

# The controlling / controlled human, or humanity's dystopian future\*

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This discussion begins with the assumption that humans possess a natural inclination to theatricalize life. As Erving Goffman observes, “[t]he expressiveness of the individual appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that he gives and the expression that he gives off.”<sup>1</sup> Theatricalization is thus automatically associated with illusion, artificiality, and subordination to both the director and the script. The same principles apply (albeit to varying degrees<sup>2</sup>) to the digital world. Today, the scope of the “presentation of self in everyday life” has expanded dramatically to include the virtual realm. Humans now operate

<sup>1</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2021), 2.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in computer games this interdependence is substantial, since players must follow a specific scenario. In social networks, it is far weaker, as their development depends on the spontaneous reactions of users. As a result, improvisation dominates. Regardless of the mode of interaction (game or social network) we are still dealing with theatricality, only operating on a different level.

in two dimensions: the real, physical one and the virtual one. Technological development, as Gérard Raulet noted in the late 1980s, produced a “radically new technological culture,”<sup>3</sup> with new modes of communication in which the boundary between “being close” and “being far away” becomes increasingly blurred. How we think and live changes. A new kind of utopia emerges, one defined by “dispersion” and “the rhizome,” philosophical ideas that metaphorically capture the nature of today’s networked world.<sup>4</sup> This shift leads not only to dematerialization but also to a delocalization in space and time, giving rise to a “new utopia” without territorial, material, or economic constraints, an ideal world, at least in theory.

The expansion of new technologies and the total mediatization of life, as Piotr Zawojki notes, means that “being-in-the-world” is largely replaced by “being-through-the-medium” (telepresence) and transferred to avatars, which are “digital constructs brought to life to represent the ‘I’ in cyberspace; at the same time, they also represent an escape from corporeality, allowing one to cross the portal (the threshold) into the virtual world.”<sup>5</sup> This shift moves us away from firsthand experience and empiricism toward a world shaped by simulation. A *Virtual Personality* emerges, complementary to—and often in competition with—the *Real Personality*. Stahl Stenslie argues that the two maintain a strong and continuous psychophysical connection, a condition he identifies as characteristic of cyberspace. Ultimately, a “post-biological cyberorganism” emerges. It is a double, a duplicate, a replica without physical form, yet it possesses knowledge and awareness of it. The Virtual Personality gives rise to an online presence (telepresence), a means of shaping one’s “terminal identity.” It is the definitive end of the real subject and a beginning.

If the Virtual Personality comes to dominate the Real Personality, we will witness the end of the real subject and its transformation into what Jean Baudrillard calls a “virtual human.” Encased in various energetic and mechanical prostheses, the human being becomes an “artificial growth of his own prostheses.”<sup>6</sup> This brings us to the problem of avatars, which, according to Baudrillard, are a simulacrum of existence. An avatar offers an attractive mode of digital self-representation, as it permits a comprehensive reconfiguration of identity—the observer encounters a (more or less simplified) figure that may differ entirely from the person behind it. This is most clearly visible in computer games; the creator of the avatar possesses no extraordinary skills or powers in real life. Additionally, through the avatar one can construct an identity and exercise full control over it in relation to the context in which it will function—from appearance, through language and forms of expression, to the environment it chooses

<sup>3</sup> Gérard Raulet, “Nowa utopia: Socjologiczne i filozoficzne konsekwencje nowych technologii komunikowania” [The New Utopia: Sociological and Philosophical Consequences of New Communication Technologies], trans. Krystyna Krzemieniowa, in: *Po kinie?... Audiowizualność w epoce przekazników elektronicznych* [After Cinema?... Audiovisuality in the Age of Electronic Transmitters], selection, introduction, ed. Andrzej Gwóźdź (Krakow: Universitas, 1994), 137. All citations from Gérard Raulet’s article have been translated into English from the Polish translation of his text.

<sup>4</sup> Raulet, 141.

