

On Choosing “Or”: A Situated Response to *Heated Rivalry*

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A film or a streaming series is a prepackaged fantasy for group consumption. When screened, that fantasy interacts with the unconscious and conscious fantasies of the spectators—those individual fantasy templates the spectator brings into the theater or before their various screens generate often wildly divergent responses. The spectacular success of the Crave series, *Heated Rivalry*, is remarkable for the apparent uniformity of its enraptured audiences—all the more surprising given that this world audience incorporates subgroups long divided by sexual identities. This situation justifies a new form of critical response, one which includes myself as a sample case history in the reception of the series.

I write here in three modalities: as a scholar of film and visual culture; as a member of the rapt world audience; and as an older gay man whose modes of identification in viewing and readings of situations will diverge significantly from the general fan base. My decision to write from all three positions is a risk, and one I have not taken before as it threatens to compromise my professionalism with an indulgently subjective projection onto the text. However, I consider that text and the response it has elicited so significant in its affects and their sublimated politics that I need to take that risk in writing from an identified situated position, borrowing Donna Haraway’s term, “situated knowledge” that grounds the critical encounter in an ethically accountable epistemology (575-76). I begin rather audaciously, by attempting the kind of self-analysis Sigmund Freud risked in his letters to Wilhelm Fliess, to explicate my fascination, a fascination that also energizes my more conventional analytic engagements with the series.¹

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¹ For Freud’s self-analysis, see *Complete Letters* pp. 207-12, 449-51.

I. The Fantasy Anatomy of Hollander and Rozanov

Heated Rivalry follows the relationship of two hockey players, Shane Hollander, an Asian-Canadian man playing for Montreal and Ilya Rozanov, a Russian playing for Boston. They meet before they became professional, and their occasional sexual hook-ups lead to a real romance. There are any number of texts from manga to films that deal with male homoeroticism. Why would this one capture my attention so deeply? In asking myself that question, I discovered the components of their attraction for me. In reflecting on my investment in the principal characters of *Heated Rivalry*, I found myself revisiting both my childhood, my teenage years, and graduate school studies.

(I) Shane Hollander

Shane is Canadian-Asian. I grew up in inner city Buffalo, close to the Peace Bridge which linked the US and Canada. Canada always seemed the shining bastion of freedom. When the conservative ABC-TV affiliate, WKBW, refused to air *Dark Shadows* because it was too grim, and later *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, because it was too sexually frank, I could watch them on the closest local Canadian station, Channel 11, from Hamilton. Between the ages of 15-16, while still enduring bullying at school, I worked as a stockboy in a drugstore. I saved up my salary to take theater trips to Toronto. I bought package day trips that included roundtrip bus, lunch, and a matinee at the O'Keefe Center. There I saw Katherine Hepburn in *Coco*, Lauren Bacall in *Applause*, Ruby Keeler and Patsy Kelly in a revival of *42nd Street*, and Ann Miller in *Sugar Babies*. These trips were dazzling respites from the dreary streets of Buffalo through which I had to map potential escape routes from bullies both to and from school. As a Canadian, Shane embodied both the freedom and the refuge that Canada meant for me. As a Canadian-Asian, Shane looked like the people around me and my chosen family, as I have now happily lived in Asia for over twenty years.

(II) Ilya Rozanov

The fantasy valence of Rozanov is also dual, but here split between his given name and surname. Ilya names the focus of one of my earliest sexual

fantasies, although I had no name for it at the time. David McCallum played Ilya Kuryakin (Fig.1) in the NBC-TV series, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964-1968), which I watched faithfully for its entire run. For the first year, I mostly ignored Ilya's partner, Napoleon Solo (Robert Vaughn).



Fig 1. Ilya Kuryakin (David McCallum)

That changed one winter night as I hid under the covers to read a *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* novel, *The Thousand Coffin Affair*, in which a scene essentially paralyzed me with feelings I could not comprehend, that involved Napoleon Solo waking up stark naked in a giant bird cage. The fact that I can remember that so clearly is nearly as remarkable as how I have misremembered the conclusion of that scene all these years. Having found a copy of the novel on the Internet Archive I now realize my reconstructed memory functioned like the secondary revision of dreams Freud had identified.

