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Queer Mysticism: Elisàr von Kupffer and the androgynous reform of art

The dynamic rapport between science, psychology, esotericism, and sexuality that characterized cultural production at the turn of the 20th century began to be recognized in the 1980s.¹ This emergent scholarly literature, however, tended to focus on French and Belgian contexts, omitting the contradictions found in parallel movements, such as those in Germany.² The artistic and theoretical practice of the Estonian born German artist Elisàr von Kupffer (1872–1942) and his long-term companion philosopher Eduard von Mayer (1873–1960), is representative of an alternative approach to sexuality and spirituality in the period.³ The historiography of von Kupffer and von Mayer’s practice is complex. Studied broadly as an example of gay art,⁴ French philosophers of the 1970s typically focused on the utopian dimensions of their work.⁵ More recently, Fabio Ricci examined the ways in which their textual and artistic production engaged with monist and esoteric philosophies as well as German nationalism.⁶ This article aims not only to synthesize these approaches, but also to explore the impact of contemporary ideas about the reform of masculine identity, particularly in von Kupffer and von Mayer’s use of the mythical metaphor of androgyny. Through their artistic and philosophical program called

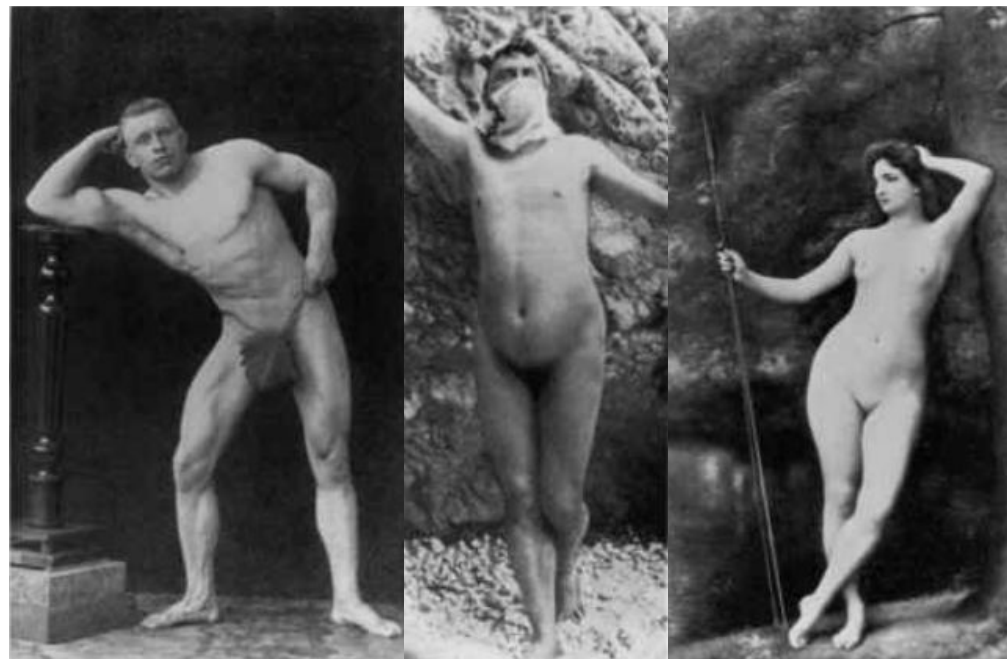
Clarismus, von Kupffer and von Mayer sought to create a utopian ideal where male “over”-sexuality was deactivated. At the intersection of esotericism and the dreamed antique, their proposal of an alternative male sexuality can thus be considered as an example of what I call “queer mysticism.”⁷ A trans-historical aesthetic system, “queer mysticism” combines the decompartmentalization of male and female genders and religious iconography. The goal of this utopian visual program is an asexual vision of human sexuality, a “queering” of dominant models that used the mystical metaphor of androgyny.

Evolutionism, degeneration and the body’s reform

The crisis of *Kulturkampf* in the 1880s, or the “fight for the ideal society,”⁸ was colored by the tensions between nation and religion, by the conflict of the imperial chancellor Otto von Bismarck versus the representatives of the Roman Catholic Church. Attempting to bridge this struggle, a number of new cultural movements arose that sought to reintegrate national unity and metaphysical beliefs. These movements, called *Jugendbewegung* (youth move-

ments), also tried to challenge the cultural and material conditions of the bourgeoisie. Faith in pagan forms of religion offered adherents a model to radically change their lifestyles while simultaneously searching for the authentic values of a utopic Germany. The *Wandervogel* (the migrants, or walking youths), the *Wagnervereine* (an association for Wagnerian festivals), and the *Lebensreform* (health reformers) all promoted a return to nature inspired by the philosophy of monism, which argued for the primordial unity of all things.⁹ This cultural context was extremely important for the German artists and writers who gathered at the margins of official practices. Monistic syncretism was intrinsically allied with naturalistic paganism and the political reform of society – a real critique of the materialistic bourgeois culture, a *KulturKritik*.¹⁰

