russian identity politics (see Neumann 2018). Their analysis is important for thinking about identity politics and what is constituted as acceptable ‘Russian’ behaviour. There is scholarship examining the way LGBTQ people have been constructed as Other in Russia (Healey 2018; Riabov and Riabova 2014b, 2014a; Novitskaya 2017; Wilkinson 2014) but, like identity politics generally, the visual aspect is unattended. This essay contributes to that lack by exploring how images are used to reinforce hegemonic norms governing SOGI and structure the identity performances available to Russians.

I use Hansen’s (2006,62–72) suggested intertextual model of discourse analysis that includes popular culture to explore identity construction. I combine it with Doerr and Milman’s (2014,420) suggestion to centre visual research design around one of three dimensions: visual expressions of a movements’ messages; visual representations of movements by other actors; or movements’ visibility within societies. The second is pertinent to mapping official discourses and cultural representations linking and differentiating acceptable Russianness and unacceptable queerness in the 2018 campaign videos (Hansen 2006,20). Heeding Bleiker’s (2015) call to use multiple, even conflicting, methods and Doerr and Milman’s (2014,421) encouragement to experiment when studying images, I draw on several visual approaches to analyse the videos: Hansen’s (2011) intertextual model for studying visual securitization, a chromatological approach (Andersen et al. 2015; Guillaume et al. 2016), work on filmmaking (Weber 2011; Callahan 2015; Iedema 2004) and, because images never exist in a vacuum, discourse analysis (Hansen 2006).

POLITICAL IDENTITIES

Identity—who ‘we’ are, who our Others are, and the relationship between us—is socially constructed and linked to State policies (Campbell 1992; Hansen 2006). Policies represent threats, security problems, state identity, or a crisis/event/problem they seek to tackle; in so doing they ascribe identity to the objects—both Selves and a series of Others—in a given situation (Hansen 2006,5–6). Identity is, ergo, relational: to speak of ‘Russian’ (Self) is to constitute a set of non-Russian (Other) identities, allowing one to identify what is not characteristically ‘Russian’. Maintaining a given identity means maintaining territorial and social boundaries around it—a continual process of linking and differentiation (Neumann 2018,183; Hansen 2006). Caricature is oft used to construct the Other in stark terms—often wild/barbaric vs civilized—and make it easier for audiences to distinguish Self/Other (see Hansen 2011,63). In the campaign videos

‘ordinary’ Russians are represented against caricatured queers. According to Campbell (1992) identity construction is not always a radical binary but can take on degrees of Otherness.

Queerness challenges gender and sexuality norms which are traditionally discussed in male/female, gay/straight binaries (Weber 2016). To label something Queer—thus abnormal in a heteronormative world where being cisgender and heterosexual is the norm and privileged—and construct it as threatening is a discursive tool linking non-heterosexuality and/or gender non-conformity with enmity and Otherness. One used in processes of nation building and times of perceived national crisis to maintain boundaries around a given, always heterosexual, Self (Stychin 1998,194; Healey 2018,31). Most societies and states have had an uneasy relationship with queerness: it has often been cast as “violating the moral foundation on which nationhood is structured” (Ayoub 2016,12) and has “frequently been deployed in the construction of national cultures” as the Other against which Self is cast (Stychin 1998,194).

With this construction of an external queer Other, queers-at-home are constructed as internal Others influenced/infected/misled by the outside enemy—in Russia, ‘Gayropa’ and ‘the West’ (Riabov and Riabova 2014b,29). In and beyond Russia, this discourse is prominent in societal and political debates about the undermining of ‘traditional’ (family) values where homosexuality is constructed as a symptom of modernity and something to be defeated/cured (Riabov and Riabova 2014a; Weber 2016; Gaufman 2017). The notion of traditional values—and the threat queerness poses to them and Russia’s socio-political-economic fabric—dominates discourses on homosexuality. These themes are strikingly manifest in visual material produced for the 2018 election, which focuses on the dangers of not voting and potentially allowing pro-queer politics to flourish. The threat non-heterosexuality poses to Russianness is central and used to encourage people to vote to protect Russia’s sociopolitical structure.

