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Necrorealism: Absurdity and the Aesthetics of Social Decay in Late-Soviet Russia

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Introduction

The present work is concerned with the development of absurdism and detachment in Soviet underground art in the 1980s; specifically, those works which heralded the emergence of the ‘necrorealist’ movement, pioneered by film director and painter Yevgenij Yufit. It analyses the peculiar traits of the movement, including its aesthetics of death, decay, suicide and violence, and its fascination with public spectacle, in relation to earlier forms of social criticism in Russian and Soviet art, and the impact of glasnost and perestroika on Soviet society. This thesis argues that these ‘necroaesthetics’ arose partly as a result of the widespread ideological uncertainty which was seeded by de-Stalinisation and exacerbated by Gorbachev’s policies of liberalisation. It investigates the relationship between necroaesthetics and other forms of dissident art contemporary with necrorealism, including *chërnukha*¹, punk and rock music, and the postmodern approaches of artists like the poet Dmitri Prigov, and identifies common themes and approaches. I argue, in this work, that *chërnukha* was a reaction to the inadequacy of socialist realism for the task of social critique, and that necrorealism was *chërnukha* taken to its logical extreme and imbued with a darkly comic sense of mischief. Necrorealism grew out of a wider feeling of malaise and discontent which had been growing in Russia from the end of the 1960s, fed in part by a period of economic and political stagnation under Leonid Brezhnev, and a succession of ageing and infirm leaders. Despite declaring itself and its members’ actions apolitical, the necrorealist movement was given life by the decay of, and loss of meaning in, Soviet politics, and subsequently society, in the 1970s and 1980s. Further, necrorealism was a specific product of its time. Whilst it shares elements with other aesthetics and modes of artistic expression, necrorealism emerged from the combination of the post-Brezhnev political atmosphere, and the ideological crisis and new artistic freedoms which arrived under Gorbachëv.

The current state of scholarship on necrorealism relies on the valuable contributions of Aleksei Yurchak, Ellen Berry, and Anesa Miller-Pogacar in English, and Viktor Mazin and Olesya Turkina in Russian. Yurchak and Turkina give very interesting accounts of the formation and practices of necrorealism, and of its relation to other contemporary underground artistic movements. Viktor Mazin provides astute commentary on the nature of symbolism and psychology in the same, whilst Berry & Miller-Pogacar comment on the ways in which necrorealism responded to social and ideological crises in late-Soviet Russia. This work aims to integrate and expand upon these themes, contextualising necrorealism in relation to both earlier social critique in Soviet film, and to a general undercurrent of absurdism and socio-political satire in 1970s and 1980s youth culture.

Structure and preliminary concepts

The first chapter of this thesis offers a summarised history of socially-critical and ‘difficult’ film in the Soviet Union, helping to place the emergence of Yufit’s distinctive and particular style within a broader canon. It charts the emergence from the shattered ideals of socialist realism of alternative and parallel film in Russia, and aims to explain how the search for ‘truth’ by directors of alternative films led to the extreme shock-tactics of the necrorealist movement and its experimental contemporaries.

Chapter Two examines the motifs of death, dying and decay in the necrorealist aesthetic,

¹ All italicised transliterations are given in the literature-standard US Library of Congress standard (ALA-LC Slavic alphabets 1997), using single character to single or multiple character transliteration without diacritics. Non-italicised transliterations are used in instances where the transliterated word is a common Russian name for which there is an established English transliteration, or in cases of words such as ‘perestroika’ which have entered the English language in a particular and generally-accepted transliteration.

looking at their origin and their relation to the state of late-Soviet society. It applies Roland Barthes' writings on the power of the photograph to necroaesthetics and the context of the collapse of Soviet society to explain necrorealism's shock value. The chapter finds that Brezhnev's 'zombie'-like officials and soulless, formulaic rhetoric combined with the artistic freedoms and societal decay of perestroika to promote the use of corpse-like aesthetics and the parodic appropriation of official discourses.

Despite the grave images and subject matter, necrorealism was nonetheless infused with a kind of dark, satirical, almost nihilistic humour, a trait which it shared with contemporary movements such as Russian punks and the Moscow conceptualists. The nature and origins of this humour, or *stëb*, are discussed in Chapter Three, which posits that the use of subversive, abstract humour is an understated but crucial indicator of socio-political commentary within the necrorealist movement.

This thesis concludes that necrorealism used absurdity and nonsense to highlight the loss of meaning in Soviet society, caused by the gradual loss of ideological legitimacy by the Soviet state.

Volha Isakava (2012, 305) argues that *nekommunikabel'nost'* (non-communicability) plays a key part in the aesthetic of *chërnukha*, a genre of film which appeared in the 1980s and painted a bleak picture of late-Soviet society, dominated by themes of violence, poverty, sexual abuse, domestic violence, and substance abuse. She defines *nekommunikabel'nost'* as 'not just the absence of communication and understanding, but also the lack of channels with [sic] which to communicate' (Idem.), continuing that *chërnukha* is distinguished from the Russian cultural tradition by its 'drive toward non-meaning and the extermination of all possible ideologies' (Ibid., 306.). I propose that the necrorealist movement, and especially Yufit in his short films from the mid-1980s, advanced the logic of *nekommunikabel'nost'* to its extreme by rejecting dialogue, conventional narrative, and even rationality. Through the frenzied acts of apparent madmen, often accompanied by complete silence or, in the case of *Lesorub* (The Woodcutter, 1985), distorted, carnival-esque music which would be at home on one of Tom Waits' more experimental albums², Yufit detaches the audience completely from the spectacle before them. In a dark interpretation of Soviet film-pioneer Sergei Eisenstein's comments on 'attraction'³ in theatre and film, necrorealism provided its shocks, and thus its 'attraction', through incomprehensible and disquieting imagery such as the bizarre scene in Yufit's *Vesna* (Spring, 1987) of two men apparently engaged in a tug of war using a rope which seems to pass through the length of a third man's body.

This shock factor was a fundamental aspect of necrorealism from its earliest days; Aleksei Yurchak (2008, 201 – 202) recounts Yufit's story of an early necrorealist activity in 1978 (or in 1976, according to Yurchak 2006, 244⁴) in which Yufit and a group of his friends were set to clear snow from in front of a Leningrad cinema, in exchange for free tickets to a film screening. According to Yufit, after shovelling snow for a while, one of the group decided that he was getting too hot and began to strip from the waist up. The others joined him, some stripping from the waist down, one stripping entirely down to his boots, and soon '[t]he situation spontaneously turned into a provocation,

² This comparison is perhaps more relevant than it would initially appear, as Mark Yoffe (2013, 217) has suggested a link between Tom Waits and *stëb* in his examination of ironic-parodic culture in the U.S.A.

³ Eisenstein defined attraction in this context as 'any aggressive movement in theatre, i.e. any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence, verified by experience and mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator in their proper order within the whole. These shocks provide the only opportunity of perceiving the ideological aspect of what is being shown, the final ideological conclusion' (Eisenstein 1923, in Taylor 2010, 34).

⁴ I expect that this discrepancy arises from a memory lapse on the part of Yufit, given that he would only have been fifteen- to seventeen-years-old at the time. I am inclined to believe that the true date was 1978, based on the fact that this date appears in the more recent of the two publications by Yurchak, and may therefore have been influenced by newer, more accurate information.

and the original plan to see the movie was abandoned' (Ibid., 201). More and more passers-by gathered to watch, some amused, some outraged, and all of them confused; the police were called but Yufit and his friends grabbed their clothes and quickly dispersed before they could be challenged. Although such activity started out from the peculiar understanding of *byt*⁵ held by the group's members, by engaging in what they described as 'dim-witted merriment (*tupoē vesel'e*) and energetic idiocy (*energichnaia tupoē*)' (Yurchak 2008b, 725 – 726), the necrorealists harnessed the power of the surreal and the absurd to make their impact. The eventual recognition and success of Yufit and his group stemmed from the same basic reasons as *chërnukha*'s success; the contrast between the ordered, regulated, ideologically-appropriate Soviet *byt* and the violation of the same which audiences saw in the works of directors such as Kira Muratova, Yevgenij Yufit, and Vasily Pichul. This disparity was the source of shock and 'attraction' in 1980s Russian cinema, though, as one might expect, the directors who exploited it more moderately within a traditional narrative structure (Pichul's *Malen'kaia Vera* [Little Vera, 1985], for instance) found a greater degree of contemporary public success than those like Muratova and Yufit who were more radical in their approach.

Motifs of hopelessness, frenzied rage, violence, suicide, and insanity hyperbolically reflect the responses of Russian society to the post-ideological void of the late-Soviet period. Whilst the publication of previously forbidden works, such as Yevgenij Zamyatin's dystopian novel *My* (We), and Boris Pasternak's 'Doctor Zhivago'⁶, represented to some degree a triumph for liberal and artistic society, it also served Soviet citizens as a reminder of, or perhaps awakening to, the USSR's uncomfortable past, leading many to question the foundations of their entire identity and worldview (Izakava 2012, 1 – 6). Anna Lawton (1992b, 52 – 53) refers to a rush of 'open criticism of censorship...negative allusions to the Stalinist terror' and 'an irrepressible flood' of previously unpublishable material, 'pushing further and further beyond the frontier of the permissible'. Perestroika was responsible for a glut of information and ideas, a large proportion of which sat uncomfortably with, or explicitly contradicted, the façade of strength, stability, and 'rightness' which had hitherto been projected by the Soviet state. Lawton (Ibid., 42) also mentions the 'issue of difficult youth' in 1980s Russia, referring to newspaper reports about teenage brutality and juvenile delinquency. The theme of youth in revolt, and the use of group-dynamics amongst young people to reflect social problems, were taken up most enthusiastically by *chërnukha* directors, perhaps the best examples being Pichul's famous *Malen'kaia Vera* and Rolan Bykov's *Chuchelo* (1984), less-frequently discussed in academic literature on the subject of *chërnukha*. Pichul portrays the broken family and dysfunctional relationships typical of *chërnukha*, as well as showing teenagers engaging in illicit parties, abusing substances, being sexually promiscuous⁷, and generally acting in very un-Soviet fashion. Lawton (Ibid., 42 – 43) explains Bykov's film, which tells the story of a young girl ostracised by the other children in her community for a perceived act of betrayal, as a comment on the paranoia of Stalinism and a warning about the perils of a 'collective...become...tyrant'. The necrorealists did not address this issue as directly in their cinematic productions but their chaotic antics, which often

⁵ The term *byt* comes from the Russian verb 'to be' but it carries the more general meaning in Russian of everyday existence, distinct from '*bytie*', the term for existence in the philosophical sense. Yurchak (2008a, 201) details how the necrorealist understanding of, or reaction to, *byt* was initially not intended to be artistic, but was merely a means of self-expression. In the interviews conducted and referenced by Yurchak (2008a), the importance of spontaneity to the necrorealist lifestyle is repeatedly stressed.

⁶ *My* was written in 1920-1 and first published in New York in an English translation, only being released in the Soviet Union in 1988. 'Doctor Zhivago' was written between 1945 - 1955 and, denied publication in the Soviet Union in 1956, was circulated abroad for thirty years before being published in 1988 by *Novii Mir*, the journal which had originally refused to publish the full text.

⁷ Peter Shepotinnik (1992, 335) asserts that *Malen'kaia Vera* was the first Soviet film to show a sexual act, something which would have been unthinkable before perestroika.

included feigned violence or play-fighting and absurd, seemingly drug-induced behaviour, played on these same issues of rebellious youth⁸, either by accident or by design.

Aleksei Yurchak (2006, 267) comments on the rejection of boundaries in late-Soviet underground art, with artists who aimed to create works which were neither explicitly art nor parody, but which held some middle-ground position between the two. His main point of reference for this observation is the form of advanced irony known as *stëb* (also transliterated as *stiob*), which he defines as a type of absurd humour which required ‘such an overidentification [sic] with the object, person, or idea at which this *stëb* was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two’ (Ibid., 250). From Mark Yoffe’s (2013) writings on *stëb*, it becomes clearer that it has been present in some incarnation throughout centuries of Russian culture, and that it had developed, by the 1980s, almost into a separate language of subtext and inference which played an important role in self- and group-identification amongst the country’s youth. A key part of *stëb*, according to Yoffe’s article, was the blurring of boundaries between parody and sincerity, a point which he illustrates with the examples of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and the rock band *Zvuki Mu* who both incorporated *stëb* into their personas and their public interactions (Ibid., 214 – 223). The confusion of parody and sincerity affects audiences or spectators in much the same way as the distortion of social norms and propriety, and thus one can look at the incomprehensible mania of necrorealist activities as an unvoiced variety of *stëb*, a *stëb* of action and reaction, rather than the traditional *stëb* of wordplay and allusions. Other *stëb* artists, such as Sergei Kuryokhin and Dmitri Prigov, are discussed in Chapter Three.

Yurchak (2008a, 199 – 200) has also admirably outlined how the practitioners of ‘parallel cinema’⁹ (*parallel’noe kino*) in the final decades of the Soviet Union often claimed to completely ignore politics and regarded their work as apolitical. I agree with Yurchak’s (Ibid., 200) rejection of this position based on his argument that, in the context of the Soviet state, with its ‘exclusive control over what language and what actions were seen as legal and “political”’, the very notion of presenting oneself as apolitical was itself an act of subversive politics. From this point, I further the argument that necrorealism, and parallel art in a more general sense, was inherently political, both in its genesis (if not stated concept) and in the nature of its communication with and to audiences.

