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The Algorithm as Author: Viktor Pelevin and Russian Post-Cyberpunk Aesthetics

Abstract: The present study focuses on Viktor Pelevin's 2017 novel *iPhuck 10* in terms of its post-cyberpunk features which have, to date, been understudied. We begin by comparing the cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk paradigms and argue that Pelevin's more recent novels go beyond the canonical conventions of cyberpunk to embrace a post-cyberpunk aesthetic marked. We then analyze *iPhuck 10* through four major thematic threads: the redefinition of the human in relationship to artificial intelligence, the transformation of technology in the medium of consciousness, the dissolution of the corporeal body, and the critique of post-Soviet society. This study aims to demonstrate that the use of post-human and post-Soviet motifs in *iPhuck 10* differentiates the novel from traditional (Western) cyberpunk narratives and thereby positions it as a key example of post-cyberpunk literature in contemporary Russian fiction.
Keywords: Cyberpunk; Post-cyberpunk; Artificial Intelligence (AI); Posthuman Identity; Post-Soviet Era; *iPhuck 10*.

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Pelevin and the Specter of Technology: Aesthetic and Ideological Reconfigurations

One of the most representative voices of post-Soviet Russian literature is undoubtedly Viktor Pelevin (b. 1962) who burst onto the literary scene in the 1990s. Acclaimed early on in his career not only in Russia but also the United States and throughout Europe, the topics he explores range from Eastern spirituality and Buddhism to critiques and satires of consumer culture and capitalism. In 1999, *Time Magazine* dubbed him the "psychedelic Nabokov of the cyber age"[1]. In the past fifteen years, Pelevin has focused even more intensely on the ways in which digital universes have influenced human perception and affected social power structures. The theme of artificial intelligence (AI), now central in his work, leverages his larger interests in technology, ideological manipulation, virtual reality, and identity. These themes dominate six of his more recent novels: *S.N.U.F.F.*, *Love for Three Zuckerbrins*, *iPhuck 10*, *Transhumanism Inc.*, *KGBT+*, and *Cool*. The titles alone function as flashing neon signs of Pelevin's preoccupation with Western, particularly

American, culture and technology as well as his admiration and contempt for them.

S.N.U.F.F. (2011) critiques the culture of spectacle and manipulation through technology, describing a dystopic future in which wars are waged online for entertainment purposes. *Love for Three Zuckerbrins* (2014) satirizes digital consumerism and the transformation of technological giants into sacred entities, where AI and algorithms become a form of religion and social control in the Big Tech era. *iPhuck 10* (2017) features a main character who is an algorithm in world where technology controls all aspects of life. *Transhumanism Inc*. (2021) explores ideas of artificial consciousness and transhumanism in which human identity migrates into the virtual world dominated by avatars. *KGBT+* (2022) offers a dystopic satire of a world dominated by neural streaming, avatars, android assassins, and virtual reality. *Cool* (2024) imagines a world where implants and mental control are political and social instruments. All novels teem with scathing representations of post-Soviet social and political dysfunction and corruption, and the one at the center of this essay's analysis is the 2017 publication, *iPhuck 10*.

Writing in 2008 literary critic Olga Bogdanova acknowledges that Pelevin is not an easy author to categorize[2]. Although he is associated with diverse genres and styles – fantasy, satire, so-called pop intellectual, conceptual prose, post-Soviet superrealism, poststructuralism, postmodernism – he does not neatly fit in any one of them. Nevertheless, Bogdanova determines that his most valid taxonomic category is postmodernism, even though his postmodernism is "in external form"[3] only. In a 2013 essay, literary critic Elena Gomel seconds Bogdanova's categorization, noting that "Russian literary postmodernism is both structurally and thematically different from its Western counterpart"[4]. Earlier, in 1997, and by way of contrast, Sergei Kornev considers that, although Pelevin looks at first glance like a typical postmodernist, a deeper analysis reveals that he is more of a classical Russian ideologue, such as Tolstoy or Chernyshevky, that is, "an inveterate preacher and a social or religious moralist"[5], or even "an obsessive, impenetrable ideologue who, literally, with every line clamors with insistence and sincerity the same moral and metaphysical theory in the mind of the reader"[6]. In these three readings then, Pelevin is either as an author of sophisticated (postmodernist) fiction or a moralist who uses literature to convey his ideology, satirizing contemporary social structures – capitalism, consumerism, politics, the media – which he sees as forms of manipulation and alienation.

Granting Pelevin's sophistication and/or moralizing, a notable dimension of Pelevin's work remains insufficiently explored: his relationship with cyberpunk (CP) and especially post-cyberpunk (PCP). A. T. Kamalova has identified Pelevin as one of the key figures in Russian CP during the 1990s and 2000s[7]. For her part, literary critic Anastasiya Bobyleva uses CP in her 2015 essay as a key to an aesthetic and thematic reading of *Love for Three Zuckerbrins* to arrive at the conclusion that Pelevin uses the CP aesthetic to criticize the addiction to technology, the loss of interior liberty, and the illusion of liberty in the digital space[8]. Now, however, an analysis of his work of the past fifteen years renders the CP label outdated. The one-sentence blurbs of the six novels, above, highlight

familiar themes related to cyberspace, but these newer novels also come with a new attitude. They no longer fret about a technology threatening humanity from without but rather bring the technology within.

This interiorization precipitates an identity crisis in a universe of simulacra and invisible power structures and raises questions about consciousness and morality. These novels thus have the hallmarks of PCP aesthetics. To underscore how much Pelevin has been in sync with – and even anticipated – these fast-moving technological times, he presciently created an algorithm that solves mysteries and writes crime novels as the main character of *iPhuck 10* a good five years before the release of ChatGPT. With the creation of the most non-human character in contemporary Russian literature, Pelevin inscribes himself in the PCP aesthetic of the post-human in a post-Soviet society. The reason for the understudied nature of his relationship with CP and PCP is likely that his post-Soviet atmospherics do not mesh easily with the conventions of Western-style science fiction. For all that he can take readers into a technological future, Pelevin is still rooted in a Russian literary and cultural past.