VISUAL IR

Aesthetic approaches to IR emphasise art, films, novels and other parts of ‘popular’ culture as means to gain knowledge about the social world (Bleiker 2009; Weber 2008; also Hansen 2006,62–72). In that same vein, work emphasising visual aspects of global politics, particularly security, have emerged since Hansen (2000,300) and Williams (2003) advocated a visual research agenda. Being part of human existence since prehistoric cave drawings images are not new but are more abundant than ever (Bleiker 2018,4–5). Technology means they circulate fast and far, and that more people can produce and disseminate them (Hansen 2011, 52,59; Friis 2017,10; Sturken and Cartwright 2009,389). We live in a visual age (Williams Forthcoming) where, per Bleiker (2018,8–9), visuals have power in two forms: as icons that “capture social and political issues in succinct and mesmerising ways”; and as social artefacts that “evoke, appeal to and generate emotions” and appear to “express better [and differently] than words do” (see Hansen 2015, 2011,55; Weber 2008). The visual frames “life and living, structures and agents, institutions and identities” and is part of the processes of meaning-making that help construct ab/normal (Weber 2008,138; see Hansen 2006; Iedema 2004,193–94).

Images can be used to establish a sense of community and identity as well as to produce the Other, making the identity work images do pertinent to questions about societal in/security (Neumann 2018,183). They cross linguistic boundaries far easier than words—no formal education is required to ‘get their message’ and linguistic proficiency is not necessary—and there is the possibility—with technology, likelihood—that images will circulate transnationally, become de/re-contextualised and used for securitizing purposes (Hansen 2011,57; McCloud 2017,49; Bleiker 2018,11). This is pertinent because identity transforms from a malleable subject to contestation ‘thing’ defining how to perform Russianness to fixed and beyond the scope of contestation/(re)negotiation at the point of securitizing (Williams 2003).

Images always require interpretation. Meaning is read into them by viewers influenced by their own personal and sociopolitical assumptions and norms (Barthes 1977; Bleiker 2015,875). They do not themselves speak but are constituted inter-textually/visually (Hansen 2015,57). This is the connoted message—how images are read and interpreted within specific sociopolitical structures and contexts—which means an image’s meaning is always polysemous and never fixed (Barthes 1977,17–19; Hansen 2011,57–58). It has as much to do with audiences’ interpretation(s) as an image’s actual content, its pre-iconic simulacrum (see Heck and Schlag 2012,9). Images are woven into and co-constitute larger discursive, iconic, symbolic and textual milieus, making context important to understanding what they say and do (Hansen 2011,54; Sturken and Cartwright 2009, 22–23,46).

VIDEO

Visual IR focuses on single and iconic images with less done on videos. There is work on moving images (e.g. Weber 2008, 2011; Der Derian 2009, 2010, 2014; Friis 2015, 2017; Callahan 2015; Barabantseva and Lawrence 2015) but most focus on documentary filmmaking to the exclusion of methods for analysing video. Callahan (2015) and Barabantseva and Lawrence (2015) write on filmmaking method thus providing insights on how videos might be analysed. This is also true of Friis (2018,34–43) and Weber’s (2011,7–9) analyses which hint at aspects to focus on: audio (music, speech, sound effects), editing (cuts, censoring, subtitles), framing, camera angle and equipment.

I build on Hansen’s (2011) intertextual model for image analysis by including some specific features (Table1) highlighted in scholarship on moving images (Callahan 2015; Weber 2008; Friis 2018; Barabantseva and Lawrence 2015; Iedema 2004); not all are used in analysis below. Based on the notion that images are polysemous, Hansen advocates looking at four elements to study images of security (2011,54–55). The first requires looking at the image and its strategies of depiction. The second, analysing the specific references an image makes to other texts or images that came before: they can make references to or position themselves against hegemonic ideas, events and norms (2011,54). The third, looking to “policy discourses in the country/locale in question” (2011,55). The fourth studying accounts of or debate about what images say within a given context. Inter-textual/visual links can be made through conceptual references, the image’s location within a larger body of images/texts, or direct quotes (Hansen 2006,56–

59). How these manifest in visuals can be explicit or implicit; spotting them all requires vast socio-cultural-historical knowledge that only area experts would have (Hansen 2006,84–86). This does not mean visual analyses should be left to them: images circulate online and increasingly affect international politics so leaving their analysis to a Russianist would be unwise.