⁸ Or, depending on one’s viewpoint, were symptomatic of the problem itself. See Yufit’s accounts of his encounters with the police, in Yurchak 2008, pp. 201, 203, 205.

⁹ Parallel cinema was the name given to the underground cinematographic movement in 1980s Russia, i.e. those who operated outside of the major film studios. Dobrotvorskii (1994, 40) explains that the seat of the official Soviet-Russian avant-garde in the 1980s was Moscow, which adhered to different principles from those held in Leningrad; as such, Leningrad artists adopted the term ‘parallel cinema’, with the implicit meaning of ‘parallel to Moscow avant-garde cinema’, to highlight this fact. Yurchak (2008b, 731) asserts, however, that the first use of the term in this context was in relation to the *samizdat* films of the Muscovite Aleĭnikov brothers.

Chapter One: A brief history of social criticism in Soviet film

Art is reactive. It is a facet of human life which interprets the human environment, be it natural or artificial. It reflects technical and scientific innovation, as was the case during the Renaissance, responds to human crises, evidenced by artistic paradigm shifts following the great wars of the early 20th-century, and challenges authorities and norms. Artistic pioneers can reveal or predict changes in societal norms and values by virtue of their position at the vanguard of a culture's taste and sensibilities. Since it established itself in the 1920s and 1930s, cinema has been a particularly interesting mirror held to the society alongside which it has grown. Due to its unique possibilities, cinema has enabled avant-garde artists to comment on and criticise society and politics in a variety of new ways. Aside from advancing the older audio-visual narrative styles of theatre and opera and widening the audience for whom these styles were accessible, cinema was also able to convey reactionary, sometimes subversive messages by playing with the concept of narrative itself. This could come in the form of nonsensical or abstruse narratives, or in the form of a cinema devoid of narrative; both of these deviations from expected narrative structure serve to force the viewer to concentrate on some other aspect of the film, even on the nature of narrative and how it is used to inform and misinform, to shape perceptions, and to represent 'truth'. This last point is especially pertinent in a Russian context.

Cinema was very highly valued by the Soviet state due to its mass production potential, which allowed propaganda and agitation to be spread across the USSR much more quickly and efficiently than had been previously possible. Particularly given the widespread illiteracy of the newly-Soviet proletariat after the Revolution of 1917, cinema was an ideal means by which to spread official discourse, a fact evidenced by Lenin's oft-quoted comment that 'of all the arts, for us cinema is the most important' (Boltianskij 1925?, 16-17). Although Party control over the medium was not effectively established until the end of the 1920s (Taylor 1979, 156-157), the surge of socialist realist cinema which dominated the mid-Soviet period invariably led to a strong association between film and propaganda. The heyday of socialist realist cinema in the Soviet Union coincided with the artistic controls of Stalinism and persisted into the 'cultural revolution' of Khrushchev's Thaw (Lawton 1992a, 6). As such, the changing, uncertain politico-ideological climate of the 1930s-1950s, coupled with the increased control which the state had over cinema¹⁰, led to the stifling of intellectual and creative film-making. Much of this state restriction was achieved by labelling unapproved themes and techniques with the slur of 'formalism'; as Beloduborovskaja (2015, 313) points out, the implication of this insult was not simply that a formalist produced work which was formally complex, but that they valued the aesthetics of their art above its responsibility to deliver an ideologically-appropriate message. The cultural policies of the Soviet Union from the 1930s up to the 1980s focussed on the value of art to the masses; combined with the advent of socialist realism and the anti-formalist attitudes aroused by the Stalinist campaigns of the mid-1930s, this led to criticism of films which were seen by Party purists as intellectual and therefore elitist, bourgeois, and un-Soviet.

Stylistically speaking, the 1920s saw a broad range of methods practised in Soviet film, of which the most pertinent to this thesis are those pioneered by Eisenstein, and by Dziga Vertov: respectively, the montage of attraction and *zhizn' vrasplokh* (literally 'life caught unawares'). Eisenstein's montage of

¹⁰ Cinema at this time was a great deal harder to involve oneself in independently than music, art or literature, owing to the limitations and cost of contemporary cinematic technology. Whilst forms of underground self-publishing, such as *samizdat* and *magnitizdat*, existed for literature/art and music respectively, no real analogue for cinema would be readily available until the end of the 1960s. Cf. Vinogradova 2010, and Dobrotvorsky 1994.

attraction is an application to film-making of the Marxist and/or Hegelian concept that a thesis, presented with an antithesis, produces a synthesis; it comprises the ‘juxtaposition of conflicting or opposing elements, out of which grows a third element: a specific audience reaction’ (Just 2010, 168, grammar adjusted; see the English translation of Eisenstein’s own comments in Taylor 2010, 35). Vertov’s *style* was concerned primarily with the duty of film to ‘record class struggle and the creation of the new world’, regarding plot-driven narrative cinema as one of ‘the most deadly [sic] weapons in the hands of the capitalists’, the other being religion (Kenez 1992, 52). Vertov (1984, 71) advocated a documentary style of film which focussed on the ‘ordinary mortal, filmed in life at his daily tasks’. These ideas may be seen respectively as precursors of Russian cinematic absurdism¹¹ and the *bytovoï*, or ‘everyday’, style of film. Both of these styles can be observed in the films of 1980s socially-critical directors such as Muratova and Yufit, with their preponderance for showing extreme contrasts and disjointed non-narratives.

Early social criticism in Soviet Film

Denise Youngblood (1992) has provided useful analysis of elements of social critique within Soviet cinema from as early in its existence as 1926, with Fridrich Ermler’s *Kat’ka – bumazhniĭ ranet* (Katka the Apple Seller). Ermler’s treatment of the social problems brought about by Lenin’s New Economic Policy (NEP), for instance the rise of profiteering and the prominence of the black market in the wake of market economy reforms, is much less bleak than later examples of social criticism in Soviet film. For example, unlike in *chërnukha* and necrorealism, the characters are still able to have normal personal relationships, and show sympathy and compassion. However, it marks the beginning of a social consciousness that seems, on some level, to have been present throughout the history of Soviet film, at times when film production took place under conditions of relative directorial autonomy from the state. Interestingly, Youngblood also posits that *Kat’ka* was one of the foundational films which led to the genre of *bytovoe kino*, the ‘cinema of everyday life’, which, as I discuss later, appears to have influenced the work of Muratova and Yufit. In the 1920s, the official response to films of this nature which showed imperfect Soviet lives was contradictory, as Peter Kenez (1992, 101 – 102) points out in his monograph on Soviet cinema from the revolution to the death of Stalin. Whilst the Bolsheviks did indeed value cinema very highly and were initially supportive of the role which cultural ‘enlightenment’ could play in building socialism, they also ‘discovered that cultural pluralism implied dangers’ when it led to the appearance of directors whose ideas and values ‘contradicted the world view in which the Bolsheviks deeply believed’ (Ibid., 101). Youngblood (1992, 69) explains that similar confusion was present in 1920 film-criticism, drawing attention to formalist/anti-formalist debates in Soviet film criticism with evidence from reviews of *Kat’ka* taken from different contemporary publications: *Pravda* and *Sovetskoe kino* praised Ermler’s film as simple and believable, whilst *Izvestiia* and *Kino-front* lambasted it for the same. By the end of the 1920s, Kenez (1992, 102 – 107) shows that the Soviet state was beginning to tighten its grip around the burgeoning Soviet film industry, establishing an ideologically ‘correct’ line for directors to toe. *Sovkino*, the organisation which had been responsible for film production, distribution and import since 1924, was replaced in early 1930 by a new body, *Soiuzkino*, with a new leadership and a greater emphasis on censorship of artistic autonomy, and the political use of film (Ibid., 105). Other film organisations established in the 1920s, such as the *Assotsiatsiia revoliutsionnoiĭ kinematografii* (Association of Revolutionary Cinematography, ARK) and *Obshchestvo druž’ei sovetskogo kino* (Society of Friends of Soviet

¹¹ In relation to Eisenstein and the concept that ‘thesis + antithesis = synthesis’, use of the term ‘absurdism’ is debatable. The similarity I seen between the two lies in their use of sharp contrast and discord in order to elicit an audience reaction.

Cinema, ODSK), were dissolved or seriously weakened by the mid-1930s when ‘the “cultural revolution” eliminated whatever autonomy film organizations had once possessed’ (Ibid., 107).

Stalinist film

The 1930s saw the rise of the artistic repression and ideologically-driven attacks which had begun to emerge in the late-1920s. The man in charge of the new *Soiuzkino* organisation was Boris Shumiatskij, an outspoken critic of formalists, amongst whom he counted Eisenstein, Vertov, Kuleshov and other prominent figures of the ‘golden age’ of Soviet film (Kenez 1992, 129). In 1932, Shumiatskij criticised montage and ‘plotless’ films as ‘powerless in regard to both ideology and entertainment’ (Goodwin 1993, 146). In addition to this assault on the principles of montage, Eisenstein and his experimental contemporaries also believed that the arrival of sound, and most importantly dialogue, would also threaten the integrity and development of montage¹² (Kenez 1992, 135). For them, the freedom to move quickly between shots, a vital part of the image-based narrative and descriptive style of montage, would be hampered and constricted by the introduction of realistic audio and recorded dialogue because ‘it takes longer for the ear to comprehend a dialogue than for the eye to make sense of an image’ (Idem.). Kenez (Ibid., 135 – 136) suggests that they aimed to reconcile the art of montage with the arrival of sound cinema according to the same ‘Marxist dialectic’ which governed Eisenstein’s montage of attractions: the proposal was that ‘the artistic idea would emerge from the clash between sound and picture’. Thus, the concept of seeking to engage with film audiences through the use of contrasts, asynchrony, and dissonance has its roots in the beginnings of Soviet experimental film theory.

The ideologically ‘correct’ line which accompanied the attacks on formalism was socialist realism. This doctrine was introduced in 1934 at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, with the inclusion of the following definition:

Socialist realism is the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. It demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism (Tertz 1960, 24).

The driving need to protect the State’s ideology meant that the official, Stalinist idea of the ‘truthful, historically concrete representation of reality’ differed somewhat from the reality experienced by most Soviet citizens. Mikhail Sholokhov, described by Kenez (1992, 157) as a ‘foremost practitioner’ of socialist realism, offered a more illuminating definition, writing that the genre ‘is the art of the truth of life, comprehended and interpreted by the artist from the point of view of devotion to Leninist party principles’ (Vaughan James 1973, 121). The truth which was portrayed in socialist realism was therefore a subjective truth, a truth of reality as understood according to a specific, teleological understanding of the world. With regard to this, it is particularly telling that the Vertov, pioneer of ‘candid’ documentary and arguably the most committed of all early-Soviet directors to the struggle for ‘truth’ and realism in cinema, was attacked by critics for making films which were ‘boring’ or which were ‘primarily interested in artistic experimentation’ (Kenez 1992, 112). Kenez (Ibid., 157) comments that the teleological demands of socialist realism, i.e. that it should portray the perfect

¹² Montage is here used in its more general sense, to mean the broader range of image-based cinematographic styles pioneered by Eisenstein and similar directors from the 1920s.

world which socialism was meant to build, were incompatible with the simultaneous requirement that it show the world ‘as it was’. This combined with the ideologically-motivated perspective typical of the genre, not ‘I’ and ‘they’ but a collective ‘we’ and ‘us’, and the homogenisation of the Soviet everyman hero¹³ to distance Soviet cinema in the 1930s and 1940s from the notions of the everyday and direct it towards larger-scale narratives. Additionally, the introduction of realistic audio to cinema has been linked to a general trend in socialist realist film towards literary tradition and conventional narrative (Goncharenko 2016, 150). Film-making was generally inaccessible to most individuals in the 1930s to 1980s, particularly amateurs, as a result of the cost of the necessary equipment and the stricter regulation of officially-produced film under the tenets of socialist realism. As there could be no real underground cinema movement before the 1980s, the only films produced in Russia in this period had to be approved to some degree by the state, curtailing most socially-critical film-making activity until the 1960s when the state’s grip on cinema began to loosen.

Despite the suppression from the mid-1930s to 1960s of most of the aspects of film and film-making with which this thesis is concerned, the case of documentary film in the 1940s contributes to a better understanding of *stëb*, especially as practised by Sergei Kuryokhin, which is discussed in Chapter 3. Kenez (1992, 188) asserts that ‘the Soviets did not draw a sharp line between feature films and documentaries’; ‘documentaries at times included staged scenes’ and ‘directors made feature films about real persons’. This situation was further complicated by the official definition of social realism: suggesting that staged films gave a ‘truthful, historically concrete representation of reality’ when many of them, particularly in the 1940s, were clear, unabashed propaganda led to a blurring of the boundary between fantasy and reality in the Soviet perception of the filmic image. Kenez (Ibid., 189) adds that Soviet documentary during the Second World War initially had little to show its audience which would inspire confidence in the Soviet war effort. To remedy this, documentary makers did not focus as much on battles as on domestic themes of civil defence, heroic emergency service workers, and stoic Soviet citizens (Idem.). This is a tactic which was later employed by practitioners of *stëb* in the 1980s and 1990s: focussing on smaller pictures and details to distract from an incongruous or uncomfortable whole.