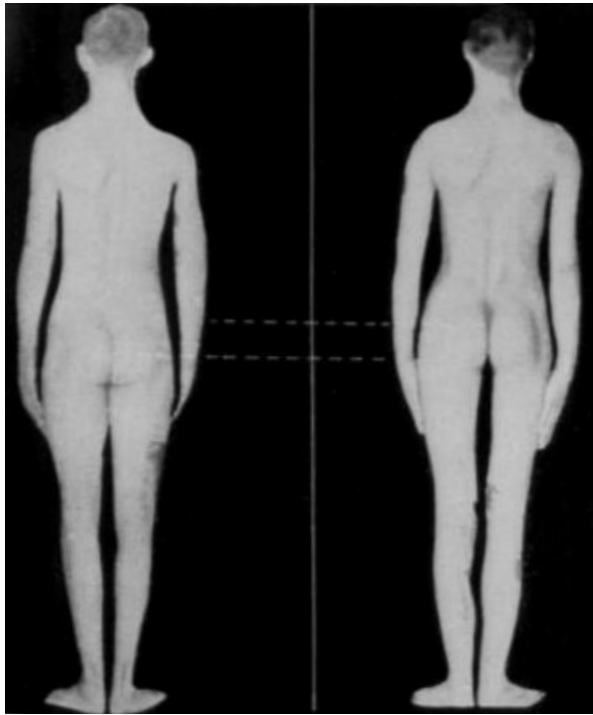
The monist biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), who championed positivism and denounced the Catholic Church during the crisis of *Kulturkampf*, was highly regarded by the *Jugendbewegung*, particularly for his ideas about nature, metaphysics, and the birth of the nation. In line with Romantic ideals, Haeckel advanced the principle of primordial unity through the observation of natural phenomenon, rejecting the dualistic principle of Platonic philosophy. Connecting nature and nation, he considered unity to be the primary element of biology and the essence of the German people. For the origins of human life, Haeckel proposed the famous “Recapitulation theory,” wherein the embryonic stage not only encompassed life’s diversity and the Spirit, but also concentrated all the physical and chemical phenomena seen in the world (water, air, light, etc.).¹¹ In the growth of the embryo, moreover, the processes of evolution were made manifest (ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny). This classification of species was developed in Haeckel’s *Anthropogeny: Or, the Evolutionary History of Man*,¹² which took Darwinian ideas about the



inequality of the species and expanded it to include the inequality of the races. An evolutionary monism that greatly influenced Pangermanism and, later, National-socialism, Haeckel’s theories were also widely accepted by the pseudo-religious movements of the *Jugendbewegung*, particularly nourishing the romantic and nationalist ideas of the *Völkisch*. Through the search for the exceptional origins of the German people, their mystical and Teutonic roots, the *Völkisch* sought to virilize German culture: “Volk signifies the union of a group of people with a transcendental “essence”. (...) It was fused to man’s innermost nature, and represented the source of creativity, his depth of feeling, his individuality and his unity with other members of the Volk.”¹³

1 “Classification of homosexuals as a natural third sex situated between man and woman,” in *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, vol.5 (1) (Leipzig 1903), 128–129.

Haeckel’s evolutionary monism also had a distinct influence on psychopathological studies, the development of which intensified at the turn of the century. Nourished by contemporary discourses on the physical and moral degeneration of man, this growing corpus of literature tended to focus on male sexuality, placing white heterosexual men at the top of the biological pyramid. Pathologies, therefore, were observed through deviation from this norm.¹⁴ The



Verhältnis der Oberlänge zur Unterlänge des menschlichen Körpers.			
Oberlänge in Prozenten der Oberlänge	Fälle	Heterosexuelle	Homosexuelle
84 — 86	220	prozent 5,2	prozent —
87 — 90		8,0	—
91 — 93		10,0	1,4
94 — 96		55,8	2,5
97 — 99		23,8	5,9
100 — 102		15,0	11,4
103 — 105		6,2	23,2
106 — 108		—	22,5
109 — 111		—	18,2
112 — 114		—	8,0
115 — 117		—	5,2
118 — 120		—	0,4
121 — 123		—	1,8
124 — 126		—	1,4

Durchschnittsgröße	169 cm	170 cm
Verhältnis der Oberlänge zur Unterlänge im Durchschnitt	100 = 93	100 = 105

criminalization of sexual acts between men, made famous by Bismarck's paragraph 175 published in 1871, intensified the debates on sexual psychopathology and precipitated theories on homosexuality.¹⁵ The journalist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895) was the first to explain the specific mechanisms of sexual attraction between members of the same sex, which he called “urning.”¹⁶ In his proposal, the homosexual male had inverted sexual poles, meaning he had the soul of a woman within the body of a man. This was explained by the supposed effeminacy of the homosexual. Imagined as a kind spiritual hermaphroditism, Ulrich's idea was based on the principle that sexual attraction could only result from the desire for reproduction, the union of differently sexed individuals being at the filial origins of the human species. The study of human evolution was therefore tied to growing anxieties about sex, which were often expressed by the systematic observation of anatomies and anomalies, especially in cases of physical hermaphroditism. Ulrichs' concept of the homosexual's hermaphroditic spirit was later adopted by Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902) and used to explain sexual perversion and the signs of degeneration. These ideas also appeared in the anti-Semitic and antifeminist pamphlet *Sex and Character* written by Otto Weininger (1880–1903) in 1903.¹⁷

2 “Body measurements in homosexuals established by Dr. A. Weil Hirschfeld,” *Geschlechtskunde auf Grund dreissigjähriger Forschung und Erfahrung bearbeitet*, vol.4, (Stuttgart: J. Püttmann, 1926-1930), 521.

3 “Body measurements in homosexuals established by Dr. A. Weil Proportion of length of upper to lower part of the body”, *Geschlechtskunde auf Grund dreissigjähriger Forschung und Erfahrung bearbeitet*, vol.4 (Stuttgart: J. Püttmann, 1926-1930), 522.

