

*Late Soviet and Post-
Soviet Necro-
Aesthetics*

Motherland Death: Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Necro-Aesthetics (A Short Introduction)

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The content cluster below has been put together as a contribution to death and immortality studies (see e.g. Khapaeva 2017), with an East European twist (see e.g. Bernstein 2019; Sofronov 2022; Jianu and Lazar 2023; and Epshtein 2023). The articles in the cluster encompass the period from the 1980s to the present day, i.e., from one global shift, signified by the fall of the USSR, to the next, signalled by COVID, Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine, the world's division into increasingly isolated and antagonistic segments, and the return of the threat of a nuclear apocalypse.

In the context of East European studies, the topic of death has been primarily explored by anthropologists (see e.g. Mokhov 2021 and the academic journal *Arkheologiya russkoi smerti*, nos 1-6, 2015-18). Researching necroaesthetics (i.e. a beautification of death in East European culture) is an underdeveloped field. In the 1980s-1990s, necroaesthetics reflected the gradual disintegration of Soviet society and individuals through necrorealism (see Lars Kristensen's article in this cluster), the so-called schizo-revolution of St Petersburg art scene (see Khlobystin 2017), the National Bolshevik Party and its Moscow newspaper *Limonka* (see Fenghi 2020, Chapter 2), the *chernukha* film genre (see Isakava 2017), songs by the Siberian punk band *Grazhdanskaia Oborona* (see Chernyi 2014), heroin chic in fashion (which arrived in Russia in the late 1990s, see Kushnir 2021), and so on.

During the relatively prosperous 2000s, the chill of afterlife diminished its attraction for authors and artists, yet it made a comeback with the advent of *russskii mir* ("Russian World"), an intellectual and institutional "attempt at conceptualising the identity of Russia and her place in the post-Soviet space, with strong reference to the spread of Russian language and culture" (Wawrzonek 2021: 19), by force of arms if necessary.

According to the cluster's authors, the current revival of necroaesthetics has been prompted by the Kremlin's adoption, in the early 2010s, of conservative values, characterised, in particular, by the development of the cult of Victory (over Nazism, see Walker 2022) and the return of patriotic hero as a principal role model in popular culture

(a long process with post-Soviet roots in the late 1990s, see e.g. Norris 2012). Today, nostalgic necrophilia dominates official Russian culture and politics, with its constant recycling of the Soviet era, evident, for example, in the processions carrying ancestors' portraits (known as *bessmertnyi polk*, or the Immortal Regiment, see polkrf.ru) at the annual Victory parades, and in the digital resurrection of once popular (now deceased) actors and singers (see Nemchinova 2022), e.g. for the New Year's Eve TV show *Goluboi ogonek* ("Blue Light"). A symbolic revitalisation of the dead has also been practised by the Kremlin's countercultural opposition, which, in competition with the officialdom, seeks to reappropriate death (cf. the Party of the Dead phenomenon, see Agitatsia 2021).

The articles in this cluster deal with necroaesthetics from various angles. Lars Kristensen analyses its manifestations in contemporary Russian cinema through Mikhail Brashinsky's film *Waves* (2023), situating it between Western necropolitical theories and the Russian tradition of necrorealism, exemplified by Evgenii Yufit. Kristensen argues that *Waves* moves beyond necrorealism by developing an allegorical critique of post-Soviet authoritarianism that encourages political awareness and viewer responsibility.

Andrei Rogatchevski examines how death is conceptualised in the artistic, political and military activities of Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party through psychoanalytical and metaphysical frameworks, using Limonov and Zakhar Prilepin as case studies against the backdrop of post-Communist wars in Europe and Mbembe's theory of necropolitics. The article also explores the interaction between the party's grass-root necropolitics and the Kremlin's state-level necropower.

Thomas Drew's paper analyses how the Russian state has memorialised war casualties since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, drawing on (post-)Soviet visual traditions to use the war dead for propaganda and social engineering. Drew argues that these necroimages underpin state mythmaking, and interprets the Putinist regime's self-image as a death mask.

Finally, Emma Rimpiläinen traces the post-Soviet zombie as a cultural figure from the demise of the USSR up to the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, showing how it articulates social anxieties about influence, communication and power, rather than about physical contagion. In the context of the current Russo-Ukrainian war, zombification becomes a rhetorical and ethical tool for distrusting communication, managing responsibility for the beliefs of one's loved ones, and diagnosing the workings of power, with the implication that anyone can become zombified.

This cluster is the first publication within the international research network "Necroaesthetics and Necropolitics in Contemporary Eastern Europe", initiated and coordinated by Maria Engström and Andrei Rogatchevski.

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