Viktor Pelevin's Postmodern Apocalypse

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the work of the leading living Russian prose writer, Viktor Pelevin, in the context of the image and idea of *world's end* that is so present in his writings. In many of Pelevin's novels, a fictional world that the reader first accepts turns out to be a deliberate creation of this or that *demiurge*, realistically depicted as spin doctor. Apocalypse is thus rendered in a Gnostic/Buddhist manner. What is specific for Pelevin against a background of the postmodern and cyberpunk genres he continues, is the elaboration of an antiworld symbolic weapon, a formula that counters a world so as to make it perish. The main reason for this motif is the desire to protect/shelter oneself—and the reader—from the violence of language that remains authoritative even in absence of any public authority.

The idea and image of the world's end is ubiquitous throughout the history of human consciousness (Löwith 2011, Taubes 2009), being an essential moment of *myth*, but a myth that can be stretched into the territory of scientific knowledge. Historically, we see apocalyptic imagery rising in popularity both in periods of deep crises and social melancholy, and in the turbulent moments of revolutionary popular movements (millenarianism, etc.).

Sigmund Freud, in his famous analysis of Dr Schreber's delirium, explains the apocalyptic fantasy by the withdrawal of libido from real objects: the world literally disappears, in fact not as a body but as a value.

> A world-catastrophe... is not infrequent during the agitated stage in other cases of paranoia. If we base ourselves on our theory of libidinal catexis ... we shall not find it difficult to explain these catastrophes. The patient has withdrawn from the people in his environment and from the external world generally the libidinal cathexis which he has hitherto directed on to them. Thus everything has become indifferent and irrelevant to him, anf has to be explained by means of a secondary rationalization as being "miracled up," "cursorily improvised" (Freud 1958: 69–70).

To an extent, this psychologizing reflection helps explain the ubiquity of apocalyptic images today: deprived of absolute frames of reference or of transcendent teleology, people sometimes lose their investment in the things of this world. Depression is a common diagnosis for this condition, and through the intentionality of depression things may indeed present themselves apocalyptically (as becoming immaterial, unreal, evanescent), or alternatively (as in Schreber), as purely internal products of someone's mind. Hence the anxiety over a coming apocalypse, or the fantasy of an apocalypse about to happen. In addition to the loss of God or of a utopian telos, there is also a factor of *capital,* as famously analyzed by Georg Lukács: since everything can be calculated in quantitative terms, things are disincorporated, and appear as precarious figures of an indeterminate continuous substance (Lukács 1971). Moreover, a minimal analysis of natural consequences of human action shows that this capitalist abstraction is literally realized, and the world is partly disintegrating before our eyes. At least, it is losing its "non-renewable" energy resources, losing energy *tout court.*

This entire explanation is the easiest one, but it has the disadvantage of explaining the negative *through the negative* (a move classically criticized, among others, by Heidegger in his "What is Metaphysics?" (2008: 89–110). Basically, this explanation goes, the apocalyptic anxiety is justified, an apocalypse, at least an affective, a value apocalypse, is indeed happening, and the apocalyptic imagination is another expression of nihilism. Not that this interpretation is wrong, but it is not a complete picture.

In fact, the sense of things losing ground emerges as much when they retreat from reach, as when they suddenly and brightly *happen.* The world of apocalypse is a spectacular, intriguing world, the world of manifestation (*apo-kalypto*). In its disclosure, it risks losing ground, the predicate faces the disappearance of its subject. And this is what is anguishing. Heidegger, who otherwise shares Freud's nihilistic scenario, sees this aspect of the problem correctly in his "Question Concerning Technology" (2008: 307–42). It is, paradoxically, *because* technology is a genuine way of disclosing nature's inner potential that its meaning for the human world can be disastrous: the very *quid* (the scholastic "whatness") of nature, its secret, seems to be dissolving, and the resulting technical effects, as a result, start looking unreal.

