

Towards Necroaesthetics in Contemporary Russian Cinema

Original research article

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Abstract:

This article examines the emergence of necroaesthetics in contemporary Russian cinema through an analysis of Mikhail Brashinsky's 2023 film *Volny* (*Waves*). Drawing on the theoretical framework of necropolitics as outlined by Achille Mbembe, the study distinguishes between Western conceptions of necroaesthetics and the uniquely Russian tradition of necrorealism, particularly in the works of Evgenii Yufit. The analysis identifies how *Volny* draws lines to the aesthetics of necrorealism, incorporating intertextual references. However, in *Volny*, Brashinsky must construct his own framework of post-Soviet authoritarianism that can be aligned with a neoliberal critique. Through the film's three-part structure – the main protagonist's retreat into nature, his immersion in a death cult, and the confessional aftermath – the paper argues that *Waves* offers a critical reflection on grand narratives, belief systems and sovereign power. Ultimately, the film presents a form of necroaesthetics that goes beyond necrorealism by adding allegorical critiques to the political system. It is argued that this creates a space for political awareness and viewer responsibility in an era marked by ethical uncertainty and authoritarian resurgence.

Introduction

At our local art museum in Skövde, Sweden, an exhibition opened in the fall of 2022 titled *The Chance of Survival at the Time of Necropolitics* by Chto Delat? and The Party of the Dead. It was only six months after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. The museum staff told me they had envisioned an onslaught from the public about the relevance of displaying Russian artists at their local museum – artists who could be considered complicit in the war against their landlocked neighbour. However, the public backlash did not happen – as it usually does not in our small town. Thinking about this later, it seemed even more significant that the exhibition’s announcement referencing necro-politics did not cause offence. Recalling Ella Shohat’s perceptive article, ‘Note on the “Post-colonial”’ (Shohat 1992), in which she registers a shift in attitudes toward the term *postcolonial* grounded in the geopolitical changes brought about by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, one might ask whether a similar shift can be detected in the passing of *necropolitics* in the exhibition title going largely unnoticed. Perhaps necropolitics is now understood as a natural extension of the postcolonial perspective, which has shaped the politics of art exhibitions ever since postcolonialism emerged as an academic discipline (Cohen, Torshizi & Zamindar 2023).

A second observation that guides this paper comes from *The Guardian* (2024), which featured an article about the science of death. According to the scientists cited, “death is not a point but a process.” One of them, Belgian neuroscientist Charlotte Martial, argues that we need to reconsider the relationship between consciousness and responsiveness, and “maybe [even] question every state that we consider unconscious” (Blasdel 2024). The way these researchers describe their topic and push the boundaries of death into a state of unconsciousness resonated with the artworks of The Party of the Dead, now exiled in cities like Berlin, Vienna, or Tel Aviv. They too seek to push death into the consciousness of their audiences.

One of the artworks in the exhibition was Chto Delat?’s *Canary Archives*. This piece draws allegories from the function of canaries in the mining industry, where the death of a caged bird signalled the presence of toxic gases. Similarly, in this artwork, the cage functions as a warning system for detecting a toxic environment. However, whereas birds were once the warning, in Russia today it is the artists who are the first to be strangled by the totalitarian atmosphere. Using this metaphor of a warning system for the slow progression into totalitarianism, this paper aims to analyse one film to assess whether cinematic indicators of totalitarianism can be detected.

The selection of material for analysis is deliberately limited. I will use one filmmaker and, in particular, one film to illustrate my argument. This is, of course, methodologically problematic if the goal is to make claims about Russian cinema as a whole. My aim is to use Mikhail Brashinsky as a case study to pinpoint trends or currents in contemporary Russian cinema. Brashinsky becomes my cinematic canary – used to

detect the toxic gas of necropolitics. Before turning to Brashinsky's film, we need to define necroaesthetics as it manifests in art.

There is a direct lineage to necroaesthetics from Achille Mbembe's definitions of necropolitics, tied to the postcolonial production of "death-worlds," where the extraction of resources and human lives leads to a condition of living death (Mbembe 2003: 40). Necroaesthetics is formed out of the desire to make the condition of living death visible – to give "death-worlds" a voice. The argument here is that the necroaesthetics found in Brashinsky's work is closely tied to necropolitics – a consequence of growing totalitarianism – rather than arising from a purely aesthetic condition. The necroaesthetics of *Waves* is driven by a desire to critique sovereign control over individual freedom. The film divided critics: some condemned it (Kichin 2023), while others saw in it a glimmer of hope (Chernova 2023; Il'ina 2023). Its production was torturous and laborious, with several setbacks – COVID-19 among them (Stepanov 2022). Nevertheless, I argue that Brashinsky and his film *Waves* provide an excellent case through which we can assess the evolution of necroaesthetics in Russian cinema.