At the turn of the century, defenders of the homosexual could also be found. The sexologist and committed monist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935) founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee (Wissenschaftlich-humanitäre Komitee, WhK) in order to fight the persecution inflicted by the application of paragraph 175 and the ideologies of men like Ulrichs. Hirschfeld proposed the hypothesis of “intermediate sexualities,” which opened gender and sex to non-heteronormative expressions. Particularly interesting for this article is Hirschfeld's concept of the third gender, which can be understood as a response to the threats constituted by the indeterminacy of homosexuality. Using physiognomic classifications and anthropometric measures, inherited from the criminological school of Alphonse Bertillon and the treaties of Gaspard Lavater, Hirschfeld created a unique anthropological study based on the classical canons of virile muscled man and procreative woman (figs. 1–3).¹⁸ The system lacked strict binaries, however, and allowed Hirschfeld to isolate cases of “gynosphygie” and “androsphygie,” morphologies that were assigned to the homosexual.¹⁹ Key identifiers were the level of the hips and the size of the pelvis, which differentiated the homosexual body from that of the heterosexual and tied it to both feminine characteristics and the body of the adolescent. Hirschfeld's final result was the *Sexualwissenschaftlicher Bilderatlas zur Geschlechtskunde*²⁰ (The Visual and Scientific Atlas of Sexualities) published in 1932. In addition to defining the homosexual morphologically, this text also associated the artistic temperament with intermediate sexualities, an idea that was colored by recent discoveries in sexual psychology. Section 21, for example, was dedicated to understanding the “unconscious narcissistic component in artistic production (...).”²¹ Hirschfeld not only gathered together self-portraits of Italian masters like Raphael, Andrea Del Sarto, and Botticelli, but also two pieces by

von Kupffer: *Der Neue Bund*²² (The New Covenant) from 1915/16 and *Amor Dei Victoria*²³ (Love of Victory) from 1917. Directly inspired by the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis, which regarded the homosexual as an individual suspended in the narcissistic stage,²⁴ Hirschfeld was attempting to read artists' biographies through their paintings. For him, both the body and its artistic expressions broadcast sexuality and psychology, a branding of the homosexual individual that paradoxically marginalized those he sought to redeem.

The “araphrodite”: an idealistic counter-model

Elisar von Kupffer and Eduard von Mayer were fully conversant with and engaged in the scientific and political contexts described above. Although they both grew up in Eastern Europe, von Kupffer and von Mayer were strongly connected to the rest of the continent, with Germany having a special meaning for each. For example, in his autobiography,²⁵ von Kupffer “revealed” a semi-fantastical, doubly aristocratic ancestry: first from the god Apollo, because his birthplace at Sophiental in Estonia was on the same meridian as Delos (“Apollo island, creator of light”²⁶), and second from his biological family. His father, the doctor Adolf von Kupffer, was the descendant of a German aristocratic family with origins in the 16th century. Enrolled at the German school of Saint Anne in Saint Petersburg, von Kupffer met his future companion Eduard von Mayer, a Russian national who was deeply engaged in the study of German philosophical pessimism.²⁷ Von Kupffer's first play also had Germanic associations, being deeply connected to the Wagnerian movement. *Die toten Götter*²⁸ (The Dead Gods) presented an idealistic hero (like Parsifal) searching

for a sacred crusade. This hero's cause was meant to lead him across the medieval and erotic universe, just as Wagnerian mysticism spread over Europe.²⁹

Arriving in their beloved Germany in 1894, von Kupffer and von Mayer immediately found inspiration in the *Jugendbewegung* movements, which privileged the cult of masculine beauty. Amongst these groups, the image of the Greek Antique was becoming a new aesthetic ideal, where gymnastics and outdoor collective sports were being used to develop courage and bravery and negotiate sociability between men.³⁰ The ideal of Greek beauty allowed the *Jugendbewegung* to bridge their moral principles and their ideas regarding the health of men, the body, and the nation. This call for antiquity was also taken up by German Realist painters, such as Max Klinger (1857–1920) and Ludwig von Hofmann (1861–1945), whose careers marked the education of von Kupffer while he attended the Royal Academy of Art in Berlin. Although Von Kupffer left the academy soon after his enrollment, the city continued to nourish his training in art history, economy, and ethnography. The philosophical education of von Mayer found in Berlin was in turn influenced by the pessimistic vision of Schopenhauer, which provided a source of relief for the young man's crisis of faith. After von Mayer attempted suicide, which seems to have been provoked by von Kupffer's relationship with Agnes von Hoyningen-Huene, the pair left Berlin for a long voyage in Italy, following the esthete impulse for physical regeneration through the sun.

During this trip in the summer of 1897, the couple visited Venice, Florence, Rome, Naples, Capri, and Ischia. While passing through the ruins of Pompeii, they discovered traces of Roman art, which greatly contributed to their developing concept of the idealized androgynous. In his philosophical treatment of Pompeii, inspired by the paintings he saw, von Mayer depicted the lost city as a paradise,

“an antitype of our own age”³¹ that could function as an example for modern civilization. Putting aside Hellenic society's focus on masculine values, its patriarchal and militarist character, von Mayer instead emphasized the social harmony he saw depicted on wall decorations of the ruined city. Particularly seductive were images that could be interpreted as part of the Hellenic educational model for young boys under “feminine control.”³² While earlier discussions of Greco-Roman education had typically omitted the important relationship between morality and Antique sexuality, an exception to this silence has been written by John Addington Symonds in 1883, *A Problem in Greek Ethic. A Problem in Modern Ethic*.³³ Well-known for his work on the Italian Renaissance, Symonds was an early influence on von Kupffer.³⁴ In *A Problem in Greek Ethic*, Symonds examined antique moral codes in order to demonstrate how male bonding was connected with bisexuality, and thus operated beyond procreative goals. Male education was determined by the relationship between the *erastes* and the *eromenos*, the male adult and the young boy. Passive sexual activity was not meant to be experienced after adolescence, and was criticized once maturity had been reached (with the apparition of beard). Relationships between adult men, however, could be found, although the passive man was disparaged for taking on the submissive, female position. While the Roman tradition followed the idea of male Greek bisexuality, it progressively yielded to a more ascetic approach to sexual life during the Empire and the period of Pompeii.³⁵

Von Mayer's interest in the bisexuality inherent in Hellenic male sociability can be seen in the author's fascination with images of the hybrid in the frescoes of Pompeii. These figures of indeterminacy were interpreted by the author through a monist understanding of Neoplatonism: “Every force finds embodiment in form, that could fashion from the shapes of man and beast Fauns, Centaurs, Tritons, and

