

# Necro-Utopia

## The Politics of Indistinction and the Aesthetics of the Non-Soviet

by Alexei Yurchak

Informal communities of Russian artists and intellectuals during the late Soviet years practiced a “politics of indistinction.” They claimed to be uninterested in anything political and differentiated themselves from ordinary “Soviet citizens,” whether supporters of or dissenters from the system. However, their apolitical lifestyles and pursuits contributed greatly to creating the conditions for making the collapse of the Soviet state imminent. Close examination of one such group, the Necro-realists, raises a set of questions that are central for an understanding of momentous and unexpected social transformations such as the “Soviet collapse”: Since members of these groups claimed that anything political was profoundly uninteresting to them and that neither support of nor opposition to the Soviet system was relevant, is it possible to think of them *politically* at all? Since the language of resistance and opposition does not capture their alternative subject positions, what political language is required to describe them? What were the implications of this peculiar “politics” for the Soviet state and its momentous collapse? Is this form of politics relevant today in other contexts?

While the collapse of the Soviet state was profoundly unimaginable for most Soviet people, it was retrospectively experienced and discussed as quite unsurprising. It became clear after the collapse, around 1990, that certain “alternative” selves, lifestyles, and communities that developed during the late Soviet period and differed from oppositional or dissident selves and lifestyles had contributed greatly to creating the conditions that made the collapse both unimaginable and immanent. These alternative selves and lifestyles were widespread among various groups in the Soviet Union of the 1970s and '80s and especially in the intellectual and artistic circles of Soviet cities. Many members of these groups, especially those of the younger generation, claimed to be uninterested in anything political and differentiated themselves from ordinary Soviet citizens, both supporters of and dissenters from the system. These groups were relatively unknown to the general public and isolated from each other, but after the collapse many of them quickly achieved fame and success for their artistic and literary experiments and were commonly seen in Russia as having contributed to the conditions that made the disintegration of socialism possible.

Exploring this transformation here, I shall attempt to clarify what kind of subjects the members of these artistic and intellectual groups were and suggest that it is possible to see

their activities and their claim of being uninterested in anything political as a form of politics, albeit one that refused to recognize itself in political terms. I will argue that the conception of political “resistance” (as a reaction to power that opposes it) is inadequate for the conceptualization of this alternative subversive politics and discuss its effects on the Soviet state and its implications for other contexts. I will start with a few brief ethnographic examples from the period and go on to describe a peculiar movement of provocateurs known as the Necrorealists that emerged in Leningrad in the early 1980s. The absurdist and provocative aesthetics of living and acting that they developed was a particularly explicit example of the alternative politics I wish to discuss. This movement, therefore, will serve as a lens through which to analyze this peculiar form of political relation to the state.

### Non-Soviet Soviets

In the early 1980s, before the reforms of perestroika, when the Soviet state was popularly experienced as eternal and immutable and its imminent collapse was still unimaginable (see Yurchak 2006), increasing numbers of young Soviet urbanites found it irrelevant whether ideological messages of the Party were true or false and instead occupied themselves with interests, values, and pursuits that were neither in support of nor in opposition to that ideology. They avoided talking about “politics,” considering it uninteresting and irrelevant. Inna, then a student at Leningrad University, described her and her friends’ life around 1980 as follows: “We never went to vote.

**Alexei Yurchak** is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley (Berkeley, CA 94720, U.S.A. [yurchak@berkeley.edu]). This paper was submitted 19 II 07 and accepted 12 VI 07.

We simply ignored elections and parades. . . . We did not speak with each other about work or studies or politics. Not at all . . . we did not watch television, listen to the radio, or read newspapers.” Inna’s friends considered themselves non-Soviet people, different not only from the system’s supporters but also from its dissenters: “None of my friends was any kind of anti-Soviet person. . . . We never spoke about the dissidents or opposition. Everyone understood everything, so why speak about that? It was uninteresting.”

This ethos was not invented in the 1970s. Sergei Dovlatov (1993), for example, contrasts the idealistic young Soviet intellectuals who debated ethical and political issues of Soviet socialism in the 1960s with a new type of person who appeared at that time, one who considered such questions irrelevant and instead focused on “deep truths”—problems and concerns that transcended any given social world and historic period. One example was the young Leningrad poet Joseph Brodsky, next to whom, writes Dovlatov (p. 23), his non-conformist friends seemed “like people of a different profession.” Brodsky knew or claimed to know so little about the goings-on in the Soviet political universe that he thought Dzerzhinskii<sup>1</sup> was still alive and that the Comintern was a musical group. He

could not identify members of the Politburo of the Central Committee. When the facade of the building where he lived was decorated with a six-meter portrait of Mzhavanadze (member of the Politburo), Brodsky asked: “Who is this? He looks like William Blake.” [He] created an unheard-of model of behavior [living] not in a proletarian state, but in a monastery of his own spirit. He did not struggle with the regime. He simply did not notice it.

While this ethos was recognized in the 1960s, it was only in the 1970s that it became widespread.

In the subculture of informal rock musicians in Leningrad in the early 1980s, it was also common to insist that “political” concerns were uninteresting and irrelevant. According to the music journalist Alik Kan, “the main texture of communication” in this subculture “was sarcasm and a lack of any political themes” (Yurchak 2006, 147). One adherent of it explained: “We’re interested in universal problems which don’t depend on this or that system, or on a particular time. In other words, they were here a thousand years ago, and they still exist—relations between people, the connection between man and nature” (Cushman 1995, 95).<sup>2</sup> These musicians saw the political regime of the state as not only irrelevant but also benign, provided that one avoided engaging with the political directly. As the sociologist Thomas Cushman reports,

“What is striking [in this informal music subculture] . . . is not just the lack of discussion about politics per se, but the complete dearth of any expression of fear . . . , either of the state in the abstract sense, or of the actual potential of it to intrude directly into their lives” (pp. 93–94). In other words, contrary to common assumptions, the experience of oppression, fear, and resistance were not the central constitutive elements of these people’s relations with the state.

Often these people were engaged in various aesthetic pursuits (usually just endlessly reading literature but sometimes also playing in a musical group or writing short stories) but always “unofficially”; at the same time, they were employed in undemanding and low-paying official jobs that they used to fulfill the state’s requirement of employment: they worked as librarians, doormen, boiler room technicians, street sweepers, unskilled nurses, and so on. In exchange for the lowest official wages, these jobs left plenty of free time for other pursuits and interests (one’s obligations were minimal because the work was undemanding, organized in long shifts with breaks in between, and one was spared the need to attend various political meetings and events).

In these milieus the experience of being different from “Soviet people” and leading a life that was not “Soviet” was so strong that sometimes this difference was described through biological metaphors. Inna, for example, says, “For us . . . all those pro-system and anti-system types—they were all just Soviet people. And we never thought of ourselves as Soviet people. We were *organically different*.”

Considering the constant refrain in these milieus that anything political was profoundly uninteresting, that neither support of nor opposition to the Soviet system and state was relevant, and that, moreover, they were not “Soviet persons,” what kind of subjects were they? Did they invent a paradoxical subject position for themselves of being Soviet citizens but not Soviet political subjects? Is it possible to think of such individuals politically at all?

I argue that it is possible and in fact crucial to think of these people in political terms and of their peculiar strategy of living vis-à-vis the state as a form of alternative politics. In a situation in which the sovereign state held exclusive control over what language and what actions were seen as legal and “political,” this alternative politics included, paradoxically, a refusal to see oneself in political terms. Instead of challenging the state by occupying an oppositional subject position, these people carved out a subject position that the state could not recognize in “political” terms and therefore could not easily define, understand, and control. This was a challenge to the state’s sovereign powers of defining and imposing political subjectivities. Therefore it should be recognized as subversive and political—acknowledging that it could exist only if it refused to identify itself as such. This peculiar form of subversive politics is different from what is usually described as the politics of opposition or resistance and challenges us to broaden our understandings of what politics is,

1. Felix Dzerzhinskii, one of early leading revolutionaries, died in 1926.

2. This subculture made a distinction between different types of truth similar to that described by Dovlatov: its representatives saw their pursuit of music “as expressions of *istina* [deep truth], as the embodiment of elemental truths about the human condition, and were utterly uninterested in the political stance that searching for *pravda* [clear truth] implied” (Cushman 1995, 107–8).

what forms it may take, what effects it may produce, and in what terms we must describe it.

To examine this political subjectivity and its subversive effects I now turn to a particularly intensive and provocative example developed in an “artistic” movement that emerged in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) around 1980. After describing it I will discuss why this particular relation to the state was political and subversive, why the usual concept of “resistance” is inadequate for describing this form of subversive politics and what other terms are required instead, what implications this politics had for the Soviet state, and whether it may be related to forms of politics in other historical contexts.

## The Necrorealists

In the late Soviet context some informal intellectual and artistic groups practiced an aesthetic strategy of suspending the political from most spheres of their existence, often so thoroughly that their lives literally changed on the existential level. This suspension of political subjectivity was often accompanied by a growth of interest in biological existence and “naked” life as a strategy for reinventing one’s subjectivity in terms that were not commensurable with the political language of the state. Indeed, many informal artistic groups during the late Soviet period experimented with aesthetics organized around metaphors and images of naked bodies, individuals devoid of speech, animalistic behavior, references to the living dead, etc., to explore alternative subjectivities that were radically different from a regular Soviet person, whether supporter of the system or dissenter.<sup>3</sup> One of these groups was known as the Necrorealists. I first encountered this group in the late 1980s, during a film screening it had organized, and have been collecting materials about it ever since. In the past several years, I have conducted about 50 interviews with group members, people who witnessed their activities in the 1980s, members of the audiences of their early films, their friends and acquaintances, and members of other groups of this type. I have also collected photo and video documents produced by the movement, its writings and publications, its films and drawings, materials about its artistic installations, and reports about it by art historians, cultural critics, and journalists.<sup>4</sup> I chose to focus on this group because the aesthetics of everyday living that its members practiced emerged spontaneously and was not originally thought of by them as an “artistic” project and because, though unknown to wide audiences at the time, it quickly achieved wide recognition

after the Soviet collapse as representative of a certain ethos of its generation, some of its members becoming successful artists.

In the late 1970s in Leningrad, a group of young friends started experimenting with “irrational” events and provocations, some of them carried out among themselves, in private apartments and during outings to the countryside, and others in the public space of the city in front of unsuspecting witnesses. The lifestyle, interests, and collective practices of this group were not originally an artistic or political project. Evgenii Yufit (born 1961), the group’s leader and now a well-known filmmaker, remembers: “In the beginning no one thought that our lifestyle might sooner or later turn into some professional artistic activity.” Vladimir Kustov, now a painter and installation artist, similarly claims: “We arrived at a certain nonstandard behavior and lifestyle quite spontaneously. . . . At that time no one of us thought that this way of being, if packaged in a particular way, could become artistic practice. . . . This was simply our way of living and expressing ourselves.” Later, in the late 1980s, the crisis of the Soviet state turned these pranksters into “artists” and their provocations, paintings, and later films into successful “artistic” activity. However, here I am interested in the roots of the experimental living and public provocations that they developed early on, before they thought of themselves as artists and before art critics created discourse about them.<sup>5</sup>

In the winter of 1978, a group of young men, all friends from a Leningrad neighborhood, were loitering around a local cinema. The manager spotted them and suggested that if they cleared the snow in front of the cinema he would let them see the film free. They readily agreed, were given wooden snow shovels, and set to work. The hard work soon made them hot, and one of them suggested that it was time to take off some clothes. He proceeded to take off his winter coat, sweater, and undershirt. Without any discussion the others followed suit, pushing farther the absurd aspect of the event: some undressed above the waist, some undressed below the waist, and one of them undressed completely, remaining only in his winter boots. The situation spontaneously turned into a provocation, and the original plan to see the movie was abandoned. The young men started aimlessly throwing snow in different directions with manic enthusiasm. The second floor of the cinema had large windows looking down onto the street, and the people waiting for the film to begin stared in amazement at the scene below, some smiling with embarrassment and some outraged. Someone called the police, and

3. For a discussion of death-related genres in late Soviet and post-Soviet literature and film, see Alaniz (2003).

4. Other groups of the 1980s and ’90s include the experimental theater *Derevo*, the art group *Mit’ki*, music groups *AVIA* and *Popular Mechanics*, the musician and philosopher-provocateur *Sergey Kuryokhin*, the performance artist *Oleg Kulik* (man-dog), *Timur Novikov* and his art movement *Neoacademism*, the art duo *Oleg and Viktor*, and the performance artist *Vladislav Mamysh* “*Monroe*.”

5. The Necrorealists were not unique in developing an aesthetics of public provocations first and conceiving of it as an “artistic” activity or “performance art” only much later. A similar trajectory was followed by the infamous U.S. duo *The Yes Men*, who explained in an interview: “For a long time we didn’t realize we were doing ‘theater’ or performance art—we didn’t know it at first, but after a while we figured it out. Now we’ve gotten some grants from the Creative Capital Foundation, the Herb Alpert Foundation” (Vale 2006, 38). This progression from the spontaneous aesthetics of everyday action to organized “art” is an important element of the politics that I am discussing.

everyone was yelling, remembers Yufit. Just before the situation turned dangerous, the young men dropped their wooden shovels, grabbed their clothes, and ran away in different directions (Evgenii Yufit, Vladimir Kustov, and Andrei Mertvyi, interviews; see also Mazin 1998).

