
Camp Kharitonov and Russian Gay Identity

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Camp is a superficial aesthetic; it is not to be found in Russian literature
(McMahon 8)

Abstract: The Russian underground writer Evgeny Kharitonov lived his entire life (1941-1981) in the Soviet Union under threat of Article 121, the anti-sodomy law, yet he managed to carve out a space to write an almost aggressively gay identity for himself. Though he never traveled abroad, Kharitonov locates himself in a worldwide gay tradition and deploys camp humor as a strategy to survive as a gay man both in the USSR and in the circle of straight dissident writers who were his peers. This paper looks at camp Kharitonov through the lens of David Halperin's *How to be Gay* as a way of theorizing a spontaneous gay cultural style, rather than a colonization by the West. Kharitonov's prose challenges the idea that Soviets lacked a gay identity (Laurie Essig, David Tuller). Kharitonov's use of camp led his straight peers, especially Vasilii Aksenov, to fail to appreciate him fully. Kharitonov deploys camp to reclaim the subject position, to act as a spokesperson for a gay minority and against a heterosexual majority that would silence him.

Keywords: Kharitonov, camp, Soviet gay identity, gay culture, gay literature

The Russian underground writer Evgeny Kharitonov lived his entire life (1941-1981) in the Soviet Union under threat of Article 121, the anti-sodomy law, yet he managed to carve out a space to write an almost aggressively gay identity for himself. Though he never traveled abroad, Kharitonov locates himself in a worldwide gay tradition and deploys camp humor as a strategy to survive as a gay man both in the USSR and in the circle of straight dissident writers who were his peers. This essay will look at camp Kharitonov through the lens of David Halperin's *How to be Gay* as a way of theorizing a spontaneous gay cultural style, rather than a colonization by the West.

In *How to be Gay* – both his class and the book – David Halperin examines initiation into gay male culture, primarily in the US. This essay will be a foray into how to be – or to have been – gay in the Soviet Union, through the writings of Evgenii Kharitonov. Halperin’s early work on ancient homosexuality was all about arguing against thinking about homosexuals in Greece and Rome as a category of people – against, in other words, projecting our construction of “the homosexual” onto the Classical world (*One Hundred Years*; “Is There a History of Sexuality?”). Yet he was later prepared to make allowances for continuities, identifications, and queer correspondences between past and present (Halperin, “Introduction” 17). *How to be Gay* explores how proto-gay boys – even without exposure to gay culture – gravitate towards certain cultural forms like musical theater or opera or camp. In other words, there is a subjectivity that connects them, even if they have not (yet) identified as gay and learned the ropes of gay culture from other gay men.

Just as Halperin’s work contributes to the question of the universality of gay culture (and questions of social construction, essentialism, historical change), so I hope this essay will contribute to the discussion of Russian gay culture and continuities, identifications, and queer correspondences between gay culture in the US and in Russia. Such comparisons are always fraught with charges of hegemony, colonization, Orientalist projection, or assumptions about temporal differences (Russia as backward or catching up to the West), critiques of elevating American history to the status of a universal pattern (Kulpa and Mizielska 102). But the case of Kharitonov will, like Lukasz Szulc’s examination of gay journals and activism in Poland, challenge the myth of total isolation of Communist Eastern Europe and the myth of teleology (the Western progress narrative) or a temporal schism between Russia and the West (Szulc; Kulpa and Mizielska; Navickaite). As Navickaite writes, this myth condemns Central & Eastern Europe to perpetual belatedness, “everything that will ever happen in postsocialist societies is going to be just an imitation of what has already happened in the West” (128).

When US scholars began exploring the question of homosexuality in Soviet Russia, we were scrupulous about not imposing our own stereotypes of gay identity onto Russia. I remember Susan Larsen at the first US roundtable on gay and lesbian life in Russia in 1993 warning us against projecting our own gay identity onto Russia. Yet what always struck me both in Russia and in other parts of the post-Socialist world was how familiar at least the gay male milieu felt. That is also my reaction to Kharitonov’s writing to this day. I agree with Brian Baer’s critique of the first Western works on gay identity or the lack thereof in Russia, namely David Tuller’s *Cracks in the Iron Closet* and Laurie Essig’s *Queer in Russia* (“Russian Gays”; *Other Russias*). In their effort to avoid mapping Western gay identity onto Russian queers in the early 90s, Tuller and Essig both seem to celebrate a sexual fluidity that Essig connects with post-identity politics. Both seem to seek an escape from the identitarian rigidity and gay/straight binary they find in San

Francisco and New York gay communities and greet Russia as a kind of queer utopia. I agree with Baer that this is also a kind of Western Orientalizing projection. Like most Orientalist projections, I think the “fluidity” others found tells us more about the West than it does about the Russians. Of course, many gay people married heterosexually, but there may have been other reasons for that than a fluid sexuality or identity.