Nereids, could call sea-horses and sea-griffins into being, could conjure the tender forms of lovely children out of flower-bells, and conceive human limbs terminating in the tendrils of plants. Pompeian art converted these impossibilities into realities.³⁶ The love of hybrid would later influence the decoration of von Kupffer, especially with the development of “ornamentation (...) free to spin the bright threads of its sparkling tale.”³⁷

The Bacchanalian feasts dedicated to the god of wine Dionysus particularly interested von Mayer. The relationships between the chimeric figures and the young priests and virgins who honored them constituted the idyllic model for the communion between nature and the sexual ideal of purification: “Art is either a living natural religion or nothing.”³⁸ The impact of Hellenic religion can also be felt in von Mayer’s monist model of reform. In his description of the Adonis house, for example, an image of the god incarnated as a hermaphrodite was considered as a paragon of moral of virtue. Repelling the advances of the goddess of love, Aphrodite, Adonis represented mystical chastity, and like Narcissus was “fascinated by his own beauty, pined away in self-adoration, and was turned into a flower this admonition against the exclusion of fertile and glowing love, and also loftiest tribute to the supremacy of beauty over the senses, this intensely Greek conception of Life, that we find so inexhaustible again and again materialized upon Pompeian walls.”³⁹ This vision of human primitivism created an opening for fantastical and alternative sexualities. Amongst the possible approaches to sex represented in the frescos, the adolescent hermaphrodite was held up as the “loftiest” of goals, an image of chaste love where sexuality was transcended by the aesthetic-narcissistic admiration of male beauty. As a system that represented an alternative to the radical pathologization of gender and sexuality, von

Mayer’s ideal paired male desexualization with the synthesis of the genders. Against the evolutionist conclusions of the degenerate man who is feminized, von Mayer privileged what he saw as Pompeii’s lack of gender binary: “Owing to race-conditions, not sufficiently taken into account at the present day, the Hellenic people, from an aesthetic point of view, tended to equalise the distinctions of sex.”⁴⁰ Gender indeterminacy, therefore, became the expression of the purity of form, which only materialized abstract ideas of nature. The morphologic combination of the two sexes, as discussed by von Mayer and later painted by von Kupffer, thus added a male asexual point of view to the historical theories of the plastic androgynous described by Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Théophile Gautier, and Joséphin Péladan.⁴¹

For von Mayer and von Kupffer, the regeneration of “our own age” and masculine virility took shape within antique forms of male bonding and rejected both Ulrichs and Hirschfeld’s concepts of homosexuality and feminization. In his anthology on male love,⁴² the preface to which was published in 1899 in the activist journal *Der Eigene*,⁴³ von Kupffer used extracts from ancient and contemporary texts to demonstrate that male friendship was not only the origin of homosexuality, but also the primordial cell of society. Civilization, therefore, was not determined by the filial relation, but by friendship between men in accordance with the sibling model. The ideal masculinity, furthermore, was androgynous, a state von Kupffer described in an article dedicated to the painter Sodoma: “Eternal grace – the Edenic ideal of belief in angels and houris, a rare blossom on earth, – ‘where the antagonism of the sexes is resolved into One’ is the desire for harmonies. This is a vast field that requires the development of a specific work. If you want to understand Giovan Antonio [Sodoma], what is

certainly necessary is the ‘araphrodite’ (...) the harmonious penetration of the powerful and the graceful. This sensation was developed later in his career when it reached its highest expression.”⁴⁴ This idea of the “araphrodite,” an amalgamation of male Ares with the female Aphrodite, derived from the sexual ambiguity of Sodoma himself. Giorgio Vasari published a portrait of the artist as having been constantly surrounded by young boys, whose company he appreciated. This dimension of implied sexual attraction allowed von Kupffer to explain the reasons behind Sodoma’s desire to paint himself and his adolescent models with a combination of the delicate female beauty and male strength. The “homosexual” or “bi-erotic” aesthetic relationship did not designate the attraction for the same or the different, but instead for the fragile and the strong at the same time.

The renewal of antique social models, whose modernity Michel Foucault demonstrated in *History of Sexuality*, provided an alternative to patriarchal domination. Foucault underlined the relationship between the access to Truth and the distance from the imperative of sexual reproduction present in male bonding. The antique hedonism inherited from Plato did not signify total sexual freedom, however, but was instead a path towards the pure use of sexuality: “it is in the reflection on love of boys that one sees the principle of ‘indefinite abstention’ formulated; the ideal of a renunciation, which Socrates exemplifies by his faultless resistance of temptation; and the theme that this renunciation has a high spiritual value by itself.”⁴⁵ The purification of ascetic love, where androgyny was the principal agent, allowed von Kupffer and von Mayer to achieve a certain idea of Truth, whose goal was not “pleasure and the esthetics of its use, but desire and its purifying hermeneutics.”⁴⁶ As philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) underlined in the 1960s, the importance lay in the refusal of sexuality (the

paragon being Narcissus and his absorption in his dreams of a lost paradise), and the denunciation of the “normal” Eros.⁴⁷ The rejection of established systems of stable sexuality played a central role in the genesis of queer politics in the 20th century.⁴⁸ In Marcuse’s philosophy and the artistic program of von Kupffer and von Mayer, an alternative vision of sexuality was deployed, one that participated in the concept of “queer mysticism” mentioned in the introduction. Both of these systems explored sexual renunciation and sublimated desire as a means to provoke the reform of masculine domination. Contrary to the democratic vision of gay sexualities developed during the 1970s, the esoteric dimensions of von Kupffer and von Mayer’s work pursued the moral values of sexual asceticism in an unlimited quest for new sensorial stimuli.