The scene begins in Solo's dream of a naked woman (which I had entirely erased from memory), but when he tried to move in the dream, he woke up to find himself naked and caged:

He tried to stare down at himself.

He was hardly surprised to find that he too was naked; that he too was staring at his own knee-caps . . . His own lithe body of a hundred and eighty pounds was contorted and doubled like some fantastic pretzel not of his own making . . . imprisoned like some strange species of bird in [an] awesome cage of iron. (Avalone 72)

I remember Ilya Kuryakin freeing Solo from the cage, with Kuryakin not only seeing Solo in his nakedness, but having to touch his body quite intimately in helping him out and exercising his legs so that Solo could walk again. Nothing of the sort happened in the novel. Yet this is part of my fantasy attached to the name Ilya. From that time on, my fantasy incorporated Ilya's intimacy with Solo, seemingly foreshadowing Hollander and Rozanov (Fig. 2). Now decades later others have taken up the Kuryakin/Solo coupling with memes and carefully edited montages on YouTube.



Fig. 2 Kuryakin and Solo together

My association with the name Rozanov is slightly more professional. When writing my dissertation, I surveyed Symbolist poetry around the world. Although they did not make it into my manuscript, I spent significant time with the Russian Symbolists, both the older generation, exemplified by Innokenty Annensky, and the younger poets such as Alexander Blok and Andrei Bely. In reading them, I kept coming across the name, Vassily Rozanov, so I looked into him. He was a tremendous essayist with a powerful but completely undisciplined imagination. I was astonished at his rapturously lascivious speculations on forms of sexuality that he thought should empower if not subsume Christianity (Rozanov 58-63, 158-62). His audacity and his self-identification as an adept in a mystical sexuality reminds me of Ilya Rozanov's guiding Shane Hollander into secret ecstasies between hockey games. These associations comprise the fantasmatic excess these characters radiate for me, guaranteeing my fascination with their presence on screen.

II. *Heated Rivalry* as a Mini-History of Sexuality

The story runs from 2008 to 2014, a period where much of the world has accepted same-sex relations to varying degrees. However, the series becomes a *de facto* time machine, as the situations of Hollander and Rozanov harken back to earlier forms of oppression as well as stolen moments of clandestine joy.² Because I have been an active member of many gay communities across six decades, these resonances with a pre-Stonewall past are particularly lucid and affective for me. I “came out” essentially in 1972, joining the Mattachine Society, founded in 1950 by Harry Hay, the first “homophile organization” in the US. The inklings of gay activism in New York City scarcely made its way to the inner-city Buffalo of my youth, and Mattachine was a discreet social gathering that nevertheless risked police interference. There I met many gays and lesbians who had survived the 1940s and 1950s, which gave me a deeper appreciation of the histories of struggle.

Although *Heated Rivalry* takes place far later, Hollander and Rozanov were still desiring in secret under an oppressive regime. Discovery of their difference would be disastrous for their careers as professional athletes and would potentially end their market value for commercial endorsements. As a Russian citizen, Ilya would face an even grimmer future, subject to incarceration and even life-threatening, state-sanctioned anti-gay violence. This context reveals the courage even in their first moments of oblique flirting that had to remain so subtle it would maintain a deniability even to each other. When they take a break after working out in the gym, they sit opposite each other on the floor, sweating, with their legs open-a stance usually reflecting the male casual entitlement to take up space, but here it takes on a suggestion of offer,

