AGAINST THE NEW MIDDLE AGES:

IMPERIAL REMODERNISM IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN VISUAL CULTURE

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Abstract. The article focuses on contemporary Russian neo-modernist utopia in visual arts, particularly on Anton Chumak's artistic work. In his project ‘Borders’ (2015), dedicated to Donbass, Chumak offers a vision of imperial remodernism as an alternative to the postindustrial new Middle Ages. The notion of the ‘new Middle Ages’ is often used today in socio-political discourse to characterize the new ideological role of the Orthodox Church in contemporary Russia. The ‘conservative turn’ in Russian politics and culture, the concept of traditional values and new legislative initiatives of the State Duma are sometimes described as ‘the end of the Enlightenment’ (Vladimir Sorokin). However, it is precisely the existing oligarchical globalism that is seen as the new Middle Ages through the conservative prism whereas the conservative utopia (Novorossiya, USSR-2, the Eurasian Empire) exemplifies the reemergence of the republican idea and the industrial empire.

Contemporary radical conservatives such as Alexander Prokhanov, Alexander Dugin and Maxim Kalashnikov promote imperial neo-industrialism and offer a critique of demodernization processes in Russian culture and society.
Their ‘conservative remodernism’ is characterized by a fusion of the leftist idea of social justice and the rightist idea of overcoming fragmentation and localization through the weakening of corporations and the oligarchy along with strengthening the state. Aesthetically, these ideas are manifested in a style, which can be described as ‘industrial neo-classicism.’ Industrial neoclassicists visualize the aesthetic utopia of the ‘new antiquity’ and ‘new order’ as an alternative to the chaos of neoliberal post-industrialism, which, according to them, has set us back to the new Middle Ages with its ethnic nationalism, fragmentation, irrationality, and uncontrollable emotionality.

**Key words:** radical conservatism, Donbass, Anton Chumak, neomodernism, neoindustrialism, neoclassicism, contemporary Russian art
Introduction

The ‘new Middle Ages’ has been a common term for referring to Russia’s present and near future since the publication of Vladimir Sorokin’s *Day of the Oprichnik* in 2006. In this novel, we see the post-secular Russia; it is made up of small princedoms run by government henchmen (*oprichniki*) who indulge in various sexual deviations when not practicing political violence. New information technologies feed fake news and ‘post-truths’ to the passive population, which revels in freshly dug dirt and impurities. The publication of Sorokin’s *Telluria* in 2013 and the 2014 release of *Hard to be a God*, a dystopian film directed by Aleksei German, brought this medieval analogy to wider attention. The concept of the new Middle Ages was developed by a number of Russian thinkers including Nikolai Berdyaev who penned the eponymous essay *The New Middle Ages* (1924). However, the concept’s breakthrough came after the publication of the famous essay *The Coming Dark Age* (1973) by Roberto Vacca, written amidst the oil crisis of that year. It has become the conceptual source for a number of cinematic masterpieces of the post-apocalyptic genre. The popularity of the concept of the new Middle Ages has been strongly influenced by Umberto Eco’s bestseller *The Name of the Rose* (1980) and his theoretical treatise *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (1994).

Critique from the right: radical conservatives against de-modernization
The notion of the new Middle Ages is often used to characterize the new ideological role of the Russian Orthodox Church whereas the conservative concept of ‘traditional values’ and new legislative initiatives of the State Duma are sometimes described as “the end of the Enlightenment”. However, were we to refer directly to works of the advocates of the contemporary radical conservative thought such as Alexander Prokhanov, Alexander Dugin or Maxim Kalashnikov (pen name of Vladimir Kucherenko), we would become aware that these are not medieval guilds and traditional values at all but imperial neo-industrialism which is the key metaphor in these projects. It is precisely the existing neoliberal, oligarchical globalism that is seen as the new Middle Ages through the conservative prism whereas the conservative utopia (e.g. Novorossiya, USSR-2, the Eurasian Empire) exemplifies the reemergence of the republican idea and the neo-modernist industrial empire. For example, conservative futurologist Maxim Kalashnikov describes the near future built by the global oligarchy as ‘new feudalism’ where the ‘islets of paradise’ are separated from the rest of the poor world by the wall. These ‘islets of paradise’ constitute affluent territories, which are built around transnational corporations and have their own infrastructures and armies. He characterizes the official Russian imperial and neo-traditionalist rhetoric as a fake:

“[It is] Archaic in the form of the ‘rebirth of statehood’, creation of ‘spiritual bounds’ (skrep) and so on. It is not the rebirth of USSR: on the contrary, the Union was industrially developed technocratic society with the cult of science and technics. While
here we have mere, deep-seated (machroviaia) archaic multiplied by provincial ‘oil-economy’.” (Kalashnikov 2015).