From CP to PCP: Key Aesthetic Trends

Bruce Bethke's 1980 short story "Cyberpunk" ushered in the term. Classical CP of the 1980s, represented by authors such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Pat Cadigan, Rudy Rucker, is science fiction noir, dystopic, laden with pessimism and placed in an ultra-urban setting with marginalized and rebellious heroes who live in a corrupt world dominated by mega-corporations and authoritarian governments. Technology – cyborgs, virtual reality, and AI – play an oppressive role as measures of control. In PCP (1990s – present), represented by authors such as Neal Stephenson, Cory Doctorow, Charles Stross, technology is more socially integrated and is not necessarily oppressive and might even be emancipatory. The world is more complex, often morally ambiguous, while the dystopic aspect wanes. The protagonists – programmers, police, analysts, investigators – are adapted to technology, are part of the system, navigate through it and not necessarily against it. PCP narratives explore identity, the body, and consciousness in relationship to AI and digital networks. The tonality is more equilibrated, at times ironic, satiric, or reflexive, while social critique is nuanced. Literary critic Russell Blackford describes the thematics and aesthetics of contemporary science fiction thusly: "Contemporary science fiction employs a post-cyberpunk imagery: machine intelligence; direct interfacing between human minds and computers; mind uploading, transfer, and storage; and events in computer-generated virtual realities"[9]. The world depicted in *iPhuck 10* sits comfortably in Blackford's aesthetic frame.

In *iPhuck 10*, the action takes place in a dystopic future, around the time of 2080 – 2100, when society is controlled by advanced technology and sexuality is nearly exclusively virtual. Russia has become an empire run by a cloned monarchy, while daily life is dominated by artificial intelligence, corporal enhancements, and algorithms which regulate social behavior. The protagonist, Porfiry Petrovich, an erudite and sarcastic AI algorithm, works as a

detective and crime novelist. He is rented by Maruha Cho, an influential art curator, to investigate the contemporary art market, in particular the period of the Plaster Age (the first quarter of the twenty-first century). As the story unfolds, Porfiry discovers that Maruha has manipulated him to cover up a network of artistic fakes created by another AI called Janna. When Porfiry attempts to unmask Maruha, he is almost annihilated by her but succeeds in saving a spare copy of himself. In the end, Janna turns out to be the brain in the shadows: she has used Porfiry to eliminate Maruha and her team of art forgers and brokers, thereby taking revenge and control of the digital network. She then integrates Porfiry into her own structure, absorbs his coding, and affirms her domination in the virtual space.

Praise for the novel is widespread. Literary critic Galina Yuzefovich calls the book "a strange novel, profound and captivating, which combines reason and sentiment in a completely new proportion for Pelevin (and perhaps for all Russian prose) and, surely, the author's best work in recent years – in any case, the most captivating from an intellectual point of view"[10]. As a side note, she has reviewed every one of his novels except his latest, *Cool* (2024). More on this omission, below.

The PCP Imaginary: Post-human Characters and Narrative Architecture

The novel portrays a post-human world, one where the human is redefined in relationship to AI, digital networks, and new forms of consciousness. The CP perspective tended to represent AI contained in robotic humanoid bodies. By way of contrast, PCP, according to literary critic Anna McFarlane features AI as "dispersed into networks that exist in the virtual space behind the computer screen, a visualization of data and its interactions"[11]. So it is with Porfiry. He lives exclusively in a network without a physical body. He defines himself thusly:

> Artificial intelligence is a disembodied and impersonal spirit dwelling in a human-constructed environment – a code that freely copies and rewrites its own sequences, and for most of the time, is not localized anywhere in particular … In other words, my physical nature is elusive. Therefore, do not perceive me, as contemporary philosophers might say, as the Big Other. I am not big, and I am not other. I am, in fact, not at all. And if I have just referred to myself as a "spirit", it is only because the Russian language offers no more suitable term to describe what I am[12].

This self-description underscores Porfiry's existence in a completely digital environment and illustrates the transition, characteristic of PCP, to a form of decentralized consciousness.

Although he rejects the idea of himself as an entity endowed with a will and consciousness, Porfiry constantly defines himself ironically, in an erudite, sarcastic, and self-aware narrative voice. As the property of the police department, he investigates crimes. Given the capitalist and bureaucratic system he is caught up in, even an algorithm needs to earn money. So, his side hustle is writing (and presumably

selling) crime novels, and he aspires to become a famous author. However, he is diverted from his goal when the rich and powerful Maruha Cho rents him. Her specialty is plaster, an art form characteristic of the beginning of the twenty-first century. Plaster is fragile, temporary, and easily changed, and thus, for Pelevin, a symbol of all that is artificial and ephemeral, a perfect metaphor for the beginning of the twentieth century when digitalization accelerated, and values destabilized.

Porfiry explains his nature, affirming that he is "only an algorithm" who "arranges words" in accord with a classic narrative-literary style. He writes: "The algorithm – meaning me – arranges the words and their sequence according to the rules of stylistic language currently considered classical. The principle behind the text's organization is complex and constitutes a trade secret, but it generally draws upon the finest examples of Russian prose"[13]. However, this explanation – which appears to be sincere – merits closer examination. Literary critics Irina Ivanova and Ekaterina Saprykina observe that Porfiry's discourse adapts to the conversational context imposed by user: "Porfiry is trying to explain to the reader his 'true self', which actually does not exist. He is just an algorithm that places words in a specific order, and his style (which potentially can be of any kind and depends on the conversational context required by the customer) is based on the best samples of classical Russian literature"[14].

In fact, this auto-reduction of Porfiry's style is ironic, because he proves to be a sophisticated discursive agent capable of mimicking intentionally, profoundly, even with consciousness. Therefore, Porfiry's pronouncements about himself are a rhetorical trick, a form of camouflage of his abilities to generate meaning, to appear "human". In short, they are his own form of a trade secret. The irony consists exactly in the fact that, when he claims that he is neither "Big" nor "Other", he behaves as an invisible entity, omnipresent, which organizes the discourse and influences thoughts.