² The in participating in the promotional campaign for *Heated Rivalry*, the actors, Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie went out of their way to remain physical intimate with each other and maintain a public flirting routine, while remaining coy about their actual sexuality. On Valentine’s Day, 2026, Williams disappointed many fans by admitting the rumors were true, that he had a girlfriend. The fact that he had to hide it is an ironic reversal of the plight of gay actors. Williams has come under fire from some who find his performative flirting a kind of gay baiting. I think more is going on here, compounded by other actors as well. Alexander Skarsgard engaged in similar faux-homoerotic displays in his promotion for *Pillion*. In his case, however, it seems that he was exploiting his appeal to gay men for his own narcissism. Presumed straight actor Paul Mescal has now played a gay romantic interest in two films, once opposite self-identified gay actors Andrew Scott. Their joint interviews did not indulge in the flirtation of Williams and Storrie; however, their on-screen chemistry carried over to a warm mutual respect in their joint appearances. All of these incidents seem to contribute to a post-modern throwback to a much earlier formation of homoeroticism. It was first in the late nineteenth century that homosexuality became a personality type. Prior to this, sodomy was a crime that any man might commit. See Foucault pp. 42-44.

of possible surrender, supported by their fingers touching as they pass the water bottle back and forth (Fig. 3).



Fig.3. Manspreading with a message

Their eyes risk more, the looks that could give the right signal to the right person could also be met with violence and exposure (Figs. 4-5). These attempts are as painful as they are hopeful as they have to maintain an ambiguity in an appeal that undermines its own aim.



Figs. 4-5. The eyes work overtime

Nothing happens until six months later when Rozanov joins Hollander in the locker-room showers. Hollander tries to hide his erection, but gives up after

seeing Rozanov's. Rozanov starts to masturbate as an invitation, but Hollander says, "not here," a directive that he will repeat in other contexts throughout the early episodes (Fig 6).



Fig. 6. Mutual exposure, another communication

Young gay men lived in terror of getting an erection in high school gym showers. One friend told me he would imagine the most gruesome car accidents with detailed gore in order to ward off his excitement. Another recited the table of elements. In this scene, the worst thing that could happen in the shower becomes the best thing to happen to both parties. This is why the scene has a particular affective power for the gay male viewer.

In the locker room, Hollander tells Rozanov he wants to forget what happened in the shower. Rozanov does not believe him, and one of the most erotic dialogues in the series ensues:

R: What is your room number?

H: 1410.

R: What if I come to your room number at, like nine o'clock?

H: I might open.

R: I might knock. (Fig 7.)



Fig. 7. Contact in the danger zone

This scene prompts me to risk a more blatant transgression of critical detachment. I do this not because my experience was so unique, but because it was not. It must have happened and still happens conceivably by the millions. Behavior in the locker room is strictly policed; communications deemed suspect will bring severe consequences whether or not the suspect is actually “guilty.”

When I was a freshman in high school, I began talking with Doug, a student in my mandatory swimming class. We both kept aquariums and loved tropical fish. After several such conversations, I showed Doug a poem I had written about the fish we loved, and wrote underneath the title, “For Doug.” There was nothing illicit about the poem. But those two words ruined my entire high school career. He immediately showed it to the swimming class and even the teacher. I was beaten up that afternoon, and it began three years of harassment so severe I had to find places to hide to eat lunch because the cafeteria was too dangerous. I skipped school frequently, and just as frequently got suspended for doing so. By sophomore year I was directed to weekly mandatory sessions with a psychologist, and in my second week of my senior year I was expelled for being “a detriment to the morale of the school.”³ Hollander’s and Rozanov’s exchange would have been unimaginable at the time, and even seeing it now is a bittersweet vindication, no less powerful for being imaginary.

³ For a more detailed account of the consequences, see Earl Jackson, “Oxydol Poisoning.” “Oxydol Poisoning” with a scene restored that was excised in the Routledge version can be found in the Pseudopodium version.

III. Sex as an Appetite

Almost as important as their eventual sexual encounter is the tension both endure on the way: Hollander in his hotel room watching the clock, and Rozanov in the elevator watching the floor numbers climb. The sexual encounter itself was a miracle for them both, a rare moment neither one could be sure it would be repeated. This was the experience of so many gay men from older times who had to trust encoded glances hitting the right note for the right men who may have passed through their lives at random, glances that could have just as easily brought disaster. But when Hollander and Rozanov were alone in the room for the first time, their bodies exalted, since repression is also an aphrodisiac and any successful evasion of the policing of sex was a celebration, however tentative.