This leads us further to appreciate the special role that art and the media play in the apocalyptic process. The present fashion of apocalypse as a theme in art did not begin yesterday, It has been gradually becoming popular starting with the dark mood of the fin de siècle in the nineteenth century and the advent of modernism. At first it was bound by the conventions of minimal realism and secularism, and it turned to literal apocalypse only in the face of actual disasters, such as the world wars. However, apocalypse fast became a constitutive fantasy rather than an external occasion for writing. The fashion for apocalyptic visions started in the 1930s but only ultimately established itself by the 1970s and 1980s, with the new antiwar sentiments and the pessimistic turn of Hollywood cinema (*Apocalypse Now*, later *Jurassic Park*, *Terminator,* etc.). It is in the same period that high modernist art retrospectively conceptualized itself as "writing of catastrophe." Maurice Blanchot, in his seminal book of aphorisms *The Writing of the Disaster* (1995 [1980]), seems to equate a certain radical, neo-romantic mode of literary writing—fragmentary, impersonal, disorienting—with an experience of a "disaster" that is not a total destruction, but is something that through art emerges as indestructible. This connection was not that evident in the early twentieth century when the occasional depictions of disasters with Modernist means (Beckman, Dix, Picasso) coexisted with the use of these means for purely expressive, spiritualist, or even utopian purposes. A question of chicken and egg may be asked, with no decisive answer, about the relation between the impact of actual terrible events and the internal tendency of modernist art to destroy the world it creates.

Among the first instances of fictional catastrophic writing in the West were Karel Capek's "R.U.R." (2004 [1920]) and "War with the Newts" (1996 [1936]). His peer of disaster writing from the Soviet Union, Andrei Platonov, wrote a harshly critical review, accusing Capek of a pessimistic unilateral view of technology (Platonov 2011). But previously, while positively depicting miraculous and utopian machines of the future, Platonov himself put them into the human context of devastation and failed struggle for survival (Platonov 1978, 2007). Paradoxically, in Platonov's world,

the enthusiasm of revolution and happiness produced by technology seem to produce in humans a state of exhaustion and fatigue.

It appears to me that the logic of apocalyptic writing is *triple.* First, there is a modernist intention of disincorporating the work of art in favor of pure form or of the formless mimetic medium, and in some cases also of the infinite artistic genius, even though the very figure of the author is too questioned by this tendency. The turn of art towards "abstraction" can be read as a gesture of sublimation or spiritualization (Kandinsky 1977), as a turn toward narcissistic autonomy (Greenberg 1939), or as a self-undermining of art as a practice and institution (Lacoue-Labarthe 1999). Throughout the twentieth century, modernism increasingly moves toward ironic self-undermining and reflexive questioning of the "artistic" nature of its image—a tendency already highly characteristic of symbolism (Blok 1950) and later flourishing in so-called "postmodernism." This adds to the potential of the "end of the world" narratives as they motivate the end of the fictional worlds in question.

Second, there is the spectacular value and attraction of mass destruction that can be exploited even by the popular culture industry, under the "alibi" pretext of taking a negative moral stance of fear, warning, and moral condemnation. There is undeniably a measure of negation and destruction here. But they function less as a diagnosis and more as a mode of enjoying and affirming something else than the image (which is destroyed): the pure *force* of spectacle, and the unstoppable multiplication of attractions that risk to tear apart the continuity of objects and the story, and the verisimilitude of the plot, threatening both the substance and the subject. The manifestation detaches itself from the world that manifests itself and destroys it. Thus, the condition of apocalypse in art and media is not only nihilism as such, but equally sensationalism, speed, and the richness of infinitely multiplying events. The "overexposure" of the "information bomb" that Paul Virilio so eloquently describes is in itself a force of destruction of the human subject and of all its subject matter (Virilio 2005: 57). All of this shows that the phenomenon of apocalypse is something that does not just testify to the erosion of things, but gestures toward their hidden core, be it thing or subject.

There is however a third reason that we will see developing further. This is the imaginary emergence of *evil* that destroys the world through a specific monstrous apparition. In logical terms, this is a *determinate,* not abstract, negation of *cosmos*. Indeed, in the recent Hollywood apocalyptic movies the world does not just disappear, there is a giant dinosaur, atomic explosion, or a vagabond planet that kills it. In the same way, the end of the world in Christianity is prefigured by the Antichrist.

Apocalyptic redemption, and God as redeemer, necessarily appear as *destructive* of being, as "antiworld" (Taubes 2009: 48–49). Therefore there is a tendency in apocalyptic thinking for God to redouble itself dialectically. Thus, in the apocalypse and its reception, "Antichrist," origi-

nally written as "Ante-Christ," can also mean "an impostor disguised as Christ" as well as "Christ's predecessor" (*Ante-Christ*) who prefigures him, destroys the world, and whom Christ then overcomes in a sort of negation of negation (McGinn 2011). In Gnostic thought, the relationship is inverted: it is the conservative positive God who is evil, and the true God comes as a destructive liberating force. To use a much later formula by Goethe, "nemo contra Deum nisi Deus ipse" (Nobody against God except God himself [Goethe 1994: 598]). God, Antichrist, or both, reveal, explain, and impersonate the negative force of history that draws it towards the end. But, fortunately, this force too negates itself, turning against itself.

