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## Cyberpunk, "Feelosophy", and Politics. Tatyana Tolstaya, Victor Pelevin, and Vladimir Sorokin's Fiction, between Postmodernism and Metamodernism

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at the cyberpunk fiction authored by Tatyana Tolstaya, Victor Pelevin, and Vladimir Sorokin, in order to delineate their literary and political engagements in imagining the future, in a world where Russia plays a lead, if controversial, role. From the literary point of view, their prose ranges from postmodernism to metamodernism, with Pelevin closer to the former, and Sorokin, to the latter of the two poles. Their aesthetic choices should be correlated with their public postures (involving biographical trajectories, artistic creeds, ethical statements, political choices, and so on). Postmodern tropes like unreliable narration, irony, and self-referentiality can be connected to political relativism, whataboutism, and solipsism, while the metamodern emphasis on the affective turn resonates with a mutant form of moral responsibility, in a post-apocalyptic ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Post-Soviet Postmodernism; Dystopia; Cyberpunk; Metamodernism; Affective Turn; Posture.

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This paper looks at a series of novels authored by the Russian writers Tatyana Tolstaya (*The Slynx*, 2000), Victor Pelevin (*Homo Zapiens*, 1999; *S.N.U.F.F.*, 2011; *iPhuck 10*, 2017; *KGBT+*, 2022), and Vladimir Sorokin (*Ice*, 2002; *Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006; *The Blizzard*, 2010; *Manaraga*, 2017; *Doctor Garin*, 2021)<sup>1</sup>, sometimes described as cyberpunk, *noir* techno-fantasy, dystopian or speculative fiction. We preferred the term cyberpunk, as an all-encompassing genre hybridizing "high" and "low" elements, mixing representational modes like hyperrealism, hi-tech sci-fi (including CG or AI imaginaries), conspirational thriller, political satire, fantasy and so on.

All of the above-mentioned narratives have in common a pessimistic outlook on the future of our ecosystem, in tone with Nick Bostrom's anxieties regarding the development of transhumanist superintelligence<sup>2</sup>. The fictional representations of the world of tomorrow have changed from the 1990s to the 2020s, in tone with the evolution of international relations and, in particular, with the deep transformation of the public sphere in Russia, from Yeltsin's relatively liberal governance of the late

1990s, to Putin's authoritarian regime of the latest decades.

From the literary point of view, Tolstaya, Pelevin, and Sorokin's fiction should be associated with two different traditions. On the one hand, the reader should look at the Russian repertoire of dystopian Sci-Fi and black fantasy, represented in works like *We* (1924) by Yevgeny Zamyatin, *The Master and Margarita* (1967; written in 1928-1940) by Mikhail Bulgakov, and *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (1980) by Chinghiz Aitmatov, on the backdrop of a larger series of texts pertaining to the Soviet culture<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, the texts are connected to a framework of international references like *R.U.R.* (1920) by Karel Čapek, *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell, or more recent novels by Frank Herbert, Philip K. Dick, Richard Morgan, and Cormac McCarthy. More or less direct allusions to this double framing can be (and have been) perceived in all the texts taken in account, due to their authors' strong engagement with the national and world literary heritages.

### 1. A Telescope from the Future and One from the Past. The Middle Ages 2.0

In Russia, the interest in the dystopian genre was rekindled in the 1990s, as a late counter-reaction to socialist-realism, the main dogma imposed on the literary system of the Soviet Union, for many decades. In a 2022 interview, Vladimir Sorokin explained that his decision to leave realism behind was not only political, but also aesthetic, as he considered realism unable to grasp the fluidity of today's conception of

the world: "the world is changing so unpredictably that classical realistic prose isn't able to catch up to it [...]. It's like shooting at a bird that's already flown away"<sup>4</sup>. In order to capture the fleeting reality, the writer needs a more complex toolkit, enabling him to grasp both the past and the future, in the present: "This is why I prefer complicated optics [...]. In order to see what is real you need two telescopes. [...] One from the past and another from the future"<sup>5</sup>.

I contend that this double-sided optical system is a cognitive metaphor fit to describe not only Sorokin's, but also Tolstaya and Pelevin's literary strategies. Their narratives accommodate a "telescope" "from the future" and "one from the past", representing at the same time the progression to the hi-tech and the regression to the archaic, the advance to superintelligence and the return to atavism.

In what regards the future, eight out of the ten novels discussed here are set in post-catastrophic societies, in the aftermath of nuclear explosions, world wars, or Islamic revolutions (*The Slynx*, *S.N.U.F.F.*, *iPhuck 10*, *KGBT+*, *Day of the Oprichnik*, *The Blizzard*, *Manaraga*, *Doctor Garin*). In the not-so-distant future of the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> centuries, the world is run by dictatorships, supported by media-manipulated, techno-controlled, bio-engineered populations devoid of free will. Even the two stories narrating events from the 1990-2000s are oriented toward bleak futurescapes, in which smart gadgets and cognition enhancers (like nootropic drugs) are used in order to consolidate power structures enslaving the individual (*Homo Zapiens*, *Ice*).

In what regards the relationship with the past, the reader may notice how frequently the atmosphere of ancient times

insinuates in these futurescapes. In *The Slynx*, the post-nuclear community experiences a new form of primitivism, returning to the fear of supernatural animals (like the "slynx"), given that the authorities, led by the dictator Fyodor Kuzmich, did their best to erase all the remains of modernity, and especially the books considered dangerous. It is noteworthy that the supreme leader, Kuzmich, bears the name and surname of a Siberian hermit of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, retired in a medieval-like settlement in Siberia, canonized by the Eastern Orthodox Church in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik*, the secret police agent Komiaga drives a fancy car equipped with a dog's head on the hood, communicates with his superiors through virtual tele-screens, while indulging in brute practices like breaking the bones of political rivals with a club, or gang-raping their wives, as retaliatory measures. The terror institution he works in, *oprichnina*, bears the title of the repressive state apparatus invented by Ivan the Terrible in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The mix of medieval and high-tech elements results in a 2.0 version of obscurantism, providing Nikolai Berdyaev's idea of "the new Middle Ages" with a turn of the millennium update. The authors hybridize premodern with postmodern features in order to represent the coextension, if not identity, of hi-tech autocracy with primitive capitalism. The first meaning of the time regression is, thus, markedly dystopian.

