

GONCHAROV: A SELF-AWARE QUEER MIRROR ON TUMBLR

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ABSTRACT

Packed with homoeroticism and symbolism, *Goncharov* is a mafia movie from 1973 about the rivalry between a Russian mob and the Italian mafia in Naples. However, *Goncharov* is unlike any other production by Scorsese, since it is a fabrication by Tumblr. In a community effort which began on November 18th, 2022, thousands of Tumblr users convincingly conceived the plot and the characters of *Goncharov*, adapting the conventions and stereotypes from its supposed genre. Nevertheless, *Goncharov* is also quintessentially Tumblr, which the presence of fandom and the queer readings of the movie give away. From the tenets of cognitive linguistics and the tools of Text World Theory, this paper attempts to unravel the cultural knowledge and assumptions underlying *Goncharov*, focusing particularly on its reflection of LGBTQ+ representation in films. A corpus of 150 Tumblr posts has been manually analyzed to identify the mental frames and cognitive blocks which the content of the said posts activates. The results reveal the coalescence of the past and the present of LGBTQ+ characters in TV shows and movies, perhaps influenced by the noticeable presence of the LGBTQ+ community on Tumblr.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics; frame theory; text world theory; Tumblr.

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1. INTRODUCTION

On the days after November 18th, 2022, Tumblr users from all across the platform conceived a brand new mafia movie: *Goncharov*, directed by Scorsese in 1973. In their posts they proposed and analyzed characters, themes, plot lines, and behind-the-scenes trivia from a film that did not exist at all, adding to the complexity and the plausibility of the fabrication. The discussions and responses around *Goncharov* were so similar to previous Tumblr fan reactions to TV shows and films (Turner 2023, 54) that *Goncharov* reached not users from other social media, who fell into the trap, but also its director, Scorsese, who jokingly confirmed his involvement in the production of the movie a few days later.

Goncharov followed Goncharov, its eponymous protagonist, and Katya, his wife, in Naples, where Goncharov was trying to spread the influence of his Russian gang while competing against the local mob. The initial consistency of some of its alleged features, such as the cast and the production team behind it, were all derived from a photo of a boot uploaded on Tumblr and by a subsequent movie poster designed by user beelzeebub

who was inspired by the said image (cf. Turner 2023, Codega 2022). Nevertheless, despite the contradictions in the plot and narrative of *Goncharov*, Tumblr users remarkably behaved like a collective whole and, without any prior agreement, managed to create not only a movie, but also the lore surrounding its production and reception, and its own fandom (Turner 2023, 9).

Goncharov is a Tumblr creation, as its queerness and predominance of fandom reveal. In spite of its unprecedented repercussions—for Scorsese himself played along, and several journals, such as *The New York Times*, rushed to discuss the phenomenon (Codega, 2022) –, *Goncharov* has not attracted much academic attention. The focus of scholarly work has solely been placed on the influence of Tumblr on *Goncharov*, which has been examined as a Tumblr game (Turner 2023). However, Tumblr users and, therefore, *Goncharov* do not live in isolation. They arise from the intersection of various social and cultural circumstances which leak into the phenomenon of *Goncharov*, furnishing it with a cognitive framework. Codega (2022) has also acknowledged the presence of other components, such as the place of the filmography of Scorsese in popular culture. Thus, besides Tumblr as a platform and community, it would be safe to assume that there are other cognitive pillars sustaining *Goncharov*, such as the filmography of Scorsese. Furthermore, the emphasis which Tumblr users placed on the romance between characters of the same gender in *Goncharov* points at another root of the phenomenon: LGBTQ+ fictional characters in the 1970s.

Considering this trinity of fields of knowledge and experience, this study aims at deepening the understanding of *Goncharov* as a phenomenon of not only Tumblr but also LGBTQ+ culture. To discern the mental processes and associations that led to the inception of *Goncharov*, this paper relies on cognitive linguistics and, more specifically, on Text World Theory (Werth 1994) to dissect its mental building bricks. Consequently, this work revolves around the next research questions: First, which frames do Tumblr users activate to articulate the different mental spaces of *Goncharov*? And secondly, how does *Goncharov* reflect the evolution of LGBTQ+ media from the 1970s to the present day?

The paper will be organized as follows: The first section will develop the theoretical approach and the historical and cultural context of the study. The second section will provide a summary of the data and the method followed for the analysis. The third section will present the quantitative and qualitative results of the study. The last section will conclude with some final remarks and suggestions for the future.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.2 FRAMES AND TEXT WORLDS

As has already been mentioned in the introduction, this paper takes a cognitive linguistic approach, according to which the bidirectional association between mind and language renders meaning experiential and cultural (Hart 2014, 109). Meaning does not reside in a

word but rather emerges from the cognitive processes resulting from the knowledge and experience linked to the said word (Langacker 2002, 61). Thus, meaning is contextual (Chilton 1996, 57).

Within meaning making, cognitive linguistics distinguishes various levels and units. Domains concern broad and “general areas of conceptualization” and offer the context in which speakers bestow sense upon words through a network of connected frames (Radden and Dirven 2007, 11). Frames furnish domains with structure, for they rise as the “relatively stable sets of facts about a domain” (Chilton 1996, 70) which shapes and organizes its cognitive structure (Chilton 1996, 58). Frames follow an analogical logic: In order to comprehend their reality, the speaker will apply similar frames to new situations resembling past circumstances (Chilton 1996, 33). This way, frames as constituents of, and keys to, the cognitive space of *Goncharov* are placed at the center of the proposed analysis.