Let me now stick to Soviet-Russian literature for a while. Russian and then Soviet literature has always been full of apocalyptic and millenarian content, and some, such as Russian philosopher Berdyaev, even claimed—dubiously—that it was special for that matter as compared to Western literature (Berdyaev 1992). Authors such as Nikolay Gogol, Fedor Dostoyevsky, Andrey Bely, Andrey Platonov, Boris Pasternak, or Vladimir Nabokov have more or less obvious allusions to the apocalypse and the Antichrist in their main novels. David Bethea, in his book *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction* (1989) traces the motif of an apocalyptic horseman in most of these authors, and likens them to the British and German Romantics of the period of the French Revolution (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hölderlin): in both cases there is a reference to a coming or past revolution, and in both cases, he argues, an expectation of immediate collapse or of God's Kingdom on Earth failed, and "apocalypse" gradually shifted from a historical reference to a *subjective* and *artistic* event. What remains to be emphasized in what follows is the role of art in the very framing of apocalyptic reality of revolutionary and postrevolutionary time. What must be added to Bethea's diagnosis of Russian literature is precisely the degree to which artistic subjectivity becomes, in revolutionary time, the very form of objective reality: something Pelevin explores most systematically.

Andrey Platonov was a great Soviet writer of the 1920s and 1930s and an author of dark narratives about revolutionary nomads trying to build both communism and various miraculous machines in a complete void. In his novel *Chevengur* he depicted a millenarian communist village that attempts to build a communist utopia but instead follows the apocalyptic scenario of living in endtimes. Joseph Brodsky wrote of Platonov, "he is a millenarian writer if only because he attacks the very carrier of millenarian sensibility in Russian society: the language itself—or, to put it in a more graspable fashion, the revolutionary eschatology embedded in the language (Brodsky 1986: 283). As I show elsewhere, the main issue in Platonov's prose is the *subject* (Magun 2010). "You'll exhaust yourself and die, and *who* will then be the people"? (Platonov 1994: 18), "I don't exist, I just think here" (Platonov 1994: 13) In a repeatedly used figure, Platonov

gives his characters famous names and casually calls them by these new names, thus questioning the subjecthood of a literary character as someone whose identity is only given by his or her name. A peasant from *Chevengur* takes the name of Dostoyevsky instead of his real name "Ignatiy Moshonkov," which sounds rather comic (Platonov 1978: 94), and the author refers to him simply as "Dostoyevsky" for the rest of the novel (where he and his fellow communist villagers exterminate each other and the rest are finished off by the entering soldiers). This shifting of subject is not only a linguistic picture of communism but also an issue of an apocalyptic world not dying entirely but becoming a predicate of a yet unknown subject to come. And yet, against Brodsky, there is in Platonov's prose a charateristic ambivalence to eschatology as such. Platonov's characters use the energy of the end, but at the same time they try to delay the end itself, thus deceiving death. Thus, the protagonist of *Soul,* Nazar Chagataev is nearly dead from hunger, then pretends he is dead, serves as bait for scavenger birds, captures them and stays alive (Platonov 2007). In his notebooks, Platonov writes, "Do not bring anything to its end: at the end there will be a joke"; "For longevity, one has to put oneself into the position 'on the eve of liquidation'—and you will live two ages" (2006: 132, 115). Thus, obsession with the energy of ending coexists in Platonov with a protective postponement of apocalypse (Magun 2010).