## 2. Russian Classics and "Feelosophy"

However, there is a second type of time regression, to a closer historical past: that is, to the 19<sup>th</sup> century literature of Russian classics like Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy,

Dostoevsky, or Chekhov. The hero of Pelevin's *iPhuck 10*, a versatile A.I. police-operated algorithm, morphing through different cyber-identities, bears the name of the detective who investigated Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*: Porfiry Petrovich. In Dostoevsky's vein, the nonhuman hero ends the novel with a vibrant monologue on human suffering. In *The Blizzard*, Sorokin imagines a whirling winter highly reminiscent of Turgenev and Chekhov, with a drowsy *muzhik* crouched by the stove in an *izba*, a vehicle barely navigating between mounts of snow, a doctor willing to cure the peasants from a remote village of a mysterious epidemic and so on. The protagonist from Sorokin's *Manaraga*, a human enhanced with mechatronic microcomponents, is a chef specialized in *book'n'grilling* with Russian classics, that is, in burning vintage editions of Gogol, Tolstoy and others to fire the grill, at flashy dinner parties thrown by the *nouveaux riches*.

The allusions to the 19<sup>th</sup> century authors reactivate the Russian cultural heritage and, in particular, a certain type of psychological literature exploring moral crisis and inner illumination. The referred classic novels, codifying various degrees of trauma, re-humanize the trama of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cyberpunk novels, marking an affective turn in the space of the genre. While the main plots invite the vision of a transhumanist capitalism turned cynical, the intertextual references refresh the memory of a candid humanism, though sometimes diverted towards malignant purposes. Such is the case in Sorokin's *Ice*, where a group of sect followers use special ice hammers to break open the chests of carefully selected victims, in order to free the "voice" of their hearts and enroll them in what looks like a eugenics programme. "The chosen ones" experience an "awakening" of conscience,

a state of exhilaration manifesting itself through grateful embraces and outbursts of tears, à la Dostoevsky. However, rather than spiritual illumination, Sorokin's novel envisages the commodification of spiritual illumination on a postcommunist Russian market dominated by an alliance of mafia rackets and capitalist kingpins, implying that the inner quest, debased and monetized, wouldn't save either the planet, or the soul. This vision lacks the naïve positivity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century humanism championed in the writings of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Jean-Paul Sartre, or even Eugène Ionesco (whose hero from the play *Rhinoceros*, Béranger, represented the last man standing against de-humanization).

While not claiming the return to a purported "human essence", Tolstaya, Pelevin, and Sorokin's cyberpunk novels seem to suggest an affective turn, by reactivating motifs from the Russian classics. In a social environment heavily impacted by environmental disaster, genetic engineering, and biotechnology, such boosts of oxytocin still move something within the (trans)human subject.

Tolstaya details such an inner discovery in *The Slynx*. The protagonist, the scribe Benedikt, has the job to copy some books written before the nuclear blast, in which he comes across sophisticated words unknown to him and to his community, given that the traces of the material and spiritual civilization have been wiped out almost entirely. By misspelling, mispronouncing, and misinterpreting old concepts found in the books, he carves out new terms, like *feelosophy* (a corrupted form of *philosophy*, of course), whose meaning he tries to approximate, based on his inner states: "It's like there's a sadness inside. Like you feel sorry for someone. Must be feelosophy"<sup>6</sup>.

Another attempt to grasp the visceral content of the corrupted word surfaces in the narrator's free indirect speech:

[...] feelosophy suddenly churned up inside Benedikt. Dimly, like a shadow under the water, something in his heart started to turn, to torment and call him. But where? Hard to say. There was a tingling in his back, and he felt tears rise. It was either like you were fixing to get good and mad, or wanted to fly. Or get married<sup>7</sup>.

As clumsily described by Benedikt, his fluid emotion resembles an irrational or suprarational experience, either empathic ("like you feel sorry for someone"), erotic (like longing to "get married"), or aesthetic ("like a shadow under the water", tormenting his heart). "Feelosophy" – a portmanteau between *feel* and *philosophy* – should be understood as a private wisdom, a σοφία, of feeling<sup>8</sup>.

The temporal loop to the Russian classics signifies a return to emotions, as traumas explored with the "optical system" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. The welding between past and future imaginaries results in a Russian narco-technological retrofuturism imbued in nostalgia, both naïve and duplicitous. The ambiguity of the end-products in terms of sincerity/ insincerity has raised controversies in what regards their classification in literary paradigms.

### 3. Post-Soviet Postmodernism and Metamodernism

The usual label attached to Tolstaya, Pelevin, and Sorokin remains "postmodernism", whether we look at the

literary press or the academic research, with some variations around the used keywords (conceptualism, Sots-Arts, neo-baroque, post-postmodernism)<sup>9</sup>. Nicolas Dreyer developed a different perspective, preferring "neo-modernism" as a paradigm characterizing the Post-Soviet prose in general, and Vladimir Sorokin, Vladimir Turchkov, and Aleksandr Khurgin's writings in particular. As evidence against the existence of a Russian postmodernism, the critic holds that the local society did not fully traverse modernity, in the Western sense of the concept, involving "rationalism, humanism, individualism, and democracy"<sup>10</sup>. A more traditional Russia has resisted civilizational dislocation, to the effect that a further step beyond modernity would be, yet, implausible. Accordingly, the Russian literature has remained engaged with old themes like "a metaphysical yearning for universal meaning, transcending the perceived fragmentation of the tangible modern world"<sup>11</sup>, still rooted in the metanarratives that the Western cultures have long disposed of. This is why Dreyer thinks that the recent novels, re-elaborating motifs taken from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian cultural repository, would qualify as post-Soviet neo-modernism.

