

2
engl

“Revolutionary Machines” and the Literature of Andrei Platonov

Valery Podoroga

Institute of Philosophy (Russian Academy of Science)

“Revolutionary Machines” and the Literature of Andrei Platonov

Abstract

The paper reflects upon one of the major themes in the writings of Andrei Platonov, the theme of machines. At stake are not ordinary machines, but revolutionary ones, whose purpose consists in the radical transformation of life, nature, and world. But what is the matter of this transformation? How to describe the revolution that stands behind the avant-garde reflections of Platonov, which can be unambiguously categorized neither as utopian, nor as anti-utopian? Both utopia and anti-utopia usually relate to the future, whereas the time when Platonov's machines are going on stage coincides neither with the future nor with the present. This is a specific revolutionary time, the time of revolution as completed planetary catastrophe, of the devastation of nature and the beginning of a new history, whose subject's embodiment is not a living human being, but a new machine, capable to manage natural energies.

Keywords

Andrei Platonov, history, machines, nature, revolution, technology

Andrei Platonov, Inventor of Machines

A machine exists. What is she? It is a miracle, the first and last miracle of human work. A machine is created by labor and creates labor. She is not only our brother—she is equal to the human, the human’s living, wonderful, precise image. A machine is often higher than a human, since she does not know fatigue, work stoppage (soon she will forget wear and tear, too), these purely natural signs, proof of her infirmity and fallenness before the human (Platonov 2004b: 40).

You know, I accidentally discovered the principle of wireless energy transfer. But only the principle. It is far from being realized. When I have time I will write an article in a scientific journal (Platonov in a letter to his wife).

Platonov’s novels from the 1920s and 1930s are usually classified as anti-utopias. But is that really what they are? It seems to me this claim is not quite accurate. By definition, an anti-utopia does not differ in any way from a utopia. Both are artificial, “transitional” worlds invented for testing the future (whether in the negative sense [anti-utopia] or the positive [utopia]). Therein lies the main idea of utopianism: the aim of the experiment should be solely to project the future. Platonov’s work contains nothing of the sort; there is no future whatsoever. Yes, he indicates that there is a special time during which the action of his novels takes place, but it is neither the time of the future, nor the time of the past. The only thing known about this time, which can be referred to as the Great Revolutionary Era, is that it does not contain time—it is not definable even as a matter of existential temporality. If we imagine particular places, *u-topoi*, behind the names of *The Foundation Pit* and *Chevengur*, we will again be mistaken, because Platonov’s literature does not contain places that would be defined without a relationship to completed time. Time that is complete in itself, or *eschatological*, is time *after* time, and so all the places suitable for living have been destroyed; everything is frozen, fallen into the silence and stillness of the world. There is no more future—it has become the present.

There are spatial forms in which life has acquired its social and “human” definition, and there is life that exists beyond this framework. According to Platonov-the-metaphysician and Platonov-the-sun-worshipper, it is an endless reserve of energy: “Life is of solar origin. We are descendants of the Sun—not in the figurative sense but literally, physically. Life is not only carried by sunlight, it is light in the physical sense.” And further on: “Space itself, according to the latest teachings, is of an electromagnetic nature, i.e., akin to light or light itself, since light is only an alternating electromagnetic field. And this light-space is the baptism of

life: life is made of light on every planet and on light it feeds and renews itself” (Platonov 2004: 188–89). Platonov understands life as being in opposition to Nature. Life is something truly non-anthropomorphic, which contains the reservoir of all other life. Life is indestructible, and because this is the case, the whole point of a social revolution is not in its short-term, finite goals, but in the restructuring of all matter in the Cosmos (Nature). Only then, and on that basis, should society follow suit. These are the conclusions at which Platonov arrives.

...there are no conditions in the universe to which life could not adapt. If the conditions are fatal, catastrophic, life simplifies until it becomes unbelievably small, increasing its own stability and endurance, and thus survives. Perhaps, atoms and atoms of atoms, electrons are also micro-organisms, only of an utterly elementary type, since they endure any conditions in the universe: under good conditions they somehow synthesize, become more complex, enter into relationships, etc., but when these conditions deteriorate they break down what they had built and retreat to the elementary body—the electron, the most powerful construction in the world, because it is the simplest, because it is minimally constructed—and the destructive elements are left with a very tiny, narrow space in which to operate (Platonov 2004a: 187–88).

The course is not of history, but of nature (“We are a force of nature,” says Kopenkin in *Chevengur*). It is a course that leads to the movement of space, liberating the Earth’s landscape from all that is human. The end of history is a movement of nature as it returns to itself, of nature that has become history. The historical dissolves in forces of nature, becomes devastated, recedes into invisible life.

Thus, history, and not nature—as it was, as it is now—must become the passion of our thought, since history is a gaze into the distance, a destiny that has not actualized. History is time and time is unrealized space, i.e., the future. Nature, on the other hand, is the past, formalized, frozen as the space of time. And we should comprehend this, because history is our destiny, and destiny is the indicator of our power, the harbinger of our aim and end, or the beginning of a different infinity. History for us is dwindling time, the forging of our destiny. Nature is completed time; completed because it has stopped, and stopped time is space, i.e., the sanctity of nature, a dead face which contains no life and no mystery. The stone sphinx is terrifying because it has no riddle. But humanity lives not in space (nature), and not in history (future time), *but at that point between them where time transforms into space, and nature is made from history. Both space and time are alien to human intimacy, which lives in a link between them, in a third form, and merely allows the roaring, fiery lava of time to pass through it, casting its gaze back to*

where this fiery chaos towers, whirling like a tornado vortex—and collapses, powerless—turns from freedom and might to impotence and limitedness—space, nature, consciousness (Platonov 2011c: 43–44).

The history of humanity is the killing of nature, and the less nature there is around people, the more human the human, the more meaningful its name (Platonov 2004: 226).

The first commandment of technology, which exhausts all others, states: destroy nature as it is, and from its chaos create another—your own human [nature], or nature will destroy you (Platonov 2004b: 192).

