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[The new antiquity versus the new Middle Ages](#)



The “new Middle Ages” has been a common term for referring to Russia’s present and near future since the publication of *Day of the Oprichnik* in 2006. The publication of *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. A plot summary of *Oprichnik*: Post-secular Russia is made up of small princedoms run by government henchmen (*oprichniks*) 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 next, less apocalyptic version of the new Middle Ages is urbanism “with a human face” and “soft archaisation”; former industrial premises are converted into clusters of galleries which exhibit modern art and bars which dabble in craft brewery. The number of city parks and green zones is growing. Organic farming is

efflorescent while the youth adheres to the ideals of new ascetism.

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).

The notion of the new Middle Ages is used today in socio-political discourse to characterize the new ideological role of the Russian Orthodox Church whereas the 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, 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 (Novorossiia, USSR-2, the Eurasian Empire) exemplifies the reemergence of the republican idea and the 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 have their own infrastructures, armies and are built around transnational corporations.

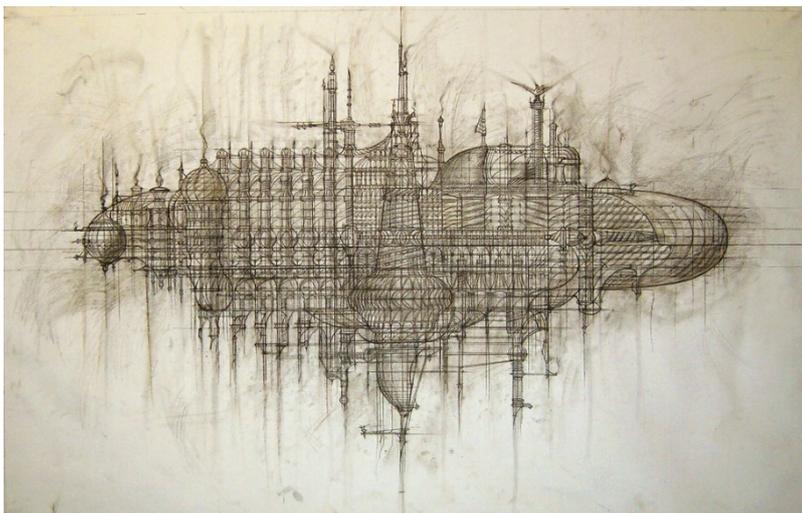
Conservative utopians offer imperial remodernism as an alternative to the postindustrial new Middle Ages. Remodernism is characterized by a fusion of the leftist idea of social justice and the rightist idea of overcoming fragmentation and localization through the weakening of corporations and the oligarchy along with strengthening the state. This ideal can be achieved in practice through implementation of the program of a new industrialism. Aesthetically, these ideas are manifested in a style which can be described as industrial neo-classicism reminiscent of Greco-Roman antiquity, the European Enlightenment, the Soviet modernization project, the era of industrialization and space exploration.



Stepan Liphart, *The Triumphal Arch*, 2012-2015. Computer graphics, 55x76

A number of renowned contemporary artists who cooperated with or were part of the circle of Timur Novikov, the New Academy and Friends of Mayakovsky Club in the 1990s represent industrial neo-classicism. These are Georgy Guryanov, Alexei Gintovt, Alexei Morozov, Mikhail Rozanov, Denis Egelsky, Natalia Zhernovskaya, the Plumbum-Cobalt Society (Sergey Sonin and Yelena Samorodova) or the Doping-Pong Group. The new generation of artists who associate themselves with Novikov's neo-academism - Anton Chumak, Stepan Liphart and Anastasia Zaborovskaya - represent the industrial neoclassical style.