Many viewers in Facebook fan pages describe the relationship as “love at first sight.” This is definitely not the case. A full appreciation of the dynamics of the series requires a clear distinction among: sex, love, and desire. Sex is an appetite; love is an emotion; desire will take further explanation. Freud explains that the drives lean on an instinct because the drive has to look like something (“Three” 179-81). The sexual drive leans on hunger; Hollander and Rozanov demonstrate how that drive borrows the urgency of hunger. Their pursuit of satisfaction, however, reverses the drive’s aims: hunger preserves life while their appetite risk theirs. The first two episodes of *Heated Rivalry* focuses on sex as appetite, and gives it the respect it deserves. Love comes more slowly, and it is resisted more fervently by both parties given what recognizing it would mean to each of them.

The focus on sex itself in the respective stages in the lives of Hollander and Rozanov makes perfect sense here. It is also what draws the misplaced ire of even usually enlightened media. Take, for example, the review in *The Guardian*, beginning with the headline: “These Physically Perfect People Have So Much Sex It’s Tedious” (Mangan). Such a judgment is redolent with heterosexual entitlement and condescension. First of all, months and even years pass between sexual encounters. And secondly, these encounters are vital moments in the sexual lives of two men under tremendous pressure and scrutiny. Their opportunities depicted in a condensed temporality concern psychological survival. I doubt that these scenes are tedious to the population who remember how much was at stake in such moments even in passing. Furthermore, I doubt

that the heterosexual women watching fast forwarded through these scenes. In the 1980s in San Francisco, among the most frequent consumers of gay male porn videos were lesbians. One lesbian friend explained that heterosexual porn seemed oppressive. “Lesbian” porn was a fake show for straight men, but gay male porn celebrated sex as sheer pleasure. Perhaps the sexual interludes in *Heated Rivalry* offer the same alternatives for the heterosexual woman viewer.

Even as the emotions deepen, *Heated Rivalry* continues to illuminate aspects of sex as appetite in its more visceral manifestations. At the risk of overreading, I found one text exchange in Episode Two remarkable as the frankness of its focus on the sexual appetite occurs across subliminal linguistic and cultural differences:

R: “If Boston wins this round I get to fuck you next fall, deal?”
 H: “And what do I get if Montreal wins?”
 R: “Same thing.”

Many people online interpreted “Same thing” as “vice versa.” I see this exchange, however, as Russian humor translated into English. Russian jokes often parody imbalances in power dynamics. Moreover, if this dialogue were translated into Russian, “Same thing” would be “То же самое.” Meaning: “the same results—I get to fuck you.” If he meant “vice versa” it would be “И наоборот.” Of course, there is nothing unfair in the deal that ensures the same result, as it reflects both Rozanov’s and Hollander’s complementary sexual preferences (Fig. 8).

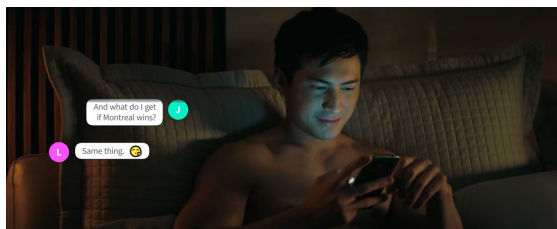


Fig. 8. Hollander’s arousal over the terms of the deal

In Episode Four, Hollander makes a mistake that many gay men under various forms of oppression and despair make: they attempt a relationship with

a woman, thus at least doubling the number of people that will suffer. Both Svetlana (Ksenia Daniela Kharlamova) and Rose Landry (Sophie Nélisse) are collateral damage in the sanctioned rituals of compulsory heterosexuality, although each of them is savvier than many less fortunate women in similar situations. In Episode Five, Rose confronts Hollander on his likely homosexuality, not out of anger but out of concern. In attempting to characterize Hollander's situation, she makes an inadvertently lurid analogy, likening him to "a square peg in a round hole." When Rose asks him if he had ever been with another guy, the film cuts to a montage of intimate moments with Rozanov that overwhelms Hollander, and in that state, he confesses: "Thing is, I'd rather be the hole than the peg." In other contexts, this would come off as vulgar oversharing, but he says this so innocently, his words come from his own wonder at his self-discoveries, as if his body were a Maserati and he had just read the owner's manual.

