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Visions of the Third Rome: Moscow as a Retro-futurist Imperial Capital

The political turbulences of the past few years have emerged at a time where popular political discourse (in Russia and the West) is dominated by questions over the nature of reality. 'Post-truth', or 'weaponised irony' (Power, 2017), has enabled the resurgence of a growing radical right-wing in the US. Whether it be interventions on the 'unhappy consciousness of neo-reactionaries' (Hui, 2017), or the 'language of the new brutality' (Power, 2017), contemporary scholarship has repeatedly turned to psychoanalytic, economic, or linguistic analysis of the conservative challenges to contemporary world order. This paper seeks to look at the rise of a renewed 'conservatism' through its visual constructions.

In particular, I focus on depictions of 'Moscow as the Third Rome' – a common trope in Russian imperialist thought (Laruelle 2008). I examine visions of the Third Rome in the work of three contemporary artists – Alexey Belyaev-Gintovt, Alexey Morozov, and Alisa Korolyova – asking how retro-futuristic visions of Moscow enter into relation with the mainstream political and artistic discourses. Does the parallel coexistence of this artistic Moscow (un)intentionally affect the Moscow in which these works are shown? Is this retrofuture a form of escapism or resistance? In this paper, I argue that contemporary visual art is a key medium through which radical right discourses have quickly become part of the mainstream imaginary; in my analysis I show how, having aesthetically excavated Moscow, they seek to normalise imperialism and construct an alternative vision of Russian political and cultural life.