External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Jevgenija Konoreva

"The Lacanian Concept of Sexuation as an Alternative to the Genderqueer Paradigm"

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filled in by:
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I. Brief summary of the dissertation

Konoreva's thesis examines, first, the limitations the researcher recognizes in what she calls the "genderqueer" paradigm, connected, in her account, to a fundamental aspect of the very structure of modernity, namely, the dimension of "publicity" in enunciation - an aspect that prevents feminist and queer movements from producing effective change, rather feeding into social phenomena of polarization and anxiety-production. As an alternative, the author examines the potential of Lacan's theory of sexuation, read specifically through the lenses of Russian psychoanalyst Alexander Smulyanskiy and his reading of sexuation as the "sexuated part of nonbiological" human life, a conception which should both expand the reach of Lacan's ideas and clarify alternative paths for a politics of "non-all", exemplified here by an analysis of "fanfic" literature.

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

This is an ambitious work: it seeks to pass a general judgement on a world-wide political movement, to re-evaluate the history of the appropriation of psychoanalysis through French and American filters, to introduce the ideas of Smulyanskiy to a broader international audience and to present its own alternative position in the debate on queer, feminist and trans politics. My evaluation is that the dissertation achieves some of these goals better than others - with a high degree of disparity in fact: though this is certainly not the intent of the author, the level of detail she can assign to her reading of queer theory and feminism is very low, resulting in a distorted picture that cannot be called anything but a dangerous scarecrow at points. Though this is certainly a product of the need to fit many other topics in the dissertation, the result is not on par with other better parts of the work, for example, her discussion of the history of psychoanalysis and critical theory on the West or her later analysis of Dora through Smulyanskiy's lenses.

I believe the core of the thesis does not reside in the critique of queer and trans feminist

politics - despite the author's suggestions and decision to frame the whole work as a response or "alternative" to it - and I think we can extract a really great contribution from this ambitious and uneven result. This shorter, to-the-point contribution - a proposal of how to read Lacan's theory of sexuation that has a clearer position regarding the relation between enunciation, speech and enjoyment - is very valuable and definitely deserves praise.

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

Before I address issues of structure, formal aspects, use of sources and ultimate contribution of the dissertation, I need to begin with a more general remark.

As anticipated in section II of this document, I have severe issues with the depiction of what has been called "genderqueer paradigm" in this dissertation. I do believe that this portrayal is the result of a pragmatic need to cut down source material, focus on specific problems of relevance and so on - all of which is fine! - but the *way* it has been carried out is, to me, the greatest problem of the project. As with any other political movement, I would already have a problem with the author making no distinction between the *academic theory* and the actual *political thinking,* so easily assuming that the former represents the latter, when this is often not true. The struggle of black people in Brazil cannot be reduced to books about it and requires engagement with properly political sources (showing problems, what measures and concrete strategies have been taken, concrete consequences, etc). Politics is always situated and making large abstract claims about the political state of the world requires many careful mediating steps. And the same is valid for the struggled of women and queer folk everywhere: there are only concrete struggles and these might get translated or captured by books and discourses, but surely they cannot be neatly packaged into the work of a few academics. So when a dissertation suggests to treat a whole "paradigm" without addressing this initial issue - the difference between the struggles and the theories that try to account for it - it is already hard to evaluate the merit of the critique that follows. In fact, I will return to this point because it points to one of the most serious reproaches I have for the work - which is not exploring the possibility that sexuation does not need to be an alternative to gender simply because *these concepts refer to different problems*. But we can only explore this if we retain space within the dissertation to address the actual problems and struggles that led to gender having gained traction as a category, and this was not the case.

