

necrorealism

Contexts, History, Interpretations

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Early Necrocinema in Context

JOSÉ ALANIZ & SETH GRAHAM

Every representation of death is a misrepresentation.
Thus an analysis of it must show not only how it
claims to represent death, but also what else it in fact
represents, however suppressed.

—Goodwin and Bronfen (20)

In "Eroticism in the Cinema" André Bazin reiterates his realist's appreciation for the persuasive powers of the motion picture, its capacity beyond any other medium not only to reproduce reality, but to "bring it back alive," so to speak, to display it whole and unmolested to the viewer. Bazin employs as examples those two great extremities of human life, sex and death, in addressing film's capacity to capture the "objectness" of the object:

If you can show me on the screen a man and woman whose dress and position are such that at least the beginnings of sexual consummation undoubtedly accompanied the action, then I would have the right to demand, in a crime film, that you really kill the victim—or at least wound him pretty badly. Nor is this hypothesis ridiculous, for it is not too long ago that killing stopped being a spectacle.... I once wrote, apropos of a notorious newsreel sequence showing officers of Chiang Kai-Shek's army executing "Communist spies" on the streets of Shanghai, that the obscenity of the image was of the same order as that of a pornographic film. An ontological pornography. Here death is the negative equivalent of sexual pleasure, which is sometimes called, not without reason, "the little death." (173)

Bazin's point that the veracity of the sexual act is vouchsafed by cinema's recording capacities has found resonance in the work of pornography scholars like Linda Williams, who see in the "body genre" of porn a means to arrive at the "truth" of sex, however problematic the notion of "truth"—visual or otherwise—may be.¹ The fact remains that when we see frank, pornographic filmic representations of sex we "believe" them—the "actors" are

not faking it—due to the medium's indexical capacities, its power to reproduce *presence* beyond any book or painting or website, and our own optically-based will to knowledge.²

What of the second half of Bazin's declaration? What of the "truth," the "presence," of death? What tools, if any, can the cinematic apparatus bring to bear on the "real" represented by the dead and/or dying body? What is the nature of death's "obscurity" and how do filmmakers mitigate, negotiate, and/or exploit it in their representations of death? Of immediate concern here: how did filmmakers in the moribund USSR (and since 1991 in the reanimated Russia) approach the representation of death, and to what ends?

Before examining particular instances of "filmed death" we must specify which "death" we have in mind: the philosophical/metaphysical problem; the physical occurrence; or the physiological state. If we are referring to the second of these—death as a portrayed *event*, i.e., the on-screen end of a character's life—Russo-Soviet cinema over the past decade-and-a-half has been permeated by death(s). The end of Soviet censorship sparked a compensatory flood of previously-taboo images and themes in all the arts, which accounts in part for the prevalence of necrotic film imagery.³ Death was a hallmark especially of the perestroika era's so-called *chernukha* film, a darkly naturalistic "anti-genre" (Horton and Brashinsky 163) that foregrounded the bleakest aspects of contemporary Soviet/Russian social and psychological life: violence, illness, poverty, addiction, and despair.⁴

As in Western films, the vast majority of characters who die on the Russo-Soviet screen (even in deliberately shocking *chernukha* films) do so quickly and—in terms of the visual consequences of the death—without a trace. As Mikhail Iampolsky writes, "[n]o one ever thinks to question the whereabouts of the mountains of corpses produced by the cinema" ("Death in Cinema" 271). Only exceedingly rarely do corpses in the movies, when represented at all, appear as they would in reality: as decomposing masses of flesh (though other thanato-pornographic "truths" abound in the cinema).⁵

The likelihood of the camera lingering on a corpse-as-such is typically proportional to the clarity and insistency of the film's discursive or emotional agenda (its "message"), or to the conventionality of the genre. In films about atrocities (especially the

Holocaust), for example, graphic images of dead bodies are an accepted part of the project of bearing witness.⁶ A different (though arguably related) example are corpses in horror films, which can be represented in more detail and longer takes (even those that do not come alive) than they normally are because the viewer is protected from the existential obscenity of "real" death by the buffer of a familiar, non-realistic genre, one that moreover relies heavily on necrotic imagery for its aesthetic effect.

One reason *chernukha* was so despised, by audiences and critics alike, was the absence of a horror genre in Soviet cinema. Death in all three of the above senses had been represented on the Soviet screen, though in over-determined ways (as either righteous sacrifice or deserved punishment), but there was no context in which to represent death outside the familiar categories (for example as an entertaining scare, as in horror). So death in the *chernukha* "anti-genre" was raw, uncodified, uncontextualized, unmotivated, and thus unacceptable; it was perceived as death porno masquerading as contemporary drama.

Russian cinematic death since the end of censorship has not been the exclusive domain of the maligned purveyors of *chernukha*, however. Big-D "philosophical" Death, little-d deaths, and even dead people have been prominent in many, perhaps most, of the best-known and most successful Russian films of the past decade and a half. The film that many consider the first genuine "perestroika film," Tengiz Abuladze's *Repentance* (*Pokoianie/Monanieba*, 1984/86), opens with an episode about a Stalinesque dictator's body that continually reappears after repeated burials. In Sergei Bodrov's *Prisoner of the Mountains* (*Kavkazskii plennik*, 1996), a character killed in a war in the Caucasus immediately returns as a wise-cracking spirit. In Pavel Chukhrai's *The Thief* (*Vor*, 1997), a boy continually sees the ghost of his dead father. Aleksei Balabanov's *Brother* (*Brat*, 1997) and *Brother 2* (2000) feature a vigilante protagonist who kills prolifically and without emotion. Nikita Mikhalkov's *Burnt by the Sun* (*Utomlennye solntsem*, 1994) depicts the gradual coming to terms of its hero with the fact that he has just lived his last day on earth before torture and eventual execution under Stalin (whose mammoth portrait floats menacingly, spectrally, in the sky). Probably the most extended narrative treatment of death in recent Russian cinema is Kira Muratova's *Three Stories* (*Tri istorii*, 1997), a trilogy

of short films united by the theme of murder.

As the stylistic and topical variety of this incomplete list illustrates, there are as many ideas of what constitutes the cinematic signification of "death" as there are filmmakers who attempt such signification. The larger work-in-progress of which this essay is a part is concerned with filmmakers who have pursued more sustained and explicit interrogations of death during the twenty-or-so-year period straddling the 1991 demise of the USSR: Aleksandr Sokurov, the maverick St. Petersburg *auteur*—widely regarded as the heir to Andrei Tarkovskii—who has made intensely personal films that examine death in a tragic, neo-Romantic mode; and the Necrorealists, a *rear-garde* (to use Mikhail Epstein's term) arts collective that began as an underground band of young layabouts and drunken "weekend warriors" who started to film their own debauched and violent free-for-alls in the woods in the early 1980s. "Death" for the Necrorealists quickly became not only something to be represented on film (both as an event and a condition) but a comprehensive, organizing metaphor for an entire approach to visual representation. Thus their work is a logical starting point for an extended examination of Russo-Soviet cinematic death. The remainder of this article focuses on the emergence of the Necrorealist aesthetic and several of their early films.

Necrocontexts

Picture the early eighties: Leningrad at the zenith of socialism. Against a background of Communist slogans and portraits of zombified leaders, twenty-year-old men loiter about the streets. The visual thematics include a shifting landscape of simple events: a grocery store, an apartment and courtyard, a fight, the police—with insignificant variations and structural rearrangements. The public, gathered into a unified, communal body, is heterogeneous and poorly acquainted among itself: from blatant criminals to intellectuals and working artists. At the same time, they are united into an assembly by just one thing – an utter existential senselessness that pervades them, one and all. A savage masculine glee accompanies these

occasions, along with affectations and a marasmic gust of stagnated energy. (Demichev, "Face" 5)

Many members of what has come to be known as the "last Soviet generation," particularly the males, would find something to relate to in Demichev's bleak description of the social reality of 1980s Leningrad. In this version of events, a watered-down death instinct seized a horde of these men, driving them to the forests outside the city to release their pent-up rage in besotted half-serious brawls, a sort of rural "fight club" of anarchic freedom. Evgenii Iufit, a long-time prankster, exhibitionist, and self-described "eccentric," emerged as a leader of this rabble.

An arts collective formed out of this unstable group in the early 1980s. Iufit was at the time a student at a Leningrad technical institute,⁷ but soon developed an interest in art and cinema. Eventually the group started filming its exploits and screening them in the underground scene, the only alternative to the system of film production and distribution controlled by the state via the official cinema organ, Goskino. Out of improvisation, zero budgets, crude equipment and puerile bombast, the Necro-realist ethos emerged: exploration of the liminal state between life and death, in which crazed "zombies" or necro-denizens wander apocalyptic landscapes and commit acts of wanton cruelty, homosexual violence, and murder.

This "heroic idiocy" (to use Igor' Aleinikov's memorable term) amounted to something between a sick, juvenile provocation and a veiled social critique, a de-idealization of Soviet myth and a boisterous, irrational expression of the "inverse of a will to power" (Berry and Miller-Pogacar, "Shock Therapy" 187). Dobrotvorskii writes that

necrocinema sent back to the empire its most well-worn stereotypes: homosexuality as the flip-side of exaggerated masculinity; idiocy as an extreme parody of heroic pathos; and disdain for death, as a natural consequence of collective ethics." ("A Tired Death" 7)

The Soviet masculine id was unleashed on underground movie screens in deliberately crude and primitive short films with titles like *Werewolf Orderlies*, *Urine-Crazed Body Snatchers*, and *Fortitude*, whose impact on alternative Russian cinema has been likened to that of *Le Chien Andalou* on the Surrealists (I. Aleinikov 7, qtd. in

Berry and Miller-Pogacar, "Shock Therapy" 188). In 1984 Iufit founded his own independent studio, Mzhalalafilm, but continued to shoot in a coarse, primitivist, "home movie" style. The early films were silent, manic throwbacks to the slapstick comedies of the 1910s and 1920s, with sinister twists that included suicide, dismemberment, and bloody "corpses" eating human flesh, often intercut with archival footage of Soviet propaganda.

The group's collective filmmaking methods (a sort of performance art) were as important to its ethos as the final results on celluloid:

According to Iufit, the first reel of [*Werewolf Orderlies*] happened by itself. Twenty-odd people, scarcely acquainted with each other, gathered together at Finland Station. While conversing in a train car, they came up with some ideas. Someone had a saw, someone else had a sailor's vest, and thus the main hero made his appearance as a sailor, whose exit from the suburban train takes place in the first shot of the picture. (Demichev, "Face" 4)

"It was merriment for the sake of filming and filming for the sake of merriment," Iufit later recalled (Yurchak interview). Throughout the 1990s the Necrorealists engaged in performance pieces, sometimes with the musical ensemble Pop Mechanics, in which they essentially carried on violent, liquor-driven brawls on stage, to the hooting delight of audiences.

Berry and Miller-Pogacar see in Necrorealist film the logic of socialism carried to its absurd, materialist end, enacted on rotting human flesh and in a manner designed to shock the sensibilities of *Homo sovieticus*:

In necrofilms, the social is not represented outside its inscription on bodies—the site through which relations of power and resistance are played out...the post-abject necrosubject does not "live" but persists like a slow wasting disease or a decomposing object, and, in embracing this "impossible" state of living death, achieves a molecule of freedom. (189)⁸

The most active, seemingly "least dead" of the characters in necrofilms enact sadism, forcing a

response from others through invasion of the body, in the form of sodomy; imposition, in various forms of assault; and consumption, particularly cannibalism. Descending the scale of deadness into the area of excremental imposition, we find the passive-aggressive necrosubject that urinates or defecates at odd times and in inappropriate places.... (198)

Images of bodies as gross, leaking, rotting bags of flesh offering the nearest approximation of a visual "truth" of death in Necro-realist cinema. The film's problematic, stereotyped views of women and homosexuality are a different matter and serve mainly as a sideshow to the representation of death's "truths."

The nihilism of the Necrorealists has its basis in a culture drained of transcendent meaning, a utopia gone to rot, where all is negative energy, a social living death. This state recalls the phenomenon of Eastern bloc societies described by, among others, Vaclav Havel, and also that described by the artist Ilya Kabakov in his essay "On Emptiness," remarkable for its anticipation of spasmodic, irrational necro-behavior:

Emptiness adheres to, merges with, sucks being. Its mighty, adhesive, nauseating antienergy is taken from the transfer into itself, which, like vampirism, it gleans and extracts from the existence surrounding it. Searching for a metaphor for what I wish to say, I see a table covered with a table cloth at which people sit conversing, a table set with dishes and food at which these people are taking lunch, and upon which a hostess constantly sets new dishes. And I see someone who is constantly unnoticed who inexorably pulls off that table cloth, with everything on it flying to the floor in the even thunder and sound of falling plates, glasses and cups. Why? What was the purpose? This question can be put only to the living, the intelligent, the natural, but not to emptiness. Emptiness is the other, the eternal "no" beneath everything small and large, whole and individual, intelligent and mindless – all that we cannot name and that has a meaning and a name. (92)

The world of death ("emptiness") is viewed as irrational, absurd, explosively violent and misogynist, a kind of metaphysical mosh pit. It is both exultation in and denigration of the powers of the body. Yet as Foucault reminds us, we need not read the "freedom" of the body, be it sex or other antics, as always and only "liberating." Rather, we can see it as the result of a discursive incitement to speak: through a reciprocal feeding of power and pleasure, an odd osmosis or "implantation of perversions" comes about, further hardening the roles we have been assigned to play into gender and class identities (12). There is a compulsion to perform, to return, to repeat in the Necrorealist snow fights, movies, and performances, to stay behind the bars of a cage of stereotyped masculinity. It is a trap structured by the very staidness and oppressive requirement to conform of the authoritarian society that produced it.

