Kissing to Be Clever: Gender Politics of Pop, the Russian Way

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ABSTRACT

Two teenage girls kissing each other are Russia’s most successful and most controversial pop export ever. We position this pop phenomenon “Tatu” as center of a case study of the intersection of female sexuality and global consumer culture. We identify the issue of gendered authenticity as the basic subtext of Tatu’s public perception. In our main hypothesis, the actual use of gendered authenticity in relation to Tatu is criticized for misapprehending the feminized traditions of pop music. Furthermore, we criticize the ethnocentrism in the Tatu controversy with an analysis of their specific Russianness in the global cultural flow.

IT STARTED WITH A KISS

A specter was haunting (not only) Europe — the specter of two female Russian teenagers, held responsible for the fall of the Western Empire by smooching in the market place. Aged 17 and 18, the two snotty girls of the Russian pop duo “Tatu” were marketed with the unique selling proposition of a “girl-girl” kiss. It was the focal point of their break-through single/music video “All the things she said” and the essential part of every live performance. Before appearing live in the Jay Leno Show, they had to promise to refrain from kissing each other. When they represented Russia the same year in the European song contest, most of the pre-contest publicity focused on the detailed stage regulations for the physical interactions of the Tatu singers. Finally, a brief kiss in front of the audience was allowed. Not since the days of the infamous Hays Production Code in the US movie industry was a broadcasted kiss as regulated as the Tatu kiss. Although in 2003 they were commercially one of the most successful artists worldwide, the media reaction was a united chorus of outcries, unequivocally focusing on The Kiss: sick, obscene, blasphemous, hideous kinky pedophilic porn pop.

The intriguing ruckus Tatu raised is a complex mixture of arguments, without a standard, value-based clear-cut front. They are criticized for feeding male fantasies, for using sexuality as a marketing tool, for being too authentic, or not authentic enough, for stressing the marketing angle more than the music itself or opportunistic sapphism in the “Lezsploitation” sense. The British newspaper Daily Mail even went into rapture in criticizing Tatu for degrading marketing and music at the same time (Lampert 2003).

In our analysis of the gender politics embodied in the image of Tatu and its echo in the media, we want to exemplify that what triggers the emotionally laden responses is the connection of female sexuality, intimacy and bodily gestures to consumer culture. Here we refer to what Danae Clark (1991) termed as “Commodity lesbianism” to understand the logic of the dynamic formations of female subjectivities under capitalism. So far, the focus has been more on media representations in advertisements, television and movies or on
a consumer segment defined as “lesbians” (Cortese 1999; Peña loza 1996; Reichert 2001). Here we wish to contribute to this research with an emphasis on the less visible (and audible) area of popular music. After setting the scene with giving a background of Tatu, we will first contextualize Tatu as a pop phenomenon in which the gendered implications of the standard music discourse of authenticity is highlighted. Second, we will frame Tatu in the context of Russian music and sexuality to criticize the persistent ethnocentric Western view of Tatu.

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE: t.A.T.u.

The Russian pop duo Tatu was formed in 1999. The producer Ivan Shapovalov, a former child psychiatrist who also had worked in the advertising industry, created the duo as a controversial band with a non-traditional sexual orientation (Beumers 2005, 233). In the much talked about creation myth, Ivan Shapovalov first developed the idea of an ‘underage sex project’. He is quoted as getting the idea for the band after browsing porn sites (Walker 2003). Later, Elena Kiper, the former lover of Shapovalov, co-author and original deputy manager of Tatu, referred the main concept to her own dreams of kissing a woman and mentioned the Swedish movie about female teenager relationships “Fucking Åmål” as an inspirational source. Lena Katina and Yuliya Volkova, the duo’s stars and at the time teenagers, performed in school uniforms (white blouses and short skirts), exhibiting overtly lesbian antics, such as passionately kissing and groping each other on stage. The name of the band comes from Russian Ta [liubit] tu (this girl loves that girl). Even though the songs were already popular in Russia, MTV-Russia banned the accompanying music videos: “Prostye Dvizheniya / Simple Motions”, depicting Katina masturbating, and “Ya Soshla S Uma / I’ve lost my mind”, which evolved into their international break through single “All the things she said”. In this video the two girls are kissing passionately while being stared at in disapproval by a group of older people and peers behind a fence. The video won a People’s Choice Award in Russia after MTV-Russia finally broadcast them. Their first album “200 km in the Wrong Lane” sold about a million copies in Russia and went platinum in such diverse countries as Finland, Canada, and Japan. According to many sources, Tatu became the most popular band in Russia and reached international fame in 2002 when they published new versions of their Russian songs with English lyrics and new productions by the famous English producer Trevor Horn. They became the first East European band to top the UK pop charts with their hit “All the Things She Said”. New York Times wrote that Tatu is “Russia’s biggest musical export since Shostakovich” (Tavernise 2003, A4).