The period from 1945 to 1953 was one of even tighter regulation and censorship, in which critics launched ever more vitriolic attacks on those seen as deviants from state-approved messages and methods. After the death of Stalin, and the beginning of the campaign of de-Stalinisation, Soviet directors took a few years to adjust and to begin showing the reach of their newly-lengthened leash. The late 1950s to early 1960s saw a move back towards the ‘film of the everyday’, building on the foundations laid by Ermler and, to an extent, Vertov. Oksana Bulgakowa (2013, 445 – 446), in a study of Soviet film during Khrushchev’s Thaw, notes the rise of everyday themes in films released between 1956 and 1964, with a reduction in the importance of those themes, such as labour, collective solidarity and predictions of a bright socialist future, which had dominated Stalinist film. She notes that ‘[f]ilm narratives still promoted the preservation of the communal (socialist) world’, but makes clear that this communal world was now inhabited by distinct individuals who had personal desires unrelated to advancing the cause of Marxist-Leninism, and were shown engaging in activities which were mundane, but whose inclusion in a Stalinist film would have been considered ideologically inappropriate (Idem.). Characters in films now had illicit relationships, they bought home furnishings and had private lives and senses of humour (Ibid., 446). Among the films mentioned by Bulgakowa

¹³ Of whom Zavedeeva (2014, 263) writes that ‘[t]he romantic hero of socialist realism does not have his own features for he perceives himself not as an individual “I” but rather as a more significant, universal being, i.e. an integral “we.”’

(Ibid., 447) as belonging to this movement of everyday films is *Nash chestnii khleb* (Our Honest Bread, 1964), directed by Kira Muratova and her husband, Aleksandr Muratov, showing that the former's interest in *byt* as a stylistic film-making device dated from the early days of her directing career.

'Difficult' film

By the late 1960s, the political climate had changed sufficiently to allow these a greater degree of artistic autonomy to directors. Herbert Marshall (1992, 174-176), in an article on Soviet New Wave cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, follows the lead of film critic T. Ivanov (1969) and makes special mention of directors Sergej Paradzhanov and Iurij Il'enko when discussing the emergence of 'difficult films'. 'Difficult' was a term given by Soviet authorities to 'films that do not fit into the prescribed categories of socialist realism and lack Soviet mass appeal' (Marshall 1992, 174). Paradzhanov's main contribution to this somewhat broad and abstract genre is usually considered to be *Teni zabitykh predkov* (Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors) (1964), due to its complicated dialogue, which liberally used words and expressions from the Hutsul dialect of Ukrainian, rendering parts 'incomprehensible even to native Ukrainians' (Marshall 1992, 176). Combined with the film's bleak, uninspiring narrative, this redirects the viewer's attention towards Paradzhanov's depiction of the cultural traditions of the Hutsul people. In this sense, Paradzhanov can be seen to continue the traditions of meaningful spectacle and cinematic poetry espoused by Sergei Eisenstein ([1934] in Taylor 2010, 290). Il'enko, having worked as a cameraman for Paradzhanov, made his directorial debut with *Vecher nakanune Ivana Kupaly* (The Eve of Ivan Kupala 1969), and attracted similar accusations of formalism and making 'difficult' films as a result of his complicated language and unconventional style.

Marshall (1992, 183) makes an important observation about 'difficult' films in the 1960s, namely that they share a common theme: expressing 'the age of cruelty and tragedy – the tragedy of the innocent being slaughtered by implacable senseless social forces'. He cites Bleiman's (1973) distinction between difficult films and socialist realism, that the former 'refuse to soften the horror or the cruelty of the injustices that are suffered by the innocent', whereas the latter 'always soften the blow, *none of them seeks truth to the end*' (Marshall 1992, 184; emphasis added). Thus the two qualities which characterise the difficult films of the 1960s, at least for Marshall and Bleiman, are the uncompromising portrayal of social injustice and the search for truth. Leaving aside, momentarily, the inherent complexities of any attempt to define an artistic endeavour in terms of its relationship to some concept of 'truth', the significance of this interpretation of 'difficult' films lies in its understanding of their message and intent. According to this concept, the avant-garde functions for Marshall and Bleiman as both a mirror to society and as something of a moral compass. Whereas socialist realism aimed to fill the former role itself, its softer approach and the incongruence between its depiction of reality and reality as experienced by most Soviet citizens led to its displacement by 'difficult' films (Greenwold 2001, 234 – 237).

Anna Lawton (1992b, 32 – 33) identifies Paradzhanov and Il'enko as members of the 'poetic' or 'archaic' school of Soviet film, based mainly on their preference for a narrative structure which favoured 'analogical images' over 'narrative logic' and thus gave their work a romantic colour. The directors whom she lists as belonging to this school are all Ukrainian and Georgian but she identifies Andrei Tarkovsky as their northern counterpart in Russia, drawing attention to the 'fragments of experience', 'disconnected episodes, [and] events out of chronological sequence' which characterise the fractured narrative style of his 1975 film *Zerkalo* (Mirror) (Ibid., 33). Tarkovsky's role in the

development of socially-critical film is discussed by George Faraday (2000, 95 – 97), who asserts that Tarkovsky believed in the obligation of artists ‘to address the spiritual and moral needs of the public’. Tarkovsky (1987 [1967], 181) himself said in his self-reflective work ‘Sculpting with Time’ (*Zapechatlënnoe vremîa*), that it is impossible for artists to ‘freely create themselves’, and that ‘it is the lot of the artist to accept that he is created by his time and the people amongst whom he lives’. In the same work, Tarkovsky speaks of the impossibility of representing a comprehensive, objective ‘reality’, but stresses that he feels an artistic responsibility to ‘tell people the truth about our common existence as it appears to [him] in the light of [his] experience and understanding’ (Ibid., 184 – 187). Again, the role of the director of ‘difficult’ films is described in terms of a search for truth. Tarkovsky’s comment on the creation of an artist ‘by his time and the people amongst whom he lives’ can be applied to both himself and Yufit to explain the different approaches they took in order to display their understanding of reality. Tarkovsky was an individual from the more privileged sectors of society: he came from a long line of educated professionals and artists and was well-versed in art history (Faraday 2000, 94). Yufit and the necrorealists were mainly factory-workers, broadly unaware of the legacy of Soviet film, particularly in terms of artistic method, and far from the ‘cultural aristocratism’ of which Faraday accuses Tarkovsky (Yufit 2011, c. 04:00; Faraday 2000, 94). As such, their understanding of the society in which they lived, their place within it, and the way in which they articulated that understanding differed greatly.

Social criticism and the grotesque

In an interview included in *ÛFITi*, the documentary on his art made by St Petersburg-based internet video-production company *UTROMEDIA*, Yufit declared that his art arose from ‘the fixation... , like that of any young man, to capture that which was happening around him, maybe with some excessive elements of social grotesque and black humour’ (UTROMEDIA 2015, c. 08:54). Here, Yufit appears to agree with this concept of the director as described by Tarkovsky and Marshall, acknowledging that the mad and senseless world he portrays through his films is influenced by his perception of Soviet Russian life and society in the 1970s and 1980s, and hinting, through his reference to the ‘social grotesque’ that he intended to make some comment on that society. The term ‘social grotesque’ likely refers to grotesque realism, a concept described in Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984 [1965]) study of the 16th-century French writer François Rabelais¹⁴. Grotesque realism is the counterpart to Bakhtin’s ‘carnival’, in which ‘the world reveals its dual nature’ and temporary rule is claimed by fools, clowns, and unofficial ideologies (Kobets 2001, 7). An important part of Bakhtin’s ‘carnival’ is laughter and, in line with this, the subversion of dominant ideologies through ridicule. The ‘grotesque’ seeks ‘to represent cosmic, social, topographical and linguistic elements of the world’ by means of the material body, with all its faults and obscenities (Stallybrass & White 1995, 8 – 9). It is also vital that the image of grotesque realism ‘is always in process, it is always *becoming*, it is a mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, outgrowing all limits, obscenely decentred and off-balance, a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion’ (Ibid., 9. Emphasis in original). The ‘grotesque’ has also been described as:

a vantage point [for Bakhtin] from which a different conception of the human arises, a humanism that is no longer bound to a belief in the individual and is no longer underpinned by an embrace and promotion of the virtues of measure, proportion, or reason. It is a humanism that manages to incorporate and process the

¹⁴ Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder are excellent examples of the grotesque in art more or less contemporary to Rabelais, showing the visual roots of the concept.

“darker side” of humanity and the sometimes aggressive and unpredictable mode of action that carnival poses (Tihanov 2013, 15).

Bakhtin (1985, 24) defined the two indispensable traits of the grotesque image as ‘relation to time’ and ‘ambivalence’. Yufit’s short films, with their accelerated movement and vague concept of time, combine with his publicly-stated political ambivalence to display both of these necessary traits. Bakhtin also makes repeated references to the idea of the grotesque image representing concepts of regeneration and rebirth, the death of the Old leading to the birth of the New (Ibid., 21 – 29). From this, Yufit’s films, in particular his short films of the 1980s, can be viewed as Bakhtinian grotesque images which attempted to show Soviet society its darkest side, amplified, distorted, *chuzhoï* (alien, strange)¹⁵. Yufit’s films depicted a chaotic, senseless world in order to highlight the need for the renewal of Soviet/Russian society.

Chërnukha and socialist realism

José Alaniz (2003, 123) states that the necrorealists had a particularly strong influence on the film-making of Kira Muratova. Films such as Muratova’s (1989) *Astenicheskiï sindrom* (The Asthenic Syndrome), a stark, compelling tour of the ‘post-Communist... ideological bankruptcy’ of perestroika (Berry 1998a, 448), marked the apex of *chërnukha*, a genre of film which carried on in this tradition of highlighting the darker side of Soviet society.¹⁶ Elements of social critique are also present in necrorealism, whose cinematic offerings certainly qualify under Volha Isakava’s (2012, 27 – 8) category of ‘cinemas of crisis and transgression’ along with the movements of film noir and *chërnukha*, sharing with them the trait of a ‘dark vision’ of the world which runs ‘against the grain of mainstream cinematic representation’. It has been suggested, in Ellen Berry’s (1998a, 449) essay on *Astenicheskiï sindrom*, that Muratova, by confronting the viewer with unsettling discord and contrast, also strove to provide ‘greater insight into the true nature of things’. In Mikhail Iampolski’s (2008, 6) monograph on Muratova, he quotes her statement that ‘the primary function of art is to reflect’ and not to pose questions ‘because a question [*problema*] is something which has a solution, an answer. It seems that the discussion here concerns things which are irreversible, which have no solution’. This philosophy seems to have been shared by the necrorealists, as both they and Muratova showed the imperfections they perceived in Soviet society but neither attempted to offer any kind of solution; the lack of resolution is an important distinction between late-Soviet socially-critical film and its precursors. In Fridrich Ermler’s *Kat’ka – bumazhniï ranet*, for example, the imperfections which are shown in NEP society are solved for the title character and her ‘reformed’ intelligentsia companion when they re-enter Soviet society by going to work in a factory; there is a general message in the film of the importance of community and interdependence.

Muratova, like Yufit and the necrorealists, focussed on the everyday and believed that, in Berry’s (Idem.) words, ‘[i]t is on the level of the everyday - most especially of the body - that social pathology becomes most immediately manifest and on which it must first be diagnosed and solved’.

¹⁵ In the context of necroaesthetics and the grotesque, Ellen Berry and Anesa Miller-Pogacar (1992) also refer to *Mochebuĩtsy-trupolovy*, a film by one of the co-founders of necrorealism, Andreï Mërtvii (this film’s title cannot be adequately translated into English. Most instances in English cite the film as ‘Urine-Crazed Bodysnatchers’). Although, from the descriptions I have read, it appears that this film may be more closely related to the grotesque than Yufit’s films, I have been unable to find any available recording of it for analysis.

¹⁶ The word ‘apex’ is used here to refer to the extent to which the principles of *chërnukha* were applied in the film. As a result of the extreme nature of Muratova’s vision, *Astenicheskiï sindrom* was not as commercially successful as other films in the genre, most notably Vasily Pichul’s *Malen’kaia Vera* (Little Vera, 1988). Many *chërnukha* films, such as *Malen’kaia Vera* and Pavel Lungin’s *Taksi Bliuz* (Taxi Blues, 1990), a misanthropic ‘buddy’ film starring Petr Mamonov (see Chapter 3), were not at all ‘difficult’ films in the same vein as Muratova or Paradzhanov, but dealt with similarly bleak concepts and imagery of a broken society.

The everyday, or *byt*, of the body as the subject of socially-critical art provides a link between necrorealism, Muratova's brand of *chërnukha*, and Bakhtin's grotesque. As in Yufit's short films, Muratova's *Astenicheskii sindrom* has no grand narrative to hold together the scenes it portrays; both directors present their work as a selection of 'pieces of everyday life', albeit everyday life seen through a distorted lens. Berry (Idem.) also describes 'two thematic poles' in *Astenicheskii sindrom*: stasis/disengagement/death, and frenzy/aggression. Both of these poles are equally important in Yufit's short films, which rely on a similar 'dislocat[ion of] habitual patterns of sense-making [which] forces a greater degree of engagement on the part of the viewer' (Idem.).