Necrotexs

The Cruel Masculine Disease (Zhestokaia bolezni' muzhchin). Dirs. Gleb and Igor' Aleinikov. 1982. 10 min.

This short displays most plainly and directly the homophobic basis and masculine terror of the Necrorealist aesthetic.⁹ Through a typical extended montage sequence, images of Soviet realia (documentary and narrational footage) clash and throb to the somber wail of an oboe and punctuating military percussion. The images contrast the "masculine" with the "feminine": Soviet construction workers, cavalry rushing across the steppes, a newspaper photo of Stalin, war footage (tanks, explosions, soldiers, marching Nazis) intercut with scenes of a girl running on a beach, a wedding ceremony, or women simply posing for the camera (this list is by no means exhaustive, but the "masculine" images do predominate). These gendered pictures alternate with standard Necrorealist (and Soviet) fare of parades, happy children, and citizens of the USSR.

Early in the film, a man dressed in black walks in long shot through an industrial space, a factory or gas works, with pipes and chimneys stretching to the sky. Various workers and passersby ignore him. This seems to have no obvious bearing on the rest of the film. Slowly, through the barrage of archival footage, a scene takes shape, eventually crowding out the other im-

ages: a typical Soviet subway car, empty but for two men in suits and another, younger man in casual dress. All sit apart; one of the well-dressed men reads a newspaper.

In medium shot, one of the suited men (Rapist) approaches the younger man (Rapee), sits down next to him and starts groping him. The Rapee resists and tries to run out of the car at the next stop, but the Rapist blocks his way. No one enters at the station and the train moves on. By now the Rapee and Rapist are in full *melée*, as the older man overpowers the victim, holding him down on the floor of the train. He manages to lower the Rapee's pants sufficiently to reveal his buttocks. A close-up shows the Rapist's hand as he squeezes some sort of white lubricant onto it. The man with the newspaper (Viewer) does nothing. The music, meanwhile, has picked up tempo.

In a medium shot from behind and over the Rapist, a shaky camera shows the Rapist pulling down his own trousers and proceeding to rape the young man. In a series of cutaways, the Viewer watches the rape and starts masturbating beneath his newspaper. The newspaper rattles comically to his movements. He has no expression and wears sunglasses.

On the other side of the 180 degree axis the camera reveals, in a medium long shot, the Rapist standing up and refastening his pants. He seems to leer down at the Rapee, who does not get up but remains immobile on the floor, on his stomach.

Cutaway close-ups of the Rapee show his emotionless face, pressed against the floor, his eyes glazed, almost corpse-like. The Viewer, meanwhile, also gathers himself and both he and the Rapist, never acknowledging each other, depart once the train stops again.

Significantly, the final shot is of the Viewer, not the Rapist, exiting the train. The choice of ending with a shot of a "marginal" character should, of course, strike us as obvious: the Viewer is standing in for the viewer of the film. His passive excitement and voyeuristic pleasure is our own, the perversion reinforced by actual masturbation played off for humor in the middle of a rape scene. In fact, except for the overt violence and lack of punishment for the Viewer, this sequence resembles a typical turn-of-the-century voyeur film.

The violation of one man by another aboard a huge phallic train speeding through a dark tunnel along empty stations repre-

sents the logical culmination of the earlier war and propaganda footage, which included a shot of a train derailing (the film further enacts a widespread Russian urban characterization of homosexuals as perverts and "ass-grabbers" on public transportation).

We could of course interpret the film as an incensed critique of such hyper-masculine culture (which paradoxically leads to anal rape), but the film itself seems to resist any reading along these moralistic lines. Rather, *The Cruel Masculine Disease* operates as the "sick joke" described by Berry and Miller-Pogacar, a juvenile re-enactment of homophobic fantasy (or dread) meant as a riposte to Soviet archetypes of manhood, as Dobrotvorsky writes. But this does not mean the film in any way takes this critique to the point of affirming a more positive, consensual model of homosexual sex: the Rapee is a necro-citizen not only in that he rapes for a thrill, but that he rapes "irrationally," choosing as his target another man rather than a woman.¹⁰

Woodcutter (Lesorub). Dir. Evgenii Iufit. 1985. 6 min.

On scratchy, low-quality film stock, a mannequin falls from a nine story building. Several men in long shot converge on it and beat it up. While the crudely-recorded song "Fat Wax" plays, they take the mannequin to some rural train tracks and watch as the train approaches,¹¹ pulling the dummy out of harm's way at the last moment. An intertitle proclaims, "Despite his fall from a great height, he continued to function well." The camerawork is extremely primitive and at times indecipherably shaky, as men are shown fighting and tumbling in snowy woods. The effect is of a cheap, home-movie-ish take on silent slapstick comedies, with a curious energy driven by the wailing music.

Soon a "pseudo-tourist" arrives in the woods, bandaged and half-naked, carrying suitcases. He finds the mannequin, which turns out to be bait; the others run into frame and cartoonishly beat him with sticks. The "real" corpse is thus made an object of manipulation for the "active" corpses: as a toy hanging from a tree, as a falling body, as bait for people or trains. When one of the necro-denizens collapses, seemingly in exhaustion, another zombie immediately ties a rope around his foot and drags him like the mannequin.

The film continues in this vein, as perhaps twenty people

(and at least one dog) engage in a free-for-all in the snow. The action moves to some sort of farm; in one shot, two pig carcasses hang from poles, while the men continue fighting between them. A close-up of a menacing bear behind a cage, its breath visible, appears briefly. Other cutaways include a close-up of what looks like rotting meat (brains?) covered with flies among some rocks, a live warthog pressed up against the camera lens and a crazed, lab-coated "mad scientist" type who stares aghast at something off-screen (the violence and chaos itself?) and screams and runs about in panic.

A long take, sort of a culmination of the work, shows a slow pan from one necro-denizen to another, flailing, beating on others' bodies, digging vainly, along a large earthen hillock. The unbroken shot recalls one of Breughel's populated landscapes. The camera steadily moves among the spasmodic people before panning up a large chimney or tower-like building that juts from the hillock—one of the more frankly phallic and neo-pagan images in the Necrorealist oeuvre. The suggestion is that the violence and irrational exuberance forms a link to the primeval past, perhaps the Bacchic cults, *sans* women. At the same time, the tower appears modern, an industrial construct usually seen spewing smoke. The link to the past could thus be a dead end, a feint, or perhaps the shot demonstrates how the Dionysiac, irrational side of man finds expression even in a modern setting.

An intertitle informs us that "the pseudo-tourist decides to hide in the deep forest, and devote the rest of his life to wood-cutting." The pseudo-tourist, still bandaged but now more bruised and bloodied, emerges staggering from a tunnel beneath a forest bridge (in one of the more classically composed shots) while the other men rush past overhead. The gang finds him and gives chase. The pseudo-tourist then topples several saplings like dominoes—the "wood-cutting"—as he falls over and recovers himself (a Buster Keatonish gag).

A long take in medium shot shows him lying in the snow, wearing polka-dotted boxers and gasping for breath. An intertitle declares, "Three years later, his mission was not forgotten," and again a gang of necro-denizens run into the frame, fighting and tumbling in the forest, exactly as before. The intertitle underscores the timeless nature of necro-reality; three years might as well be three minutes. At the same time, the fact that these

creatures "die"—collapsing from exhaustion and becoming props for others to manipulate—shows that time does eventually assert itself.

The film cuts to archival footage of Soviet-era children releasing doves into the air (an ancient symbol of death)¹² and clapping joyfully, before cutting back to the forest, where a long pan shows each necro-denizen dead—really dead—and unmoving on the ground in a shaky medium shot. The music stops abruptly and the final shot shows an old woman's face, a classically chubby Russian babushka, staring stolidly at something off-screen (the dead necro-denizens?) and exasperatedly shaking her head. "What a waste," she seems to be saying, or perhaps she is scolding "the boys." Her Mona Lisa-like expression of compassion? disgust? sadness? seems to bespeak the value of femininity/maternity in the necro-world: it is an ordering force, a return to culture, society, the life of reproduction, duty, morality.

Since she brings the music to a halt, clearly disapproving of what the necro-denizens have been up to, and in effect puts an end to their revels (even if they themselves had already "died"), the maternal feminine is clearly "no fun," in effect, a prison. The woman's face, nearly filling up the frame, forms a literal wall which necro-reality smashes into. Medusa-like, she in a sense "kills" necro-reality. So we see that woman resumes her traditional role as carrier of death; she represents the castration/end of masculine life, even of the necrotic variety. Woman exists as witness to the necro-world; she can exist only outside it.

Urine-Crazed Body Snatchers (*Mochebuitsy Trupolovy*). Dir. Andrei Mertyvi. 1985. 10 min.

Demichev calls this "the sternest and most radical production of Necrorealism, executed outside of any and all ethical and aesthetic categories" ("Face" 6), presumably not because of its more graphic, gory *mise-en-scène*, but because so much of it takes place around a blackened, filthy toilet bowl and involves urinating on corpses, as if the violence, rape and mayhem of the previous films should somehow be less shocking. But, of course, it often is; the depiction of excremental bodily functions represents a greater taboo in Western culture than the representation of mere violence or sex. *Urine-Crazed Body Snatchers* resembles a demented horror film directed by the American cult auteur Jon Wa-

ters; indeed, its gloomy scariness does chiefly derive from a misanthropic visual equivalence between human life and excrement.

In other respects, however, the work does not stand out much from other Necrorealist films. A portrait of a "happy family" (with grimacing kids) gives way to a ship on the water. Inside the bridge, the body of a woman lies on the floor in medium shot, its eyes hauntingly open. Discolored, somewhat bloated and bruised, the cadaver achieves a verisimilitude alluded to but not often seen in Necrorealist works. The body, obviously dead by violence, vaguely recalls Edvard Munch's "The Scream." A sailor gazes through the window at some nearby necro-denizens tussling and feigning anal rape in the snow. He seems fascinated. The corpse stares at him staring at them. The sailor picks up the dead woman and carries her to shore, tying her to a tree trunk. An industrial landscape (electric towers) shimmers in the distance, punctuated by a slowly moving train that crosses laterally (anticipating a shot from Sokurov's *Mother and Son* and perhaps performs a similar function). He leaves the body there and walks off.

The next scene unfolds in darkness, somewhere in the woods. A bright light suddenly reveals a man apparently fellating a wooden, periscope-like stick (a precursor to the human-tree copulation in *Silver Heads*). The wooden penis seems to be connected to a black mass above the man; it might be made of rubber and vaguely resembles the carapace of a giant beetle. In this unclear image, the man appears to both enjoy his task and to experience pain.

The dead woman, meanwhile, "wakes up"¹³ and smiles as we cut away to flailing people being tortured and perhaps anally raped in the dark. Blackout.

The next section depicts a toddler in bed with necro-victims: a man in sunglasses and bandages, covered in blood, and other battered bodies. The filthy, corpse-laden, post-apocalyptic room resembles a serial killer's domicile, made all the more disturbing for the presence of the child, who stares worriedly just above the camera-eye level. In an overhead medium long shot, the infant stands before a toilet bowl as the bandaged man approaches. The toilet bowl is half-filled with a blackish, oozing substance that flows down into it from a long scrap of clothing that dangles from above. The tattered cloth is revealed to be connected to a

corpse hanging upside-down over the toilet, slowly dripping blood and gore into the bowl. In a very dark and ambiguous close-up, the bandaged man licks the corpse's torso, lapping up blood and slime, as the infant looks on in cutaways.

The close-up provides a strange horizontal image of the torso, an odd disorientation similar to a shot in Sokurov's *The Second Circle*, and like it indicative of something not being quite "normal." The laws of nature are inverted by the image, as the bandaged man "eats" from the corpse. A close-up of the dangling scrap shows more blood and ooze flowing down into the toilet.

For Berry and Miller-Pogacar, the scene represents an utter denigration of human life. The dismembered and oozing body depicted in this Sadean fashion is alien to the liberating corporeality of Bakhtinian carnival:

These images of youth alongside a wealth of bodily fluids convey none of the organics of regeneration that Bakhtin discusses. Rather, they suggest that youth has no future other than an existence in which the juices of life and death are equally worthless – both end up in the toilet, in a horrid cycle of repetition that never leads to improvement, but only to more of the same. (193)

While not disputing Berry and Miller-Pogacar's reading, I believe we can say more about this scene and Mertvyi's startling juxtaposition of child and excrement. For the toddler (he or she could not be more than two years old) has clearly arrived at the anal stage; the scene therefore establishes a continuity or equivalence between feces and the dead bodies in the bathroom (another shot reveals the space is filled with corpses, all in static orbit about the toilet bowl), and the child's own realization of that continuity.

As Becker notes in his "Recasting of Some Basic Psychoanalytic Ideas" chapter of *Denial of Death*, upon discovery of and toying with the anus, the child takes its first steps on the hard road of death awareness:

With anal play the child is already becoming a philosopher of the human condition. But like all philosophers he is still bound by it, and his main task in life becomes the denial of what the anus repre-

sents: that in fact, he is nothing *but* body so far as nature is concerned.... The tragedy of man's dualism, his ludicrous situation, becomes too real. The anus and its incomprehensible, repulsive product represents not only physical determinism and boundness, but the fate as well of all that is physical: decay and death. (31, emphasis in original)

The *mise-en-scene* here re-enacts the child's discovery in visual terms; the overhead shot with its black toilet bowl "anus," the child at the rim, trying to make sense of the spectacle, the disordered ring of corpses that surrounds it. The cannibal, meanwhile, acts as a father figure, an already-inducted necro-denizen who introduces its offspring to this world of death, as Berry and Miller-Pogacar describe (their reading is the Sovietized, "local" one, while the Becker-influenced reading represents the global reality of this universal phenomenon, the child's anal play which leads to its grasping the reality of death).

