Cross-Dressing Women in the Cinema of the Russian Empire, 1910-1917

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Abstract

This article analyses cross-dressed performances by women in films produced in the Russian Empire between 1910 and 1917. It examines around 25 films, both those that are extant and those considered lost, and identifies two major groups: cross-gender cast films and films featuring women characters who temporarily disguise their gender identity. In most of the films in the first group, women are cast in the roles of boys and young men, which links them directly to the theatrical travesty tradition. The article devotes special attention to *Portret Doriana Greia* / *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Vsevolod Meyerhold, 1915, Russian Empire), in which the actress Varvara Ianova played the eponymous role. It also traces some of the public discussions on the topic of travesty in Imperial Russian theatrical circles, focusing on a 1905 brochure *Pochemu ia igraiu rol' Orleanskoi Devy* / *Why I Play the Part of the Maid of Orleans* by Boris Glagolin, an innovative theatrical actor and director who indeed portrayed Joan of Arc on stage. Among the films that depicted cross-dressing as intrinsic to the plot, the article briefly reviews several comedies, as well as dramas in which cross-dressing was less widely represented and usually included as part of a heroic narrative. The film *Nelli Raintseva* (Evgenii Bauer, 1916, Russian Empire) represents a remarkable exception to this trend and is therefore analysed more closely.

Keywords

Russian Empire, pre-revolutionary Russian cinema, cross-dressing, travesty, lost films, 1910s.

Introduction

The historiography of early cinema in the Russian Empire has a remarkable history of its own. First attempts to conceptualise pre-revolutionary cinema were made by Soviet film scholars who mostly branded the films decadent and reactionary. Despite certain ideological prejudices, several important Soviet works, such as Veniamin Vishnevskii's fundamental catalogue from 1945 and monographs by Romil Sobolev and Semen Ginzburg from the 1960s, helped to preserve important accounts of this early film culture. Western publications were scarce until the rediscovery of 286 early films at the Soviet State Film Archive Gosfil'mofond and their subsequent presentation at the *Giornate del Cinema Muto* Festival in 1989. After the reemergence of these films, interest in the cinematic legacy of the pre-Soviet period grew both in the Soviet Union and abroad. Since then, scholarship on Russian Imperial cinema has developed in various directions, with the topic of gender politics receiving increasing attention in recent years. Building on articles by the feminist film scholars Miriam Hansen (1992) and Heide Schlüpmann (1992), Rachel Morley's pivotal book *Performing Femininity* was published in 2017. It was followed by various articles written by the participants of the Research Team Project "Early Russian Film Prose", led by Anna Kovalova (Andreeva 2020 and 2022; Gudkova, Kozitskaia et al. 2020). In 2022, the representation of women was the focus of the conference *The 'New Woman' in the Cinema of the Russian Empire*, held at the University of Basel, and in 2023, Svetlana Smagina dedicated some chapters of her insightful Russian-language monograph *Novaia zhenshchina v kinematografe perekhodnykh istoricheskikh periodov* / *The New Woman in the Cinema of Transitional Historical Periods* to pre-revolutionary cinema. However, to the best of my knowledge, there is no comprehensive scholarship specifically on cross-dressed women in Imperial Russian cinema. This subject offers an interesting perspective on the representation of femininity as well as on 'female masculinity' on screen.[1] This article therefore aims to provide an overview of the examples of female to male cross-dressing and to map out the possible conventions behind its usage in Imperial Russian cinema, while also exploring whether the trope of cross-dressing contains meanings that are not obvious for a modern-day viewer.

The history of Russian Imperial cinema is still fragmented, as its canon tends to gravitate primarily towards distinctive and innovative dramas, especially the works of the celebrated director Evgenii Bauer. Many frivolous comedies and less artistically ambitious dramas remain understudied even though they have the potential to broaden our understanding of mainstream early film culture as well as its undercurrents. The paucity of studies about less prominent dramas and films of lighter genres is an unfortunate omission – after all, what can be more promising for a feminist critique than a film titled *Masculine Girl, Feminine Man*? This film, *Muzhestvennaia devushka, zhenstvennyi muzhchina* (Władisław Lenczewski, 1916, Russian Empire), is currently considered lost.

By seeking out traces of cross-dressed performances not only in extant films but also in those that are lost, I hope to expand and nuance our understanding of gender expression for women on the early film

screen. My interest in the non-extant part of early film heritage resonates with Allyson Nadia Field's *The Archive of Absence: A Manifesto for Looking at Lost Film*. Field argues that "scholarly writing is [...] disproportionally weighted towards extant films", but with more than 80% of early films considered lost "it is irrational to perpetuate extant-centric film history" (Field 2015: 23). This is also true for the early Imperial Russian film heritage, with its approximate 15% survival rate. The extant-centric cannon of Imperial Russian film history cannot fully reveal the variety of ways in which women were represented on screen. Turning to other media in the absence of the moving images themselves can be productive for broadening the scope of analysis.

Instead of choosing several exemplary films, I aim to present (even if only briefly) all the pre-revolutionary Imperial Russian films featuring cross-dressed actresses that I have so far managed to trace. In my analysis, I focus specifically on cross-dressing, on its place in the diegesis and the way it was perceived, while not including performances with the early cinematic representation of lesbians (which requires a separate, thorough analysis that I hope to conduct on another occasion). However obvious this link – and cross-dressing's potential for challenging gender norms in general – seems for a modern-day viewer, it was not necessarily as evident for film audiences one hundred years ago. The best illustration of this difference in perception might be the case presented in Robert A. Rushing's article on cross-dressing women in Italian silent cinema. While recent reactions to a 1915 film *Filibus* (Mario Roncoroni, 1915, Italy) celebrate it for featuring either "one of the first lesbian characters in the history of film", or a transgender character, not a single contemporary review of the film even mentioned cross-dressing (Rushing 2021: 88). The conservative Italian audience of 1915 simply did not see anything out of the ordinary in the protagonist's gender disguise.

As Laura Horak has noted, "[r]eading cross-dressed women as embodiments of contemporary concerns flattens and sometimes misrepresents the cultural work that they were doing in their own times" (2016: 2). Understanding what these images were communicating to the viewers of the 1910s is essential, since cinema not only reflected contemporary norms and expectations towards gender expression but also actively formed them. In my analysis, I take the reactions of the 1910s film press as a point of departure in an attempt to reconstruct the conventions of cross-dressing in Russian Imperial cinema, carefully testing the intuitive hypothesis of whether each of the performances was really subverting any gender norms of its time.

Jiu-Jitsu and a Suffragette with a Tail

A rich lady, Vera Nikolaevna, hires a new maid, who proves to be an indispensable, efficient worker, skillful at massage, manicure and other services. The Count, who has been unsuccessfully courting Vera Nikolaevna, shows his real face: he tries to take Vera Nikolaevna by force. The maid comes to her mistress's rescue and drives away the attacker with jiu-jitsu. After the police arrive, however, it is revealed that Vera Nikolaevna's maid is actually an escaped male convict in disguise. Vera Nikolaevna is outraged: a strange man has watched and touched her in her most intimate moments. Her pride is also wounded: "Is she really so uninteresting that the male criminal maid [prestupnik-gornichnaia] was so indifferent to her?" (Daydreams Database 2023a).

This is a brief summary of the libretto of the lost film *Ia ne veriu v dobrodetel' zhenshchiny* / *I Don't Believe in a Woman's Virtue* (Nikolai Kozlovskii, 1916, Russian Empire). Vishnevskii's catalogue of pre-revolutionary films mentions that the film is loosely based on a story by Guy de Maupassant (1945: 122) – apparently it is the short story "Rose" (1884) that concerns the fall of a convict disguised as a

chambermaid (but lacks the plot-line of the lady's violent suitor and the jiu-jitsu attack).