But even if we skip the issue of how political struggles and academic writing relates, there is also the issue of the heterogeneity of theories that relate to queer and trans feminism - a very rich set of traditions, without a single source. Though Judith Butler is often the focus of the dissertation - which is a great focus to have! - the work often takes her as a representative of a whole paradigm! Once this reduction has happened, then criticizing Butler becomes a critique of the whole paradigm itself. This is not to say that the dissertation is not well researched: there are several interesting sources in its reconstruction of queer theory, though these are often collections of texts and not foundational texts. Here, I feel as an evaluator I

can make a choice: I can either assume that the author believes that there is really such a homogeneous field of queer studies that can be truly summarized by Butler's particular theory of performative identity or I can - more generously - invert the order of reasoning and assume that the core of the thesis was a debate with Butler that was *exaggerated* into a paradigmatic conflict. I prefer to assume the second position - otherwise we would need to revise, point by point, many claims of the dissertation about what feminists are looking for, about what is at stake in struggles for gender equality throughout the globe, etc, corrections which would serve to remind us that there is no way to just reduce these complex political movements around the world to a denunciation of one same inconsistency, but which, ultimately, do not contribute at all to the dissertation's main prepositive kernel.

My impression is that the so-called "genderqueer" movement plays no *effective* role in the dissertation: it is an example tailored to highlight the benefits of an "alternative" proposal - nothing singular is said about feminist struggles, the specifies of different queer theories, their history and, more importantly, the particular type of struggle and impasse they are answering to. It is simply wrong to claim that queer theory is an answer to the claim that "gender identity is a social construction" - it is rather an attempt to answer to real political problems such as the one we have in Brazil, the country that kills the most transgender people in the world. Everything else follows from real *political struggles* - with different degrees of success, for sure, but, as with every political movement in the world, often the best course-corrections come from inside the political struggle itself, while those of us who sit at the margins tend to point the finger to its faults denouncing a project that is doom to fail. At its worst, I think this dissertation sits at the margin - at its best, I think it proposes to think together with a political movement how to deal with its current impasses, but this "togetherness" is masked or obscured by a dismissive tone.

Now, a crucial feature that affects my evaluation of this aspect of the dissertation is that this way of dealing with political theory and political movements cannot be blamed on the author alone - it is rather a common feature of how us, psychoanalysts and analytic theorists, deal with politics regularly. It is almost a build-in feature of psychoanalytic discourse to feel as if we are in position to say something about the very structure of modernity, of how modern subjects think in general, of the "hysteric" character of whole political movements that are in fact demanding equal-pay, the lowering of feminicide and transphobic murders, a renewed concern with social reproduction and care, etc. The psychoanalytic theorist that drives the argumentation of the dissertation, Alexander Smulyanskiy, clearly works within this established paradigm himself, so it makes sense that this dissertation would also have to accept the "grammar" of making over-arching assessments of big political paradigms all at once. I do regret that, for all its great insights into shortcomings of other readings of Lacan and Freud, the present dissertation has not touched on this crucial impasse of our field.

I needed to make this long preamble to clarify a choice I have made as an evaluator. If I were to work under the hypothesis that the reading presented here of the queer and feminist movement is central to the thesis defended - that is, that the picture presented here of the

thinking of gender is a caricature not because of length restrictions, need to make contrasting arguments and the general psychoanalytic approach to politics, but because this is the view the author really wants to present - then I would have to reject every conclusion drawn in the work as well, for it would be built with a false problem in view. So I prefer to adopt the alternative position and assume that these other factors have contributed to such a restricted reconstruction of the complex panorama of queer and feminist positions - positions that matter in this work only insofar as they exemplify (a) how the university discourse works in modernity, according to Smulyanskiy and (b) how we need a theory of the "sexuated nonbiological part of sex" in order to get a better picture of the struggle against patriarchy today.

1. Structure of the argument

As I said before, this is a very ambitious project - and I think this is remarkable! I do think that the higher the mountain the researcher wants to climb, the better the path needs to be planned ahead. If we are going up a small hill we can just point to it and go there - but going up the Himalaia requires clear division of parts of the path. So it is *because* I respect the ambition to contribute to such large-scale conversation concerning how psychoanalysis might contribute to sexual politics today that I also evaluate with some harshness the way the path towards this contribution was thought out.