Adding the *coup de grace* to this gruesome scene, the sailor enters the room, finds it empty of child and cannibal but still strewn with cadavers, and urinates on them; the trickle falls on their faces and bodies in a low-angle panning medium shot. The sailor then leaves, and proceeds along a desolate snowy landscape, where he finds a dumpster-like container. He opens it (a cat leaps out and runs away), and jimmies a typical Necrorealist suicide device with some rope: he attaches one end to his foot and another to the container's lid. He sticks his head into the container, pulls on the rope, and the lid crashes down on his head. The sailor goes about all this mechanically and without emotion.

An overhead medium shot shows the sailor collapsing, his face bloodied and already vacant (the rope sways like the scrap over the toilet). Interestingly, as in *Woodcutter*, a woman's face then fills the screen (this is a photograph); she is young, dark-skinned. This image (possibly serving a similar framing, contextualizing, or life-affirming function as in the earlier film) gives way after several seconds to another view of the snowy landscape, with a mass in the foreground that may be the sailor's body. Black out.

Knights of Heaven (*Rytsari podnebes'ia*). Dir. Evgenii Iufit. 1989. 20 min.

In the late 80s Iufit became the only Necrorealist auteur to receive formal training in the state film industry, when he joined Alexander Sokurov's studio at Lenfilm. The result proved an evolutionary leap in the Necrorealist aesthetic project, according to the group's frequent chronicler and commentator Viktor Mazin. Shot in 16mm with sync sound and a length of 25 minutes, *Knights of Heaven* abandons many (but not all) of the movement's primitivist film techniques in favor of a more polished and "serious" presentation, although the story itself remains ludicrous.

The film inaugurates the second phase of necrocinema, in which the lengthening of shots and drastic slowing down of action complements the deadened and dulled psychological state of the characters and social reality represented. As Mazin writes: "Time stretches out. The torturous slowing down of filmic events suspends the knights of heaven between photography and the cinema" ("Knights" 4).

The simplistic plot involves a group of elite "soldier-alpinists" who set out on an inscrutable expedition/experiment. We learn this through a ridiculous television news report delivered in the unmistakable dead-pan of Soviet propaganda, which extols the soldiers' "great feats" and the incalculable value of the "wondrous experiment" for the peoples of the USSR.¹⁴

Over a series of long scenes of slow pans with minimal editing, the soldiers seemingly go insane and murder each other in a forest setting, as well as in the ruins of a factory. The direction remains so monotonous throughout the film, the pans and dollies so predictable, that the actual violence seems to hardly matter. Since these characters act irrationally, mumbling nonsense or smacking their lips, and no attempt is made to explore their inner psyches, the effect is to dull the senses into a necro-state commensurate with the sham reality on the screen, Mazin argues. So the slowing down of the necro-aesthetic achieves the same deadening result in the viewer's own psyche as the early film's manic, mile-a-minute punk technique—boredom as a form of desensitized death: "The two speeds of tempo [in Necrorealist films] accord ... with the two forms of idiocy, each of which is death—at least social death" (*Kabinet* 145).

The very opening shot foretells this stagnant inescapability of the necro-state, as the camera reveals a low-angle view of a calm pond at the dreary edges of an industrial landscape (buildings stand dully in the distance, trucks and automobiles rush by on a road far away). The camera slowly pans left, eventually settling on a painting propped up on the shore, *A Sultry Night in the Reeds* by the Necrorealist artist Leonid Trupyr', which



Leonid Trupyr':
*A Sultry Night in the
Reeds*

depicts two sailors with slit throats.

Wherever the eye wanders, in other words, only death and senseless monotony abound. Necrorealism can only offer an aestheticization of that supremely indifferent deadness – put a frame around it, so to speak.

We see this apathetic approach to death enacted in a long take of a ghastly, decayed corpse in close-up, lying tangled in some branches in the water, its dried-up eyes staring hollowly from its upside down face directly at the camera. Referred to by Iufit and other Necrorealists as "Dutik" ("Bloatie"), the effigy (a decomposed descendant of the falling mannequin from *Woodcutter*) lies forgotten as the soldier-alpinists carelessly walk over it from off-frame and proceed into the distance. Their utter disinterest in the cadaver, Mazin writes, prefigures their own ongoing dissolution and apathy towards each other's lives, visually underscored in their slow blending into the environment:

The contours of the hero erode. The faces of the heroes take on vegetation. The visual hybrid is brought about by the congealing of man and wood. The knights dis-

solve into their surroundings, in the outskirts, liminal territories between the city and the un-city, there, where ruined and abandoned houses, ruins once again recall in their transitoriness the allegory of death ... The erosion of borders, the loss of integrity of the corporeal contours, is the annihilation of life. Life is possible only in a delimited, differentiated state, which regulates the vital level of autonomy of the organism. ("Rytsari" 5)

The knights' "mimicry" of the environment—their transformation into objects in a landscape—reflects a common strategy for depicting death in Sokurov's own films, notes Mikhail Iampolsky. Following Caillois, Iampolsky likens mimesis (specifically, the mimicking capacities of insects in the natural world) to the journey from subject to object in the death process: "In mimicking, the insect blends with its surroundings and becomes invisible, it dissolves into the space." The subject experiences a psychoasthenic debilitation of the ego, "an erosion of boundaries between the organism and the environment, which [Caillois] termed 'temptation by space'" ("Reprezentatsiia" 164).¹⁵ This dissolution of foreground subject and background as a visual trope of death anticipates much of Sokurov's own cinematic strategies in *The Second Circle* and *Mother and Son*, and we of course cannot discount his role as artistic director of Iufit's project; we might even designate *Knights of Heaven* a Sokurovian Necrorealist film.

The shaky, amateur "home-movie" quality of the original films vanishes, but the same violent and homophobic set-pieces remain, along with the ironic contrapuntal archival footage. In the climactic final minutes of the film, a soldier-alpinist leads another, apparently wounded soldier, to a foxhole. Other figures can be seen in the distance, chasing each other, some nude or with their pants down. While another "zombie" looks on in the foreground, the wounded soldier is placed in the hole and his comrade drops a grenade in with him.

It explodes, and the original soldier approaches the smoking remains, his pants at his knees (he had apparently been masturbating). The soldier then chases after a naked man in the distance while the observing necro-denizen runs after the soldier—a seemingly endless chain of senseless violence. An unclear final shot into the hole reveals the mangled body of the exploded sol-

dier. An intertitle declares: "There Passed a Second Day of Thaw, Joyful Animation Reigned at the Seashore," followed by the closing shot: a piece of archival footage (according to Mazin, from a 1936 Spanish newsreel) showing a beach on which a ring of children surround a boy and girl who dance charmingly. Once again we see the induction of the young into the necro-reality, with the added horror that these "children" have of course long since either grown up or died, existing now only as simulacra of a vanished era.¹⁶ Whether we read it as a Necrorealist parody of Sokurov or a Sokurovian parody of Necrorealism, Sokurov's stamp on *Knights of Heaven* and on the subsequent development of necrocinema, with its longeurs and minimal editing techniques, is hard to deny.

All of Iufit and Maslov's films in the early 1990s (when they managed to raise Russian state and foreign funds for their works) involve longer running times (60-90 minutes), frequent single take scenes and a slowing of action that recalls Sokurov's work. But whereas the latter director uses a more ruminative cinematic pace to foster a meditative approach to the frame and its metaphysical content, the Necrorealists dull the viewer into a "necro-state" of indifference with "boring" shots, occasionally shocking him with unexpected and senseless violence whose impact steadily diminishes to nothing.

In the latest phase of Necrorealism, Iufit and Maslov (who have collaborated since the 1990s) further what we might call the "cynical" approach to cinema through a conceptualist appropriation of established genres: *Daddy, Father Frost is Dead (Papa, umer Ded Moroz*, 1991) sends up the vampire film and George Romero-type zombie film; *The Wooden Room (Dereviannaia komnata*, 1995) parodies stories of tortured artists who escape into imaginary worlds; *Silver Heads (Serebrianye golovy*, 1998) superimposes the Necrorealist ethos onto a standard science-fiction experiment-gone-out-of-control plot similar to *Knights of Heaven*.

The usual devices and set-pieces remain: elaborate suicides, the dread of anal rape, the sudden reanimation of ostensibly dead bodies, the blurring of borders between the human and natural worlds, the detached view of character and lack of rational psychological motivation. Only the use of archival footage diminishes in the 90s, presumably since such ironic critique of the So-

viet era seems dated and irrelevant.¹⁷

Necrorealism has in a sense grown up since the collapse of the USSR, abandoning its anarchic, primitivist techniques in favor of the larger budgets, longer running time, higher production values, and unscratched 35-mm film stock of the art film (again, reflecting the influence of Sokurov on Iufit's professional development). But the "cynical vision" (the term is Alexei Yurchak's) and juvenile black humor have remained. Their current reception in Russia, at least on a wide scale, is more difficult to assess.¹⁸ Still, we can imagine that audience responses to Necrorealist films today would differ little from those gathered by the Leningrad-based television program *5th Wheel* after it broadcast a selection of films in 1989:

"From the artistic standpoint it's regular junk—insanity!" "Total absurdity!" "The people who made this—are they mentally all right?" "Horrifying!" "No meaning in it whatsoever." "This is a dreadful pathology, consisting of sexual perversions, attraction to corpses, often including elements of sadism." "Such anti-aesthetic visions can arouse nothing other than revulsion." "The only thing I saw was a shot of somebody's bare ass. That's all I saw that I could understand." (Miller-Pogacar 14)

NOTES

1. Bazin's description of cinema's "embalming time and the object" in that essay is also of note.
2. As Jameson points out, in a passage appropriated and fleshed out by Williams in *Hard Core*, the process of "giving in" to cinema's illusory force is predicated on our increasing enslavement to the visual:
The visual is *essentially* pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination... Pornographic films are thus only the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body. On the other hand, we know this today more clearly because our society has begun to offer us the world—now mostly a collection of products of our own making—as just such a body, that you can possess visually, and collect the images of. Were an ontology of this artificial, person-induced uni-

verse still possible, it would have to be an ontology of the visual, of being as the visible first and foremost, with the other senses draining off; all the fights about power and desire have to take place here, between the mastery of the gaze and the illimitable richness of the visual object.... (Jameson 1)

The present study is premised on the notion that not all pornography (read "rapt, mindless fascination") is sexual, that the dead body (naked or otherwise) holds just such a grip on our desires (and dreads) to know the visual/ontological "truth" of death, just as the pornographic film provides the "truth" of sex.

3. Although "death" was the ninth-most-common word in titles of Russo-Soviet films made from 1918 to 1996, occurring 46 times, 22 of those are from films made in the period 1990-1996 (during which "death" was the third-most-encountered word, after "love" [54] and "Russian" [27]). The other title words in the top ten for the period 1918-1996 are: "love" (221); "life" (75); "day" (69); "happiness" (61); "person/man" [*chelovek*] (59); "night" (50); "white" (49); "last" (48); and "three" (46). Farther down on the list are "secret/mystery" [*taina*] (41 times), "Russian" (34 times, 27 of those in the 1990s), and "kill" (30 times). This information is from Sergei Zemlianukhin and Miroslava Segida's indispensable encyclopedia *Domashniaia sinemateka: Otechestvennoe kino 1918-1996*, which contains many other cumulative statistics and lists in addition to entries on 5,578 films.
4. For detailed discussions of *chernukha* cinema see Horton and Brashinsky 163-68; Lawton 200-207; and Graham.
5. A notable corpse in American narrative film is that of the strangled teenage girl in Tim Hunter's *River's Edge* (1986), in which the decompositional stages of the corpse are not only graphically depicted, but serve to mark the narrative's progression and growing tension. The film's representation of death is also unusual because the murder takes place before the film begins. Thus it violates both elements of what Iampolsky calls mainstream cinema's "imperative of showing the moment of death and hiding the corpse" ("Death in Cinema" 272). A corpse in the Russian cinema that violates the same imperative is that of the murdered neighbor in "Boiler Room #6," the first novella of Kira Muratova's *Three Stories* (1997), the working title of which was, incidentally, *Three Stories About Death*.
6. Two recent examples are Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (1997). The best known such film in the Russo-Soviet tradition is Mikhail Romm's documentary *Ordinary Fascism* (1965). Aleksandr Rogozhkin's fiction film *The Chekist* (1991) depicts corpses of victims of early Bolshevik terror in a way

similar to common representations of Holocaust dead: in piles of naked bodies.