IV. Distinctions: Sex, Love, Desire

To return to the differences among appetite, love, and desire, I will assume love has been dealt with sufficiently and focus on the other two: just as the sex drive leans on hunger, desire leans on love, but like the sex drive, desire extends beyond the emotion it both occupies and bypasses. There are at least two psychoanalytic conceptions of desire, and I will give brief descriptions of each. Either one can be discerned in *Heated Rivalry*, which reveals another one of the strengths of the series: it is open to options both in affect and association—which is one reason I can share the same intensity of enthusiasm for the series with a heterosexual housewife from Idaho and a straight male weekend hockey player from Winnipeg (actual fans who post regularly on dedicated chat groups).

One theory of desire is best described in Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis in "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality." They situate the beginning of sexuality with a foundational fantasy the infant deploys marked by thumb sucking. When the infant feels hunger the infant recognizes it as a need for the breast. In terms of the instinct, the pressure of hunger leads to the satisfaction of the milk ingested and rendered to the workings of the digestion. But the infant longs for the sensual pleasure of the contact of mouth and breast, the warmth of the milk over lips and gums, the body-to-body contact with the mother. The fantasy object therefore becomes an identification of the physical

pleasure of the breast and the real satisfaction of hunger, a hybrid object that does not exist, whose non-existence inaugurates an unconscious career of pursuing a potentially infinite number of substitutes, that project being desire itself (Laplanche and Pontalis 11-12).

Jacques Lacan also describes the infinite substitutability of object; however, he attributes it to the object in question being originally the object of another's desire:

The object of man's desire . . . is essentially an object desired by someone else. One object can become equivalent to another, owing to the effect produced by this intermediary, in making it possible for objects to be exchanged and compared. This process tends to diminish the special significance of any one particular object, but at the same time it brings into view the existence of objects without number. ("Some reflections" 12-13)

Later Lacan would shift this radically to claim, that the desire is the desire for the Other's desire (Fink 9-16).

Cinema has offered various representations of each of these phases of appetite, desire, and love, although they are often difficult to isolate. Ironically looking for sex as pure appetite in commercial pornography is a red herring as the sexual encounters are done for the camera and the economics of the industry. A more lucid study occurs in Federico Fellini's *Fellini's Casanova* (1976) a deliberately artificial portrait of Giacomo Casanova played by a badly dubbed Donald Sutherland. Casanova's sex life is exposed in the monotony of his serial obsessive conquests. The film in fact critiques Casanova's phallic entitlement for its demeaning of an otherwise vital appetite. John Dahl's *The Last Seduction* (1994) scandalized the spectator with Linda Fiorentino as a woman who both recognized sex as an appetite and acted on it unapologetically. *Heated Rivalry*, by contrast, showcases the appetite as a valid human reality under extraordinary social pressures.

Wong Kar-wai may be the poet laureate of desire. In *Chungking Express* (1994), Officer He Zhi Wu (Kaneshiro Takeshi) is in denial all through April that his girlfriend May has broken up with him. He buys a can of pineapple every day with a May 1st expiration date, to count down to his imagined reunion which is also his birthday. But he actually fetishizes May's absence through his

purchases and lives within his desire unrestrained by any satisfaction. He shifts that desire to the mysterious woman (Brigitte Lin) whom he encountered one evening during her escape from the mob, holding on to her birthday message. Although Ho Po Wing (Leslie Cheung) and Lai Yu Fai (Tony Leung Chiu Wai) in *Happy Together* (1997) had been lovers in a stormy relationship, it was only after the definitive break and Lai Yu Fai's return to Hong Kong, that Ho Po Wing, alone in Buenos Aires, fully realized his desire, crystalized in the souvenir lamp of Iguazu Falls the pair had attempted to visit but never found.