Fig. 1. M. S. Kal'manson. 1916. Poster for *Ia ne veriu v dobrodetel' zhenshchiny*.[2]

According to Vishnevskii, the male criminal in disguise is played by the actress Mariia Kulikova. The

decision to cast an actress in the role of a man pretending to be a woman seems curious. In order for the character of a convict in a maid's costume to be believable and for the denouement to make sense to the audience, Mariia Kulikova probably had to play a "strange" maid, queer enough to give the viewers a hint of their hidden masculinity. Since the film is considered lost, it is hard to assert this or any other hypotheses about this casting: Kulikova's name in the list of actors might be someone's mistake. However, cross-dressing was in no way a rarity. If the information about *Ia ne veriu v dobrodetel' zhenshchiny* is correct, then it happens to be at the crossroads between films with cross-gender casting and those in which cross-dressing occurs simply as a part of the plot. Both categories were present on the early screens of the Russian Empire, especially for female performers.

Besides, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, women's fashion in general was transforming, gradually including more and more items of clothing previously available only to men. Women dressed in clothing that was unfeminine by the standards of its time were not rare, either in life or on the screen. However, less conventionally feminine attire suggested additional subtexts, whether about modernity and urban lifestyles or politicisation. In the Russian Empire, by the mid-nineteenth century less feminine clothing and hairstyles for women were universally recognised not as a quirk but as a clear political statement. At this point, the image of the "*nigilistka*" emerged: "hatless, short-haired nihilists who wore plain black woollen dresses" (Stites 1990: 70) and "frequently assumed dark glasses" (Stites 1990: 103).

Ideologically charged film heroines were often marked out through less feminine clothes and hairstyles; for example, consider the protagonist's friend, the female doctor Koretskaia from the extant film *Nelli Raintseva* (Evgenii Bauer, 1916, Russian Empire). In the script, by Aleksandr Amfiteatrov, she is described as an instantly recognisable type: "with slick hair, a pince-nez, and a non-revealing dress resembling a shirt" (Amfiteatrov 1916: 6). She also smokes. Koretskaia is thus marked as a New Woman, independant, assertive, and professionally successful in a male-dominated occupation. She represents modernity and progress, as does the main character of the openly pro-feminist extant drama *Zhenshchina zavtrashnego dnia* / *Woman of Tomorrow* (Petr Chardynin, 1914, Russian Empire). Also a dedicated female doctor, Anna Betskaia delivers a speech in favour of equal rights in one of the film's scenes. These serious, emancipated cinematic heroines are in no way portrayed as caricatures, which was the case for many nameless real-life suffragettes, who were often mobilised for comic effect.

Pre-revolutionary cinemas showed foreign farces mocking the women's suffrage movement. Drawing on their success, filmmakers working in the Russian Empire made at least five comedies about suffragettes. Three of these were produced by the Khanzhonkov studio and starred the very popular Polish actor Anton "Antosha" Fertner. These were *Sufrazhistki* / *Suffragettes* (director unknown, 1915, Russian Empire), *Pobornitsy ravnopraviia* / *Combatants of Equality* (Władisław Lenczewski, 1915, Russian Empire) – characterised by Vishnevskii (1945: 74) as "a mediocre farce that satirises the women's suffrage movement" – and *Zhenshchiny, bud'te iziashchny* / *Women, Be Graceful* (Władisław Lenczewski, 1915, Russian Empire). This latter film, while a parody, quite literally shows women to be weary of impractical, feminine outfits. Antosha plays a publicist who laments that modern women lose their graceful appearance under their mannish suffragist clothes. He falls asleep and has a nightmare: an angry mob of suffragettes "put a corset on him, tighten it mercilessly, put high-heeled shoes on his feet, and a heavy wig on his head" to demonstrate how painful it feels to look graceful (Daydreams Database 2023b).

The other early Imperial Russian comedies about suffragettes were an adaptation of Jerome K.

Jerome's play *Zhenskaia logika* (*Miss Gobbs; Zhenshchina-Ianus*) / *Women's Logic* (*Miss Hobbes; Janus Woman*) (V. Demert, 1917, Russian Empire) and – possibly the most curious example – the film *Sufrazhistka ili muzhchiny, beregites'* (*Khvostataia sufrazhistka*) / *Suffragette, or Men, Beware* (aka *The Tailed Suffragette*) (attributed to Anatolii Durov, 1913, Russian Empire). The suffragettes were played by the animals of the renowned circus trainer Durov. Unfortunately, all these films are lost, but one can safely assume that "the combatants of equality" (even those with tails) were portrayed as recognisable types and visually marked by their distinctive style of clothing.

Emancipated female film protagonists, who openly challenged the traditional position of women, could represent both the promise of modernity and its threat. But regardless of whether they were portrayed as strong, enterprising personalities, or deployed for comic effect, as a target for ridicule, their appearance signalled a recognisable political identity. Meanwhile, women's cross-dressing or mannerisms that could be read as traditionally (or stereotypically) male had a strikingly different position in the cinema of the Russian Empire. In the examples I have found so far, gender-crossing for film heroines never marks a shared identity, much less a political one. If anything, it reinforces their femininity and cements their transformation as purely temporary, whereas cross-gender acting roles illustrate the contribution of female masculinities to the cultural production of boyhood and manhood on screen.

Female Boys: from Tsarevich to Blackface

In 1913, the Romanov dynasty celebrated 300 years in power. For the grand jubilee, Khanzhonkov's studio released a ceremonial film, *Votsarenie doma Romanovykh* / *The Accession of the House of Romanovs* (Vasilii Goncharov, Petr Chardynin, 1913, Russian Empire). In this solemn historical epic, the first tsar of the Romanov dynasty, young Mikhail Fedorovich, was played by a woman: the actress Sof'ia Goslavskaia.

The portrayal of the Tsar and the royal family was sacred territory and any frivolity was absolutely unthinkable. As Natascha Drubek notes, "[f]ilm censorship in Russia began [...] with a preoccupation with the moving images of the Tsar" (2017: 15). The same reverential logic applied to his direct ancestors, because a ruling Tsar was supposed to be the embodiment of God on earth for his Orthodox subjects. Film producers actively sought the intercession of high-ranking officials: just two years previously, Khanzhonkov had secured the "Highest Resolution" from the Imperial Chancellery for his production of the patriotic epic *Oborona Sevastopolia* / *The Defence of Sevastopol* (Vasilii Goncharov, 1911, Russian Empire), along with permission to use units of the Russian army and the military fleet for filming (Khanzhonkov 1937: 48–49). Considering this, it would be hard to suspect filmmakers of any intention to profane the image of the first ruling Romanov by casting a woman as tsarevich.

The attention of the film's reviewers was mainly focussed on its "historical illiteracy" (Ivanova, Myl'nikova, Skovorodnikova, Tsiv'ian, Iangirov 2002: 141): the tsarevich's May arrival in Moscow was filmed in winter, the infantry were wearing overly modern warm jackets, and the horses had their tails trimmed in a historically incorrect manner, they complain. But no one found the decision to give the role of tsarevich to a woman scandalous, provocative or even, in fact, worthy of any discussion.

Fig. 2. Sof'ia Goslavskaia as tsarevich Mikhail in *Votsarenie doma Romanovykh*. 1913.[3]

In the early twentieth century in the Russian Empire, many theatrical actresses specialised in travesty performances and were cast specifically in so-called "breeches roles" on stage. The practice was not as anachronistic as one might think, and came in handy during World War I when male actors risked being drafted at any time. In 1917, the magazine *Kulisy* published a comic "little feuilleton" about Shakespeare bringing *Othello, the Moor of Venice* to a modern-day entrepreneur who corrects the title's Mavr (Moor) into Mavra (a female name). Shakespeare argues that the Moor is a man, to which the entrepreneur replies: "A man? Embarrassing. [...] Where will I get a man unfit for duty to play your Moor. Now the Moor must be female" (F. 1917: 12). A dispirited Shakespeare agrees for an actress to play Othello.

