

Conference Paper

The Battle for (Pre-)Modernity: Medieval Festivals in Contemporary Russia

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Abstract

In May 2016 a medieval Russian “knight” lanced a drone out of the skies above Lipetsk. The assailant was part of the Rusborg Historical Festival, one of hundreds of medieval re-enactment events that have sprung up across Russia since 2000 and have gained widespread popularity in recent years. This article considers these festivals as part of a larger trend in neo-medievalism that has come to occupy a surprisingly prominent place in contemporary Russian culture. Examining this trend in historical reconstruction, this article demonstrates how it is motivated by contemporary concerns about globalization and modernity and Russia’s place in the modern world. Though these issues are not explicitly discussed at medieval festivals, this article suggests that such events build towards an “affective public sphere,” that is, a space of public experience centered on aesthetics and affect rather than rational discourse. The immersive imaginary environments provided at these festivals encourage participants to explore the anxieties, nostalgias, and hopes evoked by contemporary life through emotional, affective experience, rather than rational political debate.

Keywords: neomedievalism, affect studies, public sphere, festivals, Times and Epochs

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1. Introduction

We have all reached the point of mixing up times. We have all become premodern again.

– Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*

In May 2016, a knight lanced a drone out of the sky above the Rusborg Medieval Festival near Lipetsk, one of hundreds of such festivals that have sprung up across Russia since 2000 and have gained significant popularity in recent years. [1] This incident highlights, in vivid kinetic detail, a growing trend in today’s Russia that stages interactions and often conflicts between the pre-modern and the contemporary, between tradition and technology. These festivals are part of a broader turn towards medievalism that has crept into post-Soviet Russian culture. Medieval festivals like the one outside of Lipetsk are part of a broader turn towards medieval aesthetics in both culture and political

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discourse that rejects aspects of modernity and globalization in favor of a pre-modern mode of being in the world.

2. Materials and Methods

This trend has been noted and discussed in contemporary Russian literature and film, but in this essay I instead want to turn to medieval festivals in Russia. Festivals are a particularly fruitful entry point into this broader neomedieval turn for at least two reasons. First, the immersive and collective nature of medieval festivals allows participants to enact and embody *non-discursively* a pre-modern way of being. (Scholars of Russia's reconstruction festivals often compare them to open-air museums and the tradition of 'living history' long active in Western Europe and North America. (See, for instance [2]) The key distinction, as I argue below, lies in the Russian festivals' reliance on aesthetics, performance, and affect over intellectual or discursive history. This orientation allows the historical record to mix more freely with imaginative elements informed by fantasy, the supernatural, or the occult) Medieval festivals encourage a collective, affective, and imaginative rejection of modernity, but one that leaves aside rational political discourse. This priority of affect over discourse is a central aspect of these festivals' appeal and of their power. Second, as these festivals reject much of the modern world, they also selectively integrate certain contemporary technologies into the pre-modern imaginary that they propose. While rejecting the "virtual reality" of contemporary culture, for instance, medieval knights have become Internet stars with their own dedicated webseries. (Dmitry Puchkov's YouTube channel, which has attracted over 1.1 million subscribers, features the host, often alongside Klim Zhukov exploring the history of the middle ages in both intellectual and performative modes. Most videos include an informed discussion on a certain historical event or artifact (usually military in nature) followed by a costumed re-enactment or reconstruction of that event in which Puchkov and Zhukov play the roles of medieval knights. See, for instance [3]. A more elaborate webseries, *A Knight's Story (Istoriia rytsaria)*, follows three contemporary Russians in their quest to become knights in various medieval festivals. [4]) Most major medieval festivals are staged by production companies that offer slick promotional videos and full-scale social-media campaigns. (The Heart of the Parma Festival was produced in its early years by the production company *lu'*, which has gone on to produce many of Aleksei Ivanov's multimedia projects. Promotional videos (often called "trailers") for regional festivals like Abalak Field and Epic Shore (*Bylinnyi bereg*) are produced by local production companies. See, for instance [5]. Moscow's