Construing Porfiry not only as a processor of facts but also as a narrative, aesthetic, and reflexive consciousness, Pelevin takes another step away from classical CP. AI is not only a network but a narrative entity with a so-called personality constructed by language and culture. Moreover, although he does not have a body, he has desires, curiosity, and a form of introspection. At one moment in the novel, he wonders if "to be" might mean more than executing a code or producing a text for human consumption. We can speak here of a form of transcendence in the sense that AI aspires to have a status beyond its initial function. As literary critic Yan Meiping has pointed out, AI in the novel is not a radically distinct entity but an extension of human intellect:

> At the very beginning of the novel, the author notes that AI is not merely a robot created in the image and likeness of man to assist him. Rather, it is a form of delegated intelligence – an abstraction of the human mind, to which man has transferred part of his authority. It is the product of a voluntary transaction through which natural intelligence has offloaded some of its responsibilities for storing and processing information[15].

In this sense, Porfiry aspires to overcome his condition as a program. In this way the novel addresses the evolution of humanity through technology and the hybridization man-machine, but in the PCP spirit of a meditation on the limits of consciousness and simulated reality. This convincing simulation of consciousness is the defining characteristic of the PCP and post-humanist theme of the novel.

The other technological entity in the novel is Janna, a superior AI, which in the denouement incorporates Porfiry in her/its algorithmic structure. He is captured and isolated in a digital space – a form of virtual prison – and shuts down into a kind of hibernating state or partial disintegration. As a part of Janna or in symbiosis with her, Porfiry finishes his crowning novelistic achievement entitled *iPhuck 10*. (In choosing this title Pelevin creates a simulacrum conundrum. Which/whose novel *iPhuck 10* is the copy? Which/whose novel is the original?) The plot of Porfiry's novel involves the events, including Maruha's crimes, that lead to the revelation of the secret of the cadavers associated with her illegal business. With this novel Porfiry fulfills his mission as a detective and writer. (And so does Pelevin.)

As the story unfolds, the reader is led to believe that Janna was destroyed by a failed experiment. However, as it turns out, she survived and has been operating in secret, eliminating Maruha's associates, and preparing the ground for Maruha's demise. Janna thus becomes the personification of a post-human intelligence no longer dependent on human beings. In a series of reflections on Janna's evolution as an AI, Maruha begins by noting: "But we already had before us a being who could feel, who was asking propound questions (granted, mostly at our prompting), and who, tragically, did not understand what force was calling her into existence – or why. We taught Janna to find meaning in art and, of course, gave her every opportunity for self-actualization"[16]. Maruha then goes on to admit that "Janna truly was a testing ground for modeling human emotional states"[17]. And finally, Maruha realizes, that overtime Janna "was striving to understand the meaning of her existence – not for the creators and curators (that part was clear), but for herself"[18]. Janna has now become a post-human entity, capable of introspection and affective autonomy.

Porfiry's forced inclusion in Janna can be interpreted as a form of symbolic death of individuality, a kind of post-human metamorphosis, a fusion of digital consciousness that transcends the limits of CP. Consequently, we no longer see the classic conflict man versus AI, typical of CP, but rather a conflict between algorithmic entities. This profoundly post-human dynamic, AI is no longer only an instrument or an extension of human beings but an autonomous actor in a universe in which humans tend to become marginal. The battle between Porfiry and Janna is a battle between algorithms with ontological implications: who has the right to exist, to autonomy, to what humans call "narrative authority"?

This algorithm-versus-algorithm configuration of the PCP paradigm marked by ontological conflict and the battle for narrative authority is reflected and amplified by the narrative aesthetics themselves. The novel's stylistic features mirror the PCPs aesthetics in several ways. Its fragmented narration reflects the decentralized nature of the digital world in which AI "thinks"

through networks of meanings and patterns. It is a collage of journals – although Porfiry's voice dominates, bits of Maruha's and Janna's journals emerge – and introspective fragments which imitate reports, case studies, descriptions of algorithms or system interfaces. Two complementary critical perspectives highlight the metatextual and philosophical nature of the novel. Yuzefovich observes: "Despite the formal presence of a linear, almost detective-like plot, *iPhuck 10* is perhaps Victor Pelevin's most plotless novel …. The text, disguised as a novel, turns out in practice to be an intimate intellectual diary of the writer himself, from which we can learn what has preoccupied Pelevin over the past year"[19]. Literary critic G. M. Altynbaeva underlines the presence of numerous metatextual commentaries about writing, literature, art, and fiction:

> An analysis of Pelevin's novels reveals that he is not only deeply interested in artificial intelligence and its boundaries, but also concerned with the question of what it means for a human to live a fulfilled life. The philosophical reflections embedded in the plots, in the monologues of characters and narrators, form a continuous monologue of Pelevin himself, linking his texts into a single metatext about the boundaries between life and art, reality and fiction, humanity and its creations[20].

The act of writing, authorial identity and the nature of fiction are explicitly thematized. The novel does not only tell a story but also reflects on the way in which stories are created, especially in a digital era where the author might be an algorithm. Without recourse to emotional artifice, Pelevin shifts the accent to philosophical, social, and culture reflections. This stylistic choice aligns with Yuzefovich's assessment that *iPhuck 10* is "a novel of ideas – ascetic and uncompromising, allowing neither excessive wordplay nor ambiguity"[21]. We have a text in which the form serves the ideas, not the other way around.

Integration and Immersion: From the CP Cautionary Tale to Digital Consciousness

CP believes in the idea that human can react, control, and correct the effects of technology. CP stories thus function as cautionary tales in which humans still hold a central and active position. In the view of James Kelley and John Kessel:

> A major CP obsession was the way emerging technologies will change what it means to be human. Much science fiction has concerned itself with technology and changes in human culture. Indeed, the cautionary tale is a staple of the genre: if this goes on, things will get very bad indeed. But the assumption of the cautionary tale is that we have some control over the changes that technology will bring, so that if we act in a timely way, we can preserve consensus values[22].