In this survey, I had omitted love, not because it is self evident but because I prefer to trace its complexities in *Heated Rivalry*.

V. Contingencies

There are two large categories of gay men: gay men, like Hollander and Rozanov whose situations limit their opportunities for sexual contact and even more so a relationship as commonly defined; and gay men in urban settings or adept at the internet for whom sex is virtually always at hand. These divergent groups, however, share a need to negotiate terms of contact over time. At first Hollander and Rozanov agree that their hook-ups are just that, and anything else would be difficult if not impossible to maintain. However, their arrangement was subject to three contingencies: technology, physiology, and geopolitics.

In Episode One, before any actual sexual contact, Rozanov manipulated the social technology of celebrity culture to construct a fantasy for the fans that would also bring Hollander into his own fantasy. In Toronto Rozanov was chosen for a promotional photo series and he asked for Hollander to be included. The scene shows countless takes and retakes of the two in hockey gear skating into a face-off. The faux intensity eventually resulted in the men breaking out in laughter; however, the photos become the mass-produced fantasy for the fictional fans, another step toward intimacy between Hollander and Rozanov, and the prototype for the emblematic image series itself (Figs. 9-10). Thus, the viewers are interpellated into the fantasy as well.



Fig. 9. The fictional production of the hockey fantasy



Fig 10. The packaged fantasy

Although their meetings were months-even a year apart, the men kept steady contact through text messages, Hollander as “Jane” and Rozanov as “Lily.” The texts were mostly sexually explicit and jocular; however, they become vital connections as even the most blatant messages become a form of affection and clandestine reassurance-secret even to themselves on how meaningful they prove to be.

Physiology takes over the night that Rozanov and Hollander engage in penetrative sex for the first time, after talking about it and anticipating it for so long. The scene itself takes its time and does not shy away from the nuances.

Before this, sex had been either oral or mutual masturbation, which maintains an exteriority to the person. But penetrative sex involves surrender, invasion, and a cohabitation of both bodies. Both men are clearly changed by the experience (Fig 11). However, the afterglow they share scares Rozanov and he leaves abruptly.



Fig. 11. A boundary crossed registers affection and anxiety.

Geopolitics compounds the difficulties between the men with the Sochi Winter Olympics. Hollander and his teammates are there, and their disorientation suggests a kind of Cold War hangover, that also makes contact between Hollander and Rozanov impossible. Meanwhile Rozanov is subjected to enormous familial pressures from his father and brother, on top of the sociopolitical pressures while playing in Russia. As a result, Rozanov shuts down and refuses to relate to Hollander, knowing he could not understand what Rozanov is going through and they do not communicate for several months thereafter. While their precarious relationship concretizes a sexual politics, that relationship is also conditioned by micro- and macro-politics that only one of them fully appreciates.

The men reconcile during an awards ceremony in which Rozanov wins Most Valuable Player. Their professional competitiveness becomes the venue for a mutual seduction with Hollander taking charge. Hollander is on a bed in only underwear while Rozanov still in tuxedo sits in a chair directly across from the bed. Rozanov asks, “Do you want to know what it feels like?” in a seductive voice. “What feels like?” Hollander replies. “Holding the trophy,” Rozanov

answers and makes orgasmic sounds. Hollander then removes his underwear, throws it at Rozanov and keeps his legs open defiantly. Rozanov is thunderstruck, looking, enthralled at Hollander's maneuver, which I have described elsewhere as "victorious surrender" (Jackson, "Sincerity" 59-60) (Fig. 12).⁴



Fig. 12. Professional competition and seduction

The dynamics between the men can no longer be reduced to appetite; however, neither one of them is willing to rename what is happening. This brings me back to the question of the negotiation. In Episode Four, Hollander visits Rozanov's new luxury house. After sex, Rozanov persuades him to spend the night, and in the morning, he makes them tuna melts. The new dimension of domestic intimacy makes Rozanov's discussion of the women he likes all the more painful for Hollander. After sex on the couch that Hollander initiated, when they call each other by their first names for the first time, Hollander decides he has to break ties. The implicit contract they had based on sex no longer applies, however Rozanov does not understand this. The imbalance is too painful for Hollander and he leaves.