My basic problem with the structure of the argumentation is the one I have already mentioned in the long preamble to section III of this document: the role of the more or less scarecrow picture of "genderqueer" theory presented. My impression is that framing the dissertation as a debate with such a large "paradigm" was helpful as a contrast, but in actual argumentation it plays two separate roles: at points gender theory is treated as an example of deflated critical thinking, a product of modern American pasteurized neoliberal "transgressionism" with no political consequence, at others, specially in the figure of Judith Butler, it is treated as a powerful theory that in fact shaped political practice everywhere, and because the theory is shaky, the political movement itself would also be. It is either too frail, a product of neoliberal ideology, or too strong, as a theory that set the whole queer movement in the wrong direction.

Regarding the first argumentative use of genderqueer theory, which is mostly explored from chapters 1 to 5, I feel that the kernel of the argument did not concern the theory per se, but only an example of a phenomena that the dissertation claims to be widespread and general: political positions that trying to criticize, denounce or advance past some enemy, end up producing undesired effects that hinder its goals and display unthought libidinal attachments. The dissertation argues that this is an effect of modernity and often points to how feminists do not see the inconsistencies they fall prey to, which would stem from their reliance on poorly analyzed premises that are supported by this modern backdrop. The second use of the trope, which appears closer to the end of the dissertation, focuses especially on Butler's theory and is much more fruitful and to the point, it refers to concrete arguments made by

Butler and these are counterposed to Smulyanskiy's ideas in a helpful way. I often felt, when reading the last chapters, that the dissertation should have downplayed the initial assessment where queer feminism is so reductively treated and focused on this more concrete debate between Butler and Smulyanskiy's Lacan. I do not say this, again, to suggest the author should have had less ambition, but on the contrary, because this way more robust and solid steps would have been taken in the direction she is going.

But moving beyond the use of this contrasting paradigms in the argumentation, it is important to state that the dissertation is well-written and arguments and ideas are, most of the time, very clear. The caveat must be added though: clear to someone already involved with the discussion! Concepts by Lacan and Freud were introduced quite quickly and I am not sure if the idealized reader of the work is meant to be already well-versed in psychoanalysis or not. If not, then some clarification and slower-pace in introducing these ideas would be good, if yes, then I think the dissertation is clear and nicely concise when it comes to the Lacanian jargon. Where I did find something missing was in the way that Smulyanskiy's work was presented: I feel there might have been a missed opportunity here, since there aren't many discussions of his work outside of Russia (that I know of), a slower and more thorough presentation of some of his ideas would have been good!

Now, since the dissertation's objective is very broad, the complete line of reasoning that would have to be consistently presented by the conclusion is also very broad - and I do not believe it has been laid out in totally convincing fashion. The author would have had to show us (a) that it is true that the "genderqueer" paradigm is truly reducible to the traits she has presented (I already argued here against this), (b) that it is true that this can be accounted for by the diagnosis of modernity proposed by Smulyanskiy (I have serious problems with this too.. its quite striking that, in classic Lacanian fashion, almost nothing is said of capitalism in explaining what "modernity" is and how it is structured.. Descartes takes all the blame!), (c) that Smulyanskiy's theory is able to account for why queer theory, like all theories striving for social change in modernity, falls short of its goals (this is argued in ambiguous terms: sometimes it sounds like it is the fault of queer theory specifically, due to Butler's use of Austin and her reliance on intentionality, other times it sounds like every modern theory of change has the same problem!) and (d) that his theory of sexuation gives us a better take on the political impasses of the feminine (and here my problem is: along the way we lost track of the problems and struggles at stake in concrete queer politics and substituted them for the problems of "refashioning male desire", so how are we to assess if this new position is helpful, by its own standards or that of the political movement we just criticized?). This is a huge endeavour. So some parts of the argument are better presented than others and some parts are more convincing than others, due to the large leaps we are required to take in order to follow the general line of investigation. But one thing is for sure - and to me, it is the crucial point: I am convinced, by the end of it, that we should continue to think through the impasse of psychoanalysis' relation to queer theory and that we should take Smulyanskiy's contributions seriously into consideration. And to me that is enough of an objective for a

dissertation!