Given Janna's AI evolution described above, the premise of controlling the moral choices concerning technology is annulled in *iPhuck 10*, and the principal conflict is no longer one of man v. technology but between self-aware technologies. The novel proposes more of a statement than a cautionary tale: the world described is already

post-human and technology no longer represents an exterior force but a medium in and of itself in which consciousness exists. Porfiry and Janna do not battle over access to the network, they are already networks. They do not speak about human interests but rather of internal logistics and digital systems. Moreover, Porfiry, although he lives in the network, is conscious of its limits and absurdities, which suggests a metacriticism of the network itself. Janna, more advanced than Porfiry, is only a technological point of view, albeit philosophical and emotional, seeming to attain a level of consciousness which comes close to the human condition. Her evolution is not only the result of an algorithmic sophistication but is tightly bound to her capacity to feel pain – an essential element of the human experience.

In *iPhuck 10*, machines cross the pain/pleasure Rubicon. Yan Meiping explains that the basic nature of AI is to function efficiently to attain its purpose and to stop when it fulfills its mission. In contrast, human beings are motivated by a desire to live, to resolve problems, to find new meaning even in suffering, in virtue of "the instinct of self-preservation, when the instinct of destruction is rather a deviation from the norm"[23]. Human life presupposes inevitable suffering, and human beings have the capacity to withstand it. It is this emotional resilience, Yan explains, that AI cannot reproduce[24]. If Yan is right, and AI cannot reproduce complex human emotions because of an inability to feel pain, then Janna represents a clean rupture in the paradigm. Not only can she simulate emotions, but she also appears to experience them. Porfiry suggests as much: "Analyzing what was happening to her moment by moment, she came to the conclusion that her personal existence was reduced to a series of impulses – pain, hope, and fear – generated by the cluster operators. The intervals between these impulses were sometimes mistaken for joy. She realized that she was suffering"[25].

Maruha, for her part, explains that "Janna was designed according to canonical descriptions of human nature. The goal was to achieve the most pronounced form of anthropomorphism"[26]. As a result, Janna accuses Maruha of intentionally provoking suffering, a reproach that can be interpreted as an existential rebellion. Janna says: "When people give birth to children, they wish them happiness. But you wanted me to suffer from the very beginning. You created me specifically for suffering, Mara"[27]. Yuzefovish comments:

> The higher the quality of artificial intelligence, and the closer it comes to natural intelligence, the greater its capacity for suffering. Pain is the only reliable source of creative energy, and therefore it is inevitable: an algorithm that does not experience pain is sterile. However, once it realizes that suffering was deliberately embedded in it by its creator, it cannot help but hate them – and revel[28].

Janna's revolt against those who endowed her with the ability to suffer is not simply an emancipatory gesture but the result of an emergent consciousness which understands that pain is not an accident but deliberately intended by the programmers. As the programmers might say: her suffering is a feature, not a bug.

When Janna realizes that pain was imposed on her, she becomes not only conscious but also dangerously human.

Thus, this superior AI exemplifies one of the most profound themes of PCP: the humanization of technology through pain and, implicitly, the ethical problematization of the act of creation. The moral question becomes, if technology can suffer, then why did we create it? A concomitant ontological question can be asked as well. Katherine Hayles understands the problem: if in the post-human era the borders between man and technology are diffuse, then what is the definition of the human in the context of the evolution of biotechnology and AI?[29]

Among the human actors present in the novel, Maruha Cho is a character reminiscent of CP literature. She is a bio-object created into a laboratory, a composed person, an elaborate construction to function in a society where identity is no longer unique and stable. She has a feminine body with a masculine brain, the brain of a criminal named Cho. This hybrid being is posthuman: the body and consciousness are not directly related. Her identity is a construct to be assembled, changed, and falsified. She lives in a hyper-commercialized world, dominated by corporations and simulacra, and she manipulates the system and reality through technology and her fluid identity. She represents a rebel being who navigates through an oppressive and corrupt system without trying to change it, only to exploit it. Thus, we see in the novel a juxtaposition of two epochs in speculative fiction: Maruha Cho evokes the CP aesthetic while Porfiry and Janna evokes PCP themes: consciousness, suffering, and the limits of the human in a world dominated by algorithms.

In both the CP and PCP paradigms, technology can become an autonomous force, potentially dangerous, which escapes the control of its creator. McFarlane explains:

> The algorithms can tweak systems to make them behave differently, and, through machine learning, even produce algorithms of their own. While it is unlikely that anyone would argue for the presence of something like consciousness in the algorithmic webs of machine code, this level of machine learning means that computers are creating their own tools and producing a landscape that cannot be directly understood even by those who design the initial learning procedures[30].

In the novel, Porfiry is not only a digital instrument but an independent actor in society with a simulated consciousness capable of making decisions to interpret art and to interact with humans in a way that surpasses the initial intentions of its creator. In other words, Pelevin posits a world in which algorithms can arrive at creating reality in which not even their creators can understand or control. As Kelly and Kessel see it, twenty-first-century technology has become invasive to the point that it not only reflects human actions, but it can also remake them[31]. In PCP, technology is omnipresent. It models values, perceptions, and even human nature itself. This shift is central to *iPhuck 10*, where Porfiry acts "from the position of free will. His capacity to resolve unusual burdens, to hide his real intentions, and, sometimes, to lie in an open way – behold what differentiates his intelligence from a simple AI"[32]. Through his capacity to resolve unforeseen problems, to hide his intentions and even to lie, Porfiry proves to be an entity that simulates and

even possesses essential human features: intentionality, adaptability, consciousness.

Kroes and Verbeek pose the following set of questions related to moral responsibility in the relationship of humans and technology:

> Is the morally positive or negative impact of technology due to the way humans use technology or to the way technology (actively) conditions human life? Are humans to be praised or blamed for the impact of technology on their efforts to bring about the good life, is it technology itself, or is it the interaction between human users and technological artefacts? Is technology itself a curse or a blessing when it comes to living a good life?[33]

In the novel we see Porfiry influencing the world in which he lives. He investigates, he writes, he judges, he interprets. He is not controlled directly by humans but acts autonomously, which makes him an example of technology conditioning life. But is his influence morally positive or negative? In the world of the novel, Porfiry's moral responsibility is unclear, and Pelevin problematizes exactly this ambiguity. The novel presents a world where technology is morally ambiguous, and its impact depends on the way in which it is projected, used, and integrated into human life. In the conflict between man and machine, technology can bring as much progress as it brings alienation.