STOLEN KISSES: THE GENDERED PERSPECTIVE ON POP AUTHENTICITY

When Tatu entered Western markets, the basic verdict was this is marketing, not music. Appropriately enough, the online magazine SLATE discussed Tatu in the advertising criticism section and not in the music/popular culture section (Walker 2003). The male dominated music press, with sparsely hidden lewdness, taunted Tatu with “overdoing the lesbian thing” and forgetting that it is the music that should matter (Rolling Stone 2003). But also in the gay/lesbian community, the reduction of Tatu to a “marketing gimmick” was criticized. Accordingly, it is difficult to believe in a potentially progressive imagery of Tatu because it is a product of the “marketing machine” (Flick 2003). Even worse, the product is blamed for missing authenticity. Male music critics as well as gay/lesbian activists share a similar line of reasoning, though they differ in their implicit premises and assumptions. These
can be distinguished as phallocentric and gynocentric authenticity.

**Phallocentric authenticity**

In music criticism as well as popular music studies, traditional aesthetic values of popular music are “realness, honesty, integrity, sincerity, and credibility”. In the academic music discourse, these terms are usually subsumed under the general criteria of authenticity (Moore, 2002, 209). As an ideological construction, the potential authenticity markers can change based on the musician (e.g. as a member of the music community), the music (e.g. as a direct, unmediated, pure, raw sonic gestalt) or the modes of production (e.g. as autonomous and independent). Grossberg (1992, 206) argues that this demand for authenticity is a basic requirement, stemming from the development of rock music in the 50s. What made rock music so distinct from other cultural forms was developing a sphere for young people to express the social and cultural changes and tensions after WWII. In this way, rock music expressed the shared feelings of young people, suggesting new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. And unlike movies or books, music had a physical dimension that celebrated the intensity of sound and experience. A main building block for this signification was the opposition to “establishment culture”. Though notoriously awkward in handling popular music, this ideological construction of authentic rock resembles the basic art conception of Theodor Adorno (1941). In his argumentation, popular music is commodified music, regressive, oppressive and can only offer “pseudo-individuation.” Music in the commercial sphere not only deprives listeners of authentic emotion, it also makes them love their deprivation. In the popular music discourse, Adorno’s “authentic and therefore auratic art” is replaced by “authentic rock”. Here we have a deeply romantic concept of music, as unmediated expression and a unified, coherent, autonomous individual, telling the audience from the depths of his/her heart what is only possible to articulate in the universal language of music. Naturally, the artist is only making music for the sake of posterity and not for his/her own bank account. A basic fallacy is the mistaken notion of music as a universal language instead of a cultural construction (Bode 2005). A basic annoyance is the construction of authenticity based on a masculine and often misogynist perspective.

The authentic rock musician walks on the wild side and rebels against the “constraints of society”, which were embodied in the antipodes of authenticity as conformity and domesticity, both aspects codified as administrated by Wife/Mother. The untamed, virile existence of the authentic rebel musicians can be read as a constant longing of the open free space, the frontier as a women free zone (Reynolds and Press 1995). When Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie (1978) introduced the infamous “cock rock” term, they tried to delineate a special subset of rock, the explicit, crude, and often aggressive expression of male sexuality, based on gestures, behaviour, lyrics, musical style and stage personae. As much as this early description of a certain kind of music, fostered by a male dominance in the music business (from artists, technicians, engineers, producers, music critics to business owners) is important, they still work with the basic distinction of pop versus rock in a gendered way: Rock is authentic music for the boys (sometimes perhaps too masculine) and pop is for the girls, inauthentic, fake, commercialized and more concerned about fan worshipping (aka screaming, hysterical girls with posters and scrapbooks) than the music itself. The rise of “sweet black music” and girl groups in the late 50s is labelled as “the decline of rock ‘n’ roll” based on ‘a process of feminisation’” (Frith and McRobbie 1978, 13). Even the authoritative text on popular music and
gender by Simon Frith and Joy Press (1995) disparages pop as a less valuable area for the representation of female subjectivities and prefers more “legitimate” forms for negotiating authentic female subjectivities as folk, singer/songwriter, punk, or post-punk.

Based on this principle of phallocentric authenticity Tatu is per definition non legitimate music. It is a feminized and devalued form of pseudo-music that is too profane and banal not only for “real”, male music nerds, but also for popular music academics. In the construction of the pop ideology, the playful, imaginary “as if” principle was always more central than the “blood, sweat, and tears” ideology of rock’s direct expression. Pop was always conscious about the important aspect of marketing. In the 80s, with New Pop bands like Heaven 17, ABC, The Associates or Duran Duran, the business and image creation process was highlighted, made explicit and consciously communicated to the audience as a necessary and enjoyable aspect of music (Reynolds 2005, 377). A huge influence in this development was ZTT records, founded by the rock writer Paul Morley and the most important producer of that time, Trevor Horn. Horn is also responsible for the English version production of Tatu.