In the early 2000s, Sergei Medvedev (2025: 43–44) argues, Russian politics underwent a 'corporeal turn', characterized by an intensified focus on bodies, health, and life as objects of political control. This turn can be understood as closely linked to the emergence of necroaesthetics, in which body politics occupy a central position. As concepts of hygiene, classification, and population management increasingly entered political discourse (Medvedev 2025: 43–44), the distinction between necrorealism and necroaesthetics became more pronounced, with the latter foregrounding forms of otherness produced through such discursive regimes. Moreover, in the transition from biopolitics to necropolitics, death itself becomes a governing principle that drives political action, as exemplified by the deployment of soldiers to the front lines (Terry 2024: 313). Within this neo-colonial context, the Russo-Ukrainian war "can be seen as a typical example of Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics" (Makarychev & Medvedev 2024: 123). While the war represents a culmination of the corporeal turn, I will argue that Brashinsky's filmmaking can be read as an early manifestation of the same shift.

Brashinsky's film will be set against the necrorealism of Evgenii Yufit, who best personifies the necrorealist perspective (Berry & Miller-Pogacar 1996). According to Fenghi, necrorealism of the 1990s is characterized by "intellectual freedom, creativity, and radicalism" (Fenghi 2023: 256), which is markedly different from the current cultural climate in Russia where culture is seen as an 'engine' for social transformation (Murawski 2022). My claim is that Brashinsky makes explicit references to Yufit and the necrorealists through his film *Waves* and thus points in the direction of necroaesthetics.

Capturing the Necroaesthetics

Russian and Soviet colonialism were different from Western transatlantic trade industry that characterises the predominant perspective on colonialism. Etkind has controversially (Hansen 2023) argued that Russians were both colonisers and the colonised at the same time through internal colonisation (Etkind 2011), which is used to illustrate that “life is preserved and cultivated as an organic natural resource” (Makarychev & Medvedev 2024: 139). It is the argument of Makarychev and Medvedev (2024: 144) that Russia has moved from biopolitics into necropolitics through treating its own population as it an expendable commodity (whether in pandemics or wars), which is reminiscent of a colonial situation where overseas colonies were part of a widespread slave trade. In short, Russian necropolitics is included in the same process and procedures are comparable with a colonial situation. Internal colonialism produces that same systems of exploitation and power hierarchies where the death of some is necessitated by others. While Mbembe’s necropolitics is formulated out of a Western context, death-worlds are continuously produced through political action and can be detected within other forms of imperial construction, including the post-Soviet Russian case.

In the Western context, necroaesthetics has been considered a consequence of biopolitics, colonialism, and racism. The term follows in the wake of Mbembe’s work on necropolitics, in which he outlines how political regimes – often colonial authorities – have decided who may live and who must die. Slavery is just one condition in which life and death are intricately linked to body politics (Mbembe 2003). If necropolitics is “the expression of sovereignty that resides in the power to decide life and death,” then it is also “an emergent practice” within the realm of aesthetics (Lushetich 2018: 2). As mentioned, colonialism plays a major role, but so do contemporary political crises such as climate change, migration, and the plight of refugees.

For example, Verónica Tello examines the construction of the Silent University – an art project led and executed by migrants – as a collaborative effort within contemporary art’s critique of institutional frameworks. Crucially, this critique, which emerged in the 1970s, should not be seen as anti-institutional but rather as an attempt to preserve the art institution in a more egalitarian and transparent form (Tello 2018: 60). However, it is precisely this drive for institutional critique that attracts “artists to come and propel ‘recovery’ or elicit ‘empowerment,’” which reads as capital extraction from “death-worlds” (Tello 2018: 68). Another example is the aesthetics of environmental crisis, which, according to Hauser, serves to “hypercompensate for a systemic necropolitics that has variously taken the form of the increasing technical manipulation of living systems, ecologies, the biosphere and of very ‘un-green’ mechanisation which [...] has ‘taken command’ of life and death” (Hauser 2018: 97).

What becomes evident in the application of Mbembe’s necropolitics to aesthetics is that it aims to give voice to the voiceless. Necroaesthetics seeks to tell the stories of

silenced communities that inhabit the death-worlds Mbembe identifies – immigrants, sweatshop workers, and victims of climate change – those sacrificed by a global neoliberal economy that does not discriminate by country or ethnicity. All societies are affected. However, this aesthetic is not neutral; it emerges from capitalism’s continuous effort to extract wealth from others’ labour or resources.