While I appreciate his emphasis on the recent prose aiming to "redeem the past", I have two objections against Dreyer's argument. First, the development of (post)modernism in the absence of a full-fledged (post)modernity has been the rule, rather than the exception, in all East European cultures. Due to well-known historical circumstances, the necessary economic, political, institutional, societal conditions of (post)modernity were not met in synchronicity with the West, giving way to starker contrasts between the elite and the

working class, the urban and the rural, or innovation and tradition. The Romanian case is standard for the region, in this respect<sup>12</sup>. This is why I subscribe to Mark Lipovetsky's contention about the possibility of a postmodernism without postmodernity<sup>13</sup>, a possibility frequently invoked by the Romanian theorists, as well, since the 1990s. Second, in the particular case of Tolstaya, Pelevin, and Sorokin's prose, the multitude of postmodern markers like intertextuality, pastiche and parody, unreliable narration, temporal distortion, metafiction, derealization, and carnivalization strikes from the beginning. While each of these traits may be associated individually with modernism as well, their co-occurrence in high levels of concentration testifies the engagement with the postmodernist experiment.

A more fitting framework would be, therefore, that of metamodernism, described by Vermeulen and van den Akker as a pendulum oscillating between the modern and the postmodern:

Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity<sup>14</sup>.

Even among the promoters of the concept, it is a matter of debate whether metamodernism represents a category after, or a subcategory of postmodernism, conceived as a multiplicity<sup>15</sup>. We do not intend to solve the problem here; suffice it to notice that the new trend keeps close to

some postmodern core-traits, while shifting away from some others. On the one hand, the majority of postmodern tropes are retained and illustrated richly in the multi-levelled narratives constructed by Tolstaya, Pelevin, and Sorokin, mixing history, virtual reality and mental delusion, decomposing and recomposing sometimes literally the characters' selves, hybridizing the (trans)human, and using self-referentiality as a current technique. On the other hand, a series of tropes correlated with metamodernism – the affective turn, the neoromantic sensibility, the transition from the euphoric to the dysphoric, postirony, metalepsis – are also present in the literature of the three writers, as we brief below.

### 3.1. The Affective Turn.

#### Romanticizing. Back to the Dysphoric. After Virtue

While the “metaphysical yearning” mentioned by Dreyer in his analysis might be too strong a phrase, the reader may notice the writers' playful inclination towards “feelosophy”, a sort of wisdom interlocked with emotional depth, implying that there is no knowledge beyond subjectivity. Then, the turning back to the Russian classics is attuned to what Vermeulen and van den Akker called “the neoromantic sensibility”, configured after 2000, resonating with a new structure of feeling<sup>16</sup>.

As a field of scholarship, the affective turn<sup>17</sup> emerged approximately in the same period, that is after 2007, inspired by the refreshed interest in trauma manifested in feminist and queer studies and reasserting the pivotal role of subjectivity. That happened in blatant contradiction to Fredric Jameson's idea about the “waning of affect”

(1991)<sup>18</sup>, supposed to happen in the logic of late capitalism, in the rarefied atmosphere of visual media, simulacra, and consumerism. In the metamodernist fiction (like that authored by David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, or Zadie Smith), the scale of mental states swiftly shifts from the euphoric to the dysphoric (while, on the contrary, Fredric Jameson celebrated euphoria as the signature mood of postmodernism, deferring forever to the past such negative states as anxiety and alienation<sup>19</sup>).

Sorokin's hero, Doctor Garin, is representative for the “affective turn” towards a neoromantic sentiment, replete with dysphoric boosts. The doctor, wearing a *pince-nez* à la Chekhov, prosthetized with titanium limbs after losing his frostbitten legs in the blizzard, finds himself at the end of the long road novel, past catastrophic blasts and gruesome encounters with non-human communities, madly in love with his assistant, Masha, dedicated to care for her physical and mental injuries for the rest of his life, thus reclaiming the human in the transhuman. Pelevin's protagonist from *iPhuck 10*, Porfiry Petrovich, after indulging in playing mind games with his super-smart female client, the art historian Mara, gets so intoxicated with her that he ends up, surprisingly for an AI algorithm, sermonizing about human pain, hamletizing about “to be or not to be”<sup>20</sup>. The reader will never know if the complicated process he underwent, including code de-clustering and re-clustering, has pushed him past the point of singularity to emotional self-consciousness, or if he is just faking feeling, as before. Whatever the answer, a grain of melancholy subsists, even considering the twist of irony typical for Pelevin's prose.



The case of Doctor Garin (whose first name is, suggestively, Platon) can instruct us on the sort of wisdom envisaged by Sorokin. At the beginning of the narrative, he seems haunted by melancholy, maybe for an old love, for which the tenderness for Masha is no more than a substitute. Later, held in captivity by a tribe of mutant swamp dwellers, he makes love to an albino female guardian that he considers physically repulsive, in exchange for his escape. He is anything but perfect, a flawed Bérenger, before he and Masha reunite and embrace each other "with their three arms"<sup>21</sup>, in the whirl of another blizzard, oddly reminding of the unfortunate couple from the film *Station for Two* (dir.: Eldar Ryazanov, 1983), whose male protagonist was also called Platon. With a long history of cheatings, Doctor Garin is far from an observer of maximalist moral principles. He doesn't stand for Plato's virtue, or for *virtus romana*, but for Machiavelli's *virtù*, blending, together with the "golden bough" of his love for Masha, the art of compromise, the cunning of survival, the sense of reality – i.e., the empiric wisdom to navigate in a post-apocalyptic world, devoid of moral landmarks. His psychological depth, beyond the sarcastic humor of his exploits, also illustrates Sorokin's efficient use of postirony.