When cultural studies changed from an emphasis of the production sphere to the consumer sphere, the “authentic inauthenticity” (Grossberg 1992, 207) of pop came into the spotlight. For young female listeners, pop opens up an imaginary space to negotiate female subjectivities in a different way then rock. Pop music always celebrated the nexus of verbal and visual cues, like visual imagery and interviews, while rock music tried to uphold the illusion that “only the music matters” (Bode 2004). Thus, the phallic authenticity reproach of male managers, producers etc. just “pulling the strings” of interchangeable dummies is not a shared evaluation strategy of pop consumers. As much as a more female presence in the music business is desirable, it is the marketed image of the music and the artists that counts in pop. Peterson (1987) takes the example of Cindy Lauper to emphasize the celebration of a unique female sphere related to bedroom culture, magazine consumption, dancing, dressing up and female bonding. This form of resisting a dominant culture is different from the phallocentric rebellion. For the girl groups of the early 60s, Susan Douglas (1994, 88) describes these consumption themes as: “Girl group music acknowledged—even celebrated—our confusion and ambivalence. Some of us wanted to be good girls, and some of us wanted to be bad. But most of us wanted to get away with being both, and girl group music let us try on and act out a host of identities, from traditional, obedient girlfriend to brassy, independent rebel, and lots in between.”

Similar forms of pleasure are identified in studies based on “The Spice Girls” (Leach 2001; Lemish 2003). In the case of Tatu, the specific quality lies in the image of a strong bonding between the two women that can resonate with the experience of young women and girls. In a classical rebellious pose this friendship is defined in terms of the “we” versus “them” constellation, whereby “them” is specified as the older generation, patriarchal systems like the church as well as peers. The intriguing fascination especially for a young audience lies in the irreverent behaviour of

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1 It is worthwhile to note, that the criticized svengali model of Tatu, with the mischievous manager in the back, is less pronounced with accepted, authentic male musicians, like Elvis Presley / Colonial Parker, the Madchester scene with A Certain Ratio, Happy Mondays etc./ Tony Wilson or in the case of the Sex Pistols / Malcolm McLaren, as one of the most scrupulous, manipulative and misogynist svengalis in recent popular music. Still, the manufactured Sex Pistols are legitimate members of the canon of authentic rock heroes (Reynolds, 2005, 304ff.).
young women, behaving as they like in the face of social rejection. Instead of focussing on the fear of being out of control in terms of a male defined body regime (being attractive and desirable to boys without being seen as a slut) Tatu plays with a general teenage sexual confusion outside of the power of male hegemonic definition. The iconic kiss celebrates and confirms the inherently conceptualized female relationship outside of the boys’ world. In this way, the female listener is not necessarily “masculinized”, as the male gaze conception for movies assumes (Mulvey 1975; Taylor and Laing 1979).

Rather, the female audience becomes part of the group that it addresses. Elizabeth Leach (2001, 150) summarizes this process for the Spice Girls as: “The traditionally authentic rock band speaks for their audience (who feel truly understood and that they truly understand). The Spice Girls speak as their audience and with their audience.”

Gynocentric authenticity

When it comes to the representation of specific female experiences and viewpoints in popular music, history has a more reduced set of articulation modes to offer. Reynolds and Press (1995) identify as prototypical representation the following types:
- “female machisma”: the tomboyish emulation of the tough male rebel posture (e.g. Suzie Quatro, Joan Jett, L7)
- “celebrating femininity”: the positive appraisal of formerly discredited feminine values like emotionality, vulnerability, care, nurture, etc. (e.g. Tracy Chapman, Natalie Merchant, Sandy Denny, Liz Fraser/Cocteau Twins)
- “postmodern masquerade”: using female clichés as a strategic personae without being reduced to them (e.g. Madonna, Siouxsie Sioux, Annie Lennox/Eurythmics)
- “all fluxed up”: focussing on the tension of female subjectivity between essence and strategic play (e.g. Patti Smith, Throwing Muses)

Not surprisingly, the evolution and subsequent evaluation of these role options is closely related to the feminist discourse of Second Wave versus Third Wave feminism (Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Haywood and Drake 1997; Scott 2005). However, when it comes to music, there are overlapping positions that lead to a similar devaluation of a pop band like Tatu based on what we call the principle of “gynocentric authenticity”. A music example for Second Wave feminism is the development of “Womyn’s music”. As part of the establishment of a Women-identified-Women environment in the 1970s, independent institutions by and for women were founded. In the music field, Olivia Records was established in 1973 as an important cooperative to promote a new kind of music (Stein 1994). In tune with the general ideology of that time, womyn’s music was consciousness raising, politically correct music. Though not explicitly a forum for lesbian culture, the lesbian-feminist zeitgeist in these days defined women and lesbian culture as identical. Here, the authenticity markers were being unprofessional, imperfect and lacking in technical skills. Professionalism of any kind was seen as a male category, therefore a destructive category “set up by the patriarchy that limited the possibilities of women ‘creating a vision together’” (Faderman 1991, 222).