Evgeny Kharitonov’s entire life fell within the period when homosexuality was a criminal offense and a taboo topic in the Soviet Union. In view of this, his healthy, open approach to homosexuality in his writing is quite remarkable. Kharitonov’s writing often deals with his gay identity, which made it difficult even for the other writers who shared his outcast dissident status. He was a doubly underground writer, as a radio show on his work put it (Volchek). Other underground writers were influenced by his form, though not by his content. The failure of Kharitonov’s straight dissident colleagues to fully understand his work, I will argue, can also be explained with the help of Halperin’s *How to be Gay*.

Unfortunately most of the memoirs about Kharitonov come from his straight writer friends, who exhibit a classic homophobic worldview, one that seeks to marginalize homosexuality or even erase it from discourse altogether. Kharitonov’s own reaction to his straight peers was clearly a kind of queer, in your face, camp bravado. Many of these writers seem to have a hypersensitivity to Kharitonov’s homosexual descriptions. Evgeny Popov expresses his disgust several times at the “physiological description of homosexual pleasures” and criticizes Kharitonov’s “in your face homosexuality” [кичение гомосексуализмом] (104). Aksenov puts it this way, “You suddenly discover in the narrative some burning and shameful ‘naturalistic’ details of same sex love . . . The hero hides them, the author turns everything inside out, demonstratively shows everything, all the stitches and scars” (94). He describes the author’s “overcoming his fears, immense pride, disguised sometimes even as arrogance, showing off – I’m ‘like that!’” (94) Perhaps this is what is described by Aleksandr Timofeevskii as his “constant rapid transitions from homosexual pariah to homosexual elect, just one step from messiah” (181)

Kharitonov claimed and celebrated his homosexuality as a gift, as something that set him apart from others and gave him special insight:

The most unusual, the most heartfelt, the man with the clearest mind on earth was undoubtedly the Evangelist John. And the second was Oscar Wilde. Joyce might compete with him here. But Joyce wasn’t a homosexual, which didn’t let him be as heartfelt as Oscar Wilde, for all his artistic gifts impossible for the mind to grasp. The second place might be contested by Miss Sei-Shonagon as well. But Japan is a country not of our world and Sei-Shonagon is a woman. And writing has to be not directly-masculine, but that doesn’t mean it should be only-feminine either. Though, I repeat that she’s his rival, Oscar Wilde’s,

whatever you like. And the third – what can I do – well, it’s me, I say without being sly. And glory be to those who can sometimes feel it.” (“V xolodnom vys-shem smysle,”) (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 327)

Yet Kharitonov must have been as good at concealing this side of himself from his writer friends as he was at concealing his writing from the KGB: most of them claim that as a devout Russian Orthodox believer he felt his gayness to be a sin. According to Nikolai Klimontovich, “he wasn’t a Hellene, but a person of asceticism and spirituality ... His homosexuality was a form of abstinence” (*Slezny* 114). Nina Sadur claims he felt the “misery of a deeply Russian person (and therefore a believer beyond reprieve) who was a homosexualist” (149). There is little evidence of such an interpretation in his writing. Kharitonov’s gayness did get him into trouble. He was completely open about his homosexuality and completely frank in his language, which led to some problems with the *samizdat* typists, since those who were not working for the KGB were for the most part puritans in this regard. And he had trouble with the authorities as well: “Tears for One Murdered and Strangled” is a response to a real incident in Kharitonov’s life. When a gay acquaintance was murdered in 1978, Kharitonov was dragged in by the police and forced to testify. Common wisdom has it that the trauma of this event laid the groundwork for the heart attack that killed Kharitonov three years later. Part of his response to the interrogation is an imagined dialog with the examiners, who threatened him with Article 121. It expresses his rage, but at the same time ends with a kind of punch-line:

So tell me, and when you understand that I have nothing to do with this, will you then ask my forgiveness?