2. Formal aspects of the dissertation

I think the dissertation was very well-written and presented. Sources were clearly available, footnotes properly formatted (to the best of my knowledge) and I did not find any grammatical mistakes.

3. Use of sources and/or material

I have already mentioned my main problem in terms of the use of source material: the selectiveness in the characterization of queer theory, making it look as if it was incapable of recognizing its own shortcomings, as if it wasn't a highly plural and divergent field of debate and, especially, as if the actual questions and problems the movement deals with are theoretical and philosophical, and not practical and historical. But I do not believe the solution for this problem, in the scope of this dissertation, would have been more books, more references and sources, but rather less: a focus on the study of Butler as a particularly relevant representative of a *particular* strand in queer theory - a lot would have been dropped out, but what remains would have been lacking less!

Other than this, I think the dissertation is very well researched.

4. Personal contribution to the subject

I anticipated as a choice I made as an evaluator to stick with the hypothesis that the confrontation with the genderqueer paradigm is not an essential part of the work in question: it is not as an "alternative paradigm" that this dissertation should be measured if we are looking for its original contribution. I believe its originality lies in three points.

1) To introduce to a larger audience the work of Smulyanskiy, giving historical and conceptual context to his ideas. This is the most consistent original contribution, in my view.

2) To engage with Jacques Lacan's work while being aware of how French philosophy and, later, French Theory, is an ideologically ambivalent historical moment. I find this a crucial and very fruitful contribution of the dissertation, which opens up many doors of investigation, concerning how we might read Lacan without underlying commitments to his style, political choices or intellectual references. This contribution is not so consistently argued throughout the dissertation, though, but it was nevertheless a highlight in my opinion.

3) To try to remain attentive to the fact that even good political ideas produce "discontent" and unease amongst those that promote it - this third point is not consistently argued throughout the dissertation, but the moments that I liked the most were those where I felt this position was being maintained: to avoid idealized progressivism *and* conservative dismissals of political movements in favor of a realist and psychoanalytic-inspired defense that *to solve a problem is to create a new one*, hopefully a *better* problem. At points this is argued as a dismissive critique of feminist or queer politics, but sometimes it seemed rather a realist

recognition that political movements need to address their own unthought consequences - which can be quite anxiety inducing, but should not keep us from trying nonetheless.

IV. Questions for the author

Q1. How does capitalism and commodity-production relate to the picture of modernity and its structural impasses presented here?

Q2. How should we distinguish - if at all - feminism and "neoliberal" feminism? If we should, how do you account for the transformation of one into the other?

Q3. Do you feel like there is anything specific about the Russian historical experience that conditions the emergence of readings of Lacan such as Smulyanskiy's?

Q4. Smulyanskiy's reading of sexuation as "sexuated nonbiological part of sex" seems in close dialogue with later Lacan's theory of parletre and enjoyment-in-speech, with Zizek's theory of the real as an inherent impasse in the symbolic and Badiou's theory of love. Could you talk more about the difference and similarities between these three positions and then how Smulyanskiy differentiates himself from Badiou? Because Badiou is not interested in sexuation, but in love, while Smulyanskiy does not seem to talk about love (at least not in the texts mentioned here).

Q5. How does the clinic feature into Smulyanskiy's theory? The proliferation of other forms of sexuated enjoyment (such as reading) suggest that psychoanalysis is a broader type of theory than a clinical one?

Q6. Are other traditions of anti-patriarchal politics relevant to the debate of the dissertation or only Butler's? What about Marxist feminists that focus not on gender but on sexual division of labour and social reproduction theory? Or more contemporary trans feminists, such as McKenzie Wark?

V. Conclusion

I provisionally classify the submitted dissertation as **passed.**

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