The same gynocentric authenticity criterion was dominant in establishing the aesthetic (and political) value of music in the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s, usually filed under the label of third-wave feminism. Musically focused on traditional hardcore music and late 70s punk, Riot Grrrl embodied the same spirit as Womyn’s music, in establishing a women-identified,
autonomous infrastructure, often with a separatist tendency for women-only zones and strong links to the homocore/queercore movement. The fundamental empowering spirit favored the process more than the product. The more women bands, the better. Again, male music making was identified with professionalism. In the words of Reynolds and Press (1995, 328), Riot Grrrl lived a “cult of incompetence” with “(s)loppy, out-of-sync, lo-fi”, unskilled music signifying authenticity.

Via participation in the pop machinery, Tatu necessarily has to fail according to the gynocentric and phallocentric authenticity criterion. Yet, it is important to remember that a fundamental difference between both criteria takes place based on the power relationships in the field of the symbolic gatekeepers in academia and media, as well as in the representational opportunities in the field of popular music. Proponents of the phallic authenticity criteria determine exclusion from the cherished club of authentic music by defining deviations from the masculine norm. From a minority position, adherents of the gynocentric authenticity criterion determine the inclusion into the group of antagonists of male supremacy. This leads to a demand for rigid identity politics in music. Not taking into account the ambiguities of the constructed pop image, the gynocentric authenticity perspective presupposes the identity of artist/auteur and music/product. While Madonna was criticized for not ambiguously flirting enough in the mainstream media with a lesbian or bisexual personae (Musto 1995, 435), the ambiguities of Tatu were rejected from traditional lesbian-feminist perspectives as well as perspectives more open to “lifestyle lesbianism” (Bloch 2003).

**PRELUDE TO A KISS: THE RUSSIANNESS OF T.A.T.u.**

So far, we tried to analyze the music-related gendered premises that caused the rejection of Tatu from the media. Now we turn to a different contextualization of Tatu. The main question hereby is, what makes Tatu so different from being just another weird, incomprehensible market success like the *Wombles*, *Smurfs*, or *Crazy Frog*? Looking at the half bemused, only scantily hidden vitriolic media reports in the West, it seems like their Russian background might have something to do with it: “like a cold war Soviet ruler (...) the duo have their sights on the west. It is as if cultural revenge is finally being sought for Police Academy VII: Mission To Moscow” (Paterson 2002). When the *TIME* announced “They Have Pop Tarts in Russia Too” (Grossman 2003), it signified a glitch in the cultural globalization paradigm. Appadurai (1996) proposes the ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, ideoscapes and the mediascape as important dimensions of the global cultural flow. The mediascape encompasses the worldwide distribution of information through newspapers, magazines, TV-programs and films. In the discussion of cultural homogenization versus heterogenization a shared point of view is the unilateral direction of the cultural flow. The “cultural imperialism” and synonymously “Americanization” is marked by the global expansion of CNN, MTV and Hollywood movies (Barnet and Cavanagh 1996; Kilbourne 2004; Rowe 2004). The heterogenization argument stresses the complex nature of the cultural flow, insisting on the presence of strong local, traditional cultural traits and often emphasizes the creolization or hybridization element of the cultural flow (Ger and Belk 1996; Peñaloza 1994). This line of thought also emphasizes the core impact on the periphery as a takeover, negotiation or resistance. The phenomenon of creolization has also been shown for the case of the Post-Soviet society (e.g. Pilkington et al. 2002).