Vladimir Nabokov, Platonov's apparent antipode, was a noble who fled the 1917 Revolution and hated it immensely. Not surprisingly, it is in his prose that the apocalyptic tendencies that were implicit in early Russian symbolism were fully developed. A typical ending of Nabokov's novels gradually disorders discourse (its consistency, grammar, etc.), thus producing an incoherent text close to stream of consciousness. This is motivated as an ironic derealization of the story: the preceding narrative appears as a mad vision of the protagonist (Nabokov 1990), an apocalyptic fantasy of the narrator whom the character disobeys (Nabokov 2012a), or as a gaze at the material reality taken from a postmortem/paradisiac state (Nabokov 2012a, c). This trope was maybe most brilliantly used in *Pale Fire* (Nabokov 2012b), where the story is presented from two different perspectives: that of Professor Kinbote and that of an exiled king of a country named "Zembla" (spoiled Russian for "Land"). It gradually turns out that the story of a king is a delusion of professor Kinbote himself, and the whole fictional world falls apart, as a result of this discovery itself triggered by the murder of the character's poetic double, Shade—a subjective "end of the world." But the final judgment on the reality of characters is left to the reader. Perhaps it is yet another character, absent from the novel's stage, a Russian émigré called Botkin, who imagines himself to be all of those characters at once. It is important that Nabokov choses a king as the ultimate "subject" of the disastrous story of three persons. It is as though the kingly status would be the only way to save and determine the unity of a dissolving world.

Let me now finally turn to the main subject of this paper—the contemporary Russian writer Viktor Pelevin, arguably the most important and popular prose writer of the post-Soviet period, the only one who managed to combine a reputation among the broader public and the literary critics. Pelevin started his career as a Soviet science fiction writer but quickly moved into a freer fantasy world that roughy follows the cyberpunk tendency, adding vampire plots, drugs, and a very seriously taken Buddhist mysticism. But, this explosive mix is unchangeably used to present a political commentary on the situation in Russia and beyond. For instance, *Homo Zapiens* (2000)[1] is the story of a spin doctor—Pelevin calls him a "creator," in the full sense of the word—who ends up becoming a living "god" of the Russian media space and managing a machine that entirely invents and counterfeits reality in the TV news. *Empire V* (2016) describes a monopolistic group of vampires who suck from earth a mysterious substance of happiness that combines the features of money and oil.

Pelevin's work has rightly been described as "postmodern," even though this broad stylistic definition does not exhaust his literary technique. Mark Lipovetsky sees Russian postmodernism, and Pelevin's work in particular, as a reaction both to an almost eschatological collapse of socialist realist archaic classicism and to contemporary Western postmodernism (Lipovetsky 2008: XXII, 6–7). But the latter was itself a reaction to a catastrophic advent of mass culture. Pelevin freely combines modernism both with mass culture and with socialist realist aspirations to transparency. But, at the same time, and this is what Lipovetsky also emphasizes, Russian postmodernism is an *attack* on what he, using Derrida's word but changing its meaning, calls "logocentrism": a belief in the identity of language and reality (Lipovetsky 1997; 2008).

Pelevin's mysticism only emphasizes the actual political content of his novels. The same is true of Pelevin's "international" short stories, such as the "Macedonian critique of French thought" (Pelevin 2003: 265–302), where "to restore the balance of energy in the Eurasian space" that had been undermined by the unilateral transfer of oil from Russia to Western Europe, the protagonist builds in France an enterprise that makes prisoners read the works of Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, and Houellebecq, whips them on every page they read, and transfers 360 euro to Russia at every stroke.

In most novels by Pelevin, the world ends in disaster. Or at least, as in *Homo Zapiens* (2000) and the *Sacred Book of the Werewolf* (2009), it is constantly threatened by a five-legged apocalyptic hound, "Pizdets" (the word is obscene slang for "total disaster," the root referring to female genitalia, in the sense of an all-swallowing abyss). "Pizdets" is translated,

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[1]   *Generation "П"* (Generation *P*) is the original Russian title, published in 1999. The English translation was published as *Homo Zapiens* in the United States (2000), and a UK version published as *Babylon* (2001).

not quite succesfully, by Andrew Bromfield into English as "Phukkup." I suggest to translate it less obscenely but more precisely as "Fiasco."

> One of these gods was the lame dog *Pizdets* (Fiasco) with five legs. In the ancient chronicles he was indicated by a large letter 'P' with two commas. Tradition says he sleeps somewhere among the snow, and while he sleeps, life goes along more or less OK; but when he wakes up, he attacks. When that happens, the land won't yield crops, you get Yeltsin for president, and all that kind of stuff. Of course, they didn't actually know anything about Yeltsin, but overall it's pretty similar (Pelevin 2006: 229–30).

The novel *Empire V* ends with the following lyrical meditation:

> Stars in the sky once seemed to me as other worlds to which spaceships from the Sun City would once fly. Now I know that their sharp points are holes in the armor that protects us from the ocean of merciless light.
> At the top of Fuji one feels with what force this light presses on our world. And somehow thoughts of the ancients come to mind.
> "What you're doing, do quickly." What is the meaning of these words? The simplest one, my friends. Hurry on living. Because there will be a day when the heaven will burst at the seams, and the light whose violence we can not even imagine, will break into our quiet home and will forget us forever (Pelevin 2006: 412).