Marina Gržinić (2018) argues that necrocapitalism hollows out images of poverty, suffering, and conflict to such an extent that it links aesthetic landscapes to death. Ultimately, necropolitical regimes produce the “beauty” of death (Gržinić 2018: 31). Interestingly, in post-communist contexts, this emphasis on image production is accompanied by a lack of articulation around colonial experience. Gržinić writes that the 1970s saw the imposition of what she terms “biopolitical amnesia” – not as a racializing process of forgetting but as a deficit of memory. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in the 1990s, the suppression of counter-history continued in the form of aphasia: a lack of language with which to address the colonial past (Gržinić 2018: 31). This inability to develop a language for colonial legacies is precisely why necroaesthetics emerges – it helps us see the unseeable, to sense what cannot yet be articulated in words.

While necroaesthetics may appear more direct and detectable in certain artists' work, it also signals the rise of anti-globalist nationalism, as seen in Russia over the past two decades. Berardi (2018: 93) writes: “[t]he necro-aesthetic is the attunement of sensibility and of perceptual expectations to the current drift to extermination that is the key feature of the Trump age”. The “Trump age” could easily be replaced by the “Putin age.” Berardi argues that the necropolitics of the ‘strong man’ appeals to those who feel abandoned by the neoliberal marketplace – those who have lost status and security in the face of an unrestricted global economy. These individuals, seeking revenge, are often drawn to reactionary politics – Brexit, protectionist tariffs, or anti-woke rhetoric. In his view, “[t]he cult of superiority returns in the neoliberal age in the guise of social Darwinist competition, which despises those who cannot survive the ‘Natural Selection of the Market.’ Fascism, on the other hand, may be seen as an aggressive resentment of the historical game’s losers” (Berardi 2018: 88–89).

It is my argument here that the silent majority of Russians who support Putin’s warfare are among these historical game’s losers. The loss of empire, according to Anton Shekhovtsov (2025), is central to Putin’s quest for symbolic immortality. The Cold War’s outcome plunged Putin into revisionist thinking that has ultimately placed him within a necropolitical framework – one that seeks to distinguish between good deaths and bad deaths. Good deaths are those that further the return of the Soviet empire; bad deaths are those that attempt to prevent it – NATO, the EU, liberalism, or “woke” politics.

Neoliberalism itself does not oppose this logic of “good” versus “bad” deaths. However, it is important to distinguish between **thanatopolitics** and **necropolitics**. The former concerns the governance of death and the production of meaningful deaths – of

“good deaths” (Grue 2022) – while the latter links back to biopolitics and is connected to Nazi-era ideologies of racial extermination. In my view, this ties Russia’s war in Ukraine to the necropolitics of imperial nation-building.

This is essential because, as this paper argues, the necroaesthetics of Brashinsky’s film *Waves* represents a response not directly to the Russian army’s meat grinder in Eastern Ukraine, but to the failed promise of neoliberalism. It expresses the experience of losing the neoliberal game. What links the necroaesthetics in *Waves* to the necropolitics of Putin’s regime is Berardi’s “cult of superiority” in a neoliberal era where the strongest survive – while death-worlds are left behind.

Brashinsky: The Canary Bird of Russian Cinema

Mikhail Brashinsky emerged on the Russian cinema radar in the early 2000s with the drama *Gololed* (*Black Ice* 2002), although by then he had already established himself as a film critic. Together with Andrew Horton, Brashinsky co-edited two volumes on Glasnost cinema – *The Zero Hour: Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition* (1992) and *Russian Critics on the Cinema of Glasnost* (1994). Having been educated partly in Russia and the United States, Brashinsky was well positioned to contribute to the growing interest in post-Soviet Russian cinema following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This dual cultural background carries over into his filmmaking practice, resulting in films that do not resemble much else produced in Russia at the time. In addition to his work as a scriptwriter, translator, and producer, his directorial films stand out as unique and somewhat anomalous in the post-Soviet Russian cinematic landscape.

This singularity makes Brashinsky easily comparable to international filmmakers. Quentin Tarantino is often referenced in connection with Brashinsky – not only because both make extensive use of allusions to film history and genre conventions, but also because of the deliberate pacing with which they develop and release their work. Neither filmmaker rushes projects; instead, they spend considerable time shaping their scripts before bringing them to the screen.

This international sensibility was already evident in Birgit Beumers’ review of *Black Ice*, where she references influences such as *Dogma 95* and ‘post-human’ cinema (Beumers 2003). *Black Ice* is a fragmented, fast-paced portrait of emotional alienation in Moscow around the turn of the millennium. The narrative centres on two figures: a lawyer who has left her husband and becomes entangled in a dangerous legal scheme, and a gay translator who becomes obsessed with her after a chance encounter in a hospital. Neither character can truly connect with others, trapped in self-absorption and unable to recognize love even when it is offered. Their paths intersect only fleetingly as they spiral deeper into isolation and dissatisfaction. Avoiding traditional narrative structures, the film presents a sequence of missed opportunities and failed encounters, underscoring the characters’ inability to see beyond their immediate desires. Visually,

this fragmentation is mirrored through rapid editing, hand-held camera work, and a surplus of close-ups that deny the audience a clear sense of spatial orientation. *Black Ice* portrays a world in which the speed of urban life has frozen emotional connection, leaving characters trapped in a dehumanizing cycle of desire and disappointment.