<sup>5</sup> Piotr Zawojki, “Monitory między nami: O byciu razem i osobno w cyberprzestrzeni” [The Screens Between Us: On Being Together and Apart in Cyberspace], in: *Wiek ekranów: Przestrzenie kultury widzenia* [The Screen Age: Spaces of Visual Culture], ed. Andrzej Gwóźdź, Piotr Zawojki (Krakow: Rabid, 2002), 424.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Świat wideo i podmiot fraktalny” [Videoworld and the Fractal Subject], trans. Andrzej Gwóźdź, in: *Po kinie?... Audiowizualność w epoce przekazników elektronicznych*, selection, introduction, ed. Andrzej Gwóźdź (Krakow: Universitas, 1994), 248. All citations from Jean Baudrillard’s article have been translated into English from the Polish translation of his text.

to share (for example, showing “where and with whom I eat lunch” on Instagram).<sup>7</sup> This corresponds to the three contexts or types of telepresence: simulation, dialogue, and personal telepresence.<sup>8</sup>

Telepresence is tied to audiovisuality (webcams, microphones, cameras). At times, the avatar is created entirely from scratch, completely severing its connection to corporeality. This possibility, in line with Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, becomes a simulacrum of a person consciously presenting their self-image to others—a “life on display.”<sup>9</sup> We are therefore confronted with the problem of “the self-for-oneself” versus “the self-for-others.” At the same time, telepresence carries specific risks. As “a specific form of shaping a ‘terminal identity’ [...], it is often treated as ‘secondary’ to actual being,”<sup>10</sup> and thus frequently perceived as more interesting, easier, and more attractive because it is not defined by physical limitations. A similar dynamic plays out in our relationships with others. Who we are in real life, for ourselves, becomes irrelevant online, because only our decisions, reactions, and behaviors—those that others perceive, interpret, and respond to—matter. Since we exist within communities both online and offline, we inevitably confront questions about our identity and our ability to remain autonomous. I will attempt to illustrate this problem using selected works by contemporary Russian prose writers, with particular emphasis on the works of Victor Pelevin.

From a global perspective, contemporary Russian literature (that is, literature after 1990) is largely dominated by a pessimistic (more sociological than philosophical) outlook. Clearly visible in Pelevin’s work, it also undergoes an evolution. Since the outset of his career, Pelevin has attentively observed global transformations, with a particular focus on social change, and has engaged with them with notable force.

The theme of virtual reality and its influence on individuals appeared in his work as early as the 1990s, in what is arguably his most famous novel, *Generation P* (1999) (also: *Babylon, Homo Zapiens*). Among the many current issues it addresses, one of the most prominent is the development of advertising, a medium that perfectly illustrates Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra and simulation. Advertising rapidly achieved ubiquity and, as a result, an almost omnipotent cultural force, systematically supplanting established values and ideas. The novel’s protagonist, Vavilen (Babylon in the English translation), starts out as a copywriter but soon evolves into a creator of advertisements that fabricate a virtual reality for post-communist Russia. In Pelevin’s view, advertising is a medium that, by employing various communication channels, fulfills multiple functions. Above all, it is a tool of manipulation, because it not only “sells” specific products but, more importantly, creates new human needs and behavioral patterns, thereby redefining one’s identity. Secondly, by effectively marginalizing established

<sup>7</sup> Artur Brzeziński, *W świecie awatarów...* [In the World of Avatars...], source: <https://pracowniaintegra.pl/psycholodzy-pisza/w-swiecie-awatarow/>, date of access 12 Mar. 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Sidey Myoo, *Ontoelektronika [Ontoelectronics]* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013), 107–110.

<sup>9</sup> Marta Gliniecka, “Profil na Facebooku – awatar, wirtualna maska czy obraz siebie? O konstruowaniu tożsamości internetowej” [Facebook Profile: Avatar, Virtual Mask, or Self-Image? On Constructing an Online Identity], *Zarządzanie Mediami [Media Management]* 2 (2017): 90–91.

<sup>10</sup> Zawojwski, 424–425.

narratives, it offers the illusion of meaning and fulfillment in life. In doing so, it lays the foundations for a new hyperrealistic society, with its own mythology, gods, and rituals. Thirdly, it becomes an effective tool in the struggle for political and social power. A key moment here is the passage describing politicians. They exist only on television screens, so politics (like advertising) is not a real instrument for influencing reality but a form of illusion.

По своей природе любой политик – это просто телепередача. Ну, посадим мы перед камерой живого человека. Все равно ему речи будет писать команда спичрайтеров, пиджаки выбирать – группа стилистов, а решения принимать – Межбанковский комитет.<sup>11</sup>