When it comes to music, the paradigmatic type of musical globalization is the impact of Michael Jackson in local, so-called “third
world“ music cultures (Blacking 1987; Connell and Gibson 2003; Taylor 1997). The exceptional reversal of the cultural flow is usually framed as spicing up traditional (=Western) pop patterns with an exotic world music flavor (Brennan 2001; Feld 2000; Frith 1989). Tatu does not fit into either of the former categories. They are pop musicians from Russia, a country that is not exactly famed for exporting popular music into the rest of the world. It seems that for Western commentators, the musical export from the Russian periphery to the core is more acceptable for classical music, the Don Cossack Choir and folkloristic music, as they exemplify Western clichés of Russianness like overt sentimentality combined with a certain coarseness. In a paternalistic way, Russian musicians are “allowed”, even encouraged to mimic western popular music, as it is taken for granted that popular music is essentially Western music. The subsequent logic is that they will never be as good as “us” because they are necessarily just an imitation of the original, and the imitation itself confirms the taken for granted status of western pop music. Goodwill is conceded when the final product displays some authenticity markers for the Western ears of the exotic source. This pattern could also be observed in the initial curiosity during the Perestroika area when the first Russian rock musicians were invited to West-Europe and the USA (Ramet 1994; Ryback 1990). The interest soon faded.

For Tatu, not complying with the usual rules, brings resentment, as articulated in the “snake oil from Russia” argument. They dare to avoid an overt, Western defined Russianness, they employ a famous Western producer to hide their exotic otherness and the worst, they choose the cheapest trick of the trade: stirring up a scandal just for promotional sake. The assumed formula follows the logic of “sex scandal = media attention = commercial success”. Here it is argued that provocation, transgressing each and every social, sexual, racial, political, or moral boundaries has always been an essential aspect of popular music. Partly influenced by the art context, it often diffused from subcultural niches into the mainstream. In different forms and disguises, sailing close to the wind, contesting the actual limits of authorial arrangements was always one important aspect of the popular music promise. But to isolate provocation from the meta narrative of popular culture is futile, it has to be contextualized in the specific musical genre rules and audience expectations as well as in the historical context. Furthermore, to appreciate provocation based on the reasonableness of its goals also misses the point. In popular music insurgency is a posture. It might have a reason, but is often aimless and evaluated by consumers on the basis of their contextual intensity, as well as the individual affective and projective adequateness. The context factor came into play when the Dixie Chicks announced their Bush criticism on a European stage. The North-American country community was not as receptive, as in the case of the Bruce Springsteen consumer segments. When Sinead O’ Connor tore apart a picture of the Pope, the North-American provocation worked (in terms of media attention, less so in terms of commercial success), yet her fan base in the more secular Europe could not care less. And when the ex-Svengali of Tatu, the producer Ivan Shapovalov, looked for new projects and started NATO with a female “suicide bomber” trying to exploit terrorist chic, he definitely got media attention but failed commercially. It seems that Tatu involves more than just a “marketing gimmick”. In the following contextualization of Tatu, we position Tatu in the context of Post-Soviet popular music, highlight the lesbian

2 Or in the revealing words of Paterson (2003), when evaluating one of the first international Russian hit singles by the group PPK: Their recent dance tune “was the country’s first hit since one of their rockets landed on Afghanistan.”
Popular music in Soviet Russia was highly scrutinized, controlled, regulated and sanctioned by the political apparatus. Until the early 70s, rock music, and politically dubious instruments like the electrical guitar, did not exist in the official sphere of public stages, records, radio or television. Officially, rock music was stigmatized as essentially decadent, corrupt and capitalist music. In the 1970’s, the political goal changed from fighting the rock music scene to gaining more control. The sanctioned form of rock bands was now called “VIAs” (Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles), in which rock musicians could work officially within strict regulations such as mandatory uniforms and pre-approved lyrics (Ryback 1990). Yet, the amateur underground flourished considerably and developed into a unique form of Russian Rock in the 1970s and 1980s (Ramet 1994). The music was based on Western rock patterns, still despised by the authorities, and integrated local traditions. A strong sense of local identity was developed by the immensely valued rock lyrics: “the purely literary level of our rock lyrics is higher, on average, than in the West.” (Trotsky 1987, 34). The stress on lyrics has several reasons, like the restricted options to deliver information and meanings in the public sphere (concerts, radio, or TV appearances). More important here is the influential link to the tradition of underground folk singer-songwriters, called “bards” (with the most famous artists Vladimir Vysotsky). The bards saw themselves predominantly as poets, who accompany their poems with a guitar. Genres were pre-revolutionary city ballads, underworld songs, or camp songs, emerging after Stalin’s death (Steinholt 2003, 99). The incorporation of that tradition in Russian rock had two significant ideological impacts. The bard genre is exemplified in the genre and principle of the avtorskaya pesnya (author’s song, which established the idea of an identity between rock musician, his/her ideas and emotions and the music (Zhitinskiy 1990). This tradition, the reference point of rock as poetic, high art and the constant official pressure, formed a sense of rock music as a way of living. This music mattered to the musicians and the audiences. The authorial authenticity is then connected with a production mode authenticity. In this aspect, the Russian rock musicians implicitly shared the official state ideology: capitalism has the Midas touch to corrupt everything it lays its hand on. Russian rock musicians could uphold the notion of authenticity, just because they acted outside of any commercial (either Soviet or capitalist) system with a private distribution network of home-copied tapes (Steinholt 2003, 95).