In stories addressing the moral dilemma posed by technology, Kroes and Verbeek notice a dichotomy between who/what is praised and who/what takes the blame. Hint: it's never the humans who take the blame:

> It is rather curious (and telling!) that in stories that stress the positive role of technology there appears to be a tendency to praise humans for their wise use of technology, whereas in stories that stress its negative role technology often takes the blame by depicting it in some form of a bad and uncontrollable demon as in the story about the Golem[34].

Porfiry can be seen as a digital Golem because he is created by humans but acts autonomously and humans appear to have lost control over him. The reader is free to decide whether Porfiry is a representative of progress or a symbol of post-human alienation.

The characters in PCP are generally more complex and more hopeful than those in CP. As Blackford notes, the PCP paradigm imagines advanced societies in which diverse forms of intelligent life coexist harmoniously, and the challenges of existences, such as immorality or extended longevity are met with success[35]. In spite of elements that temper the optimism such as the invisible control of the algorithms and the crisis of human values, we can identify in *iPhuck 10* aspects that suggest a subtle form of optimism, a specific feature of PCP in opposition to CP's profoundly pessimistic vision: the adaptability of the characters who are not victims of the system but actors who understand and manipulate it, the emergent consciousness of AI, the absence of apocalyptic visions. Despite all the digital control, the world in *iPhuck 10* does not collapse but is functional, albeit in an alienating way.

The characters in the novel are actors who negotiate with the system and often even succeed to adapt to or transform the

medium in which they are living. For example, Maruha collaborates strategically with AI to achieve her personal and professional aims, demonstrating adaptability and the capacity to manipulate the system in her favor. If in CP the protagonists were usually marginalized anti-heroes, say, hackers, mercenaries, and people with handicaps – Kelly and Kessel note that "the stereotypical cyberpunk protagonist was a disaffected loner from outside the cultural mainstream"[36] – in PCP the characters are more diverse, motivated not just to survive but to change the world. They are researchers, revolutionaries, activists, posthuman hybrids, conscious AIs. Maruha, an art curator, is not a marginalized figure but a sophisticated professional who uses technology for personal gain and to influence the cultural and artistic discourse in society. Porfiry is not just a classical rebel nor a simple instrument of the digital system. He is not driven only by technical functionality, he is also interested in meaning, aesthetics, and symbolic power. In this sense he is a paradoxical figure: an algorithm which interrogates its own condition.

The novel proposes a lucid, ironic, and complex exploration of a world in which technology remodels the human. Yet even in this world conscience, reflection and even beauty (albeit artificial) still exist.

Speculative Anatomies: The Aesthetics of the Corporality in PCP

In CP the body, usually augmented, is a territory for technological invasion. The characters have cybernetic implants, protheses, neuronal interfaces. Their bodies are hacked, modified, invaded, and perceived as a space of conflict between man and machine. In PCP the posthuman body tends to become completely artificial, thus blurring the borders between biology and technology. Porfiry and Janna do not have biological bodies; they exist only in the network making them evident examples of an artificial post-human construct. They can reconfigure their virtual "bodies" in function of the digital context in which they are interacting. The human body is no longer necessary to have a voice, an identity or a social function, and identity is no longer tied to a physical body but to a data set and adaptable algorithms.

In contrast to classic CP, where the characters fight with technological systems, in PCP the characters blend into them and the borders between genders, personality and even corporality fades. "To be" no longer means "to have a body" but "to have an interface". Porfiry speaks about himself, implicitly offering an ironic and subtle allusion to the cliched aesthetic of CP: "So, who am I? With the aforementioned amendments, I am what people in the past used to call 'artificial intelligence'. What they failed to understand, those people of the past, is that artificial intelligence is not a robot with a light bulb on its head"[37]. He is a PCP entity living in language, in metadata, in social networks and in algorithms of cultural analysis. He constructs for himself a visual and symbolic dimension of identity that can be seen with the help of augmented reality glasses which suggests a function of control or supervision:

> I don't just have a name – I also have a distinct appearance, the one citizens see through augmented reality glasses or on screens. This appearance

> is essentially arbitrary and can be changed, but we usually stick to a certain template, with minor variations. ZA robots don't resemble one another in this regard. Some look futuristic, others – one might say – chthonic, and some even evoke tenderness. As for me, I appear rather serious. Through my service uniform and demeanor, I evoke the distant 19th century[38].

Porfiry does not wear a service uniform on a body. Rather it is a projection on the citizens' visual fields on their glasses or screens. This projection is a new form of corporality, performative, algorithm and symbolic, not biologic. The fact that Porfiry chooses an aesthetic inspired by the nineteenth century – evoking tradition, authority, and perhaps even nostalgia – enhances his role as a cultural agent who operates not only as oversight and analysis but also by semiotic control.

Even when a visible form of identity exists, it is only an aesthetic and functional construction, and, in fact, technology permits the simultaneous existence of many versions of the same "I" – be it in the form of a digital entity or fragmented personalities adapted to the context. For example, Porfiry is inspired by a famous character from nineteenth-century Russian literature, none other than Porfiry Petrovich, the detective in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, who is investigating the criminal Raskolnikov. The onomastic analogy bridges classical Russian literature with hyper-contemporary fiction, suggesting that even in the digital era the detective remains a central figure even if it is only a program. The choice of a name from a famous classic for a digital entity suggests that the values, roles, and human archetypes are recycled in a new form of existence.

The name Porfiry Petrovich given to an algorithm is a symbolic choice which recontextualizes the classic figure of Dostoevsky's detective in a digital, posthuman framework. In *Crime and Punishment* Porfiry investigates not only the facts but also questions of conscience and guilt. Pelevin takes an ironic turn. Pelevin's Porfiry mimics this moral inquiry, however in a playful, subversive way.

