

Avatars and Electronic Devices in the Russian Dystopia (Vladimir Sorokin's novels *Day of the Oprichnik* and *Telluria*)*

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Boris Lanin

ORCID: 0000-0001-5542-7616

The concept of avatars debuts in the earliest Russian dystopia, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1920). The recurring figure of S-4711 provokes conflicting emotions in the main character, D-503. He sees S-4711 in the Bureau of Guardians.

"D-503 is captured and subjected to the Great Operation. If S-4711 is allied with the Mephi, why has he failed to protect D-503? And how is it that D-503 ends up captured? Only one person has been following him around and knows his entire story and that is S-4711. So, is he the serpent or the angel?" asks Steve Shachbazian ¹

A postmodernist's response: he is neither an angel nor a demon — he is an avatar, an avatar of surveillance, of the state security service. S-4711 possesses neither character nor personality.

¹ Steve Shachbazian, *A Century of Dystopia* (London: Kolvern Books, 2019). 51.

Originating in the novel *We*, avatars became central narrative elements in the works of Vladimir Sorokin. In his dystopias, avatars and various electronic devices carry far more significance than mere background details. In the novel *Blue Lard* (1999), Sorokin explores cultural memory through the lens of hypertext and postmodern reconstruction. A key motif in the work is the technogenic representation of cultural codes — the creation of clones of canonical Russian writers (Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Andrei Platonov, Vladimir Nabokov, Boris Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova), who function as cultural simulacra.

These literary avatars serve not only as hermeneutic figures but also as generators of textuality. They produce “blue lard” — a substance with zero entropy, a metaphor that represents the idea of an absolute sign, free from chaos and variability. In this way, Sorokin models a process of literary distillation, in which the symbol acquires physical form and becomes an object of spatiotemporal displacement.

According to Marusenkov,

In *Blue Lard*, Sorokin created an anti-world of the history of Russian culture in the second half of the 20th century, compressing it into a unified space-time continuum. Grotesque imagery allowed the writer to sharpen the main patterns of the cultural process of the past century, embodying them in phantasmagorical visions of a near future and an alternative past. The novel’s fantastical plot is firmly rooted in Russian reality: the image of ‘blue lard’ serves as a semi-ironic equivalent of Russian literary centrism — the tendency to deify literature and assign it functions and qualities that lie beyond its true nature.²

Sorokin constructs an alternative geopolitical vision of the world, in which the USSR and the Third Reich form an alliance, while the United States remains as a third center within a global tripolar order. The injection of “blue lard” into the bodies of dictators activates a process of semiotic mutation: the fabric of space and time is disrupted, and binary oppositions — reality/fiction, power/text, individual/avatar — are subjected to revision.

The writer actively employs postmodernist techniques such as grotesque, hyperbole, and travesty. In the novel, Stalin is transformed into a tailor, and “blue lard” becomes a symbol of luxury. Sorokin critically reexamines the status of canonical literature. In this context, literature ceases to function as an ideological tool and instead becomes a space of linguistic play and simulation.

Vladimir Sorokin’s novel *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006) is presented as a dystopian satire in which a futuristic Russia is immersed in a new feudalism, operating on a 21st-century technological platform. Within this fusion of archaism and high-tech, electronic devices and digital avatars play a crucial role. Through them, Sorokin not only constructs a world of the future but also embeds a critique of power from philosophical and ethical perspectives.

² Максим Марусенков, *Абсурдопедия русской жизни Владимира Сорокина: заумь, гротеск и абсурд*. (Санкт-Петербург: Алетейя, 2012), 275.