Note the themes of: 1) protection from Enlightenment, and a transition from utopia to apocalypse, and literature as a *katechon* against it; and 2) a shift of the subject in the transition from one world to another that destroys it. They will both reemerge below.

The most characteristic of Pelevin's apocalyptic thinking is perhaps the early *Buddha's Little Finger* (2001)[2] where a general of the Russian Civil War (1918–1924), Vasiliy Chapaev, builds a magical machine gun out of Buddha's finger and thus destroys the whole world. However this is not the end of the novel because subsequently the main character, Petr, wakes up in a psychiatric clinic in today's Russia and is told that all of this was his hallucination. But this, too, is dubious: the narrative points of view are given as equivalent. And the hero gradually comes to the conclusion that the world that he woke up in was in fact a fiction composed by Grygory Kotovsky—in real history another famous Red Army general, but in the novel, a "famous mystic" who emigrated to Paris and there, according to the suspicion of Petr, created a grotesque illusion of 1990s Russia (with its mixture of Soviet and Western life). In response, Petr publicly tells a joke

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[2]   The Russian publication, *Chapaev i pustota* (Chapaev and the void) (1999), was published in English as *Buddha's Little Finger* (2001) in the United States, and *Clay Machine-Gun* (1999) in the UK.

about Kotovsky where his bald head gets pierced and explodes like a bubble. Then he recites a poem about the void, shoots from a pen into the lamp, and thus gets back into the alternative universe of civil war where he meets Chapaev again.

Another novel entitled *T* (Pelevin 2009) has the protagonist "T," or "Lev Tolstoy," who turns out to be an action superhero, master of "nonviolent resistance" (in fact a virtuoso of lethal fighting skill). He constantly encounters a demonic character "Ariel" (with a pun on "a-real") who claims to be the author of his story, and in the end the two fight over which of them includes the other into his story: at the end T ends up as the "true" author of the novel.

Apart from the theme of unmasked authorship, there is in Pelevin an equally important motif of a targeted symbolic blow. Thus, in the "Anti-Air Complexes of Al-Efesbi" (Pelevin 2011a), Pelevin describes a Russian ex-FSB[3] agent who learns how to down American drones in Afghanistan by presenting to their cameras some impossibly insulting and problematic messages (we learn only fragments, such as: "greenspan bernanke jewish [rothshild/federal reserve/builderberg group/world government"]). Supposedly they freeze the system that is responsible for justifying each shot of the drone to US taxpayers. In another story from the same collection, "Operation 'Burning Bush'" (Pelevin 2011b), the FSB talks to George Bush from inside his tooth with the voice of a fake "God." This "God" is in fact a Russian Jew who is given heavy drugs and then has to listen to mystical theological literature. As he describes it, under the influence of drugs these words "sounded otherwise than a usual human speech. They seemed to cut through, by consciousness by fully occupying it by their meaning and became the only and ultimate reality while they sounded" (Pelevin 2011b: 46), "I became prey of every whisper that reached me" (Pelevin 2011b: 47), while the authors "couldn't imagine that their words would transform into psychic reality in the brain of a person suspended amidst black eternity and deprived of our usual immunity to other's speech" (Pelevin 2011b: 47). George Bush, to whom this newly converted "mystic" speaks through his tooth, experiences a similar effect of direct penetration by words, and thus the FSB convinces him to start the war in Iraq, alongside other catastrophic actions.

The phrase about the "usual immunity to other's speech" is a latent reference to the philosophy of the great Soviet thinker Boris Porshnev, author of an original theory of human evolution (Porshnev 2007; Magun 2017 [forthcoming]). The following lines in the "Anti-Air Complexes of Al-Efesbi" also refer to Porshnev:

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3   FSB stands for "Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti," the Federal Security Service.

My ancestors were hairy low-headed corpse-eaters who chiseled skulls and bones of the carrion that was rotting along the river, and sucked the decomposing brains out. They did it for millions of years, using same silicon chisels, without any idea why this happens to them—just following their instinct, like the birds who nest or beavers who build dams. They did not mind eating each other as well. But then a demon of intelligence descended upon Earth and taught them the magic of words. The herd of apes became humanity and started their vertiginous ascendance by the stairway of language. And now I stand at the crest of history and see that the highest point has been passed. I was born after the last battle for the soul of humanity was lost. But I heard its echo and saw its farewell lightnings... (Pelevin 2011a: 224).