What right does he have to threaten me with the examination, without it even popping into the charlatan’s head that the so-called examination is itself a sadistic invention. That it can’t prove anything; that only if you catch someone right after coitus there might be evidence; that if even a day has passed everything has long been washed away. Some chafing or chronic scars in the rectum one might say are from constipation, from enemas, and you can’t prove anything; or even from masturbation with a drill handle. (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 228)

Kharitonov makes the case for a kind of Soviet gay identity, or at least a Soviet gay subjectivity. The Soviet Union was known for a complete absence of public discourse about homosexuality. “We have no sex!” as a Soviet woman famously declared on a televised bridge program.¹ Dan Healey’s tripartite geography of perversion maps the Soviet Union as a place of heteronormativity, where Russians project homosexuality onto “civilized” Europe and the primitive “East,” while imagining “their nation as universally,

1 For the original clip from a TV bridge with Phil Donahue and Vladimir Pozner on July 17, 1986, see Telemost 1986, “Fragment telemosta ‘Leningrad-Boston,’” *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/y0FTbeKGPjM>.

naturally, and purely heterosexual” (253). Kharitonov’s writing, which interlaces camp sensibility, overt descriptions of homosexual sex, and Soviet kitsch, does not fit in this world-view at all.

Kharitonov writes about gay geography, uses gay language, and describes gay rituals, gay genealogy and gay history. He uses gay argot and gay shibboleths: *natural* for straight (a word few Russians knew even in the mid-90s). Several times he uses *priamoi* in a way that sounds like he means “straight” as well (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 253, 314). He mentions the *pleshka* – the gay cruising area, and gives a defense of glory holes. He also notes gay ancestors and gay culture, both Russian and international: Kuzmin, Rozanov, and Richter, but also Pasolini, Wilde, Proust, and Mann’s *Death in Venice*. He mentions Antinous, the emperor Hadrian’s beautiful lover, whose name became synonymous with homosexuality in Russia at the turn of the 20th century. In a letter to Aksenov, Kharitonov explained that his authorial “I” does not mete out his homosexual description in doses: he is not Albee, not Baldwin, not Tennessee Williams (*Slezy* 98). “*Svoi*,” “*nashi*,” “*takoi*” “our kind,” “ours,” “like that” – these are the words Kharitonov most often uses to describe his gay friends, but if the word is unstable, the identity seems not to be. At one point he even goes so far as to talk about a “gay (*goluboi*) sect” (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 257).

Straight writers had a hard time reading this, and they certainly missed the camp elements. Aksenov’s reaction to Kharitonov’s prose provides the starkest example of this heterosexist failure to appreciate camp, and it does not reflect well on the established writer. As Evgenii Kozlovskii puts it, “Aksenov’s only serious conversation with Zhenia [Kharitonov] was not one that would contribute positively to the legacy of Vasia [Aksenov]” (*Slezy* 131). After reading Kharitonov’s writing, Aksenov tried to convince him that “sexuality or homosexuality can’t be the main content for a writer” (94). According to his own account, Aksenov advised Kharitonov to avoid open portrayal of the “‘naturalistic’ details of same sex love,” the “secretions of this strange love and its dead-end underground meaning,” and instead to interject some “humor, some mockery, tricks, playfulness ...” (94). Unlike Aksenov, I read Kharitonov’s works as full of mockery and play, it’s just camp play that might be directed at a non-straight, non-Aksenov audience.

In “Tears for one Murdered and Strangled” a passage begins with a play on the slang word for “cruising area,” *pleshka*:

No Sir, in the summer one doesn’t go anywhere, it’s the beginning of the season
for plye,
plya,
plyu
a new generation of old ladies.

Again to the plye? (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 241)

Or various transitions in “Роман” (The Novel) from graphic descriptions of sexuality to humor:

Cock: Want to suck me? (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 178)
 Blowjob: I want them to give me give me give me. Why won't he let him give me to himself? (210)
 – and you feel it inside you feel how it's in you
 ...
 now you will always want c.o.c.k. always think about c.o.c.k. now at last you're no longer a man say I'm no longer a man
 – I'm no longer a man Oy careful, you'll crush all the tapeworms! (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 210-11)

Aksenov is not the audience for this camp play, but some of us are. He doesn't get Kharitonov, but we do. Eve Sedgwick says the typifying gesture of camp may be “the moment at which a consumer of culture makes the wild surmise, ‘What if whoever made this was gay too?’ Unlike kitsch-attribution, then, camp-recognition doesn't ask, ‘What kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?’ Instead, it says what if: What if the right audience for this were exactly me?” (Sedgwick 156)