“In *Day of the Oprichnik*, many details indicate that the artistic reality of the novel — both ironic and, in its own way, serious — takes the Asian world, more specifically China, as its primary model,” writes Ekaterina Bibergan. “Sorokin clearly traces (and simultaneously mocks) an orientation toward the Eastern way of life, along with a desire to emulate it as closely as possible.”³

Electronic devices and avatars in *Day of the Oprichnik* serve a multilayered function. On one hand, they construct a realistically fantastical world of post-Soviet neo-feudal Russia. On the other hand, they expose the automation of violence, the erasure of individuality, and the substitution of reality with digital projections. This was the author’s intention: to depict a technologically advanced empire in which civil society has been dismantled, the rule of law is absent, and intellectuals have been replaced by fortune-tellers, clairvoyants, and various charlatans.

Sorokin illustrates how technologies — originally intended for convenience and communication — become tools of torture, humiliation, and control. More than that, they become digital symbols of a new barbarism. These technologies carry ethical weight, emphasizing the processes of dehumanization and the fetishization of power.

Electronic Devices: Technology as a Tool of Control and Ritual

The novel is saturated with unusual devices that blend modernity with mysticism. One such device is the *mobilo*, a smartphone of the future that not only transmits voice but also projects a holographic image of the caller: “...and right away, next to the *mobilo*, his mustachioed, anxious mug appears in the air.”⁴ This is not merely a means of communication — it is a form of social surveillance and ritualized interaction, where the perceived distance between interlocutors is an illusion.

A favorite technology in the novel is the holographic avatar. The Sovereign’s face, for instance, appears in the air surrounded by a “golden, shimmering frame.” This is not simply a digital broadcast — it is an icon-like image that evokes religious awe: “His Majesty looks at us with his expressive, intent, sincere, and perceptive gray-blue eyes. His gaze is unique. And for that gaze, I would not hesitate to give my life.”⁵

Technology functions as an extension of the body of power. It depersonalizes interaction, replacing empathy with automated rituals. When the Sovereign, speaking from the digital frame, summons his son-in-law, the conversation immediately becomes an interrogation. The digital distance does not soften the cruelty — it renders it cold and calculated. Holographic representation erases the concept of privacy and individuality: all participants in the drama exist as “faces in frames” — digital shadows of their physical selves.

³ Екатерина Биберган, Рыцарь без страха и упрека: Художественное своеобразие прозы Владимира Сорокина. Издание второе, дополненное. (Санкт-Петербург: ИД «Петрополис», 2014), 87.

⁴ Владимир Сорокин, День опричника. (Москва: Захаров, 2006), 6.

⁵ Владимир Сорокин, День опричника. (Москва, Захаров, 2006), 53.

A particularly sophisticated episode features digitally rendered avatars of canonical writers, summoned through vocal command. These enlarged figures hover above a virtual grid, functioning not merely as visual representations but as participants in a simulated tribunal. Within this framework, a “pasquinade poem” is subjected to real-time adjudication, symbolizing the subjection of literary expression to algorithmic scrutiny. The episode exemplifies the reduction of individual authorship to a mediated projection, while simultaneously illustrating the ascendancy of automated bureaucratic systems in the regulation of cultural production. The *oprichniki* use a device called the *searcher* — capable of pinpointing a target’s location — as part of their investigative and punitive system. The *searcher* is used not for rescue, but for identifying and eliminating enemies. The *mobilo*, with its “torture music” (a recording of sounds from a torture chamber), serves as a means of discipline and intimidation, literally “waking the dead.” Other devices — “beeping locks,” “voice-controlled wardrobes,” laser weapons, telescopes in mansions, and cannons integrated into domestic spaces — emphasize that the technosphere has become an integral part of the new *oprichnina*.

The telescope deserves special mention — a symbol of the paradoxical mix of pseudo-science and superstition: the characters themselves do not understand “what the telescope is for,” yet they buy them en masse as a fetish of power and a status object.

Within the structure of the novel, technology plays the role of a ritual instrument, turning everyday brutality into an aesthetically charged act. The protagonist’s morning dressing routine includes the activation of an electronic lock and the voice-command selection of clothing — all of it resembling a liturgy before battle.