### 3.2. Postirony

Once praised as an aesthetic novelty paving the way to promising perspectives, postmodern irony was recently denounced as an attempt to deconstruct any assertion about the world, to eschew engagement with social or political issues, and ultimately to flee from responsibility<sup>22</sup>. After decades of over-exposure to

the postmodern mindset inflected by the consumer economy, the society of the spectacle, or the hyperreality of simulacra, the search for inner truthfulness and authenticity has become again of the issue:

This postironic literature communicates or tries to communicate with the reader, not primarily to entertain but rather to wake the reader from her *consumer-culture-anesthesia*. [...] Postirony, as a countermovement to second and third generation postmodernism (in the sense of continuing what postmodernists from the 1950s to the 1980s already did), tries to reestablish a feeling for authenticity in its readers.<sup>23</sup>

Other critics associate postirony with a to-and-fro between irony and sincerity (sometimes feigned)<sup>24</sup>, or even with a dialectical overcoming of the two: "Postironists don't advocate a simple return to sincerity – they're not anti-ironists – but rather wish to preserve postmodernism's critical insights (in various domains) while overcoming its disturbing dimensions"<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, postirony represents a step forward from postmodern irony, using mockery only as a tool to debunk grand narratives and question hard-wired beliefs, but also claiming the eventual return to "serious matters". This is the way in which, for instance, Tolstaya employs black humor in *The Slynx*: to finally address real threats faced by Russia, in the year 2000, like nuclear escalation, social poverty, the war in Chechnya, or the rebirth of political medievalism. Sorokin's bloody scenes from *Day of the Oprichnik*, as well as Pelevin's dystopian pulp episodes from *S.N.U.F.F.*, about

the country of Urkaina and the floating artificial city Big Byz, have been reassessed as anticipations of historical realities like Putin's ascension, or the war in Ukraine<sup>26</sup>. A "serious" stake awaits at the end of the story, especially in Tolstaya and Sorokin's cases, while Pelevin's still strong relationship to postmodern irony tends to blur his political view in mixed messages (as we show in subchapter 3.4).

### 3.3. Metalepsis

As a narratological device, metalepsis was defined as a crossing between narrative levels and logically incompatible worlds, illustrated through a large array of works, from Lawrence Sterne to Julio Cortázar (see Genette's series of essays dedicated to the matter, from 1972 to 2004<sup>27</sup>). Postironic literature highlights the ontological dimension of the trope, often trespassing the frontiers narrator – reader, or fiction – reality, aiming to engage a deeper and more change-effecting communicative act. A recent genre based entirely on a metaleptic strategy is autofiction, placing the authorial figure on the cusp between text and world, in order to force a stronger, "more real" response in the audience. The transgression of traditional literary barriers, norms and forms typically produces "laughter or disturbance, and sometimes both"<sup>28</sup>.

Hardly touching the autobiographical, cyberpunk fiction generally uses the metaleptic leap in order to short-circuit and disrupt the levels of its multi-layered plot. As the logical distance between text and world is even greater than in the case of realism, the "oddity effect" can be more striking. Introducing real public

personalities in futurescapes with mutants, cyborgs, and V.R. holograms can amuse, startle and stimulate political reflection. So is the reference to the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident in a primitive community retreated in a forest, in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century (Tolstaya), or the apparition of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel in a 3D AI-generated multisensory film (Pelevin).

Maybe the most hilarious intrusion of real politics in cyberpunk fantasy is staged in Sorokin's *Doctor Garin*, where the neuro-psychiatric sanatorium run by the Chekhovian physician, Garin, is occupied by eight ultra-rich patients – Donald, Silvio, Justin, Boris, Angela, Emmanuel, Vladimir, and Shinzo –, surreal creatures of similar biomorphic build: each of them is made of eyes, nose, and mouth, placed over a pair of buttocks equipped with arms, jumping through their salons like rubber balls, making faces and playing pranks on one another. It doesn't take long before the reader identifies under these cartoonish figures the U.S., Italian, Canadian, British, German, French, Russian, and Japanese leaders of the 2010s, especially since one can easily recognize their traits popularized in the global media folklore: red-freckled Donald is blunt and self-centred, old Silvio secretly watches lewd holograms of female models, courteous Emmanuel experiences nervous outbursts, bad-boy Vladimir denies responsibility for any action (his verbal tic being: "It's not me!"), and so on. Beyond the comedy effect, Sorokin delivers a message that will become self-evident by the end of the novel: the ridiculous and hypocritical diplomacy of the 2010s can be a Belle Époque, compared to the reckless warfare conducted by the militaries, after a nuclear conflict.



In the postironic mode, employed the most efficiently in Sorokin's prose, the metaleptic leap, provoking laughter and thrill, is meant to help the readers transfer knowledge from the cyberpunk text to the real world, and remodel their political thinking. On the contrary, Pelevin's fiction rests on the comedy effect of the trope.

### 3.4. Victor Pelevin, Postmodernist Relativism, and "Bothsidesism"

Although some critics associated him with post-postmodernism or meta-modernism<sup>29</sup>, Victor Pelevin remains closer to postmodernism. In order to explain the differences between the writing modes of the three authors, it is necessary to draw the lines between the public postures that they assumed since the 1990s, by briefly comparing their biographic trajectories, interviews on literary or social issues, political stands, and publishing strategies.

Tatyana Tolstaya wrote most of her only novel to date, *The Slynx*, in the U.S., where she stayed between 1990 and 1999, teaching courses at various universities and contributing to top cultural magazines from New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. She remigrated to Russia in 2000, as an internationally recognized intellectual, and released the book in the still liberal atmosphere of power transition from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin, while working as a speechwriter for the pro-free-market electoral bloc Union of Right Forces. Later, she denied any political affiliation (except for a vaguely pro-liberal attitude<sup>30</sup>), worked as a (co-)host for nationally praised TV shows, refrained from taking a stance on the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and gave up writing novels, returning to

short-story writing, for which she received an important award in 2019.

