

## Article

# Angels with Dirty Faces

Gosha Rubchinskiy and the Politics of Style

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**Abstract** In many ways, twenty-first century Russia is the land par excellence of extreme masculinity. President Putin himself regularly indulges in spectacular performances of extreme masculinity, whether it be pledging to ‘bump off’ Chechen terrorists in their ‘shithouses’, swimming in ice-cold Siberian lakes, or posing in the pilot’s seat of a supersonic strategic bomber. Men’s fashion and fashion imagery is one of the rare areas of Russian culture where the kind of masculinity embodied (in a literal sense) by Putin is still challenged, and indeed subverted. Perhaps the most interesting Russian men’s fashion designer working today, certainly the designer who has engaged most persistently with political change, is Gosha Rubchinskiy. In his work he foregrounds various ‘extreme’ forms of Russian masculinity, from the angelic youth at one end of the spectrum through the brown-shirted neo-fascist adolescent, to the shaven-headed football fan at the other end. He does so, he maintains, in order to change the way Russia is perceived in the world. Indeed, if Dostoevsky once claimed that ‘beauty will save the world,’ Rubchinskiy self-consciously enlists what he refers to as the ‘beauty’ of his models in an attempt to challenge the negative image of Russia generated by western media as part of what he has called an ‘informational [sic] war’ against his native country. Borrowing concepts from Bakhtin (the chronotope, carnival) and Foucault (heterotopia), I examine Rubchinskiy’s extreme masculinities, and the questions they raise about masculinity, about the cultural relationship between Russia and the West, fashion as a discrete cultural practice, and the place and role of the fashion designer in society.

**Keywords** fashion, Gosha Rubchinskiy, masculinity, Russia, visual representation

‘Angels with dirty faces,  
Angels from nowhere places,  
Kids like me and you’  
Sham 69, *Angels with Dirty Faces*

In many respects, post-soviet Russia is the ultimate land of extreme masculinity. The secret initiation rites, violent ‘protection’ methods and brutal moral codes of the mafia that spread through the country in the 1990s, for example, and indeed of the loose network of criminal fraternities that preceded it, known as the ‘thieves-in-the-law’ (*vory-v-zakone*), have been well documented (Varese 2001). The countless examples of Russian male public figures engaging in extreme forms of behaviour include the outlandish far-right nationalist politician and one-time presidential candidate Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, whose 1998 book *The ABC of Sex* (*Azbuka seksa*) called for Russia to model itself on Thailand and place sex at the centre of its economy (Sperling 2015, 65), and Alexander Zaldostanov alias ‘The Surgeon’, free-wheeling leader of the infamous Night Wolves motorcycle club and personal friend of President Putin, who publicly decorated him in 2013 with the Russian Order of Honour for encouraging patriotic feelings in the



country's youth. Putin himself regularly indulges in spectacular performances of extreme masculinity, whether it be pledging to 'bump off' Chechen terrorists in their 'shithouses' (Gorham 2013), swimming in ice-cold Siberian lakes, or posing in the pilot's seat of a supersonic strategic bomber (on Putin as 'strongman,' see also Roxburgh 2012). Indeed, by uniting in one and the same body the three cultural paradigms that have historically codified heroic masculinity – the warrior, the philosopher and the ruler (Goscilo 2013) – Putin has made a quite extreme form of hegemonic, heteronormative (and indeed homophobic) masculinity a central pillar of Russian national identity (see also Sperling 2015).

As Putin's performances underline, and as Goscilo (2013), Healey (2010) and others have shown, masculinity is increasingly central to contemporary debates about Russian identity. This should not surprise us. For much of Russian history, as Evans Clements (2002) has argued, the question of Russian identity has been primarily clothed in debates about Russian men and their bodies, how they should behave, what they should look like, and how they should be dressed (on the symbolic significance of the body, and especially the male body, in the Soviet era, see also Kon 2003, and Amico 2014). As she puts it

What is certain ... is the centrality of conceptions of the masculine in Russia's past. Tsarist bureaucrats, Stalinist economic planners, intellectuals and social reformers from the eighteenth to the twentieth century understood that they could not change Russia unless and until they changed Russian men. Fundamental to this task was defining what Russian men were and what they should become (Evans Clemens 2002, 12).

As I have noted elsewhere, men's fashion and fashion imagery is one of those areas of Russian culture where notions of 'what Russian men [are] and what they should become' (Roberts 2017a) are still in a state of flux. Moreover, it is one of the relatively rare domains where the kind of hegemonic masculinity embodied (both in a metaphorical, and in a literal sense) by Putin, while sometimes found, is also frequently challenged, not to say subverted. Men's fashion designer Serguei Teplov, for example, has used androgynous-looking male models in his publicity material, while some of Cyrille Gassiline's shoots have a distinctly homoerotic feel about them. Designers such as these bear out Karaminas' point that 'fashion imagery, as a mode of representation, is in constant flux with the social forces that shape culture and political change' (Karaminas 2012, 180).

The question of political change in general, and of the relationship between representation, masculinity and power in particular, is especially relevant to Russia, a country where traditional gender stereotypes – and in particular the equation of masculinity with such characteristics as physical strength, high economic status, and emotional restraint – are especially popular among the country's young male population (Levant et al. 2003). Perhaps the most interesting men's fashion designer working in Russia today, certainly the designer who has engaged most persistently in his 'fashionscapes' (Karaminas 2012) with the forces of social and political change, is *Comme des Garçons*' Gosha Rubchinskiy (Roberts 2017b). In what follows, I propose to examine Rubchinskiy's work, and the different forms of extreme masculinity that appear

therein. In doing so, I shall explore the questions Rubchinskiy raises not just about masculinity, but also about Russia itself, the cultural relationship between Russia and the West, fashion as a discrete cultural practice, and the place and role of the fashion designer in society.