In this selection of avant-garde musings, Platonov expresses what is most important: revolution is not a historical event, but a natural catastrophe. This is why all of his *central* novels describe, in one form or another, society in its postrevolutionary state, which is the space that remains after the bonds that had formerly tied society together have dissolved as a result of a telluric catastrophe. Platonov is *ahistorical* or, put slightly differently, he describes a space that no longer needs human time; it accrues emptiness, awakening in the human a fatal capacity for the final metabolism, or, more precisely, a *gravitation toward disappearance*, toward a natural and free transition from the visible to the invisible world. Nature can be like this when it is revived and comes to itself. For the human, two paths exist: to once again become a natural, nonhistorical being, to simply be in the world, like an animal or plant or sunlight; or to become a human-machine, which naturally brackets off all that is human (passion, pain, hope, love). Thus, the machine, the new subject of history at large, is endowed with the functions of recreating nature on new foundations. Hence, the consistency in the circulation of transitions from nature (enemy) to history, and then from history to newly resumed, “recreated” nature (friend), this time “made” by a machine.¹

¹ The blurred boundary between so-called modern science and its “understanding” in Platonov’s literature is striking. Today the ideas of Fedorov, Florenskii, and Vernadskii have turned out to be footnotes to the ideas of Platonov in areas of electrical engineering, the theory of machines, and the general theory of Nature. Behind all this stands Platonov’s unconcealed admiration for the latest achievements of human reason. Discoveries in science seem so great that philosophers (and scientists) often rush to construct new images of the world that supposedly correspond to what has been discovered. It is precisely in this intersection of the desired (the imaginary) and the thinkable that a unity emerges between the literary, religious, and quasi-scientific discourses of the time. Science becomes part of the religious-literary myth. Yet what is even more surprising is the almost compulsive repetition of the subject of the utopia of light in this era (cf. Semyonova 1990: 363–73).

Two things should be kept separate here: ruins (visible destruction) and atomized remains, the dust of things, that is, invisible matter. Walter Benjamin, a connoisseur of baroque poetics, came up with a formula for ruins: when the temporal current of sacred history falls into the space of nature it creates a bizarre order of ruins (in places where the falling has occurred) (Benjamin 1998: 159–235). We find nothing of the sort in Platonov's world of deserted spaces. There, the fall of the *temporal* into the *spatial*, of *History* into *Nature*, is endless. Pieces break up into smaller pieces, which break up into yet smaller pieces until they become the dust of steppes and deserts. It is not ruins, but *dust* that signifies the end of Historical time for Platonov. Yet, in the reverse motion of world time, it is precisely dust, the smallest remains of life's substance, perhaps, the smallest, invisible, yet living things that will form the continuum of future existence outside of death and time. For Platonov, devastation is the universal existential from which we derive all other effects and skills of existing. Beginning with a *tabula rasa*—postcatastrophic time is the time of new humans. Only a few figures, nearly motionless, with a very limited set of motor reflexes (they are not even in space), they are some kind of fluid configurations, graphic sketches, contours, shadows on a wall. This is how they are against the backdrop of a stable authorial self-consciousness, the negative tonality that defines everything: the tonality of *devastation*. The spaces in which there is less and less human participation can only become devastated. The world of Platonov's atopia is humanless, unpopulated, contains no familiar and stable things. Emptiness and devastation reign, the devastation of anything and everything. But why? For the sake of what? The answer seems to be in the vein of Nikolai Fedorov: for the sake of *another* world, a world that can be created using exclusively scientific thought, that is, via the invention of the great Machine of Life that would be capable of opposing Nature, which brings death.² Pla-

² The theme of devastation, of the "simplicity of space," is acutely important in the literature of Samuel Beckett (1984a, 1984b, 1986). He employs a unique method: by presenting a world within the limited framework of empty space, he is able to magnify the smallest details, to look at them with maximum clarity. Everywhere is grey light, diffuse and empty, rather lunar, sunless. But this begs the question: Where did this peculiar world of Beckett's characters come from? At the center of this world moves a protagonist, usually paralytic, unconcerned with anything, who tries to maintain his own existence at a minimum after some catastrophe. If a catastrophe has taken place, who are these survivors? Who are those who intend to survive and how, on what terms? Absurdity lies precisely in the fact that a human tries to survive even when life has lost all meaning. To live despite the absurdity of life... Beckett's world is a postcatastrophic world, it is not populated; the same lonely heroes that continue to exist in it carry within themselves signs of having survived a catastrophe, even though they do not look devastated. Rather, they are unfazed by their own devastation. We like to observe not only how a character moves, whether they are lying down or crawling, groaning or looking for crutches, but also what they want, what they are wearing, where they sleep, what

tonov did not reject anything, but merely took to its logical conclusion that which seemed so obvious during the so-called avant-garde period of Russian art and literature. Revolution is total, so the human of the future who comes to replace the human of the present cannot be the same. Consequently, all those who had “made revolution” must exit the historical stage. Nature returns to itself without the mediation of humans and their “invented” History. Reaching the frontier only to die. Platonov’s experience of catastrophe is defined by the order of relations that exist between three postcatastrophic existentials: *devastation* (for the world), *emaciation* (for the body), *boredom* and *ennui* (for the soul). This, basically, is the conclusion of Platonov’s allegory of Revolutionary time in *Chevengur*.³

The Parade of Machines

The many machines that appear on the pages of Platonov’s work (especially during the twenties and thirties) differ from one another by their locations, functions, parameters. And yet it seems as though they stem from a single imaginary root, reflect in and beget one another.

The following presentation of Platonov’s machines is organized according to the level of development in his literary experiments of what

they think or dream about, and who their friends are—but that is precisely the world that is absent, the world that has been devastated.