Between the 1990s and the early 2010s, Vladimir Sorokin was celebrated as a leading voice of the post-Soviet literature and won most of the major awards in Russia (like the Russian Booker, the People's Booker, the Andrei Bely, and the Big Book prizes). However, the tide changed in the 2010s, when the writer faced discredit and false accusations from Kremlin-backed organizations and mainstream media (for instance, accusations of promoting anti-Orthodoxism, extremism, and even cannibalism<sup>31</sup>, in 2016). Sorokin left Russia for Berlin in February 2022 and published an uncompromising article in *The Guardian* immediately after the invasion of Ukraine<sup>32</sup>, elaborating on the parallel between Vladimir Putin and the medieval despot Ivan the Terrible, an idea known to his readers from the visionary novel *Day of the Oprichnik*. He has lived in exile ever since, giving numerous interviews to the Western media, on literary and political matters.

In the 1990s, Victor Pelevin was widely viewed as the *enfant terrible* of the post-Soviet era, for his nonconformist short stories and early novels like *Omon Ra*, challenging stereotypes, endogenous or exogenous, about the past and present Russia. While his prose was translated in English, he took part in the International Writing Program, hosted by the University of Iowa in 1996, and caught the public eye in a generous interview conducted by Professor Clark Blaise, as a provocative young writer, his face hidden under mirror-glasses, humorous and confrontational, at the same time. His 1999 novel *Homo Zapiens* gained him more international visibility, for prophesizing the emergence

of the new authoritarian Russia. However, despite growing public attention, the 1996 Iowa interview proved to be one of the few to date (the last one being published in 2010). Pelevin opted for a reclusive life in an unknown residence (probably in Russia, though he was spotted in Asian countries like Nepal, India, China, South Korea, Thailand, or Japan), staying away from events like readings, debates, or book releases, having no public accounts on Facebook, X, Telegram, or other known social media platforms. In exchange, he has produced constantly one book per year since 2013, his high prolificity giving rise to rumors about his name façadeing a team of ghost-writers, or even an AI neural program<sup>33</sup>.

A shade of indeterminacy characterizes not only his biography, but also his fiction, giving way to *double entendres* and to conflicting interpretations. Using postmodernist ambiguity to scramble geopolitical references, his novels focus on a critique of capitalism as a global system, held responsible for instrumenting high tech to enforce control and lessen the human subject, in a manner bordering fascism. His wholesale approach hardly discriminates between political cultures, treating (the avatars of) the U.S., E.U., and Russia on an equal footing. For example, Pelevin considers "*homo sapiens*"<sup>34</sup> (the individual zapping through TV channels, devoid of inner life, replenished with propaganda, in exchange, and turned into an obedient subject) characteristic of any hyper-commodified society, on either side of the Atlantic. Likewise, in *iPhuck 10*, the allusions to state-control policies in Russia are counterbalanced by the reference to a film script in which the spirit of Hitler's lapdog reincarnates in

Angela Merkel<sup>35</sup>, hinting at the ex-Chancellor's cynophobia, famously speculated by the president Putin during a 2007 meeting at his *dacha* in Sochi. Postmodern irony is directed towards *all* actors around the globe alike, relativizing political evil to the point of implying that "they are all the same". This motto seems to also hide behind the title of his 2021 novel, *KGBT+*, a portmanteau blending KGB and LGBT+, as if the two acronyms would equally deserve sarcasm. The sneer at sexual minorities might be considered offensive by a part of his audience, however, the author seems to strongly disavow ethical-political readings of his books.

The fact has been made evident since his Iowa interview, when, asked about the social significance of his oeuvre, Pelevin invited those who wanted "to find out how things are in Russia" to read "a good article" about it. In exchange, literature would call for a purely aesthetic interpretation: "a good literary text reflects on itself"<sup>36</sup>. Self-referentiality, as formulated in the 1996 dialogue, is also suggested by the cover design of his novel *iPhuck 10* (2017), using what is known as the Droste effect: the cover incorporates a reproduction of itself, incorporating a reproduction of itself, recursively. Untied from extratextual surroundings, literature offers itself as an autarchic realm, contends Pelevin. In this logic, de-realization, self-referentiality, irony, perspectivism function as aesthetic correlatives of ethical relativism, whataboutism, bothsideism, and post-truth. Postmodernist poetics morphs into an apparatus for defending authoritarian politics.

Pelevin's tendency to level the gap between authoritarian and liberal regimes resonates with his understanding of

unfreedom, a pivotal concept for his fiction<sup>37</sup>. Starting from Dostoevsky's reflection on the corruption of freedom in the modern social contract, the concept of unfreedom ("несвобода") occurred literally in Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We*, accommodated in a futuristic, dystopian environment. Since then, the word resurfaced in various political theories, expressing a negative characteristic of either late-capitalism (Herbert Marcuse, Slavoj Žižek), or totalitarianism (Timothy Snyder). A strong voice in the counterculture of the 1960s, Marcuse denounced the "comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom" nestling in the post-war Western societies. Decades later, Žižek extended the argument to the incapacity of language, as a political construct, to articulate an authentic dissent ("We 'feel free' because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom")<sup>38</sup>. Separated by 40 years of leftist critical thinking, Marcuse and Žižek locate unfreedom in the liberal West. On the contrary, Snyder's main focus is contemporary Russia, the author following closely how the thinking of the ultraconservative philosopher Ivan Ilyin has guided Putin on the "darkening road to unfreedom"<sup>39</sup>. Pelevin's understanding of unfreedom echoes Marcuse and Žižek's skepticism towards late capitalism *qua* global system, while refraining from an upfront critique of the Russian case in particular. In this respect, his worldview differs dramatically from that of Vladimir Sorokin, whose satires in *Day of The Oprichnik* and even *Doctor Garin* point clearly at the post-2000 politics of the Kremlin.