### **Gosha Rubchinskiy, the Image Maker**

Politics, style and extreme masculinity run through all of Rubchinskiy's work like an inextricable tripartite red thread. That work itself is remarkably diverse for such a relatively short (if nevertheless meteoric) career, although Rubchinskiy has been keen to emphasize the ways in which his different creative activities complement each other (ICA 2014). A graduate of the Moscow State University of Design and Technology, he first made his name as a fashion photographer and designer of street wear in Moscow in 2008. *Empire of Evil*, the title of his first men's fashion collection, presented at the end of that year, can be seen both as an allusion to Ronald Reagan's description of the USSR, and as a nod towards the anti-Russian sentiment felt in much of the West following the country's brief war that summer with neighbouring Georgia (for a short extract of this show, see YouTube 2008). His second collection was shown in a disused Orthodox church-turned-gym, while his third, entitled *The Sunrise Is Not Far Behind the Mountains* consisted of a video shot in St. Petersburg, a book of photographs, and the collection itself (ICA 2014). In 2012, Rubchinskiy was signed up by Adrian Joffe at Comme des Garçons (Kansara and Fedorova 2016). Since then, while keen to stress his independence (YouTube 2015), he has effectively operated as a (highly bankable) sub-brand for Joffe, producing what one fashion journalist has succinctly described as 'the new black' (Massoca 2016; on Rubchinskiy as 'the hottest designer in menswear' see also Ferrier 2016). Perhaps the high point of his career so far came in June 2016, when he was invited to present his Spring/Summer 2017 collection as guest designer at Florence's biannual Pitti Uomo, currently the world's largest menswear trade fair (Leitch 2017), and also one of the most prestigious.

Rubchinskiy's guest designer status at the Pitti Uomo, and more generally his success with critics and consumers alike (see for example Stoppard 2015), is all the more remarkable, given that the man himself appears not to wish to be seen as a fashion designer. As he put it in an interview with SHOWstudio's Lou Stoppard in 2015: 'I still don't think I'm a fashion designer. I feel more comfortable when someone says, "You're an artist, or photographer, or producer"' (YouTube 2015). In another interview, this time given to *i-D*'s Anders Christian Madsen on the fringe of his Autumn/Winter 2017-18 runway show presented in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad in January 2017, Rubchinskiy claimed to be first and foremost an 'image maker' (Madsen 2017a). His images are designed, he maintained in that same interview, in order to change the way Russia is perceived in the world. Indeed, if Dostoevsky once claimed that 'beauty will save the world,' Rubchinskiy self-consciously enlists what he refers to as the 'beauty' of his models in an attempt to challenge the negative image of Russia generated by western media as part of what he has called an 'informational [sic] war' against his native country (YouTube 2015).

Showing us his 'world' (Suliman 2015), and the youths who make up that world, would appear then to be just as, if not more, important to Rubchinskiy as designing t-shirts.

Discussing his 2008 *Empire of Evil* show, he has suggested: ‘I wanted it to be like a performance. It was not about the collection, but about these boys, this generation, this energy’ (quoted in Kansara and Fedorova 2016). Indeed, fashion may be little more than the means to an end for Rubchinskiy, a way for him to stage performances – and specifically performances of masculinity – around the images he creates. Even Adrian Joffe, who has been distributing Rubchinskiy’s designs since 2009, sees him less ‘as a fashion designer,’ than as ‘a recorder of things’ (Kansara and Fedorova 2016). Rubchinskiy’s interest in visually recording not just any ‘things,’ but the quite specific, and at times extreme, masculinity of teenage boys in particular may be why in 2016 he helped design the *Mad About The Boy* exhibition, curated by Lou Stoppard at SHOWstudio, a fashion film website. This exhibition, as Stoppard herself has put it, ‘explored fashion obsession with youth, focusing on the way ideas of the teen boy are constructed through specific collections and images’ (SHOWstudio [n. d.]).

Rubchinskiy himself has directed two films documenting the activities of teenage boys in his native Russia, both of which can be found on his official website (Rubchinskiy [n. d. a]). These are *Transfiguration* and *The Casting of Alexey* (both released in 2012). This is also the subject of three of his collections of photographs: *Transfiguration* (2012), published to coincide with the release of the eponymous video, *Crimea / Kids* (2014) and *Youth Hotel* (2015), all strictly limited editions produced and sold exclusively by Dover Street Market’s IDEA books. In 2016, Rubchinskiy published a fourth collection of photographs in which young men – at times fully clothed, at others semi-naked or completely undressed – feature prominently, namely *The Day of My Death*. This book was issued to coincide with the eponymous 17-minute video directed by Russian filmmaker Renata Litvinova and designed by Lotta Volkova, screened at the end of Rubchinskiy’s Pitti Uomo show.

This last example, and in particular the involvement of Volkova, hailed recently as ‘the coolest woman in the world,’ and ‘fashion’s most in-demand creative’ (Fox 2016), reminds us that whatever the man himself may say about his work, Rubchinskiy’s international reputation undeniably rests primarily on his fashion designs. These designs have gained a good deal of (very positive) critical attention in recent years. An article on ‘Goshattitude’ in the Spring/Summer 2017 edition of *Vogue Hommes* went so far as to claim that ‘if you’re into fashion and you haven’t heard of Gosha Rubchinskiy, then there’s something wrong [with you]’ (Anon. 2017; our translation). Commenting on the disruptive mise-en-scène of Rubchinskiy’s Spring/Summer 2016 show in Paris, SHOWstudio’s Stoppard commented: ‘Rubchinskiy’s clothes merit consideration, they demand that you reflect and ponder. Unlike a lot in fashion at the moment, they’re worth waiting for’ (Stoppard 2015). Stoppard’s observation nevertheless has relevance not just for Rubchinskiy’s collections, and the runway shows at which those collections are displayed, but also for his camera work, his photography collections and his video output. Taken collectively, Rubchinskiy’s work presents us with a whole range of extreme masculinities, as we shall now see.