Times and Epochs is the most elaborately produced. That task is undertaken by the company Ratobortsy, which promotes historical reconstruction more broadly, producing documentary films and videoserries on pre-modern enactments as well as several festivals) Even as contemporary technology would seem to clash with the imagined worlds of these festivals, it is often not rejected, but rather incorporated into the larger imaginary project. Indeed, after the drone was lanced down from the sky outside of Lipetsk, festival organizers announced their intention to include a future competition, in which drones festooned as Styrofoam dragons would be specifically deployed as target practice for the knights. [6]

3. Discussion

3.1. Carefully Reconstructed Fantasies: The Historical Paradoxes of Medieval Festivals

Contemporary Russia's medieval festivals are not confined to a single region, nor do they conform to a single format. Some, like the Abalak Field (*Abalakscoe pole*) festival outside of Tiumen' in western Siberia, intend to recreate a historical event or era specific to the festival's location. Others are based on fictional sources, like The Heart of the Parma (*Serdtse parmy*) festival north of Perm in the Urals, which originally took its inspiration from a 2003 novel by Aleksei Ivanov about the fifteenth century colonization of the Urals, and which now attracts between 10,000 and 25,000 participants annually. [7] Other festivals are more vaguely pre-modern, like Moscow's enormous Times and Epochs (*Vremena i epokhi*), which focuses on a different era each year but perennially features participants in costumes of a variety of premodern eras and geographies, from fourteenth-century France to tenth-century Viking lands to the homegrown medievalism of Ivan III's *Rus'*. (In addition to these three festivals which represent the focus of the current study, hundreds of festivals and clubs can be found throughout the country. Though I have not been able to locate an exhaustive nationwide list, the abundance of local scholarship on regional and municipal festivals and clubs allows one to extrapolate that around two hundred festivals take place annually with the participation of nearly 1,000 local clubs and other organizations. For a sample of such local scholarship, see, for instance [2, 8–10])

Regardless of their historical scope, all of these festivals emphasize historical fidelity. They require costumed participants to apply with a picture of their wares along with up to three museum or archeological sources they used for the recreations (see, for instance,



Figure 1: Photographs of historical kit in application to the 2018 Prince's Court (*Kniazhii dvor*) festival outside of Novosibirsk. The applicant, Viktor Egorov, reconstructs a Rus' civilian of approximately 1280–1330. His historical 'passport' details his sources: pants and shirt based two different a fourteenth-century icons with hand-made buttons and belt buckle (detail) modeled on archeological finds detailed in a 2004 academic publication. (Photo courtesy of Viktor Egorov)

Viktor Egorov's historical 'passport' submitted in combination with the photographs in Figure 1 [11]). As one of the festivals' websites insists, this is the only way to ensure an 'authentic' (*dostovernyi*) "immersion into the epoch of the early middle ages." [12] (Other festivals use similar language. The Rusborg festival promises "Full immersion into the atmosphere of the middle ages. Bright. Colorful. Authentic" [13]) To an outsider, however, it is a strange kind of immersion, one that does not seem bothered by the imposition of contemporary reality. Knights battle in front of modern audiences and stacks of concert-grade speakers. When displaying their homemade weapons, artisans emphasize historical authenticity while sharing details about which hardware stores and modern tools aided their creations. (I interviewed a reconstructor from the Heart of the Parma festival, Nikolai Burtsov, as he visited various hardware stores buying supplies for an upcoming festival. At the festivals themselves, reconstructors share best practices with each other and describe their creative process to visitors. The possibility of ordering textiles from Moscow comes from Kliuev and Sveshnikov's survey of western Siberian reconstruction: "In general you can do it all very economically. But if you do everything right, like you should, for instance ordering from Moscow fabrics that are specially woven and dyed" the cost is more. [14]) All festivals invite un-costumed visitors, and

many include family-friendly and very modern amusements like face-painting and Nerf sword-fighting, alongside the more historically faithful reconstructions and events.