From the concept of “domains” stems the idea of “worlds” (Werth 1994, 207), which are “conceptual domain[s] representing a state of affairs.” There are three layers within worlds: discourse world, text worlds, and sub-worlds (Werth 1994, 182). This paper makes use of the medium level, leaving aside sub-worlds and briefly acknowledging the discourse world. The discourse world entails the context in which the text world is produced; the text world, on the other hand, contains a group of propositions that constitute an “overtly construct” with explicit deictic coordinates—time and place—and an array of related characters. In this work, the content of Tumblr posts stands as the explicit manifestation of the text worlds departing from *Goncharov*, which facilitates tracking which cognitive mechanisms sustain this phenomenon. All the layers within a world are equal in terms of the components they rely on—modality and “informational elements” (Werth 1994, 182), of which this paper focuses on the latter in the form of nouns and noun phrases, with the tag #Goncharov, a proper noun used as an entry point to the data of the corpus, as a prime example. Lastly, text worlds lie on a rich common ground—general knowledge established at an earlier stage in discourse (Werth 1994, 197)—which explains the involvement of many frames in *Goncharov*.

The latter processes will be addressed to decipher the multilayered organization of *Goncharov*, which presents Tumblr as the discourse world in which various text worlds arise from the referent “Goncharov” itself. Through the application of this theoretical framework, this paper attempts to uncover the cognitive mechanisms which facilitated that thousands of users “agreed” on the narrative and the details surrounding *Goncharov* “as a cohesive unit” which seems to surpass what one may expect of a game or a stroke of genius from Tumblr (Turner 2023, 9). These cognitive mechanisms have not been explored yet. With this purpose, this work will turn to frame and text world theory, inspired by other previous papers that relied on frame analysis to dive into Tumblr culture, such as Filardo-Llamas and Roldán-García (2024).

2.2 TUMBLR: A QUEER RELIC

Tumblr is a microblogging site founded in 2007 by David Karp (Feraday 2016, 29). From their blog, users may follow other blogs, whose content will appear in a chronological order on their dashboard (Feraday 2016, 26). Users can create their own posts, or they can also reblog posts from other users—i.e., share the said posts on their blog to which they can add a comment at the end (Feraday 2016, 26). Users can also like, or reply to, a post. Replies, unlike comments, do not appear in the body of the post and only emerge if one checks the “notes” tab (Proferes and Morrissey 2020, 33).

Like other social media platforms, Tumblr relies on tags to categorize and retrieve posts (Bourlai 2018, 47). Tumblr tags can be long, as they may hold entire sentences and special characters, and infinite, as users may add as many tags as they consider to a post (Bourlai 2018, 47). When users reblog a post, the tags from the user who shared it first disappear, and the next user can introduce their own tags (Oakley 2016, 6). This peculiarity of the interface of Tumblr has consolidated what now is regarded as the main function of its tags: a space for “opinions,” “reactions,” and “asides” (Bourlai 2018, 48) which “indicate [...] audience, intent, and self-identity” (Dame 2017, 23).

In the words of Robard et al. (2020, 281), “there is something queer about Tumblr.” From its inception, Tumblr has harbored a userbase which predominantly featured the LGBTQ+ community, thus becoming its online cornerstone (Feraday 2016, 30). The content ban of 2018 which mostly affected and targeted trans users marked the beginning of the drastic decline of Tumblr, as it drove many LGBTQ+ users away (Haimson et al. 2021, 346). While nowadays Tumblr is no longer seen as a LGBTQ+ network, it retains its appeal as a former queer hub, for Robard et al. (2020, 284) found that LGBTQ+ youth was five times more likely to have a Tumblr account than their heterosexual counterparts. Despite the frequent criticism of the pervasive Anglocentric perspective of the platform (Klink et al. 2020, 171), many scholars have turned to Tumblr to delve into various aspects of the LGBTQ+ community, such as the use of gender and sexuality labels—e.g., Feraday (2014), or Oakley (2016)—or the notion of community therein sustained—e.g., Byron et al. (2019), or Jacobsen et al. (2022).

The queer, counterpublic nature of Tumblr has proved to be fertile soil for other alternative groups, namely fandoms (Morimoto 2018). With its preference for GIFs and memes, the multimodality of Tumblr triggered a shift from the mostly textual forums in which fandoms had flourished in the 20th century and forever changed the constitution of fandom itself (Morimoto 2018). The impact of Tumblr on contemporary fandom culture cannot be overstated. For instance, the lexicon which is often associated with fandom slang can often be traced back to this platform (Romano and Minkel 2020, 65). Besides its supposedly progressive and transgressive streak, there are other reasons for which fandoms proliferate on Tumblr, such as the fast dissemination of posts through the reblog

function, and the anonymity of blogs, which do not require any personal data beyond an email address (Proferes and Morrissey 2020, 29).

Consequently, and as hinted by Codega (2022), two of the key elements of the identity of Tumblr—the significant presence of the LGBTQ+ community, and the predominance of fandoms—affected the development of the phenomenon of *Goncharov*. Therefore, these two factors will be included in the analysis.

2.3 LGBTQ+ REPRESENTATION IN US MEDIA IN THE 1970S

Since its release year is 1973, *Goncharov* is a movie supposedly scripted, filmed, and produced in the early seventies. Among the most defining traits of *Goncharov*, many Tumblr users highlight the presence of either homoerotic subtext or explicit homosexuality—a clash which will be further developed in the analysis. However, what kind of media representation did the LGBTQ+ community in the US actually enjoy during this period?

The 1960s witnessed the relaxation of the strict moral code that banned the overt inclusion of homosexuality in Hollywood productions (Edwards 2020, 29). Consequently, in the 1970s appeared the first explicitly LGBTQ+ characters in US movies, who often embodied the stereotypes of “funny clowns, [...]; villainous criminals, mental patients, child molesters, and vampires; or victims of violence, HIV/AIDS, and gender/sexuality identity disorder” (Raley and Lucas 2006, 23). Moreover, their storylines did not benefit from much development nor complexity (McInroy and Craig 2016, 8) and often met a deadly end that ultimately led to the establishment of the self-explanatory “bury your gays” trope (Rodríguez 2019, 3).