The scandalous nudity, the absurd hyperactivity, and the improvisational character of the event point to a curious aesthetics of public spectacle that the group was developing. One had to be always ready to turn any mundane situation into an absurd event that resisted easy interpretation and simultaneously was provocative or outrageous. It was also important to avoid discussing and rationalizing what went on and why. This mix of spontaneous absurdity, provocative behavior, antirationalism, and active avoidance of analysis became a permanent presence in their lives.<sup>6</sup> They referred to it as “dim-witted merriment” (*tupoe vesel'e*) and “energetic idiocy” (*energichnaia tupost'*). In the 1980s, various versions of such behavior became widespread among young city dwellers and became known in slang as *klinika* (slang for “psychiatric clinic”).

Around 1982 one of the Necrorealists found in a second-hand bookshop a 1900 Russian edition of a book by the Austrian forensic physician Eduard von Hofmann entitled *Atlas of Legal Medicine* (figs. 1–3). They became mesmerized by the book's pictures of corpses and injured bodies, stories of violent deaths that occurred in and around Vienna at the turn of the century, and scientific explanations of the causes of death and especially the transformations that took place in the cadavers in the following days. Despite its unusual content, the book looked like an exquisite art album that evoked distant places and times; it had a beautiful leather binding, fine color drawings, and old print fonts, and its pages were yellowed with time.

Before they bought the book, the group's activities had

6. This aesthetics was an important difference between the various late-socialist artistic scenes of Eastern Europe and those of the Soviet Union. The unofficial artistic scene that emerged around the same time in East Berlin also developed aesthetic forms based on absurdity and outrageous spectacle, but it provided these absurdist aesthetic forms with elaborate commentaries about how and why they challenged the East German state (Boyer 2001). This discursive difference may be grounded in the different discursive conditions under which the two artistic scenes emerged. The Soviet political sphere was dominated by a binary political discourse that divided every statement into official-unofficial, supporters-dissidents, friends-enemies, and there was no political analysis other than those of the Party and the dissidents. In contrast, in East Berlin unofficial artists and intellectuals were engaged with a robust political and theoretical discourse of poststructuralism that transcended the binary divisions of the socialist political sphere. This discourse came in German translations of (mostly) French works published in West Germany and smuggled into East Berlin. It can be said that both the Soviet and the East German artists developed poststructuralist critiques of their political systems: they both exposed the hidden absurdities behind the system's “coherent” discourse by constructing a discursive space that transcended that discourse—that did not fit its coherent structure. However, the ways in which they constructed that space differed: in the Soviet case it was usually characterized by the breaking down of all language, while in the East German case (though the breaking down of language was also important) it was also characterized by the language of poststructuralist theory (see Boyer 2001).

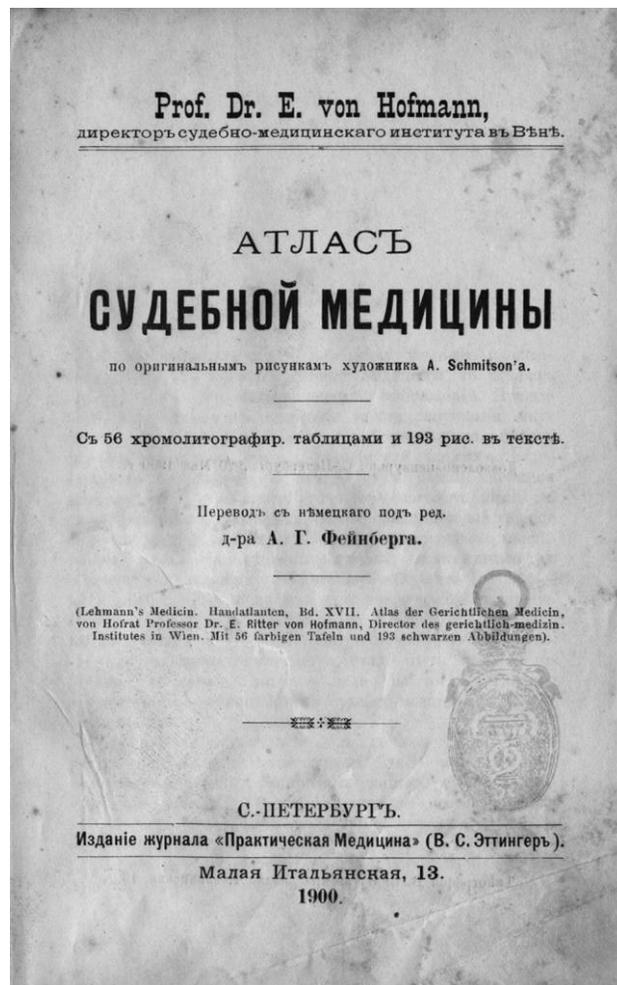


Figure 1. Title page of the Russian edition of von Hofmann's *Atlas of Legal Medicine*.

often focused on the body, involving strange clothes, nakedness, insane behavior, etc., but now, remembers Kustov, they “spontaneously stumbled on a corpse” and quickly developed an interest in violent death, injuries, and processes of decomposition. Corpses in the book were represented vertically to simplify the reading of the wounds by medical students.<sup>7</sup> This orientation had an additional effect: “The vertical rotation transformed the cadaver into a kind of a dead living being, neither dead nor alive. This in-betweenness [*promezhutochnoe sostoianie*] was very interesting. I called them *noncorpses* [*netrupy*].” This effect made it easier to link the images of the

7. The practice of positioning the image of a corpse vertically is by no means universal in the medical literature. However, it was also commonly used in the Soviet books on legal medicine. In Kustov's opinion, this positioning deemphasizes the idea of death, reanimating the corpse and allowing the viewer to repress the feeling of disgust and awe. In the Soviet case it also probably had an ideological component, enhancing the eradication of the theme of “death” from Soviet public discourse.

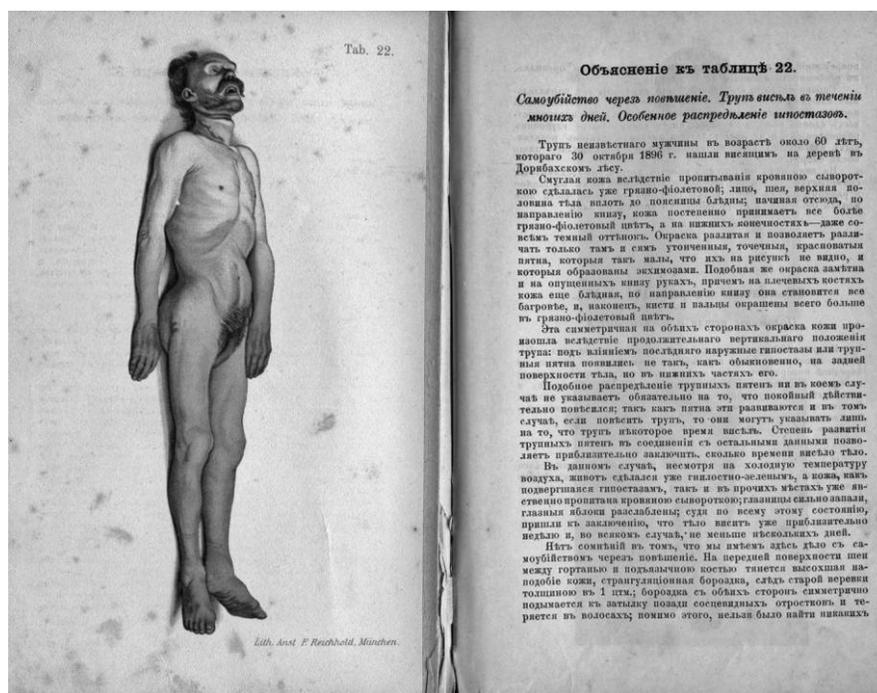


Figure 2. Plate 22 of von Hofmann's book: "Suicide by hanging. The corpse was hanging for many days. Unusual distribution of hypostases . . . unknown man of about 60, found on October 30, 1896, in Dornbach Forest."

cadavers into a narrative. Now, instead of practicing spontaneous provocations, says Kustov,

it was enough to simply enter a subway car full of people with that book. Three or four of us would sit together and a couple others would stand around. We would open von Hofmann's *Atlas* and start loudly and agitatedly discussing the pictures inside, linking them into a narrative: "Look! This guy goes round to see that woman, right? He comes and unexpectedly bumps into this man. And they start a fight." And so on. People in the car would get interested and peek over our shoulders to see the pictures. And would see these eerie images and get shocked and stumble back in awe, exclaiming, "Oh, God!" or calling us idiots and degenerates.

Subway trains were a perfect place for these actions, because they would affect "a lot of random people who had nowhere to go, at least until the next stop."

Members of the group found a few other books on forensic and legal medicine, including a translation of another von Hofmann manual (1912), a Soviet textbook entitled *Legal Medicine* (Smol'ianinov, Tatiev, and Chervakov 1961), and other editions for Soviet medical students, and carefully studied the photographs and drawings of cadavers and wounds and the descriptions of violent deaths and processes of decomposition. Reading these forensic materials pushed them toward more complex

experiments. In them spontaneity, a relative lack of a scripted storyline (sometimes no plan was preconceived at all, while sometimes some of its elements were preconceived in the most general terms), and a desire to "provoke" the general public remained central. However, many events now involved new obligatory elements such as a full-size mannequin of a man that the group stole from the Institute of Criminological Medicine, where it was used to study the effects of car crashes on the human body. The mannequin was made of fine leather and smooth plastic and looked uncannily human. The Necrorealists gave it the name Zurab, a Georgian name that sounded exotic in the Leningrad context,<sup>8</sup> and it became a frequent participant in various spontaneous and partially prearranged activities in the streets. One day, five of the men slowly carried Zurab in a large black sack through a small park in the city center. People gave them bewildered looks. When they stopped to rest and tossed the sack on the ground, says Evgenii Yufit (and see also Mazin 1998, 63),

We were suddenly surrounded by the police. They demanded in a rather harsh manner that we show them what's in the sack. We untied the sack and a person fell out. . . .

8. For example, in Russian "ethnic jokes" about Georgians, Zurab was often a homosexual.

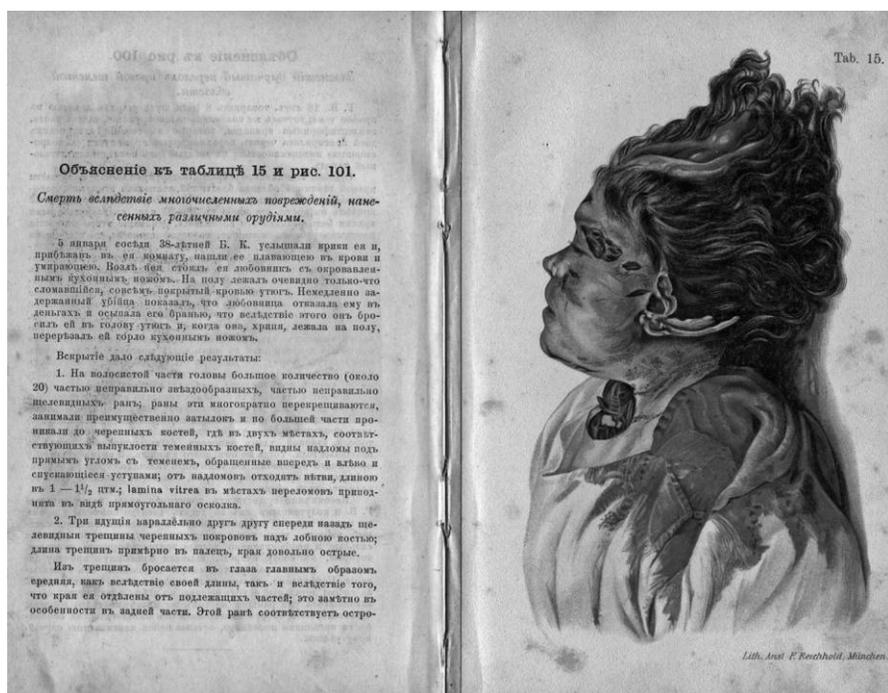


Figure 3. Von Hofmann's Plate 15: "Death was a result of various injuries inflicted with different instruments, 1898."

Zurab was bouncy and supple, but in the bag it was bent and folded. When it fell out it started waving its limbs, jumping, and dancing. The police reaction was complete stupefaction. At first they panicked and leaped back. But when they realized that it was a mannequin dressed in winter clothes they simply did not know how to react. . . . They turned it over several times, started touching it and walking around it in a kind of a shock, not knowing what to say. . . . I remember the sergeant's face: he was at a loss. What could he do next? Take us to the police station? But then what would he write in his report? That he arrested several people for carrying a dummy? . . . So eventually he just said: "Okay, get your stuff and get lost. But if you had a real corpse, we would've shown you!"

By the mid-1980s the group had grown larger and more porous. No longer simply a group of friends, it was now a gang or "communal body," with an open-ended and shifting membership that was "heterogeneous and poorly acquainted among itself: from blatant criminals to intellectuals and working artists" (Demichev 1993, 4–6, quoted in Alaniz and Graham 2001, 9). Once in the winter of 1984, during the evening rush hour, around 20 of them started an agitated fight on the fifth floor of a building under reconstruction in the city center. That floor was missing the front wall, and they were clearly visible to the pedestrians on the street. The fight was more insane than violent; it was accompanied by wild swinging of arms and wooden

sticks, agitated running and hopping, and loud screaming. At some point the mannequin Zurab, dressed in winter clothes and a fur hat, was thrown down from the fifth floor to the pavement underneath. The combatants ran out of the building and proceeded to hit the mannequin with sticks, shouting that they needed to finish him off. One member of the group remembers: "Pedestrians on the street thought that it was a real person. People ran over, screaming and yelling: 'You murderers! What are you doing?' . . . Everyone was running about, trying to get a glimpse of the human body lying there. The police showed up." Suddenly, the mannequin's head tore off, and the petrified pedestrians, seeing the spongy plastic innards where his neck was cut, realized that something was not quite as it seemed. While the crowd remained stupefied, the men grabbed the mannequin and ran away.