7. "I and most of the people I knew were only enrolled there to evade the draft. None of us seriously considered becoming an engineer" (Yurchak interview).
8. Friedberg examines the scene in George Romero's 1978 film *Dawn of the Dead* in which the zombies aimlessly wander a suburban shopping mall, to which they mindlessly gravitate since it was a "familiar place to them in life." Here we see an example of what a Necrorealism founded on capitalist realia might look like, with dulled and rotting subjects meandering through our own version of an apocalyptic landscape: a bright-colored, multi-tiered hellhole punctuated by brand logos and chain coffee shops.^{the Brothers'}
9. The Moscow-based Aleinikov brothers were the Leningrad Necrorealists' comrades-in-arms in the larger movement known as parallel cinema. This and other films by the Aleinikovs resemble Necrorealism "proper" to such a degree that they can, indeed should, be included in the present discussion.
10. A depiction of male-female rape, I would argue, would not be "sufficiently" Necrorealist since it would be more "natural" to the filmmakers and therefore not as shocking.^{11.} Some have seen in this train imagery an allusion to the Lumière brothers' 1895 *Arrivée d'un Train*, the first publicly exhibited film, as well as to the train's associations with modernity in Western European and Russian culture. Other frequent allusions to the cinematic past include shots reminiscent of Eisenstein's Cossack swinging his sword at the camera in the Odessa steps sequence of *Battleship Potemkin*, as when a zombie sailor clubs a female victim and the viewer sees it from her point of view (in *Spring* 1987). The following shot, an even more vicious parody of Eisenstein, duplicates the victim's mangled face in a close-up (as in *Potemkin*), only upside down. Necrorealism here turns the hallowed cinematic legacy of the Soviet era literally on its head.
12. Birds taking flight has also developed into one of the most common cinematic clichés for symbolizing death, as in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Joan Chen's *Autumn in New York* (2000), to name two (otherwise dissimilar) examples.
13. Although she might have been asleep, not dead, all along, her body is clearly meant to *look* dead. On the relation of sleep to death, see Ariés 440-1.
14. As Dobrotvorsky notes:

This discordance between [the announcer's] speech and the tone in which it's delivered extends to the entire structure of the film. The internal logic is perfect, but the absurdity remains. Even though you have the

strange sensation that what you're seeing or hearing is totally ridiculous, the style of speech or the skillful montage assures you it's entirely true. And the notion might flicker through your consciousness that just maybe this authoritative televised voice is talking nonsense. ("A Tired Death" 14)

This is clearly a conceptualist strategy of appropriation, especially prevalent in Vladimir Sorokin's fiction.

15. There are parallels between Caillois/Iampolsky's "temptation by space" and Kristeva's boundary-eroding concept of the abject, as well as to Freud's death drive, the subject's compulsive return to a primordial, undifferentiated state. What I want to emphasize here is how this "blending into the environment" is visually enacted by Iufit and Sokurov in terms of a literal fusion with the natural world, as well as through irrational behavior.
16. Like all the Soviet propaganda footage in Necrorealist films, these images are doubly "dead" in that they act as signifiers pointing to no actual referent; like a Potemkin village, they present an unreal reality of Communist prosperity and happiness, a point emphasized in Mikhail Epstein's "The Origins and Meanings of Russian Postmodernism." Though of foreign origin, this Spanish newsreel footage falls into the "pure simulacra" category for the purposes of this film.
17. Several critics, including Artiukh, ask whether Necrorealism as a movement and a cinematic aesthetic is not itself dead, swept away along with the Communist world that produced it. Demichev's "Autumn of Necrorealism," in this booklet, is a response to such claims.
18. In the Miller-Pogacar interview, Iufit discusses the reactions to a television broadcast of Necrorealist films in 1989:

AMP: Maybe the studio audience was offended by the very idea of watching films about dead people. Do you think that might be it?

EYu: What dead people?

AMP: The characters in your films. Aren't they all supposed to be corpses?

EYu: What do you mean? Look. They're moving around. How can they be corpses?

AMP: But there are acts of suicide in your films. In *Spring* for example, the one man propels himself into the trunk of a tree ...

EYu: But that doesn't kill him, Why should it kill him? It only cripples him. He can still go to therapy [general laughter].

(Miller-Pogacar 15)

From *Cabinet of Necrorealism: Iufit and*

VIKTOR MAZIN

Introduction

Our subject is artist, photographer, and director Evgenii Iufit, who inspired the movement called *Necrorealism*. But naturally our subject is not only Iufit; perhaps not even Iufit himself so much as the products of his artistic activity, Necrorealism, approaches to the representation of the unrepresentable, presentation, death: about cinema, about dreams, about death. Death in all its paradoxical uniqueness and repetitiveness. It is always quite a different image. It is always quite a different cinema.

On our path we encounter not only a variety of material, but also a variety of approaches to material. As we move along, we pass through contextual membranes that close behind us, membranes through which a phenomenon appears and out from under which the *image* of Necrorealism rises up and displaces the obtrusive one-dimensionality of perception dictated by the principle of reality.

It sometimes seems as if Iufit and/or Necrorealism are only pretexts for a description of something else. Yes, that's true. This *something else* at times feels like a certain surplus of motion, at other times like a certain deficiency of motion, an emptiness, even, a blind spot hidden from the eye by pre-programmed perceptions. The presence of "something else" might make one think: there *isn't* any of that in Iufit's films. True, it goes without saying that none of *that* is in them and cannot be; there is *something else*, something that must be transferred from the level of the fantastical, the phantasmagoric, the image-less, to the level of the symbolic.

Super-contextualization, despite its "super," is not and cannot be exhaustive. We never encounter more than one or a few of the possible interpretations. Each thought and each signifier refers to several images, points to several pictures; each image gives birth to a multitude of thoughts, of which we see but a few. So the "presence" of a remainder is inevitable, there always *remains* yet another possibility, it remains in a different place, it remains beyond the cognitive horizon.

On this path we will run into recurrences, repetitions, and maneuvers that seemingly return us to the same place, to lead us in a vicious circle. Foreseeing such repetitions—which resemble if not death itself, then its handiwork—we can prescribe certain distinctive, driving motifs with a kind of anticipatory gesture:

(1) Dreaming represents a stimulating analog to the description at hand. And not only because cinema, as an otherworldly (non)existence homologous to death, traditionally corresponds to dreaming, but also because so many delirious fantasies or dreams are possible in cinematic reality. On account of dream work and/or cinema work, notions arise that are impossible in so-called actual reality. In necrocinema, as in dreams, the connectedness of the film text is violated or, more precisely, only an *imaginary connectedness* shows through on the surface. Also violated is the distinction between dreaming and waking states that was once called the principle of "coherence."

In Iufit's films, moreover, a certain boundary is *obviously* maintained, allowing for doubt on the affective level as to whether events are taking place in wakefulness or in a dream¹; it is a different boundary from the one that exists in films that we are told take place in a dream state. The boundary in necrocinema is not only maintained; it is precisely within its confines, within that dimly illuminated area, that events occur.

This dubious space—the space of doubt—is filled by an imaginary narrative that hints at disorder of thought, at incoherence, at a lack of connection between elements, which allows us to compare the graphic arts—including cinema, especially cinema that does not rely on discourse in the common sense, cinema that is paradiscursive—with dreaming.

In addition, during the viewing of a film, as during a dream, intellectual activity recedes into the shadow of perception. (Necro)cinema appears on the screen in conjunction with a dream-like hovering of intellectual activity, and emerges as an imaginary catalyst for regression. At the very least, the "I" can and should disappear after surrendering to the dark, enclosed space of the cinema, it should shift to a different state, dissolve into the unidentifiable otherworldliness beyond the event horizon. Perhaps the "I" recedes into the shadow of the process of incorporation, of crypto-reorganization. Cinema and dreams are indirectly and directly projected onto the screen of psychic activ-

ity, the screen of dreams, onto the hallucinatory snow-white surface of the maternal breast. Film and dreams are (co)experiences of the reality of the unreal, of the ephemerality of the (non) material; film and dreams are temporary death, inter-time, a fairytale forest in which terrible initiation rites take place. And, *finally*, in the deep cine-dream, time vanishes, loses its meaning.²

(2) Necrorealism, Iufit's necrorealism in particular, may inevitably be considered an allegorical art, at least by virtue of its constant *necrobackground*, as we will see, however, allegorical death has a *unique* character.

(3) In the process of necrowork, allegory resorts not to simple symbolization, not to metonymic substitution, but to the imitation of a process, to the reproduction of death work. That is, it resorts not simply to the impossible—mimesis (realism)—but to double mimesis (Necrorealism).

The stealth display of death work underscores the literal, etymological meaning of allegory (Gr. *allos*, other + *agoreuein*, to speak), which manifests itself in the representation of the unrepresentable, in the signification of an unsignifiable "place."

(4) This process of persistently repeated re-production of necroimages indicates the ritualistic or, more precisely, ritual-narrational character of necropractice. The game that imitates work and the reduplicating, grotesque representation of the body's negative coming-to-be erect screens as they go about their death work, screens on which images settle, images transmitted in a ritual of spellbinding thanatophobia.

(5) Moreover, in a double mimesis of this sort the para-real picture³ does not meet its end, does not die, freezing in mute likeness, but is in motion towards a body that is never shown, a dead body. The endless uncertainty of each fragment and each element of the narrative creates a sense of proximity to the end, a proximity precisely due to its absence, precisely due to the suspended narration, which is transformed entirely into imaginary narration.

(6) Imaginary narration dashes expectations again and again; it creates the conditions for cryptomnesia, i.e., for transgression of the border between the real and the imaginary, between reality and dreaming. Anticipation is left unsatisfied, and the relationship between the "I" and the screen turns out to be an illusion. The constant frustration of expectations, and the indefinableness

and unpredictability of what is happening, create a constant tension between *now* and *then*.⁴ The frustration of expectations in turn sends us once again to a dreaming regression, to a move away from representation towards sensory image.⁵

1. On the Strange

The cinema of the strange cannot be called experimental or mass, sound or silent, shocking or intellectual, narrative or non-narrative, logical or pathological. *Neither this nor that* is dismissive, it keeps us on our toes. It suspends space-and-time.

Looking at the screen, we encounter something strange. This *something strange*⁶ appears to us, appears before us, as *something else*, something foreign, something unknown, located beyond the limits of our experience, and, paradoxically, as something genuine, something distinctive, particular, original, which differentiates it from everything we've seen before. Death appears to us like that. And not death itself, but the idea of it. We know about it without having experienced it, we know it via the untranslatable experience of others; that is, death always "belongs to" someone else, someone different.⁷ At the same time, however, no one can experience our death for us; like a dream it is always ours, and ours alone. Strange: only our own *and* only somebody else's.

No less strange: death is natural, ordinary, it is in the order of occurring events; and at the same time it is supernatural, surprising, unusual. Moreover, in the anticipation, the presentiment, of its arrival, we still never manage to compute our own death, to calculate it as we are able to do in a lethal act directed at another.

Something strange is the membrane between rejection and recognition, the boundary of experience that lies between depersonalization and de-realization, between the burial of "I" and the burial of the world; it is a time of initiation, in which there is no longer a past or a future. Thus *something strange* appears just as strange as death, terrible and sublime in its paradoxicality. Like the terrible and sublime in general. Like an expansive description of them.

2. The Name: Necrorealism

It is no longer possible to recall when, by whom, and under what circumstances the word was first pronounced: *Necrorealism*.

Perhaps the word was already in mind during the winter of 1984–1985, and on some evening on the outskirts of a large city, in a hut where Evgenii Kondriat'ev—who would later become the artist and film director known as Debil [Retard]—lived at the time, Evgenii Iufit pronounced this word in the presence of a great number of men. It was immediately forgotten.

It was repeated over and over: necro-realism.

Repetition gave birth to the name.

The name gave birth to the phenomenon. The idea of the phenomenon, that is to say.

The name "Necro" and the word "death" turned out, paradoxically, to be productive means of inscribing the phenomenon: death became the lynch pin of the phenomenon of *Necrorealism*, insofar as "it"—death—is a mystery, impenetrable but at the same time, it seems, familiar to everyone. The name *Necrorealism* is the name of a *mystery*. A name connected to someone else. A name connecting man with his mystery. With his *connectedness* as such.

In any event, this word now indicates not only something that can be the foundation, the principle, of an artistic movement (*necro*), it not only indicates a definite aesthetic paradigm for the representation of "death" (*realism*); it also demonstrates its own innate heterogeneity or, more precisely, reveals a twofold contamination: a contamination that is both etymological and semantic:

nekros (Greek)—dead, i.e., one who is absent here and now, one who can no longer respond, one who has irrevocably left this world, one who is no more.

realis (High Latin)—substantial, associated with objects, with the material, the corporeal, with that which affirms by its materiality and corporeality the presence of a certain thing, of a certain being. An object in its repetitiveness, in its *visible* repetition, serves as confirmation (if illusory) of the non-illusory nature of a certain presence.

Thus the concept of Necrorealism indicates an absent presence and a present absence, the ambivalence, the insolubility, of the relationship between life and non-life, the double meaning of necrorepresentation. It can also indicate the possibility of rejecting

reality [*Verleugung*], if reality is perceived not as an omnipresent absence, but as the lethal proximity of a terrible and peculiar necroreality.

The intellectual ambivalence of the concept of *Necrorealism*, that is, the simultaneous inception and coexistence of positive and negative poles of representation, stands out clearly on the screen: the reality the viewer encounters—the filmic reality—is *dead*; it is *always already* an unreal reality, a *necroreality*, for the viewer is shown images of absent life (plants, animals, people) filmed by someone (a *former* Iufit), but at the same time, filmic reality is alive, because the viewer is a witness, an eye-witness, you could even call him a re-animator, an agent for the re-viv-al of seemingly obsolete images, an agent of movement, a cinematic agent. And the vivacity, the authenticity of the experience testifies to this.⁸ On one hand, the viewer sees certain things, certain objects of the material, *real* world, and perceives them, identifying them precisely as such objects, but at the same time this is "but only" a *representation* of objects from the real world, only transparent membranes of reality.⁹

In such a context, the double meaning is hardly surprising, nor even the multiple meanings of the titles of Iufit's films and photographic compositions, for example, *Werewolf Orderlies*, "Term" (*Srok*), or "Scythe/Greenbelt/Jetty of Maturation" (*Kosa vozmuzhaniia*). The last title, for instance, can signify, depending on the chosen context, the landscape where maturation takes place [*kosa* = "greenbelt" or "jetty"], or the process of growing up itself, or an implement symbolizing that maturation [*kosa* = "scythe"], or, finally, a traditional allegory for death. There is, however, a common denominator in all these connotations: initiation, *crossing* from one state to another: from childhood to adulthood, from the feminine to the masculine, from living to dead. Initiation always signifies movement, a coming into being—the death of one state and the birth of another. The crossing is ambivalent: one foot *here*, one foot *there*. And also instantaneous. Fast. No time to say where you are. No time to say when you are.