Often tied to immorality (Rodríguez 2019, 2), LGBTQ+ characters were thus punished by the dominant heteronormative narrative of the 1970s in the US. During this decade, television offered a similar portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community. As Montgomery (1981, 56) explains, the plot always followed a heterosexual protagonist, and pushed to the background the LGBTQ+ character, who was stripped of any display of affection towards people of their same gender, nor of any connection to the community (Raley and Lucas 2006, 25). This sanitized and depoliticized LGBTQ+ representation usually focused on cisgender, white, gay men, a trend which is currently yet to disappear (Gutowitz 2017). Returning to *Goncharov*, the plot deepens into the efforts of Goncharov, a member of a Russian mob, to infiltrate the mafia circles of Naples, accompanied by his wife, Katya. In Italy, Goncharov and Katya will fall into homoerotic dynamics with Andrey and Sofia, respectively. All in all, this narrative seems to coincide with what one would expect from LGBTQ+ characters from a 1970s movie. However, a closer look to the data will test how true this first impression of *Goncharov* is.

Having briefly considered the historical context of LGBTQ+ characters in US media in the 1970s, it will be easier to discern the cognitive building blocks of *Goncharov*, which will be developed in the next sections.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 CORPUS COMPILATION

This study delves into *Goncharov* via an ad-hoc corpus of 150 Tumblr posts. Some preliminary criteria were established to ensure the relevance of the compiled material. First, the posts had to be uploaded between November and December 2022, which coincided with the most productive period of the tag #goncharov. Second, posts which gathered a chronology of the events around *Goncharov* so that new users could follow the trend were discarded, since they mostly offered links to other posts that were already part of the corpus. Using the tag #goncharov as an entry point to the raw material, the 150 most popular—according to Tumblr—posts were extracted in strict order of appearance. The lack of transparency of the algorithm of Tumblr has often been a topic of discussion, for it may trouble the accuracy of the obtained results (Proferes and Morrissey 2020, 34-35), influenced by the decade of use the author of this paper has made of the platform. However, the already mentioned constraints aimed at countering these hypothetical obstacles.

Due to the time gap between the beginning and development of *Goncharov* (November 18th—22nd 2022) (Codega 2022), and the compilation of this corpus (August 26th—29th 2024), this approach intends not to capture *Goncharov* as it happened, but to collect those posts that, in hindsight, most contributed to the constitution of the piece of media *Goncharov* as reflected in their high number of notes, which were mostly over 10000. Moreover, as an ad-hoc corpus, it does not attempt to achieve a completely representative portrayal of *Goncharov*, but rather a magnified look of a period of the phenomenon so as to answer to the specific needs of this research (Mautner 2016, 164).

The manual extraction of the posts followed the next steps. First, the post was registered in a dataset, where it was assigned a code (“GF” plus its position in the data set). For instance, the first post of the corpus receives the code “GF_001.” The dataset also contains other relevant information about the post, such as the date of publication, the username of the poster, the number of notes, and the type of content therein (“text,” “video,” “images,” “GIFs,” and “music.”) Next, the textual component of the post—i.e., the body and the tags (Bourlai 2018, 55)—were copied and pasted in a txt files. Then, the non-textual elements (if any) of the post were downloaded and organized in a separate folder. Lastly, the entire post was screenshotted to retain its original arrangement.

After the completion of the corpus came the analysis of the data, which the next subsection will briefly describe.

3.2 DATA ANALYSIS

During the manual compilation of the corpus, it became apparent that, even though all the posts belonged to the #goncharov tag, Tumblr users were discussing *Goncharov* in

different terms. Nevertheless, the diverse topics conflated under #goncharov followed generalizable patterns that facilitated its categorization, as Turner (2023) also pointed out. Thus, the first step involved the classification of the content of the posts in three broad groups.

Some posts talked about *Goncharov* as a movie—i.e., they commented on scenes and plot lines, and they reminisced about the production surrounding it. Other posts talked about *Goncharov* as a phenomenon—i.e., they pointed at the mechanisms and the strategies which users employed to create such a convincing illusion of a movie, and the impact *Goncharov* had on reality outside Tumblr. Lastly, some other posts talked about *Goncharov* as a Tumblr phenomenon—i.e., they explained the experience of Tumblr via the example of *Goncharov*. Of interest to this paper is the first category, as they provide *Goncharov* of content.

The second and last step entailed the elaboration of a Word document which comprised all those posts whose topic was *Goncharov* as a movie. The textual and non-textual components of each post were transferred following its original structure. Then, after a close reading of each post came a list of possible frames that could emerge from their content. This list grew in size upon the analysis of the posts, as the in-depth, manual examination of their components allowed the retrieval of other frames that underlay those which had already been covered.

Considering Tumblr as the discourse world which encloses *Goncharov* as an entity, two related text worlds were identified: *Goncharov* as a person, and *Goncharov* as a (possible) cultural artifact. Various frames structured these cognitive spaces, which were signaled and categorized via the comment function of Word.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

As illustrated in Figure 1, out of 150 Tumblr posts, 69 posts discussed *Goncharov* as a piece of media. Then, 47 posts talked about *Goncharov* as a phenomenon, diving into the intricacies of this social media fabrication. Lastly, 34 posts reflected on the particular case of Tumblr as a social network through the example of *Goncharov*. Hence, the subsequent qualitative analysis will be based on almost half of the corpus (46%), since the other two types of posts did not expand the narrative of *Goncharov* but rather examine it from the outside.