The author makes it clear that both big business and politics are largely shaped, and in many ways steered, by advertising agencies, making those who command these agencies the true masterminds. In a world increasingly defined by Westernization, understood here primarily as the adoption of specific consumption patterns, the rapid expansion of media and advertising fuels a kind of hysterical consumerism. As a result, reality itself becomes subject to a constant process of “spin,” carefully engineered to manipulate public opinion. Within this landscape, the position of the younger generation transitioning into adulthood is particularly vulnerable. Confronted with the forces of predatory capitalism, they find themselves disoriented and ideologically unmoored, suddenly standing at a crossroads: the old value system has been dismantled, while a new one has yet to take shape. Attempts to navigate this new reality, combined with the absence of role models and meaningful support from the older generation, drive young people to seek identity and purpose in chaotic, irrational, superficial, and hysterical ways, making them easy prey for copywriters. Two additional points are worth noting. First, Vavilen (Babylen) Tatarsky, the protagonist of *Generation P*, is not a singular character type but rather the vanguard of a whole succession of lost figures—individuals perceived, both by society and by themselves, as losers, wandering through the (often illusory) world. This is the case, for example, with Roman Shtorkin from *Empire V* (2006) and *Batman Apollo* (2013), who, in the opening sections of both books, appears passive, lost, and disoriented. Secondly, Pelevin is not the only writer to portray and assess the younger generation of Russians in this way. The younger generation’s identity crisis was explored in a similar vein, though somewhat later, by Irina Denezhkina in her short story collection *Give Me [Songs for Lovers]* (Дай мне, 2001), Mikhail Elizarov in his novel *The Librarian* (Библиотекарь, 2007), and Dmitry Glukhovskiy in his novel *Dusk* (Сумерки, 2012/2007). In each of these works, young Russians—while not yet powerless puppets in the hands of the creators of an illusory world—are nevertheless predisposed to manipulation: they distrust ideologies and instead prioritize concrete values such as material success and consumption.

In his later works, Pelevin gradually shifted toward a more pessimistic assessment not only of his compatriots but of humanity as a whole. In 2006, in his novel *The Helmet of Horror*, he went even further, examining the relationship between real people and their digital counterparts in a slightly altered dimension. Published in the international “Myths” series, the book offered a bold reinterpretation of the Minotaur myth. All the action unfolds in a virtual world where, for unknown reasons, eight complete strangers have been imprisoned. Confined to separate rooms, they can communicate only through a computer network. As the story progresses, we observe

<sup>11</sup>Виктор Пелевин, *Generation «П»*, source: <https://loveread.me/contents.php?id=2937>, date of access 12 Mar. 2025.

their attempts to return to reality and reclaim their former, materially grounded lives through an online chat. Each character is assigned a nickname that reflects their personality and worldview, and the entire process is continuously monitored by a computer system—a hyperreal God. Despite their efforts, a return to physical life proves impossible. Moreover, through the discourse they are compelled to engage in, the chat members create a new world entirely grounded in that discourse. This world is dual in nature: on the one hand, it offers limitless possibilities; on the other hand, it completely and permanently negates reality. Pelevin writes:

...теперь будем Минозавром. Дрэнвним змеем [...] Человеческое нам только мешало [...] Будем драконом. Взлетим под облака, нырем на дно морское.<sup>12</sup>

Here, as becomes evident, Pelevin leaves the question of human identity unresolved, though he clearly inclines toward Baudrillard's view that, in the face of pervasive mediatization and the expansion of cyberspace, humanity faces loneliness and an endless drift through a maze of worlds. Electronic embodiment through the avatar is not mentioned (here, identity formation is emphasized through a top-down assignment of nicknames), yet the process of existentialization unfolds holistically,<sup>13</sup> rendering human incarnation<sup>14</sup> in the electronic environment both total and literal. The characters not only “descend” into the electronic world but are created within it. They create themselves inside the anthroposphere they have constructed—and in which they will ultimately remain.

In *The Helmet of Horror*, the ambiguity of the depicted world—marked by the destabilization of foundational truths and the existential anxiety this process generates—progressively yields to a thorough dismantling of its very order. The status of humanity changes dramatically as well. The world's pan-labyrinthine nature generates unease and defines it above all else. Within it, humanity occupies a dual and seemingly irreconcilable position: while adapting to the demands and constraints of the virtual environment, it becomes both the controlled and the controlling force. This tension is particularly evident (especially in relation to cognition shaped through language, as suggested by the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis<sup>15</sup>) at the level of language and structure. Aside from the author's introduction, the text unfolds entirely as an online chat.

<sup>12</sup>Виктор Пелевин, Шлем ужаса, source: <https://loveread.ec/book-comments.php?book=2944>, date of access 12 Mar. 2025.