“Queer mysticism” and the “Clarismus” solution

By the end of the 1910s, von Mayer and von Kupffer had developed an aesthetic and religious community called *Clarismus*,⁴⁹ which they based on the model of the *Lebensreform* movement. Their “cult of the sun” settled in Germany, founding the publishing house *Klaristische Verlag Akropolis* in Munich and Weimar in 1911, and expanding to Zurich in 1913. When von Kupffer began exhibiting works of art at the Brogi gallery in Florence in April 1913, he called himself Elisarion, “painter of Clarism,” in honor of this group. The artistic initiatives in Italy were, however, set aside during the First World War, when the couple chose to leave for Minusio Switzerland in 1915. This city was only a few miles from Ascona, where the utopic community of *Monte Verità* had settled in 1900.⁵⁰ In Minusio, von Kupffer and von Mayer built their neo-symbolist sanctuary, which opened

to the public in August 1927. The architecture chosen for this space was reminiscent of the style promulgated in Sicily, one of the first regions the couple has discovered when they left Germany. The artistic expression of nostalgia for national identity combined with medieval underpinnings found in the decoration of the Minusio sanctuary can also be found in von Kupffer’s *Die Entwaffnung*⁵¹ (The Disarmament, 1914, fig. 4), where male regeneration is linked with medieval tropes, Antique heroism, and courtly eroticism. A nude young man, crowned with a wreath of roses, gently pulls off the glove of an armored knight while leaning back to prevent a kiss. Central to this gesture is the lifting of the knight’s sword, which is a proxy for the cross that both are meant to adore. The knight’s religious conversion to the antique ideal implicit in the piece is accentuated by the landscape, which contains both a medieval castle and an Antique temple. This spiritualized conversion of love was deeply connected to *Clarismus*’s dogmas. More than a religion, the model of purification through platonic Eros promoted by this group reflected a philosophy of life, Foucault’s “art of existence” and an example of the aestheticized approach to chaste love that is characteristic of “queer mysticism.”

The “araphrodite” figure equally played a major role in these conversions. A cross between man and woman, the androgyny of this figure had previously been admired by the couple in the frescoes of Pompeii. In the *Araphrodit und Falter*⁵² (Araphrodite and Butterfly, 1915, fig. 5), a young boy holds a golden cup within an orientalist interior, heightened by Persian tapestries and a bough of orange tree branches. The naked body of this adolescent, wearing

4 Elisar von Kupffer, *The Disarmament*, 1914, oil on canvas, 119x57, Fondazione Monte Verità/CCE.





golden sandals *à l'antique* and a headband, is endowed with surprisingly large buttocks. The combination of the sexually indeterminate body of the figure and the intimate atmosphere of the enclosed space enhance the erotic ultra-realism of the picture. Von Kupffer reinforced this impression through the work's illustrative style, including its saturated tones, classical and ordered composition, lack of depth between the space and the figure, and unity of chromatic scale. The *Araphrodite's* morphology, derived from photographs von Kupffer took of adolescent models, was demonstrative of a double level of artistic and medical homosexuality. If the adolescent was connected to the *eromenos* and became a sexual object whose large buttocks, was implicit of sodomy, he also corresponded to the medical observations of Hirschfeld on the larger size of the homosexual pelvis.

Like his process in the *Araphrodite*, many of von Kupffer's figures were derived from his photographic experiences. His meeting with the photographer Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden (1856–1931) in Sicily appears to have revealed to von Kupffer the potential of materializing erotic desires through *tableaux vivants* connected to antique canons.⁵³ Playing on the painting of the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* by Sodoma, von Kupffer himself posed for a photograph against a tree, clad in the very little clothing (fig. 6).⁵⁴ This practice of self-portraiture eventually shifted to the photographic observation of the younger boys who took part in the cult of *Clarism*. One of the first adolescents to be photographed was Adolf Schmitz. Nicknamed "Fino

5 Elisar von Kupffer, *Araphrodite and Butterfly*, 1915, 155x66, oil on canvas, CCE.



6 Elisar von Kupffer, *Saint Sebastian*, published in *Nackte Schönheit: Ein buch für Künstler und Aerste* (Stuttgart: Gustav Fritsch, 1907).



von Grajewo” or “Eros Messenger,” Adolf was the son of the couple’s first landlord in Berlin. Von Kupffer’s article on Sodoma was also illustrated by one of his photographs of an acolyte, in this case an image of Amleto Fanfani dressed as *Madonnina* (1908, fig. 7). Illustrative of the aesthetic preoccupations behind, “queer mysticism,” this photograph expresses a desire for religious purity through the inversion of gender and the use of cross-dressing.

Von Kupffer’s photographic productions seems to have also played with the Pictorialist project of the American artist Fred Holland Day (1864–1933), who had a handful of exhibitions at the beginning of the 20th century in London and Paris. For example, the image of another acolyte, Luigi (Gino) Taricco, dressed as a medieval knight, seems to have been inspired by themes used in Holland Day’s work, especially the wearing of leopard skin, medieval clothing, and the use of Christian imagery (figs. 8 and 9). Holland Day’s photographs were published in catalogues and other journals on photography that we know greatly interested von Kupffer. The symbolic and spiritual atmosphere of von Kupffer’s photographs, however, exceeded Holland Day’s theatrical compositions. For the project of *Clarismus*, moreover, these photographs – and the paintings that resulted from them – represented conversions, which in turn gave birth to divine reincarnation that regenerated male identity.

As the philosopher René Schérer demonstrated in his study of von Gloeden, von Kupffer and Otto Meyer Amdem, utopic visions had taken hold of a generation during this period, and helped Kupffer to develop his “queer mysticism.” To explain von Kupffer’s utopic cosmology,

7 Elisär von Kupffer, *Madonnina* (A. Fanfani), circa 1908, 1915. Photo. CCE.



Schérer utilized the metaphor of the angel in Honoré de Balzac's *Seraphita*: "The flesh of the image is a 'spiritual flesh,' directly and precisely visible in the child (...). The pictorial motif, with its inherent abstraction, is the operator of this manifestation."⁵⁵ Von Kupffer's pictorial operations, wherein bodies of adolescents were transformed into superior beings, proceeded from the consciousness of the artist himself. This "indestructible adolescent"⁵⁶ figure became an exaltation of eternal youth. According to Schérer, these investigations of the "dionysiac vibration"⁵⁷ were opposed to scientific evolutionism, and celebrated a new rhythm based on suffering, death, and resurrection. The artistic program advocated by von Kupffer and von Mayer, however, remained remote in Schérer's estimation, since the machinations of their eroticism were always distant from contemporary codified sexual practices.