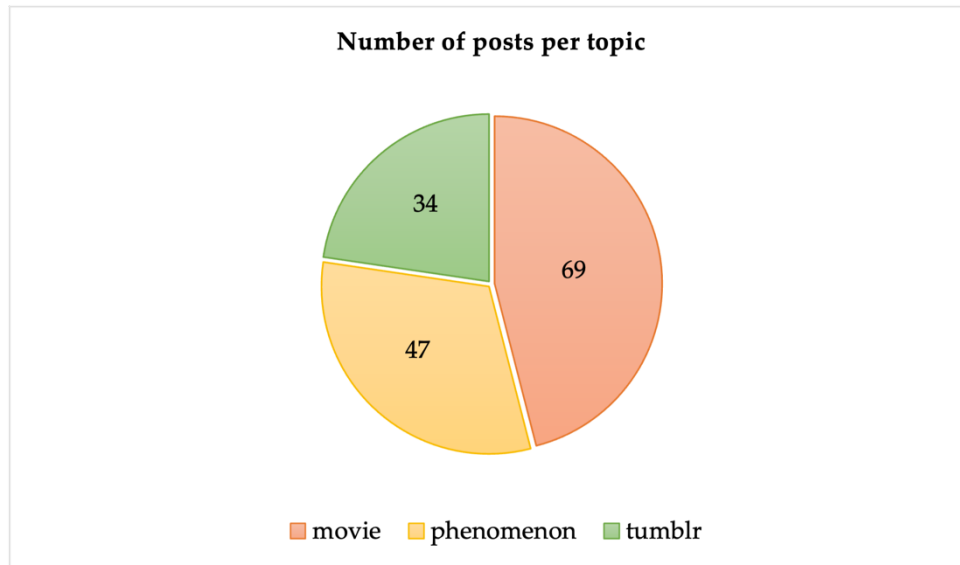


Fig 1. Total sum of posts according to their topic of discussion.

In a movie which does not exist in the conventional sense of the word—i.e., there is not a feature to which the audience can refer, *Goncharov* becomes the content of these posts. Some users, such as GF_054, even show awareness of this situation: “the way whatever is written or made about goncharov is technically goncharov itself because the source doesn't exist.” This reflection hints at the multiple text worlds *Goncharov*, as an entity, contains since, in spite of their similarities, each post offered its own version of *Goncharov*. Furthermore, it also reinforces the position of Tumblr as the discourse world of *Goncharov*, as Turner (2023, 7) and Codega (2022) have both reiterated that *Goncharov* itself cannot be comprehended if extricated from Tumblr. Next, the qualitative analysis will develop the peculiarities of Tumblr as a discourse world, and the frame ramifications derived from the two text worlds *Goncharov* gathers.

4.2 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS: THE TEXT WORLDS OF “GONCHAROV”

Rooted in several assumptions from US general cultural knowledge, *Goncharov* triggers two text worlds which, at the same time, set off a chain of frames and other schemas. All these mental processes unfold in the context of the discourse world Tumblr. Discourse worlds emerge in interaction, in certain demonstrative and extralinguistic elements (Werth 1994, 182). Tumblr, in this sense, is present in the very format of *Goncharov* as a movie, which is not a standard motion picture, but a recollection of GIFs, fan arts¹, edited images, and posts—the most remarkable Tumblr affordances and discursive strategies. However, the presence of fan arts and other artistic expressions conjures another relevant constituent in the discourse world of Tumblr: the participants— i.e., Tumblr users or, in

¹ Often found in the form of drawings and paintings, fan art refers to “artwork based on popular works of fiction (such as books, movies, etc.) that is created by fans” (Merriam-Webster n.d.).

the particular case of fan arts, fans. *Goncharov* emerges from the dialogue among fans, as users added new pieces of trivia to previous ideas. Turner (2023) has already delved into this process of collective creativity, which is further explored as a linguistic phenomenon in its various stages as a “meme” by Filardo-Llamas and Roldán-García (2025). The influence of Tumblr as a social media platform on *Goncharov* falls outside the scope of this paper, which uncovers the sociocultural and historical knowledge constituting its cognitive frames—i.e., its text worlds. This does not necessarily entail, however, that Tumblr will be fully excluded from the analysis, as *Goncharov* conglomerates the experiences and views of the world of all of the Tumblr users involved in the creation of *Goncharov*.

To any Tumblr outsider, “Goncharov” may, first and foremost, remind them of the name of a person. However, if they were informed that the term actually refers to the title of a movie, they are more likely to assume it is the name of a character, rather than that of a person from reality. Now, if they were also let on the fact that Goncharov is a character much loved by Tumblr, and if they were vaguely aware of the reputation of Tumblr as a social media platform, they would probably imagine Goncharov to be not only a fictional entity, but a LGBTQ+ fictional entity or, at least, a presumed LGBTQ+ fictional entity. However, if instead of fixating on the dimension of Goncharov as a character, they delved into the concept of *Goncharov* as a hypothetical cultural artifact, other ideas would spur their mind. If they discovered that Scorsese had directed *Goncharov* in 1973, certain expectations would rise around the aesthetic and the topic of the movie. If they were also in the know of the presence of LGBTQ+ characters, another set of notions would join the previous suppositions. The sequence of thoughts which the previous lines gather condenses the succession of frames, knowledge schemas, and assumptions which structure the two main text worlds constituting *Goncharov*: the cultural artifact, and the character. The following subsections will dissect the cognitive blocks found in these text worlds, and their manifestation in *Goncharov*.

4.2.1 GONCHAROV: THE CULTURAL ARTIFACT

Goncharov is said to be a mafia movie by Scorsese from 1973. With titles such as *Mean Streets* (1973), or *Taxi Driver* (1976), Scorsese is mostly known as a movie director and is associated with the genre of mafia movies (Film Affinity n.d.), which renders the association of notions underlying the conception of *Goncharov* unsurprising. Consequently, within the text world of *Goncharov* as a cultural artifact features the frames “mafia movie,” “Scorsese filmography,” and “movie industry.”

When Tumblr users, as in (1), attempt to discuss the plot of *Goncharov*, they introduce elements—such as violence, crime, and murder—which one would expect from any mafia movie. *Goncharov* involves Andrei and Sofia, among various Italian characters. The US collective imaginary often stereotypically links this nation with the idea of mafia,

and Scorsese explores this intersection in movies such as *Mean Streets* (1973) with its Italo-American protagonists. However, the main characters of *Goncharov* are Goncharov himself and Katya, a Russian married couple. The filmography of Scorsese is yet to focus on the Russian mafia; thus, this piece of knowledge is rather derived from the stereotypes and assumptions of the broad mafia movie genre.