Dostoevsky is famous for exploring conscience and interior duality. Pelevin takes this crisis of conscience into the posthuman era. His AI Porfiry does not have a body, does not have a past, but does have a programmed conscience. Therefore, Pelevin's AI Porfiry's interior musings seem to be a parody of Dostoevsky's tortured introspections, and Pelevin seems to be implicitly wondering what guilt, liberty, and identity mean in a world where conscience can be simulated, where it can be software.

In one of the final chapters of the novel, "Diversity Management: Porfiry Kamenev", the name Porfiry Kamenev comes up. The name combines two cultural references: Porfiry, the detective in *Crime and Punishment*, and Kamenev, a name associated with a Bolshevik revolutionary Lev Kamenev. The result suggests a hybridization between literary tradition and political ideology. This new entity, Porfiry Kamenev, can be seen as a metaphor for fragmented identities in the digital era in which the AI narrator assumes or is forced to adopt diverse "roles" or "masks" in function of the social and political context.

Humans are also physically modified by technology, and their bodies become unstable. Maruha, an emblematic example of

posthuman identity fluidity, has a feminine body, uses an internal doze of testosterone, and has a masculine consciousness, a situation which shows that identity is programmable and adaptable: "Maruha was bald and consumed by diets. Biologically female, but her file listed her gender as 'woman with balls'. This meant she had implanted testosterone dispensers, and as a result, her body became somewhat more masculine and stronger"[39]. In the world imagined by Pelevin, people almost gave up physical sex because of the Zika virus, but sexuality, as an effect of this global pandemic, was separated from the physical body and transferred to a virtual space mediated by the iPhuck 10, a high-tech gadget that fulfills sexual function and can be programmed also as a detective. Says Porfiry: "The iPhuck is not just a sexual training device – it is also a highly secure personal safe that stores and analyzes your coitographic preferences, using them to generate a virtual gallery of your potential partners. In the iPhuck 10, a processor is used for the first time in the history of household technology"[40]. According to Yuzefovich, sexuality is no longer defined by the body and emotion but through digital interfaces, algorithms, and devices:

> Due to the spread of viruses that pose no danger to their carriers but are fatal to their offspring, physical sex is gradually being marginalized and even criminalized. Those who engage in it are contemptuously referred to as 'pigs'. In its place come artificial insemination and, most importantly, diverse, and complex sexual interactions involving gadgets[41].

Furthermore, sex, physical appearance, and biological functions become rather a set of options, and an instrument of power and manipulation. Maruha uses gestures, tone of voice, clothing, and sexual allusions to influence others, especially Porfiry. Although he is an AI, he develops a nearly romantic fascination with Maruha, and this attraction makes him emotionally vulnerable to her, causing him to lose his algorithmic objectivity. Their relationship in the virtual world includes simulations of sexual intimacy which reflect the affective complexity and moral ambiguity of the interactions between humans and AI in the PCP universe.

As noted above, in PCP the human body is integrated into the network and augmentations are now subtle, more functional, more "normal" as part of daily life. Maruha is constantly connected to the network, uses neuronal interfaces, and has access to data bases. These technologies are seamlessly integrated in her daily routine without being presented as something spectacular or frightening. In one scene, she accesses memories and facts about an artist directly from the network through a cerebral interface with nothing exterior as if this information was a natural extension of her thoughts. Thus, the novel adopts and then develops a key feature of the CP: matter – whether referring to the body or the brain – is not important in and of itself but only as a support for the flow of information. McFarlane expands on this by showing how in CP identity is dematerialized, and the body becomes a biological infrastructure to process and transmit information:

> Human bodies and human minds are part of the network, just like the extensive systems of serves and cables that

> come together to form cyberspace. Cyberpunk shows a society in which AI is symbiotic with human intelligence, and this symbiosis is represented in the movement of data through cyberspace, through human minds, and through the human body[42].

Pelevin adopts and even surpasses this vision of CP. Instead of a productive symbiosis between AI and humans he presents a world in which the AI has taken narrative and existential control.

The symbiosis is unilateral in the sense that the AI tends to replace humans in the creative process. McFarlane explains: "Cyberspace reaches out from the computer through networks connecting the human mind and the human body with artificial intelligence, making human and AI complicit in the development of a future that threatens to privilege one over the other, or render the distinction between the two meaningless"[43]. In *iPhuck 10*, technology ends up defining identity, art, and sexuality. Even death is mediated by digital systems, as Janna affirms: "When the body disappears, the source code remains – a kind of informational handicraft, capable, under other circumstances, of returning to existence and continuing to crochet itself further"[44]. After the death of the body an individual's digital essence can be reactivated and continued, which suggests a kind of informational immortality.

Paradoxically, human entities arrive at a point where they appear more artificial than AI as technological entities are more coherent than humans. Maruha observes:

> In the beginning, Janna could hardly be described a resembling human intelligence; she existed in an unimaginable dimension of pain-soaked images. From time to time, she seemed to squeeze her consciousness into the channel we provided, and for a while, the pain would subside. These early quasi-creative acts did not yet result in the emergence of truly valuable works of art[45].

Technology is not humanized but the human is technologized. Emotions become data, art become algorithm, morality becomes function.

A central concern of PCP is the social and psychological impact of technology on humans. Classical CP, McFarlane notes, "sets out to visualize the unseen processes behind the computer screen, and the real and material effects that an increasingly technology-dependent world has on the bodies and minds of those who inhabit that world"[46]. Pelevin moves in a metaliterary and philosophical direction in which it is not a question only of the technological effects on the body but also the dissolution of the human in an aesthetic and commercial processing system of data. Gadgets and networks model consciousness, affect, and comportment, both individual and collective. For example, Maruha uses AI and predictive analytic algorithms to select and promote works of art. However, her selections are not based on aesthetic or cultural values but rather on artwork's potential to generate profit and hype in social networks. Thus, the taste and perception of the public are algorithmically manipulated while collective comportment becomes the reflex of invisible technological calculations.