In *The Mystery of the sexes*, a quasi-manifesto for Clarism written by von Mayer in 1923, pansexualism and the belief that only sexual libido could explain human behavior was heavily criticized. This attack against the foundations of psychoanalysis⁵⁸ and the psychology of sexuality ran alongside the text's promotion of the androgynous desexualizing goals of Clarism's sexual utopia. In his book, von Mayer provided the reader with examples of behaviors that would allow for the coordination of sexual rhythms, as in musical harmonies. Physical attraction was shown to be made up of fluid energies that allowed the renewal of sexual and intellectual polarities. Only the redemption embodied by the

8 Elisàr von Kupffer, *Gino Taricco*, circa 1910, photograph, CCE.

9 Elisàr von Kupffer, *Warrior*, undated, oil on canvas, CCE.

10 (next page) Elisàr von Kupffer, *The Clear World of the Blessed*, 1923-30, 345x2590, oil on canvas, Fondazione Monte Verità/CCE.







“klangfigur”⁵⁹ (sound figure), could bring these energy poles into equilibrium: “(...) a spiritual state of form-like, driving to the pleasure of rhythmic harmony which lifts the whole soul and swings through it - an anticipation and notion of the highest stages of maturity (...).”⁶⁰

These sound figures, in combination with light (*clarity*), were given a physical dimension through dance. The cycle *Die Klarwelt der Seligen*⁶¹ (Parthenon Frieze of the Eros Faith, fig. 10) testifies to this connection of music, dance, and sexual idealism through the figure of the “araphrodite.” On 33 circular panels that describe the evolution of life through the cycle of the four seasons, von Kupffer created a series of neo-symbolist frescoes where utopic male bonding was explored. The technique of these images was the application of dry colors of resin to chalk panel. The naked male figures, with very static and stereotyped poses, were oriented in groups of two or three, locked in embraces and loving games. The saturated tones and flattened surfaces compress the figures into decor, like the cardboard cutouts of photography studios. Most of the poses were taken from other compositions, perhaps indicative of the series’ position at the end of von Kupffer’s artistic career. Previous studies that have examined these frescoes also mention the influence of Ludwig von Hofmann (1861–1945) and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898), both of whom the couple met during their travels. Contrary to these artists, however, the male beauty exalted by von Kupffer was connected to political issues around masculinity and male bonding, subjects that were avoided by von Hofmann and de Chavannes.

With von Kupffer’s composition *Resurrection* (fig. 11),⁶² the artist furthered his theories of androgyny through a

sublimated vision of mystical elevation, in this case through the loving communion of bodies on the cross. Highly reminiscent of the composition found in *The Loves of the Souls*⁶³ (1900) by the Belgian artist Jean Delville (1867–1953), this double-body image on the cross features similarly androgynous figures. The Symbolist conception of the androgynous initiated by Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918), art critic and head of the symbolist Rose-Croix Salon in Paris, can be connected to the theory of “queer mysticism” through its desire for the neutralization of masculine and feminine poles within a singular figure of chastity. For von Kupffer, it was through the syncretism of antiquity and medieval Christianity that his theories of androgyny were forged. In the *Resurrection*, the dream of male love within heteronormative culture is given form, consecrated by the light of a geometrized sun that recalls Christ’s halo.

Masculine identity rebuilt through androgyny was completely at odds with the pantheism of the *Jugendbewegung*, whose ideas were later coopted by National-Socialism and the Nazi party. Von Kupffer and von Mayer’s artistic practice of virilizing masculine identity through idealized desexualization not only helps us to understand how sexual difference was constructed, but also how their ideas later nourished studies on masculinity. It is far from surprising, then, that the first appearance of the term “masculinity” occurred in Germany, as opposed to “virility,” which was first used in England and France. Linked with the early years of homosexuality’s identification and framing, the artistic and theoretical practices of von Kupffer and von Mayer revealed a new utopia based on the ideal of transcendent sexuality (“queer mysticism”), which would bear fruit in the second part of the 20th century. All these operations resulted from a desire to give Man the image of eternity⁶⁴ that his virility did not allow him to possess since his masculine domination was being contested.

11 Elisar von Kupffer, *Resurrection*, undated, CCE.

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Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