On another occasion, curious to find out how the engineers of trains would respond to "irrational events," members staged an "experiment" near the suburban railroad tracks. Two members of the group stood on one side of the tracks wearing navy uniforms with the pants pulled down to their ankles, with their heads swathed in bloody bandages and their faces made up to simulate deep wounds and signs of decomposition. Several others, also heavily bandaged and bloodied, hid in the bushes beside the tracks. When a train approached, the first pair started energetically simulating a homosexual act, while the others jumped out from the bushes simulating

a knife fight. The bizarre sight in the middle of the deserted countryside must have left the engineers bewildered and confused. “One endless freight train reacted with a long hoot that lasted several minutes, while the train was moving away” (Mazin 1998, 120). Suburban railway tracks were among their favorite sites for such provocations because here the participants were exposed to many unsuspecting witnesses in the trains but remained safe.

At that time, remembers Yufit, they often performed their semispontaneous provocations to “study the reactions of the general Soviet public” (*izuchali reaktsiiu naseleniia*). For many events it was important that someone on the street become suspicious and show this (occasionally by calling the police). Anything out of the ordinary caused suspicion: Are the characters involved in the strange activities plotting something? Are they trying to undermine the normal flow of life? Could they even be “spies” (*shpiony*)?

On one occasion, around 1984, a few members of the group improvised an absurd event in a railroad station in the city center. The event consisted of pushing each other in and out of a large dumpster with intense and gloomy determination. Yufit, who by that time had started learning how to use a movie camera, was quietly filming this behavior standing nearby, while random passers-by stared in amazement. Just as they were about to leave, he recalls,

a police car suddenly arrived and we were put inside. They confiscated our camera and brought us to an office of the Department of Internal Affairs, where a colonel spoke with us. They thought this was some serious matter, which was rather typical of the atmosphere of spy mania (*shpionomania*) then. He asked: “What was this all about? What are the goals of your actions? Why did you film them?” I said I did not know. I honestly did not know how to explain what the goals of our actions were. He became even more agitated and told us that our camera would be sent to a laboratory at the KGB and that we could go home for now but they had our names and addresses and would contact us. When I came back later to get the camera, they were completely befuddled: they had seen the developed film and could not figure out what this nonsense was all about. I said that it meant nothing; we were just practicing filming. They returned the camera and told me to get lost, and that was it.

Another situation took place a little earlier, around 1982, before they started filming. A few of them were passing the time in a courtyard with a little garden in the city center. Yufit climbed a tree, hung a rope from a thick branch, and started preparing to hang himself, while others assisted from below and offered advice. This event was only semispontaneous: under his clothes Yufit was wearing a system of suspenders prepared in advance on which he was supposed to hang, simulating death. The rope was connected to the suspenders, and Yufit hung for a while from the tree with a noose around his neck. After a few minutes,

some laborers from a nearby construction site came up to us and started asking who we were and what we were up to. We told them not to worry, we were just rehearsing a film scene. But they got very anxious: “No, no. Something is wrong here. You are probably spies. We are going to call the police.” That was a fairly typical reaction to inadequate situations: we were suspected of being spies.

## Necro-aesthetics

In the mid-1980s the aesthetic side of the experiment expanded further. Members of the group started drawing pictures, making sculptures, taking photographs, and writing short stories. Noncorpses remained their main characters. Mertvyi wrote stories and made a few short films; Kustov turned to painting; Yufit took up photography and later became the main Necrorealist filmmaker. In figure 4 Yufit transforms the artist Oleg Kotel'nikov into a noncorpse by using the method of inversion described earlier by Kustov (he was made up and was hanging upside down for a few minutes before the picture of his face was taken; then the picture was rotated to become a portrait in the noncorpse style). Neither photos such as this nor Yufit's early short films, produced in the mid-1980s, were conceived of as “artistic” endeavors.<sup>9</sup> The

9. He pursued this occupation and by the 1990s, after the reforms of perestroika, had become a famous film director.

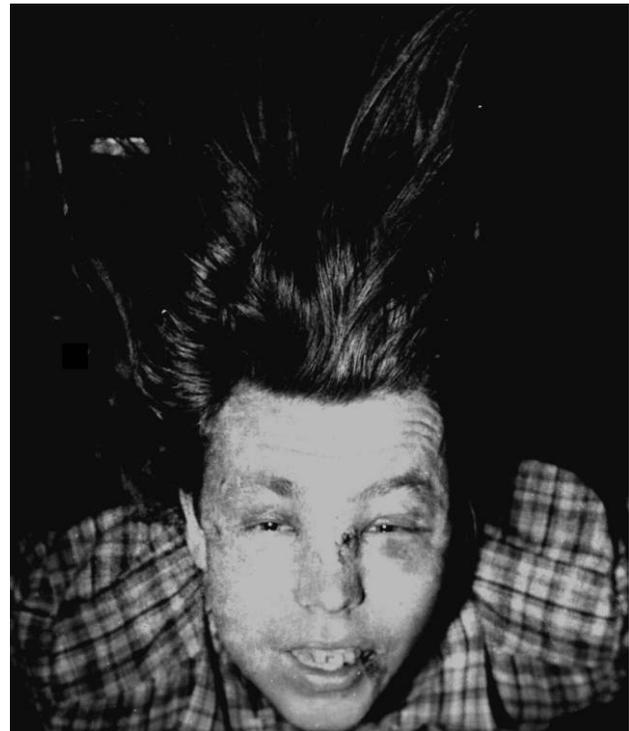


Figure 4. Portrait of Oleg Kotel'nikov (photo Evgenii Yufit, 1983).



Figure 5. Painting by Leonid Trupyr (Leonid “Cadaver”), *A Sultry Night in the Reeds*, used in the logo of the Necrorealist “studio” Mzhalalafilm. In it two drowned sailors with slashed throats are shown walking through the reeds by the lakeshore.

first films, just a few minutes long, had no script and little story line; they consisted of lightly edited footage of the group’s crazy collective escapades (fig. 5). Filming was not a goal in itself but an excuse to gather a large number of friends for spontaneous collective actions and later for watching this footage together in someone’s apartment.

The first three-minute film, *Werewolf Orderlies* (*Sanitary-oborotni*), was made in the winter of 1984 outside Leningrad. A young man steps down from a local train and briskly walks through the snow to a nearby forest. He is dressed in a navy uniform and carries a saw. A group of four men in white medical uniforms spot him and start pursuing him, running as a pack, hiding behind bushes, and making eccentric movements (fig. 6). The young man stops by a tree, thinks for a second, then climbs it and seems to be preparing to commit suicide by jumping from it. The crazy male nurses surround the tree, catch him as he jumps, wrap him in a bag, toss him on the snowy ground, and start beating him with sticks. This film emerged out of the footage of a slightly directed frolic such as those the group regularly organized. Yufit (quoted in Musina 2003) recalls:

The story was unraveling on its own. There was neither any plot, nor any general idea. We took a suburban train to the countryside. Someone in our company had a sailor’s shirt, someone had a sailor’s cap, someone had a saw. So I suggested that one person should put on these clothes, take a saw and walk from the train like this. The man walked out of the train and I filmed that. He continued walking and I filmed further. And so, step by step, the storyline was developing itself. Then it turned out that someone had brought white robes—everyone brought something for the filming. So, I suggested [to several participants]: “put them on and run after him.” An idea of the

pursuit and an absurd kind of situation emerged: a sailor walks into the forest and male nurses run after him. So like this, quite sporadically my first film *Werewolf Orderlies* appeared.

The early films and photographs, shown in private apartments to members of the group and their friends, began attracting more and more people, and by the late 1980s rumors about these showings were circulating around the city. The Necrorealists developed an informal cult status. If anyone asked about the meanings of these works, members invariably responded that they were “medical reference materials” (*spravochnyi material po meditsine*) (Mazin 1998).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, most of the activities and images in the films, photographs, and paintings were inspired by real stories about and images of violent injuries and deaths described in medical books. For example, one character in Yufit’s short film *Spring* (*Vesna*, 1987, 10 min.) attempts multiple suicides by one bizarre method after another, among them roller skating full speed into a tree trunk (fig. 7). His suicide attempts repeatedly fail. This scene was inspired by von Hofmann’s chapter “Suicides,” which described pathological suicide cases.<sup>11</sup>

Filming also acquired a protective function: as we have seen, if the police demanded an explanation of their crazy group

10. In the 1990s, when the Necrorealists achieved fame, their pictures, photos, and installations were regularly exhibited in the Museum of Forensic Medicine (part of the St. Petersburg Medical School), blurring the boundary between “art” and “medical reference materials.”

11. Von Hoffman described the case of an officer of the English Expeditionary Corps in Austria who invented elaborate methods that would kill him by delivering multiple complex injuries. In one method, he put a heavy metal cask filled with inflammable liquid in the second-floor window of his house. He tied a rope with a noose at the end of it to the cask’s handle, put the noose around his neck, shot at the cask with a revolver, and then jumped out of the window. The liquid ignited and the burning cask followed him to the ground. He received multiple injuries simultaneously—asphyxiation, severe burns, a heavy blow, and fractured bones—but still survived the incident (Mazin 1998, 130).



Figure 6. A still from *Werewolf Orderlies*.



Figure 7. A still from *Spring*.

activities, they could say that they were practicing amateur filming. At that time, many Soviet institutes and factories had amateur film clubs (*kluby kinoliubitelei*)—state-sponsored organizations that allowed one to film relatively free from state control while remaining under its general supervision. This situation reflected a general paradox of the Soviet cultural policy: many amateur activities that the state sponsored and even promoted as a means for developing socialist culture undermined the policy’s socialist meaning (see Yurchak 2006, chaps. 5 and 6). It was partly the resources provided by the state and partly the ability to justify one’s actions to the police that drove Yufit in the mid-1980s to join an amateur film club at a Leningrad factory.

The political relaxation during the perestroika years contributed to the Necrorealists’ popularity, and in 1989 a new TV program on cultural events called *The Fifth Wheel* broadcast a few episodes from their films. A panel of professional psychologists whom the program invited to discuss the footage dismissed it as the work of sick psychopaths, necrophiliacs, and sadomasochists; a few TV viewers called the station to protest the disgusting horror it broadcast (Andrei Mertvyi, interview; see also Miller-Pogacar 1993, 14). Not surprisingly, the Necrorealists’ fame skyrocketed (Mazin 1998). They were publicly seen for the first time as unusual “artists.”

Under these new conditions, the Necrorealists and their observers gradually started thinking of what they did as art-work. In 1989, Evgenii Yufit was invited to learn and experiment with film technique in the workshop of the film director Alexander Sokurov at the Lenfilm studios in Leningrad.<sup>12</sup> Andrei Mertvyi (Andrei “Dead”) made a few acclaimed short films before switching to writing and drawing on Necrorealist topics (see, e.g., fig. 8); Vladimir Kustov pursued a successful

12. There he made his first 35-mm full-length film, *Knights of Heaven* (*Rysari podnebes’ia*, 22 min.), which had a relatively well-defined narrative. The plot contains a secret experiment, an idyllic and brutal male brotherhood, irrationality, and absurd heroic behavior.

career as a painter and installation artist (see fig. 9); Oleg Kotel’nikov became a successful artist and a co-founder (with Timur Novikov) of the New Artists movement.<sup>13</sup>

The more the Necrorealists turned to artistic projects the more their texts, installations, and films became populated by human, semihuman, and hybrid life-forms, all related to each other as a kind of “transgenic” (Haraway 1997) kinship community that dwells in the zone between life and death, human and animal, sane and insane, in which subjects are no longer regular human beings (see also Hayden 1995 and Franklin 2001 on the constructedness of kinship in the new biopolitical contexts). In contrast to earlier films, the necro-films made in the post-Soviet period have clearer and more important story lines and narratives. The characters in the earlier films performed suicidal and murderous actions and practiced multiple methods of self-abuse making themselves different from “regular” people. The protagonists of the post-Soviet necro-films staged more elaborate “scientific” experiments trying to become not quite human. In these films unconventional scientists come up with alternative evolutionary theories that unite humans with animals and organic with inorganic matter while heroic geneticists and biologists apply techniques of hybridization and mutation to themselves in an attempt to cross the human-nonhuman divide.

In three recent examples of Yufit’s post-Soviet film, the story line is explicitly articulated. In the 1998 film *Silver Heads*

13. Yufit’s photographs and films have been shown at many international festivals and museums (e.g., St. Petersburg’s Russian Museum, Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum, Dusseldorf’s Kunsthalle, New York’s Museum of Modern Art). The 1991 film *Papa, Father Frost Is Dead* (*Papa, umer ded moroz*, 81 min.) has been the most recognized of Yufit’s films, having received the Grand Prix at the International Film Festival in Rimini; his 2002 film *Killed by Lightning* was shown at Manifesta-5 in San Sebastian, Spain, and his 2005 film *Bipedalism* was shown at the 34th Film Festival in Rotterdam. Vladimir Kustov’s painting and installations were shown at the same range of international galleries and museums.



Figure 8. *Old Buddy (Dedina)*, by Andrei Mertvyi (oil on canvas, 1990): a drowned man, depicting the real transformation that happens after drowning.



