

Title: 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 Ruborg 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 paper considers these festivals and their place in contemporary culture. I argue that such events build towards a “cultural public sphere” (McGuigan 2004), that is, a public sphere centered on aesthetics and affective experience rather than on discourse or debate. These immersive imaginary environments, I suggest, encourage participants to reconsider modernity from a fantastical, pre-modern perspective.

Focusing on one such festival, the Call of the Parma in the northern Urals, I argue that medieval reconstructions produce an effect similar to what Umberto Eco (1986) called hyperreality: a simulacrum that presents itself as both fully realistic and fully constructed. When displaying homemade armor, for instance, the "rekonstruktory" (or re-enactors) emphasize historical authenticity while simultaneously sharing details about which hardware stores provided their raw materials and which modern tools aided in their creations. The constant presence of the contemporary world suggests that the festival's medieval setting exists only as an imagined possibility, not a fully reconstructed reality. Pre-modernity becomes an imaginary alternative to contemporary reality, a foil against which to re-evaluate actually existing modernity. Crucially, these festivals provide primarily an aesthetic experience, rather than a discursive platform for exploring these issues. Instead of reasoned political debates, they stage the battle for modernity as affective engagement, encouraging skepticism of the modern world while avoiding direct political confrontation.