The theatrical travesty tradition spilled over into early cinema, bringing some of its conventions along. All the male roles played by women in early Russian Imperial films were those of young men and boys. In *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema,* Laura Horak calls such characters "female boys" and explains their traits in early US-produced films, as follows:

> Female boys connected moving pictures to centuries-old theatrical traditions. Furthermore, they made a specific appeal to middle-class mothers and grandmothers by embodying a sentimental ideal of boyhood. Female boys were considered more expressive, more beautiful, more innocent, and more vulnerable than boys played by male actors (Horak 2016: 24).

Interestingly, Goslavskaia was not one of the actresses known specifically for travesty performances, even though she mentioned that in acting school her favourite role was that of a page Cherubino (1974: 140). In her memoirs, Goslavskaia recalls the director Chardynin's reasoning behind casting her as the tsarevich: "Actors, even the youngest ones, are rude, devoid of charm and nobility, while

travesty actresses are stereotyped" (Goslavskaia 1974: 139). It seems that Chardynin shared the traditional theatrical notion that men were unfit for the portrayal of innocent boys, while at the same time aspiring to create a travesty performance specifically for cinema. He preferred to pick an actress who had already made her screen debut and showed a good sense of the camera, so that she would embody a young man in a new way, bypassing the "stereotyped" canon of the theatrical tradition.

However, most of the Imperial Russian films with cross-gender casting of male characters embraced theatrical traditions, which they applied without much adjustment. In Nikolai Rimskii-Korsakov's opera *Snegurochka* / *The Snow Maiden* (1881), based on the play of the same title by Aleksandr Ostrovskii, the role of the shepherd boy Lel' was written for a female contralto or mezzo-soprano. In opera productions, this role was traditionally (and still is) performed by a woman. Despite the performer's voice being of absolutely no importance for a silent film, in Władisław Starewicz's film *Snegurochka* / *The Snow Maiden* (1914), Lel' was still played by a woman, the actress N. Semenova.

Fig. 3. N. Semenova as the shepherd boy Lel' in *Snegurochka*, 1914.[4]

The artistic craft and liveliness displayed by Lel' makes him of (platonic) interest to the Snow Maiden. In both Ostrovskii's play and opera's libretto, his character is not, strictly speaking, innocent or sentimentally pure: he constantly basks in the attention of the village girls and cheekily asks for kisses as a payment for singing his seductive songs. The playfulness ingrained in Lel' seems more characteristic of an adolescent, than of the mature male characters common on screen at that time.

It would also be difficult to label as innocent the cruelly mischievous boys in a film adaptation of Wilhelm Busch's illustrated story *Max und Moritz – Eine Bubengeschichte in sieben Streichen* / *Max and Moritz: A Story of Seven Boyish Pranks* (1865). A lost film, *Maks i Morits* / *Max and Moritz* (M. Gurin, 1914, Russian Empire) was supposed to be the first in a series of Max and Moritz films, but it apparently flopped – no other films followed. One of the boys was played by an actress, whose name remains unknown. A brief description mentions only that the film was shot "with the participation of youngsters from the Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi and Svobodnyi Theatres" (Anon 1914).

Fig. 4. An advertisement for *Maks i Morits*. *Sine-Fono* 1914 (15): 67.

The characters of adolescents could be not only diabolical, like the famous Max and Moritz, but also driven by an awakening desire, like Tom from the lost film *Chernyi Tom* / *Black Tom* (Mikhail Linskii, 1916, Russian Empire). This was a film adaptation of a popular song by Isa Kremer, a prominent singer, recitalist and, in her later life, a performer of Yiddish folk songs (in fact, she is often credited as the first musician to sing in Yiddish on big international stages). The film featured Kremer herself and told the story of an Algerian delivery-boy named Tom who falls in love with a white lady. The lady never takes him seriously and later falls in love with a white gentleman. Driven to desperation by jealousy, Tom prepares a knife. One could assume that in the screen version of her song, Isa Kremer

would star as the white lady, but, according to an advertisement for the film (Anon 1916), she starred as Tom, which makes it a cross-dressed performance in blackface. Interestingly, the advertisement features a typically elegant portrait of Kremer and only indicates the role she plays in the text. Kremer's repertoire leaned heavily on stereotypical "exotic" images of far away lands: among her other hit songs were *Negr iz Zanzibara* / *A Negro from Zanzibar* and *Poslednee Tango* / *Last Tango*, which is set in Argentina.

Tom is introduced as a Black boy who dreams that "once he grows into an adult, [he] will buy a tall house and will live there with a white wife" (Sarieva 2018: 262). However, his love is not that of a child, but quite adult and passionate. In the lyrics he is presented as a sexual but essentially infantile character, unable to soberly assess his matrimonial chances. Tom's innocence manifests itself only in a child-like naivety and yet-to-be-tamed impulses, which places him rather far from a sentimental ideal of boyhood.

Fig. 5. Tat'iana Bakh (on the left in the background) as Mishka in *Drakonovskii kontrakt* / *A Draconian Contract*, 1915.[5]

In 1914 and 1915, Petr Chardynin shot at least three comedies with female boys. The lost film *Bambukovoe polozhenie* / *A Sticky Situation* (Petr Chardynin, 1914, Russian Empire) featured the actress Dora Chitorina as Vitia, the Duchess's young student son. In the film *Drakonovskii kontrakt* / *A Draconian Contract* (Petr Chardynin, 1915, Russian Empire) of the "Antosha series", starring Fertner, the actress Tat'iana Bakh played a boy named Mishka, who helps Antosha get out of trouble. The mischievous boy Kol'ka in the lost film *Zloi mal'chik* / *Evil boy* (Petr Chardynin, 1915, Russian Empire) is played by "Bauer the second" [vtoraia], the feminine form of the adjective suggesting that this was, presumably, the child actress Emmochka Bauer.

Bauer the second [vtoraia] also plays a boy in the extant film *Pervaia liubov'* / *First Love* (Evgenii Bauer, 1915, Russian Empire). It depicts a saccharine 'love story' between two children: a boy invites a girl for a date. She dresses up and puts on make-up, mimicking what her adult sister usually does, and then sets off.[6] On her way she is frightened by a frog, which later turns out to be just a clutch bag shaped like a frog. The boy tires of waiting for her and leaves, while the upset girl returns home where she is cheered up by feeding some little chickens. This short film, clearly designed to be adorable, presents both children as sweet and angelic. Its female boy is probably the closest in Imperial Russian cinema to the sentimental image of idealised boyhood that early American films gravitated to (Horak 2016: 25). Many of the female boys in the films of the Russian Empire represent a "red-blooded" type of boyhood. They express playfulness, insouciance and impulsivity that were not befitting of adult men outside of the setting of a rowdy gathering.

Contrary to the intuitive assumption of modern-day viewers, none of these cross-gender roles sparked any polemics. They did not seem to challenge the dominant gender system and were apparently not perceived as an oddity or subversion. However, there was one film that did force the press to dispute the appropriateness of cross-gender casting: Vsevolod Meyerhold's *Portret Doriana Greia* / *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1915, Russian Empire).

Travesty is a Dangerous Thing

> Travesty is a dangerous thing in general, and especially travesty in a tailcoat. However, Madame Ianova never lets it be noticed that the role was played by a woman, while she "knows how to wear" a tailcoat admirably (Anon 1915a: 90).

This is a quotation from a press review praising the actress Varvara Ianova's portrayal of Dorian Gray in Vsevolod Meyerhold's *Portret Doriana Greia* / *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1915, Russian Empire). This film, created by one of the most important directors in the history of Russian and later Soviet theatre, is unfortunately considered lost. Based on the scarce surviving materials and reviews, it is still possible to grasp how visually innovative and experimental *Portret Doriana Greia* was in its time (Kovalova 2019). Unusually, its cross-gender casting was among the creative decisions debated in the press: "As for Madame Ianova, this is a complete curiosity: this curly-haired boy makes some angry, scandalises others, and puts many in a cheerful mood" (Anon 1915b).