If *Black Ice* is a fast-paced, entangled narrative, then *Shopping Tour* (2012) is a slower, more coherent genre film. A satirical horror-comedy, *Shopping Tour* transforms a mundane day trip into a grotesque nightmare. The story unfolds through the lens of a teenage boy's mobile phone camera as he documents a bus trip to Finland with his mother. Initially framed as a shopping excursion, the trip takes a dark turn when the Russian tourists arrive at a Finnish shopping centre, only to be locked in and hunted by their hosts, who morph into zombies. The drama escalates into genre pastiche as every Finn seems determined to consume the "tasty" Russian shoppers. The mother and son struggle to survive, uncovering personal secrets along the way – her hidden smoking habit, his sexual orientation, and their unresolved family tensions. In my reading (Kristensen 2014), their flight through the shopping mall's back corridors exposes the "backside" of capitalist excess, where human life is commodified and consumed like merchandise. Through a mix of irony and horror, the film critiques Russian consumerism and the complicity of Russians in a system that feeds on materialism.

Although necropolitics are not overtly addressed in these two earlier films, both engage with contemporary political themes. Retrospectively, necropolitical tendencies can be detected. In *Black Ice*, the individual characters' various paths ultimately lead to death or dead-ends, with egotistic desires serving as their downfall. More directly, *Shopping Tour* visualizes Mbembe's "death-worlds" by exposing capitalism's underbelly. Still, it is in *Waves* that Brashinsky confronts necropolitics explicitly, making it the central focus of this paper.

Waves follows Oleg, who escapes city life after his girlfriend's suicide and stumbles upon a forest commune that promises immortality through synchronization with the universe's "waves." The cult-like community resembles a summer camp, but those over 65 voluntarily submit to "the next level" – a so-called meaningful death. As Oleg becomes drawn to a single mother, Vera, and seduced by the commune's ideology, he is gradually pulled into its rituals. The commune eventually collapses in flames, leaving behind shame and confusion. The film ends ambiguously, with Oleg and Vera ascending an escalator toward an uncertain light – perhaps redemption, delusion, or merely another chapter in their journey.

I argue that Brashinsky incorporates film history into his filmmaking not just as an auteur or a genre pasticheur, but as a means of political commentary on contemporary Russian authoritarianism. In this view, Brashinsky draws upon elements of necrorealism from late Soviet cinema to articulate his critique of Russia's political trajectory over the past two decades – a period in which necropolitics has taken firm root not only in Russia but across the geopolitical landscape.

Together, these three films – *Black Ice*, *Shopping Tour*, and *Waves* – explore themes of love, alienation, consumerism, and the search for meaning through innovative genres and unsettling narratives that challenge the viewer. They reflect a growing tendency toward necroaesthetics in contemporary Russian cinema. The aim of this paper is to argue that necrorealism serves as a reference point for the development of necroaesthetics, as seen through the lens of Mikhail Brashinsky's filmmaking.

Soviet Necrorealism

As I aim to distinguish between *necrorealism*, which is particular to late Soviet and early post-Soviet Russia, and *necroaesthetics* as formulated by Western critics, it is essential to examine necrorealism more closely – especially the filmmaking of Evgenii Yufit. Why realism? Realism became the dominant mode in the Soviet Union through Socialist Realism, officially established in 1934 at the First Congress of Soviet Writers. In cinema, Socialist Realism marked a departure from the formalism of early Soviet film, such as montage cinema, which constructed reality by cutting and rearranging moving images. This approach emerged both from avant-garde aesthetics – where form and content were subject to experimentation – and from the technical constraints of the time, which only allowed for short segments of footage. These factors contributed to the celebrated tradition of Soviet montage cinema, though some critics saw this as problematic in terms of realism. French film theorist André Bazin, for instance, argued that Soviet formalism imposed a controlling mode of cinema that limited the audience's ability to interpret meaning from the images (Bazin 2005).