Figure 9. *Electricians*, by Vladimiri Kustov (oil on canvas, 1990): the death of masturbating men in a sauna from an electric shock caused by lightning.

(*Serebriannye Golovy*, 82 min.), three scientists attempt to hybridize themselves with a tree, but their experiment fails because they become infected by Z-individuals—seminaked byproducts of the previous, failed experiment (so hybridization succeeds but takes an unpredictable turn). In *Killed by Lightning* (*Ubitye molniei*, 2002, 62 min.), a young female biologist argues that evolution can be “both wildly discontinuous and reversible. Sudden leaps between the inorganic and the organic (for example, from stone to man) or from the more advanced to the primitive (from man to ape) are possible . . . within the lifetimes of individuals” (Campbell 2005) (fig. 10). One of these sudden evolutionary leaps happened to her father, the captain of a military submarine, and his crew, and this explains their mysterious disappearance. In *Bipedalism* (*Priamokhozhdenie*, 2005, 90 min.) it emerges that before an imaginary Soviet eugenics program failed in the 1950s, it produced an unplanned result in the form of half-human mutants that to this day wander the forests and damage railroad tracks (fig. 11) (see Campbell 2005, 2006, for discussion).

## Postnatural Life

In retrospect, in 2004, Yufit suggested to me that what the Necrorealists intuitively attempted to create in the 1980s was “a situation that broke the frame of familiar perception [*slomlal ramki znakomogo vospriyatiia*], fell outside the boundaries of social stereotypes [*nakhodilsya za gran'iu sotsial'nykh stereotipov*], and hit a kind of logical dead end [*upersia v logicheskii tupik*].” It is important that such comments and elaborations were not a part of Necrorealist aesthetics at the time. They refer not only to the reaction of the audience but also to the perception of the Necrorealists themselves. Although, as we have seen, Necrorealist actions were often performed in public with a desire to provoke various unsuspecting wit-

nesses (the public, passengers, engineers, policemen), this was not their only or even their main function. In fact, it was equally important to perform various strange actions where no one else, or at least no one outside the group, could see them—for example, in private apartments or in the forest. The actions were meant not only for outsiders but also for members themselves. Moreover, they were not just isolated staged performances different from the real lives the Necrorealists led elsewhere; on the contrary, they were part and parcel of everyday Necrorealist life. As Vladimir Kustov put it, all these crazy actions and provocations “were not separate from how we were living in general; our whole life was infused with this attitude.” This is why the term “provocation” does not quite capture the full meaning of these actions. They were also experiments performed most of all on oneself as part of continuous experimental living.

An example of this experimental ethos was the work of Andrei Mertyvi, who in the mid-1980s often spent whole nights alone, deep in the forest, sleeping on the ground: “I was trying to get coarse [*zamateret'*]<sup>14</sup> and gain some animalistic experience.” A more striking example comes from the Necrorealist Anatolii Mordiuikov, known in the group as Svirepyi (Fierce) for the particularly outrageous experiments that he liked to carry out. For example, he often ran into traffic, occasionally jumping out in front of a speeding car. “He did not want to get hurt,” explains Mertyvi. “He just wanted to see what the drivers’ reactions would be. He did this often, for many years, and sometimes did get wounded. But when he recovered he would start again.” One day in the early 1990s, Svirepyi was hit by a car and died.

Some of these activities and provocations are reminiscent of experimental performance art and cinema in the West (e.g., The work of Stelarc [Smith 2005]). For example, Svirepyi’s actions have a parallel in David Cronenberg’s 1996 movie *Crash* about people who reenact famous car crashes and create new ones, incorporating carnage and wounds into their intimate relations.<sup>15</sup> However, unlike these forms of art, the Necrorealists’ actions were not performed on a stage but integrated into their lives, often with very real implications (at least, during the early Necrorealist period, in the 1980s; in the post-Soviet 1990s the new Necrorealist films came much

14. Andrei used a favorite Necrorealist verb, *zamateret'* (to become *materyi*), where *materyi* means a combination of “coarse,” “manly,” “bearish,” “hardened,” “old,” “seasoned,” etc.

15. Through these actions they create a community that is profoundly different from that of “regular” people. As Cronenberg (2005) explains, *Crash* “is a metaphor for those people who undergo life-shattering experiences, whether it’s being comrades in arms in a war, or whether it’s people who have to fight off the same disease as you have. Finding people who are almost a subculture, who are the only ones who can understand what you have gone through, and finding strange ways to relieve that experience and so come to understand it.” This explanation is relevant to the Necrorealists but only partially. Rather than reliving/repeating a certain common traumatic experience in order to come to terms with it, the Necrorealists’ goal was to *invent* a completely new experience—something that would make them profoundly (and “organically”) different from ordinary people (or even from “people” of any kind).



Figure 10. A still from *Killed by Lightning*.

closer to staged art such as Cronenberg's films). It would therefore be inappropriate to describe such actions, experiments, and interests as merely "performance art." This point was made to me by Vladimiar Shinkarev, a member of another group, the Mit'ki, that led a similar existence in the early 1980s (they did not know of the Necrorealists at the time). Describing their peculiar aestheticized way of living, Shinkarev said:

The word performance (*igra*) does not adequately capture our life. It was much more serious than performance. We

were *living* (*prozhivali*) a serious model, living it to a maximum degree. . . . This living became our life, and that behavior became organically ours (*organichno svoim*). Our way of spending time, reacting to others, interacting with each other, using various expressions and exclamations, practicing certain eating habits—all this was an organic part of our existence. They were ours not only in public but also in our personal, intimate daily life.

The difference between staging occasional performances and always living in a certain way is the difference between acting



Figure 11. A still from *Bipedalism*.

like someone else and *becoming* someone else. Baudrillard (1994) describes this difference by opposing faking to simulation: “Whoever fakes an illness can simply be in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces *in himself* some of the symptoms” (p. 3, emphasis added).<sup>16</sup> By living this model one was changing one’s self, becoming someone else, a representative of a sociality and a form of life that were different from ordinary people—or, in Yufit’s preferred and much repeated phrase of that period, “life uncontaminated by human consciousness” (*zhizn’ neoporochnuiu chelovecheskim soznaniem*). Necrorealist provocations, artwork, films, and behavior were intuitive attempts to explore these alternatives formed within the realm of bare life.

Since the *politics of indistinction* is based on suspending state-defined political identity and instead emphasizing bare life, one of its key features is the lack of a language in which to articulate one’s goals and actions and, moreover, a problematic relationship with language in general. Indeed, the Necrorealists cultivated a certain negative linguistic skill, learning to speak in a manner that was inarticulate, with long pauses, an impoverished vocabulary, and an emphasis on grunts, moans, and laughter. Even when making more elaborate statements, they often avoided articulating an argument that would seem coherent and self-reflexive, especially in response to questions about the meaning of their actions. Usually they could not explain what effects they were trying to achieve and why. They also avoided discussing and analyzing their actions in public and among themselves. This was especially characteristic of the Necrorealists in the early period, although to some extent it remains true even today. The disintegration of articulate language was a general strategy of many art groups of the period.<sup>17</sup>

Later, around 1990, when the Soviet state was collapsing and the Necrorealists acquired sudden fame, their activities were analyzed by art critics, journalists, and the public. This new public discourse attempted to elicit a coherent discussion from the Necrorealists and to fit their practice into the familiar frameworks of artistic genres investigating death. However, members of the group resisted these attempts at reduction. Although their responses remained, as always, elusive and absurd, they suggested that the main interest of the group was not death but alternative forms of life that did not fit

normative definitions. When a Western scholar asked Evgenii Yufit in the early 1990s whether Soviet audiences had been offended by the focus on dead people in his films, he responded with ironically naïve surprise (quoted in Miller-Pogacar 1993, 15):

Yufit: What dead people?

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

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

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

Yufit: But that doesn’t kill him. Why should it kill him? It only cripples him. He can still go to therapy.

The Necrorealists also resisted a new discourse that attempted to reduce their work to familiar artistic genres of political opposition. On one occasion a journalist asked Yufit what relationship his films had with politics. In his answer Yufit refused the implicit expectation that he would talk about politics as opposition; instead he insisted that the only interest he had in that kind of “politics” concerned politicians, who, like all humans, interested him only when they were not quite alive but in a state of being transformed into nonpersons (Mazin 1998, 42):

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

By the end of perestroika, in 1989, when Necrorealist practice was increasingly being discussed in publications and journalistic writings, Vladimir Kustov wrote a treatise (which exists only in manuscript) entitled “Necromethod: The Basics of Necrostatics and Necrodynamics.” Erasing the boundary between performance and reality, it serves simultaneously as a reflection on the meaning of Necrorealist practice (the first explicit example of such reflection by a Necrorealist himself) and as itself part of that practice. The treatise starts by theorizing a distinctive period in which the human subject is neither alive nor dead but undergoing a transformation between the two. On a diagram provided in the text the zone in which this process takes place is marked by a black square. The text explains that both the “life” and the “death” of a

16. On the erasure of a boundary between mask and reality in an aestheticized practice of living in the Soviet context, see Yurchak (2006, 1999). See also Andrew Lakoff’s (2005) discussion of a fin-de-siècle Buenos Aires movement of “oversimulation” of madness as a combination of true madness and imposture of madness and Žižek’s (1993) discussion of “overidentification” with ideology as an artistic practice of Laibach and NSK in Tito’s Yugoslavia.

17. This approach was perfected by another famous provocateur and practitioner of the politics of indistinction at that period, Sergei Kuryokhin, who turned his discourse into highly articulated and intellectual-sounding nonsense. Another example of this genre is poet Prigov. Among earlier Soviet examples of this approach are the literary works of Daniil Khariams.

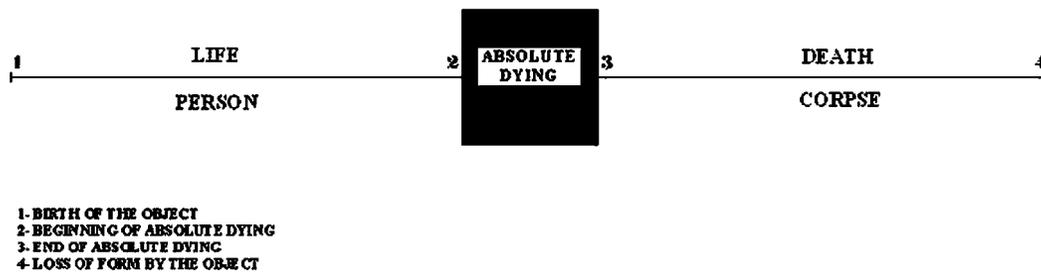


Figure 12. Kustov's "Necromethod."

subject are processes of limited length. Life starts at birth and ends when "absolute dying" begins; during life the subject is a "person." Death starts when "absolute dying" ends and goes until the subject loses any "recoverable form"; during this period the subject is a "corpse." In the intervening zone that Kustov calls "absolute dying," the subject is neither a person nor a corpse but is in a transitory stage in between (fig. 12).

This zone and the peculiar personhood associated with it were the true objects of the Necrorealist explorations. Therefore, Necrorealism, in contrast to what the term may misleadingly suggest, is interested not in death but in alternative forms of vitality—in nonpersons who inhabit the blurry zone between life and death.<sup>18</sup> These explorations of alternative subjectivity are related to the philosophical tradition of vitalism,<sup>19</sup> whose focus on "life itself" undermines such established dualisms as nature/culture, mind/body, live/nonlive, human/animal (Brown 2006, 331). They are also related to the long history of artistic and philosophical explorations of such figures as the undead, zombies, vampires, aliens, and cyborgs. As did other modern manifestations of these traditions, the Necrorealists drew on a fundamental indistinction in conceptualizations of life as consisting of two forms—"human" and "nonhuman" or "organic" and "animal." These two forms of life do not overlap precisely: "organic life begins in the fetus before animal life does, and in aging and in the final death throes it survives the death" of

animal life (Agamben 2004, 14–15). In the blurry zone between life and death the human being is alive but not necessarily a person. This ambiguity of human vitality is reflected today, in the age of biotechnology and organ transplantation, in medical discourse's reference to "clinical death" as "post-natural life" (Waldby 1997, 8).<sup>20</sup> Whether a human is a person in this zone (e.g., whether a fetus or a deeply comatose patient is a person) and consequently how this zone is managed legally and medically are questions that are today vigorously contested on ethical, ideological, theological, political, and other grounds, challenging the sovereign state's biopolitics. Even the central criterion for defining the end of human life in clinical practice today—brain death—is increasingly understood today not as a precise moment but as a blurry zone. As a result, for example, in North American clinical practice the human brain-dead body tends to be treated as alive but no longer a person, while in Japan such a body is treated as alive and still a person (Lock 2004, 141–42, 150).<sup>21</sup>

Having intuitively discovered this blurry zone at the boundary of state power, the Necrorealists celebrated and explored it in their style of living, provocations, stories, pictures, and films. During their outings in the early 1980s they liked to shout a song written by Yufit with the uplifting lyrics "Our corpses are devoured by enormous fattened lice. After death our life has flowered and become much cooler, guys!"<sup>22</sup> When Mertvyi spent nights all alone in the forest, he was seeking to experience a state of being in this blurry zone, as if becoming for a night neither a man nor an animal but both,

18. Therefore I cannot accept the argument that for the Necrorealists "death" is the main object and organizing metaphor of all visual representation (see Alaniz and Graham 2001, 7, and also Miller-Pogacar 1993). Life and death are equally uninteresting for the Necrorealists; they are important to them only as two (among many) external referents vis-à-vis which they construct their real object and metaphor of visual representation—an alternative vitality that dwells in the blurry zone of in-betweenness (between life and death, between human and animal, between sane and insane, etc.) (see also Demichev 2001).