Seth Graham (2000, 13) describes *chërnukha* as a 'parodic (though rarely humorous) inversion of the classic socialist realist model of film narrative'. He (Ibid., 13 – 14) writes that *chërnukha*, in exchange for the 'pure idealism, logocentric optimism and "conflictlessness"' of socialist realism, offered 'pure naturalism, mute pessimism and omnipresent conflict'. Graham also outlines two key attributes of *chërnukha*: firstly, 'subordination of the verbal signifier...to the visual (or non-verbal auditory) image', and secondly, 'a radical, indiscriminate, and ostentatious rejection of all ideals, especially those which are culturally-marked' (Ibid., 14). Early necrorealism carried both these attributes even further than the most extreme *chërnukha* by entirely removing the verbal signifier¹⁷ and rejecting not only societal ideals but any coherent notion of society at all.

Chapter conclusion

The themes of societal disease and malaise which saturated *chërnukha* and were obliquely referenced in Yufit's work seems now to have been augmented with depictions of a state that is no longer failing society through inaction or absence, as in many socially-critical films of the 1980s and 1990s, but through corruption and bureaucracy. This is evidenced by recent films such as Yuriy Bykov's *Durak* (The Fool, 2014) and Andrej Zvyagintsev's *Leviatan* (Leviathan, 2014), in which an everyman antihero 'take[s] on corruption and criminality but, despite their best efforts, come[s] up short' (Dolgoplov, 2015). These modern trends owe their existence directly to the darker sides of late-Soviet and early post-Soviet cinema, exemplified by directors like Muratova and Yufit, and the aesthetics of social ruin which they pioneered. In turn, the trailblazers of socially-critical film in the 1980s owed debts to post-Thaw directors such as Paradzhanov, Il'enko and Tarkovsky who were able to resurrect the experimental movement in Soviet film which had perished in the 1930s under the onslaught of socialist realism. Until the 1980s, social criticism in Soviet film had occurred within the context of narrative with character development or, at least, within a recognisable depiction of reality which included conventional human interaction and some form of rationality. Even the bleakest examples of *chërnukha* show at least some form of society. That society is often broken and toxic but, even as *chërnukha* destroys them, the essential notions of 'home', 'family', and 'community' are retained in order to portray the crumbling pillars of the Soviet social order. Early necrorealism did not show that which it believed to be broken, instead it showed the absence of the same; a hyperbolic vision of a decaying society.

¹⁷ The lyrics to *Zhировоск*, the song which plays during Yufit's film *Lesorub* (1985), could perhaps be viewed as a verbal signifier, were they discernible to the average listener. The shouted vocals and intentionally bad sound quality of this recording (compare this audio with that in *Sanitary-oborotni* and Dmitri Frolov's *Son* [1987] for reference) implies that the lyrics are not meant to be understood, and that the audio should thus be treated as a non-verbal auditory signifier.

Chapter Two: The Aesthetics of Dying

The necrorealists started as a group of friends in Leningrad in the 1970s, of whom Yufit, Andreï “Mértvii” Kurmōiartsev and Vladimir Kustov appear to have been most prominent. Their initial activity mainly involved public provocations, which they carried out in order to ‘study the reactions of the general Soviet public’ to ‘irrational events’ (Yurchak 2008, 204 – 205). By the mid-1980s, the group had become more artistically-focussed and had grown to include a wider range of artists, musicians, and intellectuals such as Oleg Kotel’nikov and Andreï “Svin” Panov (Ibid., 204). Yufit’s independent film studio *Mzhalalafil’m*, through which he released all of the films discussed below, was founded in 1984; the studio’s name is a combination of *mzha* (drowsiness or unconsciousness) and the childish vocalisation ‘lala’, and reflects Yufit’s decidedly non-serious approach to his early work.

To this chapter, which comprises an analysis of the aesthetics employed in necrorealism, I append brief summaries of Yufit’s independently-produced short films which will help to contextualise the discussion of necroaesthetics later in this thesis (see Appendix 2). I restrict the analysis to these five films because they show Yufit’s early aesthetic independent of professional studio influence. As soon as Yufit began to work in conjunction with the official studio *Lenfil’m* from 1989, his aesthetic changed noticeably, adopting realistic synchronised audio, and dispensing with the grainy picture quality and accelerated movement speed which characterised his independent films.

Analysis of necroaesthetics

Initially, one must bear in mind the dangers of trying to extract too much significance from apparent symbolism in Yufit’s short films. It is worth reading the director’s comments on the semi-spontaneous origins of his first film, *Sanitary-oborotni*, in which:

‘The story was unravelling on its own. There was neither any plot, nor any general idea. We took a suburban train to the countryside. Someone in our company had a sailor’s shirt, someone had a sailor’s cap, someone had a saw’ (Yurchak 2008, 206).

Much of the necrorealists’ activity, particularly in the early years, was improvised in a similar manner and lacked the deliberate planning and constructed metaphors of, for example, a Tarkovsky film. For this reason, it seems best to focus on those elements of Yufit’s necroaesthetic which have been specifically referenced by the director in interviews and workshops, in order not to fall into the trap of over-analysis.

Golden-Age influences

In a 2011 masterclass at the *Lendok* open film-studio and cultural centre in St Petersburg, Yufit mentioned his love of 1920s silent film, which he regards as the ‘most interesting and the strongest, both in terms of energy and visuality’¹⁸ of all the films which had come into the Soviet Union by the late-1970s (Pavlova 2011, c. 12:20). He says that he ‘strives to continue these traditions [of energy and visual impact] ..., not imitate them ... but continue these traditions with elements of the social life of Soviet Russia ... with black humour, social grotesque, cruel absurdism’ (Ibid., c. 12:56). This fondness for the early years of film is evident in Yufit’s short films from the 1980s. The black and

¹⁸ From the Russian *vizual’nost’* which I understand, in this context, to mean the impact of the presented images on the viewer; the extent to which the visuals allows the viewer to become immersed in the film.

white, grainy images; accelerated, frenetic movement; and, in most cases, the lack of audio are all hallmarks of 1920s film which Yufit continued in his own work. Other directors of parallel cinema experimented more with colour and sound. For example, *Devochka i Buda* (A Girl and Buda, 1984), a short film of a performance produced by the Muscovite Aleĭnikov brothers in collaboration with fellow underground artists, the Zhigalovs, and Dmitriĭ Frolov's 1987 surrealist film *Son* (The Dream) both feature colour and the use of a soundtrack. Although the necessary technology was still fairly difficult to obtain privately at the time, the fact that Yufit's contemporaries in underground cinema were able to film in colour leads me to believe that the preservation of a 1920s – 1930s aesthetic was a stylistic choice on his part.

Shooting in black and white, and on grainy, poor-quality film, contributed to Yufit's aesthetic in several ways. Firstly, the indistinct nature of the captured footage adds to the general feeling of uncertainty and absurdity in the films; attempts made by the viewer to find a human coherence in the films are often thwarted by faces hidden in shadow or dirt, and by partially-observed action taking place at a distance. The overall, intentional lack of clarity helps to detach the viewer from the events. Secondly, Alaniz (2003, 87) suggests that the 'crude and distressed state of the film medium itself' functions as a metaphor for the decomposition of a corpse. Extending the metaphor slightly - old, disintegrating film reflected the old, disintegrating ideals of socialist realism and the previously invulnerable ideology of the Soviet Union. Thirdly, the clear aesthetic parallels between Yufit's short films and Russian avant-garde film of the 1920s encourage the viewer to compare the periods in which each was created and contrast; for example, the early-Soviet optimism of Eisenstein with the late-Soviet¹⁹ pessimism of the necrorealists.

Death and madness

Yurchak's understanding of the necrorealists' 'organising metaphor', or main object, is based on a manuscript called 'Necromethod: The Basics of Necrostatics and Necrodynamics' (*Nekrometoda: Osnovy nekrostatiki i nekrodinamiki*. To my knowledge, this work remains unpublished), written in 1989 by Vladimir Kustov, a necrorealist and photographer. Yurchak (2008, 211) includes, in his essay 'NecroUtopia', a diagram from this manuscript which I have reproduced below (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Vladimir Kustov's representation of the zone of Absolute Dying, as it appears in Yurchak 2008 (211).



- 1 – Birth of the object
- 2 – Beginning of Absolute Dying
- 3 – End of Absolute Dying
- 4 – Loss of form by the object

¹⁹ Although Yufit would, of course, not have known at the time that his short films were 'late'-Soviet. From his perspective, the contrast was between the revolutionary energy of the 1920s – 1930s and the stagnant gerontocracy which, by the time he started making films, had been in place for most of his life.

Yurchak (Ibid., 210 – 211) identifies this zone of Absolute Dying as the main focus of the necrorealists' interests, supported by, among other things, Yufit's frequent comments to journalists that his films did not contain corpses or indeed death. What fascinated the necrorealists, then, was transition; the transition from life to not-life. In the context of the times in which necrorealism emerged and developed, the mid-1980s to late-1990s, a clear parallel is visible between this focus on transition and the monumental socio-political transition periods of perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union²⁰. It also seems pertinent to link this focus on metamorphosis to the word *oboroten*, or 'shapeshifter' which occurs several times in the titles or intertitles of Yufit's films and strengthens the argument that necroaesthetics were rooted in the process of transformation.

The subjects of necrorealist films, that is the particular presentation of the figures on screen, their appearance and actions, have been described as 'necro-people' (*nekroliudi*), ostensibly both alive and dead simultaneously (Mazin 2006, 201). They occupied Kutov's zone of absolute dying, a 'new species' on the edge of life and death and the border 'between sanity and insanity' (Yurchak 2006, 248 - 249). It appears that notions of sanity were the initial driving force behind necrorealist activity; Yurchak (2008, 202) writes that the *tupoe vesel'e* and *energichnaia tupost'* (dim-witted merriment and energetic stupidity) which characterised early necrorealist behaviour became 'widespread among young city-dwellers' during the 1980s. This carries the implication that Yufit and his friends were tapping into an existing undercurrent of youth frustration in late-Soviet Russia, characterising their activities not in terms of the intellectual avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s, but almost in terms of the proletarian culture which was tentatively and inconsistently advocated by elements amongst the Bolsheviks around the same time. That is, necrorealism was not aiming to impose a cultural idea from an elevated, philosophical position, but was drawing attention to an existing feeling within the bulk of Soviet society. Yufit was an engineer by trade, not born into artistic surroundings, and most of the necrorealists, unlike contemporary provocative absurdists in East Berlin, did not even consider their own actions to be artistic until wider Russian society began to describe them as such in the last years of the 1980s (Yurchak 2006, 202; Ibid., 207). In 1989, a pivotal year for Yufit and the necrorealists, some of their work was shown on a special episode of the new cultural affairs program *Piatoe koleso* (The Fifth Wheel), a program which was later to air Sergei Kuryokhin's famous *Lenin – grib* pseudo-documentary (see Chapter 3). Though their aesthetic and behaviour were heavily criticised by analysts on the program, the exposure was enough to earn Yufit the chance to work at the professional film studio *Lenfil'm*, and to secure invitations for the necrorealists to exhibit their work abroad (Idem.).

The aesthetic of death was introduced to *nekrodeiatel'nosti* around 1982, when one necrorealist found an old medical textbook, a 1900 Russian-language edition of Eduard von Hoffman's 'Atlas of Forensic Medicine', in a second-hand shop (Ibid., 202). They were struck by the photographs and illustrations in the book, as well as its occasional descriptions of elaborate and bizarre suicide attempts. The book's photographs were vertically-positioned on the page (see Fig. 2) and, removed from their usual context and horizontal orientation, the depicted corpses were given a semblance of life. The subjects of these photographs were described by Vladimir Kustov, a founding member of necrorealism, as *netrupy* or 'non-corpses' (Yurchak 2008, 202), and became a defining aspect of necroaesthetics. The necrorealists' collection of medical textbooks grew to include Mikhail Avdeev's 1966 *Kratkoe rukovodstvo po sudebnoi medicine* (Short Guide to Forensic Medicine), a 1912 publication by von Hoffman, and a 1961 Soviet textbook entitled *Sudebnaia meditsina* (Forensic

²⁰ This latter period, the first post-Soviet decade, is often referred to as the *likhie devianostye* ('wild nineties'), in reference to its social instability and huge increases in criminal activity.

Medicine), the enthusiastic study of which greatly informed the group members' respective artistic endeavours (Yurchak 2008, 203).

Figurative corpses of aged leaders

The peculiar impact which the photographed corpse can have on the mind is worth elaborating on, as it helps to explain the allure of the 'necro-image' and the symbolism it has in a broader, societal context. Roland Barthes' (1981, 78) treatise on photography, 'Camera Lucida', speaks of the immobility of the photograph, how it captures 'that instant, however brief, in which a real thing happened to be motionless in front of the eye'; from this comes his idea of the 'pose', the combination of that instant of time with the immobilising power of the captured²¹ image. He continues, that:

the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the image has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive²², because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value (Ibid., 79).