³ Psychologically this complex feeling is understandable: to get to the very edge in accepting the impossible, the total victory of the Revolution. It is like a miracle. And on the other hand, to strive in the opposite direction towards the inception of feeling, to discover the absence of energy necessary for thrusting oneself forward. Hence the apathy, the ennui, the yearning; hence the dead(-like) characters, like psychoautomata that have forever lost their instructions and are now roaming the deep, boundless Russian steppe. Open any one of his novels at random: everywhere is the triumph and demise of bodies. The overwhelming majority of Platonov’s characters struggle to be separate bodies with an existence that is entirely and solely their own, their own life and death; they are insufficient, vulnerable, they constantly strive to adjoin to other bodies, they tend to self-destruct. And the main quality that characterizes them is that they are *dead*; they are expended bodies, spent. For example: “All of the sleepers were as thin as if they were dead people, the crowded space between their skin and bones in each was taken up with vein tissue, and from the thickness of the veins it could be seen how much blood they had to give passage to during periods of intense work. The cotton of their shirts transmitted with precision the slow freshening work of the heart—it beat close by within the darkness of each sleeper’s wasted body. Voshchev looked into the face of the sleeper closest to him—to see if it expressed the unresponding happiness of a satisfied man. But the sleeper lay there like dead, with eyes shut deeply and sadly, and his cold legs were helplessly extended in old workers’ trousers. Other than breathing there was not a sound in the barracks, no one was having dreams or speaking out with recollections—everyone existed without any superfluity of life, and in sleep only the heart remained alive, caring for and preserving the human being” (Platonov 1978b: 14).

could be called *machine sense*. I highlight several image-levels of *machine mimesis*:

—*Machine hymns*—the poetry of machines; machines howl, creak, strike, shred; our exhilaration before this awful sacrifice of millions, through pain and torture, towards a new corporeal image (machine envy and terror of mass castration);

—*Machine sense* is developed *benevolently* in Platonov's paternal cult of the *locomotive*. The phenomenon of machine totemism (Lévi-Strauss 1964) emerges here; individual machines have been well understood, adapted to human dimensions, and turned into special technical objects that can only be controlled if one recognizes behind them a magical force, which can only be but served;

—Further, machine sense subordinates itself to a splash of the technical imagination. Platonov, inventor and poet, ameliorator and surveyor, geographer and geologist, energeticist and conductor, writes a series of stories and novels in which he foregrounds *ether* or *light* machines (the invention of the *electromagnetic resonator*). At this third level we discover the greatest of machines, whose mission is to liberate humankind from the constant struggle for survival. The natural state of human being must be transfigured: physically splintered and atomized—here the mimetic animal-totemic sense of the machine falls into the trap of self-destruction. These kinds of machines reach the deepest layers of matter, they control its birth and energy, mercilessly destroying the Earth and the Human: the time of universal *devastation* arrives;

—What happens at this level is opposed by the proletarian striving towards a “soft,” gradual transformation of Nature using a kind of bricolage: all sorts of odd job machines, what Deleuze and Guattari call “machines that don't work” (1983); strange embryos of unseen technical machines of the future;

—The experiment goes further (the third level of the machine-sense): Platonov uses his protagonists to test the power of a different machine, which needs no auxiliary technical devices or energy. Machine sense turns to its own source: a support structure for the future mastery of Nature is discovered in the human brain. Thought itself, by acquiring the rhythms of ethereal (electromagnetic) fields of the Cosmos, becomes the greatest of machines. The time will come when using even a weak mental effort humans will be able to stop the movement of the stars, change the trajectory of comets, transfigure the environment, the conditions of labor, and their own nature.

1) *Dynamo-hymns*. The son of an engine driver, Platonov passionately loved machines and was himself an inventor. His prose and poetry of the twenties is filled with a magical atmosphere of worship, whose object is the machine civilization of the future. Man and machine, merging into a single image, become the emblem of the revolutionary era. Listen:

Slaves of Machines

Rumbling! Humming! All day
The workshop blazes in smoke and dust.
The machines' obedient slaves
Languish for hours, breathing dust,
Without unbending their arms and backs.
Head hung over a lathe,
A streak of spilled blood,
He stands in a daze, his face
Like a shadow or a corpse,
A slave with a mangled arm.
Suddenly he falls. His hand trembled,
The machine stopped whistling,
They came running to him from all sides,
But he did not need them,
The pain and life in him were fading.
(Platonov 2004a [1918]: 348)

Dynamo

Song of the mute depths of metal
A long, motionless ringing.
Power rises up from iron
Breathes a million waves
Up from mysterious wells
Onto the hump of the machine, singing
Currents burst—a living heart beats there
Blood, red and hot, beats through the veins
Wind blows from under the wings of flailing belts
My comrade turns the dial all the way
Until nightfall, until death—at the machine, only with her
We do not pray, we do not love, we will die as we were born
before the iron face
Our hands are regulators of electrical current
Its uncomprehended strength breathes in our heart
We are without soul and without god, and we work without deadlines,
The electrical flame has cast a different life for us
There is no sky, no mystery, no death,
Above us pipe and smoke
We are fathers and we are children, too,
We explode and create
Fearful we used to live, give birth and love,
But we made the machine, made iron come alive
Mortified the soul of God
Our old skin came off
And we got up to work at the dynamo controls

Forgot about eternity, about stars—about what is not with us
and is not us
With blackened hands
We will make meaning out of darkness.
(Platonov 2004a [1920]: 334)

The Final Step

Out of the screaming, hacked-open universe
A bulging, working hand has grabbed the world.
We arrived ahead of schedule, without a bell, we are a joyful shift
All times have descended into subterranean, forgotten centuries.
And shine closer, Sun, everywhere, everywhere is our home,
And you are my friend and brother, she is a sister, sister.
The Earth is an iron machine. Thunder flows to her through a wire.
We laugh, we will not retell love from morning to morning.
We have earned immortality through death and the grave,
The face of the sky will not hide from our eyes,
Life heats up all the way to the bottom with a deep, mysterious force,
Work is our father, we will not leave our father.
The world will be silence. We will walk it to the end,
There is no one anywhere, comrade-machines burrow the skies.
A star flies towards the Earth, no one dies,
The human's eyes have become forever lost in thought.
They who fell in the cities at night,
Children fallen silent in graves...
We are the crushing final step.