The distance between Pelevin and Sorokin's novels, in terms of implied ideology, can be measured also by comparing the two *Companions* dedicated to the writers (both,

published in the U.S., prior to the Russian invasion in Ukraine)<sup>40</sup>. A simple search for the keyword "Putin" returns only 1 result in Sofya Khagi's monograph of Pelevin's literature (in a neutral context), and more than 40 results in Dirk Uffelmann's "reader" of Sorokin's work (mostly, in politically charged frames). In exchange, while Pelevin's novels are loudly promoted on the Russian literary market and rank close to the national best-sellers, Sorokin's prose has been marginalized and even withdrawn by some important booksellers<sup>41</sup>.

One of the most accurate assessments of Pelevin's literary project from a political perspective describes his fiction as an "ideological hall of mirrors"<sup>42</sup>. Sophie Pinkham uses this metaphor, strongly reminding of John Barth's imagery from *Lost in the Funhouse*, to suggest the pulverization and self-effacement of the ideological mind. To debunk the message hidden in Pelevin's "hall of mirrors", the concept of situatedness comes into play. For a philosopher "situated" in the West, belittling liberalism and arguing for *coincidentia oppositorum* in political matters might signify challenging the dominant capitalist discourse, from a leftist standpoint (as is the case with Marcuse and Žižek). Whereas, for a writer activating within an authoritarian state, articulating philosophical doubts about freedom and constructing aporetic reasoning to ridicule the claims of democracy come down to being complacent with the official narrative of discrediting the West. When placed in a Russian environment, the "hall of mirrors" turns into a twice advantageous strategy, aligning conveniently with the politics of the Kremlin, while taking on the "cool" air of rebel neomarxism attacking hypercapitalism.

The double-sidedness of Pelevin's discourse (formally "acceptable" and informally "alternative") attracted more public figures involved with the Kremlin circles. The most famous is Vladislav Surkov, considered Putin's main PR strategist until 2014, turned recently into a literary character himself<sup>43</sup>, who found in Pelevin's protagonist Babylen Tatarsky, from *Homo sapiens*, a fictional pair of his own biography (from aspiring writer, to advertising agent, to deep state mastermind). The case of the war blogger Maxim Fomin, killed with an artisanal bomb by a Ukrainian infiltrated activist at a propaganda event in Moscow, in April 2022, is more striking: Fomin, an ultra-nationalist supporter of Putin, was known to his followers by his Telegram nickname Vladlen Tatarsky, inspired by the same character. Pelevin's cult-book proved beneficial to the official narrative, at least twice.

One of the latest mock-concepts that earned Pelevin a dubious reputation is "letitbeism" (from the novel *KGBT+*), a simplified doctrine of inaction, rooted in the belief that one should let worldly matters the way they are, with a nod to the Beatles song *Let it be*. The idea of keeping oneself away from the surface of things (*māyā*) may resonate with the author's supposed engagement with Buddhist practices of mindfulness. However, the political implications of such unassuming conduct are at least problematic, especially in a context like Putin's Russia. That is, if the novel's "philosophy" is to be taken at face value, and not as another jest of postmodern irony.

### Concluding Remarks

The boost of cyberpunk on the post-Soviet market came as a late reaction against the dogma of socialist-realism,

imposed as a norm on the literary system under communism. Successful both "home" and abroad, the fiction written by Tatyana Tolstaya, Victor Pelevin, and Vladimir Sorokin between the late 1990s and the early 2020s range, literarily speaking, between postmodernism and metamodernism.

Assuming Vermeulen and van den Akker's discourse as a starting point<sup>44</sup>, we consider appropriate to conceive of the two currents not as conflicting, mutually exclusive paradigms, but as a continuum, with lengthy fringes of interference. On a unifying scale, Pelevin keeps close to some core-traits of postmodernism (like irony, indeterminacy, self-referentiality), Tolstaya shares characteristics from both sides, while Sorokin is more engaged with tropes of metamodernism (postirony, the affective turn, the neoromantic sensibility).

We contend that there is a correlation between the authors' aesthetic options (briefly, postmodernism or metamodernism) and public postures (in terms of biographic personae, creeds, articles, and interviews on the mainstream media, posts and silences on the social media, ethical conducts, political choices). As Tolstaya's cyberpunk fiction is limited to a single novel, published in 2000, before the rise of the new authoritarianism in Russia, it is more relevant to explore the relationship between literary profiles and postural identities in the cases of Pelevin and Sorokin.

We noticed how the author of *S.N.U.F.F.*, *iPhuck 10*, and *KGBT+* used postmodern devices like irony and self-reference to relativize the political differences between liberalism and autocracy, or to avoid civic responsibility, to the point of being accused of complicity with the Kremlin. A critic characterized one of his

novels as a “horrible cocktail of postmodernism and fascism”<sup>45</sup>, while another described his recent oeuvre as an “ideological hall of mirrors”<sup>46</sup>. Pelevin’s literary strategies of elusiveness are complemented by his political bothsidesism and philosophical quietism, ethically questionable as they are, in a turmoiled social-political context like that of contemporary Russia.