19. Vitalism holds that the processes of life cannot be explained simply by the laws of physics and chemistry because they also include very different vital principles (variously referred to as "vital energy," "vital forces," "the soul," etc). For a genealogy of vitalism see Lash (2006). On contemporary versions of neo-vitalism in religious and ecological movements in the United States, see Faubion (2004), and in academic theories of ethnic history in post-Soviet Russia, see Oushakine (2005).

20. This conceptualization has a long history: in *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault (1973, 196) argued that starting with the late eighteenth century the concept of "death" in Western medical discourse became multiple, dispersed in time, and seen as a process "embodied in the living bodies of individuals" like disease.

21. This indistinction is exacerbated by the fact that a brain-dead body, unlike a cadaver, is not passive but active: it remains warm and in good color for a long time; its breathing, metabolism, and excretion continue; its nails and hair grow; and an infant can still be delivered from it (Lock 2004, 39).

22. In the Russian original the song, called *Zhirovosk (Fatwax)*, goes like this: "Nashi trupy pozhiraiut razzhirevshie zhuki/Posle smerti nastupaet zhizn' chto nado, muzhiki!"

like a folkloric werewolf, “a man who is transformed into a wolf and a wolf who is transformed into a man” (Agamben 1998; see also Agamben 2004, 106). This figure was also invoked in the title of Yufit’s early movie *Werewolf Orderlies*.

## Suspending the Political

Returning to our original questions, we may ask again: Was the peculiar aesthetics of everyday living, experiments, and provocations developed by the Necrorealists and similar movements in the late Soviet context a form of politics? If so, what political effects did it have? And may comparable forms of politics be found in other socio-historical contexts?

A useful starting point for this theoretical discussion is the work of Giorgio Agamben on biopolitics in the contemporary world and the recent productive critique of Agamben’s work by other scholars. Drawing on a number of political theorists, Agamben (1998, 2005) points out that to be recognized by the modern state as a citizen with rights one has to be seen as having both political life and bare life—the former referring to the legal status of a human being within a polity, the latter referring to human biological existence as such. Having political life suspended reduces the person, from the perspective of the state, to the status of bare life. Such persons inhabit the state’s zone of indistinction, a political vacuum in which the state no longer distinguishes them through its politico-juridical topology as full political subjects—that is, no longer sees them as either good citizens or bad citizens, either legal or illegal, either supporters or dissidents. In extreme cases, the location of these people in the zone of indistinction reduces them to the status of less than human, making them altogether disposable (which may contribute to explosions of genocide, mass extermination in death camps, and euthanasia of deeply comatose patients).

The exceptional subject position of such individuals bears some similarity to that of the people discussed in this paper. Indeed, the relation to the Soviet state of such groups as the Necrorealists (as well as various other groups and subcultures of that period, including Inna and her friends and the rock musicians) also involved a considerable suspension of political subjectivity and emphasis on depoliticized, “naked” life. They avoided political news, chose employment in low-paying jobs that provided the bare necessities for living, with maximum free time and minimum political engagement with the state, and even claimed that they were not Soviet people or that they differed from ordinary people organically. Inna and her friends tried to lead lives untouched by contemporary political subjectivities—lives filled with interests and concerns from other historical periods and places. The Necrorealists took this process farther, erasing their political subjectivity to such a degree that their daily existence became reduced, metaphorically and literally, to the status of something nonhuman, nonlinguistic, and “uncontaminated by human consciousness”—to the status of bare life.

This suspension of the political and the emphasis on bare

life makes them reminiscent of Agamben’s subjects (his *Homo sacer*), but unlike the latter these Soviet people were not reduced to the bare status by the state but sought it *themselves*. This was their strategy of becoming a kind of subject who could use many of the resources of that state (social welfare, subsidized housing, employment, education, etc.) and yet largely avoid the political subjectivity of a citizen.

Turning oneself into a subject whose political life was suspended made much of what these people did and how they lived partially illegible to representatives of the state, the police, and ordinary Soviet citizens. As a result, upon encountering such people and their activities the state was often uncertain what to make of them and how to treat them. In extreme cases the state looked for legal reasons to persecute them as “loafers,” hide them in psychiatric wards, or even expel them from the Soviet polity altogether (as happened, for example, to Brodsky). However, in most cases the state remained uncertain of their status and simply ignored them.<sup>23</sup> Avoiding the political and ethical concerns that preoccupied supporters and critics of the socialist state, these groups pursued forms of life that could not be easily interpreted in that system’s political language. This illegibility to the state came at a cost: it prevented these people from pursuing many state-recognized careers, living in relative financial comfort, having the privileges granted by the state to various groups, etc. At the same time, it was liberating, allowing them to evade the symbolic order of the state “from within” and thus to undermine its ability to control and interpret their lives rather than having to resist or oppose the state on its own political terms.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore this strategy functioned as a form of politics, albeit one that, paradoxically, was based on suspending the political (as defined by the state) and locating oneself in the state’s zone of indistinction. We may call this politics the *politics of indistinction* to contrast it with the better-known

23. I use the term “bare life” differently from Agamben. In the USSR in the 1980s, there were subjects who were much closer analogies to what Agamben describes as bare life—camp prisoners, psychiatric clinic inmates, people living in forced internal exile. It is productive, however, to apply the term “bare life” also to such groups as the Necrorealists, for whom the suspension of political life and the focus on naked existence was a particular strategy of living within that state. Although, unlike the state’s inmates, in the eyes of the state the Necrorealists retained their citizens’ rights, their citizenship was devoid of the necessary “political” component.

24. Russian writer Andrei Bitov (1997) argues that such groups in the 1970s and ’80s invented an “organic” version of freedom “that had nothing to do with accepting or not accepting a given political order.” This “organic” freedom cannot be understood in terms of a binary opposition of freedom and unfreedom, nor can it be reduced to the survival instinct or fear of the KGB; it can rather be compared with the freedom that is achieved, according to the anthropologist Talal Asad (2003, 85), by means of martyrdom in a religious context (i.e., also by emphasizing *bare life*): the martyrs of early Christianity, instead of “shunning physical suffering,” in fact “actively sought to live it.” Such a relation to the world may be interpreted in a religious context not as an example of defeat but as symbolic of “victory over society’s power” (or over the state’s political sphere) and therefore as a sign of freedom.

politics of opposition and resistance.<sup>25</sup> Although the relationship to power based on the politics of indistinction is not one of resistance (at least as it is usually understood, as opposition to power), it does not promote stasis either. In fact, this relationship to state power in the late Soviet context challenged that power in unexpected ways and ultimately contributed to undermining it.

As this discussion suggests, although my understanding of the politics of indistinction draws on Agamben, it departs from his view of biopolitics. Agamben's critics have pointed out that it is wrong to reduce, as he does (contrary to Foucault 1980), the dominant form of biopolitics in the contemporary world to the power of the sovereign state to take life or define what kind of life is unworthy of living (Rancière 2004; Rabinow and Rose 2006, 202). This reduction may characterize the Nazi state and the Stalinist state but only to an extent; it describes even less accurately the biopolitics of contemporary liberal democracies and of the Soviet Union during the post-Stalinist period of late socialism (see Yurchak 2006).

This reductionist view of contemporary biopolitics in Agamben's work, according to Rancière (2004), comes from the narrow understanding of "political life" that he inherited from the work of Hannah Arendt (1951). Arendt started her analysis of politics with the premise that private life is excluded from the sphere of the political by definition, thus "depopulat[ing] the political stage by sweeping aside the always ambiguous actors" that inhabit it (Rancière 2004, 301–2). In her formulation politics vanishes "in the sheer relation of state power and individual life" and becomes "equated with a power that is increasingly taken as an overwhelming historico-ontological destiny from which only a God is likely to save us" (p. 302). However, contrary to Arendt's premise, politics does not begin after the boundary between political life and bare life is drawn; rather, drawing this boundary constitutes the object of politics par excellence.

Similarly, contemporary biopolitics is not exclusively an affair run by the sovereign state as Agamben suggests; it can be practiced by different actors and in multiple directions and sites, including some that the state never anticipated. It includes an alternative biopolitics that inhabits the state's zone of indistinction (a kind of biopolitics of bare life itself), challenging the boundary between political life and bare life that the state has imposed. Therefore, instead of seeing "bare life" as a passive product of sovereign state power, as does Agamben,<sup>26</sup> we may see it as being capable of escaping sovereign

25. In the Soviet case the politics of opposition was practiced by far fewer dissidents.

26. In fairness to Agamben, he does discuss a possibility of an alternative politics that would subvert sovereign power precisely from the grounds of bare life. This kind of alternative politics, he argues, would require that bare life be "transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life" (1998, 188) that escapes the sovereign's definition. However, Agamben's discussion contains a paradoxical slip-page: suggesting that bare life may be the potential ground for articulating a new kind of politics, he simultaneously insists that bare life is nothing

power's control and becoming grounds for alternative political subjectivities that the state has never foreseen and that it cannot interpret in its own political terms. Indeed, anthropologists and other social scientists have described numerous examples of bare life's serving as grounds for an alternative biopolitics.<sup>27</sup>

Again, the strategy of suspending the political has been shown in certain contexts to be the most productive political strategy. Discussing political regimes that are experienced as immutable and eternal, Jameson (2005) argues that the only potential for changing them may be to attempt imagining what is radically unimaginable in the terms of the current political system. This effect can be achieved by practicing a "suspension of the political . . . from daily life and even from the world of the lived and the existential" that may allow one "to take hitherto unimaginable mental liberties with structures whose actual modification or abolition scarcely seem in the cards." Jameson focuses on the current context of global capitalism, which, he argues, has come to be experienced as "a situation in which political institutions seem both unchangeable and infinitely modifiable [internally]" and "no agency has appeared on the horizon that offers the slightest chance or hope of modifying the status quo" (p. 45). However, his broader point about the potentiality for change that a suspension of the political may achieve under specific conditions concerns any political system that is internally experienced as immutable, including the Soviet late socialism of the early 1980s.<sup>28</sup>

Although Jameson does not quite explain how the strategy of suspending the political may be achieved in everyday practice, outside literary genres, he suggests that this strategy im-

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but a product of sovereign power (see discussion of this point in Genel 2006, 61; see also Lemke 2005 and Norris 2005).

27. For example, discussing the management of organ transplantation in India, Lawrence Cohen (2005, 82) argues that the Indian state recognizes as legitimate organ donors only four classes of kin: spouses, siblings, parents, and children. With this law the state seeks to legitimize those who may donate organs "out of familial love" and simultaneously to protect those who "in the conditions of everyday poverty or extraordinary debt" may be forced to sell their organs. However, argues Cohen, this law also erases the political subjectivity of these latter, poorest citizens by refusing to recognize that they may also perform their desperate acts of trading in bare life "out of familial love." Although the state does not recognize these sacrificial acts as political, they constitute an alternative biopolitics—as acts framed in terms of an ethical exception to the state's sovereign law and therefore as acts that redraw the boundaries of the political sphere. See also Farquhar and Zhang (2005, 305) on biopolitical self-cultivation in today's China, which involves a strategy of minimizing one's ability "to contribute to the polity," Fassin (2001, 5) on "biopolitics of otherness," which amounts to an "extreme reduction of the social to the biological" in which the body, is treated as "the ultimate refuge of a common humanity," Callon and Rabeharisoa (2004) on the "politics of refusal" practiced by the incurably ill when they refuse to engage with the state and with activist groups, instead focusing on bare life as a means for constituting alternative selves and socialities, and Rose (2001) on the "politics of life itself."

28. Elsewhere I argue that the experience of the system's immutability was a defining feature of late socialism (Yurchak 2006).

plies the invention of a certain aesthetics of living that would allow one to transgress the ethical and political norms of the current system without speaking the language in which these ethical and political norms are articulated. In other words, the aesthetics of everyday existence may allow one to be political beyond the current definition of the political and to challenge the current ethical and political norms without identifying one's actions as a form of opposition.

Indeed, as Rancière (2004) has shown, any truly political project always includes an aesthetic project that is directed at disturbing "the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable" by articulating alternative ways of life that are unknown and unimaginable within the current discursive regime<sup>29</sup>—that transgress the current sphere of the political. This is why the goal of radical political art, according to Rancière, should be neither simply to represent forms of domination nor to describe its own political critique (as does "politicized" and "politically correct" art) but to break with the discursive regime in which domination and critique of domination are imagined and articulated in the first place. Radical political art must produce a "double effect": on the one hand, a form of political signification that can be read and made sense of and, on the other hand, "a sensible or perceptual shock caused . . . by the uncanny, by that which resists signification" (2004, 63).<sup>30</sup>

In the late-Soviet case, the politics of indistinction I have described was an example of an aesthetics of everyday living that was based on suspending the political and producing Rancière's "double effect." This is especially clearly seen in the case of the Necrorealists. The early Necrorealist actions, provocations, experiments, films, and artwork were organized in the 1980s, before the groups became recognized as "artists." As we have seen, although these practices were directed at the practitioners themselves, as a means of self-cultivation, most of them also functioned as "experiments" designed to provoke the general public, workers, and the police into having a succession of reactions, from suspicion to outrage, embarrassment, disgust, and ultimate confusion. Often the participants in these actions appeared to the public as an organized group involved in bizarre activity that seemed to have some hidden agenda.

The early provocations and films consisted of semispontaneous events in which the story line was not missing altogether but not quite present either. Some events seemed to their witnesses to be intensely purposeful and yet absurd, violent and failing to fit a coherent narrative (e.g., Who were the bloody bandaged sailors fornicating by railroad tracks?