Thus, the image of a dead body simultaneously gives and denies life to the subject: it sets Barthes' surreptitious belief in the subject's life against the knowledge that the subject is dead, and was dead at the time the photograph was taken. It has been suggested, following Barthes, that any image of a living or once-living being portrays a 'figurative corpse of what has been alive' and that this compounds the often unsettling effect of necro-images on the mind (Schwenger 2000, 396). Peter Schwenger (Idem.) also writes about the uncanny, quoting Ernst Jensch's definition, that it often involves 'doubts whether an apparently animate object is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate'. The 'living image' of a dead body forces an objective reappraisal of itself by rendering a subjective appraisal uncanny and unpleasant. French-Bulgarian philosopher Julia Kristeva (1982, 4) views the corpse as 'the utmost of abjection' because, in Schwenger's (2000, 399) words, '[it] is the body's ultimate betrayal of the *I*'. Schwenger (Idem.) goes into greater detail, affirming that:

I has been created in the image of its body, a body that must be bordered in order to achieve coherence. Everything that betrays that coherence - the body's wastes, its fluids, ruptures, and putrescences - is associated with the abject. This unclean existence must be forfeited for the sake of what is seen as proper, in more than one sense of that term; and on this foundation of the body's propriety the ego is constituted. The corpse, in contrast, is the body become wholly waste, wholly associated with the vulnerability and decay of its coherence.

Expanding upon this, the perceived decay and vulnerability of late-Soviet society, its death-in-life, lent itself to a morbid portrayal. This is noted by Yurchak (2006, 256), in his discussion of how what became known in Western media and scholarship as the Soviet 'gerontocracy' contributed to aesthetics of undeath. He explains that the membership of the Communist Party politburo, the chief organ of government in the Soviet Union, 'remained practically unchanged' for over two decades, and that the politburo, as a result of this stagnancy, became 'a perfect example of hypernormalised authoritative discourse' (Idem.). Yurchak asserts the speeches of politburo members were reduced to 'performative rituals', devoid of any constative meaning (Idem.). The other, more obvious result was that the average age of politburo members rose from fifty-five in 1956 to seventy in the early-1980s (Lowenhardt et al. 1992, 131). The period between Brezhnev and Gorbachëv, a little over two years, saw both Andropov and Chernenko come and go as General Secretary of the CPSU²³ Central

²¹ Even the term 'capture' carries this implication – a moment snatched out of time.

²² This concept is often referred to as the 'living image'.

²³ Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Committee, both dying in office and receiving state funerals with official periods of mourning.²⁴ Combined with the death of Brezhnev, this meant that Yurchak and his generation had seen the deaths of three General Secretaries before reaching their mid-20s. Meaningless rituals of official discourse and the increasing age gap between the members of the politburo and the younger Soviet generation ‘that never knew Joseph Stalin’ engendered in certain parts of Soviet society a view of the Soviet Union as senseless and rotting (Evans & Novak 1985). Necroaesthetics were a direct response to this view, the manifestation of a wider societal sense of unease and discontent which I illustrate further in Chapter 3. In reference to Schwenger’s quote (inset pg. 18), I view the manner in which necrorealists operated as deliberately improper, highlighting the decay of Soviet society’s coherence. If the denial or forfeiture of the abject is necessary to maintain the propriety of the body, and thus the ego, then embracing the abject is a rejection of that same body and a step towards ego death. In Buddhism, the ego death, or ‘psychic death’ as it is called in Jungian psychology, ‘implies a shift back to the existential position of the natural self, i.e., living the true purpose of life’; as such, the necrorealists’ apparent advocacy for an ego death in Soviet society would support a broader interpretation of their actions as an incitement to societal change.

It is important to consider the relationship of state and society in the Soviet Union. Inevitably, as a result of the ideological nature of the Soviet state and its stated aim of creating a classless, egalitarian society, it engaged in direct interference in and management of Soviet culture and society. Historian David Stuart Lane (1981, 1) opens his work on Soviet societal ritual with the statement that ‘[t]he culture of every society is in part spontaneously generated by its members and in part consciously shaped and directed by its political elites’ through use of state ritual and cultural management’²⁵. Lane (1981, 23) suggests that the predominant form of ritual in totalitarian social systems²⁶ was that type which reinforces existing rules and social roles. First of all, accepting the proposition that the CPSU and governing apparatus of the USSR exercised ‘total state control’, and that they therefore owned and controlled all official, professional outlets of artistic expression, then anything produced outside of this system necessarily positioned itself in opposition (or in ‘parallel’) to the state (Miller-Pogacar 1998, 10). This is particularly true of that art which went fundamentally against the grain of ideologically-acceptable styles, such as *chërnukha* and necrorealism. Lane (1992, 306) writes that ‘[i]n Soviet and state socialist societies, forms of ritual and ceremony have been created by the political authorities [to replace previous nationalist or folk rituals] with the conscious intention of establishing solidarity between the people and the state’. He also noted in 1981 (23), that rituals of rebellion, which mock or question the social order, were ‘alien to the Soviet approach to ritual’ because Soviet society considered the existing social order to be sacred.

Chapter conclusion

Necrorealism, perhaps to an even greater extent than other forms of *stëb*, could certainly be described in terms of ‘rituals of rebellion’ as a result of its subversive public spectacles and utter ambivalence towards authority. There is no society, in the Soviet sense, depicted in necrorealism. Given the

²⁴ On which note, it is also worth bearing in mind that the embalmed body of Lenin still (July 2017) lies on public display in Moscow. Lenin’s role as the figurehead of the Revolution and a sort of ideological grandfather-figure, combined with his embalment (a preservation of life in death), makes him an un-living metaphor for Soviet ideology.

²⁵ He qualifies his understanding of culture as ‘both the formalized ideological constructs, such as art, law or religion, and the more informal way in which members of a society perceive themselves, their society and their relations to the material, social and intellectual products of that society’ (Lane 1981, 1).

²⁶ I am not suggesting here that the Soviet state in itself was totalitarian, but referring to Lane’s (1981, 23) concept of a totalitarian social system as one ‘which has abandoned multiplex visions of the social structure in favour of a total view’.

paramount ideological importance of community and collectivism to socialist societies, it seems significant that instances within Yufit's films of co-operation and collective effort are linked with violence and death, or with absurd behaviour. Groups of *nekroliudi* engage either in manic, inane activities, such as the snow-swimmers in *Sanitary-oborotni*, or in the mass brawls, murders or (assisted) suicides which are shown variously in all of Yufit's short films. Collective effort, a fundamental aspect of Soviet ideology, was degraded and inverted in necrorealist film, and mocked by the group's public tomfoolery. The necrorealists were, as Tarkovsky (1987 [1967], 181) claimed of all artists, created by their time and the people amongst whom they lived; in the Soviet case, because of the all-pervasive nature of the Soviet state, this claim can be extended to include not just time and people, but political ideology. Thus, regardless of their professed apolitical stance, the necrorealists were unavoidably influenced by politics, or at least the repercussions of politics on society as a whole; their artistic activity had an inherently political character as a result of its conscious evasion of the control which politics held over Soviet cultural and artistic production.

Chapter Three: Black Humour

I mentioned, in the introduction, the importance of *stëb*'s role in late-Soviet counterculture, expertly practised by wordsmiths such as Sergei Kuryokhin and Dmitri Prigov, and by visual artists such as Yufit and Aleksandr Melamid. I aim, in this chapter, to show how the general popularity of *stëb* as a phenomenon and its role in late-Soviet youth culture highlights an important trend of frustration and subversion in Soviet Russian society in the 1970s and 1980s. This point combines with the historical introduction given in Chapter 1 to establish that necrorealist aesthetics did not arise in a vacuum, but from a larger social undercurrent of absurdism and discontent which had been growing in Soviet society since the 1970s.

Stëb in performance art

In addition to visual and literary artists, bands like *Zvuki Mu*, fronted by the striking, enigmatic figure of Petr Mamonov, and *Strannye Igry* also engaged in *stëb*, not only through their music and performance, but through their music videos, which were a new concept for Russia in the late-1980s, produced mostly by journalists from the West.²⁷ *Zvuki Mu*'s video for their 1988 single '*Soiuz pechat'*', made for and featured on Peter Vronsky's 1988 short documentary 'Russian Rock Underground', features Mamonov standing alone with a microphone against a backdrop of video clips and still images which evoke historical nationalist themes, Communist ideology, and modern perestroika Russia. He moves in erratic jerks, singing in Russian whilst the lyrics are overlaid in English. For much of the video Mamonov looks at the floor or somewhere off-screen but, on the occasions that he does look directly at the camera, his eyes are wide and staring and his face contorted. *Strannye Igry* practised a version of *stëb* which was a little less overt than that of *Zvuki Mu*, a band described as 'the quintessential embodiment of *stëb*' (Yoffe 2013, 217), but one can still see parallels with both Mamonov and Yufit in the promotional clip they recorded for the song *Metamorfozy* (1985)²⁸. The clip opens with the band pulling faces into the camera, admittedly not quite of the same surreal quality as those for which Mamonov was famous, before launching into a mock fight scene reminiscent of necrorealist public spectacles, sped up to give the same impression of frantic movement found in early black-and-white cinema and similarly utilised by Yufit in his short films. The band continues, dancing around in public, jumping up and down the steps of a large building, headbanging on a bridge and, in a partial echo of Yufit and his friends, taking off their coats while playing in the snow.

Strannye Igry are joined in the *Metamorfozy* promotional video by an artist from Leningrad by the name of Sergei Kuryokhin, another outstanding pioneer of *stëb* in 1980s Russia. Kuryokhin was an avant-garde jazz pianist, composer, musical director, occasional actor, and what one might call an experimental comedian. Perhaps his most famous work of comedy is the 1991 television faux-documentary which became known as '*Lenin - grib*'²⁹ (Lenin is a mushroom), filmed with his friend

²⁷ That is, the commercialised popular music video as opposed to live recordings or other audio-visual recordings employing or including music. The trend, which eventually led to the music television station MTV, is generally agreed to have been started in the United Kingdom in the mid-1970s but took some time to permeate into Russia (Fowler 2009, 243).

²⁸ The promotional video was organized by Joanna Fields (aka Joanna Stingray) for her 'Red Wave' project, which aimed to promote Leningrad's underground rock in the United States. To my knowledge, the clip was not officially shown in Russia until it was included in a two-part documentary about the band, broadcast in November 2009 by the TV station '*Nostalgiia*' for their *Elovaia submarina* series on the history of Soviet rock music. Cf. Polly McMichael, 2009.

²⁹ The broadcast was officially named '*Tikhaia pop-mekhanika, ili Sholokhov i Kurëkhin o gribakh*' and was aired on 17th May. It was later released as a commercial VHS video by Sholokhov in 1996, though this edit is

Sergei Sholokhov, in which the two men discuss very seriously the proposal that Lenin not only consumed hallucinogenic mushrooms but that those mushrooms began to dominate his personality until he eventually became one himself. Kuryokhin bases his argument on a foundation of syllogisms and misdirection which do not stand up to any real scrutiny, but the real triumph of the piece is in the way it was delivered to the public. Both Kuryokhin and Sholokhov, who acts as the intrigued interviewer, remain completely straight-faced for most of the video³⁰, despite the sheer absurdity of the topic they are discussing. Genuine photographs and clips of video-footage are used, all of which would be very familiar to the average former-Soviet citizen as a result of their widespread use in propaganda, documentaries, histories of the Soviet Union, and so on; the familiarity of the images displayed lulls the audience into a false sense of security as Kuryokhin continues to expound his theory. As it was initially only broadcast once and there was no practical way for most viewers to record the program or study it more closely as one could do with a written work, many people were left unsure about what they had just watched, with little other way to check than talking about it with friends and family. The early 1990s was a time of even greater openness than perestroika: investigative journalism had received a huge boost not only in terms of freedom but in popularity and audience size, and a host of documentaries emerged cataloguing revised histories of the Soviet Union, often presented in a sensational manner (Yurchak 2011, 311 – 313). As Yurchak (Ibid., 313) notes, Kuryokhin and Sholokhov played on this fact, combined with Sholokhov's reputation as an innovative journalist and the conspicuous absence of this level³¹ of *stëb* even in late-Soviet television, to ensure that their piece had maximum impact.

Zvuki Mu, particularly Mamonov, and Kuryokhin shared an important aspect of *stëb* with Yufit and the necrorealists: the intentional blurring of the line between fantasy and reality. The way in which Kuryokhin and Sholokhov did this in 1991 is obvious; they used a flood of new, scandalous documentaries to sneak in their own parody. Kuryokhin's widow, Anastasia, told the newspaper *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* (18th August, 2005) in an interview that Sergei had been inspired to create *Lenin - grib* after watching one of these 'documentaries' on the death of the poet Sergei Yesenin. The documentary apparently attempted to prove that Yesenin had been murdered by analysing photographs of his funeral and interpreting the body language of those present; Kuryokhin is said to have commented that '[t]his way, you can prove anything you please' (Idem.). He relied on similar techniques in his collaboration with Sholokhov; the heavy-handed use of pseudoscience and focus on meticulous details to distract from the central absurdity lends an air of credibility to an impossible hypothesis. Presented, in support of the claim, with common historical footage and images which they know (or at least assume) to be genuine, and interviews conducted by Kuryokhin with legitimate scientists and specialists, the viewer's very concept of reality is challenged.

Mamonov is closer in many respects to Yufit, in that he presents absurdity but without any attempt to logically rationalise it; his intention is not to deceive, but to distort and unsettle. Mamonov presents himself as, amongst other things, an elegant punk, a staring-eyed pantomime villain, a glassy bureaucrat, and a *iurodiviĭ* (holy fool³²). The quality and strangeness of these personas, and the way in

noticeably different from the broadcast version, featuring, for instance, a previously unshown segment in which both men break down into laughter.

