

From Spectacle to Subtext: The Retreat of Queer Visibility in Post-Soviet Pop Culture

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This past summer, I was awarded the Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship to investigate the presence and evolution of queerness and queer celebrities in post-Soviet Russian-speaking pop culture. Working alongside Prof. Reed Johnson, I examined how these celebrities and aesthetics hit the mainstream, analyzed the demographics that consumed queer and queer-made media, and explored the influence of camp and kitsch on Russian pop culture from 1998 to 2013.

The Russian pop culture landscape underwent a drastic transformation within a single decade, shaped by increasing state censorship, the emergence of queer rights movements in former Soviet states, and the internet's rise as a publishing medium. By the end of the summer, I had compiled an extensive collection of primary and secondary sources in English, Russian, and Ukrainian, documenting the evolution of queerness in Russian pop culture, particularly music, from authentic and playful expressions to ironic and subtextual. This shift mirrors broader contemporary political and social changes within Russia, especially as President Vladimir Putin further distanced the country from the West and enacted stricter laws on the display of "non-traditional orientations" in public and publicly accessible media.

This research proved to be deeply rewarding, and I intend to continue developing this project through independent study and an honors thesis as I complete my senior year at Bowdoin. The Summer Research Fellowship enabled me to explore an under-researched area within Slavic and Queer Studies that is essential for understanding Russia's repressive policies in the modern-day and the cultural significance of music and pop culture in Russian and post-Soviet societies. I am particularly grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with Prof. Reed Johnson, whose mentorship and insights have been invaluable in shaping this project. I am excited to continue working on this project with him in the future.

Faculty Mentor: Reed Johnson

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