Conservative utopians offer imperial remodernism and technocratic cosmism as an alternative to the postindustrial new Middle Ages. They advocate the abolition of capitalist economy and institutions of liberal democracy and implementation of the program of a new industrialism, they wish to establish just social institutions and treat war as a tool for national revival and for creating (or resurrecting) an empire. Aesthetically, these ideas are manifested in a style, which can be described as neo-industrial classicism reminiscent of Greco-Roman antiquity, the European Enlightenment, and the Soviet modernization project, the era of industrialization and space exploration.

In this article, I would like to focus on one utopian imperial neo-industrial project—Novorossiia, or the New Donbass. While in terms of politics, the idea of Novorossiia suffered a failure (Laruelle 2014, Kolesnikov 2015), the aesthetical Utopia of a conservative revolution in Eastern Ukraine and of establishing an anti-oligarchy state as a global alternative is continuously being developed in the works of several contemporary Russian artists. Most consistently, this utopia is presented in the work of Anton...
Chumak. The artist in his Novorossiia and Donbass projects combines the discourse of ‘soil’ (mineral resources, *tellurium*) and the discourse of ‘the Soviet Antiquity’, which is a unification of literal rootedness/locality with universality (universal language of antiquity and neo-classicism). His projects can thus be characterized as cosmonationalist (referring to glocality), or ‘tellurio-cosmic’ [*telluro-kosmicheskaia*] civilization, emphasizing both national identity and the global, universal context. The term ‘telluric’ was introduced in the current Russian political lexicon by Alexander Dugin, who borrows it from Carl Schmitt’s *Theory of the Partisan* (1963).\(^1\) Schmitt when discussing the criteria for the partisan figure writes of his ‘telluric’ character, physical attachment to the territory that he defends.\(^2\)

In contemporary Russian radical-conservative circles, the term is widely used not only to signify locality, sovereignty, and the ‘soil-bound’ tradition but as a synonym for a defensive rather than an invasive war. This ‘soil-boundness’ and partisan (telluric) war for sovereignty, the metaphors to which are ‘gifts of the earth’—oil, coal, gas, fresh water—are proposed by the present-day Russian radical conservatives as a world-wide alternative to the post-industrial globalism. The mineral resources economy, agrarian autochthony combined with the neo-Soviet industrial romanticism and the artistic language of the neo-classics is yet another attempt to see the future by means of returning to the modernisation processes of the 1920s and 1930s.

\(^1\) The term got a wider recognition after Vladimir Sorokin’s novel *Telluria* (2013) was published.
\(^2\) Carl Schmitt writes in his ‘Partisan’: ‘I want to insist on a fourth criterion of the genuine partisan, one that Jover Zamora has called his *tellurian* character. It is significant for the essentially defensive situation of the partisan –despite his tactical mobility– whose nature changes when he identifies with the absolute aggressiveness of a world-revolutionary or technologizing ideology’ (Schmitt 2004).
Anton Chumak’s neo-industrial classicism

Anton Chumak (b. 1980), a St. Petersburg artist, blacksmith and curator, is one of the founder of the ‘New Aesthetics’ movement, a sequel to Timur Novikov’s New Academy. In an interview with Artguide Chumak comments on the essence of the new aesthetics:

“We turn to the soil – even literally. [...] We are interested in the relics of Scythian mythology; we conceptualize it by means of contemporary art. We are interested in modern heroism” (Chumak 2013).

One of Chumak’s first projects—the installation ‘Temple of Fire’ (2012)—presents a museum exhibition of the future, in which refinery ruins are interpreted as a temple by the inhabitants of the future, and pieces of equipment are considered to be relics and sacred objects of worship. In this project, as well as in his other projects, we see the possible near future through a much more distant future. This look from the future at industrial oil civilization is full of melancholy and a feeling of loss.

Chumak’s works refer to the rich tradition of ‘paper’, or visionary architecture as an art of the Utopia; to surrealistic projects of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778), Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799), Claude Nicolas Ledoux (1736-1806) and Jean-Jacques Lequeu (1757-1826), as well

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3 On Timur Novikov’s New Academy of Fine Arts as the first artistic community in post-Soviet Russia to promote an imperial and conservative aesthetics, see Engström 2016.