One could argue that the dominance of realism was institutionalized through Socialist Realism. Boris Groys contends that the formalist and avant-garde aesthetics of the early Soviet Union did not entirely vanish with the imposition of Socialist Realism (Groys 1992). While opponents suggest a clear rupture between these movements (see e.g., Kirn 2015), Groys maintains that, in terms of depicting reality, the aesthetic regime of realism remained intact. Whether there was a break or not is secondary to the current discussion; what matters is that realism was the dominant framework through which aesthetics was interpreted. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that necrorealism emerged as an attempt to construct a new form of realism in opposition to Socialist Realism, which necrorealists saw as empty as the political rhetoric it accompanied. Viktor Mazin argues that the necrorealists sought to double reality in pursuit of the impossible, a “double mimesis” (Mazin 2001: 30), which retains the framework of realism. For the necrorealists, the ‘necro-’ was the principle around which the movement revolved, and ‘realism’ was the defining aesthetic frame of representation (Mazin 2001: 32). The realism that the necrorealists pursued was not a more-than-real, as in surrealism, but rather a “para-realism” adapted to the decaying aesthetic principles of Socialist Realism — and to a decomposing socialism at large (Mazin 2001: 35–39). This, of course, means

that the necrorealists were, as a critic wrote in 1992, “one flesh with *homo sovieticus*...” (quoted in Mazin 2001: 47). True to the modernist art tradition, the necrorealists added an aesthetic frame of “indifferent deadness” to the real, which audiences found shocking and revolting, even “anti-aesthetic” (Alaniz & Graham 2001: 21-24).

There are several approaches to examining necrorealism as a cinematic form. One is to consider its roots in amateur cinema and its precarious position within the state-controlled filmmaking system (Vinogradova 2011). Vinogradova argues that although amateur film workshops were fully funded by the state, they were not necessarily required to project state ideology. In this context, the work of Evgenii Yufit and the necrorealists provides a valuable example of a cinema that sought “to subvert the values grounded in the doctrine of social realism” (Vinogradova 2011: 223). In *Sanitary-oborotni* (*Werewolf Sanitarians*, 1984), for example, the narrative begins with a sailor alighting from a train and walking into the woods, where he is beaten to death by a group of sanitarians who follow him. The three-minute film ends with footage of a ship and a roaring sea. In short, there are no hallmarks of realism present, since, according to the necrorealists, the very concept of “the Real” was equated with death (Vinogradova 2011: 223).

Similarly, the opening of *Lesorub* (*Woodcutter*, 1985) is set in Yufit’s studio, where the walls are adorned with paintings of heads of corpses. Yufit himself enters the room with a bullet hole in his forehead and picks up a microphone – but his voice cannot be heard. When he finally plugs in the microphone, the film abruptly cuts to a snowy forest path where a man walks unsteadily, either drunk or struggling on the slippery ground. A mob suddenly rushes across the path at high speed, knocking the man down. Shortly afterward, they return in the opposite direction, trampling him again. They attach a rope to his leg and drag him away. A dummy is then thrown from a tall building and beaten upon hitting the ground. An intertitle states that “despite falling from great heights, his functions remain intact.”

These sequences align more closely with the aesthetic regime of formalism and the cinema of attractions. Silent imagery, intertitles, and rapid editing are reminiscent of Georges Méliès as well as Lev Kuleshov, suggesting that necrorealists were far from indifferent to film theory. At times, events are intercut with shots of people watching, implying the presence of spectators within the film. The viewer’s position is thus projected as a substitute for an internal audience, yet in necrorealist cinema any possibility of meaningful interpretation is ultimately denied. The images make no sense, either for the onlookers within the film or for the audience watching the spectacle.

Indeed, Elina Sattarova uses the term “necrospectacles,” asserting that the films arising from necrorealist happenings were indeed intended for an audience (Sattarova 2023: 91). Sattarova connects necrorealists’ fascination with trains to the birth of cinema itself, such as the Lumière brothers’ *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (see also Alaniz & Graham 2001: 26). While trains were a recurring motif in necrorealist films – and this

will be shown to carry over into Brashinsky's work – other forms of transport also featured prominently in early cinema. For instance, bicycles are central in the Lumière film *Workers Leaving the Factory*, suggesting that the bicycle is as foundational as the train in linking mechanical movement to cinematic motion (Bennett 2019). Notably, for the Situationists – whose “happenings” in the 1960s and 70s bear similarities to those of the necrorealists – the bicycle was the preferred mode of transport, due to its speed and the elevated vantage point it offers the rider. The Situationists engaged with the modernist avant-garde movement, which challenged traditional boundaries and sought to redefine “the role of the viewer” (Oldrell 2025: 7). The necrorealists similarly adopted a modernist position but did so by playing with the rules of Socialist Realism.