1) Set in Naples and involving a drug ring/mafia. The plot seems to involve Russian organized crime attempting to get a foothold in Italy. (GF_012)

Tragedy is another element of mafia movies which one finds in other productions by Scorsese too. As (2) explains, *Goncharov* concludes with the murder of its eponymous protagonist, and as (3) discusses, Katya at some point dies or fakes her death, which may hint at an open ending. All these plot lines are frequent narrative devices which the frame “mafia movie” evokes.

2) Goncharov dies a lonely, desolate man, having alienated everyone who cares for him (GF_144)

3) [S]ome posts claim katya dies, others claim she fakes her death and survives (GF_066)

Movies do not exist in isolation. Movies emerge, develop, and launch as part of an industry with its own idiosyncrasy, of which Scorsese is a successful example. Thus, the US cultural assumptions of the movie industry also appear in the text world of *Goncharov* as a cultural artifact. Scorsese usually works with a fixed set of performers, who repeatedly appear in different roles across his many productions (Codega 2022). Hence, the choice of Robert de Niro as Goncharov and Harvey Keitel as Andrey activates the knowledge of the long-lasting collaboration between these two actors and Scorsese. Other constituents of the movie industry frame involve the supposed marketing and publicity of *Goncharov*. The expected movie promotion, for example, inspire many users to create posters for *Goncharov*, as seen in Figure 2². These posters gather many visual cues that also activate the frame of a mafia movie, such as weapons, bullet holes, or the burning vehicle.

Figure 2 also acknowledges the inner workings of the movie industry, referring not only to the performers, but also to the writers, producers, and director. Moreover, *Goncharov*, like any other movie from the 20th century, apparently had a premiere (GF_002), merchandising (GF_128), and a digital launch in DVD format (GF_075). *Goncharov* has endured the criticism of movie specialists (GF_137) and the general public in the form of Letterboxd reviews, which Figure 3 illustrates. Figure 3, once again, returns to the concept of a mafia movie and mentions some of its most remarkable features, like the episodes of violence (“shooting”), and the stilled dialogues (“boring conversations”).

² The artists who appear in these subsections have been duly notified of the use and the purpose of their artwork in this paper and have informedly given their consent.



Fig 2. A Goncharov poster (GF_o24) (artist: beelzebub <https://www.tumblr.com/beelzebub/701284869475614720/goncharov-1973-dir-martin-scorsese-the?source=share>).

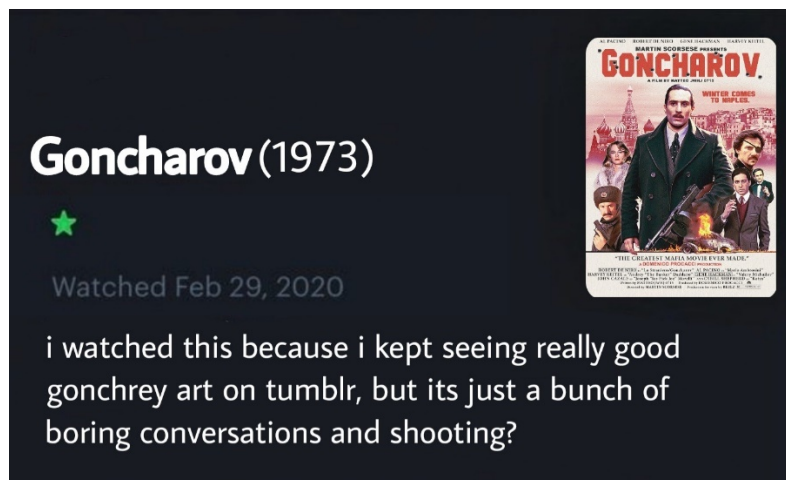


Fig 3. An edited image of a Letterboxd review (GF_o55) (artist: celia monsterhospital <https://www.tumblr.com/monsterhospital/701394032793960448/a-few-of-of-my-favorite-goncharov-reviews-on?source=share>).

Lastly, within the “movie industry” frame, spread the notions around cult movies, which some films from Scorsese are considered to be (e.g., *Mean Streets*) (Burton 2024). In fact, “cult classic” (GF_o44) is once used to describe *Goncharov*. The expected audience of this genre, another important player in the movie industry, also appears in some posts, as “film bros” (GF_o70) or “film buffs” (GF_100). However, unlike most of the filmography of Scorsese, these users admit *Goncharov* does not reach this typical audience—“film buffs will hate you for liking this film” (GF_100). Hence, the uncharacteristic public of

Goncharov links back to the frame of “fandom” from the discourse world Tumblr, which also features in Figure 3. The portmanteau “Gonchrey” alludes to the hypothetical romantic relationship between Goncharov and Andrey and represents one of the most common practices among Tumblr fandom (Morimoto 2018): shipping³. This leads us to the other text world “Goncharov” elicits—a (fictional) person, who is said to belong to the LGBTQ+ community in the 1970s, this fact shaping most of his later development.

In brief, “Goncharov” as a cultural artifact relies on three main frames: “Scorsese’s filmography,” “mafia movie,” and “movie industry.” Within “Scorsese’s filmography” one finds assumptions such as a fixed cast of actors, the production of cult classics, and the tragic nature of most Scorsese’s films. The frame “mafia movie” presents other underlying presuppositions—for instance, the presence of violence and crime, and the locations of Italy and Russia. The last frame, “movie industry,” encompasses other concepts like the process of production, marketing, and publicity of a film, and the reception from an audience in which critics, “film buffs”, and “Tumblr fandom” co-exist. Most of these notions and expectations occupy a well-established place in US popular culture, eroding the idea of “Goncharov” as a phenomenon that came out of nowhere, and aligning with previous scholars who point at the remarkably US-centric stance of Tumblr users (Klink et al. 2020, 171). Finally, these three main frames are interrelated, since they share some cognitive units—e.g., the presence of violence and death in mafia movies and thus in the productions of Scorsese—and, consequently, any of them may activate the other two.