4 The motif of the ‘view from the future’ and of ‘the archaeology of the Soviet past’ is developed in the famous project by Russian artist Grisha Bruskin (b. 1945), ‘A Collection of an Archaeologist’, presented in 2015 on the 56th Venice Biennale.
as the Soviet paper neo-classicism of the 1920-1930s and 1980s, works of Jakov Chernikhov, Ivan Leonidov, Boris Iofan, Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin (Bass 2016). For example, ‘Reconstruction №2’ (see Figure 1) from the ‘Temple of Fire’ project is a visual quote of the spherical ‘Cenotaph for Newton’ by Boullée (1784); it follows the principles of the geometrical style and architecture parlante of European classicism.

Figure 1. Anton Chumak, Reconstruction №2, from from the ‘Temple of Fire’ project, 2012

Oil and Saint Petersburg are closely linked to each other in Chumak’s art. His creative activities can be interpreted as part of the ‘oil text’
[neftetekst] of contemporary Russian culture (Kalinin 2015). The very word ‘petroleum’ is connected in his works with St. Petersburg, Peter’s city. Julia Kvasok, a Russian art critic, notes:

“[…] oil is the artist’s last subject. It unites him with Boyce’s lard and felt, and with Barney’s paraffin. Chumak’s oil is a refinement product, just like neo-classicism, as a matter of fact (Chumak, in the meantime, is a St. Petersburg guy, raised on factory blocks, a neo-classicist). It turns out that the word ‘oil’ is a St. Petersburg word. ‘Petroleum’ is derived from the Greek petra – ‘rock’ and Latin oleum – ‘oil’. Thus, it is the Northern,[…] Russian, labouring, black blood of Peter’s city. It runs through the plant’s veins and, like Chernikhov’s coal, draws and erects graceful constructivist cathedrals – either mosques, or in Gothic style for the mythical fire-worshippers. The prototype for those is a refinery outside St. Petersburg” (Kvasok 2012).

In the Donbass project ‘Borders’ (2015), in which the artist collected his works of recent years, the motif of the unification of classicism and ‘natural resources’ is fully realized. The neo-classical industrialism of the 1920s and 1930s (the years when the Soviet Donbass was built) becomes the artistic language expressing with utmost accuracy the ideology of the ‘common cause’ and the new industrial revolution as an alternative to the post-industrial globalism. Here the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the
‘extraction economy’ [ekonomika nedr] linked to it are described by means of arche-ofuturistic language that makes a reference both to the neoclassicism of the 1920-30s, and the avant-garde architectural utopias of the Russian ‘Piranesi’ Jakov Chernikhov (1889-1951).

The project is devoted to the trauma of new borders, to the carving up of the Homeland’s body, once whole, and to the dream of a new revival. Chumak writes:

“While driving past Mariupol I saw the industrial plants, far off in the distance, in the heat haze. They reminded me of half magic castles, half intergalactic space ports that have grown in the steppes. I imagined that for a moment I saw the Soviet utopia when a factory was a cathedral, and labour was the cult. [...]”

Humanity’s dream of space and of peace that grows from the soil just like the Donbass industrial plants grow from the black soil near the Black sea. And, most importantly, I realised that not all was lost in the bloodbath of the 90s. That much was preserved and what perished can be created anew. I believed again in the possibility of a new revival and a new ‘big project’ in the post-Soviet space and in the world as a whole. All my art since that day has been an attempt at romantic visualisation of that project and the search for its new fundamentals that face into the future” (Chumak 2015).
One of the paintings—The Ark—is of particular interest here (Figure 2). The arc acquires the form of a submarine but it is not beasts who find salvation in Chumak’s neomodernist future, but factories and industrial cathedrals. The reflections of their domes in the water remind of the well-known images of the legendary Kitezh Town.

Figure 2. Anton Chumak, The Ark, 2014-2016

The artist examines the metaphysics of Donbass as the most ‘tellurium-rich’ region of the former “united motherland” and presents images of its mythological landscape. In a number of Chumak’s works we see mythological images of Donbass natural recourses and industrial production (see Figure 3): hopper wagons filled with cement and equipped with wings of Hermes; and rail cars containing oil protected not only by satellites and
military bombers, but also the sky itself (mythical griffins) and the earth as well (floral designs). The principle of the agro-cosmic civilisation is embodied in the images of spheres (planets, domes, sun as a sunflower) and an ear of wheat as the image of the Earth, the golden age and the resurrection.

Figure 3. Anton Chumak, from the 'Black Earth' project, 2013

The ancient gods are also taking side of Donbass. Chumak creates images of the Athena of Donetsk who holds explosives instead of a spear, and the goddess Ossa\(^5\) with a loudspeaker in her hand and surrounded by

\(^5\) In Greek mythology, Ossa (lat. Pheme), daughter of Gaia/Terra/Earth, was a personification of prophetic voices, rumours and gossip.
satellites, radars and an air defence system (see Figure 4). Images of goddesses and female warriors hold a special status in the contemporary Russian conservative art. The visualisation of Russia in an image of a young Valkyrie (Daughterland, Rodina-Doch’) was suggested in early 2000s by Alexei Belyaev-Gintovt and has since become the *topos* of the neoconservative aesthetics (Engström 2017).