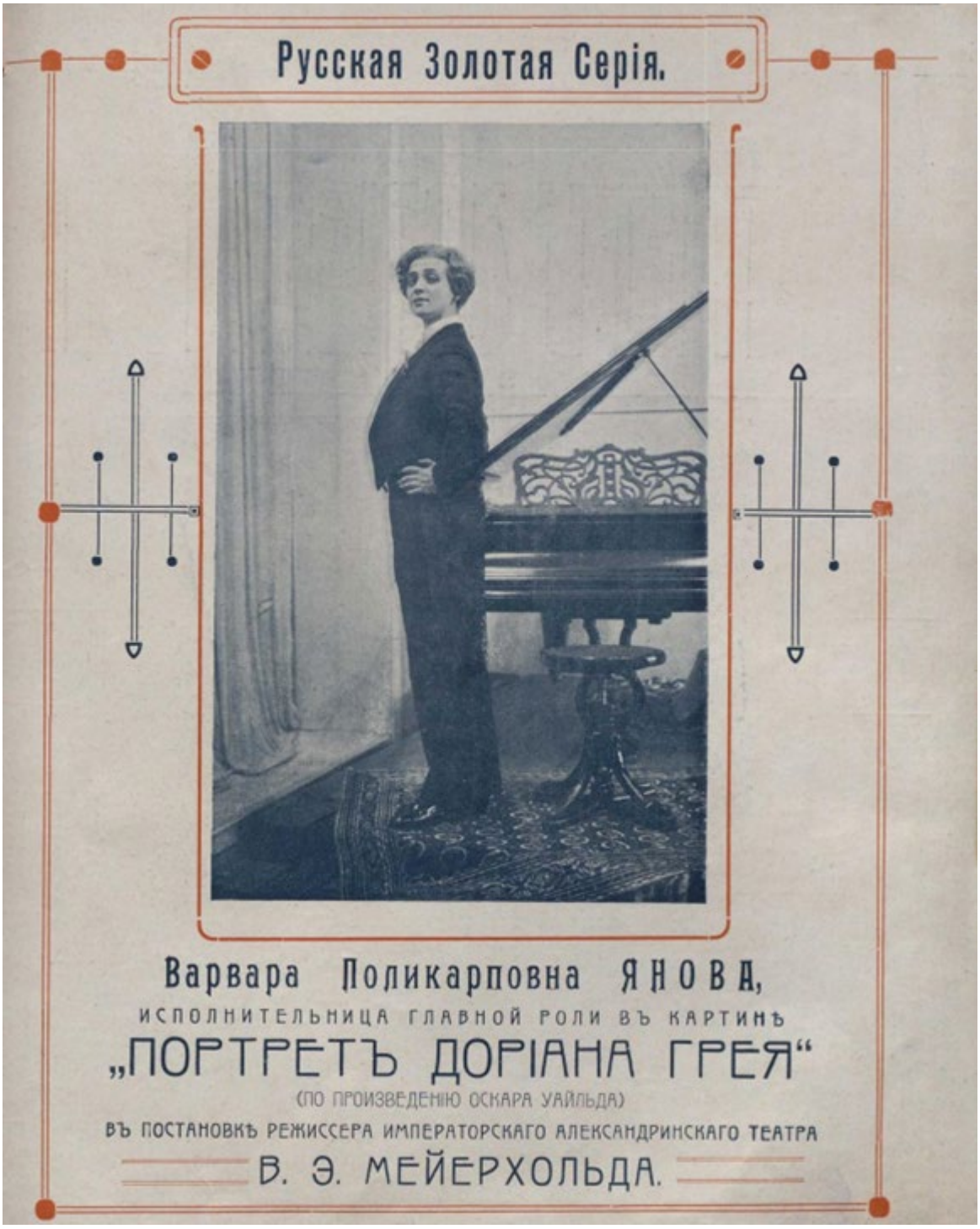

Fig. 6. An advertisement for *Portret Doriana Greia*. *Sine-Fono* 1915 (3): 55.

Fig. 7. Lakk. Caricature of Ianova as Dorian Gray. *Sine-Fono* 1915 (18): 85.

The critical reviews from the film's contemporaries enable us to make some assumptions about what was so "dangerous" about travesty and what could have been considered a successful portrayal of a role assigned to an actor of a different gender. Most of the critics who defended the casting of Ianova in the role of a man argued that "she makes the viewer almost completely forget that she is a woman" (Anon 1915a: 91). A moderately negative review cites this kind of praise as something that should be problematised, however: by fully focusing on whether a woman is coping with the role of a man, the viewers forget about the character of Dorian altogether. The reviewer describes cross-gender casting as both an outdated practice, rejected by the modern theatre, and a manifestation of Meyerhold's penchant for "old theatricality" [*staraia teatral'shchina*] – "[p]recisely the kind of theatricality that cinema does not need" (Granitov 1915: 94).

As an adaptation of a refined novel by a reputable director of the Imperial theatres, the film gave rise to reflections on how travesty functions specifically in the medium of cinema as opposed to theatre:

> Dorian Gray is played by the actress Ianova. This aroused concern. Cinema does not forgive such tricks, it is too naturalistic. When a woman plays a man on the stage, she can captivate with her acting, with a word, with a direct impact. None of that is possible on the screen. However, even this task was overcome in the film. Madame Ianova gave away that she is a woman only at moments, but on the whole she was a charming, tragic [embodiment of] Oscar Wilde's young man (Anon 1915c).

Meyerhold himself had already tried out cross-gender casting in his theatrical directorial career earlier the same year. His 1915 adaptation of Calderón's *The Constant Prince* (*Stoikii prints* / *El principe constante*) in the Aleksandrinskii Theatre featured the actress Nina Kovalenskaia as the prince (Fevral'skii 1978: 20). According to an article by Miron Malkiel Zhirmunskii, published in Meyerhold's magazine *Liubov' k trem apel'sinam* / *The Love of Three Oranges*, this casting choice was motivated by an interpretation of the prince as "a tender image of passive willpower, linked only with the notion of femininity" (Zhirmunskii 1916: 75). The prince's central feature is "a passive faith, a faith of love and patience, a faith of prayers and hope, a faith of non-resistance – a feminine faith" (Zhirmunskii 1916: 74). In other words, the prince's personality is defined by the qualities stereotypically associated with femininity, and thus it naturally invites a stage interpretation by a woman.

A similar argument for cross-gendered casting on stage had already been voiced a decade earlier, when *The Maid of Orleans* aroused attention. The theatre director Nikolai Evreinov cast actor Boris Glagolin as the warrior maiden in Friedrich Schiller's tragedy *The Maid of Orleans* for the Suvorinskii (Malyi) Theatre in Saint Petersburg. Rumours about the unusual casting choice began circulating long before the play's premiere in 1908, so Boris Glagolin explained his thoughts on the subject in a 1905 brochure *Pochemu ia igraiu rol' Orleanskoi Devy* / *Why I Play the Part of the Maid of Orleans*.

> One can look at this situation as a continuation of an evolutionary movement. At first, there was no woman on the stage. Then she ascended there like a pariah. Later, she conquered a position equal to that of a man. Now the time has come to enter the stage not as a woman or a man, but as a human. Philistine and petty characters and types require distinctions; but where a human stands in the foreground, then the task does not go further than the question of a talented, spiritual performance. And in that a male actor has all the advantages (Glagolin 1905: 33).

Glagolin consistently defended the idea that women are not good enough as performers to convey deep human feelings. The play's director, Evreinov, who also wrote an article about the production in 1908, shortly before its premiere, summed up Glagolin's line of reasoning as "all actresses are too much women to play a role of a 'human' and it is easier for men to do that" (Evreinov 1908: 182). He did not claim that he shared Glagolin's views; instead he cautiously stated that, for his part, the goal was to bring Schiller's vision to life and "show a mighty courageous spirit in a beautiful gentle image" (Evreinov 1908: 182).