29. This point is different from Benjamin's (1969) view that in the age of mass reproduction politics becomes "aestheticized." Rancière sees politics as a process that always contains an aesthetic component because it is involved in producing a particular "distribution of the sensible."

30. By exposing, describing, and representing forms of domination and inequality, argues Rancière, "politicized" and "politically correct" art can achieve certain political change but not a kind of change that is unimaginable in the terms of the current ideological frame.

Why did a man who was being murdered suddenly turn out to be a dummy?). The effect of such aesthetics was a feeling that these bizarre and often violent and obscene actions had some profound meaning that was hidden and unknowable and therefore suggested something ominous (Is this just a bunch of drunkards or lunatics, or is there *something bigger* going on?). Thus these actions introduced the uncanny into the fabric of the sociopolitical world.<sup>31</sup>

When Yufit was methodically preparing to "hang himself" in a tree in a city courtyard, the laborers working nearby suspected him and his friends of being not pranksters but "spies." When several Necrorealists filmed their escapade, they were arrested for acting suspiciously—not as just hooligans but as potential enemies—and the footage they took was sent to a KGB laboratory. In other words, their actions appeared suspiciously "political." And yet, neither the police nor the general public could come up with a coherent interpretation of what was happening and what was political and dangerous about it.

For the Necrorealists themselves it was important to avoid doing anything that the state could see as clearly illegal or politically subversive. Members of this and similar groups were legally employed and registered, carried perfectly good documents, did not spread any dissident literature, and distanced themselves from activities that would be unambiguously political. Indeed, as we have seen, these people found "political" questions profoundly irrelevant and boring. For lack of any concrete incriminating circumstances the police preferred to dismiss them as a nuisance, sometimes threatening them with potential repercussions to avoid embarrassment and the feeling of the uncanny ("Take your stuff and get lost! But if you had a real corpse, we would've shown you!").

Thus, an important effect of these actions was that the Necrorealists were perceived simultaneously as political and nonpolitical subjects, as people who seemed subversive but did not quite fit the political notion of subversion. In other words, they were recognized as individuals with political subjectivity but a subjectivity that was somehow alternative, inexplicable, non-Soviet.

Similar aesthetic strategies based on suspending the political and focusing on bare life can be found in various contexts. An example is provided by contemporary bio-art, a form of artistic practice that creates artworks by manipulating living

31. Freud defines the uncanny (*unheimlich*) as something familiar, intimate, connected to home (1919, 245). The feeling of the uncanny is related to the disgust and horror experienced when the coherent appearance of the familiar and intimate world is suddenly disrupted by evidence of its unnatural, constructed quality. Among the objects that usually invoke this feeling are "death and dead bodies . . . the return of the dead . . . spirits and ghosts," inexplicable forms of behavior, epileptic seizures, and manifestations of insanity. When one recognizes inexplicable behavior as "the working of forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellowmen" one gets a feeling that one has been always "dimly aware of them in remote corners of his own being" (p. 243). This feeling is the uncanny.

matter—genes, DNA molecules, living tissue—by means of hybridization, cloning, genetic engineering, etc.<sup>32</sup> Steven Shavero (2004) argues that to question the social changes introduced by the current biotechnological and genetic revolution, bio-artists should focus on an aesthetic rather than an ethical critique, because the very foundations of our ethics may soon be altered by these new biotechnologies. He calls the strategy that he proposes *bioaesthetics* to distinguish it from the more familiar bioethics.<sup>33</sup> Unlike ethical judgment, aesthetic judgment is based neither on an external objective principle nor on one's personal preference; it is a response to a concrete situation and therefore cannot be generalized or codified. Making an aesthetic judgment, argues Shavero, following Kant, implies going "beyond my own subjectivity," taking "a decision without having any preexisting rules to guide me" (i.e., beyond the norms and rules of the political sphere), and trying "to convince other people that I am right without having any common foundation to appeal to." Therefore, the artistic strategies based on bioaesthetics would be ready "to imagine the unimaginable, to ask questions that are not supposed to be asked, and to transgress the limits of positivist understanding." They would be "less an affair of manipulating the external world than one of experimenting on—and thereby altering—ourselves" (i.e., altering one's body, health, organic properties, bare life), which makes such strategies both powerful and "inherently risky and unpredictable."

The bioaesthetic practice that Shavero proposes is comparable to the aesthetic practice of the Necrorealists. In their challenge of the Soviet system they avoided its direct ethical critique, focusing instead on aesthetic altering of their own bare life in everyday existence, provocations, and artwork, sometimes even putting this life at risk.<sup>34</sup> By turning the politics of indistinction into a total aesthetic project they were able to make visible the limits of the Soviet state's power and to explore a peculiar boundary space in which that state, though partially successful, still failed to achieve its political goals. While it continued successfully creating citizens, it failed

32. Internationally renowned bio-artists include members of the Critical Art Ensemble (U.S.A.), Natalie Jeremijenko (Australia), and Eduardo Kac (Brazil). For more on bio-art see Anker and Nelkin (2003), Hauser (2003), Greenfield (2002), Levy (1996, 2001), Tomasula (2002), and Haraway (1998).

33. The term "bioaesthetics" is sometimes used to mean different things. For example, Campbell (2006), discussing Evgenii Yufit's films, uses it to refer to a kind of art that employs a traditional artistic medium (e.g., cinema) to produce commentary *about* biology. In contrast, Steven Shavero and contemporary bio-artists use this term to refer to radical art practice whose very medium *is* biological science. For them, the point is not to use traditional art practice to create a critical commentary about the practices of biological science but rather to practice biological science as art, as a new form of critical intervention. I use the term here in this latter sense.

34. A similar form of bioaesthetic rather than bioethical critique is found in other forms of bio-art, including David Cronenberg's movies. A reviewer wrote about Cronenberg's *Crash*: "What it hasn't got—and this is what's liberating—is a judgmental point of view. The film's sensibility is neither moral nor immoral" (Dougherty 1997).

to predict, control, and understand what kind of political subjects they were. The Necrorealists demonstrated, provocatively and spectacularly, the ability of such groups of young people to inhabit these spaces and to create within them alternative subjectivities and forms of life that were profoundly non-Soviet, undermining the hegemony of the Soviet political sphere.

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## Comments

### Dominic C. Boyer

Department of Anthropology, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, U.S.A. (dtb25@cornell.edu). 4 XI 07

In this sophisticated and very rewarding article, Yurchak builds upon his ethnographic work on late Soviet socialism and develops his analysis of late socialism's aesthetic and political fabric in new directions. The ethnographic focus here is the Necrorealists, who began to improvise spontaneous actions in Leningrad in the late 1970s before moving into the Russian avant-garde mainstream as artists and filmmakers in the 1980s and 1990s. The article argues that the Necrorealists' aesthetics occupied a special zone in the politics of late socialist citizenship. Taking the artists' declarations that they had no interest in politics as his point of departure, Yurchak shows how the Necrorealists withdrew from the highly formalized and repetitive official discourse of late Soviet socialism into aesthetic explorations of vitality and mortality. Thus, in Agambenian terms, the Necrorealists seemed to occupy the classic state of exception, the zone beyond politics which nevertheless engenders the political realm. But what makes this article such an important conceptual contribution to philosophically engaged anthropology is precisely its challenge to the Agambenian understanding of the state of exception. Yurchak argues that, despite their aesthetic proclivities, the Necrorealists were by no means denizens of an apolitical encampment of bare life. Indeed, they operated more as self-cultivating "hybrid subjects" (in Donna Haraway's sense), inhabiting a zone not outside of biopolitics but within a "politics of indistinction" created by what he describes elsewhere as the "hypernormalization" (recursive formalization) of Soviet authoritative discourse. The Necrorealists were marginal subjects to the biopolitics of late Soviet modernity, to be sure,

but by no means inconsequential ones. Indeed, Yurchak demonstrates convincingly that their work should be understood as an effort to explore the possibility of alternative forms of life from within the very heart of state socialist orthodoxy.

Yurchak's argument not only illuminates his own case material very well but also lays the groundwork, in my opinion, for a more general reevaluation of biopolitics and sovereignty in the context of the anthropology of modernity. This article should be seen at the forefront of a post-Foucauldian and now increasingly post-Agambenian reassessment of the significance of subjectivity in the constitution of political community and sociality. Although by no means naïve with regard to the cybernetic-systemic and structural-relational dimensions of modern power that Foucault and Agamben have respectively foregrounded, Yurchak's work asserts—here in the specific domains of artistic practice and aesthetics—that there are zones of subjectivity and agency that ought not to be allowed easy analytical digestion by universal schemata of force/power relations such as "*pouvoir-savoir*" and "sovereignty." The point is to develop a more delicate and socially attentive anthropology of power. This is, again in my opinion, *the* crucial project for the next generation of the anthropology of modernity.

Where, meanwhile, should we go from necro-utopia? The next move, it seems to me (and Yurchak already anticipates this in his discussion of late capitalist necroaesthetics [e.g., Cronenberg, the early David Lynch, etc.]), is to develop his study of the zones and politics of indistinction characteristic of late Soviet socialism into a broader comparative analysis of the spaces and modalities of "indistinction" in the geopolitics (also geoaesthetics) of post-cold-war liberalism and capitalism. For example, one increasingly finds evidence of intriguing parallels between the media regimes of late socialism and late capitalism that have been generated through the consolidation and financialization of broadcasting ownership, through the restructuring of relations between media organizations, and through the implementation of digital information technologies. Although there is now surely a greater volume of media content spread across an unprecedented diversity of communicational platforms, there is also a remarkable tendency, especially in the Western mass media, toward the reduction of novel content and the homogenization of representational genres. Thus, both audiences and media scholars have noted the phenomenon of widespread thematic imitation in film, cable, and network television, of "echo effects" in news reportage, of hyperformalized political discourse and performance, and so on. Indeed, the formalization of media genres and messages has reached the point where they are frequent and familiar enough that a new breed of media ironists like Jon Stewart and especially Stephen Colbert have learned to "inhabit the norm" (as Yurchak might say) as a mode of performative engagement. Likewise, one finds ample evidence of necroaesthetics at the fringes of mainstream liberal capitalist media in programs like Comedy Central's *South Park*, which explicitly rejects political participation as hypocritical, ceaselessly eviscerates dominant political ide-

ologies, movements, and sympathies, is saturated with vitalistic and mortalistic images, and yet seems less apolitical than necro-utopian in Yurchak's sense, flourishing in a zone of indistinction within the mediational and political orthodoxy surrounding it.

Yurchak's article offers a brilliant glimmer of what such a comparative analysis could achieve. It will be interesting to see how and whether the anthropology of modernity can respond to his challenge.

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### Eduardo Kohn

Department of Anthropology, McGill University, Room 717, Leacock Building, 855 Sherbrooke St. West, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3A 2T7 (eduardo.kohn@mcgill.ca). 13 XI 07

Yurchak traces a way of living under late socialism that was enabled by but also invisible to and, in important ways, beyond the Soviet state. He asks us to consider this form of sociability as an instance of something he calls a "politics of indistinction."

Because this kind of politics, unlike dissident opposition, does not formulate the state as explicit object of critique, it lacks the palpable otherness of a standard ethnographic object. It is, accordingly, the kind of social phenomenon that Riles (2000) has identified as having no "outside." How does this indistinct politics emerge and circulate? What are its unique properties and modes of efficacy? And how transportable is it, as practice and analytic, to other times and places? A consideration of the discursive conditions specific to late Soviet socialism that made this kind of politics possible can shed light on these questions.

Stalin's death marked the end of a period in which official Soviet discourse was grounded by the authority of an external author who decided which referential claims were true. Instead, through a process that Yurchak (2006, 50) calls "hypernormalization," party officials attempted to stabilize discourse by making it refer increasingly to itself. As the indexical grounding that makes discourse referentially robust disappeared, the systemic relations internal to discourse became stronger.

One effect of this extreme amplification of form was the disruption of dyadic causality and a concomitant "freezing" of temporality. In official discourse verbal phrases implying cause-and-effect and temporality were increasingly replaced by timeless intertextually linked noun phrases (Yurchak 2006, 69). Politburo members, always already "inside" discursive form, stood outside of time. They never aged (p. 257). Like its leaders, the Soviet Union itself was experienced as immutable and eternal.

The politics described here resonated with this increasingly pervasive and fragile form to such an extent that it was indistinguishable from it even as it undermined it. Always already inside a form that itself was always already everywhere, this

mode of sociability emerged simultaneously and independently among isolated groups throughout the Soviet Union.

The spontaneity of Necrorealist provocation was also an effect of its immersion in hypernormalized form. Uncoordinated and unplanned, Necrorealist practice lacked a clear cause-and-effect or means-to-ends logic. It was thus not legible as political. When the colonel asked, “What are the goals of your actions?” the Necrorealist could honestly reply that he did not know. Swept up by something somehow beyond him, he could not be identified and thus held accountable as a locus of agency.

Its ability to resonate with a ubiquitous hypernormalized form also helps explain how Necrorealist provocation could spread through the Soviet public. It propagated via mimetic contagion because the Soviet population itself had become, in many ways, hypernormalized; Necrorealist brawls on packed trains effortlessly drew in citizens and even soldiers without their ever knowing why they were suddenly fighting (Yurchak 2006, 245).