While far from the position of a committed writer, Sorokin is more interested in using the trope of postirony to represent, beyond the black humor of his cyberpunk futurescapes, a plausible ethical conduct in the environment of the post-apocalyptic world. The physician Platon Garin, the hero of his novels *The Blizzard* and *Doctor Garin*, is representative for that matter. In order to emphasize human emotions (in a transhuman setting), Sorokin consistently alludes to Russian classics like Gogol, Dostoevsky, or Chekhov, as well as to more recent Russian art (like Ryazanov’s melodrama film *Station for Two*). Borrowing a portmanteau word from the English

translation of Tatyana Tolstaya’s novel *The Slynx*, we used the term “feelosophy” to name this “affective turn”, typical for the metamodern mindset. By “feelosophy”, we understand a mutant form of emotional wisdom, in post-catastrophic times, ensuring the ethical responsibility of the (trans) human subject. The narrativization of ethical responsibility resonates with Sorokin’s outspoken public stand against the consolidation of autocracy in Russia and against the invasion of Ukraine.

When writing about post-Soviet literature in general, and about these three authors, in particular, historical contexts make the difference. The writers’ choices to live in Russia or abroad, to take or refrain from taking political stands, to stay in or out of the media spotlight have shaped substantially their postural identities, respectively. Their cyberpunk projects, displaying different levels of aesthetic and political engagement, are closely correlated with the positions they hold in the literary systems from “home” and abroad.

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## NOTES

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- See Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.
- A list of pre-Soviet and Soviet utopias and dystopias is provided by Theodore Trotman and comprises narratives like Alexander Bogdanov’s *Red Star* (1909) and *The Engineer Menni* (1913), Aleksey Tolstoy’s *Aelita* (1923), and Ivan Efremov’s *Andromeda Nebula* (1957). See Theodore Trotman, “The Mythic and the Utopian: Visions of the Future through the Lens of Victor Pelevin’s *S.N.U.F.F.* and *Love for Three Zuckerbrins*”, in Sofya Khagi (ed.), *Companion to Victor Pelevin*, Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2022, p. 187–192.
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- Ibidem*.
- Tatyana Tolstaya, *The Slynx*, p. 77.
- Ibidem*, p. 43.
- Actually, the word used by the author in the novel’s original Russian version is *фелософия* /translit.: *felosofia*/, ruling out any intended pun. Therefore, the creation of the blend-word *feelosophy*, as a contamination between *feel* and *philosophy*, must be acknowledged as an innovation of the English translator, Jamey Gambrell. However, considering Tolstaya’s direct involvement in the American literary milieu during her long-term stay in the U.S. (1990–1999), as a lecturer at different universities, and also as a columnist for various top cultural magazines, her acceptance of (if not involvement in) the translator’s lexical innovation is also beyond doubt. We should also mention Gambrell’s expertise in the Russian literary culture, as she translated another book by Tolstaya (*Sleeper in a Fog: Stories*, 1992), Marina Tsvetaeva’s diary, and massively from Vladimir Sorokin’s fiction.

9. See: Mikhail Epstein, Alexander Genis, and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, *Russian Postmodernism. New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, translated by Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, New York – Oxford, Berghahn, 2016 (first published in 1999); Andrew Kahn, Mark Lipovetsky, Irina Reyfman, and Stephanie Sandler, *A History of Russian Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018. Tolstaya was related to post-postmodernism (Vladiv-Glover, in Epstein *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 19), Pelevin, to the neo-baroque (Kahn *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 699), and Sorokin, to conceptualism and Sots-Arts (*Ibidem*, p. 697). On the other hand, the neo-baroque, the Moscow conceptualism, and the Sots-Arts are described as Russian versions of postmodernism (*Ibidem*, 633, 696, 699).
10. Nicolas Dreyer, *Literature Redeemed. "Neo-Modernism" in the Works of the Post-Soviet Russian Writers Vladimir Sorokin, Vladimir Tushkov, and Aleksandr Khurgin*, Wien – Köln – Weimar, Böhlau Verlag, 2020, p. 55.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 9.
12. For the Romanian case, Mircea Martin introduced the idea of a "postmodernism without postmodernity" in the article "En guise d'introduction. D'un postmodernisme sans rivages et d'un postmodernisme sans postmodernité", in *Euresis. Cahiers roumains d'études littéraires*, nr. 1-2, 1995, p. 373-383. Carmen Mușat argued the representativeness of the Romanian case for the East-European space, including such countries as Bulgaria, Hungary, or Russia, in *Strategiile subversiunii. Incursiuni în proza postmodernă*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească, 2008, p. 21-23.
13. Mark Lipovetsky, "Post-Sots: Transformations of Socialist Realism in the Popular Culture of the Recent Period", in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2004, p. 356-77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3220066>.
14. And also: "One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles" (Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker, "Notes on metamodernism", in *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, vol. 2, 2010, p. 6).
15. For instance, Vermeulen and van den Akker, the proponents of the concept, have a nuanced approach on the relationship between metamodernism, modernism, and postmodernism: "For we contend that metamodernism should be situated epistemologically *with* (post)modernism, ontologically *between* (post)modernism, and historically *beyond* (post)modernism" (*Ibidem*, p. 2). The differing positions of other critics may be consulted in Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen (eds), *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, London – New York, Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017.
16. Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker, *loc. cit.*, p. 8.
17. See Patricia Ticineto Clough, Jean Halley (eds), *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007). The editors refer the books *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* by Brian Massumi (2002) and *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) as foundational for "the affective turn", as a field of scholarship.
18. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991, p. 15-16.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 29.
20. Victor Pelevin, *iPhuck 10*, p. 408 (in English, in original).
21. Vladimir Sorokin, *Doktor Garin*, p. 402 (my translation).
22. For a severe re-evaluation of irony, Lukas Hoffmann cites from the article "Postirony" (2011) by the German critic Johannes Hedinger, referring specifically to visual arts: "The times of irony are over. We have grown tired of the constant tongue-in-cheek, elaborately posing doubts and deconstructing each and every subject at least in the second degree. After irony had its very last climax as the derisive sword of postmodernism, an ironic attitude today represents the veiling of truths, avoidance of any problems and the justification of any nonsense which 'wasn't really meant that way'. Irony is being deranged into some kind of 'exclusion of liability' if you will, or an attempt to flee from any sort of responsibility" (reproduced, in Hoffmann's translation, in his book, *Postirony. The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2016, p. 38).