The affective ambivalence that saturates the cinematic text with hidden doubles, with a *particular type* of crypto-images, is related to the inherently archaic nature of narration by images, to the Oneiric character of necrocinema, and to the invisible pres-

ence of death, which transforms each movement into a lie, each *cinematic* frame into an illusion.

3. Telos and the Allegory of Telos

Teleology appears *as a result of* death: individual death can be understood as the telos of the individual life; and in movement, in the movement that establishes distance, that introduces velocity, rhythm, and time, in the movement towards the telos—the telos of return, the telos linking past with future, the telos that lies ever ahead, illusorily, just over the horizon, the telos in the movement towards which other telos are born, telos that postpone the finality of the last telos—circuitous routes are laid out¹⁰ and a *co-mingling of telos* occurs. New canals of sexuality are built, ephemeral bastions of necroreality are erected, works of art are created.

The telos is all around, wherever you turn. Submersion in the sphere of visual images, like premeditated burial, grants us a reprieve from the finale, allows us eternally to shift the question of finality to the realm of the other world, to the kingdom of cemeteries and spirits, to the sphere of inhumation and representation, to the thanatosphere of non-reality, of necroreality, which has "surmounted" the principle of reality by rejecting reality. The horizon of the unknown ends up on the other side of the grave-stone/representation. The question is not decided, but postponed, transferred to someplace else. We get a reprieve. The telos is removed and replaced by "expediency without a telos" (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*), which, for Kant in particular, is a form of *aesthetic* representation of an object.

The telos, like an attractor intent on achieving a certain, comprehensible result, belongs to consciously curated art. In the necrocasse, the telos is not removed, and allegory again announces a meta-program: the notion of *Necrorealism* indicates a certain *hidden, teleologically displaced* striving to inscribe death in life,¹¹ to protect oneself through the phantasmatically begotten sphere of re-acquired thanatophobia; the allegorical telos sets itself up as an unconscious striving to inscribe death in the traditions of realistic art, to establish a regime of the reality principle's unseen presence *within the boundaries* of the aesthetic.

When the concept of realism is introduced into the necro-context, however, it always finds itself in question, because the

realistic tradition of death representation never actually remains realistic, for in the representation of death there is no corresponding representation of reality, and "there is always only room for allegories" (Jankélévitch 37). The dead body exists, but a corpse is not death; *death is not a corpse*. Necrodocumentation of a dead body is a representation of a corpse, but not of death. But in the presence of the demon of death there is the work of death. This demon is much less vulnerable than displayed corpses, which, incidentally, do not appear and never have appeared in necrorepresentation.¹²

Necrorepresentation is *obviously* different from the age-old tradition of allegorical or metaphorical representation of death, from the half-decomposed corpses known as *transi* in fourteenth-century frescoes, from fifteenth-century illustrations in *artes moriendi*, and from the various artists who have portrayed figures of death, such as Hans Holbein or Albrecht Dürer, Hans Baldung Green or Theodore Jerico. But necrorepresentation also differs from the modernist-postmodernist metonymic tradition, which indicates the hidden presence of death in the most varied works by such artists as Rudolph Schwartzkogler, Cindi Sherman, Robert Gober, and Andres Serrano. In the case of Necrorealism, we find a unique combination of the realistic allegorical tradition and the modernist-postmodernist allegorical tradition, a combination inherent to allegory itself, a combination of metaphor (the skeleton of Hans Holbein), metonymy (the legs of Robert Gober), and photorealism (the corpse of Andres Serrano). In this case, the case of Necrorealism, it would perhaps be more precise to use instead of the notion of realism the notion of para-realism, which would indicate close presence, evasive presence, deviant presence, grotesque presence, strange presence.

In any event, necrorepresentation arises within the boundaries of allegory, in the realm of allegorical representation. We can point out a number of sound reasons for including Necrorealism in the allegorical tradition, despite the fact that we don't find traditionally formulated images of *death as such* in necrocinema, or necrophotography, or necropainting.

First, *allos* in Greek means "other," and *agoreuei* means "to speak." Allegory, then, presupposes a roundabout conversation, but there is no other kind of conversation on the theme of death,

since to speak is to confirm one's own presence, to insist on it, to run in fear from the blank muteness of ever-working death, to exorcize it, to condemn it.

Second, it is a question of representation, of the reproduction of images as such, of borrowing not images of what pre-exists, but *pre-existing images*, or even *pre-existing images of what no longer exists* (such is the nature of cinema in general). With these pre-existing, preceding images it is possible to capture essences on film or to transfer photographic images to painting or to make engravings of images from forensic medicine textbooks.

Third, as allegorical arts by nature, cinema and photography realize a cherished wish, a wish that links the constant pressure of the pleasure principle and the reality principle: to make the transitory substantial, to freeze the ephemerality of the phenomenal world, to incarnate the phantasm. One of the tasks pursued by Iufit in photography is to capture the instant, to take the involuntary accident captive, rejecting the staged type of photography with which he himself once began.

Fourth, allegory, according to Paul de Man, contains two distinct language levels, the literal and the rhetorical (metaphorical), one of which negates precisely that which the other affirms; in Iufit's necrocinema, the literally alive is metaphorically dead, *at the same time as* the literally dead is metaphorically alive. The *necropeople* we see on the screen are simultaneously alive and dead, non-living and non-dead, because, if a live person has a certain meaning ("looking at a corpse, I understood what it was: lost meaning," says Iurii Tsirkul), exhibits expressive reactions and responsive movements, then that means necropeople are dead, but because they move around and sometimes even articulate broken phrases, they resemble, if not living people, then reanimated former people.¹³

Fifth, a distinctive feature of allegory is its unfinished, incomplete, imperfect nature. The essence of allegory may even be found in ruins. Ruins appear as two corporeal levels: as an exterior place of habitation (in this respect the memory resurrects such films by Iufit as *Woodcutter* [*Lesorub*], *Knights of Heaven* [*Rytsari podnbes'ia*], and *Will* [*Volia*], the action of all of which unfolds in the ruins of houses abandoned by "living" people); and as an interior place of habitation, as a mutilated human body (the dismemberment of bodies is a hallmark of necropainting in general,

a hallmark constantly reproduced in the works of Kustov, Serp, Iufit, and Morozov).

Sixth, in Necrorealism we discover that combination of realistic and romantic,¹⁴ metaphorical and metonymic features that is characteristic of allegory, which submerges by virtue of its own condensations and displacements into the quasi-hallucinatory nature of art.

Seventh, the position of the hero in the face of death in this type of allegorical representation is far from romantic fearlessness; it is conveyed through imitation, necromimesis, dense echopraxis.

Eighth, the realistic quality of the hero's position in allegorical representation is manifest in the fact that necrorepresentation always refers to that which lies beyond the boundaries of art, to different spheres of human activity. For Necrorealism artistic representation is simply technology, a tool that allows us to approach the question of death. Precisely for this reason, science often interests the necro-practitioners no less than aesthetic representation as such: on the theoretical level, they show an interest in thanatology and geratology, paleoanthropology and the theory of evolution; on the practical level, they show an interest in forensic medicine atlases and textbooks, from which they extract images for painting. A textbook by Austrian pathological anatomist Edward von Hoffmann became by far the most meaningful catalog of images for Necrorealism.

4. Conditions of Emergence; Stages Of Formation

Necrorealism appeared in Leningrad at the beginning of the 1980s, when socialism was still alive. As a system, however, it was more dead than alive, and although few believed that the corpse of this system would soon be buried, everyone understood that it no longer showed signs of life, evidenced by the gerontocracy, the death of one general secretary after another, the stagnation in the economic sphere, the negligible number of adherents to the ruling ideology, the absence of any sort of collective enthusiasm, and the demise of the aesthetic principles of socialist realism. Thus, confidence in the stability of the system was based entirely on its immobile character, its failure to demonstrate any signs of life or death. The fundamental feature of the system was semiotic replication, a striving towards neophobi-

cally precise reproduction of the symbolic order. The supporters as well as the opponents of the system agreed on one point: time was defeated, time was marked by ideological, economic, and socialist decomposition.¹⁵

Let us add to this general necrocontext the specific context of Leningrad, which had risen on the corpse of St. Petersburg.¹⁶

First, from the moment of its founding (if we can speak of the founding of something whose "foundation" was a swamp), Petersburg has been shrouded in the gloom of apocalyptic legends and prophecies.

Second, the city was founded, as we know, on the corpses of its own builders.

Third, the literary text of St. Petersburg (commonly known as a city that is more powerful and repressive than hypothetical or real, a city to which no one ever succeeds in breaking through, a city that simply does not exist in the common sense of the word) is saturated with mystical portraits of paranoid raving, covered with masks of death, filled with images of eternal doubles and suicides.¹⁷

Fourth, in the very center of the city,¹⁸ in the Peter-Paul Cathedral of the Peter-Paul Fortress, there is a burial site, a fact that is fairly unprecedented and that the Marquis de Custine noted with horror in his day.¹⁹

Fifth, the polynomia of the city, the absence of a single name for it, suggests that the presence of a single, signified object is an illusion, that its existence in general is illusory.

Sixth, from the moment of its "founding" the city has been the site of a cold war between the rational and the elemental, between cultural and natural phenomena.²⁰

In these conditions there existed a certain human, asocial mass, oriented away from generally accepted, rational, cultured activities. A portion of this mass was subsequently shaped into the artistic movement called *Necrorealism*. Equally and unconsciously alien to these people were two affirmative tendencies in culture, specifically visual culture: socialist realism and nonconformism, both of which were far from monolithic and which shared the same basic feature: belief in the truth of its own aesthetic and ideological positions. This was an irrational, sporadic challenge on the part of still-amorphous Necrorealism to conventional, institutional irrationalism, which masqueraded as

quasi-logical rhetoric. At the same time, however, that challenge was the means by which Necrorealism adapted to itself the existing conditions; their challenge was "a form of survival associated with a definite mechanism, and it didn't matter what clothes the new generation disguised itself in. In those days, we were becoming either punks or *styliagi*. Iufit was one of the leaders of the punk movement" (O. Kotel'nikov). A. Panov, a.k.a. Pig, the father of the Soviet punk scene, expresses a similar opinion (in his reminiscences of Viktor Tsoi, 1991, pp. 53-54): "We were all under the influence of Iufa [Iufit]. The punks—Rotten, the Sex Pistols—had nothing to do with it. It was all Iufa's doing. Iufa was and still is the main ideologue, and I'm like a toy for beating. He's so secretive, like Lenin. He always turns up at the last moment. In general, he's a very infectious person. He can infect anyone he wants with his psychosis.... When we began our idiot behavior, there weren't any punks yet. Iufa called me one night and said, 'you know, in the West there's some new group of cretins like us. They're called The Sex Pistols....'"

The theme of death became a nexus of protest, the theme as such, not examined from any scientific or aesthetic position. For one thing, the theme is taboo²¹; second, it casts doubt on all arithmetic axioms; third, it presupposes the nihilism of such positions as "everything is in vain," "everything is permitted," and "it's all the same."

The repressed theme of death, like the connected themes of violence, absurdism, sadism, and the loss of consciousness, was already apparent in the dark humor of early Necrorealism. I say "early" because it is possible to divide the evolution of Necrorealism (both conditionally and unconditionally) into four periods:

1. *The amorphous formative period*: a disorganized group of young men were engaged in nihilistic forms of behavior that deviated from established norms in a manner more or less typical of the times. In that era, the late 1970s-early 1980s (someone early on took a photograph of a group of naked friends at Kupchino that included future punk musician Pig [Andrei Panov] and the future leader of the famous rock group Kino [Viktor Tsoi]), art (in the sense of any form of production, be it film, music, or photography) had an unpremeditated character despite the premeditation²² and purposefulness, unconscious at least, of any art. At the time this amorphous mass of people resembled "a pack of

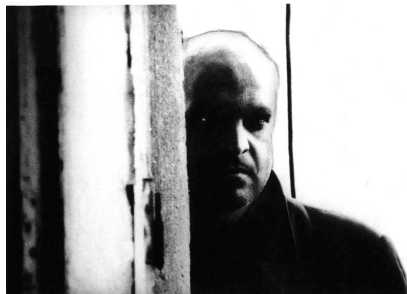
dogs drifting among the courtyards, losing some members along the way, picking up others" (Iufit). Drifting among the courtyards, the forests, intersecting the forest path hither and thither, drifting and sweeping up cast-off individuals along the way. You might say that they were not (intentionally) creating works of art in this period, but registering certain forms of idleness and merrymaking, that is, an extreme manifestation of an activity, if not to say inactivity or *displaced activity*, that was inherent to the entire *socium*. In this respect the dimwitted necro-nihilist was the comrade-in-arms of the cunning sots-artist. This "alliance," however, occurred from opposite directions: the discursive, mimetic, logical behavior of Moscow (imaginary echolalia) on the one hand; the bodily, mimetically pathological behavior of Leningrad (imaginary echopraxis) on the other.²³ Proto-art emerged from a game of opposing reality built on repressive labor, a game that, though antagonistic to labor, proved oddly homologous to the work of death. It goes without saying that there was no question of declarations or manifestos at the time. Towards the mid-1980s, the disorganized negrogroupp was one of the radical wings of the "New Artists" movement. An important figure in the emergence of Necrorealism, aside from Iufit, was one of the leaders of the "New Artists," Oleg Kotel'nikov, who collaborated with Iufit in 1986 on some of the first works of necropainting, based on images from a textbook on forensic medicine. Kotel'nikov recalls: "The first painting we did together was called "Morning in Artek." It depicts three beastly red men floating down a river one after another. Iufit did the drawing, I painted it in. I think Evgenii at the time was re-working his illustrations of ancient Greek myths, which his mother was teaching to university students."