Of all the elements of the plot of *Goncharov* the romantic relationships between the four main characters—Goncharov, Andrey, Katya, and Sofia—attracted most attention from Tumblr users. This meant that many posts revolved around this part of the plot, albeit limited by the already discussed mental structures so as not to shatter the illusion of coherence and plausibility. The fan approach to this inexistent film functions as the bridge between the text world of the cultural artifact and the second text world of the specifics of the character of Goncharov.

4.2.2 GONCHAROV: THE CHARACTER

Goncharov owes its title to its protagonist, who stirred up much passion from Tumblr fans. The sexuality of Goncharov and Katya, his wife, is often a topic of discussion on Tumblr. *Goncharov* is introduced as a production “overrun with homoeroticism” (GF_100), which features a “love square” (GF_129) between Goncharov and Andrey, and Katya and Sofia. Tumblr has gained a reputation in popular culture due to its transgressive and queer perspective on media (Romano and Minkel 2020, 63). Besides, Tumblr was the soil in which the current notion of fandom fructified (Morimoto 2018). Fandom is

³ The fan support of, and desire for, two or more characters ending up in a romantic relationship (Romano 2016).

ingrained in Tumblr culture in the same manner Tumblr is ingrained in fandom culture. The analysis of the allegedly homoerotic subtext of *Goncharov* was often guided by the interest of those Tumblr users in the relationship between Goncharov and Andrey, and Katya and Sofia, who they wish would have ended up together. The support to these pairings materialized in the use of tags explicitly stating the couples they rooted for: “Katya x Sofia” and “Goncharov x Andrey” as seen in GF_032, GF_060, or GF_068, or in the publication of fanfiction⁴ on Archive of Our Own (AO3) about these two romances, which posts GF_100, and GF_120 discuss and celebrate. In this fashion, “Goncharov” the cultural artifact met the fervor and intensity of Tumblr fandom culture (Romano and Minkel 2020, 67), and gained the momentum that would allow it to escape the confines of Tumblr, due to the amount of activity around it.

However, for the fabrication of *Goncharov* to succeed, the ideas Tumblr users invoked had to agree and partly converge with those already described in the first subsections of the analysis. Unsurprisingly, a quick glance at the filmography of Scorsese from the early days of his career would suffice to sentence that none of the titles present any LGBTQ+ characters nor plotlines. As already mentioned in previous sections, in the 1970s LGBTQ+ representation in the media was rare and stereotypical, and the audience was not particularly welcoming towards it. For a novice writer and director such as Scorsese in 1973, introducing a LGBTQ+ narrative in his work certainly constituted a risky choice which could compromise his future position in the industry. Had Scorsese truly conceived and directed *Goncharov* as Tumblr managed to convince the world, would he evoke all the frames within the “Goncharov: cultural artifact” text world? The answer seems to be “no, he would not,” if the categorization of *Goncharov* as “lost media” (GF_126) serves of any indication. In this manner, Tumblr users acknowledged the pushback a production like *Goncharov* may have faced in its alleged time period and proposed an explanation for its decades-long disappearance. However, Tumblr fandom thrives in queer readings of media, which falter if one follows too closely the content of the expected script of a film from the 1970s. Consequently, the introduction of the notion of heteronormativity⁵ accommodates these two initially irreconcilable dimensions. This concept fits alongside other assumptions and expectations from the frame “Scorsese’s filmography,” connecting the former and the frame “LGBTQ+ representation in the 1970s,” and prompting the multiple interpretations of the dynamics in *Goncharov* which the corpus collected.

⁴ Written texts by fans who explicitly employ and delve into a preexisting fictional work, such as a novel franchise, a TV show, or a movie (Romano 2016).

⁵ The expectation that heterosexuality is the norm and that everybody assumes and is assumed to be heterosexual (European Institute for Gender Equality 2016).

Goncharov and Katya are in a “loveless marriage” (GF_o66) which “slowly crumbles” as a result of “Goncharov’s growing closeness with Andrey” (GF_105). This plot line follows the common cheating trope within LGBTQ+ media: The protagonist starts the narrative in a heterosexual relationship only to cheat on their partner with someone of their same gender (Monawarah 2022, 12). Furthermore, this situation reflects the real-life circumstances of many LGBTQ+ individuals in the 1970s, who entered heterosexual marriages to protect themselves from the rampant homophobia of the period (Monawarah 2022, 12). Thus, despite their alleged romantic interests, Katya and Goncharov play the expected role of a heterosexual couple in love, as illustrated in scenes of physical closeness such as Figure 4, featuring a *Muppets* rendition of *Goncharov* in which Katya (Miss Peggy) is talking to Goncharov (Kermit). It must be remarked, moreover, that in spite of their nationalities (Russian and Italian), both Katya and Sofia take the last name of their respective husbands—Katya Goncharov, and Sofia Daddano (GF_129)—revealing not only a heteronormative, but also Anglocentric view of marriage.