### **Rubchinskiy’s Videos – Angels and Demons**

When asked about the relationship between his different activities in an interview at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2014, Rubchinskiy himself commented that

it was very difficult for him to separate film, fashion, and photography, and suggested (a little enigmatically) that designing clothes was in a sense complementary to, and a continuation of the exchanges he had with the young people he associated with and who appeared in his films (ICA 2014). One of the best places to look to see just the kind of young people Rubchinskiy likes to associate with, and the kind of exchange he has with them, is his 2012 video *Transfiguration*. This was produced while he was taking a year out from designing clothes, due to the fact that, as Rubchinskiy put it in the interview at London's ICA (an interview which coincided with a public screening of the film), it is so difficult to work as a fashion designer in contemporary Russia (ICA 2014). The film's central trope – skateboarding – is nevertheless closely connected to Rubchinskiy's activity as a designer; Rubchinskiy's early shows presented his adaptations of the clothes worn by his skateboarding friends (Fury 2016).

The focus of this 45-minute documentary film is the vibrant youth skateboarding culture in the New Holland area of Russia's second city, St. Petersburg. While politically, this might appear to be a perfectly innocent subject, this is certainly not how Rubchinskiy himself sees it. As he put it in an interview with *AnOther* magazine: 'I filmed *Transfiguration* before the crisis with Ukraine [following Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014], but revising [sic] the work it becomes relevant now. It is my best possible comment on politics as an artist. Russians skate on tanks but they also skate on skateboards – they're not all bad!' (Baker 2014). From the outset, this project was designed to change the way both St. Petersburg, and Russia itself, are perceived in the West. Russia is meant to be seen not as an Empire of Evil, but simply as a place where young lads hang out, listening to rock music, playing in the street or lazing on the beach just like anywhere else in the world. Indeed, the young men Rubchinskiy filmed (female skateboarders are conspicuous by their absence here), and the kind of masculinity they embodied, were central to this project. To quote from the same interview: 'I wanted the film to be part of an effort to rebuild Saint Petersburg creatively, and to make it a more prominent part of the cultural state of Russia. I spent two months in New Holland, where the boys were coming and going to skate. They were authentic, beautiful boys' (Baker 2014).

For the most part the film contains various scenes of skateboarders in and around St. Petersburg, together with interviews of some of the skaters, and scenes from rock concerts, including two that actually take place in a skate park. The film's only (vaguely) narrative thread relates to an unnamed young boy aged about 14 or 15. Identified by Rubchinskiy in a subsequent interview as Maxim (Baker 2014), this boy appears in a number of scenes, repairing his skateboard, talking about his love for the sport, practising his art (with varying degrees of proficiency) in the city's skate parks, and discussing his dreams for the future (at one point he says he wants to open his own skateboard shop, or possibly become a fashion designer, since this seems to be an easy way to make money).

What Rubchinskiy himself describes (Baker 2014) as the authenticity, and indeed the beauty of the boys we see in *Transfiguration* is in sharp contrast to the sombre, self-conscious performativity of many of the male models in some of his earlier runway shows. Indeed, there is something distinctly, almost radiantly angelic about Maxim, with his youthful innocence and disarming spontaneity, and his tight blond locks and clear

green eyes atop a smoothly pre-pubescent and frequently exposed torso. One could argue, however, that the most angelic character in this video is not Maxim, but rather a slightly older, unnamed boy who appears with him in one particular scene. In many respects this boy is very different from Maxim, who derides him for spending his time with his head in books. Asked what he is currently reading by the interviewer (Rubchinskiy himself), he holds up a copy of *The Devils*, Dostoevsky's novel about a group of revolutionary students in imperial St. Petersburg. While Rubchinskiy has claimed that *Transfiguration* was completely unscripted, the allusion to *The Devils* can be seen as a thinly veiled reference to one particular kind of 'transfiguration,' namely the radical social, political, economic and cultural change Russia has been undergoing since the 1990s, the decade in which Rubchinskiy himself grew up – an important theme for Rubchinskiy both in his fashion designs and in his photography (Cadogan 2017). Indeed, this boy himself alludes to this theme, in a subsequent scene in which he appears alone, discussing how people are generally afraid of change, and find it so difficult to adapt to new situations. But he is no revolutionary 'devil' – quite the opposite. Like Maxim, he has something distinctly angelic about him. This quality comes across not just in his blond hair, his piercing grey-green eyes, and his white t-shirt, but also in the way this particular scene is filmed: he is shot in mid-distance and in ethereal monochrome, and bathed in bright sunshine as he stands against a plain white background; the ethereal, luminously other-worldly aspect of the image is reinforced by bleaching, slight blurring and even over-exposure; and his words become increasingly indistinct and indeed incomprehensible, as the intradiegetic soundtrack is gradually replaced by Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. The angel of Transfiguration (source: Rubchinskiy [n. d. a])



Fig. 2. A model from Rubchinskiy's *Empire of Evil* show (source: YouTube 2008)

The type of angelic masculinity embodied here is very different from the broodingly sombre, almost cabbalistic masculinity of Rubchinskiy's 2008 *Empire of Evil* show, which included two models dressed in the kind of metal-studded face mask that might be found in a BDSM club, or on the set of a *Mad Max* movie (Figure 2). I argue, however, that as a form of masculinity, it is just as 'extreme.' But Maxim and his bookish companion are by no means the only angelic boys in *Transfiguration*. This becomes clear if we turn to the 127-page book accompanying the video (Rubchinskiy 2012). The epigraph to this book, which contains a number of stills from the video alongside other photographs of skateboarders, contains the following lines:

This whole world baby! / It is all for you! / You are beyond all praise, / You're just super!!! / This will happen baby! / You just take care of yourself! / And I, I, ie [sic] we will find each other! / So it goes! / Here now, listen, in the light / Of the sun's rays, creating a golden / Aura around you, you seem / To be an angel..." (Rubchinskiy 2012: [n. p.]).