<sup>13</sup>“The identity process leads a person to enrich the electronic world, to devote attention to it, and to fill it with elements of their own self—the value of their personality. The very processes that expand and saturate electronic reality simultaneously confirm it as a set of facts that, for various reasons, become significant and dominant for the individual” (Sidey Myoo, *Tożsamość człowieka w środowisku elektronicznym*, source: [http://www.sideymyoo.art.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Sidey-Myoo\\_Tozsamosc-czlowieka-w-srodowisku-elektronicznym.pdf](http://www.sideymyoo.art.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Sidey-Myoo_Tozsamosc-czlowieka-w-srodowisku-elektronicznym.pdf), date of access 12 Mar. 2025).

<sup>14</sup>“In the case of the concept of electronic incarnation, we have in mind an approach in which the described processes create conditions for a person's ‘descent’ into the electronic world, while simultaneously generating that world. We understand electronic incarnation as a state of affairs arising from various processes occurring on multiple levels. [...] This issue concerns the electronic anthroposphere, in which all elements of the human world possess an electronic reference or equivalent to the physical world. Electronic incarnation pertains to the person and their electronic identity, but it does not describe any specific activity. It leads to existence within the electronic world, understood as the electronic anthroposphere. Electronic incarnation is the most complete possible identification of oneself within the electronic world” (Myoo, *Tożsamość człowieka w środowisku elektronicznym*).

<sup>15</sup>Anna Klimczuk, “Hipoteza Sapira-Whorfa – przegląd argumentów zwolenników i przeciwników” [The Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis: A Review of the Arguments of Supporters and Opponents], *Kultura–Społeczeństwo–Edukacja* [Culture–Society–Education] 1 (2013): 165–181, source: <https://philarchive.org/archive/KLIHS>, date of access 12 Mar. 2025.

Within this framework, emoticons serve as substitutes for the participants' reactions. The conclusion that emerges is a qualitative shift in language, not so much its impoverishment as its adaptation to the norms of the electronic world produced and interpreted through discourse (both consciously and unconsciously). From this perspective, the human being can effortlessly merge the roles of the demiurge and the slave—the only remaining question is whether such a fusion is worth embracing.

Respectively, in the novel *Love for Three Zuckerbrins* (2014), Pelevin examines the relationship between humanity and the virtual world in greater depth, presenting a scenario reminiscent of *The Matrix*. The protagonist, Kesha, an internet troll, voluntarily relinquishes the possibility of real, physical existence and chooses pseudo-life as his sole mode of being. Bedridden and connected to a life-support system, he lives online. Yet unlike Neo, Pelevin's protagonist delights in this condition, fully enjoying his life as an avatar (more than one, in fact). He and others escape into cyberspace because of the condition and the scale of threats found in the real world. It is dilapidated, dirty, dangerous, and unbearably expensive for the average person. The only escape is voluntary confinement in a cosmic, aerial ghetto for the poor, located five kilometers above the Earth—a kind of garbage dump in the clouds, as Pelevin describes it. This place is affordable, comfortable, and appealing because it seems to offer absolute freedom. By choosing to abandon *realis* entirely, Kesha, as the protagonist, confirms Myoo's findings that Second Life, through the possibilities it offers, can not only enrich but also destroy a person, leading to their existential "drying up" in the physical world.<sup>16</sup> The fundamental reason for this state of affairs, hinted at in the novel's title, is the imperfection of humanity itself. The term "Zuckerbrin" clearly alludes to two figures: Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, and Sergey Brin, the Moscow-born American programmer and entrepreneur, co-creator of the Google search engine. The third "zuckerbrin," the true lord and master of minds, is humanity itself—the internet user addicted to technology. Seemingly dominant and in control, this user in fact remains permanently in the position of "the subject," a fanatical follower who blindly believes in a virtual paradise.

The status of humanity in the context of the total and multi-level technologization of human life is one of the central issues addressed in Pelevin's most recent work, *Transhumanism Inc.* (*TRANSHUMANISM.INC.*, 2021). The book consists of seven novellas linked by a shared focus on a transhumanist vision of the future. It shows a world in which technology has long enabled the active brain to be stored separately from the body, thereby extending life indefinitely, while allowing only indirect interaction with the real world, since consciousness and personality operate within the virtual realm. Due to its price, only the richest and most influential people on the planet can benefit from this solution. As a result, humanity has for years been governed by immortalized brains stored in special "jars." Overcoming bodily limitations through technological means (an idea central to the entire transhumanist project)