Colour is important and plays into the way we read images. It re/constructs boundaries and hierarchies (Guillaume et al. 2016), creates meaning and marks “individuals, groups, ideas, values” into “symbolic categories” like nation, race, gender and class, demarcating who is in/secure and/or threatening/ed (Andersen et al. 2015,441). Weber (2011,115) notes its power to construct specific subject positions and notions of threat/ened when discussing how she twice-shot images in her project. Colour is intertextually constituted and not powerful without contextualised understanding: The Rainbow Flag does not *a priori* signify the LGBTQ+ movement, its symbolic value is constructed.

Most videos combine audio and narrative. This makes moving images “appeal to feelings and emotions in a particularly powerful way” (Bleiker 2018,9). Understanding the power of the audio-visual image means looking at “the sequence of images” and “the relationship of image to sound” (Sturken and Cartwright 2009,21). Audio/speech is an obstacle for visual discourse analyses of videos in a language one does not know (Hansen 2006,83). Here, it is important to have knowledge about the socio-political-historical context (Hansen 2006,84–86). Hence, good historical material or critical genealogies should be used to overcome linguistic lack (e.g. Healey 2018; Riabov and Riabova 2014b; Wilkinson 2014). Here, Google Auto-Translate—which is built into YouTube—was adequate for sensing dialogue. Key words should be cross-checked with a native speaker or translator. Body language, facial expression and tone of voice are also useful for analysis (Callahan 2015,896).

Campaign videos must be fast-read or fairly unambiguous in their politics because of their context in a political election and intended purpose of political persuasion and mass appeal. The “temporal engagement” required must be reasonably low and the message straightforward as “they cannot rely upon contemplative readers” (Hansen 2011,61). Yet, like political cartooning, they can draw on satire, parody and caricature to convey their message, making them more susceptible to multiple (mis)readings and counter-/securitization, especially when de/re-contextualised (Müller et al. 2009; Hansen 2011,59). Vis-à-vis the epistemic status of camera-shot over animated videos, the former have documentary status and are regarded as more objective and realistic than illustrated images (Barthes 1977,17–19; Shim 2017,403). Even fictional camera-shot visuals, especially film and video because they insert spectators into the scene as part of the experience (see Callahan 2015; Bleiker 2018,13–14), are understood to truthfully capture reality. However, there are always power relations at stake because images and their production teams tell a story from a particular, politically laden, angle (see Strauss 2003,45; Callahan 2015,904). Thus, even camera-generated images are ‘manufactured’ and produced rather than serving as ‘visual quotations’ or a transparent account (Möller 2017,264–66; Sontag 2003, 22,46). The campaign video is by its purpose and use political and serving particular goals.

QUEER IN RUSSIA

For LGBTQ+ people around the world struggles for the protection of their human rights are not only about representation and acceptance but “a matter of life and death” (Wilkinson 2017b,236, 2017a; Altman and Symons 2016). Those opposing queer equality do so in a “fight for the future of mankind” where ‘queer peril’ will be “vanquished by the resurgence of ‘traditional values’ that will ensure the continuation of the natural order and underwrite human dignity”(Wilkinson 2017b,236). Political homophobia campaigns are launched by actors engaged in “contest[s] over national identity construction, in which the nation is said to be under threat from an external...ideology of gender and sexual difference” and when there is an economic and/or national security crisis threatening a society’s stability (Healey 2018,5). This is the case in Russia.