The implication here is that we are meant to see *all* the boys and young men featured in Rubchinskiy's *Transfiguration* project, be it the video or the book, as the embodiment of angelic 'beauty' – not just the boy in Figure 1. As if to reinforce this idea, one of the first photographs in the book is of the exposed back of a skateboarder, across which a life-size set of angel's wings have been tattooed.

This suggestion that all the subjects featured in Rubchinskiy's *Transfiguration* project possess angelic qualities is in itself worthy of note, because the boys he shows us are generally remarkable in their very ordinariness. With their shoulder-length, unwashed hair, their acne-ridden faces, bored expressions, street wear branded t-shirts and at times quite filthy personal habits, they are anything but angelic in any recognizable sense of the word. How, then, are these boys transfigured into figures of extreme, otherworldly beauty? The main technique Rubchinskiy resorts to is juxtaposition, both in his video

and in the accompanying book. For example, the photograph of the youth with angel's wings tattooed across his back is placed directly opposite a photograph of the top of a Russian Orthodox church, featuring an angel carrying a cross. Most often, however, Rubchinskiy uses not angels, but other models of classical beauty. On one occasion, his film switches suddenly from a skateboarder to the still image of a portrait of a youth by Italian Renaissance artist Botticelli. Their matching hairstyles, and the close similarities in terms of framing and composition serve to reinforce the association between these two male subjects (Figures 3a and 3b, below). The film includes stills of other Botticelli portraits, as well as images of paintings by Leonardo da Vinci (such as his *Madonna Litta*, c. 1490). A close-up of the latter, featuring the baby Jesus suckling on his mother's breast, can be found in the *Transfiguration* book, directly opposite a photograph of three young, anonymous skaters, shot from behind sitting on their boards, gazing out across the tarmac. At another moment, Rubchinskiy's camera lingers over a series of classical sculptures, including Michelangelo's *The Dying Captive* (c. 1513) from the Louvre in Paris. A still photograph of this particular statue is also featured in the *Transfiguration* book, juxtaposed with a monochrome image of a young skateboarder in a similar pose, pulling on a t-shirt on which one can read the name of the US rock band the Ramones. In what can be seen as an example of Rubchinskiy's homoerotic aesthetic (Roberts 2017a), at two distinct moments in the book Rubchinskiy juxtaposes the photograph of a painting of the gay icon Saint Sebastian with images of young St. Petersburgers.



Fig. 3a. A young Russian skateboarder from Rubchinskiy's *Transfiguration* video (source: Rubchinskiy [n. d. a]).





Fig 3b. The portrait of a youth by Botticelli which immediately follows the image in Fig. 3a (source: Rubchinskiy [n. d. a]).

Inserting classical works of art taken exclusively from the St. Petersburg Hermitage and the Paris Louvre also serves to question how we in the West view Russia, and to underline the fact that the country is far less ‘alien’ than the ‘informational war’ waged by the western media might lead us to believe. At the same time, repeatedly juxtaposing his images with those of western classical artists – many of which display extreme examples of masculinity themselves – Rubchinskiy seeks to question (one might even say to transfigure) our very notion of masculine beauty (and thereby our understanding of the artist and the artist’s social role). His aim here is nothing less than to generate a new mythology (Barthes 1973) of masculinity in general, and a new genealogy of Russian masculinity in particular, one which, oscillating between past and present, myth and reality, natural and artificial, ordinary and extraordinary, participation and representation (Jefferson 1989), has its own quite specific chronotope (literally ‘time-space’). Developed by Bakhtin in his writing on the novel, the chronotope is both the spatio-temporal matrix shaping any narrative, and the cognitive structure shaping my worldview as author of that narrative. If in his essay *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel* (1981, 84-258), Bakhtin suggests that specific chronotopes correspond to particular genres, the lesson of Rubchinskiy’s *Transfiguration* project is that they relate to particular *genders* too. In other words, Rubchinskiy reminds us here that gender norms, and standards of beauty, are always and inevitably tied to specific places and times. More specifically, both the video and the book imply that we need to rethink the chronotope of classical masculinity. The implication of Rubchinskiy’s *Transfiguration* project is in fact two-fold: first, these young skateboarding Russians in twenty-first century St. Petersburg are extremely beautiful, and we need to redefine our notion of masculine beauty to include them; and second (and following on from the first point), there is nothing extraordinary about their extreme beauty – it is in fact extremely banal, because it is remarkably like any other. Contemporary Russian masculinity, then, is both extreme and banal, just as Russia herself is both different and the same. As Rubchinskiy

himself has put it in a different context (his Autumn/Winter 2017 show held in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad in January 2017, which featured a collaboration with German sportswear brand Adidas): ‘Now things are changing, you see skate kids wearing football clothes and you can see football fans wearing skate stuff. *Cultures mix, subcultures mix*’ (quoted in Fearon 2017, emphasis mine).