³⁰ There are occasional moments when one of the pair breaks character. For instance, as Kuryokhin finishes explaining how the 'internal parts' of the armoured car on which Lenin stood to deliver his famous speech at Finland Station excellently represent the root system of amanita mushrooms, Sholokhov can be heard to stifle a laugh off-camera.

³¹ I refer here to the extraordinary nature of the claim and the fact that the documentary's subject was Vladimir Lenin, a man considered essentially untouchable in Soviet Russia.

³² *Īurodivie* (plural form, from the noun '*iurodstvo*') were people who engaged in 'foolishness for Christ', often taking the form of unusual behaviour, speaking nonsense, and acts of extreme self-denial in the interests of

which he oscillates between them, serve to obscure his 'true' personality. It is important to note that, in the 1980s, an era of Russian television in which the programming predominantly comprised serious discussions and light, family-friendly entertainment with relatively prim and proper presenters, the appearance of such a character as Mamonov was much more striking than it would have been a decade later.

Necrorealism and punk

There is a trace of punk aesthetic in the performances of *Zvuki Mu* and *Strannye Igri*, mainly in the jerky movements, impulsive dancing, facial contortions, and general theatrical nature of their performances. *Strannye Igri*, very clearly influenced by ska bands such as Madness, employ this aesthetic in a more playful manner than *Zvuki Mu*, coming across as a kind of compromise between 'bovver boys'³³ and the Beatles. Yevgenij Yufit was described by Andrej Panov, legendary Russian punk, early participant in necrorealist activities, and founder of the band *Avtomaticheskie Udovletvoriteli* (better known by his pseudonym *Svin*) as a greater ideologue of the punk movement than Johnnie Rotten (Turkina 2011, 8). Olesya Turkina (Idem.) notes that, despite this accolade and the inherent similarities between necrorealism and punk, which she lists as social protest, the rejection of all values, absurd conduct, and a link to musical culture, Yufit eschewed the term 'punk' and avoided using it in relation to *nekrodeiatel'nosti* (the term Turkina gives to necrorealist activities). She contends that the necrorealists may, for this reason, have been more radical than the punk movement, as they 'claimed universality and affirmed the national character of [their] own exclusion' (Idem.).

Necrorealist events did not target society in the same way as the more extreme, anarchistic branches of punk; they aimed more to provoke it. I can find no accounts of any instances in which necrorealists attacked the public or genuinely caused any tangible damage³⁴; they sparred with each other in order to incite a reaction. The aim suggested by this is not a destructive nihilistic urge to destroy society but to make it think. The necrorealists functioned as a self-contained bubble of chaos within Soviet society which exaggerated and highlighted the problems therein in an attempt to force it to recognise and address social issues. According to Panov (quoted in Turkina 2011, 8), the Soviet police usually left the necrorealists alone on the basis that they were not regarded as posing a real threat and were simply 'being idiots'; from this, one can apply the concept of the *iurodivij* not only to Mamonov but also to Yufit and his friends. Aleksei Yurchak (2008a, 205) refers to a particularly good example of this from 1984, regarding an event which involved necrorealists 'pushing each other in and out of a large dumpster with intense and gloomy determination' outside a Leningrad train station. Yufit was standing nearby filming the event and a small crowd of passers-by looked on, baffled by the spectacle. Eventually the police arrived and questioned the necrorealists, confiscating Yufit's camera and taking the group to an MVD³⁵ office on suspicion of espionage. Yurchak recounts Yufit's recollections of the events that followed:

charity. Harriet Murav (1992, 4) explains that it is unknown how many of these holy fools were of sound mind and simply acting, and how many were mentally ill by birth or through trauma. She also paraphrases Mikhail Bakhtin in characterising the *iurodivi* as 'reflect[ing] the existence of others by making public and externalising what is hidden and private' (Ibid., 9). For more, see Murav 1992, and Hunt & Kobets 2011.

³³ A British English slang term for skinheads or hooligans associated with punk and ska music, used from the late-1960s to 1980s.

³⁴ Although one member of the group, Anatolij Mordukov, known as *Svirepyi* ('Fierce') for his particularly outrageous and dangerous provocations which included jumping in front of cars to see how the drivers would react, was hit by a car and killed in the early-1990s (Yurchak 2008, 208).

³⁵ *Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del* (Ministry of Internal Affairs)

[A colonel at the MVD office asked] “What was this all about? What are the goals of your actions? Why did you film them?” I said I did not know. I honestly did not know how to explain what the goals of our actions were. He became even more agitated and told us that our camera would be sent to a laboratory at the KGB and that we could go home for now but they had our names and addresses and would contact us. When I came back later to get the camera, they were completely befuddled: they had seen the developed film and could not figure out what this nonsense was all about. I said that it meant nothing; we were just practicing filming. They returned the camera and told me to get lost, and that was it (Yurchak 2008a, 205. Translation by Yurchak).

The idea of provocation through absurdity and unseemly behaviour, a trademark of the holy fool, aptly characterises *nekrodeiatel'nosti*, but Yufit also utilised another key aspect of *iurodstvo*: nonsense and the subversion of language.

Black humour and misdirection

Viktor Mazin (1998, 42), a Russian philosopher, psychoanalyst, and chronicler of necrorealist activities who has contributed a great deal to the study of Yevgenij Yufit's work, quotes Yufit's response to a journalist who asked what relationship his work had to politics:

Well, there are such injuries, including those resulting from airplane crashes that may have an effect on various political figures. In this sense, politics certainly does enter the sphere of my interests. However, such injuries make it very difficult to identify who is who. The remains of the bodies get scattered around an area of up to three square kilometres. This is an extremely complex injury. . . . But a cadaver is a cadaver. . . . I am interested in its metamorphoses . . . in the transformations of form and colour. In a kind of necroaesthetics. During the first and second months shocking changes occur. The cadaver becomes as spotty as a jaguar and as puffy as a hippopotamus. And this happens only under certain conditions. Which is particularly interesting. But as for politics . . . well, I don't really know.

This response perfectly encapsulates the absurd humour of necrorealism. The initial question posed by the journalist is deflected and answered in a very serious but evasive manner. A particularly interesting part of Yufit's answer here provides a link between the Leningrad necrorealists and the Moscow conceptualists, the latter group containing artists like Dmitri Aleksandrovich Prigov the experimental poet: Yufit, as part of his digression from the question, introduces specific figures and details such as the radius in which 'the remains of the bodies get scattered' and the stages of human decomposition. He responds in a way which completely decontextualizes the question, framing it in terms of trauma, death and decay, and adds the details to give his answer an illusion of legitimacy. In doing this, he parodies the habits of Soviet newsreaders and State spokespeople, who were often regarded as pedlars of empty, formulaic, authoritative discourse (Yurchak 2006, 259 – 264). The endless barrage of statistics about harvest yields, factory production quotas, and similar information of little meaning or relevance to the average Soviet citizen which dominated official news outlets in the Soviet Union³⁶ is appropriated and decontextualised by Yufit to wrong-foot his interviewer. Yufit's tactic here is very similar to the method which was used by Kuryokhin in *Lenin – grib* to confound his audience; Soviet viewers were accustomed to being presented with specific, scientific-sounding information as a result of the nature of contemporary models of authoritative political, and were therefore susceptible to being misled by a clever application of the same principal in a different context. The subversion or seizure of

³⁶ See Epstein 1995, 38 – 39 for more on the nature of Soviet news and its contribution to the development of *stëb*.

official language and discourse by Yufit and Kuryokhin connects these Leningrad artists with the school of Moscow conceptualism and the poet Dmitri Prigov.

Underground networks

Much of this chapter's discussion thus far has centred around artists from or, at least, active in Leningrad in the 1980s. This separation is rooted in a fundamental difference of artistic approaches and concepts at the time, which Dobrotvorsky (1994, 40 – 41) breaks down into a rough dichotomy of styles³⁷, presented here in a much-simplified format for the purposes of the present work: Moscow (the main avant-garde) favoured concepts, expressiveness, and experimentation with form; Leningrad (and the underground parallel cinema movement in both cities), on the other hand, dealt in obscurity, social criticism, and shock therapy. This is not to say, however, that there was no overlap between the two schools. In a sense, the decontextualised use of dialogue conventions by Yufit et al. to undermine the contextual use of those conventions is conceptualist in nature, as it is only from the 'improper' use of the conventions, i.e. the performance itself, that any ironic or artistic meaning is derived. Dmitri Prigov was a master of such word games; an incredibly prolific poet, sculptor, and organiser of exhibitions and artistic 'happenings'. His style has been described in relation to 're-accentuation', a Bakhtinian term for the concept of recontextualisation or mixing of genres, often for parodic-ironic effect (Edmond 2012, 129). Edmond (Idem.) continues that Prigov's re-accentuations 'involve the complex relation of sincere imitation to stylisation and parody' and that 'by linking diverse discourses, genres and media, ...[Prigov] allows them to interact in new ways – a process he...describes as *peresechenie* or "intersection"'. A key aspect of Prigov's conceptual poetry was the status of words and discourse, particularly the status of official 'Soviet language'. Mark Lipovetsky (2017, 227) offers the following translation of a remark made by Prigov on the subject:

The thing was that by this time [the early- to mid-1970s] some kind of schizophrenic state had shaped and it needed to be resolved. As a rule, all artists hated Soviet language. It was, so to speak, the dog's lingo. In their studios they used a lofty, undying language, but all their lives unfolded in the realm of the Soviet language: they watched football, drank, cursed. There was some kind of schizophrenic split, which made the artistic activity insane.

The duality of being presented here is supported by a more self-referential comment from Prigov, quoted in Nicholas (1996, 18), in which he states that 'I use half of my real personality, but not my whole personality'; Nicholas notes that this displays a partially detached position. Detachment is also the foundation of the school of necrorealism; the entire aesthetic, as discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, revolves around the detachment in the viewer's mind of the presented image from reality. The duality of perception in Yufit's short films is forced by the incongruence of his *netrupy* with the viewer's understanding of the world. In other words, the ambiguity surrounding the *netrupy*, vis-à-vis their relationship with life and death, and the sheer irrationality of their actions compels the viewer to take an objective stance because their subjectivity of experience has been compromised. In destroying the viewer's sense of the Real, Yufit aims to lead his audience towards a fundamental revision of society and *byt*. Prigov establishes this same duality in a less overt way. For example, in some of his *Stikhogrammy* (rendered in English by Edmond [2012, 139] as 'poemographs'), a series of visual poems produced in the 1970s, Prigov takes familiar Soviet slogans or even lines from the Stalinist iteration of the Soviet national anthem, and 're-accentuates' them. Emphasis is put on repetition and iteration of words, sentences and slogans, with words often metamorphosing or merging into one another as the iterations progress. In one *stikhogram*, Prigov takes a phrase which would have been familiar to most Soviet citizens, "*poezd dal'she ne proïdët. Pros'ba osvobodit' vagony*" ('this train goes no further. Please vacate the carriages'), repeats it, and inverts it on the page so that the text

³⁷ Dobrotvorsky refers specifically to cinematographic styles in the two cities, but the basic principle remains the same in other media discussed here.

is upside down (See Appendix 1). With progressive iterations, the phrase is encroached upon by another which emerges from the outsides of the page, ‘*vrag ne proïdēt. Nazad ni shagu*’ (‘the foe shall not pass. Not one step backwards’). Prigov takes a formulaic but completely neutral phrase from an ordinary, everyday context and contrasts it with a militaristic call to battle. His method seems more to encourage objectivity than force it in the way Yufit does, an observation in line with Dobrotvorsky’s analysis of the Moscow/Leningrad artistic division. Prigov, for Moscow, reaches out to his audience through experimentation with form and concepts, as shown in Appendix 1; Yufit, for Leningrad, utilises shock therapy extensively, sending his messages in a much more dramatic and unsettling way.

I have already touched upon the links between the Leningrad and Moscow schools of underground and ‘parallel’ art, particularly the similarities in the way each approached the subject of language. Prigov was closely linked to underground artists in Leningrad; as he revealed in an interview with cultural historian and Slavacist Dennis Ioffe, he visited Sergei Kuryokhin every time he was in Leningrad, and knew Yevgenij Yufit, and Petr Mamonov personally (Ioffe 2014, 356 – 357). In this same interview, Prigov also mentions the Aleĭnikov brothers, whom Dobrotvorsky (1994, 41) describes as the ‘leaders of the Moscow school [of parallel cinema]’, and Timur Novikov, a respected artist and influential organiser, creator of the Leningrad art collective ‘*Novie khudozhniki*’ (New Artists).

The Aleĭnikov brothers, Igor and Gleb, definitely belonged to Moscow’s conceptualist school, and showed a strong interest in *sots-art*, a nonconformist art style which emerged in Russia in the 1970s. *Sots-art* was at once a reaction to socialist realism and a conceptualist application of Western pop-art aesthetics and ideas to the Soviet context; it derived its name from the combination of the Russian word *sotsialisticheskiĭ* (socialist) and the term pop-art. The components of their style included the creative use of historical footage, in a similar vein to Kuryokhin’s *Lenin – grib*, and occasional elements of disturbing editing techniques reminiscent of necrorealist film. *Traktora* (Tractors, 1987)³⁸, a twelve-minute short film which utilises Soviet educational material and newsreels alongside the Aleĭnikovs’ own footage, provides a good example of both of these components. The film presents itself initially as a typical Soviet educational film, with alternating male and female narrators extolling the virtues of tractors, and detailing their key mechanisms and production methods. Around three-and-a-half minutes in, the narrator’s voice begins to slow down, accompanied by strobe lighting effects, and the mood becomes increasingly sombre. As the female narrator takes over once more, she begins to speak passionately, then hysterically about her relationship with her tractor, ‘I forget about everything. Just me and the tractor’ (*ĭa zabivaĭu obo vsĕm. Tol’ko ĭa i traktor*). After reaching a fever pitch, the narrator’s voice softens, becoming quiet and mournful. The film ends with an incongruously cheerful song in the socialist-realist style which is played over a montage of Soviet documentary footage before the final upwards-panning shot of a statue of Lenin. The film is undeniably *stĕb*; its whole premise consists of ridiculing the strange enthusiasm and socialist-realist portrayal of working life found in Soviet educational films and other propaganda by taking the idea to its extreme.