The festivals, it seems, do not intend to provide a truly immersive experience of the recreated era, but rather, they offer the opportunity to participate in a collective and imaginative reconstruction of that world, which nevertheless remains embedded within contemporary reality. Even as these festivals encourage the kind of 'collective effervescence' characteristic of religious feasts in Durkheim's classic account, they are premised not on a shared religious faith, but on a shared historical imagination. Their specific magic requires not only the presence, but also the active imaginative participation of all involved, whether costumed reconstructors or interested visitors. [15]. (The collective experiences offered by these festivals might suggest comparisons to Bakhtin's understanding of carnival as presented in *Rabelais and his World*. "Carnival," writes Bakhtin, "does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. [...] Carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live it" [16]. In addition, Bakhtin's study of carnival is permeated by a longing for the distant past, similar to that which informs contemporary medieval festivals. The idea of carnival, he writes, "was most clearly expressed in the Roman Saturnalias, perceived as true and full, though temporary, return of Saturn's golden age upon earth" [16]. Many equally intriguing similarities can be drawn between Bakhtin's notion of carnival and these contemporary events. But providing an exhaustive account of possible overlap between contemporary medieval festivals and Bakhtin's analysis of carnival risks reducing the former to a concept. I have found it more productive to invoke Bakhtin's analysis periodically, usually in conjunction with other thinkers, as it helps illuminate the phenomenon at hand) Put another way, the festivals' effect is predicated not on a detached spectator's belief in the reconstructed world, but on a collective desire to both imagine and enact an alternative reality, one which resurrects aspects of pre-modernity within and against the contemporary world.

Rekonstruktory – as the battle re-enactors, costume designers, craftspeople and armaments makers collectively call themselves – often emphasize the deeply researched nature of their work, and indeed, much of the wares on display at these festivals are constructed with careful attention to historical detail. In interviews, many talk at length of their knowledge of the social worlds of the past and others highlight their reliance on primary sources. [17] Nevertheless, the reconstructors themselves frame their work as active engagement, rather than rational investigation. A Moscow-based reconstructor Andrei Ivanov, for instance, emphasizes his use of *pervoistochniki* (primary sources) but characterizes the goal of historical reconstruction not as knowledge-building but as the 'activation of historical memory' (*aktivizatsiia istoricheskoi pamiatii*).

Nevertheless, that collective desire, it would seem, depends on a certain level of historical fidelity. Indeed, for all the historical accuracy and even qualified academic work that goes into these medieval festivals, their main effect seems to be the recreation, or perhaps simply creation, of a largely imagined past, something closer to collective fantasy than to accurate historical reconstruction. A promotional video advertising the largest such festival in Russia, *Vremena i epokhi* (Times and Epochs), for instance, offers an encounter with the living middle ages, with ‘the forgotten images, smells, and sounds’ of the past. This emphasis on sensory experience over historical knowledge conjures a past created less from knowledge than from feeling. Such an emphasis leaves plenty of room for the fantastic.

In the seconds following the introduction quoted above, the camera zooms out over the festival’s grounds, and the computer-generated shadow of what could only be a dragon swoops over the Moscow River. Such fantastical elements are not uncommon in historical reconstruction. A promotional video for the Abalak Field festival features sorcerers and alchemists (as well as computer-generated magic) alongside battle-reenactors, while The Heart of the Parma festival is based on a novel that includes shape-shifters, shamans, and magical amulets. (Many festivals are even more open about their mix of history and fantasy. The Epic Shore (Bylinnyi bereg) festival outside of Tver’, for instance, explicitly takes its inspiration from the Russian epic narratives known as byliny even as it maintains relatively stringent requirements of historical authenticity for its participants and rejects around 20% of applicants. [18]) At first glance, such elements of fantasy and the occult might seem incongruous with these festivals’ insistence on historical fidelity, but as Jeffrey Brooks and Boris Dralyuk have emphasized, reconstruction and reenactment have often been conceived of as spaces of play within historical contexts. [19] Part of that play can involve the free combination of the historical record with counterfactuals and even fantastical alternatives.