- 1 For an analysis of the relations between art, science, and spiritualism at the turn of the century in Europe, see Maurice Tuchman, Judi Freeman and Carel Blotkamp, ed., *The Spiritual in art: abstract painting 1890–1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986) and Veit Loers, ed., *Okkultismus und Avantgarde. Von Munch bis Mondrian 1900–1915* (Frankfurt/M: Edition Tertium GmbH + Co, 1998).
- 2 Except recently Kai Buchholz, ed., *Die Lebensreform: Entwürfe zur Neugestaltung von Leben und Kunst um 1900*, 2 vol. (Darmstadt, Institut Mathildenhöhe: Häusser, 2001).
- 3 Concerning Elisàr von Kupffer, see Claudio Berger, “Das Sanctuarium Artis Elisarion,” in *Die Lebensreform*, vol.2, 109–112; Cecile Beurdeley, *L'Amour bleu*, trans. Michael Taylor (Köln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1994); Ekkehard Hieronimus, “Elisàr von Kupffer (1872–1942),” in *Ausstellungskatalog der Kunstballe Basel* (Basel: Kunsthalle, 1979), 2–16; Graziano Mandozzi, *Elisàrion : un santuario per il Clarismo* (Minusio: Comune de Minusio, 1996); Harald Szeemann, “Elisàr von Kupffer, dit Elisarion,” in *4e biennale d'art contemporain de Lyon* (Paris: RMN, 1997), 37–39.
- 4 See Jim Steakley, *The homosexual emancipation movement in Germany* (New York: Body Politics, 1975) and Michael Bolle, dir., *Eldorado, Homosexuelle Frauen und Männer in Berlin 1850–1950. Geschichte, Alltag und Kultur* (Berlin: Frölich und Kaufmann, 1984). Neither explored von Kupffer and von Mayer's writings.
- 5 See René Schérer, *Pari sur l'impossible: études fouriéristes* (Saint-Denis: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1989) and Guy Hocquenghem, “Elisàr Von Kupfer,” in *Race d'Ep ! Un siècle d'images de l'homosexualité* (Paris: éditions Libre/Hallier, 1979), 30–33.
- 6 Fabio Ricci, *Ritter, Tod und Eros: Die Kunst Elisàr von Kupffers (1872–1942)* (Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2007).
- 7 The principle of “queer mysticism” is based on the writings of René Schérer, Guy Hocquenghem and Gilles Deleuze. See among other writings, *Grande Encyclopédie des homosexualités: Trois Milliards de Pervers* (Paris: Recherches, 1973).
- 8 See Rebecca Ayako Bennette, *Fighting for the Soul of Germany: The Catholic Struggle for Inclusion After Unification* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Hans-Ulrich Wehler, trad.K. Traynor, *The German Empire, 1871–1918* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1997).
- 9 On monism in Germany, see John Heil, *Philosophy of mind. A contemporary introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998); Daniel Gasman, *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction publ., 2004).
- 10 The *KulturKritik*, or critique of the culture, was concerned with the material surroundings and political issues connected with aesthetics values. Fredrich Nietzsche is considered as one of the main culture critics in Germany at the end of the century. See Ralf Konersmann, *Kulturkritik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008).
- 11 These ideas were developed in Ernst Haeckel, *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen: allgemeine Grundzüge der organischen Formen-Wissenschaft, mechanisch begründet durch die von Charles Darwin reformirte Descendenz-Theorie* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1866).
- 12 Ernst Haeckel, *The Evolution of Man: A Popular Exposition of the Principal Points of Human Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, volumes 1 and 2 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897) from the German version, *Anthropogenie oder Entwicklungsgeschichte des Menschen* (Leipzig: W. Engelmann, 1874).
- 13 George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Howard Fertig Pub, 1998), 4.
- 14 These concerns have been developed in various books. See, among others, J. Edward Chamberlain and Sander L. Gilman, *Degeneration. The dark side of progress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Women and Men* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985); L. Sander Gilman, *Differences and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
- 15 The terms “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” appeared in a letter from Karl Maria Benkert (1824–1882) to Ulrichs dated the 6th of May, 1868. See Manfred Herzer, “Kerbeny and the Nameless Love,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 12 (1985): 1–26. I use “homosexuality” purposefully as a medical term, dissociating it from “male bonding” or “love between men”.
- 16 Ulrichs called love between men “Urnings,” a term he pulled from the speech in Plato's Symposium where Pausanias explains why Aphrodite's sister is called Uranus. See Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, trans. Michael A. Lombardi-Nash, *The Riddle of “Man-Manly” Love. The Pioneering Work on Male Homosexuality*, vol. 1 and 2 (New York: Prometheus Books, 1994), 23 and quotes from Plato, trans. Benjamin Jowett, “Symposium, 3:304,” in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 4 vol. (New York: Random House, 1937). On Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, see also Hubert C. Kennedy, “The ‘third sex’ theory of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 6 (1980–81): 103–11.
- 17 Otto Weininger, trans. Ladislaus Löb, *Sex and Character: An Investigation of Fundamental Principles* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).
- 18 Magnus Hirschfeld, *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, vol.5–1 (1903): 128–129. On the connections between androgyny and intermediate sexes in Hirschfeld's theory, see Katharina Sykora, “Androgynie als ‘Genus tertium’ in Magnus Hirschfeld Theorie der ‘Geschlechtsübergänge,’” in *Querelles. Jahrbuch für Frauenforschung, Androgynie*, vol.4 (Stuttgart, Weimar: Vielfalt der Möglichkeiten, 1997), 37–39 and Charlotte Wolff, *Magnus Hirschfeld: a Portrait of a Pioneer in Sexology* (London: Quartet, 1986).
- 19 Magnus Hirschfeld, *Geschlechtskunde auf Grund dreissigjähriger Forschung und Erfahrung bearbeitet* (Stuttgart: J. Püttmann, 1930), 521.
- 20 Magnus Hirschfeld, *Sexualwissenschaftlicher Bilderatlas zur Geschlechtskunde* (Berlin: Püttmann, 1932).
- 21 Magnus Hirschfeld, *Sexualwissenschaftlicher Bilderatlas zur Geschlechtskunde*, 383, “Wie sich die unbewußte narzisstische Komponente im künstlerischen Schaffen auswirkt (...).”
- 22 Elisàr von Kupffer, *Der Neue Bund*, 1915–16, oil on canvas, 214 x 119 cm, Centro Culturale Elisarion (CCE), Minusio.
- 23 Elisàr von Kupffer, *Amor Dei Victoria*, 1917, oil on canvas, 160 x 117 cm, CCE.
- 24 On narcissism and homosexuality, see Jean Bergeret, ed., *L'érotisme narcissique: homosexualité et homoérotisme* (Paris: Dunod, 1999).
- 25 Eduard von Mayer, dir., *Elisàr von Kupffer, Aus einem wabrhaften Leben* (Minusio-Locarno, 1943).
- 26 Quote from Fabio Ricci, *Ritter, Tod und Eros*, 7.