Conflating what French art historian Régis Debray (1992) identifies as the three historical stages of the image (what he calls ‘the three ages of the gaze’), namely the locally rooted idol, Western figurative art and global visual culture, Rubchinskiy also of course invites us to view him himself as a new Botticelli or da Vinci. This is particularly audacious, when one considers that the male subjects he depicts are purportedly chosen ‘spontaneously.’ This is especially the case with his photo shoots and runway shows, where Rubchinskiy is notorious for finding his models on social media (as for example the models for his Pitti Uomo show: Muret 2016). The *Transfiguration* book features photographs of one of these models, taken during a photo shoot which, rather curiously, had nothing at all to do with the eponymous video. The model in question is the subject of the second of the two videos on Rubchinskiy’s official website, namely the ten-minute long *Casting of Alexey*. This film shows us a series of interviews with Alexey, as well as a photo shoot, and extracts from one of his social media accounts. However, Alexey presents a very different kind of extreme masculinity from that embodied by Maxim and his skateboarding pals. In the first half of the film he is a nervous, self-conscious and rather pallid youth. In the second half, on the other hand, he appears extremely cynical, consciously exploiting other people for his own advantage. In the on-line social media sequence he is remarkably sexually aggressive, using extremely crude language and at one point even sending a girl a photograph of a dildo, the image of which fills the screen.

As I have argued elsewhere (Roberts 2017b), Rubchinskiy may be said to “carnivalize” (Bakhtin 1968) the catwalk here. This is because he takes us behind the scenes, both of his own work as a fashion photographer, and of Alexey’s private life, breaking down boundaries in a way which not only introduces a crudely bawdy element, but also turns upside down our expectations as viewer and our understanding of what a “casting” is. However, the essential point about carnival is that it offers merely a simulacrum of liberatory licentiousness; its ultimate purpose is to reassert authority and control. ‘Taking back control and showing [the audience] what I want them to see’ is the reason designer Gareth Pugh makes fashion films (quoted in Khan 2012, 253). While one could argue that the point of Rubchinskiy’s carnival here is to allow him, like Pugh, to take back control over his brand, there is arguably something else behind Alexey’s display of extreme masculinity, too. To see what exactly that might be, we need to turn from his films to his runway shows. For Rubchinskiy himself has said that his films and photographs convey the same ‘message’ which is there in his clothes, but which is not necessarily quite so clear (ICA 2014). So what about those clothes? And what about the Russian youths who model them, and whose images (unlike Alexey’s) can be found in countless fashion publications, both off- and online, around the world?

## Rubchinskiy's Runway Shows

*The Casting of Alexey* is noteworthy for two things in particular. First, by the way Alexey offers his body for consumption (by Rubchinskiy, by his social media fans, and ultimately by us, the viewer), it reminds us that the body is the cornerstone of social identity construction (Belk 1988). Second, it underlines the fact that this construction is primarily negotiated in space (Roux 2014), even when the space in question is the hyperspace of social media (Bauman 2007). As for social media, that particular space emerges in *The Casting of Alexey* as a quintessentially carnivalesque milieu. In many ways, it is a topsyturvy world where the normal order of things is reversed, albeit temporarily, and there are, it would seem, no limits on what the imagination can come up with (Bakhtin 1968, 9; see also Maclaran and Brown 2005, 312). This makes it a utopian space, a place which, for French philosopher Louis Marin (1984) for example, is 'the space that is neither yes nor no, true nor false [...] a space of neutrality in which contradictions are allowed to play against one another rather than being resolved or indeed repressed' (Marin quoted in Maclaran and Brown 2005, 312). This is of course a particularly postmodern utopia, one which, in the words of Siebers 'critiques the concept of the self, questions community, unhinges cause and effect, and abhors explanation' (Siebers 1994, 31). Nevertheless, this utopian element links *The Casting of Alexey* to *Transfiguration*, which constitutes a visual representation / exploration of St. Petersburg, a place historically held in Russians' collective imagination to be 'an unreal city that was alien to Russia, a supernatural realm of fantasies and ghosts, a kingdom of oppression and apocalypse' (Figs 2002, 158).

If the spaces in which the heroes of Rubchinskiy's films evolve can be conceptualized as utopias, then the places he chooses to shoot his runway shows might be called *heterotopias*. A term first coined by Foucault (1967/2001; 2009), heterotopias are, in the words of Dominique Roux (in her study of that hyper-masculine space, the tattoo parlour), locations defined precisely in opposition to utopias. Unlike the latter, heterotopias are:

real places ... governed by rules that support various human imaginary projects. These include for example libraries as the purpose of accumulating all knowledge; asylums, prisons or nursing homes as ways to manage and correct physical or moral deviance; cinemas and theaters as spaces of creation of and projection into imagination; cemeteries as sites for commemoration and cult of the dead (Roux 2014, 64).

When it comes to organizing the 'imaginary projects' that are his runway shows, Rubchinskiy has a particular fondness for alternative, heterotopic spaces. This tendency can be seen in his early shows, such as *The Empire of Evil*. This show, his very first, featured archetypal Russian symbols, such as bears and Kalashnikovs, in what Rubchinskiy himself has more recently suggested was a response to the fear of Russia in the western press following the country's military conflict with neighbouring Georgia that summer (Kansara 2017). The heterotopic element is even more evident in his most recent shows. The Pitti Uomo show of June 2016 for example took place in the Manifattura Tabacchi, an abandoned cigarette factory built in Florence in the 1930s, at the height of Mussolini's fascism (Muret 2016). Rubchinskiy's next show was staged in

Russia, or to be precise in the country's western enclave of Kaliningrad (a city described by Madsen, perhaps a little unfairly, as a 'ghost town' and a 'desolate backdrop': Madsen 2017a, 178-79). It took place in the 1875 hall of the former Königsberg Stock Exchange, an imposing building designed in the Italian Renaissance style, which now serves as the city's Centre for Youth Culture. His most recent show to date at the time of writing (October 2017) was held in St. Petersburg, in a building that had previously housed a concert hall, library and theatre, and had also been home to the city's first rave, back in the 1990s (for a video of the show, see YouTube 2017). According to Cadogan and Hope Allwood (2017), during the show itself 'guests sat around a balcony, looking down on a set made up of smashed up theatre chairs, shrouded in smoke and lit up with the green lasers you will know if you've ever been to a techno rave.' This show coincided with the launch by INRUSSIA of a new collection of photographs, dedicated to the rave scene in St. Petersburg in the 1990s and explicitly conceived to complement it (Yurchak 2017). But the question is: what relevance might Foucault's concept, or indeed the use of heterotopic spaces have for Rubchinskiy's representation of extreme modes of masculinity?