Figure 2: A shadow of a dragon swoops across the Moscow River in the promotional video for Times and Epochs, 2016 (“Otchetnyi rolík,” *Ratoborshow*, <https://vimeo.com/173893488>). video is in the public domain

The provenance of the dragon's shadow is also worth considering. The computer-generated dragon is more than a figment of the imagination, it is a creation of contemporary technology, and as such, it indicates an important aspect of the relationship between modern media and the pre-modern imaginary it represents. Far from simply reflecting the festival's collective performance, this promotional video actively participates, even contributes to the imaginative experience. It conjures a dragon that exists in no other form – no corresponding physical representation of a dragon can be found on the festival grounds. Put another way, the pre-modernity of this festival is not created in spite of contemporary technology, but 'by and through' that very technology. The end goal is not, however, an immersive computer-generated virtual reality. Instead, contemporary technology is marshaled to enhance the real-world collective experience of the festivals themselves to encourage participation, induce a sense of wonder, or activate a pre-modern affective experience. In this way, the shadow of the dragon is not meant to be believed – viewers of the promotional video should not expect to find real dragons when they visit the festival – but rather it is meant to catalyze a certain type of imaginative experience. Such flashes of digital sorcery announce the festivals' artificiality, admitting that such events can recreate only a pale imitation of the 'real' past they represent. It is then up to the collective imagination of participants to more fully conjure the distant, inaccessible, and therefore necessarily richer world of the distant past.

Far from raising questions of intellectual consistency or historical authenticity, apparent contradictions in medieval reconstruction inflect medieval festivals with their specific energy. The insistence on historical accuracy coupled with elements of fantasy, the immersion in pre-modernity with the help of contemporary media – these paradoxical elements should not be seen as chinks in the armor of verisimilitude or slippages of the medieval mask. Instead, they should be understood as essential elements of the imaginative experience. These contradictions become sites on which the conflict between pre-modernity and contemporary life is demonstratively staged. Such stagings highlight the differences between the conflicting epochs, while also allowing for resolutions that enhance the pre-modern aesthetic experience. By reminding participants of the distance between contemporary reality and the reconstructed pre-modernity, they stimulate the collective imagination, supplementing the festivals' material recreations of the past with hints of the unknowable, the inaccessible, and the supernatural. (Arguing that historical reconstruction is at least as performative and social as it is historically engaged, Saratov sociologist Nikolai Bozhok writes, "It would be more correct to call these practices 'historico-social reconstruction'" (emphasis added). [20] Reconstruction

is essentially performative, Bozhok continues; it uses recreated objects as “theatrical props,” against which it performs “verbal and nonverbal etiquette” and “social (inter)relations based on its own aesthetics.” [20] For Bozhok, the performance of these social relations forms the true core of the historical reconstruction movement)