To Porshnev, early humans first elaborated language as a means of hypnosis and thus became powerful and cruel destroyers. Only subsequently, did there emerged a new counter-language that allowed others to protect themselves, and the proper contemporary humans emerged against their dark intermediate ancestors. Pelevin is probably attracted not just to the reflections on hypnotic language-weaponry (so close to his own) but also to the logic of negation of negation at the *origin* of history that is so uncannily similar to the apocalyptic theories about its *end (*emergence of a dark master that is then overcome in a new turn of destruction). Here, however, Pelevin departs from his usual gnostic/Buddhist spiritualism (there is also a next higher world out there after this one is finished) and imparts his character with an eschatological pessimism (the last battle—against the Antichrist?—is lost, etc.) in which the language, being a negative force, ultimately destroys itself for good: a negative dialectic not so unlike the Frankfurt school's "Grand Hotel Abyss."

A more recent piece by Pelevin, *Love of Three Zukerbrins* (2014a) tells of an explosion in an opposition newspaper made by an Islamic terrorist. This is however only the apparent form of a more fundamental drama in which the protagonist is given clairvoyance and then persecuted by the demonic "angry birds." These angry birds want to kill God, who takes the image of a fat pig, and uses humans for this purpose (throwing them into the God as they themselves throw birds in the famous game). The tactic is to take a person, make her suffer enormously, and crush God by this overwhelming sentiment of darkness. All of this leads to the aforementioned explosion that in the dream of the victim is an atomic bomb exploding the entire Earth. It is an end of a particular world but not of the world as such: the protagonist survives by traveling among many worlds and learning that one of his former colleague creates such worlds.

All of this is radical but familiar, in principle, from "postmodern" literature. But I want to emphasize four points that are special in the context.

1) For Pelevin, as for Nabokov, the "end of the world" is a way to reflect upon and to express the fictionality of literature, and at the same time to overcome it by making the text repeatedly denounce itself as a mere hallucination. While for Nabokov the realistic motivation for this trope was a nostalgic sense of loss and a transcendent status of consciousness, for Pelevin it is primarily the sense of the degree to which contemporary reality is constructed, subjectively and symbolically, by the state and by the media: constructed not just as a "simulacrum," but in its very being. Contemporary everyday reality is then structured as *art,* which makes it into an object of nice and funny literature but always puts it on the verge of disappearance. Even if this reality is not in fact a fruit of a secret conspiracy—and Pelevin makes this clear by presenting such theories as grotesque—it is structured as though it was someone's conspiracy. The motivation for this is again the degree to which our world is an object of rational planning, of rationalist reflection, and at the same time is highly aestheticized, bombarding a subject with fictional or mythic narratives and images. This may be seen as a postmodern reflection both on the mass culture and on the classical rationality (be it Soviet planning or "Western" technocracy), which today work together: Pelevin's characters are modernist subjects in the world of cultural industry against which they stage a revolt.

The two together, rationality and art, in their unity and contradiction, build up a sentiment of de-realization and de-subjectivation that is explored in the cyberpunk aesthetics in general and in Pelevin in particular. Pelevin is special, because the Russian society that he lives in is even more constructible than others, because of a recent revolution that loosened the sense of reality and untied imagination, while at the same time raising the stakes for highly rational strategic behavior, and of an imitative attitude of this society towards the Western established models of policy. This all taken together has led, in Russia, to a magic belief in the power of media that became self-fulfilling. One can look at the current *non-war* in Ukraine that is made possible by a creation of a fictional world by the Russian television (cf. Pomerantsev 2014): Pelevin anticipated and influenced this kind of special operations. This is also a reason why his writing is so concerned with shielding, protecting the reader. A disaster is framed as an end of the world in the consoling sense that the world had not been real to start with, and, even more importantly, the novel's universe, with its sometimes chthonic nauseating images, is *just* literature, just fiction. And same is true of the terror stories ubiquitous in news media. Hence also the importance of Porshnev for Pelevin: the thinker who, like much later Paolo Virno (2013), saw language both as a danger of mastery, and as a capacity of protection against it. The literary apocalyptic revelations play a role of "no" that allows to weaken the power of discourse.