(Platonov 2004a [1920–21]: 397)

It is evident from these poem-hymns that Platonov had an ambivalent, tensely tragic attitude toward the world of machines. On the one hand, machines make our bodies powerless, wound them, reshape them, take away lives; they are harbingers of a universal catastrophe, protagonists of apocalyptic narratives. Having become a “working part,” the human is reduced to an automaton that has no will or choice of its own; the human is a “slave” to the machine. On the other hand, without machines, the new society and the new man cannot be created. Of course, for this to be possible, humanity needs to be radically transformed. The poet understands the machinehood of the modern world as broadly as possible: his poem is itself a machine, technically perfect and beautiful: “Every new machine is a real proletarian poem. Every new great undertaking to change nature for the human’s sake is precise, moving, proletarian prose. The greatest danger to our art is to turn creative labor into songs about work. Electrification is the first proletarian novel, our great iron-bound book. Machines are our poems and the creativity of machines is the inception of proletarian poetry, which is the revolt of the human against the

universe for the human’s own sake” (Platonov 2004b: 167).⁴ The machine as an organizing principle of matter inside a verse, of the entire proletarian poem. This means our soul is a machine and around us is only the all-destroying hurricane rhythm of machines. The machine sits inside the mind of the proletarian as an image of the new world.

2) *The locomotive-totem*. Theoreticians of the Proletkult had an interest in the mechanization of human life and being that resembled a revival of old forms of totemism. In place of totems were the technical things of civilization: different kinds of machines, apparatus and gadgets, devices: dynamo machines, pumps, automobiles, motorcycles, locomotives, electromagnetic resonators, “ether tunnels” and the like.⁵ A totem (machine) is a *thing* that is endowed with supernatural power, whose nature cannot be understood by those who entrust their fate to it. The totemic or magical practice of Platonov’s workman characters corresponds fully to the idea of the labor economy of life (or it does not in any way limit that economy). The first scene of contact between man and machine involves the magical spiritualization of the machine: the body, by becoming the body of the machine, ceases to be human, becomes a machine-animal, the natural force of machinism and, as a result, transformation of human corporeality. We discover enough characters in Platonov who feel “machine mechanisms with the precision of their own flesh” (1983: 99):

Frossia’s husband had the ability to feel the voltage of an electric current like a personal emotion. He animated everything that his hands or mind touched, so he really understood the flow of forces in any piece of mechanism and could actually feel the painful, patient resistance of the metal body of a machine (Platonov 1983: 99).

Or,

He loved machines because he felt them to be living—dead things that had become living; it was the resurrection of iron and all that had been

⁴ See also: “And I propose to host an evening dedicated to the unborn poet of the future, who is already weaving the iron wreaths of his poems. His name is Machine. The Machine is already chewing the world and making a joyful song out of sadness, like the Russian people on the Volga. Only the sounds of the song are not trembling words, but altered worlds, the dancing cosmos. I propose to host an evening of the poet-machine, our comrade and mine. I will be the lecturer on him” (Platonov 2004b: 178–79).

⁵ Cf.: “...neither Diana of the Ephesians nor any of the Oriental Goddesses was worshipped for her beauty. She was Goddess because of her force; she was the animated dynamo; she was reproduction—the greatest and most mysterious of all energies; all she needed was to be fecund” (Adams 1918 [1900]). An excerpt from Henry Adams’ famous essay “The Dynamo and the Virgin” from *The Education of Henry Adams* (Adams compares the dynamo to an image of the Virgin, next to which it was placed at the 1900 World’s Fair, meditating on the sense of magic cults present in the first industrial revolutions).

dead back to life together with the human: the image of a future, fully living world (Platonov 2000: 240).

Or,

Zhovov treated cast iron like his own flesh, better than his own body (Platonov 2000: 106).

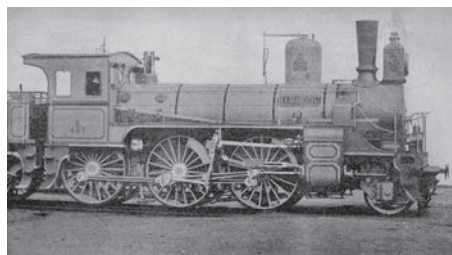
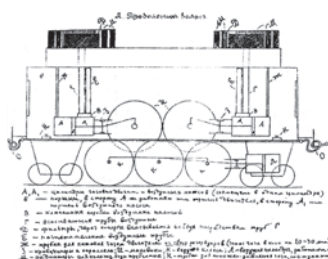
Or,

...Zakhar Pavlovich would not take his eyes from the engine, silently suffering within himself his love for it. He carried back to his quarters bolts, old valves, faucets, and other mechanical items. He arranged them in a row on the table and surrendered himself to staring at them, never growing dull from solitude. In fact Zakhar Pavlovich was not solitary—machines were his people, constantly arousing within him feelings, thoughts, and desires. The forward slope of the engine, which they called the spool, forced Zakhar Pavlovich to worry about the infinity of space. He went out specially at night to look at the stars, to see if the world was spacious, to see if there is enough space for the wheels to live and turn eternally (Platonov 1978b: 27).

The foreman knew well that machines live and move more from their own desire than from the mind and knowledge of people. People here were beside the point. Quite the opposite in fact, for the goodness of nature, energy, and metal spoils people. Any lackey can light a fire in the fire-box, but the train goes by itself, while people will corrode from their doubtful successes, until they will have to be crushed by different engines, giving the machines their freedom (Platonov 1978b: 28).

There are more examples. This stage of the first magical contact with a machine is where the fusion of the human body with the body of the machine takes place. It is not a replacement, but rather an embodiment of the human in machine form: the machine learns to become equal with the human, to rise above; it is the true human of the future. “The revolution is like a locomotive. And revolutionaries must be engine drivers” (Platonov and Pilnyak 1928: 258). Is this not what the engine driver Maltsev is like, the locomotive-human from the novella “Fierce, Fine World,” or master Pukhov from “The Innermost Man”? Thus, the machine-locomotive becomes a “warm animal.” “The locomotive stood magnanimous, enormous, and warm in the harmonious swales of its high majestic body. The foreman concentrated, sensing the ringing involuntary awe within him” (Platonov 1978b: 28). The introduction of the machine solves all problems of human existence at once: it becomes the new Nature. The machine-animal, the animal-machine. In other words, the human domesticates the

machine by transforming its machine sense into a mimesis of animal (natural) sense. The human does not become the machine, but rather makes the machine one of nature’s phenomena.