3.2. Playgrounds for the Future Elite

This particular festival’s mix of history and fantasy has proven popular. Begun in 2011, Times and Epochs is currently Europe’s largest festival of historical reconstruction. [21] It takes place annually over three days in July at Moscow’s Kolomenskoe park, and has attracted more than 250,000 visitors in each of the last two years. (In 2017, Times and Epochs changed formats. No longer contained in Kolomenskoe Park, the festival moved out into the city, with market places, artisan wares, and reconstruction activities in public spaces throughout the center of Moscow. The change in format means that the festival no longer has an official entrance but is rather open to passersby in much of the city. Because of this, official attendance numbers dropped in 2017 to around 160,000, though it is safe to assume that many more Muscovites and visitors to the capital experienced the festival in some way. See [22]) Part of the attraction, says a Norwegian reconstructor interviewed for the project, is the festival’s lack of ideological imperatives. “It doesn’t matter what country you come from. It doesn’t matter your politics, because we’re all here for our common interest in history.” [23] Indeed, many festival-goers emphasize the collective and apparently de-politicized aspect of medieval festivals. Oleg Lysenko who has been attending *The Heart of the Parma* with his family for several years, told me in an interview that the festival is one of the only events that brings together representatives of the various socioeconomic strata of Perm. [15] Participation in the festival, Lysenko says, creates a new hierarchy based on authenticity of costumes and handicrafts, and on depth of knowledge. In a similar vein, one of the organizers of Moscow’s Times and Epochs wrote on his blog, “Reconstruction is generally not very ideological [*s/abo ideologizirovana*], and that is part of its attraction.” [24] Even as the festivals encourage attendees to imagine an alternative reality, one in which fantasy and history enliven the contemporary world, they do not require the explicit articulation of any underlying value system. Rather, they provide a collective, immersive space in which to explore – aesthetically, imaginatively, but *non-discursively* – the possible anxieties, frustrations, or hopes that might animate such alternatives.

Nevertheless, the *Vremena i epokhi* festival is sponsored by the Moscow Department of National Politics, Inter-regional Relations, and Tourism. Indeed, local and regional

Russian government agencies, taken together, are the single biggest funder of historical reconstruction in Russia, suggesting that a certain ideological content might be lurking not far beneath the surface. In fact, after suggesting that medieval festivals are ‘not very ideological’, the same festival organizer goes on to say, “However, within the movement, I don’t know of any nihilists or Russophobes [...] Healthy values, ‘absorbed’ from the past, are characteristic of reconstructors: strong families, traditional gender roles, a cult of comradeship.” [24]

That the Russian government might support strong families and traditional gender roles is no surprise – indeed, these have been two of its priorities for the last several years. But what is more surprising is how these medieval festivals position themselves not as representatives of a sort of mainstream morality, but rather as insurgents, pushing against the currents of the contemporary world. Aleksei Ovcharenko, one of the lead organizers of the Times and Epochs festival in Moscow, sees the outdoor interactive events as pitted against the overwhelming growth of virtual reality, video games, and social media. He frames the ‘mass trend’ of online technology as the consensus among the contemporary youth, against which reconstruction stands as a bulwark:

When there is a mass trend, there is always a group of people who oppose themselves to that trend. And now we have young guys for whom reconstruction is the opposite, a sort of pressure release, a chance to de-virtualize and prove that in real life you’re also worth something. In any case, the elite is always formed from people who make real decisions and who use virtual reality as an instrument, and not as their habitat. [24]

The end of this quote is telling. Instead of rejecting virtual reality outright, Ovcharenko reclaims it as an instrument to be used in the decision-making of an imagined future elite. This future elite, it seems, will find their way of interacting with the world, at least in part, through medieval festivals.

The somewhat unexpected future orientation of Ovcharenko’s statement exposes the contemporary anxieties that energize the recent interest in pre-modernity. The movement might be understood as a reaction against what are seen as harmful tendencies in the contemporary world. But as an alternative, it offers not a simple return to the past. Rather, it proposes a way of bringing values of the past, along with select technologies of the present, into a future that has changed its course from our current trajectory.

This future orientation is perhaps most clear on the elaborate website of the company that produces Times and Epochs. Among its events and services, the company lists reconstructions ranging from ancient Rome to WWII, but the site also lists one particular offering that sticks out for its future orientation: *Post”iadernyi trening* or training for life after the atomic apocalypse. A video invites participants to join. The first shot opens in

a wrecked and abandoned office. The lone survivor turns to the camera and directly addresses the viewer:

Hey, colleague [*Privet, sotrudnik*]. Your world can change at any second. Boom! [A snap of his fingers cuts to an atomic explosion.] Now all your values, everything you've been striving for, no longer has any meaning. [He tosses aside his employee ID card.] You are not your work. You are not your clothes. [He removes his jacket and tie.] Remember what you're really ready for? What you're worth, what you're capable of? Want to find out? [25] (The lines "You are not your job. You are not your clothes," are directly borrowed from Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club* (or perhaps from the 1999 David Fincher film adaptation of the same name), which likewise opposes the alienation of office work and everyday life to a more real (and masculine-inflected) existence founded on physical violence)