Glagolin's essay is full of contradictions and inconsistencies. On the one hand, he wonders: "But is it really true that femininity is characteristic only of women, and masculinity only of men? Life itself interferes with these features" (Glagolin 1905: 22), as both viewers and artists are able to relate to the feelings of characters of different gender, age or status. But then he also asserts that the role of Joan is definitely a "male role", or "the role of a woman with the purely masculine qualities of a hero and a warrior" which is "more accessible to a male performer" (Glagolin 1905: 32). However convoluted Glagolin's arguments were, his essay is still an important attempt to conceptualise cross-gender

casting in dramatic work, far more complex than the criterion of passability through which critics had been appraising Ianova's performance in *Portret Doriana Greia*. Glagolin was in fact sceptical of the possibility of achieving a believable portrayal of any woman by a male actor and condemned men in travesty roles of "typical women", rather than of "chosen souls" (Glagolin 1905: 19) like Joan of Arc. He categorised Hamlet as such a chosen soul, remarking that Sarah Bernhardt's travesty performance as Hamlet was no worse, and perhaps better, than many performances by men (Glagolin 1905: 32). And, in fact, there is plenty of evidence of Meyerhold's intention to cast his wife, the actress Zinaida Raikh, as Hamlet on stage, although this production was never realised (Kovalova 2019: 72).

Eine männliche „Jungfrau von Orleans"

Der russische Frauendarsteller Boris Glagolyn.

Fig. 8. Boris Glagolin as Joan of Arc.[7] Courtesy of Ol'ga Khoroshilova.

Whereas during the rehearsal period of the play the press was full of feuilletons and mockery (Khoroshilova 2021: 144), right after its premiere the tone of the critics changed and Glagolin's performance was received quite favourably. One of the play's reviewers to a certain extent echoed Glagolin's argument that the role is inherently more accessible to a male actor:

> Glagolin gave an interesting image of a half-hysteric, half-charlatan, attractive with the beauty that is neither feminine nor masculine, but somewhat in-between – angelic, captivating, almost frightening with its hermaphroditism – not for a moment forgotten by the viewer. He did not offend the feminine dignity of the Maid of Orleans with a single word, a single gesture, while the masculine spirit in this warrior maiden could hardly be conveyed without operatic mawkishness by an actress, unless she had particularly outstanding physical characteristics (Auslender 1909: 27).

Interestingly, Glagolin's brochure also outlines a tendency to connect male cross-dressing performances with pathologised identities. Glagolin provides "A Letter from Madame Shabel'skaia",[8] that criticises his decision to play Joan of Arc and the reasoning behind it, concluding: "no matter how well a man dresses in a woman's gown, he will convey either a ridiculous or a repulsive impression of a paederast. Forgive me for being frank, but I feel it is my duty to warn you" (Glagolin 1905: 25–26). It is curious that this angle was not voiced in reviews of Ianova's performance – a woman in a tailcoat was not suspected of "deviance". Only much later, in the 1960s, the film's cameraman Levitskii "took it upon himself to emphasise that Meyerhold did not want it to give rise to any 'pathological' homosexual associations whatsoever", while the Soviet film historian Semen Ginzburg claimed that "the film's use of travesty enhanced the 'decadence' of its subject" and inspired a whole series of films of an "unhealthy, spicy, perverted" nature (Risum 2022: 247).

Extant sources do not allow us to unequivocally draw conclusions about the nature of Meyerhold's motivation behind cross-gender casting for *Portret Doriana Greia*.[9] Kovalova provides an interesting link between the film and the illustrations by Modest Durnov that accompanied one of the Russian translations of Wilde's novel.[10] In Durnov's final illustration for the novel "on the right we see the portrait; on the left, apparently, Lord Henry; and in the middle, Dorian Gray, presented in a female or androgynous guise" (2019: 71). It is possible that Dorian's striving for physical beauty and youth was "linked only with the notion of femininity", just like the nature of Constant Prince's faith supposedly was.

Fig. 9. Illustration by Modest Durnov for the translation of Dorian Gray.[11]

We can also only speculate why this example of cross-gender casting caught the attention of the press while others usually did not. The most prosaic explanation would be the film's exceptionality. Despite being commercially unsuccessful, it stood out as an artistic innovation, discussed "not only in the film and theatre journals, but also in the so-called general press" (Kovalova 2019: 66). It is possible that the casting choice drew attention not on its own but as an integral part of the number of creative decisions that contributed to a strong overall impression of novelty. The cinema debut of the well-known stage director Meyerhold was itself an event that sparked interest, especially given that he had condemned cinema in an article under the telling title "Balagan" / "The Fairground Booth" in 1912, just three years prior to releasing his film (Meierkhol'd 1968).

Nevertheless, the figure of Dorian Gray differs from the female boys described earlier. While most of them are either beautiful and noble innocent souls or playful little imps, Dorian Gray is far more complex. He goes through a drastic transformation from a charming young man (which would be natural for the female boy tradition) into a vicious and cold-hearted person, while most of the female boys stay the same, as masks do. Possibly, this disturbance of the unwritten conventions of screen

travesty required some effort from viewers to reconfigure their perceptions.

Comedies: a Sailor, a Kitchen-Boy and Two Circassians Play a Game

A jealous husband receives an anonymous letter that accuses his wife of infidelity. He rushes home and finds her in the arms of a Circassian man. The couple are kissing so passionately that they do not even notice his presence. As the furious husband attacks his rival, he realises that it is actually his wife's female friend dressed as a man. The two women are laughing: they staged this scene as a prank to teach the jealous man a lesson. The shamed husband swears that he will never doubt his wife again. This is an episode from the lost comedy *Damochki podshutili* / *The Ladies Played a Prank* (Petr Chardynin, 1915, Russian Empire). As in other similar films, the temporary cross-dressing heroine does not face an outraged reaction from other characters. Those fooled by the prank become the object of ridicule for the viewers, while the heroines achieve their goal and celebrate a triumph. It is noteworthy that cross-dressed female characters are not suspected of non-heterosexuality, even if they intimately interact with other women while in disguise. Their gender-crossing seems to be perceived by the other characters as an innocent game or a witty joke. This allows one to playfully try out a generic male identity and then safely return to one's usual self. These comedies are exemplary of what Chris Straayer describes as "temporary transvestite films" (Straayer 1996).

It is no coincidence that the main character of *Damochki podshutili* disguises herself as a Circassian man in particular. Playful and pleasurable acts of female cross-dressing in early Russian comedies almost always imply a transformation into a certain characteristic type or a stereotype, just like at a masquerade. In a costume party episode in *Natasha Rostova* (*Voina i mir*) / *Natasha Rostova* (*War and Peace*) (Petr Chardynin, 1915, Russian Empire), Sonia also dresses as a Circassian man, while Natasha becomes a hussar and Nikolai an old lady. While an adaptation of *War and Peace* is far from being a comedy, the masquerade scene is clearly of a lighter kind, and the cross-dressing does not have much functionality in the story besides revealing Natasha's cheerful personality and almost childlike charm.

Fig. 10. Natasha as a hussar (Vera Karalli), Nikolai as an old lady (unknown actor) and Sonia as a Circassian man (Mariia Reizen) in *Natasha Rostova* (*Voina i mir*). 1915.[12]

The female characters' cross-dressing in Imperial Russian comedies does resemble a masquerade, even if it happens in a completely different setting. For example, in the lost film *Odin namylilsia, a drugoi pobrilsia* / *One Soaped Up and the Other Shaved* (Mikhail Bonch-Tomashevskii, 1915, Russian Empire) the female protagonist dresses as a kitchen-boy while her male cousin dresses as a housemaid, and together they sneak into a bachelor party for the girl's future husband. In *Prikliuchenie Liny v Sochi* / *Lina's Adventure in Sochi* (Evgenii Bauer, 1916, Russian Empire), Lina and her maid dress up as guards and ambush a persistent suitor to teach him a lesson. In *Sorvanets* (*Devochka-ogon', Nevesta Anatolia*) / *Tomboy* (*Fire-Girl, Bride of Anatole*) (Petr Chardynin, 1914, Russian Empire), Liubochka dresses up as a sailor and courts the bride chosen for her boyfriend by his parents. None of these characters aspires to be a kitchen-boy, a guard or a sailor – these roles do not represent anything meaningful in the long-run. The heroines' gender-crossing is rendered pronouncedly temporal and situational by the odd specificity of the identities they adopt.