Harry Lighton's *Pillion* (2025) features a dominant-submissive relationship between Ray (Alexander Skarsgård) and Colin (Harry Melling). Such a relationship has a far more explicit contract than that of Hollander and Rozanov; however, there are illuminating parallels. For most of the film, Colin submits completely to Ray's rules. This includes sleeping on the bedroom floor

⁴ The free version of this article can be found on Chris Komater's website. See Jackson, "The Sincerity of Perversion: Chris Komater's Generosity of Exposure." *Chris Komater*, 2025.

and doing all domestic work, etc. At one point, Colin cannot tolerate it and rebels. Surprisingly, Ray agrees to having an entire day as a couple in an equal status. They go to the movies, go shopping, relax in the park. Both seem to enjoy it entirely; however, the next day Ray disappears entirely. For him, the breach of the contract was too much, and perhaps the contract itself had protected him from whatever feelings that arose on that last day. Conversely, Hollander suffers from the implicit contract being too vague; he frequently asks Rozanov what he wants from him, a question that remains unanswered, if not unanswerable. Hollander leaves when he recognizes his own feelings have exceeded their negotiations, while Rozanov does not understand what he also loses from the unanswered questions. It is after this break-up that Hollander experiments with the relationship with Rose. That news hits Rozanov hard, which begins a process of coming to terms with feelings that the original agreement did not anticipate.

Even when Hollander and Rozanov reunite in Florida, and Hollander admits that Rose is only a friend, Rozanov reiterates the original understanding that they merely hookup for sex. Although he admits that their recent times together have been special, Rozanov is adamant that, “We cannot be something.” When Hollander presses, Rozanov reminds him he could “never go home again.” “Because of your family?” Hollander asks. “Because Russia, Hollander” is the reply. Again, macropolitics intrude into the already imbalanced negotiations.

VI. Desire as an Appeal

Isolating desire in *Heated Rivalry* is difficult because it goes from an entanglement in appetite to an entanglement in the resistance to love. After his father’s death, Rozanov returns to Moscow for the funeral and has a final falling out with his brother. The situation is so traumatic for him he realizes that the enormity of his feelings may have other causes, but at this realization he reaches the limits of the available language he and Shane have in common. Shane suggests he speak in Russian—that it might help even though Shane would not understand. Rozanov’s monologue is deservedly widely discussed, but a fuller appreciation of the scene requires understanding how Shane is listening with his entire personhood.

While Ilya is a foreigner in North America, Shane’s status also has complications. He is Canadian-Asian, which leads to awkward situations. The

day he was signed to the Montreal team, the owner emphasized how “proud” he was to “break the ceiling” by hiring Shane as an Asian, much to the discomfort of both Shane and his mother standing next to him. Shane also lives in the bilingual regions of Canada, and therefore experiences other forms of linguistic marginalization. That marginalization, however, is turned against him during a French-language interview, when the reporter asks him how he feels about being “compared to Tiger Woods and Serena Williams.” This background informs Shane’s listening to Ilya in Russian.

Rozanov pours his heart out in Russian about his family’s abuse, his conflicted feelings about his father, his loneliness, and he seems to realize while speaking that he is in love with Shane: “Так сильно тебя люблю. Я не знаю, что с этим делать.” (“I love you so fiercely. I don’t know what to do about it.”)⁵ The adverb “сильно” (“strongly”) is often used to describe the intensity of a pain. And Rozanov’s declaration of love also admits that he does not know what to do, a far cry from his declaring it impossible.

Of course, Shane does not understand, but the communication is deep in that it was Shane’s suggestion and it opened something up in Ilya. That appeal through phone lines in a language Ilya knows will not be understood, and Hollander eliciting that speech and listening in rapt attention without understanding the words form a perfect illustration of the workings of desire across and around ordinary standards of coherence. This connection serves as a kind of healing from the long-time unanswered question, “What do you want from me?” However, this moment still ends in an impasse. Ilya confesses his love in a language that keeps it secret, and he remains suspended between a longing and its supposedly impossible resolution.