Over the remainder of the two-and-a-half-minute video, the man on screen continues to directly address the viewer as he scavenges for food, takes up a military-style assault rifle, and by nightfall, ends up roasting a rodent over a fire with the shapely legs of a female survivor draped across his knees. "I know how to survive," he beckons. "Join me." [25]



Figure 3: Stills from the promotional video for Ratobortsy's immersive Training for the Nuclear Apocalypse. "I know how to survive," says the central figure, "join me". [25]. The film is in the public domain

When read alongside the company's primary focus on historical reconstruction, this post-apocalyptic training and its promotional materials add nuance to our understanding of some of the concerns at the basis of medieval festivals. In this light, the de-virtualization invoked by Ovcharenko has as much to do with the alienation of office labor in a globalized (and largely virtualized) economy as it does it with video games and social media. (The demographics of historical reconstruction would seem to confirm this intuition. According to research conducted in Omsk, more professional-age men participate than do representatives of the teenage and young adult contingent more often associated with video-game and online culture. [2]) Just like this post-apocalyptic training, medieval festivals offer participants the opportunity to escape from their computer screens and sterile offices into a tactile world of emotional, immediate, and 'real' experience (with another heavy dose of hegemonic masculinity).

Of course, the offered experiences are not real, but imaginative. Carefully curated by organizers, the 'reality' of the experience is imagined into being by the collective will of the participants. And it is precisely this opportunity to imagine a new reality – collectively, experientially, rather than rationally or discursively – that these events offer. A tag line for the post-apocalyptic training reads, "Build a new world on the ruins of the old." [25] This offer to imaginatively construct a different world out of one no longer troubled by globalization and modernity could describe equally well the implicit invitation in medieval festivals. Instead of imagining a time after nuclear disaster, medieval festivals simply turn back the clock. But the effect is similar: both events clear the ground for the reconstruction of a differently imagined world, one based on values derived from the past, usually involving traditional notions of masculinity, the valuation of both manual skills and physical force, and a respect for received hierarchies. In this way, these festivals create a political imaginary that projects an array of conservative (often reactionary) values into the future, but it is an imaginary conjured less from rational political argumentation or even speculative discourse than from collective imaginative experience.

We can now better understand how Ovcharenko's imagined 'future elite' might be formed, at least in part, through historical reconstruction. Medieval festivals allow participants to reject a virtualized existence – conceived of not only as contemporary and online media, but also as the dominant modes of globalized modernity, primarily the financial capital-based sectors represented by alienating office work. The festivals create a space that, if only temporarily, wipes away such complex interworkings of geopolitics and economics and instead allows for the imagined construction of alternative social arrangements and hierarchies. As such, the events can be seen as something

like playgrounds for Ovcharenko's future elites, a sort of 'magic circle' (to borrow a term from Johan Huizinga) within which dominant social modes can be questioned and alternatives can be forged. [26] Within the festivals' magic circle, participants learn to combine historical memory with fantasy, to supplement tactile experience with contemporary media technologies, in order to resurrect traditional value systems (or, more precisely, to *bricolage* new value systems out of a stylized understanding of the past and its traditions) in a way that is viable and affectively appealing to contemporary citizens. (Such a vision of the future elite should not be dismissed as mere fantasy, as the figure of Igor Strelkov (also known as Igor Girkin) demonstrates. An avid reconstructor and participant in both medieval and other historical festivals, Strelkov took command of the Donetsk People's Republic shortly after the Maidan protests forced Viktor Yanukovitch from the presidency of Ukraine. His background in historical reconstruction—especially re-enactments of the Russian civil war, where Strelkov played the role of a white army officer—continues to inform his activities. According to Oleg Kashin, "Essentially, he is now playing the same role in Ukraine: his haircut, his mustache, his manners, and even his military tactics are almost all copied from images of White Guard officers in Soviet films". [27] Though this example should not be taken as representative of all participants in historical reconstruction—neither in their political convictions nor in their career trajectories—it does demonstrate the way in which the immersive, collective, and imaginative experiences offered by historical reconstruction can provide a playground for the development of powerful political imaginaries, which indeed might inform future political action in the real world)