<sup>16</sup>Myoo writes: "Second Life appears hungry for humanity, absorbing human activity in its more elevated spheres. Humans, in turn, expand themselves—through searching, they also discover themselves. Electronic identity emerges as people increasingly invest in the digital realm, find answers to their questions, and find open spaces for their own actions. With each added value, electronic identity gains a sense of purpose, and individuals often long for further engagement. [...] Identity processes 'pull' humans into the electronic world, at times leaving behind a void in the physical one. This could be described as the existential drying up of humans in the physical world. It is perhaps a negative manifestation of identity processes, which may lead individuals to cease to exist meaningfully in the physical realm" (Myoo, *Ontoelektronika*, 149–150).

constitutes, in Pelevin's view, a decisive turning point for humanity, one that may lead either to spectacular progress or to profound regression. Pelevin writes:

Понятие «трансгуманизм» указывает на выход за пределы обычного человеческого модуса бытия. Любым, так сказать, способом, вверх или вниз. Тем более что социальный вверх в нашем случае означает пространственный низ, то есть подземный бункер, куда уезжают мозги, а самый далекий социальный низ в некотором странном смысле означает эмоциональный вверх.<sup>17</sup>

In this clearly subversive yet idiosyncratic manner, the author argues not only with the proponents of the transhumanist project-as-progress,<sup>18</sup> but also demonstrates how the vision of immortality—combined with a sense of power, superiority, infallibility, and omniscience—can deform the human being, making them (paradoxically) a slave to their own smallness, desires, and pride. As Ewa Pańkowska rightly concludes, the post-biological world remains far from ideal (and in some respects it is even worse). Cruelty, heartlessness, greed, the pursuit of commercial success, and class divisions dominate daily life, and “[t]he ‘paradise in a jar’ is not a space of unlimited possibilities and absolute freedom but rather one of enslavement and outright monstrous manipulation of individual consciousness. Immortality cannot be bought—but one can buy ‘slow agony in a jar.’”<sup>19</sup> The commodification of humans renders them valuable only insofar as they are able to function in cyberspace, so instead of universal happiness we may (and in Pelevin's case, we do) get technological enslavement, dehumanization—even to the point of legally sanctioned slavery—and, as Michał Klichowski puts it, “general human techno-enslavement.”<sup>20</sup> Edyta Sadowska reaches similar conclusions, emphasizing that the idea of transhumanism is a double-edged sword: “On the one hand, progress allows humans to overcome limitations resulting from disease and other disabilities, thereby reducing human suffering. On the other hand, however, it can generate a serious threat rooted in utopian visions of a new human being and a society dominated by extreme hierarchization. Such emerging social divisions risk substantially violating the core human value of inherent dignity, and the emergence of a new social class—the digitariat—may contribute to further divisions.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in examining the contemporary world, Pelevin increasingly calls for careful reflection on new civilizational challenges and at times adopts a skeptical view of ideas such as transhumanism. The acclaimed contemporary Russian

<sup>17</sup>Виктор Пелевин, *Transhumanism Inc.* (Москва: Эксмо, 2021), 102.

<sup>18</sup>Michał Klichowski writes: “Transhumanism is [...] a project of transcending the human—it is therefore not humanistically anthropocentric but progressocentric. The human is the highest moral value only in the sense that its progress is paramount; the path toward the posthuman becomes the center of everything. H+ is thus often described as evolutionary humanism, in which evolution is perceived as moving from the human, through the transhuman, to the posthuman” (Michał Klichowski, *Narodziny cyborgizacji: Nowa eugenika, transhumanizm i zmierzch edukacji* [The Birth of Cyborgization: The New Eugenics, Transhumanism, and the Nearing End of Education] [Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2014], 109).

<sup>19</sup>Ewa Pańkowska, “«Być albo nie być» – transhumanistyczna wizja przyszłości według Wiktora Pielewina” [“To Be or Not To Be” – A Transhumanist Vision of the Future According to Victor Pelevin], *Bibliotekarz Podlaski* [The Podlasie Librarian] 4 (2023): 95.

<sup>20</sup>Michał Klichowski, “Technicyzacja: «w niewoli władzy i wolności»” [Technologization: “In the Captivity of Power and Freedom”], *Studia Edukacyjne* [Educational Studies] 54 (2019): 28.