In one passage Kharitonov refers to a gay friend, Sergei Stebliuk, as “Stebliuchishka” (*Pod domashnim arestom* 242). Playing with the gender of the name (Stebliuchishka for Stebliuk) is a characteristic of the kind of camp play Kharitonov deploys elsewhere. A passage in “Tears on Flowers” describes a kind of S&M initiation in which the narrator is beaten, fucked silly, and trained to “answer only to a woman's name” (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 310). In “Tears for One Murdered” he writes, “you were forced like a slave like a fool to live with a soul open and unbuttoned like a straight and simple uncouth guy forging ahead but you're not straight and not a guy you're not a he but a she” (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 253). On one hand, adoption of the feminine gender corresponds to what some see as a strict top/bottom binary among Russian gay men. But in deploying it, Kharitonov also plays up the camp abjection that Halperin describes in *How to be Gay*. “Gay male culture sees itself, its own plight, in the distorted mirror of a devalued femininity” (Halperin, *How to be Gay* 182). The stigma of homosexuality is “overcome not by resisting it, but by embracing it” (Halperin, *How to be Gay* 192). In *The Novel* Kharitonov uses the feminine gender in a catty camp attack on another gay man. This entire section begins “Gadina” [reptile/vermin (f)] and uses the feminine throughout, including for another man (also feminized), and it was the latter's friend “on whose really big and thick cock she discovered her talent as a cocksuckeress” (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 204).

Camp style is about putting roles in quotation marks, an awareness that all identities are roles (Halperin, *How to be Gay* 193). Kharitonov's straight writer friends seem to agree that his presentation to them had these kinds of quotation marks. Oleg Dark says

his most important creation was himself (*Slezy* 168). Efim Shifrin says he “created his own image” and “created himself” (162). Shifrin also says Kharitonov was a homosexual, “or wanted to seem like he was one” (167). Petrushevskaya even suggested to me that his homosexuality was only a pose, since he was married and had a child. His explicit texts seem to belie that idea.

In his gay manifesto “Listovka” (Leaflet), Kharitonov links homosexuality with specific cultural spheres:

Our genius has flourished, for example, in the emptiest and most pretentious of the arts – ballet. It is obvious that it was created by us. Whether it is literally a dance or any pop song, or any other art with sensual pleasure as its basis. (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 312)

We secretly control the tastes of the world. What you find beautiful is in part established by us, but you don’t always guess this ... To say nothing of the fact that we often dictate fashion in clothes. (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 313)

These are the very fields Halperin describes. He quotes Richard Dyer on camp reversal of style and content: “gay men have made certain ‘style professions’ very much theirs: hairdressing, interior decoration, dress design, ballet, musicals, revue. These occupations ... are clearly marked with the camp sensibility: they are style for style’s sake, they don’t have ‘serious’ content” (Halperin, *How to be Gay* 194). (Dyer could almost be quoting Kharitonov here.) At the same time “We secretly control the tastes of the world” adopts the paranoid charge of homophobes and turns it against them, in a typical camp read. The manifesto asserts that since “all of you are repressed homosexuals,” the spread of homosexuality must be controlled through silencing in the culture and sanctions in the law, because “the more visible we are, the closer the End of the World” (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 314). This is in fact the logic that underlies Russia’s adoption much later of a law against the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” to children. The text expresses puzzlement at Western laws that allow clubs, gatherings, portrayal of us in art, and declaration of rights:

Western law allows our flowers open meetings, a direct showing of us in art, clubs, gatherings, and declarations of rights – but what rights? and rights to what?

The stagnant morality of our Russian Soviet Fatherland has its purpose! It pretends we don’t exist, but its Criminal code sees in our floral existence a violation of the Law; because the more visible we are, the closer the End of the World. (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 314)

This is the same kind of paradoxical approval of repression of himself that Kharitonov articulates in another work, “Unprintable Writers,” though there it is in relation to underground writers, for whom the whole point of their art lies in the fact that they are forbidden:

Why don't they print us? They're right not to print us. Because there is a Law and Order of our life, there is a Law what one can appropriately show people and what one should be silent about. Whatever the Law and Order of the Motherland is, that's what it should be. The order for people of an artistic view is always fatally right. We are attached to it! We need it: the nerve of our art is in its transgression. Change it and the nerve will be removed and the earth will be pulled out from under our feet. (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 335)

In a Foucauldian vein, Kharitonov suggests that not only are we repressed, but we ask to be repressed, we demand our own repression. Both of these gestures work as a kind of camp strategy that, as Halperin points out, does not mean the repression is not real. "To derealize dominant heterosexual or heteronormative social roles and meanings ... is not to do away with them or to make their power disappear. It is to achieve a certain degree of leverage in relation to them, while also acknowledging their continuing ability to dictate the terms of our social existence" (Halperin, *How to be Gay* 218). I have explored the structural parallels between underground writing, which conceals political dissidence, and writing in the closet, which conceals sexual dissidence, in "The Underground Closet" (Moss 229-251). Both kinds of writing are intended for an audience that is in the know, while evading a reading by non-cognoscenti. Kharitonov does both.