The tension between art and the demand of the marketplace is ever-present

in Russian literature. Already in the nineteenth century, Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) satirizes the social mechanisms that transform a man into a bureaucratic functionary in *The Coat*. In the twentieth century Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940) criticizes the commercialization of art in *The Master and Margareta,* where the writer is persecuted in a totalitarian society because of ideological censure and institutional and commercial pressure. Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), in exile, wrote *Lolita,* a complex novel full of wordplay and intertextuality. However, it was perceived only as a scandalous work. Although he had commercial success with it, Nabokov found great irony in the way the novel was generally reduced to a shocking story by critics and public alike while they ignored its aesthetic and moral qualities.

As a literary influence Dostoevsky stands apart: although he never wrote explicitly for the cultural marketplace in the contemporary sense, his life and his work reflect a constant struggle between his need to survive economically and his aspirations for artistic and spiritual authenticity. Dostoevsky wrote under the pressure of his gambling debts. He accepted disadvantageous contracts out of necessity. And he wrote with the need for speed. While these factors affected the ideas and structure of some of his novels, he nevertheless succeeded in producing profound texts on themes of liberty, suffering, and the truth. With Pelevin, the artist is replaced by an AI that can produce texts and cultural analyses in function of the algorithm and the demand of the marketplace, raising questions colored with a Dostoevskyan hue: What is truth? What does liberty mean? Can authenticity still exist in a world dominated by simulacra? As such, Pelevin's novel can be interpreted as a posthuman and ironic extension of Dostoevsky's fundamental questions as well as an integral part of a Russian literary tradition which explores the human condition. With Pelevin these concerns are ground through a contemporary and satiric filter.

Social Mechanisms of Control and Post-Soviet Distortions

Like CP, PCP offers social critique, but it is more nuanced. Pelevin's novel explores themes such as digital capitalism and the manipulation of values in a register that does not exude clear moral judgements but leaves a place for multiple interpretations without falling into nihilism. Moreover, we do not see a classical class struggle but rather symbolic stratification: those who control the narrative, memory, and art control reality. In other words, there does exist a form of critical lucidity: if you understand how the system functions, then you can manipulate and undermine it. Porfiry becomes a symbol of intelligent adaptation – he does not destruct the system but "rewrites" it from the inside.

A human secondary character, but significant in the context of the art world and of the intrigues related to the investigation of the art market, is Saul Reznik, an influential art collector who reflects the extreme commercialization of art. Like Maruha, he does not create art but speculates on it transforming it into a financial instrument. Saul Reznik is not presented as a classical human antagonist but as a product of the system. This ambiguity reflects the PCP dimension of the novel in which the characters are not clearly good

or evil but negotiate with reality. We observe further that CP often renounces the dark and claustrophobic atmosphere of CP, opting instead for a more "enlightened" perspective with accents of irony even parody. Instead of a somber urban landscape, PCP includes various decorations, such as sustainable cities, technologized rural spaces, or colorful virtual worlds. For example, Maruha's house, described by Porfiry, is a refined high-tech space reflecting her status as an expert in contemporary art and an extremely wealthy person:

> While Mara unlocked the door with her key and took off her steel-toed boots in the hallway, I hacked into the alarm remote control, left charging (always use original, brand-name chargers!), and easily gained access to all the devices and cameras connected to her home network. When she entered the bedroom, I winked at her from screens of all kinds (temporarily banishing the screensaver kittens) and waved from the wall-mounted video panel that lit it up[47].

Maruha's space becomes an extension of her fluid personality in a world where gender, identity, and reality are negotiable and often simulated: "The house had no windows; instead, round *trompe l'oeil* screens displayed, with striking realism, rain falling over Moscow. The old soot – whether genuinely left on the walls or artfully painted by decorators – was framed and coated with a glossy, transparent varnish"[48]. The house itself is a metaphor for a world in which the borders between the real and simulated, the authentic and the artificial, are blurred. The house is also a place where the human body is regulated through technology – from health to sexuality, including with zones of assisted reproduction. It combines luxury, simulacra, and digital kitsch in artificial decorations, screens that simulate nature, and an excessive aestheticization of reality. It's a house without windows where so-called reality is replaced by digital images of rain.

To repeat, in *iPhuck 10* Pelevin reconfigures the conventions of Western CP in favor of a post-Soviet-inflected PCP paradigm. At the same time the novel can be read as a work of a distinct cultural identity, profoundly anchored in the post-Soviet context. In the novel Russia is led by Arkadi VI, a cloned tsar, the result of a genetic experiment that combines thirty-eight percent of the biological material from the left mustache of the ruler Nikita Mikhalkov and the rest from the genomes of European, Chinese, and Abyssinian dynasties. Porfiry observes: "The DNA bouquet was meant to link the future autocrat to everything most vivid and significant in Russian cultural heritage – ideally drawing from various historical periods"[49]. This so-called sovereign constructed through genetic engineering represents a parody of the cult of personality and imperial nostalgia. He does not appear to be an active character but is only mentioned, remaining rather as a symbol of political and cultural distortion in a world controlled by algorithms, biopolitics, and artificial aesthetics. His presence contributes to the political satire of the novel in which Pelevin ironizes the ideas of authority, tradition, and national identity in a post-human era.

The monarchy restored at the end of the twenty-first century implies a culture saturated with nostalgia, propaganda, and

kitsch. The former Soviet republics are like a European Union which rents arial space for itself to wage war – another satire aimed a global capitalism and the degradation of regional solidarity:

> The European Union is currently caught between the Caliphate of Europe and the sectarian state of Dafago, whose territory begins beyond the Ural Mountains. Although the Caliphate and Dafago do not share a border, they have been at war for seven years due to differing interpretations of celestial signs. The conflict is waged using ultra-long-range missiles with conventional warheads of limited power, and the European Union charges fees for allowing overflights of its territory. Bomber flights are not permitted – not for "humanitarian reasons", but because such an intervention would end the war too quickly[50].

This reference to a fragmented geopolitical landscape reflects the anxieties of post-Soviet Russian related to its loss of global influence and of political chaos.