- 27 Von Mayer wrote a dissertation on Schopenhauer, after studying in the University of Geneva. Eduard von Mayer, *Schopenhauers Aesthetik und ihr Verhältnis zu den ästhetischen Lehren Kants und Schellings*, dissertation unpublished (Halle a.S., 1897).
- 28 *Die toten Götter*, mentioned in Eduard von Mayer, dir., *Elisär von Kupffer*.
- 29 See Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner androgyn* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois éditeur, 1990).
- 30 For an explanation of the construction of masculine bodies through the Greek ideal, see George L. Mosse, *The image of man. The Creation of Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Brian Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex* (New York: Saint Martins, 1990).
- 31 Eduard von Mayer, *Pompeii as an art city* (New York: A.Stokes Company, 1907), 5.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 33 Republished as John Addington Symonds, *Male Love. A Problem in Greek Ethics and Other Writings* (New York: Pagan Press, 1983).
- 34 His volumes on Italian Renaissance art, published during the 1860s and the 1870s, were especially influential. John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy* (London: Smith, Elder and Co; New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1903–1904).
- 35 On the history of Antique homosexuality and the progressive asceticism, see Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality. Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Harrison G. Pope, et al., *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession* (Winnipeg: Free Press, 2000).
- 36 Eduard von Mayer, *Pompeii as an art city*, 30.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 41 On the history of French androgyny, see Frédéric Monneyron, *L'androgyné décadent. Mythe, figure, fantômes* (Grenoble: ELLUG, 1996). On German androgyny, see Ursula Prinz, *Androgyn. Sehnsucht nach Vollkommenheit* (Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 1987).
- 42 Elisär von Kupfer, *Lieblingsminne und Freundesliebe der Weltliteratur. Eine Sammlung mit einer ethisch-politischen Einleitung* (Berlin: Marita Keilson-Lauritz, 1995).
- 43 Elisär von Kupfer, “Die ethisch-politische Bedeutung der Lieblingminne. Einleitung zur demnächst erscheinenden Sammlung,” in *Der Eigene* (Berlin, October 1899), 182–199. *Der Eigene* was partially reproduced and translated in Hubert Kennedy, dir., *Homosexuality and male bonding in pre-Nazi Germany: the youth movement, the gay movement, and male bonding before Hitler's rise: original transcripts from Der Eigene, the first gay journal in the world* (Michigan: Harrington Park Press, 1992).
- 44 Elisär von Kupffer (Elisarion), “Giovan Antonio – il Sodoma, Der Maler der Schönheit. Eine Seelen- und Kunststudie,” in *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen IX* (1908), 94, “Das Ewig-anmutige – das Eden-Ideal des Glaubens an Engel und Huris, auf Erden eine seltene Blüte, – ‘wo der Geschlechter Widerstreit in Einer gebunden’ ist das Begehrens und Erstrebenswerte – das Harmonische. Das ist ein weites Feld, dessen Bebauung ein eignes Werk verlangt. Freilich ist zum Verständnis Giovan Antonios fast unbedingt notwendig, was ich, als erster, ‘araphroditisch’ genannt habe – die harmonische Durchdringung des Kraftvollen mit dem Anmutigen. Diese Empfindung entwickelt sich bei Sodoma noch mehr und gelangt später zu seinem höchsten Ausdruck.”
- 45 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality II. The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurey (New York: Vintage Books), 245.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 254.
- 47 See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (London: Routledge, 1987).
- 48 This is particularly relevant for masculinity studies, especially Raewyn W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987); David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, ed., *Men in Feminism* (New York: Methuen, 1987).
- 49 The expression comes from German term “Klar,” meaning clarity, lightness. See Elisär von Kupffer, *Was soll uns der Klarismus – eine menschliche und soziale Neugeburt* (München, 1912).
- 50 The connections between the two movements have not been thoroughly explored. See Martin Green, *Mountain of Truth: The Counterculture Begins: Ascona, 1900 – 1920* (London: University Press of New England, 1986).
- 51 Elisär von Kupffer, *Die Entwaffnung (Il Disarmo)*, 1914, oil on canvas, 119 x 57cm, Fondazione Monte Verità/CCE.
- 52 Elisär von Kupffer, *Araphrodit und Falter*, 1915, 155 x 66 cm, oil on canvas, CCE.
- 53 For the connection between Wilhelm von Gloeden and the desire for a Mediterranean ideal, see Robert Aldrich, *The seduction of the Mediterranean: writing, art and homosexual fantasy* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 54 Photograph reproduced in Elisär von Kupffer, *Nackte Schönheit. Ein buch für Künstler und Aerste* (Stuttgart: Gustav Fritsch, 1907).
- 55 René Schérer, with Guy Hocquenghem, *Pari sur l'impossible: études fouriéristes* (Saint-Denis: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1989), 100.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 104
- 57 *Ibid.*, 114.
- 58 Von Mayer wrote his criticism of psychoanalysis in Eduard von Mayer, “Psychoanalysis und Klarismus,” in *New Psychische Studien*, 48 (1921): 433-440.
- 59 Eduard von Mayer, *Das Mysterium der Geschlechter* (Pfullingen, 1923), 44.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 44, quoted in Fabio Ricci, Ritter, *Tod & Eros*, 114, “(...) ein geistiger Zustand gestalthaft fühlender Lust des rhythmischen Einklangs, der das ganze Wesen erhebt und durchschwingt – gerade eine Vorwegnahme und Ahnung höchster Reifestufen, (...)”
- 61 Elisär von Kupffer, *Die Klarwelt der Seligen*, 1923–1930.
- 62 Elisär von Kupffer, *Auferstehung*, undated, CCE.
- 63 Jean Delville, *L'Amour des âmes*, 1900, Musée communal des Beaux-arts d'Ixelles.
- 64 This term “image of eternity” is borrowed from Eric Michaud, *Un art de l'éternité. L'image et le temps du national-socialisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).