Timur Novikov was a Leningrad artist, accomplished in his own right, but perhaps most significant for his work in pushing the boundaries of late-Soviet and early-post-Soviet Russian art by creating the influential *Novie khudozhniki* and neo-academism projects (Dolinina, 2002). In the current context, the most important of these two projects is the former, *Novie khudozhniki*, a group which counted among its members Evgenij Yufit, Sergei Kuryokhin, and Viktor Tsoi, an actor, artist, and

³⁸ 1987 also saw the release of another Aleĭnikov Brothers film, *Zhestokaĭa bolezni muzhchin* (The Cruel Illness of Men; silent film with musical soundtrack), which features some necrorealist elements, notably a figure completely obscured by bloody bandages, and the final scene of a man raping another man on an underground train whilst an impassive witness reads a newspaper. Despite these similarities, it is closer to *chĕrnukha* than necrorealism because most of its characters are still recognizably human and it lacks necrorealism’s pervasive sense of anarchic chaos; it leans more towards *chĕrnukha*’s standard depiction of a society which is still identifiable as such, but whose norms and traditional values have decayed.

frontman of the late-Soviet rock band *Kino* who remains a cult hero in Russia today. The group continued in the tradition of the old Russian avant-garde from the 1910s – 1920s, embracing the concept of *vsëchestvo* which recognised all styles, past and present, as suitable for expressing creativity. In this respect, one can see parallels between the *Novie khudozhniki* and the Moscow conceptualists by way of Dmitri Prigov and his view of the artist ‘on a meta-level as a kind of space in which languages [or styles] converge’, above former notions and constrictions of style (Edmond 2012, 137).

Chapter conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the schools of avant-garde and underground art in Moscow and Leningrad in the 1980s were linked by a disdain for overt politics and the system in which they had developed, a desire to interpret and display the problems of late-Soviet society, and a rejection or subversion of dominant forms and styles of art and discourse. In a text adapted from a speech he gave at the ‘Language – Consciousness – Society’ conference³⁹, Grigory Tulchinsky (1998, 61) describes the term ‘Soviet mythocracy’, which he accredits to Mikhail Epstein, as ‘the complementary and mutually reinforcing unity of Stalinism and the Soviet governmental system’. He continues, clarifying his terms in a passage which is worth quoting at length:

I understand *Stalinism* (for want of a better term) to be a ‘specific manifestation of mythological consciousness, rooted in the Russian conception of Marxism and in a uniquely Russian worldview with its Orthodox religious orientation. Stalinism is no more than the mature form of this consciousness. *Mythological* is an appropriate term because this type of consciousness claims to offer a universal interpretation of reality, capable of eliminating the fundamental antinomies of human existence. It creates an impression of permanence in a changing world and facilitates the joy of finding something familiar in the unknown. It is oriented not toward creation of the new, but toward reproduction of the old, thereby serving as the basis for a profoundly ambivalent ritualization of reality [Idem., emphasis and parentheses in original].

An obsession with the reproduction of the old, and the projection of strength, stability, and contentment onto Soviet life by socialist realist art, Soviet folklore⁴⁰, and the state-approved truth which was disseminated by the media contributed to a cynical pessimism in certain areas of Soviet artistic society, which manifested itself through the use of extreme aesthetics and black irony. Tulchinsky (Ibid., 72 – 73) argued in his speech that the best response to the situation in the late 1980s, i.e. the death of this mythocracy at the hands of perestroika, was a methodical pessimism; he continued that ‘[o]nly when we understand *why* matters have reached a point of utter absurdity can we attempt to resist the negative forces’.

Whilst the necrorealists were far from alone in their efforts to highlight the absurdity inherent in 1980s Russian life, they were perhaps the most committed to the aesthetics of nonsense and horror which underground art adopted in order to address the breakdown of Soviet society. In a comment on Tulchinsky’s speech, Viacheslav Ivanov asked whether Tulchinsky was ‘being pessimistic *enough*’, suggesting that ‘[i]t might be possible to manifest even more pessimism by not even seeking logic in the situation’ (Ibid., 73, emphasis in original). I argue that this is precisely what Yufit and the necrorealists did; through the portrayal of a world without logic or rationality, full of violence, suicide

³⁹ Organised by Arkady Dragomoshchenko’s group ‘Poetic Function’ (*Poëticheskaïa funktsiïa*), with support from the Soviet Culture Foundation (Berry 1998b, 337). This event was also attended by Dmitri Prigov (Edmond 2012, 151).

⁴⁰ For more on Soviet folklore, see Latynina (1998).

and decay, they attempted to force the Soviet public to acknowledge and react to the ideological crisis of the Gorbachev years.

Conclusion

For many Soviets, the idea of the Soviet Union as a '*vechnoe gosudarstvo*' (eternal State) was not seriously challenged until the mid-1980s. Andrei Makarevich, frontman of the popular Soviet and Russian band '*Mashina Vremeni*' (Time Machine), said in a 1994 interview that, before 1986 or 1987 when perestroika was already underway, '[i]t had never even occurred to [him] that in the Soviet Union anything could ever change' (Yurchak 2006, 1). The pervasive influence on Soviet life of the state and its ideology, underpinned by notions of the immortality of the Communist cause and a teleological drive towards the accomplishment of true Socialism, persisted even through the gerontocracy of the 1970s and 1980s, despite the frailty of its leadership. The collapse of socialist realism and Gorbachëv's experiments with openness contributed to a new wave of socially-critical film, the extremes of which included necrorealism and associated contemporary movements such as *chernukha* and Moscow conceptualism.

According to the definition given by French-Romanian avant-garde playwright Eugene Ionesco, 'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless' (quoted in Esslin 1961, xix. Ellipsis in original). In the context of the late-Soviet state, as more than sixty years of Soviet ideology and identity began to show signs of serious strain, this feeling of isolation, of being cut adrift from a previously solid mooring, began to manifest itself in the absurdity of necrorealism, conceptualism, and associated *stëb*-influenced art.

This thesis posits that Yufit and the necrorealists acted as the Bakhtinian 'grotesque' in late-Soviet Russia, accompanying the 'carnival' of holy fools like Mamonov and semiotic and linguistic satirists like Prigov and Kuryokhin. Necrorealism displayed a gross, exaggerated vision of a society abstracted from social norms, which can be tied into what Hokenmaier (1993, 56) characterises as the decay of the social contract between the Soviet state and its people⁴¹. Hokenmaier (Ibid., 3) writes that Gorbachëv's aim was to redefine the social contract by 'getting the economy moving and simultaneously reducing the state's obligations', but the withdrawal of the state from a society with which it had previously been very closely integrated was bound to be difficult. There was a clear indication from the Soviet people that something had to change; demonstrated, according to Hauslohner (1897, 60 – 61), by 'undisguised social protest' and 'deepening demoralisation and spreading anomie in the society at large'. The concept of anomie, popularised in French sociologist Émile Durkheim's 1897 book 'Suicide', relates to a mismatch between individual norms and societal norms. Durkheim used the concept to explain lower suicide rates among Catholics in comparison with Protestants; he argued that the rigidity and structure of Catholicism granted a kind of security, and that Catholics were resultantly 'less likely to experience the angst of normlessness, less likely to internalize a situation with no structure, and therefore less likely to kill themselves' (Star et al. 1997, 5.1). Informational sociologist Susan Star and her co-authors advance this notion, stating that:

Durkheim also formally posited anomie as a mismatch, not simply as the absence of norms. Thus, a society with too much rigidity and little individual discretion could also produce a kind of anomie, a mismatch between individual circumstances and larger social mores. Thus, fatalistic suicide arises when a person is too rule-governed, when there is...no free horizon of expectation (Idem., emphasis in original)

⁴¹ This was due, in part, to the economic stagnation and decline of the USSR under Brezhnev.

The separation of the Soviet people as a whole from the previous omnipresence of Soviet ideology, partly a result of the latter's inadequate adjustments to social and economic change in the USSR⁴², may offer a third variant of anomie. The Soviet state offered, or professed to offer, a unified, normalised, 'Soviet' existence, with strict rules and a strong stated preference for the community over the individual. As the belief in this structure began to erode, so too did belief in the norms and concepts of identity which that structure had championed; the mismatch here arises from the collapse of the broader societal norm, and its subsequent absence as a reference point for the individual norm. This links directly to the prominence of absurdity in 1980s Russia. An underlying tenet of Communist and socialist philosophy is the idea of the community, necessarily bound by a shared ideology and common norms; as the societal norm dissolved and Soviet society began to fracture, the estrangement of anomie encouraged an increasingly chaotic and absurd depiction of reality.

The distortion and perversion of the 'truth' presented to audiences by Stalinist propaganda and socialist realism forced socially-critical directors in mid- to late-Soviet Russia to resort to extreme methods in order to present their own view of the world. Whilst conditions in Russia, including the state's long-held control of cinematic production, delayed the emergence of an independent cinema movement, these methods could still only be as extreme as could be approved by state censors. When the floodgates finally began to open under the policies of glasnost and perestroika in the mid-1980s, cultural liberalisation and improved access to film-making equipment allowed half a century of repressed cinematic expression to break free. The portrayals of *byt* and the 'truth of the everyday', advocated by Ermler and Vertov in the 1920s and 1930s, combined with forms of political critique such as Bakhtinian grotesque imagery and *stëb* to give rise to necrorealism and the darkest corners of *chërnukha*.

I, like Yurchak, see necrorealism as a political statement in the context of the late-Soviet state, but I add the qualifier that this is only due to the blurred boundaries between that state and the society around it. The primary influence on the rise of necrorealist aesthetics appears to have been the perceived decay of Soviet society in the 1970s and 1980s. Yufit's generation, born between the 1950s and early-1970s, and who came of age in the 1970s or early-1980s, are referred to by Yurchak (2006, 31) as the 'last Soviet generation'. According to Yurchak (Ibid., 32), the common identity of this generation was formed not by the momentous events of the generations before (i.e. the October Revolution, Stalinism, and de-Stalinisation) and after (the collapse of the USSR), but 'by a shared experience of the normalized, ubiquitous and immutable authoritative discourse of the Brezhnev's [sic] years'. This definition supports the view that the 1970s and 1980s saw a qualitative change in what it meant to be Soviet; if authoritative discourse was the dominant identity-building factor for the generation of the 1970s and 1980s, then any loss of substance or meaning in that authoritative discourse was bound to have an effect on the associated sense of identity. It is evident from the multi-media success of *stëb*, with its mockery of bland, official discourse⁴³, and the self-alienation of underground artists from Soviet politics and Soviet identity⁴⁴, that Russian society in the 1970s and 1980s was to some degree aware of the disintegration of Soviet ideology and felt able to pass

⁴² A full explanation of the decline in the legitimacy of the Soviet state is beyond the scope of this work. See Hokenmaier (1993) for more detailed information.

⁴³ See Chapter Three

⁴⁴ 'In a situation in which the sovereign state held exclusive control over what language and what actions were seen as legal and "political," this alternative politics [practised by underground artists, particularly the necrorealists] included, paradoxically, refusal to see oneself in political terms. Instead of challenging the state by occupying an oppositional subject position, these people carved out a subject position that the state could not recognize in "political" terms and therefore could not easily define, understand, and control. This was a challenge to the state's sovereign powers of defining and imposing political subjectivities'. (Yurchak 2008, 200).

comment on it. Whilst every decade of the Soviet Union's existence saw some or other artistic group placed in opposition to the state, the subculture which grew up around *stëb* was much freer as a result of both the weakening of the state's ideological legitimacy and the policies of glasnost and perestroika. It was also versatile and relatable enough to pervade the culture of the late-1970s and 1980s, as Mark Yoffe (2013, 208 – 211) demonstrates. Necrorealism applied *stëb*'s driving principle of over-identification to the decay its members saw in their society in order to highlight the mismatch between old Soviet ideology and new Soviet reality.

Although the permeable borders between Soviet state and society do add an element of the political to necrorealism, and it was only through the political liberalisation of culture in the 1980s that necrorealism was able to legitimise itself as an art form⁴⁵, I have found no indication that Yufit and his group were merely using apoliticism as an aspect of their aesthetic. Referring back to Makarevich's quote on the 'eternal state', I believe that necrorealism avoided politics because its members had no expectations for political change. If the nihilistic anarchy of the world the necrorealists portrayed was linked to contemporary Soviet society⁴⁶, then there would be no point in making a political statement. The world of early necrorealism contained no framework for overtly political messages but was one of the best, if not most commercially successful, vehicles for articulating and drawing attention to the late-Soviet crisis of identity. As Camus argued through his 1940 essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, '[i]f we accept our situation as absurd...and do not try to believe that there is meaning and purpose where there is none, then we can revolt against the absurd and create meaning and purpose for ourselves' (Bennett 2011, 11).