Vladimir Sorokin’s novel *Telluria* (2013) is a postmodern mosaic in which elements of science fiction, cyberpunk, psychedelia, and historical parody are woven together in an eclectic tapestry. In *Telluria*, avatars can be understood as material or symbolic objects that embody specific ideas, personalities, historical events, or collective myths, acting as their “substitutes” within the fictional world of the novel. Strange and fantastical objects, techniques, and devices play an important narrative and metaphysical role.

Such are the key fictional technologies and artifacts of this world — from tellurium nails to holographic simulacra, from robot bandits to *umnitsy* — universal information assistants. Tellurium is a pseudo-scientific and sacred element that plays a central role in the metaphysics of the novel. The sacred metal is used in the form of nails driven into the skull for a procedure called *probing* — a ritual that alters consciousness, plunging the subject into a dream world or revealing a higher reality. These nails are banned like narcotics in all countries except the Republic of Telluria, the primary exporter.

In one scene, the President of Telluria hammers a tellurium nail into a globe, visualizing control over various regions. The *globe-program* represents the aesthetics of control — a simultaneous command of space and memory. It reflects a desire not merely to know, but to possess. In the Democratic Republic of Telluria, the “nailing” procedure is legalized as a treatment for mental and oncological illnesses. The globe spins and glows in response to tellurium activity.

The *globe-program* is mentioned indirectly as part of Telluria's digital and informational world, presumably connected to holographic simulacra and control systems, though the text references it only in passing. It may serve as a metaphor for global simulation or an imitative "theater of memory" — yet another level in the virtualization of reality.

1. Tellurium Nails

The central and most ominous artifact in the world of *Telluria* — represent a dark fusion of ritual, technology, and metaphysics. The chemical and biological reaction to tellurium is described using pseudo-scientific language: "The lipid membranes of neurons literally lick tellurium atoms off the metal with their fatty acids — like tongues — licking, licking, oxidizing them, while the membranes themselves rapidly soften, a process begins in the neurons, in the brain, and the human enters the desired space!"⁶

Tellurization is an ecstatic act — a "new turn" in spiritual aesthetics: not beauty but breakthrough, not harmony but ecstasy. The nail becomes an icon of the post-religious age.

Tellurium nails can be interpreted as avatars, as they embody or represent specific ideas, forces, or entities within the novel's world. In this context, an avatar is a material or symbolic object that acts as a surrogate or manifestation of something — ideology, power, myth, or identity. The nails serve as avatars of ruling structures that use them to maintain their influence.

Driven directly into the skull, tellurium nails symbolize direct intervention into consciousness. They become avatars of a power that controls not only the characters' actions but also their thoughts. The nails are a central element of the "telluric revolution," embodying an ideology of a new order based on control over memory and consciousness.

For some characters, the nails function as avatars of personal memory and identity. Their influence erases individual pasts, replacing them with trance-like states or false recollections — making the nails avatars of distorted memory, where myth replaces reality. They can also be seen as avatars of technological degradation, paradoxically paired with the dominance over consciousness. They symbolize a world where technology serves not progress but suppression.

The act of driving a tellurium nail into the skull is performed through a special ritual — often in a ceremonial setting. This is an aesthetic of self-sacrifice, a rite reminiscent of Christian initiations or shamanic practices. The procedure is accompanied by silence, focus, and fear — all forming a psycho-aesthetic gestalt in which violence against the body becomes mystical rebirth.

Tellurium is not merely a metal, but a pseudo-scientific mythology. It is presented as a "divine scalpel" that alters consciousness and restores humanity's hope. Tellurium is the

⁶ Владимир Сорокин, *Теллурия*, (Москва: АСТ: Corpus), 88.

equivalent of LSD, DMT, or even the Holy Grail, but framed in the language of scientific legitimacy. Its effects are described subjectively: for some, it is an encounter with God; for others, with deceased loved ones; for others still, with their own true self. All of this is couched in pseudo-scientific rhetoric — “neuroregeneration,” “sympathetic synesthesia,” “proto-archetypal vibration.” In this way, the author satirizes the modern fascination with pseudoscience.