<sup>21</sup>Edyta Sadowska, “Myśl transhumanistyczna w perspektywie bezpieczeństwa człowieka: Szansa na rozwój czy realne zagrożenie dla populacji ludzkiej?” [Transhumanist Thought in the Perspective of Human Safety: An Opportunity for Development or a Real Threat to the Humanity?], *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Securitate* 2 (2019): 39.

fantasy writer Anna Starobinets expresses a similar view. In her novel *The Living* (Живущий, 2011), she depicts a world that has been almost completely transposed into cyberspace, where humans—more precisely, their brains—function as mere appendages to technology, still necessary yet no longer regarded as autonomous subjects.<sup>22</sup> It is, therefore, unsurprising that many readers saw the novel as an expression of the anxieties of the internet age. Its central concern is what might occur if a post-biological life form, in Stenslie’s terms,<sup>23</sup> were to emerge in practice, and whether in such a reality one could meaningfully speak of belief in any higher power at all.

The novel portrays a clearly dystopian world. True to the genre’s conventions, the text emphasizes a layered dualistic contrast. “The real world” is contrasted with “the virtual world” (a kind of second life), and what both have to offer is completely reversed: the virtual world is desired and perceived as a non-territorial paradise,<sup>24</sup> while the real world is consciously marginalized as evil, dangerous, outdated, unattractive, and imperfect. When humans enter it, they do so only when they have to, when it is unavoidable.<sup>25</sup>

The author thus effectively constructs a post-apocalyptic world. We start with the account of the so-called Great Reduction, a past global catastrophe that led to a drastic decimation of humanity and the near-extinction of flora and fauna. As a result, the number of all humans has been reduced to exactly three billion individuals/ files integrated into a single organism controlled and directed by a computer system known as the Living. Its functioning is based on a principle akin to *perpetuum mobile*, with human brains serving as its “fuel.” Connected through a brain-to-brain network, humans are immortal to a certain extent, though only in theory. They are all identified by/reduced to a unique ten-digit code (“инкод” – инкарнационный код) that ensures their perpetual existence as data. However, the life-extension procedure is imperfect: upon reaching a certain age (a maximum of 60 years), they must undergo voluntary euthanasia (the so-called five-second pause), allowing their data to be transferred to the next individual-host. Replacing the body with a new one is merely a cosmetic procedure, for although the “new” body inherits certain traits of the predecessor, the continuity of generational memory is not preserved. Moreover, the social organization effectively predetermines such a person’s fate: they can occupy the position held by their

<sup>22</sup>A more detailed analysis of this novel can be found in: Aleksandra Zywert, “Władcy marionetek – dystopia Anny Starobiniec «Żyjący»” [Puppet Masters: The Dystopia of Anna Starobinets’s *The Living*], *Przegląd Rusycystyczny* [Russian Studies Review] 2 (2025): 53–66.

<sup>23</sup>Term coined by Stahl Stenslie, for more details see Zawojński, 424.

<sup>24</sup>This vision aligns closely with Jean Baudrillard’s theory presented in *Simulacra and Simulation*, in which he argues—albeit in a highly condensed and simplified form—that reality does not exist, that no distinction can be made between the real and the imagined, and that only signs which simulate reality exist. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>25</sup>This vision is plausible. Karina Leksy, among others, notes that “nowadays, the virtual world is an increasingly natural, common, and sometimes even dominant element of the human environment” (Karina Leksy, “Świat wirtualny jako przestrzeń życia współczesnego człowieka: Implikacje dla stanu zdrowia” [The Virtual World as a Living Space for Modern Man: Implications for Health], in: *Psychospołeczne i środowiskowe konteksty zdrowia i choroby* [Psychosocial and Environmental Contexts of Health and Illness], ed. Katarzyna Borzucka-Sitkiewicz [Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016], 147).

predecessor within the community, with no possibility for modification or advancement.<sup>26</sup>

A turning point that disrupts the stability of this world is the birth of Zero—a child whose in-code consists entirely of zeros. He is forced to exist outside the system and solely on the most primitive level (that is, in the real world), which effectively renders him a “savage” in comparison with the other members of the community, who inhabit an online, multi-layered, and structurally complex meta-world. As an alien/other, Zero is perceived ambivalently: some fear him, while others place their hopes in him, viewing him as a new incarnation of Christ.<sup>27</sup> Zero’s birth marks a decisive moment in the narrative, initiating a complex process of deconstruction. When, as a result of various internal upheavals, Zero becomes the formal leader of humanity, it becomes clear that no qualitative change follows; on the contrary, humanity faces total destabilization, and yet another crisis emerges. What unfolds is a deconstruction of both God the Father and God the Son, as well as of Zero himself, who is revealed to be merely a figurehead controlled by the Council of Eight—a body that has held power for centuries—and a weak, disappointed, broken, and disillusioned man. The comprehensive reinterpretation of the fictional world, its systematic dismantling, exposes the true core of the new reality. Technological progress, which allowed humanity to survive the catastrophe in only the most rudimentary form, ultimately becomes a curse. Emotionally degenerated, permanently online, and constantly moving between avatars (one for professional life, another for intimacy), people are easy to control. Stripped of identity, historical memory, and the capacity for self-determination, they submit without hesitation to anyone they perceive as stronger and obey even the most brutal commands. The author powerfully shows that in a world dominated by technological expansion, information becomes a kind of deity—an unquestioned axiom governing every sphere of life. It is a double-edged sword: it enables progress and thus wealth and power, yet at the same time it can impoverish the human being to an astonishing degree, reducing them to mere components in a vast computational system. Starobinets clearly aligns with Baudrillard’s pessimistic forecasts, suggesting that if they are fulfilled, humanity will eventually disappear. The relentless drive to improve life will, paradoxically, lead to self-destruction.