Figure 4. Anton Chumak, *Ossa*, 2016
Chumak’s graphic art can be seen as a visual comment to Alexander Prokhanov’s organic technicism and his industrial utopia of Novorossiya and the Fifth Empire:

“This state has a powerful technosphere, inherited from Soviet times: the grand factories that build rockets and airplanes, turbines for nuclear power plants, elements of spacecraft. This technosphere is intricately intertwined with Russian factories, space launch complexes, nuclear power plants” (Prokhanov 2014)

A detailed mythologization of technology and industrial objects can be found in Ernst Jünger’s conservative critique of modernity. Chumak’s Donbass cycle can also be interpreted as a visualization of Ernst Jünger’s late ideas, where the Worker is not only the master of technology but also ‘the son of the Earth’. Jünger pondered about possibilities for bridging the gap between the rational and mythological perception of the world in his post-war works ‘The Forest Way’ (1951) and ‘At the Wall of Time’ (1959). Alexander Mikhailovskii, one of the leading Russian experts on the German Conservative Revolution, writes about the criticism of technocratic modernity in Jünge’s essay ‘At the Wall of Time’:

“Technology, when viewed from the perspective of myth, is not just ‘a world of abstractions’, but ‘geospiritual reality’ [erdgeistige Wirklichkeit]. Or simply: ‘Technology is the projected spirit’. Geohistorical optics allows Jünge to abandon the pessimistic view of technology, according to which it is
just unenviable and hopeless ‘soulless machinery’. Since there cannot be any direct link between a person as a subject and technology as a neutral means, there appears a conservative-revolutionary idea of the ‘spiritualization of the earth’ [Erdvergeistigung], in which our planet ‘takes on a new skin’” (Mikhailovskii 2010).

Figure 5. Anton Chumak, *The New Earth*, 2014-2016

This ‘new skin of the Earth’ often takes various forms in the works of Chumak: pipes, tunnels, rails, blast furnaces (as in the work “The new Earth, see Figure 5). According to the artist, borders should disappear not only between the disconnected parts of the former country, but also between technology and nature, between the earth and the sky, and between myth
Chumak’s paintings made in neoclassical aesthetics lack any national specifics and are universal metaphors of European culture and an alternative neomodernist globalisation.

Conclusions

Critics of the post-Soviet neo-conservatism often account for the world of the traditionalist Utopia as the New Middle Ages (Sorokin 2006, 2013; Saprykin 2015). However, my analysis shows that the major metaphors in the projects of the post-Soviet conservatism have nothing to do with the discourse of the ‘New Middle Ages’ but rather with neo-classicism and neo-industrialism. Conservative avant-garde supplies a myth of order and discipline where industrial order blends with Arcadia, and where the Ark(-submarine) is packed not with pairs of animals but with columns, cupolas and smoking chimneys. The images of the ‘New Antiquity’, severe rationality of neoclassicism and the industrial Order which we find in the works of Anton Chumak are designed to prevail over the chaos of the post-industrial ‘new Dark Ages’.

In the contemporary Russian radical conservatism, neo-industrialism has served as a synonym for anti-globalism since the 1990s. Nowadays the ideas of the conservative revolution have entered the official discourse, Kremlin’s symbolic politics and Russian popular culture, but in a more populist, less radical form. The metaphor of Order and rationality is a constant element of Putin’s rhetoric which slowly but steadily leads to the formation of the state aesthetics corresponding to the conservative discourse. In terms of the official cultural policy, the effects of the
conservative revolution are for example evident in new urbanism with its focus on regeneration of neoclassical architectural ensembles of the Stalin’s era (Gorky Park and VDNKh).

If the concepts of revitalising the common European heritage, common Christian roots of both Europe and Russia have recently become the priority in the cultural and the foreign policy, the ideas of second modernism and industrial sovereignty have not yet gone beyond conservative avant-garde. Although official Russian media pay a lot of attention to the country’s successes in the military and space industries as well as large infrastructural projects such as the construction of the bridge between Russia and Crimea, neo-industrialism has not yet become part of the Kremlin’s official rhetoric. Right-wing neoconservatives trace the causes for the Kremlin’s abandoning both its support of ‘Novorossiia’ and the strategy of the new industrialism precisely in the neoliberal nature of Russian economy and the ties between the oligarchic elite and the transnational corporations.

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