The term *necroaesthetics* is used by Yurchak (2006: 238) in his book on late Soviet aesthetics. Yufit himself employs the term, elaborating on the political aspects of necrorealist happenings. He compares his interest in cadavers to their transformation in color and form – a metamorphosis he describes as “a kind of necroaesthetics” (Mazin 2001: 48). The key point here is that the word “aesthetics” only emerged retrospectively, after the movement's peak. While one can now identify necrorealist aesthetics as a rejection of binary biopolitics and a striving towards the creation of “a new species” (Yurchak 2006: 249), I would argue that viewing their work primarily through an aesthetic lens risks re-politicizing what was originally intended as an escape from ideological frameworks. In his MA thesis, Thomas Drew (2017: 2) also refers to *necroaesthetics*, but in a similar fashion as Yurchak, through reverted commas. However, as Drew writes, the aim of necrorealism was not imposing a “cultural idea from an elevated, philosophical position, but [...] drawing attention to an existing feeling within the bulk of Soviet society” (Drew 2017: 16).

Recurring themes in Yufit's early necrorealist films include elaborate depictions of suicide, men frolicking in forests, and absurd, meaningless actions performed in a style comparable with montage-era cinema but presented as performance art. It is a world “*sans* women” (Alaniz & Graham 2001: 15), where homoeroticism reigns as an anti-evolutionary form of propagation. Women can exist as witnesses, as onlookers or as suicide enablers in the necrorealist works of the post-Soviet period. The early works were short films, as described above, ranging from 3 to 30 minutes, shot on portable cameras, and often intercut with reused documentary footage or actualities from Soviet cinema. As Yufit's films grew in length, due to his formal training at the workshop of Alexander Sokurov, they adopted a more explicit critique of evolution and human exceptionalism, becoming increasingly bleak and pessimistic. The reuse of documentary film clips diminishes in the later works, losing its relevance as a critique of the Soviet condition (Alaniz & Graham 2001: 23–24).

From a necropolitical standpoint, the condition depicted in these films is totalizing: there is no external position for the viewer that can offer critical distance of the images. It is an “undivided, whole aesthetic space” (Turkina & Mazin 2001: 54). By mimetically

doubling Soviet reality, life is portrayed as inherently meaningless, and death becomes the only means of achieving purpose. Death is not merely an endpoint but a process of transformation – and it is this process of decay that is framed as the truest expression of life.

Analysis of *Waves*

In the following analysis, I focus on three clearly distinct sections of the film. The first depicts Oleg's return to nature, in which he flees the city after the suicide of his wife or girlfriend. The middle section follows Oleg in the sect, where he falls in love with Vera and tries to understand the group's ideology. The final section takes place after the collapse of the sect and consists of online confessions from key characters. This structure mimics that of the necrorealists: first, the group travels into the forest (nature); then, they perform elaborate deaths (suicide); followed by Soviet newsreels or actualities, serving as commentary in the manner of relational aesthetics. In other words, meaning is derived from the social context of the art performance (Bourriaud 2002).

It is in the beginning of the film that we see a close resemblance to Yufit's filmmaking. If necrorealists sought to reduce life to its biological foundation – down to the molecular level – and thereby open a path to rebirth through death, then this is also what we witness in the opening of Brashinsky's film. Oleg's return to nature begins on a train as he flees his entrapped life in the city. While taking the first available train, he notices a couple arguing. When they step outside the compartment, Oleg steals one of their rucksacks and heads into the woods – reminiscent of the sailor figure in *Werewolf Sanitarians*. However, once in the forest, Oleg's struggle to adapt begins. Though he finds a small hut, he sleeps poorly, and the hut contains no food. The rucksack, containing only women's clothing, offers no help. In this situation, Oleg is the modern human alienated from nature.

Gradually, he begins to readapt. First, he lights a fire using a glass shard and tampons from the rucksack. Then he constructs a sling from condoms to shoot squirrels for food. Finally, he collects water from a stream. These actions mark his immersion into nature. He reaches a point outside the framework of society – beyond law and civilization – a bare-life condition akin to that sought by the necrorealists. He is reduced to a grain in the natural cycle, on a par with animals, insects, and trees. He even receives an endearing glance from a deer as they drink together from the same stream. Oleg's movement towards becoming an Agambenian *homo sacer*, an outcast in Ancient Rome that was considered outside legal order, is seen elsewhere in contemporary Russia in terms of body politics or war mobilisation (Medvedev 2025: 61; Makarychev & Medvedev 2024: 134-5). Here it is seen as a process of extreme othering, closely linked to e.g. prison camps, as in the case of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny (Medvedev 2025).