4. Conclusion. The Affective Public Sphere

The complex relationships among these festivals, their participants, and the political imaginaries they inspire suggests that they might be productively understood as part of contemporary Russia's public sphere. The public sphere, as imagined by Jürgen Habermas, is "a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed." [28] In distinct contrast to Habermas's vision, however, the skills and modes of thinking encouraged by medieval festivals are not those of rational argumentation or logical discourse. On the contrary, festivals mobilize aesthetic experience and develop modes of thinking that are specifically imaginative and affective, rather than rational and discursive. Nevertheless, since emotion, affect, and even aesthetics contribute no less to shaping the common political world than do argumentation and discourse, these modes of thinking should also be seen as political in nature. By marshaling aesthetic techniques

to create immersive imaginative experiences, festivals “partition the sensible”, to borrow a phrase from Jacques Rancière. [29] Through experience and materiality, objects, costumes, techniques, and ways of being, festivals engage in a version of the politics of the public sphere, but it is not the rationally discursive public sphere of Habermas’s formulation, or even the modes of aesthetic, but still verbal, engagement implied in Rancière’s analysis. Instead, it is something much more affective and emotional, something which incorporates aspects of Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnival and Emile Durkheim’s ‘collective effervescence’. (Habermas himself has reconsidered his conception of the public sphere in the decades since the release of *The Structural Transformation*. One of his subsequent refinements is especially relevant to my purposes here: “Only after reading Mikhail Bakhtin’s great book *Rabelais and his World* have my eyes been really opened to the inner dynamics of a plebeian culture. This culture of the common people apparently was by no means only a backdrop, that is, a passive echo of the dominant culture; it was also the periodically recurring violent revolt of a counterproject to the hierarchical world of domination, with its official celebrations and everyday disciplines. Only a stereoscopic view of this sort reveals how a mechanism of exclusion that locks out and represses at the same time calls forth countereffects that cannot be neutralized” [30])

What is distinctive about contemporary Russia’s medieval festivals as analyzed here is that they do not require – nor do they consistently generate – the articulation of political positions by their members. Even as participants come together at these festivals, make social connections, and forge durable group formations, the festival experience remains primarily affective rather than articulate. For this reason, I suggest the term ‘affective public sphere’, as a public sphere that brings participants together into groupings that resemble publics, but that are not conditioned primarily on discourse, but on shared affective experience formed around collective imagination, materiality, and performance. (Even those considerations of publics that are sensitive to affect and performance, such as Michael Warner’s *Publics and Counterpublics*, nevertheless insist on the centrality of discourse. [31] Though Warner insists that a public or counterpublic can elaborate “forms of intimate association, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment, erotic practices, and relations of care and pedagogy” (31) he nevertheless places discourse at the very heart of his definition. “A public,” he writes, “is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than the discourse itself. [...] it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed” (emphasis in the original) [31]) In closing, I would like to note that, though this particular instance of the ‘affective public

sphere' occupies the conservative side of Russia's contemporary political spectrum, I see no reason why imagining alternatives to contemporary modernity should be a project exclusively of the political right. Indeed, the progressive left has a long tradition of proposing political imaginaries, though more often in discursive, rather than affective modes. By tracing the effectiveness of such collective experiences today, I hope to suggest that attention to the 'affective public sphere' might be essential for not only understanding conservative retrenchment, but also for practicing politics across the ideological spectrum, and especially for generating effective progressive political imaginaries.

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