As Halperin puts it, "Camp works to drain suffering of the pain that it also does not deny" (*How to be Gay* 186). One passage in *Listovka* echoes Halperin on straight readings of camp classics as literal and serious vs. camp readings that are humorous and playful: "If it weren't for us, you would tend more strongly in your tastes to the direct [or straight], the carnal, the bloody. With a backwards glance at us, though not always realizing it, you have placed a high significance on the playful and the impractical" (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 314).

Though he speaks primarily about US gay camp, Halperin does briefly touch on other cultures. He acknowledges that "there are many variations in the ways gay male culture is constituted, ... but there are also common themes that cross social and geographic divisions" (Halperin, *How to be Gay* 17). As an example, he asks if there is a French equivalent of Madonna, or Kylie Minogue, and suggests, among other possibilities Dalida. As Kharitonov puts it, "homos love famous women as an example to be imitated" (*Pod domashnim arestom* 236). In the Soviet context, the obvious diva equivalent to Cher-Barbra-Madonna would be Alla Pugacheva, who appears at least once in Kharitonov, in his "Tears on Flowers": "Then hate me when thou wilt; if ever, now – if ever, now! No subtleties can compare with this brutality. As soon as Pugacheva stopped singing at my place, she started up again 10 windows away" (Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 299). The song, though based on Marshak's translation of a Shakespeare sonnet, is classic camp in its overt and histrionic embrace of abjection, especially in Pugacheva's performance (Pugacheva).

Maya Turovskaya wrote an article in 1992 about the theater of Roman Viktiuk with the title “Нужен ли нищим кэмп” (Do the Poor Need Camp) – to which the presumed answer was “No.” I guess she doesn’t know much about, for example, the long history of Harlem Drag Balls portrayed in *Paris is Burning* and more recently in *Pose*. Camp has nothing to do with economic prosperity, or if anything, it belongs to those who are excluded from power along many axes: gender identity, sexuality, race. It was clear from the audiences who came to Viktiuk’s plays that many people in the Soviet Union did need camp. The plays were always mobbed by gay Russians. The same kind of gathering happened when Kharitonov’s collected works were first presented in 1993.

Straight people don’t get camp. In his dismissive review of Piriutko / Rotikov’s gay geography of Petersburg, *Другой Петербург* (*The Other Petersburg*), critic Mikhail Zolotonosov claims that gay geography, gay culture, and gay literature cannot exist:

Rotikov’s goal was the creation of a ‘homosexual geographical text.’ Let me state at once ... something that should long ago have been proclaimed most definitively: there is no homosexual literature, neither fictional, nor geographical, nor any other; it does not and it cannot exist ... There is a specific set of themes, but there is no special literature or culture as a whole.” (Zolotonosov)

Zolotonosov provides a classic example of the kind of dismissal of gay culture Eve Sedgwick lays out in *Epistemology of the Closet*: “Don’t ask; you shouldn’t know. It didn’t happen; it doesn’t make any difference; it didn’t mean anything; it doesn’t have interpretive consequences. Stop asking just here; stop asking just now... it makes no difference; it doesn’t mean” (53).

Kharitonov addresses the issue head-on. In a passage that refers to the homosexuality of Eduard Limonov and Sviatoslav Richter, and which echoes today’s law against homosexual “propaganda,” Kharitonov voices the official taboo on mentioning homosexuality. Aestheticization is allowed, he says, but not open depiction. The text is framed as a response from the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda*, justifying the official Soviet position on homosexuality:

We agree to close our eyes and we do close them to such acts, when they are done quietly, if they are hidden by all kinds of distracting words. If it’s hidden by art, for example ... you can admire the naked male dancers, for example, and the whole spectacle is arranged for this, but for the people it is Ancient Greece and the struggle for freedom ... But to openly give it free rein, to everyone, and call it like it is, then what will happen with ideology and how will all this fit into it. After all what you have developed into is nipped in the bud ... The law must remain the law. To set an example and uphold ideology. And we will allow no one to mention that kind of life in our country from the pages of the press. It does not exist here. We have, perhaps, everything, but on paper, remember, it

does not exist, otherwise we will be forced to bring criminal charges against you.
(Kharitonov, *Pod domashnim arestom* 228–29)

Zolotonosov and the official Soviet position require denial that gay culture even exists. Halperin disagrees, and I think Kharitonov would have too. Gay culture and gay literature not only can exist, but they do exist and did exist, even in Soviet Russia. Though Kharitonov never traveled outside the Soviet Union, he presents gay culture in Russia and around the world, and he deploys camp strategies such as those Halperin describes in the US. What he has developed into doesn't fit. We should read him on his own terms, and not pretend – as some have – that those things don't exist or that they don't signify.

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