Russia is especially opposed to male homosexuality (*gomoseksualizm*/homosexuality¹) with other queer identities less discriminated against, at least in law (Ayoub 2016; Healey 2018,30ff). The “fresh politics of homophobia” of 2013, which culminated in the gay propaganda law prohibiting information or communications promoting non-traditional SOGIs (to minors), came in the context of a failing Russian economy, dissatisfaction with media reporting, and anti-corruption, anti-Putin demonstrations (Healey 2018,6). Notably, same-sex intercourse remains legal since decriminalization in 1993. Seeking re-election, Healey (2018,7–8) argues Putin rebranded his political system through remasculinization (also Riabov and Riabova 2014b; Novitskaya 2017) and bringing the Russian Orthodox Church, which condemns LGBT and feminist activism in favour of traditional values, closer to the state.

Shifting focus from economic and political problems to non-traditional, non-Christian, non-reproductive sexualities, and being seen to address these aberrations was important in regaining support for Putin, particularly from conservatives (Fierstein 2013; Healey 2018). A combination of nationalism and religion helped produce a xenophobic, anti-LGBTQ context culminating in the gay propaganda law and Putin declaring that queerness was a threat to Russia’s demographic and that he would defend “the traditional values of families in a world that was descending into barbarism” by allowing same-sex marriage and adoption, and LGBT rights (Putin in Healey 2018,17). The binary non-/traditional discourse around sexuality in Russia constructs a range of queer sexualities that are “alien...not indigenously Russian, but from abroad” (Healey 2018,12) which is founded in Inside/Outside, Self/Other identity politics (see Walker 1993; Campbell 1992).

In order to assert Russia’s independence from Euro-Atlantic countries legalising same-sex marriage and adoption, and to free Russia from the ‘aggressive export’ of pro-queer values Putin argued Western states were “rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis for Western civilization” and through pro-queer policy were “promoting pedophilia” (Putin in Healey 2018, 16–17). Per Riabov and

¹In Russian, denotes an ideology, like feminism. Term originated from medical and Stalinist political usage reducing SOGI to ideology (Healey 2018, 2)

Riabova (2014b, 2014a), these homophobic moves of the Russian government were a response to “globalization that crushed local identities and cultures” and the diffusion of LGBT rights with the aim of re-asserting Russianness and the true European lifestyle that Russia would protect (Putin in Healey 2018,17). Putin constructed Russia as the defender of traditional values where the West, and Russia if it was not careful, was descending to barbarism (Healey 2018,17). A new version of the Stalin-era ‘Gulag queer—who was constructed as bestial, criminal, perverse, and demonic—emerged (Healey 2018,48). This time also linked to pedophilia and protecting Russian children, a recourse to gendered protectionist discourses (Sjoberg 2014,32).

ELECTION VIDEOS

Images have been part of queer politics since the Soviet era, taking various forms (Healey 2018, 8,46): tattooing, parades, memes, photography, film, YouTube clips and campaign videos. Soviet era governments recognised film as “a powerful means of communication” that would help “realise their political projects” (Philpott 2018,144; Sturken and Cartwright 2009,148). A position supported by Callahan who argues films make it “easier for the audience to identify and understand a complex issue” (2015,902). The campaign videos are the latest visual attempt by the Kremlin to establish moral superiority, (re)constructing ‘homosexuality’ as decadent, non/anti-Russian, non-traditional and dangerous (see Bekbulatova 2018; also Philpott 2018). They are political statements that, through positive linking of Russianness to ‘traditional’ heterosexuality and negative differentiation against homosexuality, establish spatio-temporal boundaries around who Russia is/was/should be and who its Others are (Hansen 2006,46; Wilkinson 2014).

Election videos are political and aim to generate support. They generally follow a problem—solution plot structure, which in the Russian campaign videos is: homosexuality is a threat, make sure you vote to prevent its spread. Bleiker argues that “almost all aspects of sex and gender are in one way or another prescribed through visual norms, including how men and women are meant to dress, walk, talk and interact” (2018,25; also Åhäll 2018). This means, like discursively constructed gender and/or sexuality norms, visuals—as social markers and reference points used to identify oneself—can influence and (re)produce what is perceived as ab/normal, non-/traditional (Sturken and Cartwright 2009,23). Here, heterosexual relations are produced as ‘normal’ through satirical representations of what Russia-overrun-by-queers would be like. This has a particular intertextuality read against completely non-satirical videos of torture and beatings posted on social media by Russian anti-LGBT groups (Schroeder 2013; Blaustein 2013). The campaign videos are less explicit in their message to eliminate queerness but the message of both is the same.