In one case, the human element turns out to be part of the machine-as-whole, a desire not so much to become a machine—an unachievable and impossible happiness—but at least to belong to its strength and beauty as one belongs to a Higher Being: a living organic “part” that passionately yearns to become a mechanical whole. In Platonov’s atopia, machines do not take the place of man, but rather of Nature. The locomotive as a special kind of biohybridization of technical device and human flesh. This is why there is nothing mysterious in the striker-bear from *The Foundation Pit*, who takes an active part in collectivization (Platonov 2009). Hence the animal- and plant-derived series of machine metaphors: this is domestication, the “taming of the Machine.” The cause of the literary mechanization of the world is the desire to become Other, to reach a certain affective state that is projected onto the world by means of various technical objects, forms, constructions; they are individualized, taken outside the widely accepted norms of technical progress (i.e., torn from their social context); they become fantastical machines in which the reality of the future is bound up. Although Platonov’s machines belong to different classes and species of avant-garde machinism, they all represent affective (mimetic) devices.⁶

⁶ In the discussion that took place for a fairly long time among anthropologists regarding totemism in primitive societies, Levi-Strauss took the position of social objectivism (the structural method). He claimed that affectivity (what we, in our case, are calling “machine sense”) cannot be the reason for believing in the totem—it is only a superficial phenomenon that accompanies it, which cannot be used to explain anything about relations between humans and animals. “As affectivity is the most obscure side of man, there has been the constant temptation to resort to it, forgetting that what is refractory to explanation is *ipso facto* unsuitable for use in explanation. A datum is not primary because it is incomprehensible: this characteristic indicates solely that an explanation, if it exists, must be sought on another level. Otherwise, we shall be satisfied

3) *The ethereal, electromagnetic, or light machine.* Platonov's favorite machine is the light, electrical machine that harnesses the cheap energy of invisible ether. This machine is invented by Dvanov in *Chevangur*, Vogulov in "A Satan of Thought," the protagonist of "Markun," the protagonist of *The Impossible*, Kreitskopf ("The Lunar Bomb"), Ivan Kopchikov ("A Tale about Many Interesting Things"), the character from "Descendants of the Sun," Yelpidifor Baklazhanov in "The Adventures of Baklazhanov." How can one not love a machine that, according to its creators' vision, is supposed to be the real embodiment of the incredible possibilities of human reason? Its awesome strength would reveal itself in the use of the most powerful forces of the cosmos, capable of giving a new dimension of life to all that exists—*electromagnetic force*—the "living" energy of nature's dead matter. All these machines consuming Platonov's imagination are undoubtedly related to scientific discoveries and inventions that were made during his lifetime, primarily in the area of electrical engineering. And here emerges the figure of the genius scientist Nikola Tesla, with whose work Platonov seems quite likely to have been familiar. Practically all of the ideas expressed by Platonov's protagonists appear to be artistically rendered hypotheses and theories of Tesla. Even in their details, Platonov's various musings and projects (electrical machines, devices and tools) echo Tesla's magical philosophy of technology.

Let us look at some evidence of this "photo-electric" kinship between Tesla's ideas and Platonov's machine utopias.

Nikola Tesla

Every living being is an engine geared to the wheelwork of the universe. Though seemingly affected only by its immediate surrounding, the sphere of external influence extends to infinite distance. There is no constellation or nebula, no sun or planet, in all the depths of limitless space, no passing wanderer of the starry heavens, that does not exercise some control over its destiny—not in the vague and delusive sense of astrology, but in the rigid and positive meaning of physical science.

to attach another label to the problem, thus believing it to have been solved." He goes on to note, quite reasonably: "...if institutions and customs drew their vitality from being continually refreshed and invigorated by individual sentiments, like those in which they originated, they ought to conceal an affective richness, continually replenished, which would be their positive content. We know that this is not the case, and that the constancy which they exhibit usually results from a conventional attitude" (Lévi-Strauss 1964: 69, 70). By contrast, Platonov's literary machinism is affective. Moreover, this transitory empathy—which can be considered a form of "participation" (Lucien Lévy-Bruhl) or the "graphic instinct" (Émile Durkheim)—remains the only form of contact with the real world, and, in essence, its complete pictorial image.

...even matter called inorganic, believed to be dead, responds to irritants and gives unmistakable evidence of the presence of a living principle within.

Thus, everything that exists, organic or inorganic, animated or inert, is susceptible to stimulus from the outside. There is no gap between, no break of continuity, no special and distinguishing vital agent. The same law governs all matter, all the universe is alive (Tesla 1915).

The arrangement of one of the great terrestrial power plants of the future. Water is circulated to the bottom of the shaft, returning as steam to drive the turbine, and then returned to liquid form in the condenser, in an unending cycle... The internal heat of the earth is great and, in comparison with the demands which man can make upon it, is practically inexhaustible; since the heat contents of the earth are sextillions of tons (Tesla 1931).

The ambitious scheme proposed here draws power from the depths of the sea, utilizing the warmth of one layer, brought into contact with the cold of another, to operate great power plants. Its practicability as well as the theory of its operation, is analyzed in this remarkable article (Tesla 1931).

Andrei Platonov

The whole universe is, precisely speaking, a reservoir, an accumulator of electrical energy, i.e., the universe is primarily space and space is primarily an alternating electromagnetic field. By looking at history as the practical solution to a single energy question, whose resolution is the total, one-hundred-percent utilization of the universe by the human without any expenditure of human effort, we can say the following: the use of light for industry is the most perfect solution to the energy question of our time. Let us recall that the basis of the plant world is light. Let us make light also the basis for the human world. All of technology must be reduced to light engineering, all physics (perhaps, chemistry) to electrics. Light engineering must construct the mechanism that would convert sunlight into ordinary working electrical current suitable for our electrical engines. Half of this mechanism has already been constructed. It is called the *photoelectromagnetic resonator-transformer*. Its purpose is to convert light, that celestial current, into earthly human current. If this technical problem is successfully solved (we will not go into details here), light, and with it the whole universe, will become the “proletarian” of humanity for many inexhaustible centuries, and humanity will not deplete this energy with any machines, resistance, or construction. Even the energy of Rutherford’s split atom is nothing compared to the energy of the ocean of light (Platonov 2004b: 219–20).

The world will be conquered by one who will comprehend the mechanics of the finest electromagnetic perturbations that define the basic states of the human mind, by one who will learn to create these perturbations artificially, freely, according to one's own will, in the name of noble, intellectual causes.

These electromagnetic oscillations are similar in form to light, but their wavelengths must be smaller and their intervals shorter...