Politically speaking, Pelevin can hardly be seen as a "progressive" writer. Like much postmodern literature, he discredits all the existing po-

litical perspectives at once and enhances a sense of moral relativism through universal suspicion (cf., Žižek [1991] and Jameson [1991], who emphasize among other things the apocalyptic rhetoric of postmodernism). There is a convincing travesty of patriotic populism, Western liberalism, and pro-Western revolitionarism, which also sublimates all of them into mystical global conspiracies. However, being a Buddhist and thus abandoning any perspective of worldly alternative, Pelevin is at the same time not a cynic. There is an ongoing theme of individual symbolic resistance, which serves to constitute a free subjectivity. The novel *S.N.U.F.F.* even ends on an anarchist revolutionary escape led by a sex doll who gradually acquires critical consciousness (!) (Pelevin 2014b). The competing hallucinatory worlds may collapse, but the resistance to them raises subjectivity to the epic level. A world is merely a piece of art, but it is also a piece of Art.

2) Together with the image of end and "void" where the world dissolves a like a theatre play (In *Buddha's Little Finger*, Pelevin explicitly quotes Blok's "Puppet Show," [1950]) or a pack of cards, Pelevin has a figure of the world's author—a demiurge who is at the same time a character in and the supposed author of the book. Somewhat similar to Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Pelevin constantly performs a *sublimation* of such figures. At the same time, there is irony, such as is also present in Nabokov but even more so in Platonov, whose treatment of "Dostoyevsky" is not unlike the usage by Pelevin of "Chapaev" and "Tolstoy" as action genre characters (and generally his usage of the mass culture signifiers in all his novels for nominating new characters). *Subject* is a missing desideratum of such apocalyptic literature, and one should boldly usurp its role. Sally Dalton-Brown (2014) notices the role of the reflective images in Pelevin's prose and suggests that this is a postmodern "impotence" of an author whose characters start overwhelming him and he himself is degraded to the level of a character. But isn't there another process in action, by which the author, previously invisible, gets incarnated and redoubled (as in Pelevin's novel *T*). Then there is a double role: Tatarsky, in *Homo Zapiens*, invents the scripts of media, and is their main protagonist. This is a powerful scheme, a trap for the mind of a spectator, which recalls Freud's theory of mass leadership as occupying at once the positions of role model (=subject) and love object.

In Pelevin, Chapaev, himself an idealized character of Soviet war mythology, typically turns into a titanic theological guru, which is at the same time comical and persuasive, since the crypto-theological content of Soviet culture gets literalized: literally revealed. The same, with even more comical elements, happens to Kotovsky and Lev Tolstoy. Of course, these are not transcendent figures but themselves characters in the novel, and Pelevin emphasizes that from the objective (Buddhist) point of view personalities don't exist at all: "not 'I think' but think 'I'," they are themselves images. The "living God" in *Homo Zapiens* is just the most popular

image, not an omnipotent master. But this irony only reinforces sublimation. Unlike the classical genius, this postmodern author/hero plays and displays a public role. This has a clear sociopolitical meaning: even before the current Russian political regime started showing features of a personalistic autocracy, Pelevin notices the role of a messianic personality in a world that is so much suffering from apocalyptic anxiety, alias anxiety of de-realization and de-substantialization. This personality is not a god, but rather a hero: compare Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose current legitimacy rests less on a genuine belief in the picture built by TV propaganda, but rather on the respect for an extra-class spin doctor who managed to organize such a bright propaganda campaign, and is at the same time projecting his own figure as a protagonist of this film (like Pelevin's spin doctor and living god Vavilen Tatarsky from the novel *Homo Zapiens*).

3) One attributes the world to God before destroying it, but there is also a symmetrical task of *killing* God, or at least of punishing him for the construction of this world. Not just the idolatry of authors, but also idoloclasm, violence against authorial figures. Here, an apocalyptic scenario, or at least a script of a disaster, is not just an undoing of a once-created world, but an *anti-construction* that permits such undoing. You need to invent such an evil that would be impossible within the system and would make it annul itself: in *Buddha's Little Finger*, the direct annihilation of the world by Buddha's finger is first tried. But then, when Petr discovers that the world he lives is invented by Kotovsky, and he cannot just erase him, he composes an insulting poem that speaks of piercing Korovsky's bald skull with a pen. And this finally seems to work, as the world around dissolves indeed. After *Buddha's Little Finger*, there then follows in Pelevin's work the "Macedonian" torture of French citizens as a means to restore the geopolitical balance of mind and matter, the anti-missile tables of Skotenkov, the deicidal torture of humans by angry birds, (Pelevin 2003: 265–302): all of these are the horrible, case-specific anti-fantasies that remind of Lacan's "real" (and of Žižek's use of it).