NIGHTMARE CAMPAIGN

The ‘Nightmare’ Campaign video emerged on YouTube and other social media on 16 February 2018 (Bekbulatova 2018). While its source remains speculative, it is reported that President Putin’s team in the government-controlled Russian Central Election Committee (RCEC) commissioned the video (Bennetts

2018). A view echoed by opposition candidate Ksenia Sobchak (2018) when she posted the video to Instagram. It is highly likely the Kremlin were behind these videos given its previous activities to suppress political opposition and any pro-LGBT stance (Human Rights Watch 2018). While material produced by official partners of the RCEC must bear an official logo and register the material produced, leaving out a State logo may make it seem as if a civil society actor has produced the content, lending it more legitimacy (Tsinovoi 2018,47). The debate over authorship is part of the intertextuality of the video as texts ascribing meaning. Regardless of source, these videos work in favour of the incumbent Putin by establishing the gay threat he worked hard to (re)construct: the Russians who do not go to vote risk seeing their country transform into a queer-friendly state where the conscription age increases to sixty and schools demand money for security guards (Bennetts 2018; Savelau 2018).

The opening shot pans up an apartment block at night with Russian text indicating the date and time as 23:15 on 17 March 2018—the evening before the 2018 presidential election. This itself is enough to establish the video’s setting. It then cuts to a man and woman. The latter is setting an alarm for 9am when her partner (presumed so as they share a bed) tells her not to bother because “tomorrow is Sunday” and their vote will make little difference. In the ensuing scene the man has most dialogue with the woman remaining silent, still, deadpan, and clearly bemused by his insults and instruction to turn off the alarm because their vote is unimportant. Mockingly mimicking her protest at 0:26 his behaviour becomes quite erratic and his facial expression, tone of voice, and grasping at bedsheets reminiscent of a child crying. This is quickly contrasted with a final instruction along the lines of: turn off the alarm, we sleep tomorrow! This reiterates traditional gender roles—linking femininity with hysteria and childhood—and establishes who ought to have power/voice, albeit in an ironic way only revealed later when Russia has been queered, the conscription age raised, and each household forced to effectively adopt a gay. In the next scene, the man is woken up, notably alone in the bed, to a knock at the door and calls for ‘Comrade!’ from three military officers conscripting him. This establishes an alternate temporality where communism is ‘back’.

While this is interesting, it is the next scene which is of particular interest for this essay. The camera ‘follows’ the man into his kitchen where he encounters a stereotypically, cliché, effeminate man dressed mainly in pink, wearing a slash-neck top (presumably ‘women’s’ clothing) and filing his nails with a rainbow nail file. Eyes wide, the protagonist demands “What the fuck is that?!” to which his wife and the ‘gay on homestay’ explain that a new law mandates all homes to take in a gay who has been broken up with until they find a new partner. If he does not find one soon then “you’ll have to be with him” explains the woman. Her partner’s facial expression speaks volumes—eyes wide and in shock—and then it cuts to the gay who says “law is law” before biting into a banana, an implicit reference to oral sex and perhaps even emasculation.

We then cut to a close up of his face as he turns to exit the room. This is accompanied with confused, uninterpretable, echoing speech, almost sci-fi-like/thriller audio effects, and a blurry background as we follow him into his toilet—an intimate, private space (Callahan 2015). Red lights flash, the military men, his son, wife, and the ‘gay’ bust into the bathroom. Multiple quick shots cut between them and the protagonist

as the music builds to a climax and, in what seems like the end of this hellish scenario, he awakes screaming, shaking from the nightmare only to find he is in bed with the ‘gay’ who leans round to hug him in yet another invasion of his private, intimate space. It is this scene that establishes the emphasis on queer threat: neither the military nor communist threats get so singled out. Nor do they enter one of the most personal, private spaces: the bed, a space where it is assumed one procreates (and reproduces the nation) and has some of their most intimate—often sexual—experiences. The gay threat is the true nightmare, the absolute antithesis of Russianness and security. Waking for a second time, he tentatively, accompanied by dramatic music, pulls back the sheets revealing his wife. Relieved, he screams “quickly get up for the election...before it’s too late” and rushes out of shot presumably to vote.