23. *Ibidem*, p. 193–194, 195.
24. Vermeulen and van den Akker, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
25. Lee Konstantinou, “Four Faces of Postirony”, in Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 88.
26. See Sofya Khagi’s commentary in her monograph, *Pelevin and Unfreedom. Poetics, Politics, Metaphysics*, Evanston – Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2021, p. 126–132.
27. See Françoise Lavocat, “Et Gérard Genette inventa la métalepse”, in *Nouvelle Revue d’Esthétique*, 2020, 26, p.43–51, <https://hal.science/hal-03948322/document>.
28. “son d’effet de bizarrerie provoque le rire ou le trouble, parfois les deux” (*Ibidem*, p. 45). For a detailed commentary of the use of metalepsis in postironic literature, see Lukas Hoffmann, *op. cit.*, ch. “Reading the Postironic – Audience, Narrator, and Metalepsis”, p. 65–88.
29. See Maya Vinokour, “Conspiratorial Realism: On Vladimir Sorokin, Victor Pelevin, and Russia’s Post-Postmodern Turn”, in *Los Angeles Review*, 23 August 2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/conspiratorial-realism-on-vladimir-sorokin-victor-pelevin-and-russias-post-postmodern-turn/>; Bugaeva Liubov Dmitrievna, “Artificial Intelligence and Victor Pelevin”, in *Issledovatel’skiy Jurnal Russkogo Yazyka i Literatury*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.52547/iarll.22.1>, <https://journaliarll.ir/index.php/iarll/article/view/287>. Simon Radchenko has a more nuanced approach, drawing a line between Sorokin’s metamodernism and Pelevin’s prevailing hypermodernism (Simon Radchenko, “Shades of Post-Postmodernism in Russian Life and Literature: A Metamodern Study of Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin”, in *Ideology and Politics Journal*, No. 1(25), 2024, <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpglclefindmkaj/https://www.ideopol.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/4-Radchenko.pdf>).
30. Tatyana Tolstaya (interviewed by Anton Zhelnov), “I’m afraid of talks about Ukraine. Any word now can end in a bullet”, on *TV Rain*, 18 June 2014, [https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/zhelnov/tatjana\\_tolstaja\\_ja\\_bojus\\_sejchas\\_govorit\\_ob\\_ukraine\\_ljuboe\\_slovo\\_mozhet\\_zakonchitsja\\_pulej-370154/](https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/zhelnov/tatjana_tolstaja_ja_bojus_sejchas_govorit_ob_ukraine_ljuboe_slovo_mozhet_zakonchitsja_pulej-370154/).
31. See the article “Dissident Author Sorokin Accused of «Promoting Cannibalism» in Work”, in *The Moscow Times*, 23 August 2016, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/08/23/russian-activists-petition-police-to-ban-book-which-preaches-cannibalism-a55076>. The accusations were made by Irina Vasina, the leader of the Public Movement to Combat Extremism.
32. Vladimir Sorokin, “Vladimir Putin sits atop a crumbling pyramid of power”, in *The Guardian*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/27/vladimir-putin-russia-ukraine-power>.
33. See Sophie Pinkham, “The mysterious novelist who foresaw Putin’s Russia – and then came to symbolise its moral decay”, in *The Guardian*, 9 January 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2025/jan/09/victor-pelevin-the-mysterious-novelist-who-foresaw-putins-russia-and-then-came-to-symbolise-its-moral-decay>.
34. Victor Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, Chapter 7, “Homo Zapiens”, p. 76–91.
35. *Idem*, *iPhuck 10*, p. 341–348.
36. *Idem* (interviewed by Clark Blaise), 1996, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sI8ScV1iqjo&t=196s> (min. 14:30 and later).
37. See Sofya Khagi’s main argument, in *Pelevin and Unfreedom. Poetics, Politics*.
38. See Herbert Marcuse, “The New Forms of Control”, in *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, with an introduction by Douglas Kellner, London and New York, Routledge, 2007 [1964], p. 3; Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, Verso Books, 2002, p. 2.
39. Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom. Russia, Europe, America*, New York, Tim Duggan Books, 2018, p. 18. Taking current Russian politics as a (negative) model, Snyder also reflects on the threats of expanding the spectrum of unfreedom in Europe and the U.S.
40. See Sofya Khagi, *op. cit.*, 2021; Dirk Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin’s Discourses. A Companion*, Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2020. Uffelmann’s book appeared in the collection “Companions to

Russian Literatures”, coordinated by Thomas Seifrid (from the University of Southern California). It is noteworthy that Sofya Khagi also edited the collective volume *Companion to Victor Pelevin*, in the same series “Companions to Russian Literatures”. The search for the same keyword (“Putin”) returns two results, here (both in neutral contexts).

41. See Sophie Pinkham, *loc. cit.* and Waław Radziwinowicz, “Moskiewska rewolucja kulturalna. Ścigany Akunin, Sorokin i inni”, [“Moscow’s Cultural Revolution: Fugitive Akunin, Sorokin, and Others”], in *Wyborcza*, 28 January 2024, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,30639582,moskiewska-rewolucja-kulturalna-scigany-akunin-sorokin-i-inni.html>.
42. Sophie Pinkham, *loc. cit.*
43. Vladislav Surkov is the source of inspiration for the main character of Giuliano da Empoli’s political novel, *The Wizard of the Kremlin* (2022).
44. As briefly synthesized in their image of the metamodern as a pendulum swinging between the modern and the postmodern (see note 14).
45. *Apud* Sophie Pinkham, *loc. cit.* Pinkham doesn’t disclose the critic’s name, mentioning only his/ her nationality (Russian).
46. The phrase belongs to Sophie Pinkham (*loc. cit.*).