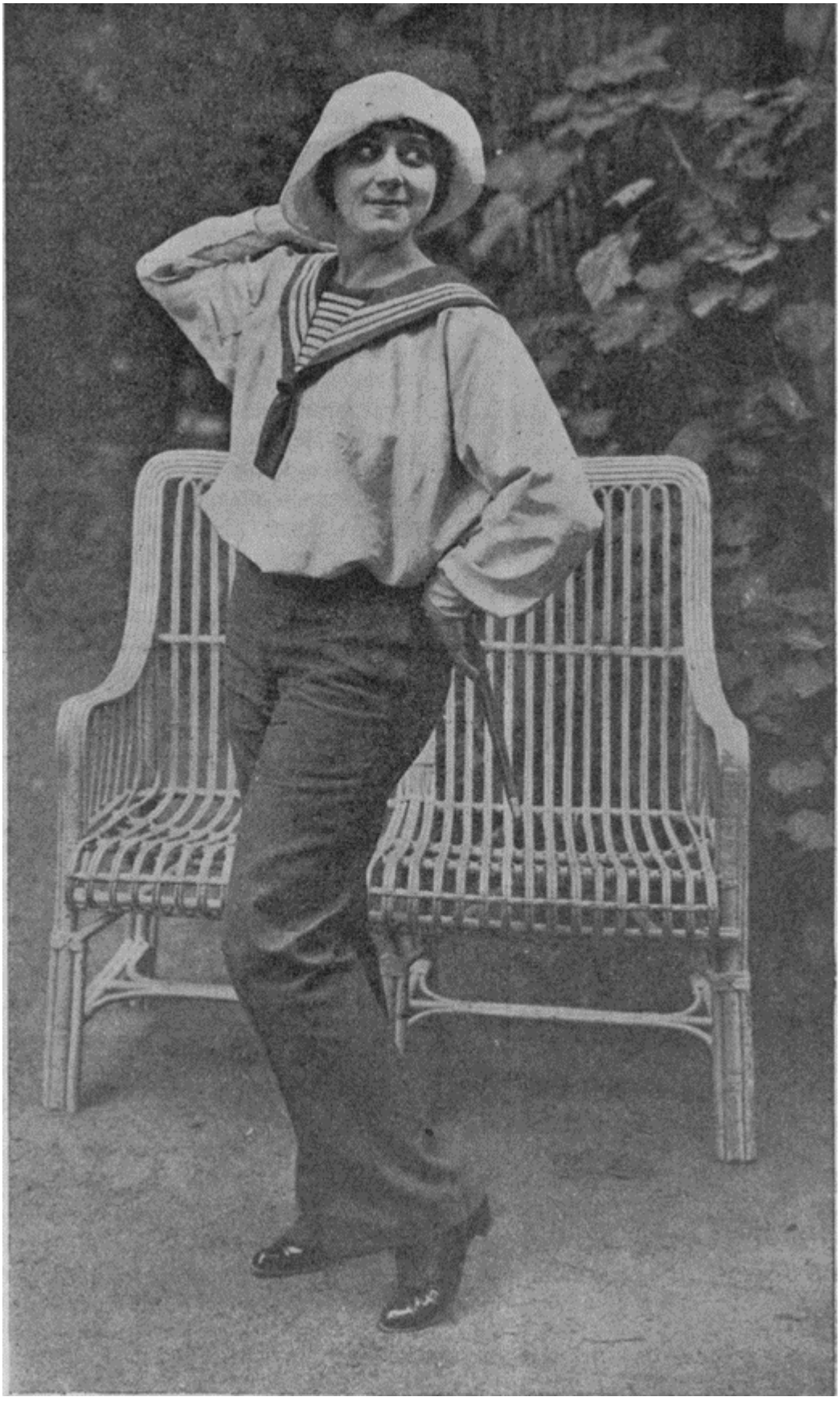

Fig. 11. Khanzhonkov studio's promotional portrait of Vera Karalli in a sailor's outfit. *Vestnik kinematografii* 1914 (92/12): 31.

Any possible destabilising potential of such a deflection from femininity seems to be nullified, as the characters' gender-crossing takes place within the framework of a stable patriarchal family (or as part of a pursuit to create one), with no other concerns to attend to. They willingly embrace conventional femininity as soon as their mischief is successful.

If serious emancipated characters, like the two women doctors mentioned earlier, represent modern subjectivity and the New Woman, and comedic mobs of suffragettes represent modernity 'gone wrong' and mock the New Woman, then what do cross-dressing women in comedies embody? In my opinion, they represent conventionally defined, out-moded femininity, superficially reconciled with the rapid social changes of the early twentieth century. Their strictly temporal and depoliticised rejection of feminine attire tends to infantilise cross-dressing: reducing it to merely an act of dressing up, it makes the heroines look adorable and innocuously mischievous. As Laura Horak noted about American frontier films:

> It is likely that the representation of cross-dressing as a temporary, pleasurable activity [...] helped depoliticize masculine styles of women's clothing—or, more accurately, that it helped unsettle the link between masculine styles and radical feminism (Horak 2016: 56).

This might also be true for Russian Imperial comedies, at least for those whose libretti are preserved and available at this particular moment. Besides the title *Muzhestvennaia devushka, zhenstvennyi muzhchina*, mentioned above in the introduction, many non-extant films remain dramatically under-researched, such as the comedy *Nu i polozhen'itse!* / *Well, Here's a Pretty Pass!* (Evgenii Bauer, 1915, Russian Empire) that Vishnevskii (usually derogatory about light farces) marked as "a funny farce with cross-dressing" (Vishnevskii 1945: 71). Another under-described title is the lost film *Akusherka s usami* / *Midwife with a Moustache* (director unknown, 1915, Russian Empire) starring actress Liubov' Variagina. She is the only cast member listed in Vishnevskii's catalogue (1945: 52), so it is quite probable that she plays the titular midwife with a moustache.

Another lost comedy is *Nevesta-sorvanets* / *Tomboy Bride* (Boris Svetlov, 1917, Russian Empire). Vishnevskii's catalogue (1945: 133) lists the main actress as "V. Alekseeva-Meskhieva". But his facts are probably not accurate, since a 1917 edition of *Kine-zhurnal* – a magazine printed by the film's production studio – captioned a promotional photo for the film as "N. V. Alekseeva-Meskhieva in her performance in the R.D. Perskii studio's film *Nevesta-sorvanets*" (Anon 1917). Varvara and Nina, both actresses, were the daughters of Lado (Vladimir) Aleksi-Meskhishvili, a prominent Georgian theatrical actor and director. "N.V.", then, stands for "Nina Vladimirovna". Both sisters performed in travesty roles on stage, although Varvara became better known: *Teatral'naia entsiklopediia* / *The Theatrical Encyclopedia* has an article on Varvara but not a mention of Nina. It appears that Vishnevskii might have contributed to this asymmetry of the preserved legacies by erroneously listing V. Alekseeva-Meskhieva instead of Nina as the leading actress in the film.

Fig. 12. A promotional still for *Nevesta-sorvanets* / *Tomboy Bride*. *Kine-zhurnal* 1917 (3–4): 79.

Fig. 13. A promotional still for *Nevesta-sorvanets* / *Tomboy Bride*. *Kine-zhurnal* 1917 (17–24): 55.

While the film's plot remains unknown, the two captioned promotional images are available. The person in a suit and a top hat is pictured in the centre of both compositions, and in both cases only Alekseeva-Meskhieva's name is mentioned in the caption. Together with the word "tomboy" in the title this suggests that Nina Alekseeva-Meskhieva's character disguised herself as a young man and, judging from the images, courted ladies.