This video follows a classic three act drama model, following a protagonist on their experiential journey (Callahan 2015,901–2; Weber 2011,286). The typical arc being: normal life before an event; how the event changed the character’s life for better or worse; and how this was adjusted or resolved. Normal life before the event is not shown but it is implied that life was different before the ‘not voting’ event, which encourages the audience to draw upon their own personal experiences and think about how life currently is and whether they want it to change before not going to vote. Through a combination of close-ups, long shots with almost elevator/filler music juxtaposed against quick-cut, short, succeeding shots using alarming and confused audio and red lights (symbolising danger; warning of imminent threat in a security context), this video establishes a temporal shift into a future where the (communist) past came back to haunt Russia—thereby also distinguishing Putin’s politics from the horrific past—and the gays are everywhere. Its message: this is what could happen (again) if you do not vote; say goodbye to your liberties and everything that makes us Russian.

SOMEONE CHOSE FOR YOU

This video has a different aesthetic than the ‘Nightmare’ video and is edited to look like a home video shot on a camcorder with the date and time intermittently in the bottom left corner of the frame and picture ‘glitches’ throughout, particularly during cuts between shots. It is shorter at under one minute and also takes place on the day of the elections. Notably, it is posted with a caption that includes ‘18+’, a nod to the gay propaganda law that this video is too dangerous for minors who may misinterpret its content as normal.

It opens with a pretty outdated car with flowers on its roof (I mistook these for police lights before a close-up) pulling up outside a canteen/hall (столовая), which looks to be near a housing estate with apartments in the background, and a bell ringing in the background. We do not see who is in the car. The image cuts inside to a baby pink sign ‘May you live happily ever after’ (COBET ДА ЛЮБОБЫ) complete with pink and white balloons and two doves either side—traditional symbol and colours of marriage and purity. The plot is set: this is a wedding. Though not a traditional one—it takes place in a canteen not a church—foreshadowing the abnormality to come. The camera zooms out and we see a woman and man—presumably her father—walk into shot and prepare to walk down the aisle. There is a pink tint to the video, which may be an allusion to femininity, innocence and traditional gender roles. Despite not taking place in

church all else appears normal: there is a band, decorations, happy guests and a man walks her down the aisle. Yet, as they walk he emphasises all of the choices everyone else has made for the bride—the location, dress, band, partner—in an implicit allusion to the election and what not voting does. The bride grows visibly more uncomfortable with shoulders high, arms rigid, and facial expressions associated with shock or disgust.

We reach the climax when the bride is confronted with an androgynous individual, Edik. It is very unclear whether Edik is male or female—emphasising how ‘normal’ the queer threat can appear—until it is announced ‘your future husband is your girlfriend’. This is not a mistranslation as it appears: муж means husband or bedfellow and подруги girlfriend. Everyone, including the registrar, is smiling like this is normal, there is no issue that the groom is a she/queer—a clear confrontation of Russian SOGI norms shown implicitly, satirically. The bride’s father alludes to the election saying ‘choose or someone chooses for you’ before she, clearly appalled, faints. A reference backed up when a voiceover repeats the phrase, adding ‘this can lead to unexpected consequences like those of March 18’ before cutting to a white screen with the election details.