A way to answer that question is suggested by Roux (2014). As she notes, quoting Foucault, heterotopias are 'various sites for exchanges, [in which] traditional rules currently applying to the marketplace are 'represented, contested and inverted' (Foucault, 1967/2001, p. 1574). Indeed, these places harbor transactions, which [...] are not based on common economic standards but on the restoration of alternative modes of exchange such as bartering, haggling, gift giving and/or reviving traditional ways of life.' In short, heterotopias constitute 'special places where deviant (re)presentations of aesthetics and relationships to the society are expressed' (Roux 2014, 63). Rubchinskiy has a long tradition of staging heterotopic runway shows, with his amateur models selected on social media, often wearing nothing more than customized t-shirts, and parading in specially converted public spaces. These are not the 'common economic standards' by which the runway show is conventionally organized, even by the most avant-garde, critical fashion designers operating today (Geczy and Karaminas 2017). Moreover, and more importantly, these in many respects 'deviant' representations of fashion also contain within them the kind of alternative mode of exchange which Roux sees as central to heterotopia; for in and around these runway shows, Rubchinskiy gives us time and time again the 'gift' of his (quite utopian) worldview, via the utopian bodies that circulate within them.

To understand the precise nature of this worldview, we need first to return to the heterotopia of Rubchinskiy's 2016 Pitti Uomo show. Rubchinskiy presented onlookers in Florence with a particular kind of extreme masculinity, one very different both from that on show in *Transfiguration*, and from that to be found in his recent lookbooks (Roberts 2017a). The Italian setting, the modernist architecture, the youthfulness and inexperience of his models, recruited via social media, as well as the clothes they wore - such details as these all suggested unbridled, (not to say criminalized) male sexuality of the kind personified in and explored by the dedicatee of the show, Pier Paolo Pasolini. Indeed, as Muret puts it, referring specifically to Pasolini's work: 'Wearing sneakers, retro tracksuits and loose sweatshirts and chains on their necks, they were reminiscent of Pier Pasolini's [novel] "Ragazzi di vita" [1955], the rent boys plying their trade in Rome's suburbs described by the Italian poet, writer and director; who inspired the

Russian designer for his Spring/Summer 2017 collection.’ (Muret 2016). More than anything else, perhaps, it was the models’ bodies, how those bodies moved and performed in space, that created this sense of a ‘gang’ of marginalized young men. The forty boys who made up the show, according to Muret ‘looked all identical, with their close-cropped hair, athletic appearance and grumpy demeanour’ (Muret 2016). This look, this body image, is described by Katerina Zolototrubova, fashion editor of Russian *Vogue*, as *gopnik*, a Russian term meaning ‘the bad boys from the [Russian] suburbs’ (Ferrier 2016). It is something that Rubchinskiy has long-since been developing, and something that sets him and his models apart in today’s fashion world. As Petrarca has commented, in his Pitti Uomo show Rubchinskiy ‘cast a crew of Soviet-looking teenage boys with bleached buzz cuts and without facial hair as the models. They were a sharp contrast to the usual Pitti peacocks’ (Petrarca 2016: see Figure 4, below).



Fig. 4. Rubchinskiy’s gang of ‘bad boys from the suburbs’ at the Pitti Uomo, June 2016 (source: Madsen 2017b).

Rubchinskiy’s boys certainly exuded a raw, edgy masculinity during his Spring/Summer 2017 show in Florence, at odds with the kind of extrovert dandies – Petrarca’s ‘Pitti peacocks’ – usually associated with this event (Leitch 2017). Rubchinskiy’s staging of the bad-boy *gopnik* look, a look that is very different from that of his New Holland skaters in *Transfiguration* for example, but can in some ways be traced back to his 2008 *Empire of Evil* show, was given a new twist with his Kaliningrad show of January 2017. This show signalled a return to Russia for Rubchinskiy, and as such it held particular personal significance for the designer, who in an interview compared it explicitly to his *Empire of Evil* show held in Moscow in 2008 (Kansara 2017). Approximately one-third of the items of his Autumn/Winter 2017 show were football-themed garments made as part of a commercial collaboration with German brand Adidas, with a view to the 2018 FIFA

World Cup, due to take place in Russia. Not insignificantly, the Kaliningrad show came just a few months after Russian football hooligans, dominated by right-wing nationalist militants, had made a name for themselves by running amok and fighting particularly viciously with rival fans during the UEFA European Championships in France. Whereas Rubchinskiy's show in 2008 featured elements – the bears and Kalashnikovs – specifically designed to parody western views of Russia and Russian masculinity through caricature, his January 2017 show was on the contrary intended to be far less provocative. As he put it himself, more than a little euphemistically: 'It's interesting for me to show an image of a more modern Russian football fan' (quoted in Kansara 2017). The image of masculinity that Rubchinskiy displayed in Kaliningrad is very much a hybrid; during the show itself, the shaved heads, purposeful gazes and angular chins



characteristic of Rubchinskiy's Pitti Uomo 'gang' members combined with the acne-ridden cheeks and self-conscious postures of a number of his models – at least one of whom was as young as 16 – to produce what one critic has called a 'poetic new masculinity' (Madsen 2017a, 172). Dressing up (literally) his 'poetic' vision in uniforms of extreme masculinity likely to intimidate many onlookers – the scarf-brandishing football hooligan, or brown-shirted Fascist Youth League member, for example – only served to bring the 'poetic' element into sharper relief. The *gopnik* here has an angelic innocence almost unique to Rubchinskiy's models, who emerge very much as 'angels with dirty faces' (see for example Figure 5).