It is worth noting that *The Living* is not the only work in which Starobinets warns against unquestioning belief in technological power. The short story “Споки” [Spock], a mix of horror and fantasy, highlights a different yet equally relevant issue: the virtual assistant-guide. In this case, it takes the form of a toy tablet (an object of desire for all children, a clear nod to advertising-driven consumerism), which only theoretically entertains and educates, but in reality proves extremely dangerous.

<sup>26</sup>The motif of top-down ordering of society subordinated to an oppressive system is an old one (starting with Tommaso Campanella’s *The City of the Sun*) but it still remains popular. Examples include films such as *Equilibrium* (2002) and *The Giver* (2014).

<sup>27</sup>Biblical associations are entirely understandable in this context, because at the current stage of human development, as Dominika Oramus notes, “in no other way is our language able to describe attributes such as omnipresence, omniscience, mediation between the world of humans and higher beings, or the existence of disembodied pure intelligence” (Dominika Oramus, *Imiona Boga: Motywy metafizyczne w fantastyce drugiej połowy XX wieku* [The Names of God: Metaphysical Motifs in Late-Twentieth-Century Fantasy] [Krakow: Universitas, 2011]: 270).

The story centers on Zhenya, a young single mother, and her daughter Tasya, a first-grader. Tasya insists on buying Spock, a toy assistant, until she finally gets it. From the moment the device is activated, the child—and eventually the mother—begins a slow but systematic descent into addiction to the virtual world. At first, the machine appears harmless and genuinely helpful, offering entertainment and assisting with schoolwork. Yet it quickly becomes clear that this is only an illusion: the toy creates such a powerful mental bond with its user that any attempt to break it carries serious consequences.

С первых дней использования игровой приставки между ребенком и «Споки» возникает сильная ментальная связь. [...] Однако резкое насильственное прерывание данной связи сопряжено с серьезной угрозой здоровью и даже жизни. [...] В случае таких повреждений у ребенка могут возникнуть осложнения (при полном выведении «Споки» из строя – вплоть до комы).<sup>28</sup>

It is worth noting that Spock has an equally destructive effect on adults, altering their perception of the surrounding world and replacing it with a virtual one. These distortions affect not only the environment (the apartment) but also the people who appear in the characters' lives. This is precisely what happens to Zhenya, Tasya's mother, who cannot accept the fact that her partner has left her. At one point, Tasya's father appears as a 3D projection and "participates" in their daily life.

In Starobinets' story, the ending remains deliberately ambiguous. The heroine has already learned what Spock truly is—a device for manipulating human behavior ("эти твари, [...] продают «Споки» и потом через них управляют людьми," p. 247)—yet the possibility of taming the technology and rendering it harmless is left unresolved. This uncertainty feels fitting, since the consequences of technological dependence are inseparable from other, equally pressing, concerns: the evolving structure of the modern family, the fragility of interpersonal bonds, and the difficulty of sustaining meaningful relationships in a world saturated with information and sensory overload.

In summary, if technological progress is a fact and it leads to only one possible future (unless, of course, we witness a global catastrophe that might set humanity back—as in Edgar Allan Poe's "Mellonta Tauta" or Walter Miller's post-apocalyptic *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959)), then "the social, political, and ideological consequences of the new communication technologies are [...] ambivalent, allowing for both pluralism and the most authoritarian totalitarianism."<sup>29</sup> People will "enter the mode" of "gamification" and "gameful experience," becoming effectively incapacitated, subordinated to the "rules of the game" that structure life. Here, the game will exceed its original meaning of play (as defined by Roger Caillois) and instead become a framework for living one's life as controlled by technology. Humanity will reevaluate its priorities, including those related to physicality. If Baudrillard's predictions prove correct, the body and corporeality will become marginal concerns, because "having a body will not be as important as being connected to one's body [...], to one's brain."<sup>30</sup> In this configuration,

<sup>28</sup> Анна Старобинец, *Икарова железа* (Москва: АСТ, 2013), 232.