The composition of this video is different to the ‘Nightmare’ campaign. There are no fast cuts, building music, alarming noises or red lights. In the background is piano music one would expect at a wedding and everyone appears to act ‘normally’. Important is the discomfort of the bride: all of the choices have been taken out of her hands, including the groom. The video implies that (hetero)sexual liberty will be lost and people forced into gay marriages against their will if they do not vote. The theme of gay marriage and European decadence, a region that has overwhelmingly embraced equal marriage, has been prominent in Russia’s anti-gay discourse (Ayoub 2016), making this video important in solidifying queer threat and the consequences of not voting. Uniquely, this is one of few forays into representing the female queer threat—a move rarely undertaken and never legally (Healey 2018). There are intertextual references to the ‘Nightmare’ video as similar themes run through both: the threat of non-traditional SOGIs taking over and the lack of freewill and choice following the March elections if one does not turn out. Notably, reading the second video is far easier having viewed the first.

For both, their circulation is hard to determine because they were re/posted across social media and by domestic and international news outlets. Sobchak’s Instagram attracted over a million views and on five YouTube channels the ‘Nightmare’ video over 1.5million (12 March 2018). Two of these have since been deleted, one through a copyright claim by Gazprom Media, Russia’s largest and majority government owned media holding, adding fuel to the claim of Kremlin links. Despite a lack of complete figures, given that the ad was also televised, they achieved significant enough media attention to warrant analysis (Hansen 2006,87, 2017,2).

Moving images have the potential to fuel (geopolitical) anxieties/rivalries by constructing certain individuals and characteristics as suspect and threatening (Der Derian 2009,166, 2010,183; Campbell 2007,358) and/or

stoking and entrenching preestablished discourses of dangerous difference. In these videos a Russian/non-Russian (i.e. decadent queer-accepting ‘Garyopa’ and the West) binary is implicitly established—though one would have to be familiar with previous discourse to fully grasp this. Following a single character in a threateningly queer world, both videos draw on and reinforce preestablished discourses of homosexuality’s dangerous difference to traditional Christian family values that follows an inside/outside, Russian/non-Russian, gay/straight grammar. They ‘fix’ Russian identity as markedly heterosexual by constructing the figure of the homosexual as decadent/degenerate and Other, thereby contributing to a stabilisation of Russian identity (see Williams 2003). One that will only continue to exist if Russians take control and vote.

CONCLUSION

Visual IR has not outlined a method for analysing videos. This essay suggested supplementing Hansen’s intertextual model with particularities of moving images. It then applied that model to two homophobic videos that appeared before the 2018 Russian presidential election encouraging people to vote. These videos are the latest visual attempt to demonise LGBT people by linking their presence to not voting—an unusual depiction. As a medium used to construct identity and gain political legitimacy, campaign videos can influence and re/produce what is perceived as ab/normal, non-/traditional. Going forward, it is important to analyse the politics of such images as, appealing to feeling and emotions and being unambiguous in their message, they are very powerful. Actors use images to set and control narratives with the hope that audiences side with their intended message. This is clear in Russia’s 2018 election videos, which, encouraging viewers to vote by presenting a queer threat, bring out an enduring political homophobia in a different way than the words “go vote” alone could. As this type of stark Self/Other campaign video is becoming more abundant, their analysis is critical to countering discriminatory politics and violences.

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TABLES

TABLE 1. TAILORING HANSEN'S (2011) INTERTEXTUAL MODEL TO VIDEOS

<i>Elements</i>	<i>Analytical Focus</i>	
	<i>All Images</i>	<i>Moving Visual Images</i>
The Image and its Constitution	Authorship Frame Angle Placement Colour Circulation On-image text Style/genre People depicted(?)	Shot, scene, sequence Cuts Audio (music, speech, computer-generated sounds, tone of voice) Plot Structure Actors Body-language Characterisation Setting Patterns of representation Subtitles Language?
Immediate Intertext	Text surrounding the image (e.g. title, caption, commentary) References to other images or texts Socio-cultural-historical context	Subtitles Credits Music/score (lyrics) Script 'Based On' Book Comments on online videos (e.g. YouTube, Facebook) What language/translations
Wider Policy Discourse	Legal texts Policy debate International Organization Discourses	
Texts ascribing meaning to the image	Domestic & International News Media Leaders' statements Government debates Popular culture: film, comics, television, etc. Social media & comments sections	Clips of original video Social Media Responses/Debates