The forensic medicine textbooks served as the optical epicenter of formative Necrorealism: Iufit distributed slides or engravings from the books to beginning artists, suggesting that they translate them into paintings. It is important to note that, even before the appearance of "necropacks," the two future film directors Iufit and Evgenii Kondrat'ev (Debil ["Cretin"]) had spent time in Rzhevka in the studio of artists Vadim and Aleksandr Ovchinnikov. This period also saw the beginning of the Necrorealists' reputation as sexual maniacs, degenerates, dangerous necrophiliacs²⁴ with terrifying names.²⁵ In 1982 they conducted

their first experiments in cinema, on 8mm film, and in late 1983 they made the film *The Race*, which was reedited in 1985 as *Woodcutter*. In 1984 Iufit established his film studio, Mzhalafilm,²⁶ and from that moment on necroart was created within a necro-environment. Other short films were made in this period: *Werewolf Orderlies* (1984), *Spring* (1987), *Fortitude* (1988), and *Suicide Monsters* (1988).²⁷

2. In 1987-1988 the necropractitioners were joined by "the cool artists" (Iufit's term) K. Mienev, I. Bezrukov, and S. Chernov (whose first appearance was in the short film *Urine-Crazed Bodysnatchers* [*Mochebuitsy-trupolovy*]). A. Anikeenko appeared in 1989 during the production of *Knights of Heaven*. That year would become the apotheosis of the early stage, which came to an end shortly thereafter. The end was marked by the disappearance of a key figure, Andrei Mertvyi. Necroaxiomatics appeared during this period, when the nature of true Necrorealism and false Necrorealism was discussed. Necrorhetoric also appeared (initiated primarily by Kustov). The appearance of art (that is, the *perception* of it as such), and the appearance of individual practitioners and their perception/confirmation of the connection between the theme of death and Necrorealism was formed: the notion of death arises from the fear of death, that is, fear for oneself as an *individual* among other representatives of *one's kind*.

Another important event occurs on an external, demonstrative level: Pontius Khul'ten organizes an exhibition in the Russian Museum that includes modernist classics (from Marcel Duchamps and Robert Rauchenberg to Daniel Buren and Nam Jun Paik) and young artists from various countries of the world, and invites necropractitioners to take part in it.²⁸ The first screenings of necrofilms at festivals, in Riga and Rotterdam, also date from this period.²⁹ Iufit shoots the film *Knights of Heaven*, which differs from early necrocinematography stylistically and in



Knights of Heaven, 1989

other ways. *Knights of Heaven*, shot in the workshop of Aleksandr Sokurov at Lenfilm Studios, marks a transition to a different aesthetic, and to a different, professional, technique. Iufit begins collaborating with author and screenwriter Vladimir Maslov. Their jointly-written script for *Knights of Heaven* was the first endeavor of their collaboration.

3. At the beginning of the 1990s Kustov, Serp, and Iufit, a stable necrogroup,³⁰ are invited to all major exhibitions featuring Soviet and, later, Russian, artists: Amsterdam,³¹ Dusseldorf,³² Hannover.³³ The first necroexhibition, which was put together in America, dates from this period.³⁴ At Lenfilm Studios they shoot the feature film *Daddy, Father Frost is Dead*, which receives the grand prize at the 1992 Rimini Film Festival.

4. An internal split within the group in 1993 results in the beginning of solo work by Serp, Iufit, and Kustov. Each finds his own technique and his own path: Serp paints pictures in Paris; Kustov creates entire para-scientific installations devoted to specific thanatological problems ("Asphyxia" [*Asfiksia*], "Explosion in the City," [*Vzryv v gorode*], "The Epileptic Status of the Golem" [*Epilepticheskii status Golema*]); Iufit, when he is not filming, takes photographs in the St. Petersburg suburbs and in the desert on the Utah-Arizona border (his first use of color), he shot the short film *Will* (*Volia*, 1994) on the outskirts of Potsdam, and in collaboration with Vladimir Maslov he made the feature films *The Wooden Room* (*Derevennaia komnata*, 1995) and *Silver Heads* (*Serebrianye golovy*, 1998).



The Wooden Room, 1995

Necroartists have participated independently in major exhibi-

tions.³⁵ Tsirkul', Bezrukov, and Anikeenko (whom Iufit calls "*the last wild boar carrying on the traditions of early necrocinematography*") are working as always.

NOTES

1. It goes without saying, however, that from a rational point of view distancing in cinema, as opposed to in dreams, is always possible: "the dreamer does not know that he is dreaming; the film spectator knows that he is at the cinema: this is the first and principal difference between the situations of film and dream" (Metz 123).
2. A dream is short, but dream work never stops. A film screening is finite, but the distribution of it in the space of the individual perception of time can by no means occupy only an hour or two.
3. Also parallel in the sense of its movement parallel to hypothetical reality and in the sense of its deviation from the "normal" path. Parallelism arises both in this case, deviating from necroreality, and in the letter that runs parallel to it. The para-logicity of the letter appears in its partly-forced mimetic character ("both Iufit and Necrorealism"), and in its (pre-)determined schematization, formalization, and dispersion of discourse, of a certain persistent repetitiveness, of the viscous movement of thought and the schizo-associativity of established connections, following one of which we cannot but mention *parallel cinema*, "cinema shot outside the system of corporate or state film production" (Aleinikov 188), the birth of which in the mid-1980s in the USSR was "like a system connected with the activity of three people: Igor' Aleinikov, Evgenii Iufit and Boris Iukananov" (Aleinikov 119).
4. To a certain degree this element of unexpectedness links necrocinema to the thriller. However, it is this "certain degree" that plays a decisive role, demonstrated by the fact that the ways in which necrocinema differs from the thriller are the least expected, the least calculated. *The disappointment of expectations* constantly underscores the unopenness and limitations of the a priori character of human perception, which is founded on a *prescribed* past experience. In specific, rigid schemas of perception, in particular, in preference for the simple but overloaded meaning of figures. The disappointment of expectations, on one hand, shows the specific and adaptive character of perception; on the other, it illustrates the illusory nature of the hypothetical cleanliness of unmediated perception. Perception is subject to momentary processing, strictly speaking, it is identical to the "simple" receipt of the given, but appears as their reflection, as their transformation into identifiable symbols.

Not only can disappointment of expectations introduce alarm, but the constancy of the disappointment of expectations creates a constant state of alarm, and constant doubt in reality or even a rejection of events. In other words, non-coincidence of actual and virtual representation may lead to the rejection of one of them—to derealization or to depersonalization, that is, to the defense against the splintering the subject of a situation by means of acceptance of an ambivalent model "both..., and...." In this way, both thriller and the "anti-thriller," necrocinema, bring the viewer into a state of alarm, but from "opposite" poles. In the first case, on account of the expectation of the possible, in the second, on account of the disappointment of expectations. In the first case a (false) systematic orientation is produced, one that the viewers know step-by-step, in the second, the disorientation and rejection of narration organized in steps of expected occurrences. Precisely this difference leads the (conventional) spectator's mind's eye into a regimen of artistic and therapeutic psychopathology.

5. "The only way in which we can describe what happens in hallucinatory dreams is by saying that the excitation moves in a *backward* direction. Instead of being transmitted towards the *motor* end of the apparatus it moves towards the *sensory* end and finally reaches the perceptual system. If we describe as 'progressive' the direction taken by physical processes arising from the unconscious during waking life, then we may speak of dreams as having a 'regressive' character" (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* 542). It is precisely an affective influence, as Iufit sees it, that necrocinema should exert on the viewer: *Papa, Father Frost is Dead* is intended for sensual, and not for conscious, perception (from a television interview on V. Potemkin's program *House of Film* [*Dom kino*]).
6. *Something strange* here means not something metaphysical, something finite, something transcendental and physically present, but a necessary detour, a detour that does not guarantee the attainment of a certain, already fixed telos. Moreover, this circumvention predetermines not forward, but backward movement: the ambivalence of the *strange*, the viscosity of a strange *ritornello*, the analogous afactuality of the *strange*, presupposing the non-disclosure of a "necessary" signifier (and the simultaneously persistent presence *beyond the strange* of some "real" signified)—all of this is evidence of regression.

Something strange here means not something metaphysical, something finite, something transcendental and physically present, but *something else*, the absence of which as such indicates a rejection of representation, a displacement, the impossibility of hypothetically restoring a former scenario. *Something strange* is not even a signifier "as such," but an empty substitute formation, a symptom of an un-

disclosed signified. It is an attempt at articulation, an articulatory torture. *Something strange* is nonsubmission to the violence of language and at the same time an attempt to enter into it. *Something strange* is an instrument of pseudo-aphasia that arises at the site of alternating syllables—ma-ma, la-la, na-na, pa-pa—that perforate the sphere of the symbolic.

7. "All that we can say and think about death and dying and their inevitable arrival, it seems to us from the beginning, is that which we get second-hand. We know about it through hearsay or through empirical knowledge. Everything we know about it comes from the language that names it, that makes suggestions..." (Levinus 1991, 22). Death, for Levinus, is inseparable from his relationship to other
8. Thus the tears, joy, fear, and surprise are genuine, though, as Iufit notes, the reaction to his films has a polarized character—either unrestrained, frenzied gaiety or a heavy, oppressed feeling.

Thus the laughter of Necrorealism is ambivalent: "It is both happy and rejoicing and—at the same time—mocking and derisive; it both negates and affirms, buries and engenders" (Bakhtin 1990, 17). In the necro-lexicon, this laughter is referred to as "healthy mockery."

Thus the train in 1896 "really" did "run over" the audience (despite all the assurances that "*it's only a film, it's not real*"); more precisely, the affect was real.

Thus, suddenly, in a blink of an eye, the viewer is run over by the car in *Spring*

Thus, death is genuine in its authenticity for the eyewitness.

9. In other words, the film audience encounters representation that is both a deliberately created work of art and objects presented in their material unpremeditatedness: "In each act of perception, two elements are present: one is the fact that the work has a signifying character, the other, on the contrary, is the unmediated experience of the work as a fact of reality... in the process of perception... the perceiver continually fluctuates between the sensation of premeditation and unpremeditation, in other words, the work presents itself to him simultaneously as a sign (a self-integrated sign, without a one-to-one relationship to reality) and as a thing" (Mukařovsky 173).
10. Also because the telos itself is not a telos. First, "it is necessary to differentiate the act of striving from the meaning and essence of the goal...the essence of the matter consists in the striving; the telos is secondary" (Pavlov 307). Just as Pavlov's striving is differentiated from the telos, Freud's attraction is not connected to the object in the realm of primary, unconscious, psychic processes, at the stage of the domination of object representation, in the age of the predominance of right-hemisphere activity. Second, one telos always conceals one more, *other* telos. And behind that telos is hidden yet *another* telos—a

target on the chest that serves not only as a screen for dreams, not only a "personal" stage for representation, but also a sphere of the mutual coordination of hands, mouth, and eyes, and also a zone for the formation of an attraction to mastery [*Bemächtigungstrieb*], which is manifest as a reflex of the telos (on this, see Mazin 1990, 12-17). With this telos the hand-brain system begins to be coordinated; with this telos the optical-technical process of mastering one's environment begins to be established.

11. Here at least three observations should be made: first, death as a concept is a relatively late development, one that was absent in a differentiated form in ancient cultures; second, death does not "tear itself away" from life, in its homogeneity to dreaming, at least; third, death appears more as a receding image than as a concept possessing a concrete meaning and place in the purpose of signifiers.
12. This is one of the illusions of the perception of Necrorealism, about which stories full of chilling horror are told. A microexample from the television program "Fifth Wheel" (*Piatoe koleso*) from the Fall of 1989 in which psychiatrists were shown necrofilms and asked to comment on them: "the corpse is hanging," "the corpse is standing," they repeat, looking at the creature moving on the screen, which by no means looks like a non-breathing corpse, since "a corpse in the morgue and an artifact or imitation—painting, film, photography—are completely different things" (Bezrukov). Here the question arises: does the corpse appear on the screen of the viewer's consciousness because the director achieves the necroeffect, or because of the viewer's knowledge that he is watching necrocinema?

If someone's disfigured head "looks out" from a Kustov painting, then it is a representation of a representation, since the prototype was an engraving or a photograph from an atlas of forensic medicine or a textbook on pathological anatomy. And here, moreover, "speaks" the very nature of representation, of re-production: "the *transformation* into *spectacle* of all that provokes horror and terror in 'real life' makes that which cannot ordinarily be looked at directly tolerable, bearable, and even agreeable: the mimetic structure—which, in the theatre and in speculative philosophy, allows us to cleanse ourselves of the intolerable, to calculate the *economy* of death, the economy of that which permanently threatens, of the risk of madness by disappropriation" (Kofman 1985, 76, trans. M. Jett). In other words, (necro) representation is a shield and a stronghold of the saving fear of death.