This is the aesthetic of neo-shamanism and cyber-esotericism. Tellurium functions as a narrative magnet: it draws to itself myths, dreams, traumas, and the desire for salvation. Once again, technology becomes sacred.

Tellurium nails are not only tools of ecstasy but also sources of tragedy. Tellurium is both *Eros* and *Thanatos*, both technology and magic. Some characters have the nail driven in incorrectly — and die. It is an uncontrolled ritual, a glitch in the ceremonial code — an aesthetic of ritual failure, the decay of the sacred. The nail becomes not a relic, not a portal — but a trap.

2. “Umnitsa” – A Foreshadowing of AI

The *umnitsa* (literally, “clever one”) is a futuristic, all-knowing AI advisor — a high-tech, shape-shifting companion capable of taking on any physical form. It appears in chapters I, IV, V, IX, X, XVII, XXIV, XXVIII, XXXII, XXXIV, XXXVI, XXXVII, XLII, XLIII, XLIV, and XLVII. The *umnitsa* is equipped with a voice interface and can project visual holograms. It can transform into anything — from a book or belt to a bun or scarf.

This device is an elite product, inaccessible to most of the population. Highly adaptive, it recognizes its owner and offers different forms depending on the situation. In one scene, an *umnitsa* is used to project holograms of entire cities — 21st-century St. Petersburg and 19th-century Kristiania. It can even be dried out for transport to allow multiple *umnitsy* to fit into a suitcase. Later, they are reconstituted by immersion in a special solution and return to their original shape.

In Sorokin’s later novel *Manaraga*⁷, the *umnitsa* receives additional neural assistants — “fleas” implanted in the brain that help users make decisions and warn of dangers. People stretch the *umnitsa* like an accordion, wear it around their neck or wrist, use it as a book, a belt, an umbrella, or a screen. It shifts form, tone, and register, adapting to the user’s mood.

The *umnitsa* embodies the tactile poetry of the future — a manifestation of technology as “a thing that feels.” It sings, purrs, vibrates, and evokes tender or teasing imagery. It is a partner, a conversation companion, a mirror. This marks a new form of intimacy with machines, where the line between object and subject begins to blur. The *umnitsa* speaks in the voice of a loved one and emotionally co-experiences the inner landscape of its owner. What we’re dealing with here is interface poetics—not engineering in the conventional sense.

⁷ Владимир Сорокин, *Манарага*, (Москва: АСТ: CORPUS, 2017).

3. Holographic Simulacra

These appear in chapters V, VI, XV, XXI, XXII, XXIII, XXVIII, XXXII, XXXIV, XXXVII, XXXIX, XLIII, and XLVII. In the world of *Telluria*, holographic technologies are used not only for visualizing information but also for immersive performance, psychotherapy, and orgies. Simulacra recreate the atmospheres of entire cultures — such as bohemian Kristiania or futuristic Saint Petersburg.

Characters in the novel become emotionally immersed in these projections, often losing the boundary between themselves and the simulation. This reflects Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra⁸ — where the copy becomes more real than the original. In *Telluria*, holograms do not merely display reality — they replace it. Ministers of Telluria appear before the president as holograms. Even clinking glasses becomes a holographic spectacle.

People use simulacra in everyday settings — projecting a hologram of “Paris in 1880” in their basement, recreating a scene with Sartre and de Beauvoir, and entering the projection. Often, they interact with simulacra as though they were the real world. This is the aesthetic of baroque illusion, a virtual theatricalization of daily life.

Just like the tellurium nails, holographic scenes act as instruments of perceptual manipulation. They generate illusory images that overwrite real memories, with visual effects amplifying the impact of tellurium. These holograms emphasize the contrast between technological advancement and the loss of authentic memory. A person no longer needs the real Paris — they're willing to pay for its phantom.