The means of obtaining electromagnetic oscillations of a psychic order is only possible by way of regulation—a complex, multiple refraction—of sunlight, either dispersed or spectral.

Sunlight is raw material (for such electromagnetic oscillations) from which a product is obtained: “psychic current.”

Long live PSYCHOCURRENT!

Long live the laboratory for its production! (Platonov 2000: 258).

...electromagnetic (or more accurately, the rhythm method), based on the destruction of matter by way of externally influencing it with electromagnetic waves that have a precisely calculated wavelength and period frequency; these waves, by completely coinciding with the intra-atomic rhythm (strictly defined, “individual” for each element, for each complex compound), destroy matter; when these rhythms—inner and outer—do not coincide, matter electrifies, is created. The thing is that every element and every bond between elements has its own strictly defined, intra-atomic and intra-molecular oscillation. Herein lies the mystery of the destruction and creation of matter (Platonov 2004b: 213).

...use a powerful tool to bore holes deep into the globe, in order to open up the crystal tomb of the maternal sea, or reach the vast reserves of water – to extract enough moisture from there to form a permanent lake or steppe sea. At the same time, to use volt fire to bore shallow water-pumping wells on all pastures and winter grazing grounds of the sovkhos (minor water supply). To obtain energy in the steppe and in the whole world from any point on a lit surface (Platonov 2011a: 426).

The great aim is to possess the energy of “dead” nature, cheap and inexhaustible. In the depths of matter hides the greatest and most powerful energy, whose proper use will allow for the abolition of borders between individual temporalities of universal matter, between sky and Earth, woman and man, the living and the dead, father and son.⁷ Rejecting

⁷ Platonov rethinks the relationship of the human to the machine in terms of primary kinship. Nature is the Mother, the Machine is the Father. Those who establish their new kinship starting with the machine are those who “exist” without the Father, but passionately await him. The machine is that highest Father-God, who returns dead, perished fathers to their sons. Wandering, vagabondage, homelessness, the lack of

the “curse” of labor as a useless waste of live human resources, as a form of workers’ mutual exploitation. This height/depth machine reaches into the cosmos and into the ultimate depths of the Earth. Not depth as emptiness, but depth as a pathway to the cheap energy of ether. This machine of life functions vertically: it is an elevator shaft through which the products of the pure forces of matter are extracted to the surface of the Earth. In describing his strange and wonderful machines, Platonov often uses biological metaphors, which, it seems to me, invite us to see in these machines not hard mechanisms with a limited range of activity, but rather organic pulsations. They are a category of machine-phantasms, oneiric machines, super-productive machines, which “do not know death.” However, in its reverse projection, the ethereal machine as a machine of life overlaps in its functions with machines of death. Transferred, for example, onto the horizontal plane, the ethereal machine does not differ from terrorist machines, from machines of violence and depletion. One object of applied force is exchanged for another, the human body for the body of the Earth. The main principle remains unchanged: to extract energy from a passive natural body and use it in ever greater amounts without concern for the cosmic unity of the human and the Earth.

4) *The cerebral machine*. Platonov’s anti-utopian novels regard technology (the whole park of machines and automata) as necessary for the revolutionary changes that, by taking over Nature, also radically alter the human.⁸ From the point-of-view of the new cosmic ontology—an updated theory of macro- and micro-cosms—the human is only a machine; perhaps sentient and self-aware, but a machine nonetheless. Likewise, Tesla writes: “In the course of time it became perfectly evident to me that I was merely an automaton endowed with power of movement, responding to the stimuli of the sense organs and thinking and acting accordingly”

“home and warmth” are not results of searching for the mother, for the maternal and female, but rather of the return to the father: “Not one of the miscellaneous had seen his father, and they all remembered their mothers as a vague longing of the body for that lost peace, a longing which in the adult years was transformed into a devastating melancholy. After birth a baby demands nothing of his mother; he simply loves her, and so it is too with orphans. The miscellaneous were not angry with the mothers who had abandoned them immediately and forever. As he grows however a child expects a father, for he is already satiated with the natural forces and feeling of the mother, even if he has been abandoned as soon as he leaves the womb. The baby turns a curious face to the world, wanting to exchange nature for people, and his first comrade and friend after the obsessive warmth of the mother, after life has been sufficiently cramped by her gentle hands, is the father.” (Platonov 1978b: 230) Thus, bursting from mass fatherlessness, the new human being can express itself—it is the proletariat.

⁸ From Platonov’s notebooks: “He loved machines because felt them to be living—dead things that had become living; it was the resurrection of iron and all that is dead back to life together with the human: the image of a future, fully living world.” (2000: 240).

(1919). The “living universe” hypothesis, which posits that everything exists in a continuous, oscillating (electromagnetic) wave environment, assumes the presence of a single universal consciousness, which cannot be individualized, that is, appropriated. The human being is a psychoautomaton, whose relationship with the world results from its *reactivity*, that is, the ability to successfully respond to external stimuli. Moreover, although the human is only a brain, the brain is thought, and thought, if it is correct, resonates with the infinite universe of other resonances. In this way, thought is the rhythm of the universe. For example, “Sartorius’s youth had been spent in the study of physics and mechanics; he had labored over the computation of infinity as a body, trying to work out an economical explanation for its functioning. He had wanted to discover, in the very flow of human consciousness, a thought that was in resonance with nature and so—even if only by chance, by living chance, reflected the whole of nature’s truth; and he had hoped to secure this thought for ever through some calculable formula” (Platonov 2001: 56). And elsewhere: “Matisen’s brain was a mysterious machine, which created a new montage out of the depths of the cosmos. This brain was activated by the device on the table. A person’s regular thoughts, the ordinary movement of the brain, are powerless to influence the world; for this to happen, one needs a whirlwind of brain parts, then the world substance will be shaken by a storm” (Platonov 2011a: 64). Platonov does not “think up” anything, but merely tries to keep up with the revolutionary acceleration of technical progress in his machine fantasies. And he is not alone.