13. The phrase "Life is movement" (*Papa, Father Frost is Dead*) is the best example of this. When our spirits and ghosts cease their activity, movement sends us in search of other obsolete creatures. The obsolete are indispensable for mass mediatization, for maintaining the necessary level of communal thanatophobia: thus voodoo zombies or

Egyptian mummies appear. Zombies and mummies cross from the realm of scientific investigation to the realm of "total culture" (P. Pepperstein), filling up the screen, infiltrating and occupying the unconsciousness, joining up with legions of *local* phantoms. The appearance of the zombie figure in the necrocontext is a result, on the one hand, of the use in early necrocimematography of so-called "zombie make-up" (a mix of cotton wadding, bandages, tomato paste, and jam). With the help of this make-up Iufit imitated images from forensic medicine textbooks; according to Iufit, the greatest success in using zombie make-up was achieved by Andrei Mertvyi in the film *Urine-Crazed Bodysnatchers* (*Mochebuitsy-trupolov*). On the other hand, there was the zombie-like movement of subjects in later necrocinema. It is appropriate in this respect to point out a film that produced a lasting impression on Iufit: George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*.

14. Fairly often people, especially artists, misspeak and call Necrorealism necroromanticism. Necrorealism's romantic allusions include not only its inherent dissatisfaction with reason, its love for ruins, its disdain for urbanism and love for nature, but especially the "irrealization" of a goal. Death is homologous to the transcendental departure of the romantics from the here and now to another place, another time or another state of mind (the fantastic imagination).
15. A. Borovskii considers this contextual register to be the foundation of the necroartists' unity: "Yes, the Necrorealists are of one flesh with *homo soveticus*... I think the impulse of Necrorealism came not from Lyotard and Beaudrillard, but other thinkers entirely. Thinkers who could hardly even walk by themselves or read the speeches that were written for them, and who so resembled one other in their flourishing senility that it was difficult to distinguish who was still alive and who had already passed honorably away, but they none the less persistently held the country in their decrepit hands... they were the very image of decomposition, not only ideological, but also physical, on both a societal and a biological level... the indelible image of "collective leadership" during the period of gerontocracy as a concentrated expression of Soviet life in its lowest form became, it seems, the impulse that united around Evgenii Iufit the young people who formed the nucleus of Necrorealism (Borovskii 65). Iufit himself addresses the question of politics with a characteristic digression: "There are disasters, airline disasters, for example, to which everyone is susceptible, even political figures. In this context, politics definitely falls within the sphere of my interests. Although in such cases the process of identification is very complicated. The remains are scattered across three square kilometers. It is a very complex disaster... A corpse is a corpse... Its metamorphoses interest me. Metamor-

phoses of form and color. A kind of necroaesthetic. In the first and second months terrible changes take place. The corpse becomes spotted, like a jaguar, and fleshy, like a hippopotamus. But that is only in particular cases. That is what is peculiar and interesting. But politics? Well, I don't know" (Mikhel'son and Iufit 135). The rejection of the ideological context is related not so much to its inacceptability to Necrorealist practice, or even to the striving to break out of the narrow framework of that context, so much as to the desire to reach bodily reality as such, the desire to go to the limit of the symbolic, to penetrate the incomprehensible body with its life and death.

In connection with the same socio-political context we can juxtapose Necrorealism with so-called "sadistic couplets" (e.g.: "Little Alesha cooked up some meat/While his dad crawled around on the floor with no feet"), a sort of necrofolklore that flourished in the same period, the 1970s and 1980s.

The influence of ideological, economic, and social contexts is indubitable: "Necrorealism is a product of its time" (Tsirkul').

16. In which Evgenii Iufit was born in 1961, studied (at the Advanced Technical Institute of a Leningrad metals factory), worked (first as a draftsman in a construction bureau, then in the worker's brigade of the Central Exhibition Hall, and later at Lenfilm), and which became in the mid-1980s "the distinctive capital of parallel cinema" (Aleinikov 120).
17. We have discussed this theme elsewhere in more detail (Tourkina and Mazin).
18. Although the city does not have just one center, which also destabilizes, if not destroys, the symbolic space of the living organism. In this case, Peter and Paul Fortress is referred to as a center because it was one of the first centers of St. Petersburg, predating other centers such as Palace Square, the Admiralty, and St. Isaac's Square.
19. De Custine's horror, however, is surprising, since burial in churches was common from early Christianity through the eighteenth century.
20. This conflict is of utmost importance for Necrorealism, which ideologically and visually occurs along the border of Nature and Culture, Nature and City. More details below.
21. In part it is possible to agree with the opinion that "Iufit 'rehabilitated' the physical reality of death after it had ceased to be a forbidden zone" (Dobrotovorskii 1993, 7). That death had ceased to be a forbidden zone, in the common sense of the word, is true, in the sense that the theme was closed by the decision regarding the collective character of life in communist ideology, for which heroic death or the death of a person giving himself to the service of fellowship is always justified: a person dies, but his deeds live on through the centuries. However, the "rise" of the theme of death after the sudden

disappearance of communism only revealed the presence of the theme of death, definitively depreciated human life, put people in front of the face of death, but did not rework the theme at all, or de-sacralize rituals that surround it; although there was a return to Christian ritual practices, a regressive re-sacralization.

22. "In comparison with all other human creations, the artistic work obviously seems like a model of premeditated work... Its destiny is to be an esthetic sign—an artistic work is realized as an undivided whole" (Mukařovsky 164). The "unpremeditated character" of early Necrorealism implies, in particular, that photography *at that time* was not perceived and was not created by the necropractitioners as a differentiated aesthetic sign. It was a time when "fun was the natural continuation of filming, and filming was a natural continuation of the fun" (O. Kotelnikov). A differentiated artistic sign demands symbolic work, it demands a definite place and rank for the initiated artist; and then Timur Novikov said to Evgenii Iufit: "You will be a film director. The position is currently open. You see, you get something on film. Make titles. Put the words 'The End' in one place and put the name of the film and the studio in another."
 23. In which "consciousness turns out to be unrelated to reflex and its basic requirement, fixation of the observer's position. This leads to domination by the orgiastic, uncontrolled discourse of bodily practices" (Ryklin 1993, 62), or in other words: "Leningraders are more inclined towards spectacle, *epatage*, shock therapy for the consciousness... the films of Leningrad directors [meaning Iufit's films, primarily],... do not submit easily to verbal deciphering" (Dobrotvorskii 1989, 16-17).
- The kinship of Necrorealism and *sotsart* can be seen in a completely different respect: in both cases "the stereotypes specific to Soviet art become an object of manipulation, in this case the phenomenon of optimistic films of the 1930s, that 'factory of social dreams'" (Borovskii 66)
24. The title, the name, and its interpretation are stronger than the natural, esthetic phenomenon: for twelve years the reputation has been maintained. As before, for most people Necrorealism and necrophilia remain synonyms. After viewing a Necrorealist film, one psychiatrist drew his own conclusions: "He is licking something... eating... devouring... necrophiliacs! There is a terrible pathology, a sexual perversion... accompanied by elements of sadism—I saw precisely these features in the films," from the program "Fifth Wheel," fall, 1989; while a journalist drew his own: "Films by the Mzhalalafilm group (leaders of the "Leningrad school") are full of corpses, wounded corpses writhing in pre-death convulsions. This is 'Necrorealism' (Astakhova). The scandalous reputation was con-

firmed by other publications, in which stories about Iufit appeared, told by his friends, the authenticity of which is impossible to prove or to verify (see, in particular: Tupitsyn 301-302). There exists, as before, a fear of aggressors, pederasts, and brutal sado-Necrorealists.

25. "Dead" (*Mertvyi*), "Corpse" (*Trupyr*), "Cretin" (*Debil*), "Compass" (*Tsirkul*), "Sickle" (*Serp*), et al. Even the actual surname Bezrukov ("Armless") has a literal meaning.
26. "Mzhalalafilm," is a highly revealing word, both meaningless and polysemic. The word is taken from the name of some second-tier figure in the Communist Party, Mzhavanadze, which was chosen not for semantic reasons, but "just because," for acoustic reasons ("it sounds good"), and it was chosen *accidentally*. The accident refers to a certain depersonalized man, of which remained... no, not even a name, but a syllable, the first syllable "mzha," a syllable that, with its two consonants, requires effort to pronounce, and after which follows the proto-articulated movement "la," "la," which sounds, on the contrary, like it comes from any one of hundreds, even thousands, of happy, uncomplicated, if not to say idiotic, songs.
27. Here is a typical description of early necrocinema: Visually speaking, Iufit has brought the metamorphoses of the corpse—the changes of the human body—to the body of cinematic art: semi-decomposed film, careless editing, characters who are corpses, suicides, or half-alive. Total decay, endless ideological battles, filmed at a hurried tempo... as a result, the suspicion was that these were just men romping around and doing somersaults..." (Aleinikov 121).
28. Socio-economic perestroika, the next and perhaps the last neo-colonial interest in *the other*, and the critical discussion of the question of identification opened up the possibility of Soviet art becoming fashionable, which by and large was the dominating stimulus for the organization of a whole series of exhibitions of contemporary Soviet art in various countries.

At the exhibition "The Territory of Art" (*Territriia iskusstva*) at the State Russian Museum in 1990, Necrorealism was represented by the works of Bezrukov, Iufit, Kustov, Morozov, Tsirkul', Mertvyi, and Serp. Iufit's work had been shown at the Russian Museum the previous year, 1989, at the first exhibition of contemporary Leningrad art, "New Pieces" (*Novye postupleniia*, curated by E. Andreeva, O. Turkina, and A. Liubimova).
29. The Riga festival "Arsenal" (1988) was the site of the first large-scale demonstration of necrofilm. That year there were shows in Finland (The First International Film Festival), Scotland (The Third Eye), West Berlin (Interfilm), and Bonn (The 10th International Film Festival). The year 1988 also saw their first public screening in Leningrad, at the House of Cinema. Iufit had screened his first experi-

ments in his apartment (at the end of 1983), and later at closed screenings for friends and acquaintances were organized at "Club-81."

30. Group work at that moment had several advantages: "It wasn't only Iufit's exceptional leadership qualities or his confidence in the idea, but the sober understanding that Necrorealism as a socio-cultural worldview was realized in a very strong, undivided, whole esthetic space. To cut off and carry away a piece of this space was hardly possible; in order to assimilate it, you needed precisely collectivity of action. And not only collectivity, but complexity; the Necrorealists, Iufit most of all, were the founders of the Leningrad "parallel cinema," actively working as a directors, operators, and actors, and their exhibited works, essentially performances, include choreography and specific music" (Borovskii 66). Speaking of music and performances, it is worth remembering the important necro-showman, Iurii Tsirkul'. Moreover, from 1988-1996 necroartists participated prominently in the "Popular Mechanics" orchestra, where they presented the savage, ugly part of the program. However, the necro-orchestra "Mzhalala" was founded already by the mid-1980s. The recording of Iufit and Kotel'nikov's song "Fat Wax" (*Zhirovosk*) at the factory where M. Malin's studio was located became one of the most important events in the life of Mzhalala. "An orchestra of twenty people, including G. Gur'ianov, T. Novykov, and S. Bulaev-Afrika, accompanied Iufit's roaring solo (O. Kolotel'nikov).
- 31. The exhibition "Brinnen de USSR en Erbuiten" at the Stedelijk Museum (1990), one of the most respected museums of modern art in Europe. Notably, the necropictures became part of a lie in the museum's journal, which announced the exhibition accompanied the announcement with four photographs: three represented the greats of Soviet art (Komar-Melamid, Kabakov, Bulatov), the fourth was Kustov's painting "If Guys of the World."
- 32. The large-scale exhibition of Soviet art was created by the director of the museum, Jurgen Harten, as a bi-national exhibition—Soviet and Israeli. This exhibition featured Iufit, Kustov and Serp. The exhibition opened at Kunsthalle Dusseldorf and then moved to the major museum in Israel, the Israel Museum, Weisbord Pavillion, and in 1992 was shown at the Central House of the Artist in Moscow.
- 33. The exhibition was called "Art, Europe" (*Iskusstvo, Evropa*), and traveled to 63 museums and exhibition halls in Germany. The director of the Kunstverein Hannover Museum, Ekhard Schneider, chose a trio—Iufit, Kustov, and Serp—to represent Leningrad art.
- 34. The first "spicy" necroexhibition, "Necrorealism, Shock Therapy of the New Culture," occurred at Bowling Green State University, Ohio, in 1993. The catalog was the first complex description of Necroreal-

ism in the U.S., and contained articles by Andrei Demichev, Sergei Dobrotvorskii, Olesia Turkina, Ellen Berry and an interview with Evgenii Iufit by Anesa Miller-Pogacar and Sergei Dobrotvorskii.

35. I have in mind the exhibitions "Self-Identification" (*Samoidentifikatsiia*) (Kil', Berlin, Sopot, Petersburg, 1995), "Idyll and Catastrophy" (*Idilliia i katastrofa*) (Erfurt, 1996), "Metaphors of Renunciation" (*Metaforii otrecheniia*) (Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe 1996), and "Office" (*Kabinet*) (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1997).

Translated by Maria Jett

*Para-Necro-Blockbuster*¹
or
*Evgenii Iufit*² and *Vladimir Maslov's*³ *Silver Heads*

OLESIA TURKINA AND VIKTOR MAZIN

Silver Heads is an atypical blockbuster. A necro-product of the late nineties.

1. What is it that you're doing here?

An experiment—that's what. An experiment in cinema.

Like *Knights of Heaven* (1989), Iufit's first work at Lenfilm, it's about an experiment. The worthiest of the worthy and the most scientific of scientists make their way to a place where life is worth death.