After the drastic changes in Post Soviet Russia, popular music changed its sound, style and meaning for young people. In general, the population is rapidly stratifying in terms of living conditions and social status, showing increasing tendencies of social instability and uncertainty with similar developments in other post-socialist countries (Sredl 2004). A widely shared perception is that of an advancing ‘plastic’ capitalism, while socially shared norms or ‘big ideas’ are lacking. Although Western popular music genres have been well established in Russia, the local adaptation is complex and presupposes a strong sense of Russianness as an identity marker. In her empirical research, Pilkington (2003) applies a postsubcultural approach that emphasizes the unstable and shifting cultural affiliations of young Russian people. Instead of subcultural organizations based on consumption practices, she identifies micro-groups with specific socio-cultural configurations that gain value by their specific position against alternative and mainstream identities on the youth cultural scene. Within the broad scope of
the ‘alternative’ reference point, the often homophobic and xenophobic nature of the ‘mainstream’ is criticized, and there is an acceptance of identity deviations from the conformist ‘mainstream’. Still, the ‘alternative’ cluster retains a conservatism regarding sexuality (Omelchenko 2005).

In this intricate field, the specific positioning of Tatu displays on first sight a very Anglophone, non-Slavic strategy. For the international resonance MacFayden (2004) also mentions the allusion to the Japanese style of kawaii with the “cute” schoolgirl look that saturated Japanese popular culture in the 1980s and 1990s. This style plays and celebrates meanings like sweet, simple, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced and can also incorporate a cheeky, androgynous, tomboy sweetness. It started as a trend amongst teenagers and was not business initiated. Meanwhile, kawaii / “cute” products like “Hello Kitty” merchandising are also sold in Russia. Main actors, initiators and idols were female teenagers. Kinsella (1995) interprets the cute movement as a specific Japanese form of rebellion, not based on an aggressive masculine urge for autonomy, but a female rebellion against adult social values by idolizing childhood as a socially pre-integrated phase. At the same time, it reversed and fetishized a Japanese debasing attribution of women as irresponsible and infantile. In addition to record sleeves depicting Tatu in the manga style, we can also see visual references to that meaning cluster in the Russian music videos of Tatu, with flashing pictures of both singers as kids, in a family context, being taken care of (Nas ne dogonyat, 2001; Prostie dvizhenia, 2002). These references to a safer childhood are juxtaposed with the problematic present that both singers are trying to escape from. In “Nas ne dogonyat (Not Gonna Get Us)” the childhood pictures are literally destroyed by the present, run over by a truck that was first used as a getaway vehicle from the oppressive reality. Yet, in Russia the allusion to childhood is also resonant with a simplified, less brutal and more stable past in comparison with everyday realities. This cultural construction of nostalgic longing focuses on a privatized and emotionalized version of a past that usually is depleted from the political realities of the Soviet regime. For some audiences in present day Russia, the old Russian Rock bands of the 70s and 80s, some still active, can fulfil this urge. For a younger audience, grown up in the 80s and 90s, the poetic rebellion pose of Russian rock became meaningless. They cannot refer to the specific Soviet context anymore that gave Russian rock its specific meaning.

Russian rock also fails for current Russian teenagers as a possible identification marker in generally fading out any references to physical aspects of sexuality. The topic of sex was regarded as lowering the song’s lyrical value (Steinholt 2003, 102): “our rockers don’t sing about the same things as Western rockers do … In the entire enormous repertoire of Time Machine [the Moscovite band Mashina vremeni] there’s not a single clear-cut love song, let alone one about sex.”(Troitskiy 1987, 34). With apparent disappointment, some proponents of rock observed that the image of hero that had been promoted through Russian rock music was now replaced in modern pop with “vulgarization and sexism” (Shiraev and Danilov 1999, 221).

Interestingly enough, Russian rock gained its underground authenticity by opposition to the state promoted pop mainstream / light entertainment music called “Estrada”. But it was in this field of music that physical love, although in a very clichéd and sentimental form, was articulated. Estrada, referring to a broad variety of genres, was state promoted and stayed firmly in the official boundaries of the Soviet discourse. It provided the private emotional warmth as social glue, which the Soviet regime could only proclaim on the ideological level.
Despite the Soviet utilization, Estrada survived the USSR and evolved in modified forms in Russia. MacFayden (2003) argues that Tatu has to be understood in this Estrada context, in which the emotionally laden and eroticized position is always more theatrical and staged than in the West. In this way, Tatu’s ambiguous identity position fits into the role-playing or even “generic infidelity” (MacFayden 2002) of a Soviet (and Post-Soviet) cultural tradition. At the same time, it also fits into the pop ideology of excess, exaggeration, and celebration of commercial success. For young Russian women outside of the ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ it offers a reference point by conferring young women a more autonomous role in expressing their (often eroticized) desires and anxieties. The ludic signification of a strong bonding between two girls avoids the often plain, one-dimensional sexuality of Western acts such as Britney Spears that is competitively focused on which of the girls excels in becoming the most desirable object for men. The Tatu image rather fosters the feminized (and therefore discredited by the official rock discourse) pop pleasures of female bonding, while opening up the formerly closed door of the bedroom sphere.