Kazimir Malevich put forth a curious theory of machinism, refreshing the avant-garde worldview. He places the human brain at the pinnacle of machine progress: “...am I not the new terrestrial skull in whose brain the new flowering takes place, is my brain not the foundry from which the new transfigured world of iron flows, and from which lives, which we call *inventions*, take wing as if from the hive of universality?” (Malevich 1968: 86–87). From another terminological perspective, the brain is intuition. This is how Malevich defines it: “Intuition is the kernel of infinity. Everything that is visible on our globe disperses itself in it. Forms originated from the intuitive energy which conquers the infinite. Hence arise variants of form as tools of movement” (1968: 104). Intuition is a radical renewal of the world in action, it is thought itself; before it, the world is nameless and subordinate only to the speed of tools with which it is being overcome. Here, like in Platonov’s work, machine activity comes down to the *atomization* of matter. The great avant-garde breakthrough consisted in the increased power of tools with which Nature was being overcome (split into particles, “kernels of infinite thought”). Only thought is commensurate with the infinitude of the task at hand. The constantly updating technological world is merely a park of tools for overcoming, each of which opens up the dynamic power of the human mind in the cosmic infinity of new worlds.

Machines bring about “the end of time,” they are catastrophic machines, “machines of death,” despotically extracting energy from everywhere (including human bodies) and dispersing it once again.

5) *Handicraft machines*. Many of Platonov’s works are experimental sites for ideas of immortality, from perpetual motion to various devices and gadgets whose practical purpose is at first difficult to guess. Hence many of the most unusual devices that can be called *handicraft machines*.

He was not unduly interested in anything, not in people or nature, except for mechanical things of all sorts. Because of this he regarded people and fields with indifferent tenderness, not infringing upon the interests of either. On winter evenings he occasionally made unnecessary things such as towers of wire, ships cut from pieces of roofing tin, paper dirigibles, and so on, exclusively for his own pleasure. It often happened that he even delayed filling someone’s chance commission, so that, for example, when he was given a vat to fix with new handles, he spent the time instead building a wooden clock which he intended to run without works just by the rotation of the earth (Platonov 1978b: 3).

During the summer Zakhar Pavlovich remade in wood all the things he knew. The warren and its manorial lands were established with the items of Zakhar Pavlovich’s technological art—a full assortment of agricultural tools, machines, instruments, and household devices, all completely of wood. It was strange that there was not a single item that repeated nature, such as horses, wheels, or the like (Platonov 1978b: 5).

Now Epishka invented light. He set up magnets in such a way that daylight oscillated the magnetic field and aroused an electrical current. Using this current Epishka raced a homemade ship down the river by which where he was born. The light of the sun and moon carried weirdo-man on water for the first time.

Since then no one needed anyone anymore. Epishka showed everyone how to make little machines like that, and everyone became rich.

[...]

One inhabitant of Ararat made a subterranean boat, and the power of Epishka’s little machine drove it into the bowels of the earth, where the man from Ararat disappeared, made a home (Platonov 2011b: 314).

Dvanov had thought up an invention which could turn sunlight into electricity. To help Gopner took all the mirrors in Chevengur out of their frames and also collected all the glass that had the least bit of thickness to it. With these materials Dvanov and Gopner made complex prisms and reflectors which would transform the sunlight as it passed through them, at the rear of the device yielding the electric current. The device had been ready for two days before, but it had not produced electricity.

The miscellaneous came by to look over Dvanov's light machine and even though it did not work they decided as they saw necessary, considering the machine correct and vital, for it had been invented and made by the corporeal labor of two comrades (Platonov 1978b: 309).

Before it had been narrow walking between the houses, but now it was completely impassable, for the miscellaneous had brought their things there for finishing. There were wooden wheels twelve feet across, tin buttons, clay statues which resembled portraits of beloved comrades, including Dvanov, a perpetual motion machine made of a broken alarm clock, a self-heating oven stuffed with all the pillows and blankets in Chevengur, but in which only one person at a time, the coldest, could warm himself. There were also other things, the functions of which Serbinov could not even imagine (Platonov 1978b: 309).

At that moment, Vermo thought he was playing a sonata about the future world: in view of the sounds he invented there walked the earth giants of milk and butter—living beings, but with some metallic body parts, so that they might be better protected from illness and their constant productivity be ensured; for example, their jaws should be of steel, their intestines almost completely mechanized (to protect from diseases borne by decomposing feces), and their mammary glands should be electromagnetically perfected (Platonov 2011a: 393).

Chepurny also had wanted to boil up a bit of something for Yakov Titych but he had discovered that not too long before Chevengur had run out of matches and he did not know what to do. Gopner however knew what to do. Which was to start the wooden pump that stood over the little well in one of the displaced gardens, but did not let any water in. In times past the pump had brought up water to wet the soil beneath the apple trees, and it was turned by a windmill. Gopner had noticed the power structure once and now he designated the water pump a means of obtaining fire, through the friction of a dry plunger. Gopner ordered Chepurny to lay straw all around the wooden pump cylinder and then set the wind vanes in motion. Then he had but to wait until the cylinder began smoldering and the straw would catch from it (Platonov 1978b: 247).

Markun leaned over the blueprint. His turbine had six systems of spirals, joined sequentially, increasing in power. Acceleration will therefore be sixfold. Water will be used in such a way as if only the last, sixth spiral were working; this is because the other five spirals will be powered by the same water.

"Any theory is a lie if it is not verified by experiment," Markun thought. "The world is infinite and its energy is therefore also infinite. My turbine has proven this law."

And like fire a thought suddenly went through him that what if one were to find a metal with an infinite capacity of resistance, infinite toughness. But such a metal exists: it is simply one of the forms of universal energy, cast into the mold of resistance. It follows from the law of infinite capacity of forces and their forms.

“But then my machine is a set of jaws where the entire universe can disappear in a moment, take on a new image, which I will pass again and again through the spirals of the motor.”

“I will build a turbine with a square, cubic incremental increase of power. I will flush the warm southern ocean into the mouth of my machine and pump it out to the poles. Let everything bloom, let everything quiver with the joy of infinity, the ecstasy of its own omnipotence.” (Platonov 2004a: 143).