<sup>29</sup> Raulet, 164–165.

<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard, "Świat wideo i podmiot fraktalny," 249.

as Baudrillard writes, the body becomes merely a “script” enacted within a collective, sexless obsession—an electronic snobbery that centers one’s connection to oneself. It is a traumatizing, because paradoxical, condition that exists in-between corporeality and incorporeality, sexuality and asexuality, unity and collectivity, loneliness and alienation.

Russian writers, as the discussed examples show, approach reality from a more sociological than philosophical angle. They view media as if, from a proscenium, assuming stasis and closure in what is perceived (a simulacrum “is an image altered or selected for certain reasons; it creates simulation [...], creates a reality detached from ‘reality,’ which it alters and replaces by copies”<sup>31</sup>). In doing so, they marginalize an interactive perspective that assumes dynamism, openness, and potential for change or creation. From this standpoint, only pessimistic conclusions seem possible: the human-avatar will win the game because (to paraphrase Pelevin) it can be anything, yet in reality it will lose; in the worst-case scenario, humanity will disappear (even if it halts at the stage of humanoid androids, as in Starobinets’ short story “Живые” [Alive]). Ultimately, then, we are not witnessing the birth of a new utopia but of a new dystopia, with its terror, its brutal and direct idea of a prison grounded in the principles of “discipline and punish,” and its pseudo-carnavalesque nature built on the fear of exclusion from life. As for the identity of the “gamified” human (that is, one who consciously accepts that the internet is an immanent part of their life), it remains problematic. On the one hand, the concept of identity has expanded to include a digital component (social networks), but is it meaningful? After all, bots also possess such an identity.<sup>32</sup> The dispute over online identity (“the avatar”) still seems irresolvable, so I agree with Bartosz Kuczyński that “when it comes to identity, we are not dealing with an entirely new problem; what is new is the environment and context (emphasis and intensification). The essence of the problem, however, remains the same: defining oneself in relation to the world.”<sup>33</sup> In this light, contemporary Russian writers appear remarkably unanimous: technological progress brings more risks than benefits, and the fundamental obstacle remains human nature, unchanged since the dawn of time. By definition, imperfect, unstable, and governed by emotions and whims, humans are special in their uniqueness. This, however, means that in being one of a kind, they will potentially lose in a confrontation with machines. As contemporary Russian prose writers consistently point out, in the name of either individual or collective interests, people will entrust themselves to technology, thereby forfeiting their own intelligence. A paradox emerges: the demiurge who creates and controls the machine will, over time, become its slave, a puppet manipulated by higher forces. The (necessarily selective) close readings show that, regardless of the conventions adopted by the authors, we move toward a dystopia. It is inherently paradoxical: at once fearful and gamified, marked by systemic oppressiveness and defined by the futility of resistance. It is worth noting that the writers in question (to varying degrees) underscore that in a confrontation with machines or technologies, humans will always ultimately lose.

<sup>31</sup>Myoo, *Ontoelektronika*, 33.

<sup>32</sup>Bartosz Kuczyński, “Tożsamość człowieka w erze zapośredniczenia: Awatary w teatrze życia cyberrealnego” [Human Identity in the Age of Mediation: Avatars in Cyberreal Life], *Kultura i Wartości* [Culture and Values] 35 (2023): 230.

<sup>33</sup>Kuczyński, 233.

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# KEYWORDS

**dystopia**

*technologization*

**ABSTRACT:**

This article examines the problem of human self-determination amid the accelerating technologization of everyday life and networking of contemporary society. A central concern within this context is the extent to which digital avatars determine individual autonomy. To explore this issue, the article analyzes selected works by two contemporary Russian prose writers, Viktor Pelevin and Anna Starobinets. A chronological reading of these texts reveals a growing alignment with the pessimistic assessments voiced by experts who warn of the risks inherent in unchecked technological dependence and immersion in virtual environments. In their fictional worlds, the human creator of the machine (the demiurge) ultimately becomes its slave, a puppet manipulated by higher forces.

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## the posthuman

VICTOR PELEVIN

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