Dramas: Dressing like a Man to Follow a Man

Cross-dressing as a part of the plot was represented not only in comedies, however. In fact, the first depiction in a Russian Imperial film of a woman disguising herself as a man represents this as a courageous dramatic gesture, not a comedic act. The lost film *Ermak Timofeevich – pokoritel' Sibiri* / *Ermak Timofeevich – The Conqueror of Siberia* (Vasilii Goncharov, 1910, Russian Empire) told the story of the eponymous sixteenth-century century Cossack ataman who launched the Russian conquest of Siberia. His favourite esaul, Andrei, leaves his bride Masha (who is also Ermak's daughter), because Ermak's warriors swore an oath that there would be no women in the camp. Masha, dressed as a boy, follows her fiancé to Siberia. The film's villain, a warrior who later betrays Ermak, also follows Andrei to a secret rendez-vous and recognises Masha in disguise. He demands that the young woman be executed together with the violator of the oath, but Ermak sees Masha's cross necklace, recognises her as his daughter and asks to spare her life.

That same year saw the release of *Kur'er ee velichestva* / *Her Majesty's Courier* (Petr Chardynin, 1910, Russian Empire), a reinterpretation of one of the episodes in Aleksandr Pushkin's novel *Kapitanskaia dochka* / *The Captain's Daughter* (1836). This lost film is not listed in Vishnevskii's catalogue but is described in the book by French cameraman Louis Forestier (Forest'e 1945: 30), who worked in the Russian Empire and, later, the Soviet Union. He described the plot as the story of a girl from a noble family who dressed in a male courier's uniform and was thus able to get close to Catherine the Great. Having handed over the dispatch, she revealed her real name and begged the Empress to forgive her fiancé, who had fallen into disgrace.

In both films, women dress as men and go on perilous journeys for the sake of (heterosexual) love. Travelling is a fairly plausible motivation for disguise, especially for historical films: it was not easy for a woman to move through sixteenth-century Russia or even the eighteenth-century Russian Empire. A man's costume granted women a certain degree of freedom and invisibility. It is also remarkable how often stories of gender-crossing include the physical crossing of geographical borders. Analysing British gender disguise comedies, Chris O'Rourke highlights this association and remarks how various locations "serve as convenient 'elsewheres' for locating and containing gender fluidity" (2021: 291). But, as in Russian Imperial comedies, the courageous cross-dressing characters in these dramas are ultimately expected to "return" to their supposedly "real" feminine selves. Their new male identities do not seem to express their ambitions, nor any discontent with their predetermined social roles, or external manifestation of their sense of self. Their courage and resourcefulness are safely channelled into a quest to ensure their ultimate realisation as a wife.

Starting from 1914, Russian film studios produced many militaristic propaganda films dedicated to the heroic exploits of the Triple Entente in the First World War and the atrocities committed by the enemy Central Powers. Many female film characters ended up becoming sisters of mercy and going to the front – sometimes following their husbands, other times out of a sense of duty to their homeland. In some films, sisters of mercy not only treated, but also fought on the front line along with men, as, for example, in *Geroiskii podvig sestry miloserdiia Rimmy [Mikhailovny] Ivanovoi* / *The Heroic Feat of the Sister of Mercy Rimma [Mikhailovna] Ivanova* (Aleksandr Variagin, 1915, Russian Empire). A sister of mercy in *Slava – nam, smert' – vragam* / *Glory to Us, Death to the Enemy* (Evgenii Bauer, 1914, Russian Empire) steals important documents from an Austrian officer, dresses in his uniform and successfully delivers the papers to the Russians.

The military prowess and courage shown by women were an important part of militaristic propaganda, which sought to mobilise the population and emotionally justify participation in the war in the eyes of a society torn apart by ideological contradictions and ever-increasing social tension. The emerging image of a brave woman patriot affected film heroines, offering not only the role of sister of mercy. For example, *Podvig riadovogo N-skogo polka devitsy Lizavety Bashkirovoi* (*Epizod iz vziatiia Erzeruma*) / *The Feat of the Private of the N-th Regiment, the Maiden Lizaveta Bashkirova* (*An Episode from the Conquest of Erzurum*) (director unknown, 1916, Russian Empire) tells the story of a peasant girl who admires her brother's successes fighting on the Turkish front. She runs away from home in men's clothes and, like her brother, goes to war. Under the male name Il'ia, she becomes a good soldier and a scout in her brother's regiment. She is wounded while heroically capturing a Turkish officer. Only in the infirmary, upon presenting the injured soldier with the Order of St. George, does the general learn that the private is a woman.

Like her travesty predecessors from 1910, Lizaveta follows a man, this time her brother, in order to

become as useful as he is on the battlefield. Changing her goal from marriage to military duty does not seem to significantly alter the nature of her gender-crossing:

> [F]emale masculinity, in the form of the cross-dressing "woman soldier", is used less to suggest modernity and more as a means to show how transgressive or unruly women could be accommodated within relatively conservative notions of national identity and a romanticized national past. (O'Rourke 2021: 291)

It seems that in these films women characters have to transform into men visually in order to exercise qualities that used to be associated with masculinity. The use of cross-dressing in these dramas reinforces rather than subverts existing gender stereotypes and gendered power dynamics, since the link between bravery and masculinity remains intact. On the other hand, cross-dressing seems to help detach gender roles from biological sex, allowing characters assigned female at birth to cross the symbolic border and "exit" their restrictive womanhood. However, it seems that unspoken conventions of the early screen closely regulated gender-crossing since it takes place only under strictly defined circumstances. A young woman seems to be able to temporarily adopt the identity of a man as long as she does it either for love or for military exploits: in other words, for the benefit of the patriarchal Imperialistic order. Her journey is supposed to result in a wedding or a victory, and to cease after that.

The First World War period also produced a drama in which a female protagonist's cross-dressing occurred outside these conventions of the early screen. Her gender-crossing was of a frivolous nature, did not mobilise her for decisive action, and thereby coded her as a woman who could not find her place in the twentieth century.

A Reputation for Eccentricity

"Well, and I myself, what am I?" [Nu, a ia-to sama, chto takoe?] – asks Nelli, the protagonist of the extant film *Nelli Raintseva* (Evgenii Bauer, 1916, Russian Empire), using the neuter gender when referring to herself (Amfiteatrov 1916: 4). She despises the nineteenth-century roles embodied by her parents but cannot seem to fit in in the new times and find a direction in life. The film starts with Nelli's funeral, and the pages of her diary reveal the events that lead to her suicide. A noble girl, she sneaked out with her maid to the servant's party, got drunk and ended up spending the night with Petrov, her father's clerk. Petrov later turns to blackmail, forcing Nelli to continue their liaison. After receiving a marriage proposal from a noble man, Nelli learns that she is pregnant by Petrov. As the intertitle that replaces the film's missing reel states: "Not wishing to disgrace [her fiancé] and full of self-hatred and self-loathing, Nelli Raintseva puts an end to her life" (Morley 2003: 44).