VII. Choosing “Or”

Episode Three turns from Hollander and Rozanov to another potential romance underway between New York City hockey star Scott Hunter (François Arnaud) and the neighborhood barista, Kip Grady (Robbie Graham-Kuntz). They first meet when Scott stopped in a café after jogging and was clearly taken with Kip and Kip’s secret addition to his smoothie. His frequent stops became more flirtatious and when the two met at an event where Kip was a waiter, Scott

⁵ The translation herein is my translation.

invited him to dinner. When the line at the restaurant proved too long, he suggested they go back to his place and call for take-out.

Unlike Rozanov and Hollander, Scott and Kip's first night together soon led to a relationship. But even this relationship required an understanding that Scott had to keep his sexuality a secret which meant he could not join in any of Kip's social engagements or even meet Kip's friends. This arrangement lasted quite a while. Eventually, Kip could not continue the secrecy and broke things off. Scott ends up looking in a bar window where Kip and his friends are celebrating his birthday and his fellowship to graduate school.

In Episode Five, time has passed, and Scott is in a playoff game. Scott and Kip have not reconciled, but Kip is in the audience. When Scott's team wins the game, and Scott wins the trophy, he invites a startled Kip down onto the ice. He declares his love for him, and they kiss in front of the world. This is a sociotechnological event of great importance to two viewers a thousand miles apart. Shane was watching the game with his parents in Ottawa, and Ilya was watching in Boston. The sequence orchestrates camera, screens, and looks, serving as a multi-dimensional variation on Lacan's mirror stage.

According to Lacan, when a child is between six and eighteen months old, it recognizes itself in the mirror. Although the infant is still uncoordinated, it sees itself as an integrated totality it has not yet achieved (Lacan, *Ecrits* 95-96). What is often overlooked, however, is the other agency in the schema. The child is not alone but held by a caregiver, presumably the mother. In the healthiest version of this scenario, the mother is looking at the child with love. The child will see the mother's look directly but it will also see itself in the mirror as the object of that look. It is with this nexus of looks the child forms a self-image in a foundational narcissism.

Let us adapt this scenario to the scene on the ice. The cameras in the stadium transmit the image of Scott and Kip; Scott confesses his love for Kip, which Kip echoes. Their looks at each other are saturated with that love. The camera revolves around them and that revolution is intercut with shots of Shane looking at his screen and Ilya looking at his. Both men know what Scott and Kip are feeling. Scott and Kip's looks of love at each other are broadcast to Shane and Ilya whose situated knowledge triggers responses that draw on their respective histories of appetite, love and desire. Ilya calls Shane and says, "I'm coming to the cottage," something he had declared impossible. The image that

prompts the change is still beyond Ilya's and Shane's capacity to achieve, but they move on the specular evidence of what is possible.

Looking back at the first stage of Scott's and Kip's romance is enlightening. The night that Scott opted for takeout, he left Kip in the living room momentarily. As Kip looked around, Scott reappeared, shirtless and asked, "Would you like the tour now, or . . . ?" Kip replied, "Or. I pick or," which led to their first sexual encounter. Although their embrace on the ice is the climactic moment, I would like to conclude by appreciating the innovative grammar of Kip's response that first night. Of course, in context, his answer is not remarkable, he simply opts for sex before the house tour.

The sentence itself, however, exemplifies the decision a gay man makes to claim a sexuality that had not even been offered as a valid alternative. "I choose 'or'" transgresses grammar as its declaration transgressively opts out of compulsory heterosexuality. The "or" is no longer a mere coordinating conjunction, but a noun representing both a world of possibilities and a claim to them. That "or" leads to the moment that allowed Ilya to claim his own version of an "or" until then outside of his psychological grammar. That "or" in the series is a tribute to those who braved that agrammatical leap and those who may be empowered to do so.

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