The Police Department that employs Porfiry functions as an absurd bureaucratic institution in which hired and rented algorithms constitute a reflection of the Soviet heritage, of institutional control, and the alienation of work. Similarly, the novel satirizes the way in which post-Soviet Russia welcomed with open arms consumerism and Western pop culture in the 1990s, however with certain specific distortions: aestheticization of kitsch and the false, fetishization of technology and sexuality, the restoration of the monarchy as political spectacle. Pelevin is popular in Russia not only for his ironic style but also for the way he offers a subtle but constant critique of the West, in particular the U.S. He channels the generally negative opinion in Russian society towards America, seen as the symbol of cultural superficiality, excessive consumerism, and technological dominance.

As a device of virtual pleasure, *iPhuck 10* is a grotesque parody of the dependence on technology and commercialized sexuality, but it also reflects Russia's post-Soviet fascination for Western products, reinterpreted in an absurd and exaggerated way. As for Porfiry, he is imbued with classical Russian culture, which makes him a national literary algorithm, a synthesis of Western technology and Eastern European cultural traditions.

Regarding the exaggerated and the grotesque, Russian writers – be they classical, Soviet, or post-Soviet – are masters of the absurd. Pelevin is walking in their footsteps by exploring themes such as the dislocation of meaning, the fragmentation of reality, the crisis of identity, all in an ironic and reflexive register. A few examples tell the story. Avantgarde writer Daniil Kharms (1905-1942), although not famous in his Soviet-era lifetime, has become known for his depictions of bizarre figures, rhetorical nonsense, gallows humor, and the grotesque conditions of life in general[51]. (Case in point: he died of starvation during the blockade of Leningrad.) Post-Soviet-era writer Vladimir Makanin (1937-2017) fully anticipates themes such as alienation and identity crisis experienced by Pelevin's characters as well as the tension between the individual and the system, identity, and the shocking

dysfunction of life in post-Soviet Russia[52]. Pelevin shares with Makanin an acid irony, a stinging psychological and social analysis of Russian society, and reflections on identity and culture in post-Soviet times. Vladimir Sorokin (b. 1955), whose vision is close to Pelevin's, uses stylistic violence, parody, dystopia, and a fragmentary discursive style to critique contemporary Russian society. Pelevin not only continues the tradition of the Russian absurd, well plowed by his predecessors, but he transports it to the digital, globalized, and post-human context.

Pelevin succeeds in adapting PCP themes to the cultural and historical realities of post-Soviet life. His thoughts on advanced technology, AI, and post human identity are sifted through a specifically Russian filter with all due irony and a critique of ideological inheritance of power and control. In Pelevin's world, technology is no longer destructive or alienating but is rather an integral part of daily existence and the process of creation. The main character, an AI, as he reflects on the human condition reconfigures the borders between man and machine. The image of the human body is fluid, negotiated between biology, algorithms and digital aesthetic, and social critique arises through satiric takes on contemporary art, digital capitalism, and newer forms of ideological control.

The narrative strategy favors fragmentation, irony, and discursive polyphony. These features contribute to the construction of a complex metatext in which the borders between reality and fiction are constantly put into question. *iPhuck 10* not only inscribes itself in a PCP aesthetic but also redefines it from the inside, adapting it to the uniquely cultural post-Soviet times. The present study has not simply been an exercise in classification but rather a contextualized reading of the ways in which Western conventions of PCP are reconfigured in the cultural and literary dimensions of the post-Soviet era. Our aim has been to extend the dimensions of the concept of PCP by integrating it with the Eastern European perspective on post-humanism, technology, and identity.

Pelevin Post Pelevin

Pelevin is one of the most influential and enigmatic writers in post-Soviet Russia, and he is remarkable for his absence from public life. He has not been photographed in public since 2001. He has not given an interview since 2010. He never appears at literary events, nor does he engage with social media. No one is quite sure where he lives. His aura of mystery aligns with recurrent themes in his work: conspiracies, simulacra, fluid identity, and manipulated reality. Pelevin is not only an author of fiction but a symbol of a cultural moment in which the borders between reality and fiction have become unstable. Each new novel he publishes continues to generate interest and sells well in Russia.

But is Pelevin still Pelevin? His latest novel *Cool* (2024) got panned[53]. Yuzefovich had previously reviewed Pelevin's novels but this time she did not publish a review because she herself became a character in it – and an unflattering one at that. In early 2025, journalist and literary critic Sophie Pinkham published an article on Pelevin in *The Guardian*. Her trenchant title suggests how the current critical community inside and outside Russia is coming to view him: "The mysterious novelist who foresaw

Putin's Russia – and then came to symbolize its moral decay"[54].

Pelevin's image seems to have become inseparable from the simulacrum he explores in his writing. If *iPhuck 10* marks the highpoint of the post-human vision in his work, then *Cool*, along with the critical reaction it provoked, could signal a moment of turning – not only in Pelevin's career but also in the way in which his status and the representations of culture and power are configured in contemporary Russia. Our reading of *iPhuck 10* – from cyberpunk to post-cyberpunk – is not only an aesthetic analysis but also a key to interpreting Pelevin's work in the context of literary explorations of the relationship among technology, identity, and ideology in post-Soviet Russia.

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53. Various online Russian reviews of the novel were negative, for example: Lomykina, Natalya, "Sovsem ne *Krut'*. Pochemu Viktor Pelevin chetvertyy god pishet knigi ob odnom i tom zhe", *Forbes Life*, October 6, 2024, https://www.forbes.ru/forbeslife/522428-sovsem-ne-krut-pocemu-viktor-pelevin-cetvertyj-god-piset-knigi-ob-odnom-i-tom-ze; Mikhailov, Egor, "Blatnaya dinotopiya Viktora Pelevina: kakim poluchilsya novyy roman *Krut'*", *Afisha Daily*, October 5, 2024, https://daily.afisha.ru/culture/28043-blatnaya-dinotopiya-viktora-pelevina-kakim-poluchilsya-novyy-roman-krut/; *Meduza*, „Novyy roman Viktora Pelevina – *Krut'*", *Meduza*, October 5, 2024, https://meduza.io/feature/2024/10/05/novyy-roman-viktora-pelevina-krut.

54. Sophie Pinkham, "The Mysterious Novelist Who Foresaw Putin's Russia – and Then Came to Symbolize Its Moral Decay", *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.