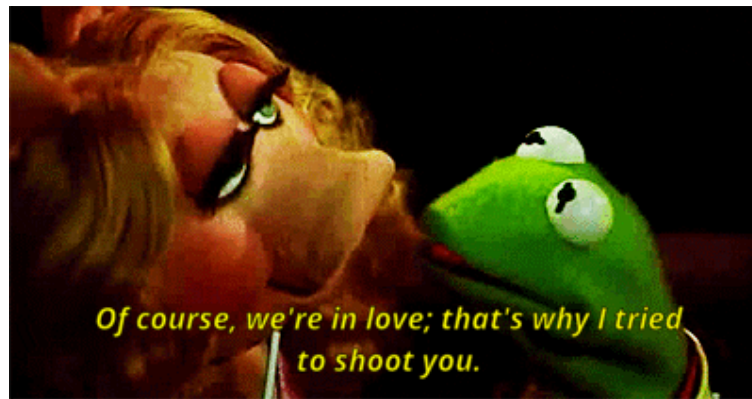


Fig 4. A *Muppets* adaptation of a *Goncharov* scene (GF_o16). (artist: moths-in-hats <https://www.tumblr.com/moths-in-hats/703555845465767936/the-muppets-as-goncharov-1973-the-only-goncharov?source=share>).

The next knowledge schema within the “LGBTQ+ media in the 1970s” frame—“homoeeroticism”—partly collides with the “mafia movie” frame, since the world of violence and immorality in which the *Goncharov* characters exist coincides with the usual depiction of LGBTQ+ individuals in the media from the 1970s. Furthermore, the tragic ending of *Goncharov*, the protagonist, matches not only the expectations for a mafia movie of Scorsese, but also for the unavoidable resolution of a LGBTQ+ character during this decade. Nevertheless, the death or disappearance of LGBTQ+ characters from popular media still remains to these days a frequent occurrence, with which many Tumblr fandoms are well-familiarized (Riese 2024). Consequently, as much as the murder of *Goncharov* and later (fake) death of *Katya* may be a result of the activation of the “LGBTQ+ media in the 1970s” frame and its corresponding assumptions, it might also be partly derived from another frame—“LGBTQ+ media in the 21st century”—which also shapes the knowledge of many Tumblr users. After all, even though it was not a novelty, the “Bury Your Gays” trope did

not rise to prominence in the popular imagery until a few years ago, when viewers actively started to protest against it (Maesar 2022).

As for the degree of homoeroticism of *Goncharov*, there was some disagreement among those users arguing that the romance between Goncharov and Andrey, and Katya and Sofia, belonged to the subtext of the movie, and those users depicting their relationship as an explicit part of the plot. The former group is suggesting the kind of LGBTQ+ presence one would expect from a movie in the 1970s, with terms and phrases such as “homoerotic undertones” (GF_070) or “wants Goncharov bad (subtext)” (GF_129). These posts also included many past hypotheticals, like “if Andrey and Goncharov confessed their feelings for each other” (GF_082), pointing at the different manners in which the narrative could have evolved had the homoeroticism been acknowledged.

The latter group is formulating assumptions from the perspective of an audience from the 21st century, and departing from the frames and structures contained in the mental space “LGBTQ+ representation from the 1970s.” They often rely on artistic renditions of scenes from the movie. For example, (4) reproduces a description of a set of drawings from which Figure 5 was extracted. The user states the illustrations follow the script of a scene from *Goncharov*, adding another layer of plausibility to the phenomenon and briefly returning to the text world of “Goncharov” as a cultural artifact. In Figure 5, Katya alludes to the relationship between her husband and Andrey: “But the only reason he still loves *you* is because he hasn’t found a way to use you.” The romantic nature of this bond is clarified in the tags of the post, in which the user elaborates that “Andrei desperately wanting to be Goncharov’s closest confidant (and lover).”

4) I’m obsessed with That Scene(tm) between Katya and Andrei in the California Director’s Cut Rerelease of *Goncharov*, so I did a lighting study inspired by the film’s Art Deco Posters! (GF_038)



Fig 5. Fanart of a *Goncharov* scene from involving Katya and Andrey (artist: Peyton Parker—secretmellowblog on Tumblr <https://www.tumblr.com/secretmellowblog/701843091358892032/my-husband-is-a-man-who-collects-things-he-can?source=share>).

Similarly, Figure 6 is introduced as “A study of the symbolism in Goncharov (1973)” (GF_077) thus transforming the illustrations into “actual” scenes from *Goncharov*. Figure 6 presents an intimate scene between Sofia and Katya, who appear to be kissing on a bed. This representation attempts against what one would expect from LGBTQ+ characters in the 1970s, a time in which they were relegated to symbolic subtext, and in which their sexuality could not be explicitly involved in the narrative (Montgomery 1981, 56). Furthermore, the complexity and agency Tumblr users grant Katya—for example, in Figure 4, she is the one delivering the threat to Goncharov, and in Figure 5 the conversation concludes with her advising Andrey to leave Naples—clashes with the usual representation of a fictional queer woman in the 1970s, who would have more likely been relegated to the background as a secondary character, or as a mere companion of her husband. Moreover, linked to the previous discussion of the trope “Bury Your Gays,” some posts transformed the initially proposed death of Katya into a planned fake death (GF_012, GF_066), so that Katya survived and escaped the fate of many LGBTQ+ characters in the 1970s and the present time. This choice, however, contradicts the system of frames and structures of knowledge underlying “Goncharov,” slightly fragmenting the illusion of a cohesive phenomenon.



Fig 6. Fanart from a Goncharov scene between Katya and Sofia (GF_077) (artist: Chelsea Goerzen—neverominiart on Tumblr <https://www.tumblr.com/neverominiart/701598000919740416/a-study-of-the-symbolism-in-goncharov-1973?source=share>)

This friction encapsulates the very essence of *Goncharov* as a phenomenon. Despite its origins from the 1970s, it was born in 2022 in an online space with a strong presence of the LGBTQ+ community. Consequently, “Goncharov” as an entity evokes two text worlds: the character Goncharov, and the movie *Goncharov*. As a movie, *Goncharov* relies on the frames of “mafia movie,” “Scorsese filmography,” and “movie industry,” some of which further unfold into other knowledge structures. As a character, Goncharov evokes one particular dimension of human experience—sexuality—and induces notions related to

the frame of “LGBTQ+ characters in the 1970s”—“heteronormativity” and “homoerotic subtext” among others—as well as others related to that of “LGBTQ+ characters in the 21st century.” The last one connects the phenomenon of *Goncharov* back to its discourse world, Tumblr.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Bearing in mind the text worlds and their respective frames and structures, Figure 7 summarizes the concepts and notions associated with the word “Goncharov” in the context of Tumblr.