Perhaps by giving strange objects the name “gizmo,” Jean Baudrillard points to an opposition between the gizmo and the machine.⁹

The machine and the gizmo are mutually exclusive. It is not that the machine is a perfected form and the gizmo is a degraded one: rather the two are different in kind, the first operating in the real, the second in the imaginary realm. “Machine” signifies, and in doing so structures, a particular real practical whole; “gizmo” signifies nothing more than a *formal* operation—though that operation is the *total* operation of the world. The virtue of a gizmo may be ridiculous in reality, but in the imagination it is universal (Baudrillard 2004: 125).¹⁰

“Gizmo” can be a name for anything that does not otherwise have a name. In other words, a thing whose purpose I do not know, but believe has a purpose, is a gizmo. It follows that if I suddenly remembered the *name*, the turns of phrase, and the vocabulary in terms of which the thing

⁹ Cf. Claude Levi-Strauss: “These assimilations are not so extraordinary, we do the same type of assimilating, doubtless more guardedly, when we qualify an unknown object, one whose function is unclear, or whose effectiveness amazes us, by the French terms *truc* or *machin*. Behind *machin* is a machine, and, further back, the idea of force or power. As for *truc*, the etymologists derive it from a medieval term which signifies the lucky in games of skill or games of chance...” (1987: 54–55). In informal Russian, there is a word that previously had a meaning of a *pattern* (a simple cut of fabric). If it was about ten meters, it was called a “thing,” *truc* (“pattern” became a proper name for a length of dress fabric, because in the 1950s to 1960s Soviet people dressed themselves exclusively from small tailoring shops; there were no readymade dress shops in Moscow).

¹⁰ We can go further. After all, it is clear that all machines that “do not work,” invented primarily by the surrealists, are precisely “gadgets.” The machines of Fernand Leger, Marcel Duchamp, Franz Kafka, William S. Burroughs, or Andy Warhol, but also all of the fantastical machines of the Russian avant-garde.

might be recognized, it would no longer be a gadget, but be a work of art or technical device. The gizmo as a failure of memory and speech. This is the first step. The second step is when the gizmo enters the play of technical imagination: not the gadget that “doesn’t work,” but another, the highest form of future technical perfection (a UFO, for example). Gizmos as special technical constructions of the future, whose purpose we cannot explain. In this case, a gizmo denies the principle of reality, exceeds it. There is also that which can be called the libidinous residue in explaining the phenomenon of the gizmo, when it suddenly turns out to be part of the phallic dimension of the world of objects. Paradoxically, these primitive appliances, these Chevengurian machines, by becoming things simultaneously become gizmos, whose purpose comes into conflict with their technical uselessness (“they do not work”). There are no “gizmos” in the traditional avant-garde, everything is clear: a thing is traced to an ideal reason, some sort of model (a prototype, a mold): the *modulor* (Le Corbusier) or the *architekton* (Malevich). That is where we see the ambition to create a Universal Machine, using which it would be possible to restructure not just society or the human, but the Cosmos, too.

Translated from the Russian by Andrey Tolstoy

Bibliography

- Adams, Henry (1918). “XXV. The Dynamo and the Virgin (1900).” *Bartleby*. <http://www.bartleby.com/159/25.html>
- Baudrillard, Jean (2004). *The System of Objects*. Trans. James Benedict. London: Verso.
- Beckett, Samuel (1984a). *Collected Shorter Plays*. New York: Grove.
- Beckett, Samuel (1984b). *Collected Shorter Prose, 1945–1980*. London: Calder.
- Beckett, Samuel (1986). *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari (1983). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1964). *Totemism*. Trans. Rodney Needham. London: Merlin Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1987). *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*. Trans. Felicity Baker. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Malevich, Kazimir (1968). *Essays on Art 1915–1933*. Trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin. New York: G. Witterborn.
- Platonov, Andrei (1978a). *Collected Works*. Trans. Thomas P. Whitney, Carl R. Proffer, Alexey A. Kiselev, Marion Jordan, Friederike Snyder. Ann Arbor: Ardis.
- Platonov, Andrei (1978b). *Chevengur*. Trans. Anthony Olcott. Ann Arbor: Ardis.
- Platonov, Andrei (1983). *Fierce, Fine World*. Trans. Kathleen Cook. Moscow: Raduga Publishers.
- Platonov, Andrei (2000). *Zapisnye knizhki. Materialy k biografii* [Notebooks. Materials for biography]. Moscow: IMLI RAN Nasledie.
- Platonov, Andrei (2004a). *Sochineniai*, Vol 1/1: 1918–1927. Moscow: IMLI RAN.

“Revolutionary Machines” and the Literature of Andrei Platonov

- Platonov, Andrei (2004b). *Sochineniia*, Vol 1/2: 1918-1927. Moscow: IMLI RAN.
- Platonov, Andrei (2009). *The Foundation Pit*. New York: New York Review of Books.
- Platonov, Andrei (2011a). *Ephirny trakt: Povesti 1920–1930* [The ethereal tract. Novels 1920–1930]. Moscow: Vremya.
- Platonov, Andrei (2011b). *Usomnivshiisia Makar: Rasskazy 1920-kh godov. Stikhotvoreniia* [Makar in doubt. Stories of the 1920s; Poems]. Moscow: Vremya.
- Platonov, Andrei (2011c). *Fabrika literatury. Literaturnaia kritika, publicistika*. [The Fabric of Literature. Literature critics, essays]. Ed. Kornienko: Moscow: Vremya.
- Platonov, Andrei, Pilnyak B. (2008). *Che-Che-O. Oblastnye organizatsionno-filosofskie ocherki* [Che-Che-O. Regional organizational-philosophical essays]. Munich: Im Werden. http://imwerden.de/pdf/platonov_pilnyak_che-che-o.pdf
- Semyonova, Svetlana (1990). *Nikolai Fedorov. Tvorchestvo zhizni* [Nikolai Fedorov. Creativity of life]. Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel'.
- Tesla, Nikola (1915). “How Cosmic Forces Shape Our Destinies.” *Twenty-First Century Books*. <http://www.tfcbooks.com/tesla/1915-02-07.htm>
- Tesla, Nikola (1919). “My Inventions.” *Twenty-First Century Books*. <http://www.tfcbooks.com/tesla/1919-00-00.htm>
- Tesla, Nikola (1931). “Our Future Motive Power.” *Twenty-First Century Books*. <http://www.tfcbooks.com/tesla/1931-12-00.htm>