Similar situations appear in Viktor Pelevin's novel *S.N.U.F.F.*⁹ Sorokin assigns simulacra the role of a new mythology, where the copy is more emotionally potent than the original. The holographic simulacrum becomes an icon of the post-truth era — where what matters is not what *is*, but what *feels*.

4. Robots

Robots in *Telluria* (featured in chapters XX, XXI, XXVIII, XXXIV, and XLVIII) are far from humanoid helpers. They are often machines designed for train boarding raids, theft, and destruction. For example, models like the “Anasphere 6000+” and “Telecolum 2049” operate on a simple algorithm: storm the train and throw bags of goods into the steppe. A distinctive trait of these robots is their complete disregard for humans. They do not attack passengers, yet their actions still result in destruction, panic, and death — their “neutral” interference makes them no less dangerous.

Humans do not control these robots — they merely witness the aftermath. The robots

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation*, (Paris, Editions Galilée, 1981), 144-146.

⁹ Виктор Пелевин, *S.N.U.F.F.* (Москва: ЭКСМО, 2011)

burst in, destroy, steal, and disappear. Their presence resembles a natural disaster. This is raw, unadorned machinery: the robot as a semantic void, a rejection of the human essence. Aesthetically, it resembles “La danse macabre” — a ballet of grinding gears devoid of millers. It embodies an anti-humanist vision: a presence stripped of emotion, purpose, and moral compass. Sorokin’s robot emerges as a post-industrial specter, summoned by the imperatives of capitalism. Robots in *Telluria* are not characters or assistants — they are alien, frightening agents of chaos, operating under strict programs beyond morality or empathy.

In Chapter XX, we see robot thieves: silvery, faceless, hook-armed. They move in a wide front, like a net surrounding the train. Owners spare no expense — the robots are numerous, primitive, and built for one task. On command, they leap through windows, tear apart paneling, grab bags of food and supplies: oil, lard, sunflower seeds, wheat, salt, herring, dried fish. The robots completely ignore people: they don’t attack, don’t defend themselves. Humans are irrelevant to them.

The robots operate like ants — swift, coordinated, unfazed by damage. Hand-to-hand combat is useless; shooting is dangerous, as it may hit fellow passengers. The only effective tactic: smashing them on the head with a sledgehammer. The train raid scene emphasizes that the robots are unarmed — their goal is to preserve the goods. Their actions are calculated and systematic: enter the train and toss the cargo out the window. Below, other robots collect the bags on a conveyor-like system and carry them into the steppe. Sometimes, a robot will jump down, hugging a sack of loot.

In Chapter XXI, we encounter another type of robot. During a crusade toward Istanbul, the Templars use humanoid combat robots operated from the inside by knights, functioning like exoskeletons. Each of these three-meter-tall robots is armed with automatic cannons, missiles, and flamethrowers. An eight-pointed red Templar cross glows on each chest. The knights’ heads are protected by thick glass, impervious to bullets and shells. Solid-fuel rocket boosters are attached to the robots’ legs. At the same time, they are equipped with built-in backpacks of provisions, highlighting the hybrid nature of their military and domestic functions. The battle robots launch from catapults and “fly like comets” across the European sky toward the Black Sea.

In *Telluria*, robots are always “the Other.” They lack empathy, acting either autonomously or in full submission to state power. Their forms — from faceless hook-limbed machines to catapulted knights — reflect a core truth: in this world, machines act, and humans suffer. A “robot” is not merely a machine, but a metaphor for soulless, programmed behavior.

Robots represent the ruins of a technologically advanced world that has collapsed, where high technology has devolved into tools of manipulation. In *Telluria*, technology has degraded but retains its power over society. This echoes the tellurium nails, which also symbolize the perversion of technological progress.