Fig. 5. Rubchinskiy's brown-shirted model from his January 2017 Kaliningrad show (source: Madsen 2017b).

A short video about the models featured in the show, produced by Rubchinskiy in collaboration with webzine and publisher INRUSSIA, was also issued (to view the video,

entitled *Apart*, see Hsleh 2017). The video contains interviews with three of the young boys who answered Rubchinskiy's invitation posted on social media, and who converged on Kaliningrad from places as far away as Divnogorsk and Krasnodar ('just a regular town – nothing special about it', as one lad puts it), as well as from Kaliningrad itself (Hsleh 2017). In the video we follow them back home, walking their dogs, wandering around their city, or covering old abandoned buildings with graffiti. We also see them during rehearsals in the Centre of Youth Culture, where they appear (as one might expect, given their complete lack of professional experience) as self-conscious, naïve, and guileless. Seeing them being put through their paces by a particularly demanding choreographer, and observing one of them having his hair shaved off prior to the show, only accentuates the impression of watching raw recruits on their first day in the army. Nick Knight has argued that the new, digital medium of the fashion film breaks down the former barrier between the artist and the audience, exposing the creative process and thereby demystifying the fashioned object itself (Knight 2013; quoted in Geczy and Karaminas 2016, 117). While Knight is no doubt right, one might say that what is demystified here in this particular video is not so much the fashioned object, as the (masculine) subject as fashioned by Rubchinskiy. That subject emerges here as collectively exposed, fragile, and indeed vulnerable.

Demystification was also a key trope of Rubchinskiy's last runway show to date, staged in June 2017. To coincide with this show, Rubchinskiy also collaborated with INRUSSIA, this time on a collection of photographs of the (predominantly male) members of the St. Petersburg rave scene, taken in the 1990s (see Yurchak 2017). As Yurchak's introduction to the INRUSSIA collection makes abundantly clear, St. Petersburg's ravers in the anarchic 1990s in clubs such as Tunnel and 145 Fontanka were in many ways engaged in 'extreme' behaviour in 'extreme' times (for a fuller discussion of the rave scene in 1990s Russia, see Yurchak 1999). Paradoxically, however, what is most 'extreme' about the models in Rubchinskiy's 2017 shows, whether in St. Petersburg or in Kaliningrad, is their very ordinariness. This ordinariness is in sharp contrast with some of the clothes he designs, which one journalist has described as 'tricky, esoteric even: gently oversized utility jackets, high-waist jeans tied with shoelaces; T-shirts emblazoned with the hammer and sickle' (Ferrier 2016). This ordinariness, and the care Rubchinskiy takes, both in his photography and in his choreography, to present them as a 'gang,' a hodgepodge of street kids assembled from the four corners of the country (Lau 2016, Muret 2016, Dewintre 2017), symbolizes a rejection of the Russian glamour culture of the 2000s. Glamour is a new social structure many see as deliberately promulgated by Putin's regime, that has led to Russian men's collective 'disorientation and desperation' in the face of such 'radical transformation' (Goscilo and Strukov 2011, 12). In this way, Rubchinskiy and his models hark back not just to the pre-glamour, rave-crazy Russia of the 1990s, but way beyond that decade too.

Evans makes the point that so much of today's fashion involves a 'return of the repressed,' typical of many of today's fashion designers. As she cogently puts it, 'modern fashion gives us a collection of dislocated images in which many narratives, histories and images are condensed' (Evans 2013, 89), adding: 'the haunting of contemporary fashion design by images from the past is a kind of return of the repressed, in which shards of history work their way to the surface in new formations and are put to work as contemporary emblems' (Evans 2013, 95). The repressed returns quite spectacularly in

Rubchinskiy's work in all sorts of guises and in all kinds of forms. Most obviously, perhaps, there are the Soviet emblems and slogans (which disappeared in the 1990s before being resurrected by Putin in the 2000s), with which Rubchinskiy likes to adorn his designs. More importantly, however, Rubchinskiy displays 'repressed' forms of masculinity. There is the un – indeed *anti*-glamorous – masculinity of the early post-Soviet era, evident in his focus on the 1990s rave scene. Then there is the element of homoeroticism and gender slippage, proscribed under the Soviets, that one finds in his some of his recent lookbooks (Roberts 2017a: see Figure 6). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there are the *gopniki* of his latest runway shows.



Fig. 6. An example of homoerotic masculinity in Rubchinskiy's Spring/Summer 2016 lookbook (source: Rubchinskiy [n. d. b]).

However, the different members of Rubchinskiy's 'gang of style' (Lau 2016) do not just embody the return of the repressed; they also stand for the utopian Russian body politic (Siebers 1994) as nostalgically imagined / envisioned by Rubchinskiy. The *Apart* video that coincided with the show held in January 2017 in Kaliningrad for example, is as much about the far-flung places the models come from, the geography and history of those places, as it is of the models themselves. Discussing that show (a Russian military enclave, taken from Nazi Germany at the end of WWII, and therefore hardly a politically neutral setting: Kansara 2017), Rubchinskiy opined: 'If you think about Russia you think about politics. It's more interesting for me to invite you here and *show you* what Russia is, rather than *showing you* in Paris' (Madsen 2017a, 178, emphasis mine). And for Rubchinskiy, 'showing [us] Russia' means first and foremost showing us its