If this *homo sacer* stage is what necrorealists attempted to reach through elaborate self-mutilation or suicide, then in Brashinsky's film, this world is soon violated by the law – in the form of policemen chasing Anton. In Agamben's thinking, bare life is made possible by the *polis* (the city-state), which defines subjects through rules and regulation (Agamben 1998). Thus, the existence of the *polis* is what enables the possibility of bare life. This is also where Brashinsky cuts to the next section: Oleg's introduction to the sect. Anton reluctantly brings him into the community, where Anton's mother Vera has joined following the loss of her husband and older son. While the necrorealists may have stayed in the forest, decaying with nature through frolic and death, Brashinsky breaks with their tradition by introducing a death cult. It is not a totalizing condition, as in necrorealism, because Oleg remains a sceptic – an outsider who maintains the *polis* as a framework.

The sect is led by a charismatic leader who claims he can gather all the world's waves and unite them to stop time. "Because you have to believe in something, right?", he tells Oleg. The sect is building a machine to equalize wave energy, and all members contribute to this goal through breathing exercises, abstaining from meat and smoking, and rearing pigs for sale. Additionally, the women are expected to have sex with the leader, complicating Oleg's feelings for Vera. Here, Brashinsky presents a clear allegory of contemporary Russia, with its turn toward authoritarianism and the paradoxical logic of restoring Soviet greatness.

Brashinsky continues the necroaesthetic theme by depicting the sect as a death cult in which people over 65 years of age voluntarily sacrifice themselves for the "greater good" – i.e. the unification of the waves. It is through Zoya, Oleg's minder and caretaker of the pigs, that he learns this. Zoya cherishes the pigs and tells Oleg they are "closest to humans – after monkeys, of course." She notes their transplantable organs, shared diseases, and identical medication regimens. This interspecies logic bears resemblance to post-human perspectives, although it does not appear in necrorealism. Importantly, the pigs are raised for profit to ensure the sect's survival. They serve a utility function, not as co-inhabitants.

In contrast to necrorealism, where heterosexual love oriented toward reproduction is largely irrelevant, Zoya insists that pigs "love just as much [as we do]." Reproductive heterosexual love is, in fact, what distinguishes Brashinsky's necropolitics from necrorealism, where love is predominantly homosexual and therefore detached from reproduction. In Brashinsky's version, Oleg's sexual desire and lust for Vera keep him within the sect and introduce a critical perspective on wave theory. Love is very much present in Yufit's films, especially in his later feature works, where characters seek sensual and intimate encounters; however, these are rarely heterosexual and are more closely tied to intimate relationships with nature or attempts to dissolve into it. Indeed, when confronted with the inconspicuous homosexuality in his film, Yufit is adamant to level it as an infantile play with nature's contradictions (Artyukh 2004). In necrorealism,

alternative forms of reproduction constitute a central concern, as exemplified in *Serebryanye golovy* (*Silver Heads* 1999), where the main protagonist seeks to dissolve into nature through being penetrated by sticky wooden poles.

In contrast, in *Waves*, love brings into focus politics, which the necrorealists vehemently avoided. This political perspective is further revealed in the sect's euthanasia discourse, once again conveyed by Zoya. She explains: "This is how it works with us: when you turn 65, you leave. Old age gets in the way of immortality. The only thing the elderly can do to help is to give themselves. Their last wave, so to speak." Oleg responds with a remark that this is nonsense, but Zoya remain defiant: "It's not nonsense, Oleg. Think about it – it makes sense."

Without Oleg's objection, there would be no rupture in this logic. Oleg's resistance exposes the totalitarian reasoning that the necrorealists embraced to avoid falling into political ideology. In this sense, *Waves* is emblematic of contemporary Russian cinema – it uses allegory and Aesopian language, but ideology is unavoidable. Unlike late Soviet official rhetoric, which was hollow, today's discourse is ideologically charged.

This also marks a shift in necropolitics, as it becomes embedded in a neoliberal socio-economic system that resembles Social Darwinism more than liberal democracy (Makarychev & Medvedev 2024: 131). Within a Social Darwinist framework, death is understood as a natural process produced through nature's selective elimination of the weak, whereby individual death is framed as benefiting the greater good. The rationale for culling those over 65 is framed by Zoya in utilitarian terms: their productivity is low, and thus they should "give their wave" to the greater good. Here, neoliberalism enters the picture. Neoliberalism is characterized by the financialization of everything (Harvey 2005), where all value is measured by utility. Whether in finance, education or art, that which is unproductive is discarded. Zoya's reasoning aligns with this logic: the elderly have little use-value and must therefore be sacrificed. Similar arguments appear in euthanasia debates, where demographic shifts link entitlements to workforce participation, thereby stigmatizing non-workers (Grue 2022). As Jan Grue (2022) notes,

euthanasia provides what neoliberalism craves most: a framework for the ostensible ideology-free management of life. And in doing so it creates a perfectly rational discourse in which death can appear – always in the abstract – as a cost-saving factor, as *telos*.