“Everybody thinks we are lesbians. But we just love each other” (Tatu, MTV Interview)

The Tatu model of Russian-infused, though globally connectable theatrical inauthenticity is condensed in their visual hook of “the kiss” that functions as a symbolic juncture between the clusters of teenage angst, female bonding, intimacy, social pressure, female rebellion and pleasure. Here it is argued that to demand a plain identification as “real” or “fake”

Tatu’s “girl-girl” kiss falls into a Russian upheaval, from historical denial to a sudden eroticization of the public sphere. In general, “the theme of intimacy has consistently been taboo in [old] Russia” (Zhuk 1994, 151). The Soviet Union inherited a similar attitude where Soviet society was portrayed itself as utterly asexual; the sex was only permissible in a marriage and even then as seldom as possible (Kon 1993, 27). After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the public space exploded with sex-related images. In a few years, Russians felt well versed in topics of sex and even looked down upon the West, considering US criticism of President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky as a sign of Puritan sexual suppression (Tavernise 2003).

In the Soviet Union, homosexuality was a taboo, a deviation from the heterosexual norm, and was treated as an illness (Zhuk 1994, 146). This pathologization can be linked to the end of the 19th century Russia, when lesbian love was widely perceived as a sexual practice that had nothing to do with love and that was seen as “freakish, exotic, [and] foreign” (Burgin 1993, 203). While the current perceptions of homosexuality have not departed far from the attitudes of a disease associated with foreignness and Western cultural imperialism, in fact, it has become a part of public discourse, “appearing with increasing frequency in television commercials, articles in the press, rock music, and popular fiction” (Baer 2005, 193). Lesbianism or “fashionable love” is celebrated in the “club culture of post-Soviet Russia” not as “exclusive homosexuality, but rather to a kind of sexual openness and experimentation that

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3 “Tatu – it’s a show. Russians aren’t afraid of that” (Dimitry Rogozin, head of the Russian parliament’s international affairs committee).
allows one to move freely across the frontiers of homo/hetero identities, something inexpressible if not unthinkable as recently as the late 1980s” (ibid, 204).

Intimate relationships between women in the West, and especially in the USA have a different story. Until WWI, it was possible for women to find “kindred spirits” in each other. Their romantic friendship involved eternal love vows for each other, they could live and sleep with each other and declare themselves love mates, without any evidence of guilt, anxiety or even secrecy. It was even publicly applauded as a virtuous, pure and ennobling relationship, favoring the Renaissance conception of the soul over the body (Faderman 1981, 71). Lesbianism as a concept barely existed. This was based on the phallocentric view that women would not have any sexuality or any sexual desires. Furthermore, sexual pleasure with a male absent seemed to be inconceivable. The status of men was not threatened in any way by these female same sex relationships; as long as no overt masculine behavior was displayed as in cross dressing.

Changes in popular understandings of female relationships occurred with the rise of antifeminism, in light of the first women activists and especially the research of European sexologists, whose work became absorbed in the public discourse. Same sex relationships between women were sexualized, discredited, masculinized and condemned. The “discovery” of female sexual desires and pleasures were now used against women as threatening “woman’s impurity”. At the same time, the sexual desire was defined in a masculine sense. This logic linked sexual desires with political demands as a woman appropriates masculine traits. Weir, one of the early American sexologists, proclaimed, that “every woman who has been at all prominent in advancing the cause of equal rights …[has] given evidence of masculo-femininity (viraginity), or has shown, conclusively, that she was the victim of psycho-sexual aberrancy.” (cit. in Faderman 1991, 47). This change in perception becomes obvious in fiction at the turn of the 20th century in which physical affection in girls’ boarding schools are described in each and every courting detail, but asexualized even in their dedicated physical attraction: “Carol came in, caught Jean, whirled her around, pulled her down on a cot, and gave her a warm kiss.” (cit. in Faderman 1981, 303, from a children’s magazine story in 1909). The same sexualization of intimate women’s relationship occurred in the dynamics of kiss symbolism, when the Freudian conception of the mother’s breast as the first and most important sexual object for the child was popularized (Blue 1996, 48).