young men. This is what Kaliningrad purportedly allowed him to do, and what made it the perfect location for him. As he put it in an interview with *Dazed* magazine, 'to me, [Kaliningrad]'s like a portrait of Russia, an image of the youth generation of today' (quoted in Cadogan 2017). Rubchinskiy shows us Russia's (male) 'youth generation of today' in almost everything he does, whether it is filming skateboarders in St. Petersburg, photographing young kids in the Crimea in 2014, or dressing his catwalk models in t-shirts with *Russkii Rennassans* – 'Russian Renaissance' – emblazoned on them, as he did at the Pitti Uomo in 2016. If his models all appear to be part of a gang – perhaps even the ultimate fashion designer gang (Dewintre 2017) – the masculinity that gang now exudes is not one of 'bad boys' (Muret 2016). Rather it is one in which angels and demons cohabit in dialogic tension. The clothes may be oversized (Ferrier 2016), but if they are, this only serves to bring into greater relief how small these boys are. This was particularly evident in Rubchinskiy's Spring/Summer 2018 show, where the green lasers cut relentlessly, mercilessly through the models' semi-exposed bodies. As for the bodies themselves, they were clothed in garments of varying degrees of sportswear-ness (on account of the designer's continued collaboration with Adidas) that were either ill-fitting, or ill-suited to the spectacular context (a simulated rave). This tension between diametrically opposed modes of being – angelic innocence and something far darker – that cohabit his models is ultimately what is most 'extreme' about the kind of masculinity Rubchinskiy presents us with, both here and elsewhere in his work. In short, the heterotopic spaces used by the designer for his recent runway shows all function as backcloths against which his utopian vision – both of Russian masculinity and of Russia itself - stands out in stark relief.

## Conclusion

In an article on the legacy of British fashion designer Alexander McQueen – and in particular on his final show, entitled *Angels and Demons* – Nathalie Khan discusses fashion as 'mythology' (Khan 2013). Gosha Rubchinskiy's work, both his fashion and his image making more generally, is full of mythology, in particular surrounding masculinity, Russian masculinity and Russian identity. In an unconscious echo of McQueen, that identity is one which oscillates between the two extremes of angel and demon. In conclusion, then, these spaces - both the New Holland skateboard park and the spaces staging his runway shows, whether in Russia or abroad - serve as the (quite remarkable) backdrop against which Rubchinskiy constructs his artistic and ideological project. This project involves giving us the 'gift' of his very personal, deeply nostalgic and ultimately 'glocal' vision of Russia, a vision in which his country exists in a quite specific chronotope, one which is both here and there, now and then, heterotopia and utopia. His male models play a central role in expressing this vision, since in a long-established Russian tradition (Haynes 2003), they stand both metaphorically and metonymically for the (Russian) body politic.

Gosha Rubchinskiy is not just a highly successful international menswear brand. He is also an artist steeped in a very specifically Russian tradition. That tradition is one in which the artist has a *mission salvatrice*, a duty to use beauty to explore Russia's identity and place in the world. As Rubchinskiy put it in an interview with *i-D's* Anders Christian Madsen (Madsen 2017a: 179), comparing himself to Pasolini in the process: '[In my runway shows] I ask, what is Europe now? What is Italy now? What is Russia now?' (In

this respect, it is surely no coincidence that Rubchinskiy returns time and again to the youths of St. Petersburg, that ‘artificial’ city built to be Peter the Great’s ‘window on the West,’ and for so long the focal point of so much debate in Russian intellectual and cultural circles on the country’s identity and direction: Volkov 1995). Revisiting, and at times Russifying, major western fashion brands such as Fila, Tommy Hilfiger (reproduced on a t-shirt mixed with the Russian and Chinese flags) and Adidas, Rubchinskiy has a very ‘glocal’ view, not just of his own brand, but of Russia itself. It is primarily through the male subjects and their performances of a range of extreme forms of masculinity that we see in his films, his photography and his fashion work, that this view is expressed.

Rubchinskiy demonstrates via the range of extreme masculinities alluded to in his work both a concern with (Russian) national identity, and an insistence on Russia’s cultural ambivalence straddling East and West. As he put it, in a comment about Kaliningrad but which could be taken to apply to Russia as a whole: ‘It’s Russia and it’s a small city, but at the same time it’s in the middle of Europe’ (quoted in Kansara 2017). This search for Russia’s national identity, and the concomitant insistence on the country’s geographical and cultural ambivalence, is the Russian Idea that has preoccupied Russian artists for centuries (Beumers 1999, Franklin and Widdis 2004). If Rubchinskiy denies his work has a political agenda (see for example Madsen 2017a), this is because in Russian culture, asking questions such as these is not seen as political, but rather as something far more normal – the very opposite of ‘extreme.’ These questions are moreover particularly pertinent in today’s post-Soviet era. Answering them is at the heart of the ‘informational war’ Rubchinskiy is engaged in and to which he so tellingly referred during his interview with SHOWstudio’s Lou Stoppard in 2015. This is the significance of the binary oppositions running through all his work, between east and west (in his fashion designs), and between angel and *gopnik* (in his photography and video work). Rubchinskiy is one of the very first artists to explore Russian identity by looking nostalgically back to the post-Soviet era (the 1990s of his childhood and early adolescence: Madsen 2017a). This fact alone makes him worthy of note. That he should choose to do so via the prism of masculinity is in itself nothing new, given what Evans Clements (2002) notes about the historical connection between the question ‘what is Russia?’ and ‘how should Russian men behave?’ On the other hand, that he should so radically challenge the norms of masculine beauty and indeed masculinity that have emerged in Putin’s Russia – and ‘trailblazing a new poetic masculinity’ (Madsen 2017a, 172) in the process – is surely the most interesting and innovative thing about him – although it is unlikely the world’s fashion cognoscenti will choose to focus on this aspect of his work.

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