It is worth noting that the necrorealists used an allegorical *telos* that pointed towards "a certain hidden, teleologically displaced striving to inscribe death in life" (Mazin 2001: 34), while in Brashinsky's film, the necropolitical *telos* of neoliberalism is in full view. Brashinsky channels this discourse through Zoya, though it becomes fully visible only in the film's final section, following the sect's collapse in a massive fire.

After escaping with Vera, Oleg is seen in a hospital – the same that admitted his girlfriend after her suicide. Then, abruptly, the film cuts to various characters speaking directly into webcams. This aesthetic – familiar to audiences from the COVID-19 era –

invokes online confessionals. The interviewer is never shown but presumed to be Oleg, which gives these monologues an intimate, direct-to-audience feel. Zoya appears first and offers a defensive, even accusatory, justification of her choices: “I don’t understand what you’re asking of me. What coercion? What violence? What more do you want from me? You’ve done the whole thing yourself. You took in everything. Everything. What more do you want? What life did you save? Whose? Mine? So I’ll turn sixty-six, then sixty-seven, sixty-eight – so what?”

These confessions explore why each character joined the sect, what kept them there, and whether they still believe in it. These questions mirror those that might be asked about Russian society’s drift toward authoritarianism post-2014 and 2022.

Oleg’s roommate at the camp, Petr, also comes online for an interview. Petr’s reply intensifies this allegorical critique. He responds: “You still don’t understand anything. What does a cult have to do with this? This isn’t about us. It’s about all of you. Look at yourself. Everything’s neat and tidy, right? You think you’re better than us? [...] I won’t say anything more.”

Here, the accusation shifts to the audience. We are asked to reflect on our complicity. Just as no one was coerced into the sect, belief systems like Putin’s regime are entered into voluntarily – because they offer meaning, purpose, and belonging. This critique is aimed squarely at the Russian audience, inviting self-reflection on individual responsibility in the political system’s evolution.

The film draws parallels with global political phenomena such as Trump’s MAGA movement, Orbán’s Fidesz, and Putin’s revisionist nationalism – each rooted in belief systems demanding faith in the face of contradiction. These systems promise greatness, purpose, and identity – however bleak or delusional the logic. *Waves*’ sect thrives on similar terms. Brashinsky thus addresses necropolitics by showing how belief in death – when framed as meaningful – can seduce people into self-destruction. His film transforms necropolitics into necroaesthetics not as a total condition, as in necrorealism, but as something escapable. There is an aftermath – an awakening. The confessions are in the past tense. The final scene shows Oleg and Vera ascending a metro escalator into the light, while we, the viewers, descend. Critics have debated the symbolism: is there a hope of (heterosexual) love? An escape into another world? A step toward redemption? (See Chernova 2023; Il’ina 2023).

Such ambiguity is a staple of arthouse cinema – leaving audiences to carry the film’s questions home with them. I do not wish to offer a definitive interpretation of *Waves*’ ending. Rather, I emphasize that the very existence of an “outside” affirms the aesthetic position of the audience. This critical stance – denied in necrorealism – is central to necroaesthetics as Brashinsky develops it. Through allegory, critique, and ambiguity, *Waves* invites reflection on belief, responsibility, and complicity in authoritarianism, offering both a diagnosis and a space for awakening.

Conclusion

Returning to the “canary in the coal mine” method, of using Brashinsky as a case study to test the invisible toxicity of contemporary Russian necropolitics, we can identify a clear evidence of playful engagement with late Soviet necrorealism. This is most apparent in the narrative structure Brashinsky employs in *Waves*: the journey from the urban environment to the forest by *elektrichka*, the return to a condition of bare life, the presence of a death cult, and the inclusion of documentary-style imagery, all closely mirroring the structures found in the early necrorealist films of Evgenii Yufit. It is within the aesthetic and conceptual spectrum of necrorealism that Brashinsky’s engagement with contemporary Russian necropolitics becomes visible.

Although the politics of death was sharply intensified in February 2022 with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it is important to note that *Waves* had been in production long before this moment. This complicates any straightforward alignment of the film with Putin’s later authoritarian consolidation of power. Instead, *Waves*, as the culmination of a decade-long creative process, suggests that necropolitical sensibilities had already taken root in the filmmaker’s imagination prior to their full realization in society at large. This trajectory can also be traced back to Brashinsky’s earlier films, *Black Ice* and *Shopping Tour*. That said, the necroaesthetics at work here is shaped by a Western critical tradition, in which the aesthetic project seeks to foreground voices rendered disposable by neoliberal and neocolonial necropolitics. Necroaesthetics thus functions as a critique of global neoliberalism, where the death of the many serves the interests of the few. We find this perspective present in the fact that Brashinsky allows space for critical distance, marking a departure from necrorealism’s more closed and nihilistic worldview.

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