This thesis has argued that early necrorealist activity and film, rather than just being 'energetic stupidity', was a sharp form of socio-political criticism which utilised elements from both early- and late-Soviet socially-critical culture. It combined the cinematic aesthetics and energy of 1920s silent film with the absurdism, *stëb*, and *chërnuška* which had proliferated in Russian underground (and, to varying extents, official) culture over the course of the last two Soviet decades. Yufit's depictions of the Soviet Union in Kustov's 'zone of Absolute Dying' (see Fig. 1) were enabled only by the relative freedoms granted to Russian independent film-making in the 1980s by technological progress and Gorbachëv's attempts to reform the state and restore its legitimacy. The present work has focussed on the early activities of Yevgenij Yufit, restricting its attentions to necrorealist film and provocations up to the late 1980s. There is interesting scope for further research into necrorealist painting, examples of which were produced by many of the group's members. Striking similarities exist between necroaesthetics and, for example, the works of Leningrad-born artist Josef Yakerson (who emigrated to Israel in 1973), such as his 1966 oil painting *Prozektorskaïa* (Prosectorium) and the later *Samoubiïstvo Iudy* (Suicide of the Jew, 1987). One can also see representations of carnival and the grotesque in the paintings of Latvian artist and dissident Ivars Poikāns, particularly in *Pirts* (Bathroom, 1983) and *Sauna* (Sauna, 1985)⁴⁷. Detailed research into these similarities may reveal connections between 1980s nonconformist artists, and their view of perestroika society, in Soviet Russia, in other former-Soviet republics, and in enclaves of émigrés from the USSR. This, in turn,

⁴⁵ I pose that Yufit was partly legitimised by his final Soviet films, *Rytsari podnebes'ia* (Knights of the Heavens, 1989) and *Papa, umer Ded Moroz* ('Papa, Father Frost is Dead', 1991), which were produced in conjunction with the official Leningrad studio, *Lenfil'm*.

⁴⁶ See pg.10

⁴⁷ Reproductions of the paintings listed here (including Yakerson's *Prozektorskaïa*) are available in: *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience 1956 – 1986*. 1995, edited by Alla Rosenfield and Norton T. Dodge, p. 115 and p. 202. Yakerson's *Samoubiïstvo Iudy* is available here: <http://galinapodolsky.com/fortissimo-akkord-josef-yakerson-esse-i-yakersona-glavy-iz-knigi-sovremennoe-izraïlskoe-izobrazitelnoe-iskusstvo-s-russkimi-kornyami/> (accessed 2nd August 2017).

may help an understanding of the cultural links between these communities during the Soviet Union's final years.

Appendix 2: Film summaries: Yevgenij Yufit, 1984 – 1988

Yufit's first film, *Sanitary-oborotni*⁴⁸ (1984), was a three-minute short, set to a comically incongruous *estrada*⁴⁹ march. It shows a sailor disembark a train, holding a saw, and walk off over the tracks into the woods. He is followed by four men, some of whom appear to be wearing surgical gowns and one of whom wears what looks to be a chef's hat. The sailor wades through the snow deeper into the woods towards a group of figures, half of whom are making a very determined effort to swim through the snow, and the other half tossing it up in the air with shovels. He tries to start a fire at the bottom of a tree, which he proceeds to climb, as the four men following him walk up to the tree's base holding a large sheet. The sailor then falls (or jumps) out of the tree into the sheet, which the 'orderlies' carry into the middle of the group of figures who are playing in the snow. The sailor is beaten with shovels whilst the figures who had been swimming in the snow fetch a large, fallen tree-branch to drop on him. The sailor's bloodied and beaten face is seen before the final shot of a Soviet naval ship.

Sanitary-oborotni was followed by *Lesorub* (Woodcutter, 1985), an eight-minute film which opens with a man (played by Yufit) silently narrating what looks like a documentary on a psychopath or serial-killer. He walks around a small room, filled with photographs of apparent corpses⁵⁰, and children's toys which seem to be hanging by the neck from, or impaled to, one of the walls, all the while giving a silent but serious-faced commentary to the camera. As this finishes, the scene changes to show a figure stumbling down a snowy forest road, staggering and jerking, accompanied by the unofficial anthem of the necrorealists, Oleg Kotel'nikov's *Zhirovosk*⁵¹. A group of figures run back and forth across the road, knocking the stumbling man down; one of the group then ties a rope around the fallen man's foot and drags him away. Snippets of old documentary footage follow, showing first what appears to be an educational autopsy for medical students, then some manner of high-society event or function. Next, a body falls out of a fourth- or fifth-storey window, where it is set upon and beaten by three men; an intertitle reads 'despite falling from a great height, he continued to function correctly'. The body is carried around for much of the rest of the film; it is hanged from a tree, thrown onto train tracks, jumped on, used as bait to lure in a 'pseudo-tourist' (*lzheturist*), thrown around, strapped to someone's back, and beaten again. *Lesorub* presents a contrast at one point between the 'south' and the 'north', the former represented by flies on what looks like rotting meat, the latter by the same snowy forest from earlier in the film. The general theme of fighting is continued in the closing scenes, the group continuing their brawl on a farm next to a caged bear, two gutted pigs, and an inquisitive boar, then fighting again in the woods. In a particularly surreal shot, a bloodied and deranged man dances in a small room with another man, dressed as a rural woman; in the corner of the room there appears to be a child's body hanging from the window-frame. Another intertitle proclaims

⁴⁸ Usually translated as 'Werewolf Orderlies'. It is worth noting, however, that *oboroten* (the singular form of *oborotni*), though often used to refer specifically to werewolves, means more generically 'shape-shifter'.

⁴⁹ The Soviet term for what might be called 'variety' or 'light music' in English.

⁵⁰ The word 'apparent' is used here because one of the photographs on the wall (in the top right-hand corner on the back wall, next to the door) bears a strong resemblance to one taken by Yufit of fellow necrorealist, Oleg Kotel'nikov. The photograph achieved a death-like look because Kotel'nikov was suspended upside-down before the photo was taken, distorting his face and spreading out his hair as though he were laid out on a gurney. For further information, and the photograph in question, see Yurchak 2008, 205.

⁵¹ This song is often translated as 'Fat Wax', which is a literal rendering of the words *zhir* and *vosk*. The word itself, however, is the Russian medical term for adipocere (also known as corpse, grave, or mortuary wax), a fatty substance produced during delayed decomposition. As I explain later in the chapter, the necrorealists studied medical textbooks for inspiration and became quite knowledgeable about post-mortem biological processes. Berry and Miller-Pogacar (1996, 200) explain that the word 'adipocere' lacks the graphic expressiveness and conversational stylistic tone of *zhirovosk* in Russian.

that the ‘pseudo-tourist shapeshifter’⁵² had been a double, and that the real tourist has hidden himself in the depths of the woods and ‘decided to dedicate the remainder of his life to logging’. The ‘logging’ itself is shown in a farcical, Buster-Keaton-esque slapstick scene, in which the pseudo-tourist stumbles around in a small clearing full of saplings, ultimately flattening them all. The final scenes show happy Soviet children releasing doves, and a sad-eyed grandmotherly figure shaking her head.

Vesna (Spring, 1987) features similar themes of violence, suicide, and inexplicable behaviour, interspersed with archival footage of entertainment at a Soviet holiday camp and a circus. Train tracks play an important part once more, with the first scene showing two figures lying on a track whilst a third seemingly tries to pull one of them to the side with a rope; trains pass on both sides and it is implied that the figures on the tracks have been killed. In the following scenes, a sailor hidden in tall reeds⁵³ ambushes a passer-by and beats him with a club; and a suicidal man builds a Rube Goldberg contraption to swing himself headfirst into a tree (made more absurd by the fact that he stops to put his glasses on before triggering the device) whilst the sailor from earlier, now bloody-faced, crawls towards him. On two occasions, a wild-faced man appears to chase after and scream at an aeroplane; on another two occasions, a figure screams in horror at something happening off-screen. The theme of suicide is continued throughout the film, one character disembowelling himself, others running at full speed into walls and trees. The archival footage shows chimpanzees, one dressed as a clown, a Soviet athlete of some sort juggling a log whilst lying down, along with more typical circus entertainment. The bizarre ‘tug-of-war’ scene, to which I referred in the introduction is intercut with a clip of bearded men dancing in dresses. The closing scenes show the seemingly-disembodied heads of three necrorealists, a shot of a solitary flying bird, and finally an old woman in bed who, it is revealed, had been writing the strange, disjointed intertitles which are scattered throughout the film. As in *Lesorub*, the final image is of a tired-looking old woman.

Yufit’s fourth film, *Vepri suitsida* (lit. ‘boars of suicide’, 1988), is much shorter than *Lesorub* and *Vesna*, a mere four minutes, but it feels considerably more focused. It is split into two parts: before and after the title of the film is shown. The first part sees two men perform an act of sadomasochism, in which one climbs into a hole in the ground and has boiling water thrown in his face before being boarded up in the hole. This is contrasted with shots of children marching barefoot: a detached shot, filmed from a distance in an elevated position, which puts the viewer into an observer role, removed from the event; and a close, low-angle shot which is tilted to the right and clearly shows the children’s bare feet. With a very simple cinematographic trick, a change of angle and a tilted camera, Yufit is perhaps referencing the ability of films which focus on small details to pick up on problems which are missed by films which aim to present a full picture. This would fit with the idea of filmic *byt* and its gritty details arising as a reaction to the grand concepts of Social realism. The shots of children, marching in neat rows, are intercut with footage of bombers flying in formation, possibly an allusion to the regimented, semi-militarised upbringing experienced by many Soviet children. The second half of the film begins with a sunset and a sad-faced man. Like the first, it features a sadomasochistic act and shows archive footage of the Soviet air force. The act is an assisted suicide and, as in *Vesna*, it uses an improvised device, in this case made from a plank, the head of a gardening fork, and a bicycle inner tube. A man lies in bed, smoking a cigarette next to a copy of Vsevolod Skopin’s book ‘*Militarizm*’; another man comes to his window and the film cuts to a shot of Soviet pilots during the Second World War. The second man sets up the improvised device and, with his compliance, ‘kills’

⁵² Here we see the word *oboroten*’ once more, highlighting the importance to the necrorealists of shape-shifting and transformation.

⁵³ Reminiscent of the painting by necrorealist co-founder Aleksei Trupyr, ‘*V kamyshakh*’ (In the Reeds), which was used as the logo for Yufit’s film studio *Mzhalalafil*’m.

the first man. A trapped insect hangs from a thread, and after a cutaway to the sad-faced man from earlier, a hedgehog is shown inspecting the book next to the 'dead' man's hand.

The final of Yufit's films which is considered here is 1988's *Muzhestvo* (Courage). This was the last of Yufit's independent films before he began to receive wider acknowledgement as an artist and was allowed to work with the professional studio *Lenfil'm*. *Muzhestvo* is the shortest of Yufit's films and unique in its sense of continuity; most of the film is footage captured by Yufit, with only a single recycled image, and all of Yufit's footage was shot in a single location. The film opens with a man lying down in a dark room next to two apparent corpses to smoke a cigarette. Another man sits in a damp underground corridor and torments a frog whilst two figures in the background drag a naked body into a brightly-lit room. A figure crawls into the room with the smoking man, the lower half of his face caked in what appears to be blood, and the two confront each other. In the next shot, three figures in various states of undress, one with a loosely-bandaged head, run out of a room into the corridor and begin to fight. A third man joins the crawling man in his altercation, is struck by the smoker and laid out next to the corpses. The smoker inspects something in a pile of rubble, then leaves the room and chases the fighting group down the corridor. The final shot is a close-up of three children's faces in a group photo.

Selected Filmography

- Astenicheskiĭ Sindrom* (Asthenic Syndrome). 1989. Directed by Kira Muratova. Odessa: Odesskaïa kinostudiïa.
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<https://www.youtube.com/user/channelAIR> (accessed 20th July 2017).
- Devochka i Buda* (A Girl and Buda). 1984. Directed by Gleb Aleĭnikov. Moscow.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bh9vXLaKcoM> (accessed 20th July 2017).
- Lesorub* (Woodcutter). 1985. Directed by Yevgenij Yufit. Leningrad: Mzhalalafil'm.
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- Son* (The Dream). 1987. Directed by Dmitri Frolov. Leningrad: NEO-Fil'm.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PooqEDU3D70> (accessed 20th July 2017).
- Tikhaia pop-mekhanika, ili Sholokhov i Kurėkhin o gribakh* (Quiet Pop-Mechanics, or Sholokhov and Kuryokhin talk about Mushrooms) 1991. Directed by Sergei Debishev. Leningrad: Leningradskoe televidenie.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OZpoBYd448> (accessed 20th July 2017).
[Note that this links to an uploaded copy of the later, re-edited VHS release. I am not aware of a publically-available recording of the broadcast version. For information on the differences between these versions, see Yurchak 2011].
- Traktora* (Tractors). 1987. Directed by Gleb and Igor Aleĭnikov. Moscow.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRdrzGpL3IE> (accessed 20th July 2017).
- Vesna* (Spring). 1987. Directed by Yevgenij Yufit. Leningrad: Mzhalalafil'm.
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