Necrorealists inhabited an ever-widening gap between language and the world. They embraced a “bare life” peopled by the nondiscursive and the nonrational, the animal and the undead. These paralinguistic spaces were products of hypernormalization even if they were unnamable to a Soviet state increasingly caught up in its own self-reference. Bare life, however, was not just about the exploration of the individual body and its limits as in the Necrorealist fascination with suicide and putrefaction. It was also manifest in the exuberant vitality of Necrorealist provocation, as well as in the more widespread emergence, throughout the Soviet Union, of what might be termed “phatic” communities of intimate sociability (see Yurchak 2006, 126–57).

In contrast to a visible and vocal “dyadic” oppositional politics, Necrorealist provocation simply punctuated the eternal immutable with flashes of the uncanny. The mannequin thrown down to the crowded street below and the frenetic fights—like the inevitable bodily senescence of the immortal Brezhnev (Yurchak 2006, 257)—shocked Soviet citizens. It was these citizens who—also spontaneously—inserted such events into a larger story that they invariably understood as being *about* a pervasive but increasingly fragile state. Necrorealists were indeed spies, because the state’s hypernormalized discursive regime provided the ever-present unspoken context for the interpretability of their actions.

Does this politics of indistinction have traction beyond the late Soviet case? To address this it might be productive to reflect on post-Soviet Necrorealism. Why is it that the Necrorealists’ films focus on the creation of posthuman cyborg communities instead of on the human body and its limits? That contemporary Necrorealist art must now provide its own interpretive contexts only shows how much a spontaneous politics of indistinction is dependent on being able to resonate with and travel along the paths created by those highly regularized conditions that are no longer part of the discursive landscape. Although this kind of politics may well emerge in

any highly systematized sociopolitical context, the extreme amplification of form under late Soviet socialism made this politics of indistinction unusually productive and, in retrospect, everywhere apparent even in its invisibility.

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### Harriet Murav

Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 707 S. Mathews, MC 170, Urbana, IL 61801, U.S.A. (hlmurav@uluc.edu). 26 X 07

Yurchak’s brilliant reading of the late Soviet phenomenon of the Necrorealists uses Giorgio Agamben to argue that the behaviors deployed by this loosely associated group amount to a form of political action both in their utter rejection of political action conventionally understood and in their unwitting citation of “bare life,” the hidden ground and “other” of political life in Agamben’s *Homo sacer*. According to Agamben, political life depends on what it places on its boundary, mere biological life. Politics is not about Democrats versus Republicans but about the production of the human being as less than human, as in, for example, the Gulag or concentration camp inmate on “his last legs,” the *musselman*. By miming this figure on the brink of nonhumanity, the Necrorealists laid bare the device of politics, and not just Soviet politics. They conducted their combination of street theater and self-experimentation in Leningrad beginning in the 1980s. The key motifs of their actions included nakedness, animality, stupidity or idiocy, and death. They used a mannequin dressed up as a corpse and costumed themselves to look like the images of corpses they found in an old textbook of forensic medicine. They avoided any involvement with political life; they reduced their income and standard of living to the “bare necessities,” as Yurchak writes, by working at the lowliest of jobs. Their action was illegible to the Soviet authorities, and it was this very illegibility that gave it meaning as a kind of politics. Agamben describes a double-bind in which the more freedom individuals win from state power, the more they are subject to it: “the liberties and the rights won by individuals in their conflicts with central powers always simultaneously prepared a tacit but increasing inscription of individuals’ lives within the state order, thus offering a new and more dreadful foundation for the very sovereign power from which they wanted to liberate themselves.” The Necrorealists did not win more freedom or rights from the Soviet state, which, in Yurchak’s account, hardly knew what to do with them.

More Russian and Soviet context might be provided not to challenge Yurchak’s apt characterization of the Necrorealist experiment but, rather, to use it to read other, earlier moments in Russian and Soviet culture. The behavior of the Russian holy fools (*iurodivye Khrista radi*), who flourished from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, included some of the same motifs that Yurchak identifies as characteristic of the Necrorealists. The preferred costume of the holy fools was nakedness; they used invective and unintelligible speech; their actions were “insane,”

violating the cultural norms of behavior of their time and in particular, the norms pertaining to the ascetic life, for example, eating meat during Lent and seeking shelter not only among the dregs of society but among nonhumans (in one case dogs). The holy fools, in contrast to monks, who cloistered themselves away from society, needed a public before which they could perform their actions so as to provoke abuse and mortify themselves. The hagiography emphasizes the deliberate nature of the actions of the holy fools, who were not or were not supposed to be truly “insane”; the popular tradition, however, does not insist on such hard-and-fast distinctions. Yurchak quotes one of the Necrorealists as saying that their performance was no mere performance: “Our whole lives were infused with this attitude.” Something quite similar could be said about the holy fools. Their behavior was a form of political theology in action.

The Soviet aesthetic of the years of the “Great Fatherland War” offers a counterpoint if not to the experiment of the Necrorealists in its entirety, then to some dimensions of their artistic self-fashioning. Yurchak points to the relationship between the Necrorealists and the “long history of artistic and philosophical explorations of such figures as the undead, zombies, vampires, cyborgs, etc.” The soldier, touted as a fighting machine, who indeed returns from war as a part-machine, with one limb or artificial ones, is an example of someone who inhabits Agamben’s “zone of indistinction.” Boris Polevoi’s *Story about a Real Man (Povest’ o nastoiashchem cheloveke)* (1970 [1946]) tells of a double amputee who recovers from his injuries to resume military service as a fighter pilot. It describes him as a cyborg who, at the climactic last moment, fuses with his fighter plane and performs his mission successfully. Polevoi based his fiction on the real-life story of an actual Soviet fighter pilot. This and other wartime writing of its type disavows suffering and the reduction of human agency that it implies by transforming the injury into superhuman ability. In these examples the prosthetic, the substitute limb or device, and the prosthetic structure of the narrative itself highlight the enhancement of human agency through mechanization without acknowledging the cost. In contrast, the Necrorealists embraced the loss of human subjectivity, underscoring the corpse and the animal as inhabiting the space of the human. What the Soviet aesthetics of World War II tended to mask, the Necrorealists positively emphasized, but without relying on a humanist vocabulary in traditional terms. It is no accident that their actions coincided with the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the veterans of which received the least acknowledgment of any twentieth-century Soviet war veterans.

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### Arzoo Osanloo

Anthropology and Law, Societies, and Justice, Denny M-41,  
University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195, U.S.A.  
(aosanloo@u.washington.edu). 30 X 07

This is a fascinating and even entertaining essay that considers the role that informal and expressly apolitical artist and in-

tellectual communities played in creating the conditions for the Soviet collapse. In particular, Yurchak highlights the creativity and spontaneity of the work of a group that called itself the Necrorealists, exploring their potential for effecting a new or, in the author’s words, an *alternative* politics. Drawing from but also reconsidering Agamben’s (1998) notion of the “zone of indistinction,” Yurchak refers to the phenomena of such groups as a “politics of indistinction.” He renders the intriguing space of indistinction with wonderful narrative and visually stimulating descriptions accompanied by a number of images that ultimately ask “Is it possible to think of such individuals *politically* at all?”

This essay gives new context and richness to the many formulaic understandings of the fall of the Soviet Union. It also adds nuance to Agamben’s theoretical work while also discreetly challenging ideas about how power comes to be constituted, deployed, and even resisted. Indeed, it challenges a common if simplistic reading of a Foucauldian bind: where there is power, there is resistance. An absence of decipherable resistance, however, does not mean stasis. The question then becomes what the space between resistance and stasis might look like. Emergent formations of and in this in-between space are new local cultural productions that manifest themselves in everyday life.

For Agamben, as, I think, for Yurchak, there is no “outside” of politics. Even for those whose political lives are delegitimized through a juridical ban, such as “illegal aliens,” that ban actually constitutes others as legal and thereby “rightful” or “rights-bearing” actors. When sovereign power constitutes subjects who are also simultaneously agents, the lines between naked life and political life become muddled—this is the zone of indistinction that is dealt with here.

Agamben is exploring the constitution of modern Western democracies, and his work points out that the totalitarian state is not as different as we (read: Westerners) might think—that repressive states like the Soviet Union are not so much foils as the other side of the coin. In a way, then, Yurchak, in this essay, is showing the opposite. In Soviet Russia, it was not all top-down superstructured power that acted on the subjected; instead the agents created through this constellation of power participated—or refrained from participating, as the case may be—in ways that current theories of resistance cannot account for. It is here that Yurchak challenges the provincial understandings of power relations in totalitarian states as overwhelmingly top-down and statist.

In examining how modern state power constitutes citizen-subjects, Agamben, like Foucault, is trying to get a handle on our contemporary understandings of citizen and state relationships and offers a framework for considering how the nation-state heuristic organizes life and comes to civilize or, rather, politicize it. What Agamben argues, in the end, is that through the state form, bare life is already politicized and governed. Yurchak depicts this in an entirely new way, one that draws from his interlocutors’ play on life and death.

In his conclusion, Yurchak brings this theoretical interven-

tion into focus: The zone of indistinction is the space between bare and political life (Agamben 1991, 1–2). The Necrorealists, through the “spontaneous emergence” of their somewhat peculiar “aesthetics of everyday life,” actively sought a space between bare and political life, where the subject-making (citizen-making) effects of state power were not recognizable. Within their all-governing state, they cultivated a space where their own agentive subject production was either obscured or irrelevant to the state. This is a fascinating new way to contemplate behavior that might otherwise have been understood as bizarre, banal, or insignificant.

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**Kevin M. F. Platt**

Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Pennsylvania, 255 S. 36th St., Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305, U.S.A. (kmfplatt@sas.upenn.edu). 12 XI 07

At the first convention of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934, Andrei Zhdanov, ranking member of the Bolshevik Party establishment, proclaimed that Soviet literature was an openly political, “tendentious” undertaking. Yet, as he went on to explain, this was because *all* literature was a priori political. Bourgeois writers might claim to be above or outside of politics, yet this claim was in and of itself a political mask, concealing a deeper truth of allegiance and services rendered to class ideology. The defining characteristic of Soviet literature, therefore, was not really its political nature but the frankness with which this political significance was announced.

Zhdanov’s syllogism is symptomatic of the broader tendency toward politicization of all aspects of social life during the Soviet era, and it renders plain the difficult position of those who, like the Necrorealist group described by Yurchak, sought to open up a space for explicitly nonpolitical social being. In the decades following Zhdanov’s speech, the logic he articulated served to circumscribe Soviet social practices, stamping those who deviated from norms underwritten by the state, whether they proclaimed themselves oppositional or not, as political criminals. Prominent examples of this dynamic of state identification of the would-be non-Soviet as the de facto anti-Soviet include the trials of the writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Joseph Brodsky (Yurchak discusses the latter as a predecessor of the Necrorealist “politics of indistinction”), state suppression of nonconformist “apartment” art shows of the 1970s and 1980s, and the Metropol scandal of 1979, when a group of writers assembled a collection of explicitly “apolitical” works outside of normal channels of censorship, only to be prosecuted as political dissidents. In short, in the Soviet Union (1) anything and everything could be identified as politically significant, especially practices that aspired to transcend or escape the political, and (2) the arbiter of this identification was the state itself.

In this light, the success of the Necrorealist group in discovering apolitical modes of behavior is striking. It should be noted that the mere possibility of such experimentation re-

veals how sporadic the exercise of state power to impose political significance on social life had become in the late Soviet period: one can hardly imagine similar experiments escaping state interdiction in the 1930s–50s. Yet even given the relative laxity of the era, the practices of the Necrorealists demonstrate that evasion of the ubiquitous potential for state-imposed political significance necessitated extraordinarily inventive strategies. To achieve their ends, the Necrorealists sought to transcend or evade not merely “politics” but any and all social codes, since any recognizable socially constituted meaning was in danger of translation into political meaning. In order to open out the nonpolitical, they challenged all familiar categories, articulating practices that were nonaesthetic, nonrational, nonlinguistic, noneconomic, and nonlegal (but not illegal). Their key conceptions of the “noncorpse” and of the condition of “absolute death” (not living and not dead) constitute a “nonmyth”—new cosmic categories exceeding all those commonly available.

Yet these extraordinary measures challenge the languages of political and social analysis no less than they do those of the state. The theoretical instrumentation Yurchak proposes for discussion of the Necrorealists indeed renders them comprehensible in political and aesthetic terms. But precisely therein lies the difficulty here. These are the right tools for the job, but they fit the phenomenon under discussion only if they are applied under erasure. Rancière’s category of radical aesthetics rings true, yet it runs counter to the explicitly nonaesthetic practices pursued by the Necrorealists in light of the state’s demonstrated ability to recode any non-Soviet aesthetic undertaking, such as Brodsky’s, as anti-Soviet. This was not an “aesthetics of indistinction” but a nonaesthetics. Similarly, Agamben’s “bare life,” redescribed by Yurchak as the state’s mobile and politically produced “zone of indistinction,” seems to fall short of the radical alterity sought by the Necrorealists. Because Soviet political practices allowed for no area of life beyond political signification—no such “zone of indistinction”—the Necrorealist group projected novel categories of existence beyond life and death, “political” and “bare” life. Theirs was not a “novel biopolitics” but a negation of biopolitics: a necropolitics. This is not to say that I object to the excellent analytical work done in this article but to propose that it be accompanied by a caveat: analysis may not ultimately be able to grasp the matter at hand.