As a social act, kissing, in the sense of receiving, giving, mutually constituting a relationship that abandons the protecting distance between two bodies, is always heavily cultural coded. Dependent on the context, the involved persons, and the place where lips are meeting, the meaning dynamic exemplifies the perceptual shift in the relationship between women throughout the human history (Best 2001; Harvey 2005). A kiss is never one single message, but more a medium. In its history, the cluster of social, public, or ceremonious meanings became more and more imbued with eroticized meanings⁴.

⁴ The increasing erotization was especially striking in the social changes of the 16th century. Before, the kiss was a predominantly male, egalitarian, elitist and public gesture. Changes occurred with the rise of intimacy as a recognized factor of human behaviour. In this sense, the holy kiss of peace in the early church was celebrated between priests and the members of the congregation as a mouth-on-mouth kiss. With the increased emphasis on the kiss’s erotic significance, the practice changed into kissing the osculatorium (pax-board) or was superseded by handshaking (Best, 2001, 110). The tension is also obvious in the amused western (eroticized) view on the male mouth on mouth kisses, that were practiced as a
When Tatu focused their public personae on “the kiss”, they exploited the ambiguity between a platonic, “union of the soul” kiss and the sexualized kiss, within the blueprint of female relationships. They contextualized the kiss with the schoolgirl outfit in the “school-friendships of girls”, that have been classified as “flames”, “raves”, “spoons” or “crushes”. When the early sexologists discovered this phenomenon around the turn of the 20th century, they concluded that it seemed to be a common experience, so it cannot be discredited as aberrant, but also not as “real”. It must be just a fashion (Faderman 1981, 247). As the recent data form the National Center for Health Statistics reveals, same-sex experiences have not come out of fashion for American teenagers; the New York Times presents the term “LUG's -- lesbians until graduation” (Lewin 2005). So, we have a kiss signification that also enables the imitation of the kiss (as seen in concerts of Tatu), without the necessary concentration of the identity as a lesbian, defined by sexual orientation. Here we can even see a progressive attitude, reiterating a view held in the lesbian community, in which lesbians often “valued romance, affection, hugging and kissing, and don’t regard the sexual act as the focal point of the relationship” (Tanner 1978, 82).

In the end, the Tatu kiss is also a grand pop gesture, a public and commercialized display of a private and intimate act. In the tradition of pop, especially in female pop, the kiss is often the focal object of longing and the seal of fulfillment. It is the symbol of sincerity, as a common perception is that while every other intimate act can be feigned, not so a kiss. The media criticism of a “fake kiss” refers to the lack of identity authority. Tatu inverts the logic and celebrates a kiss in which fakeness is not based on a strict sexual identity. Even after it was publicized that one member of Tatu became a mother, they still used the meta-narrative of the intimate friendship between both of them that is threatened but not destroyed by media pressure or relationships with men ("All About Us", 2005). In mocking the sexualization of the kiss (“We have sex at least three times a day. The best is in the morning when we have just woken up. Then we do it nice and slowly. In the evening it is a lot faster and we rip each other’s clothes off. We like it at lunchtime too.”), they caricature the pathologization of female relationships as well as the oversexualized image of the Western male rock rebel.

**Conclusions**

In the overview by Arnould and Thompson (2005) of twenty years of interpretive consumer research called CCT, there is only one explicit musical reference other than Linda Scott’s analysis of ad music: a Bourdieuan-style analysis of rave culture and acid house (Thornton 1995) by an English cultural studies scholar who somehow managed to qualify for membership in the CCT Club. To make things worse, music is not even given the status of a popular culture text, as this qualification seems to be restricted to advertisements, TV programs and films (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 875).

In this analysis of a Russian pop band, becoming successful worldwide with the unique selling proposition of a girl-girl kiss, we argue that popular music matters. It matters in the use of music as a “technology of self” (DeNora 1999) for the on-going work of self-construction. It matters in the formation of brand communities in which young women can adopt interpretive strategies to relate to the pop product that are different from young men’s strategies for relating to rock. Finally, music matters as an aspect of the global cultural flow,
with specific configurations as it has been described for the case of the Russian pop artists Tatu.

With our musical contextualization of Tatu, we criticized a view on Tatu that fails to acknowledge the inauthentic authenticities of the pop genre. In referring to the Russianness of Tatu, we criticized the ethnocentric fallacies in reducing Tatu to a lesbian exploitation ploy. When it comes to personal preferences, we might favor different musical articulations and political strategies in art. But Tatu cannot be blamed for not being the Indigo Girls. And as long as the phallic celebration of aggressive virility and male bonding as boyish camaraderie aka homosocial laddishness is still praised when it comes to male rock rebels, we tend to prefer Tatu’s shimmering pop provocation in claiming to define a female relationship in their own terms.

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