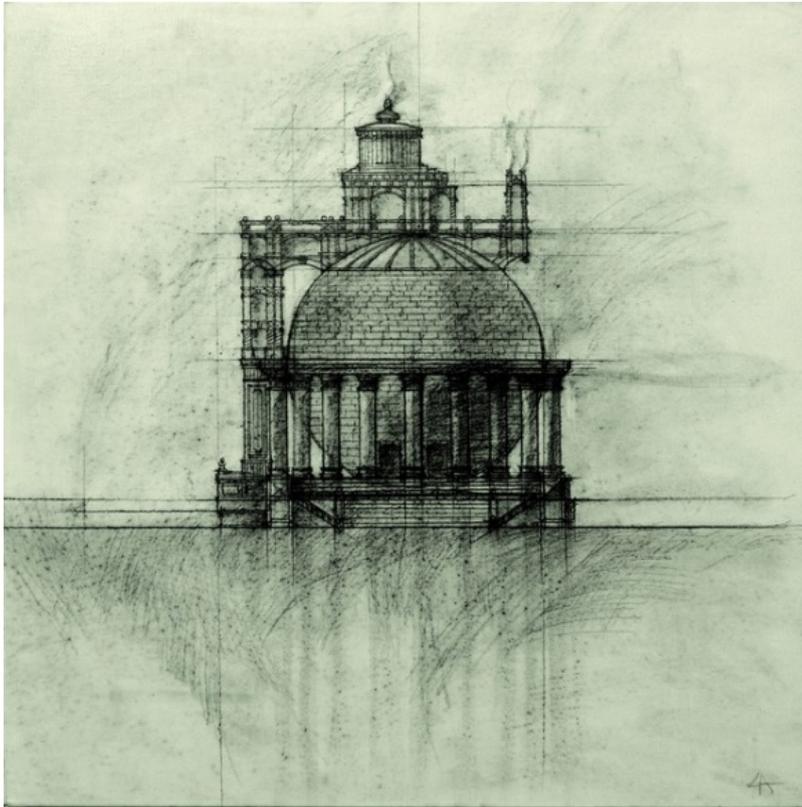
The language of classical figurativeness, rejected after World War II as "potentially totalitarian," as well as the industrial sublime associated with environmental pollution and bio-politics of Art Nouveau, appear in the works of the artists from this movement which visualize the alternative, global future project. The world of conservative utopia is sterile, mechanistic and austere. The submarine ark does not carry pairs of animals but columns, domes and smoking chimneys (Anton Chumak's work *The Ark*).



Anton Chumak, *The Ark*, 2014-2016.

Works by Alexei Gintovt, Anton Chumak and Stepan Liphart refer to the rich tradition of visionary architecture as the art of utopia - surrealist projects of the era of classicism - primarily, visionary ideas and megalomania of Giovanni Batista Piranesi (1720-1778), Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799), Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736-1806) and Jean-Jacques Lequeu (1757-1826) as well as Soviet visionary neoclassicism.

Thus, the composition *Reconstruction No. 2* from Anton Chumak's project *The Temple of Fire* is a visual citation from the spherical *Cenotaph for Newton* (1784) by Boullée. It follows the principles of the geometric style and architecture *parlante* (talking architecture) of European classicism. The exhibition of sculptor Alexei Morozov ["PONTIFEX MAXIMVS/LE STANZE"](#) held in spring 2017 in the Moscow Museum of Modern Art (MMOMA) glorifies the bridge builder and hierophant who combines the antiquity and modernity while overcoming not only territorial but also temporal fragmentarity.



Anton Chumak, "Reconstruction No. 2", project "The Temple of Fire", 2012

Projects of industrial neo-classicism can be treated as visualizations of the ideas of late Ernst Jünger, according to which the Worker is not only the master of technology but the "Son of the Earth". Ernst Jünger (1895-1998) echoes conservative criticism of Art Nouveau and contemplates the possibility of bridging the gap between the rational and mythological perception of the world in his postwar works *The Forest Passage* (1951) and *At the Wall of Time* (1959). Many artists representing this movement demonstrate an interest in "bewitching the technique", in the mythological perception of technology being part of nature. For instance, the video project "The Hunting Fragment. The Russian Stereo" by the Plumbum-Cobalt Society (2016) tells the story of the meeting of Apollo and Artemis in the woods of the Fifth Empire: space rockets and capsules coexist with birch colonnades and spruce porticoes, reminiscent of the Russian Palladianism of Nikolai Lvov (1751-1803).



The Plumbum-Cobalt Society,

Video installation *The Hunting Fragment. The Russian Stereo*, 2016.

Yet another movement of industrial classicism combines architectural photography with imperial veer, as most vividly represented in the art of Natalia Zhernovskaya. In her works, individuals, military equipment, and architecture are all governed by the universal laws of seductive imperial order.



Natalia Zhernovskaya, *Parade*, 2008.

Thus, industrial neoclassicists visualize the aesthetic utopia of the new antiquity as an alternative to the chaos of neoliberal globalism which, in their opinion, has set us back to the new Middle Ages with its ethnic nationalism, fragmentation, irrationality, and uncontrollable emotionality. This same metaphor of order and rationality is a constant in Putin's rhetoric which has gradually led to the formation of appropriate state aesthetics. The restoration of architectural ensembles of the Stalin era is central to urban projects which evidence the conservative revolution in official cultural policy. It is also evidenced by a new museum-related policy aimed at cooperation with the Vatican and the leading museum institutions of continental Europe (see my article ["The New Russian Renaissance"](#)).

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 Kerch bridge](#) in annexed Crimea, neo-industrialism has not yet become part of the Kremlin's official rhetoric - perhaps because the "new industrialist" program was proposed by Trump. In Russia, the ideas of second modernism and industrial sovereignty have not yet gone beyond conservative avant-garde but this should be anticipated in the nearest future given today's growing international isolation.



Denis Yegelsky, *Smelter*, 2015

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