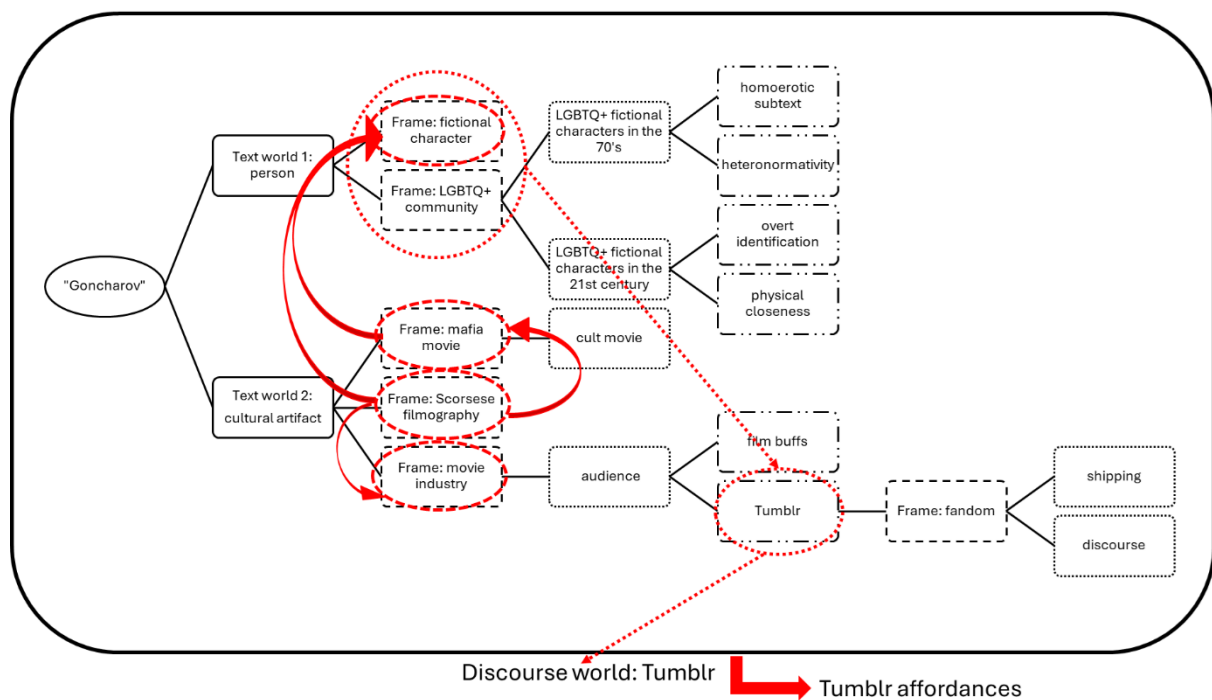


Fig 7. A summary of the cognitive structures triggered by the term “Goncharov” in the discourse world of Tumblr

As seen in Figure 7, “Goncharov” is the dynamic product of the frames “mafia movie,” “Scorsese filmography,” “movie industry,” “fictional character,” and “LGBTQ+ character.” These frames do not exist in a bubble; hence, they interact and often overlap. For example, both mafia movies and productions by Scorsese contain fictional characters. In a similar vein, the filmography of Scorsese must be understood in the general context of the genre of mafia movies, and the industry to which Scorsese belongs. In a less direct sense, the combination of fictional characters and the LGBTQ+ community may evoke the notion of Tumblr which is, at the same time, part of the bigger frame of fandom. The concept of Tumblr—the assumptions one may hold about the platform—must not be confused with the actual social media network in which the phenomenon of *Goncharov* takes place, yet it refers back to it, and to its affordances.

Thus, while *Goncharov* was born and developed on Tumblr, rendering it an undoubtedly Tumblr event, *Goncharov* also owes much of its content to other frames and knowledge outside of Tumblr, such as the genre of mafia movies, the filmography of Scorsese, or the conflicting history of LGBTQ+ representation in movies and TV shows. Thus, *Goncharov* is an inexistent film whose narrative and content arise from the well-known cinematographic work of Scorsese, and the historical and cultural context in which *Goncharov* is said to have been produced—the United States in the 1970s.

Nevertheless, “Goncharov” introduces new knowledge in some well-established frames. For instance, the focus on the Russian mob in Naples and its appeal to a Tumblr audience separate *Goncharov* from the rest of the production of Scorsese. More remarkably, the past and the present of LGBTQ+ media crash in “Goncharov.” “Goncharov” induces both the common presuppositions about LGBTQ+ characters in the 1970s—heteronormativity and homoerotic subtext, and the expectations of LGBTQ+ representation from Tumblr users as viewers from the 21st century. The occasional overt nature of the romance between Goncharov and Andrey, and Katya and Sofia, discards the expected implicit connotations frequent in LGBTQ+ characters from the 1970s, and foregrounds the presumptions and desires of a contemporary LGBTQ+ audience as well as their fears—e.g., the “Bury Your Gays” trope. Consequently, “Goncharov” reconciles both the experience and hopes of the LGBTQ+ community when it comes to media, triggering a consciously contrastive dialogue between old and present trends in LGBTQ+ representation.

Lastly, this study faces some limitations, such as its small ad-hoc corpus, or the unavoidable bias of the author. Despite the attempt at objectivity, the circumstances of the scholar as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and a Tumblr user for over a decade influence their view on the topic. Nevertheless, this same context has also guided and enriched the analysis, due to a first-person knowledge of the platform. Finally, this work leaves the door open for future venues of research of the cultural and cognitive ramifications of other Internet phenomena which may initially be dismissed as mere memes or jokes.

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