Robots can be seen as avatars of impersonal, mechanized authority, acting with autonomy. Unlike the tellurium nails, which require ritual and human participation, robots embody

automated control. They provide a stark backdrop against which the fragility of human memory is revealed. In a world where tellurium erases memory, robots — as avatars of impersonality — intensify the theme of lost identity.

Motifs of memory, avatars, and holographic images intertwine to create a complex system of symbols and metaphors that reflect a post-apocalyptic world, fragmented identity, and manipulation of consciousness. Avatars in *Telluria* serve as reminders of key events and people, but often in distorted or mythologized forms.

According to Alexander Genis,

The novel does not fall apart because it is anchored on the powerful core of a central image that justifies any fiction.

Tellurium is not just a superdrug granting euphoria; it gives each person their own experience, allowing them to build a personal utopia within their intoxicated consciousness. Some share it with Christ, others with Stalin, others with Lolita — but all have the tellurium nail in their skull.

So what is tellurium? Blue lard in the next incarnation.¹⁰

The mythologized past is presented as an era of heroism and unity. These images are not tied to specific individuals but rather to a collective idea imposed on society.

Thus, from the tellurium nail to the “Umnitsa” — every artifact in this world is a challenge to conventional anthropology. They transform morality, physiology, and society.

Various types of avatars — tellurium nails, holograms, and robots — emphasize the novel's central theme: the fragility of memory and identity in a world where technology and rituals are used for control and mythologization. Holographic images amplify these myths by creating visual narratives that manipulate collective memory. They recall mythologized events and lost individuals whose memories have been erased by tellurium.

The aesthetics of invented objects in *Telluria* play a key role. For Sorokin, technologies and artifacts are not merely functional tools but expressive, almost ritualistic forms of interaction with the world. The world of *Telluria* is not just the future but an aesthetically constructed hyperreality. People do not simply use things — they live with them, engage in dialogue, dance, and tragedy. Technologies become psychosomatic operations, symbols of faith, objects of desire, and means of violence.

This is the aesthetics of an archaic future, where technology returns us to myth, but does so through a hypertrophied, technocratic language.

¹⁰ Александр Генис, Мой Сорокин. In: «Это просто буквы на бумаге...» Владимир Сорокин после литературы, ed. E. Dobrenko, I. Kalinin, and M. Lipovetsky, (Москва: НЛЮ, 2018), 23-24.

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores the concept of avatars and technological artifacts in the dystopian fiction of Vladimir Sorokin, focusing on *Day of the Oprichnik* and *Telluria*. Sorokin's use of avatars, electronic devices, and symbolic objects highlights the interplay between technology, memory, and identity. The study draws parallels with earlier Russian dystopias, such as Zamyatin's *We*, linking S-4711 to later digital avatars. Devices such as the "umnitsa" and tellurium nails serve both narrative and metaphysical functions, symbolizing control, ritual, and simulation. Holograms and robots are examined as tools of state power and as postmodern simulacra. Through grotesque, hyperbole, and parody, Sorokin critiques authoritarianism and the commodification of consciousness. His work ultimately reveals a world where technological advancement is entangled with myth, ritual, and the erosion of individual agency.

memory manipulation

postmodern dystopia

SOROKIN

technological control

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Boris Lanin - Professor, Dr. hab. He works at the Institute for East Slavic Philologies, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan. His research interests include utopian/dystopian studies, Russian emigre literature, post-Soviet studies, and methods of teaching literature. He served as a visiting professor at the following universities and think tanks: Stanford, Waseda-Tokio, Hokkaido, Osaka, Kobe, Saitama, SUNY (distinguished visiting professor), Uppsala Swedish Collegium, Alfred Krupp Stiftung at Greifswald, Paris Institute for Advanced Studies, CEU Budapest, Woodrow Wilson International Center in DC, the Kennan Institute, Bath University, the British Academy.