In this case it is not the brave, ideologically-tinted Soviet voice of *Knights of Heaven* that tells us about the experiment, nor that voice from on high, the voice of psychic automatism, but the cine-eye: the initiation of the experiment is announced from a Leningrad University rostrum by a possessed scientist (played by the actor Morton). Science injects credibility into the discourse: "as scientists have proven...."

Genuine scientific footage comes on the screen: moving cytoplasm, beavers washing themselves, Siamese twins being separated...

The documentary footage is addressed not only to vision. It belongs to the long-term memory. It is a message from the age of *Homo sapiens* from the point of view of *Homo sapiens*. Perhaps it is the last message sent before a massive invasion of aliens, clones, others, unconscious others, virtual others, cybernetic, prosthetic, constructed others. It can be dated by the documentary citations, the university, the men's suits, the black-and-white film, the rhetoric...

The experiment is not only declared. The experiment is demonstrated.

Conclusion: *Silver Heads* is a spectacle, a para-blockbuster.

And not only a spectacle. The narrative here appears *almost* logical, "generally accepted." Instead of a false narrative, a narrative that constantly leads to confusion, perfectly logical connections are established. The place of irrationalism is taken by a quasi-scientific rationalism. *Silver Heads* can be retold. For example, like this:

A group of scientists develops an idea for crossing a human being with a tree. They carry out their plan in the forest. Besides the scientists, there are also two groups of individuals there: Z-individuals—mutants created by a previous experiment—and a special detachment sent to destroy them.



Silver Heads, 1998

It tells a story.

Conclusion: *Silver Heads* is a narrative, a para-blockbuster.

The "silver heads" are the characters. Steadfast, metallic, precious. World-wise, elderly, experienced. The three types of "silver heads" are: scientists ("eggheads"); hunters ("blockheads"); and mutants ("paraheads"). The idiocy and distinctive behavior of each group is different. Intergroup struggle forms the macrolevel of the film's narrative tension.

Each group in turn is divided into those who are more active and those who are more passive with regard to power and sexuality. Intragroup struggle forms the microlevel of the film's narrative tension.

Struggle presupposes heroism. Heroism presupposes death for an ideal. An ideal presupposes achievement of a goal. The goals of the scientists and the special detachment are idealistic. The goal of the Z-individuals is self-preservation.

The scientists strive in a paranoid delirium towards their ideal: the hybridization of *Homo sapiens* and tree. Their goal is the creation of dendroids. Their instrument is their own bodies. Their method is sacrificial self-destruction. They are heroes.

The hero is a loner. An individual. The paralogical conjunction of documentary footage of Siamese twins with the story of an ardent scientist (V. Maslov) is shown in photographs: the scientist lost his brother, his mono-ovular twin. When science refuses him individualization, when he is disgraced, when he proves unfit for the scientific experiment, when he proves less reliable than wood, he sets off for a regressive meeting with his identical brother: he rushes maniacally on roller skates down a forest slope towards the water: the noose tightens.

The special detachment of terminators works for the scientists. The terminators' task is to purge the forest of the results of the previous, unsuccessful experiment. The unit is represented by two characters who perform displaced actions⁴: one (Iu. Krasev), the defeat of locomotive functions, the second (S. Chernov), of psychic functions.

The Z-individuals are psychic mutants, waste products of a previous experiment.⁵ These Z-individuals are zero, unnamable. Yet their name is Z. They are named. It seems that they acquire meaning. But it is a false meaning. The Z are "goose eggs." The Z are non-people, genetic mutants, carriers of a psychic deviation. The Z are either non-existent people or existent non-people. Cinematic characters. One of the Z aspires to the role of a human (N. Rudik). He says that he is teaching the boy. He is didactic and medium-like, as in Tarkovsky. His sententiousness almost transforms him into a Zen monk. Against the backdrop of the scientists' grotesque rhetoric, his conundrums seem to bear truth. But he is a necro-character. He has no pants. He is carnivalesque and anal.⁶

The character interacts with the boy. The boy has gotten older. The boy has lost the zombie makeup. The boy is a son.⁷ He has become an attractive sexual object. The oral interaction initiated with him by the Z-men establishes a relationship of symbolic anallingus. The protagonist's speech is an anal-ogy.

The characters are consumed by a necro-thirst.

Conclusion: *Silver Heads* is heroics, a para-blockbuster.

The narrative in *Silver Heads* has a beginning and an end. In the beginning there is an epigraph-obituary: the forester's wife (G. Smirnova) tells the boy: father is *there*. There where the action of the film unfolds. Characters perish as the film approaches its end. At the finale a danger arises: *Silver Heads* can turn into a parable or an auto-necro-parody. The moral of the finale: everyone perishes except the Z-individuals. But the displaced behavior of all the characters does not give them status. The characters have no standing. There is no norm. No comparisons. No parable. What's left is a compositional skeleton.

Conclusion: *Silver Heads* is a film with a classical composition, a para-necro-blockbuster.

The living becomes the dead. And the dead becomes the living. The ambivalence of living and dead follows the tradition of the previous necrofilms *Papa, Father Frost is Dead* (1991) and *The Wooden Room* (1995). The characters develop the necromimesis. They are assimilated to the living and the dead. The dad for whom the son burns grass in his hand is at first "dead," and later "alive." Dead Z are revived. Like animals, they save themselves by imitating the behavior of corpses. Do not believe your eyes.

Conclusion: *Silver Heads* is an illusion, a necro-blockbuster.

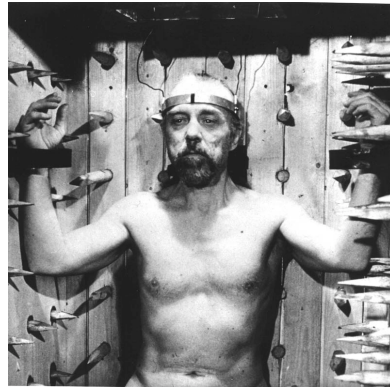
2. Where is it that you're headed?

To the forest, of course. Where else can you conduct those necrorites of initiation, those experiments?

The action shifts from the recognizable space of the university to the forest, to nowhere, to a region on the boundary of which there is only the forester's cabin. The departure is noted on the map, in imitation of an authentic narrative.

The forest is an ideal place for experiments. The forest is not just a place where individual trees are not visible, not just a place of phobias and secrets, not only a source of firewood to fuel the hybridization machine, but also a source of sticks and pointed stakes. The stick is a significant element of necrocinema. Sticks are used for beating (*Woodcutter*, 1985), sticks are used to play with someone's mouth (*Spring*, 1987), sticks unite characters (*Papa, Father Frost is Dead*). A stick is an instrument for phallogomorphous sadomasochism.

This time the stakes have multiplied into a stake-machine for lethal pleasure. The scientific initiation ritual is carried out in a bunker at the center of which there is a sadomasochistic stake-machine, which replaces the shack on chicken legs.



The woman scientist, a surrogate Baba Yaga (T. Verkhovskaia), initiates the men. The whole bunker becomes the shack on chicken legs, and the stake-chamber becomes an oven, a crucible for the sexual baking of a product of scientific development. A hero should emerge from the oven.

Vladimir Maslov in *Silver Heads*, 1998

The hero does not undergo trial by fire. The hero swims in the water. He swims in *The Wooden Room*, he swims in *Knights of Heaven*, and he swims in *Silver Heads*. Water is a crossing point, a transition from one world to another, a mirage of the world beyond the forest. The father-forester moves through the water to the world of displaced actions, the world of

the Z and the scientists. The woman scientist sends the second son of science (V. Deriagin) to the water. Then she engages in incestuous relations with phallic mother nature. She combines epistemophilia with dendrophilia. She links new myth with ancient myth.

The forest thickets and foliage are the dendrophilic scientists' totemic sanctuary. The dense, thick forest grass and the froggy swamp are the living fabric of ritual. In the forest a stiffened present awaits the boy: a friend, a dog that looks like a stuffed wolf totem. There is no escaping the series of initiations. The forest becomes a closed eco-necro-system.

Conclusion: *Silver Heads* is a totemic eco-necro-blockbuster.

3. How is it done?

Rhythm is variable in *Silver Heads*: slow, medium, fast... The slow submersion into nature, the dynamic scenes of the experiment, the fast antics of the Z.

In necrocinematic shorts the viewer wasted time in desperate merry-making. In the necrocinematic features he loses himself in a hypnotic demise. *Silver Heads* establishes control over time: the rate at which the events are depicted can be altered.

Conclusion: *Silver Heads* is a rhythmico-necro-blockbuster.

The sound of necrocinema resonates: the tapping of a woodpecker, the roar of a train, the scratching of a saw, the blow of a stick. The sound of the environment in *Silver Heads* is a chemical mixture. Music comes in (composed by V. Gaivoronskii). The sexuality of the audiosphere is maintained, the men use their saws, as always. The sound of the saw instills in man the multinomial of a sadomasochistic chamber in order to tear from him a roar of pain and pleasure.

Conclusion: *Silver Heads* is an audio-necro-blockbuster.

NOTES

1. "Blockbuster" here indicates a step not in the direction of a bloated budget, but in the direction of narrativity, dynamism, spectacle. A sidestep onto a parallel path, a step still within the limits of the necro-context.
2. From Iufit's autobiography: "Evgenii Iufit is a psychopath. He was born in 1961 during a winter hurricane. In 1984 he formed the Mzhalalafilm Studio. Under the guise of filmmaking activities he provoked mass fistfights and practiced sadomasochism. He was exiled beyond the 101st kilometer. He escaped. He built a torture chamber in his basement and locked himself in it."
3. From Maslov's autobiography: "Vladimir Maslov is a neurasthenic and a psychopath. He was born in 1941 during a retreat. In the late 1980s he became affiliated with the radical activities of Evgenii Iufit. He won renown as an actor for his incarnation of suicide by strangulation asphyxia."
4. Displaced actions deviate from the goal in relation to the impossibility of its achievement. The impossibility serves as a catalyst for more regressive behavior.
5. These individuals were present before: it was they who first exhibited mole behavior to the narrator-researcher in the initiation zone in *Daddy, Father Frost is Dead*.
6. In contrast to other necrofilms the anality in *Silver Heads* is related not only to a specific body part, but to the entire body: the body of the scientist perforated by stakes, or the body of the Z, punctured by the special detachment's knives, possess a latent poly-anality.
7. In *Papa, Father Frost is Dead*, the grandsons, covered in zombie makeup, were necro-paired with the granddads. *Silver Heads* begins with a meeting between a father and a son.

Translated by Seth Graham

The Autumn of Necrorealism

ANDREI DEMICHEV

I believe I'm not mistaken and will not offend the monsters of St. Petersburg Necrorealism (Evgenii Iufit and Vladimir Kus-tov, first and foremost) by saying that the warm, summer apogee of necro-activity (in the parameters of Necrorealism as an articulated and recognized movement in St. Petersburg during the last two decades of the twentieth century) is already behind us. But my intent is not to draw historical conclusions or dot any i's. As the century and the millennium wane, a season of abundant harvest approaches for the necro-operatives. (The sea after a storm is a clear and precise metaphor for the current state of Necro. The wind has died down, but waves, even big waves, continue to come ashore through inertia, rock the pier, and no, no, yes, to wash up a corpse, maybe a sailor or a fisherman who couldn't save himself during the storm). The necro-artists and their associates are reaping what they have sown. Recognition in Russia came on the heels of recognition in the West.

What exactly makes Necrorealism interesting? What should we value in it most of all?

For me, a thanatologist, the value of Necrorealist production is obvious. And it is located in the actualization and attempted visualization of death as a living state. "You only die twice" (Žižek). Thus arises the theme of two deaths: the symbolic (the loss of one of our lives, "settling accounts") and the real, and the interval between them: "interdeath."

The interdeath period (overtime) requires a secondary, retro-active symbolization, a "secreting," a covering of the void, but a covering that preserves the mystery of being while also elucidating and defining the "being-to-death," i.e., real death. A transparent, glaze-like covering, like "curtain-sails" (Derrida), maintains distance, but a distance of the visibility, the obviousness of the real. Of the affective real. The affect of death is not only traumatic, but by virtue of its traumatic nature, it is constructive, it fulfills an identificational function. In the case of interdeath life we can speak of a doubling of affect: an affect of "symbolic death," by which the subject is already captivated, affected

(infected?); and an affect of real death. The stereo-effect/stereo-affect of deaths in the interdeath life makes the period especially significant, for it provides the last contour, or the contour of the last symbolic order. It is as if stereo-affect inspires taking an optimal position, a position of equidistance, in order to receive maximum pleasure, a double pleasure, both from the distance in relation to the sources of affect and from experiencing their captivating activity, their "death magic." "Can you really feel pleasure at all without suffering?" asks Lev Karsavin in his "Poem of Death," and exclaims: "I love this dying world!"

Life and death manifest a balanced, consolidated nature during the "interdeath period," with its mystery and significance. Life, stuck in the locked, crystal-clear "room of death," is elevated to dying. Death, encircling life in a ring of suffering, becomes an almost erotic pleasure at the heart of deferment, of delay.

There is none of this in Necrorealism, of course. None at all. But the necro-works of Iufit, Kustov, Serp, et al., gave me a reason, threw me into the zone of strange states and bustling necro-characters, into the void of the unmotivated bravery, idiocy, gaiety, and solitude of male collective life, into the chessboard world of ornamental irreconcilability of black (the color of life) and white (the color of death), where white has the first move and wins. But it cannot win. "The point of absolute death" is unattainable. It is constantly deferred. It is in shortage. Necrorealism suggests living on when everything has already collapsed. "After death the real life begins, boys!" That's what should be valued in Necrorealism and its monsters/carriers. In this autumnal period.

Translated by Seth Graham

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