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**Blake Stimson**

Art History Program, University of California, Davis, 1 Shields Ave., Davis, CA 95616, U.S.A. (bstimson@ucdavis.edu). 4 XI 07

The impulse towards “necrorealism,” or the willful recognition of the presence of death, has been around for a long time, and so has the form that focuses specifically on the death of political being. Yurchak is right to locate the means and purpose of this antipolitical variant within the realm of

aesthetics. Indeed, if we take “necrorealism” to be not the proper name of a proprietary art style or movement or artist’s brand but the designation of a more general approach and “necro-utopia,” the ecstatic “no place” or void of death, to be its object, we might well say that it is the founding quality of the aesthetic as such. The aesthetic has always been first and foremost about death, or, rather, the principle of death has defined the limiting conditions of the aesthetic and therefore its condition for being.

The more conventional name of necro-utopia is the sublime, an experience that is, as Kant (1790) had it, “at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination . . . to attain to its estimation by reason,” and “a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgment of the inadequacy.” Death is both comprehensible and incomprehensible, both a figure of terror and a figure of release, and it provides an “awkward pleasure”—the pleasure of a “no place” or utopia—by allowing comprehension of the limits of our comprehension. In this way human reason is affirmed through its critical, self-reflexive capacity to see and understand its own limits, and necrorealism as an aesthetic enterprise achieves its aim.

This can be said to be the general operation of the practices described and analyzed by Yurchak, but the figure of death is, of course, wielded against a specific target. As Evgenii Yufit explains in another context (London 1998), that target was the vaunted New Man: “The declared program of the Soviet Union was the creation of a superior human being. More than just an improvement the Communist State promised the evolution of a new creature, something different and better than a human. Just like the American system.” The critical aim of necrorealism was to kill off that New Man, to bring the rational understanding of the limits of human reason to bear on the arrogance of a creature who presumed to pursue an understanding “converted from a dream of a better future for humanity into a science” and codified in Stalinist-era doctrines such as Diamat, Histomat, and the like (Stalin 1938).

Yurchak acknowledges that “similar aesthetic strategies based on suspending the political and focusing on bare life can be found in various contexts,” and, indeed, the techniques of the Necrorealists were not exclusive to the Soviet Union but found throughout the late-communist world. The early robotic and mechanical works of the Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, for example, share their concerns with death, bare life, suspending the political, “energetic idiocy,” and the like, as does the work of the Slovenian collective Neue Slowenische Kunst and particularly its musical division, Laibach. The same can be said about a whole range of work by Chinese artists—the thrilling idiocy and repetition of Fang Lijun’s paintings and sculptures, the extraordinarily sympathetic before-and-after photographs of Hai Bo, and the abject self-portraits of Zhang Huan, for example—and about the many late-communist practices that achieve the same ends by combining the conventions of socialist realism with those of Pop art’s capitalist realism. In each of these cases the figure of death is placed front and center, and

the “awkward pleasure” that we are offered as beholders or spectators or witnesses is the pleasure of comprehending the limits of our own comprehension.

Necrorealism might be appreciated in still broader terms. “Dim-witted merriment” and “energetic idiocy,” for example, might well be taken as modernist strategies that have been in place from the beginning. Such postures have always been key methods for shocking the bourgeoisie and before them the aristocracy. One need only think of the dumbing down of representation by David or Courbet or Seurat or Picasso or Pollock, a deskilling that presented itself as death to the aristocracy, death to the bourgeoisie, death to false gods and failed ideals in favor of “naked life.” The flattening of the picture plane, the reduction of representation to its schema, the emptying out onto canvas without even the minimal mediation of brush or palette knife, the active withdrawal from civic participation—all these techniques strove for their own politics of indistinction by pitting lived experience against system or the “awkward pleasure” of death against the smug certitude of power as such.

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## Reply

I am grateful for these extremely thoughtful and wide-ranging comments. They can be grouped under two broad themes: theoretical (whether or how is it possible to conceptualize Necrorealist actions as a form of politics) and comparative (whether and how the meaning of these actions is elucidated by comparing them with certain artistic, political, and religious phenomena in different contexts).

The commentators mostly agree with my arguments that the Necrorealists’ actions had subversive political effects but were different from pure opposition. However, some of them disagree with me and with each other over whether this political tactic should be called a “politics of indistinction,” whether it was successful, whether it was specific to late socialism or widespread in other contexts, and whether it belongs to the realm of everyday life or artistic projects.

Let us first consider two extreme reactions. In one view, my claim that the Necrorealists achieved substantial political effects is too strong. Thus, according to Murav, although the Necrorealists invented an ingenious tactic of engaging with the Soviet state they “did not win more freedom or rights” from it. In another view, my claim is too weak, because not only did the Necrorealists manage to achieve a form of freedom from the state but they did this by creating a radically different new subject that cannot be grasped by any political terms, including my “politics of indistinction.” Thus, for Platt the Necrorealist subject inhabited a unique space of freedom that requires “new cosmic categories exceeding all those commonly available.” For example, this subject practiced “not a ‘novel biopolitics’ but a negation of biopolitics: a necropol-

itics” and “not an ‘aesthetics of indistinction’ but a nonaesthetics.”

Although these two reactions may seem like the exact opposite of each other, in fact they share the underlying notion that the Soviet state, or any state, is a total polity that always fully encompasses its subjects. According to Platt, “Soviet political practices allowed for no area of life beyond political signification—no such ‘zone of indistinction.’” Murav similarly argues, quoting Agamben, that “the liberties and the rights won by individuals in their conflicts with central powers always simultaneously prepared a tacit but increasing inscription of individuals’ lives within the state order.” Both positions share Agamben’s view that the subject of “bare life” is a product of the state whose agency is unable to escape the state’s control. I believe that this view of the subject is too narrow and that it reproduces the problem in Foucault’s classic formulation of the relationship between power, resistance, and subjectivity. Foucault’s “resistance,” as Stuart Hall pointed out, is a “concept without a home” because it is not related to any notion of agency; it “must be summoned up from nowhere. Nobody knows where it comes from” (Grossberg 1986, 48).

I agree with Boyer’s comment that a challenge for anthropology today is to move beyond Foucault’s and Agamben’s formulations to pursue an analysis of power that is attentive to those “zones of subjectivity and agency” that may not be reducible to “universal schemata of force/power relations such as *pouvoir-savoir* and ‘sovereignty.’” In my opinion, the form of freedom from the sovereign state that the Necrorealists identified and explored was located precisely in these zones of subjectivity. Contrary to Agamben’s formulation of bare life, the argument of my paper is that while the state’s biopolitics is the mechanism that enables the creation of the subject-citizen, there are contexts in which it cannot fully account for that subject. Or, in other words, through the state form bare life can be politicized in ways that the state itself is not necessarily capable of fully governing.

By imitating the subject of bare life on the brink of non-humanity, the Necrorealists not only exposed the central device of politics described by Agamben (as both Murav and Osanloo point out) but also demonstrated that this subject can be an agent exceeding the state’s ability to comprehend and govern it (see Boyer’s and Kohn’s comments). It was this double exposure—of the state’s mechanism and its failure—that, I argue, constituted the subversive effect of the Necrorealist actions. For this effect to be produced it was important that the Necrorealists remained Soviet citizens who belonged to the Soviet polity and yet, peculiarly, evaded its ability to fully understand, describe, and govern them. It was this balancing act—of simultaneously being inside and outside—that made this tactic politically effective. This is why, contrary to Platt’s suggestion, I believe that the Necrorealist actions constituted not a “negation of politics” but rather a particular form of politics, the “politics of indistinction.” In other words, this was not a form of escapism but a form of subversion.

As for comparative analysis, again each commentator treats it differently. Eduardo Kohn compares the late Soviet and the post-Soviet contexts. He eloquently explains that what made the Necrorealist tactic unusually productive was the extreme amplification of ideological forms in the context of late socialism (the 1980s). With the change of that context, following the Soviet collapse, the Necrorealist work dramatically changed: now it had to “provide its own interpretive contexts” to compensate for the disappearance of the highly regularized discursive conditions of the late socialism. Necrorealist films shifted from spontaneity, absurdity, and nondiscursivity to explicit narratives, elaborate story lines, and detailed explanations of their own messages. Therefore, as Kohn agrees, the emergence of the Necrorealist aesthetics cannot be understood outside of the late-Soviet context.

At the same time, as others comment, for the “politics of indistinction” to have conceptual currency one should be able to find it in other modern contexts. I agree and suggested a few such examples in my paper. The commentators provide many more. I am particularly intrigued by Boyer’s suggestion that the Necrorealist phenomenon points to an interesting parallel between today’s “late capitalism” and Soviet late socialism. As in the late Soviet case, today’s dominant media in the United States are marked by increasing “hypernormalization” at the level of discursive and representational forms. The emergence and unprecedented popularity of such media satirists as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, argues Boyer, should be seen as a symptom of this hypernormalization. The aesthetics of their satirized political talk shows is based on performing an increasingly standardized norm of presentation to expose the predominance of form over content in U.S. media, with their increasing emphasis on formulaic “sound-bite” discourse at the expense of critical debate. Given that the years of late socialism, with their hypernormalized ideological representation, ended in a profound crisis of Soviet ideology and the state, what may this historical parallel tell us about the contemporary political situation in the United States under late capitalism? This question indeed requires serious investigation.

Murav draws a fascinating parallel with another, premodern form of subjectivity and political engagement. She argues that the Necrorealist aesthetics and their subversion of the norms of Soviet life are reminiscent of the position occupied in the Middle Ages by the Russian holy fools (*iurodivye*) vis-à-vis Russian society. However, this parallel is only partial, and this fact helps to clarify the Necrorealists’ political position. Murav is right that both the Necrorealist and the holy fool occupied a certain “in-between” subject position vis-à-vis their social universe. For example, as she points out, the contemporaries saw the holy fools as neither sane nor insane but both at once. And yet the two groups had profoundly different relations to the concept of truth. The Necrorealists’ politics of indistinction was predicated on rejecting any political position that claimed access to the absolute Truth. They were genuinely ignorant of “the goals of their actions,” and their practices were devoid of

any pathos and heroism. The holy fools occupied the exact opposite position: they broke social norms, laws, and taboos to demonstrate that they believed in the absolute Truth and that, moreover, they alone had access to it. A recent cultural history of the Russian holy fools describes their political stance as “monologic and firmly authoritarian” (Ivanov 2005, 382). Even their central practice of “self-humiliation” underlay a sense of extreme pride, self-worth, and superiority to the world. In short, despite some similarities in the aesthetics of living, the subjectivity and political stance inhabited by the holy fools was anything but one of indistinction.

Another parallel Murav suggests is with the ideological figure of the self-sacrificial Soviet hero. Indeed, as did official Soviet art, the Necrorealist films of the later period (the 1990s) celebrated the heroic acts of cyborg-humans as an imitation of Soviet ideology. Murav also emphasizes a certain difference here: while official Soviet ideology masked the loss of human subjectivity inherent in this heroic act, the Necrorealists emphasized this loss and demonstrated that it opened up a “less-than-human” space in which a new alternative subjectivity, one over which the state had no control, could emerge. In other words, it would seem that the logic of the Necrorealist work was to draw on the official Soviet myth in order to subvert it. As with the holy fools, this parallel is illuminating but partial, which allows one to differentiate the Necrorealist phenomenon further. In the early period, when the Necrorealist aesthetics spontaneously developed, it never attempted to imitate or oppose the heroic Soviet myth, instead focusing on the strange and the uncanny. The explicit parallel with the heroic Soviet images became important in the Necrorealist work only later, after the collapse of the Soviet state. And with that shift of focus, the Necrorealist work ceased to be an example of the politics of indistinction and became a relatively ordinary kind of critical art.

Important comparisons are also suggested in Stimson’s comment. He argues that versions of the Necrorealist aesthetics existed throughout the late communist world. Among his examples I am most familiar with the work of the Slovenian collective NSK and the musical group Laibach. Stimson rightly suggests that in its work the NSK also developed effective ways of subverting the socialist state without directly opposing it. To what extent was their work comparable to that of the Necrorealists? While both approaches developed in similar conditions of late socialism, there were important differences in their political and aesthetic strategies, partly because of the differences between the Soviet and Yugoslav contexts. In their performances, the NSK and Laibach (and the musical group AVIA in the Soviet case) explored the strategy of *overidentification* with the system’s ideological side: their actions and statements were often indistinguishable from the ideological slogans and rituals of the system except that they tended to be performed a little too earnestly, with too much zeal. This way of being overly faithful to the system’s norms exposed these norms as not normal or commonsensical but absurd or false. But in the case of the Necrorealists

something else took place: instead of overidentifying with the system’s representations of reality, they practiced the lifestyles and selves that the system could not represent at all. A bunch of lunatics beating a corpse/mannequin did not look like an overly faithful image of good Soviet workers. Instead, their presence in a perfectly normal urban landscape suggested that something inexplicable, uncanny, and beyond representation lurked inside it. While the NSK focused on the system’s crisp ideological core, the Necrorealists focused on its blurry marginal zones. This is why groups such as the NSK from the beginning thought of themselves and were seen by others as “artists.” They produced stage performances, music recordings, and manifestos. The Necrorealists, on the contrary, emerged as a group with no artistic pretensions and during the long early period (in the 1980s) neither thought of their practices as artistic “performances” nor were seen by others as “artists.”

Similarly, I agree with Stimson’s suggestion that from one perspective Necrorealism may be understood in a broader context of modernist art. However, limiting this phenomenon to a genealogy of artistic movements will reduce the subjectivity and sociality this group cultivated to an artistic project, obscuring their nonartistic origins and forms of existence. The Necrorealist phenomenon was an important symptom of late socialism precisely because it emerged and developed *not* as an artistic project but as a spontaneous political tactic of everyday living.

These generous and extremely generative readings have helped me to appreciate the phenomenon at hand more profoundly and from a much wider range of perspectives.

—Alexei Yurchak

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