In Amfiteatrov's script, Nelli describes her life prior to these events: "I earned a reputation for talent through drawing a bit, sculpting a bit, playing the piano a bit, singing a bit, writing poetry a bit" (Amfiteatrov 1916: 5). From the wording it is already clear that Nelli neither has real passion for any of these pastimes, nor shows any actual talent for them. Trying to find a vocation, she asks for professional opinions from the celebrated modern composer Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov, for whom she plays the piano, and the famous writer Leonid Andreev to whom she reads her writing (these real life and very well-known individuals are played by actors in the film). They both discourage her, and one of them passes the judgement: "You'd be better off getting married, young lady"[13] (Amfiteatrov 1916: 5). Nelli's friend Koretskaia, an emancipated woman doctor, mentioned earlier, encourages her to break free from her meaningless, boring lifestyle and "study, serve, work": "There is a great deal for a Russian woman to do, if she is independent, strong and not constrained by poverty" (Amfiteatrov

1916: 6). Nelli feels inspired by Koretskaia's path but nevertheless fails to take control of her life and gives up before really trying. Nelli continues:

> I acquired a reputation for eccentricity by dressing as a boy sometimes and sneaking out with a group of my hussar cousins to some chic café chantant. [...] These blockheads treated me with such rapturous surprise, as if I were none other than Joan of Arc... (Amfiteatrov 1916: 5)

We learn these things from the film's exposition, which introduces Nelli and her life before the start of the dramatic events that will lead her to a tragic end. The four episodes are introduced after the question "What am I?" in the following order: 1) Playing piano for Ippolitov-Ivanov, failing to impress; 2) Sneaking out in men's clothes, having fun and getting admiration from her cousins; 3) Getting advice from Koretskaia, failing to follow it; 4) Reading her works to Leonid Andreev, failing to impress. At first glance, the cross-dressing episode seems out of place in a story that is designed as a chronicle of failure. However, I believe that all four episodes represent Nelli attempting to find her place in the twentieth century – and not succeeding. They also predetermine her inability to break free from the out-moded, restrictive notions of femininity that lead her to tragedy.

So how would cross-dressing mark yet another setback on Nelli's journey to acquire a new, twentieth-century female subjectivity? In *Performing Femininity*, Rachel Morley analyses the unique position of the figure of the female performer in the cinema of the Russian Empire. In a striking number of pre-revolutionary films, filmmakers used a stage career "in order to indicate that their female protagonist had become, or at least aspired to become, a New Woman" (Morley 2017: 210). Meanwhile, the female characters who are not cast as performers "are typically shown to continue to construct their identities around the out-moded ideals of femininity revered by their patriarchal male counterparts" (Morley 2017: 208). That is the case with Nelli, who appears unable to "shake off her adherence to the hypocritical values which allow a man sexual liberty, but require a woman to remain pure until she marries" (Morley 2003: 44). We see her unsuccessfully trying to realise herself as an artist, while never truly trying out the path of the performer that in Russian Imperial cinema codes a woman's ability to live according to the values of modernity. The closest thing to a stage performance from Nelli is her cross-dressing.

Alyssa DeBlasio, however, sees cross-dressing as an indication of Nelli's downfall caused by Petrov, "under whose influence Nelli's life takes a turn for the worse: in attempts to advance her position, she resorts to alcoholism, cross-dressing, and frequenting clubs" (DeBlasio 2007: 691). However, this reading fails to take account of the facts that in both the script and the film Nelli is, on the contrary, shown cross-dressing and enjoying herself in clubs before the fatal night with Petrov. According to Morley, Nelli cross-dresses "[i]n her desperation to taste the same social freedoms as those accorded to men" (Morley 2003: 44). However, she seems not so much preoccupied with social freedoms per se, as simply bored, in the same way that her fateful decision to go to the party with her maid was dictated by "the stupor of boredom [that] tormented me more than usual" (Amfiteatrov 1916: 7).

From the way cross-dressing is employed in the films analysed earlier, we can outline two general patterns: the drama model and the comedy model. In the drama model, the adoption of the temporary male identity is a tool to mobilise personal qualities stereotypically associated with masculinity for a short-term decisive action. In the comedy model, gender-crossing expresses merely an innocent mischief and a pleasurable playfulness that can only reaffirm the character's conventional femininity. Nelli's cross-dressing is closer to the comedy model and thus it illustrates one more dead-end in her fruitless search for the modern, twentieth-century female subjectivity. All four episodes that

characterise Nelli in the story's exposition, code her future failure to adopt the values of a New Woman.

Conclusion

In the Russian Empire of the early twentieth-century, the question of masculine fashions for women had a clear political dimension. The less obviously feminine looks that marked numerous cinematic suffragettes, whether as caricatures or as more nuanced dramatic characters, were easily recognisable and connoted the widely debated "woman question". Meanwhile the practice of cross-dressing among female film characters did not signal a specific political, sexual, or in fact any shared identity. In comedies, their gender-crossing was usually strictly situational, and the odd specificity of the male identities that they adopted evoked the image of a masquerade. Cross-dressing earned them a somewhat charming "reputation for eccentricity", as in the case of Nelli Raintseva, and was generally received by the other characters as an innocent, witty play. In dramas, women characters mostly cross-dressed in order to set off on a hazardous adventure either for the sake of their future husband, or for a military feat. Their gender-crossing also did not mark a political or sexual identity and did not imply an option to continue living as a man after the success of their mission.

In this regard, the film *Nelli Raintseva* represents a remarkable case, and understanding the conventions of cross-dressing on screen can help to decipher it. Clearly a drama, it starts with the protagonist's funeral. However, it uses cross-dressing in a manner more characteristic of a comedy, as Nelli temporarily cross-dresses not for a daring journey but for the sheer pleasure of it and she basks in the admiration of her male cousins. This use of cross-dressing codes the protagonist's attempts to escape traditional femininity as merely a temporary act of dressing-up, thus illustrating her ultimate failure to adopt the identity of the New Woman. While characters like the doctor Koretskaia or the numerous independent stage performers of early cinema can leave behind the restrictive norms imposed on them by patriarchal society, Nelli can only toy with this idea in all the wrong ways – by trying her luck as a poet, a pianist, or by cross-dressing.

Cross-gender cast films featured actresses exclusively in the roles of young men and boys. Unlike analogous characters in US-produced films, female boys of the Russian Empire often embodied the ideal of "red-blooded" boyhood. Female performances of masculinity actively contributed to shaping the image of masculinity as such in the early cinema, as they had previously done in theatre. While most cross-cast screen performances were usually not commented on by the press, the casting of an actress as Dorian Gray caused a certain controversy. Indeed, while the complex figure of Dorian Gray does not naturally fit in the female boy canon, it did fit with Meyerhold's casting experiments in theatre and was an integral part of the film's innovative and unconventional appeal.

Encountering these cross-dressed performances more than a century after they were released onto screens in the Russian Empire, modern-day viewers can be easily misled into perceiving them as an open challenge to the gender norms of its time, an easily decipherable subversion or a bold protest. That, however, would rarely have been true in their own times, at least in the sense that would be meaningful for us today. And yet, these moving images of bodies crossing gender boundaries are an important element of the contours of gender expression at the dawn of cinema. Even if the examples of cross-dressing in these films were not intended to be interpreted as a manifestation of the characters' actual gender journey, their search for authenticity, or a genuine desire to explore their identity, they must nevertheless have served as a valuable visualisation of some intriguing possibilities

for those viewers who were receptive to them.

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Notes

[1] I borrow this term from Jack Halberstam (1998) who used it to refer to masculinities performed by female-bodied persons.

[2] Barkhatova, Mel'nikova, Esono 2019: 302.

[3] Kino-teatr.ru. https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/empire/9471/foto/722940/.

[4] In Khanzhonkov (1937: 51).

[5] *Velikii kinemo* 2002: 241.

[6] Vishnevskii's catalogue and the credits of Gosfil'mofond's film copy list the character played by Tat'iana Bakh as "the boy's sister". However, this is likely a mistake, as the film does not feature the boy's family. Bakh's character was probably meant to be the girl's sister.

[7] Khoroshilova (2021: 143).

[8] Most probably, this was Elizaveta Aleksandrovna Shabel'skaia-Bork, a Russian theatrical entrepreneur, actress and writer.

[9] Varavara Ianova was not the only actress who played Dorian Gray. Ulrike Ottinger cast Veruschka von Lehndorff for the part in *Dorian Gray im Spiegel der Boulevardpresse* / *Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press* (1984, West Germany).

[10] Image published in Kovalova (2019: 81).

[11] Uail'd (1906: 156).

[12] Barkhatova, Mel'nikova, Esono (2019: 57).

[13] Some of the English translations are taken from Morley (2003: 32–69).

Bio

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