Strictly speaking, these constructions are not "ends of world," but they are clearly related to Pelevin's apocalyptic images. Philosophically speaking, the logic is clear: it is not enough to simply deny, devalue, or negate the world for it to dissolve itself. Particularly if this is a *constructed* world as, Pelevin is convinced, is always the case with any world. It is not enough to "deconstruct," one needs to attack the author with an *anti-construction*: a *contrary* force is a vehicle to enforce a negative statement that otherwise would just remain a theoretical clause. In Kantian terms, the *nihil privativum* is indispensable to realize the *nihil negativum*.

This is an important theoretical point, in the context, for instance, of the purely "postmodern"/"deconstructive" interpretations of Pelevin such as the one by Lipovetsky (2008), who sees his work as an instance of de-centering, "iteration," and of a "para-logical" mixing of oppositions

without any hierarchy or resolution. In fact, to produce such a world of abstract negativity, a concrete negativity of inversion is necessary at some point, and Pelevin always inserts such inversions at key points. He needs to destroy a centered world, in order to produce a decentered one: literature is a live weapon of deicide, like those characters of the *Love of Three Zuckerbrins* with whom "angry birds" fire into God. Structurally, I believe, against Lipovetsky, that Pelevin's mature texts are far from paralogy or parataxis: they are always classically structured into two (or sometimes more) parallel worlds of meaning. The "werewolf" characters freely mediate between them, indeed, and the action does stumble in a series of illusionary transgressions, but the novels always finally stage a dramatic antithesis of these worlds, which often culminates in an apocalyptic collapse.

Amongst his contemporaries, Pelevin is similar, in his poetics of counter-moves, to Lars von Trier who, on his part, also likes to construct unbearable artificial images meant to shock the spectator and to please the evil God. Rosalind Galt in her fine analysis of von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2010) calls this a "trolling" of the spectator and explains this by a sadomasochist contract between the two (Galt 2015). Pelevin is less cruel to the reader: he tries to present the same mechanism in a distant, detached way.

4) The issue of apocalypse in Pelevin is not only *subject* but also *substance.* Pelevin abundantly shows the role of energetic liquid substances, such as oil ("shit of dead dinosaurs" as he calls it), or "*bablos,*" a mystical beverage combining money with hypnotic enjoyment, in the fantastic worlds that he describes. In a world with a deficit of reality, and at the same time with an overexposure of images, such substances seem to be so many magical ways both to restore reality, and eventually to destroy it. And there is always not enough of these substances.

In the Russian case, there is a loss of reality and a loss of matter connected to the revolutionary devaluation of the Soviet past. In *Buddha's Little Finger*, Pelevin's protagonist goes mad in 1919 and wakes up in 1992: the entire period in between is omitted in the novel. This is the "void" to which its Russian title, *Chapaev and the Void*, alludes. An action "in absolute void," that is described in the novel, is also an art of life in a historical void, which, paradoxically, Pelevin's literary work tries to fill in with matter. The machine gun supposed to destroy the entire world by Buddha's finger is not by chance made of *clay,* the paradigmatic raw *material.* Oil, which emerges as a key material and mystical force in the *Sacred Book of the Werewolf* and the *Macedonian Critique of French Thought*, is also a substance drawn from the distant past thatwe are thus feeding on, thus filling in the holes of recent memory.

Strangely, nature plays a large role in Pelevin's cyberpunk worlds. He likes describing landscapes and idealizes nature, for instance in the *Love of Three Zuckerbrins* where green plants emerge at the end as a

healthy force prevailing over virtual reality. It is this natural realm that is perhaps most exposed to the material destruction born by the apocalyptic forces. Following a good old Russian tradition stemming from Nikolay Fedorov and his idea of material resurrection, Pelevin develops a *materialist* apocalypse in a world that is either reduced to sheer matter at the verge of extinction or on the contrary holds on to its matter as a way to fill in the void of symbolic extermination. Matter emerges as a fragile substratum of this world as well as, at the other pole, a dark instrument of its destruction.

To sum up, Pelevin does not just describe a crumbling world of pure images and signifiers, a chaos that would come to replace the quasi-theological Soviet frame of reference. He describes a postrevolutionary and permanently revolutionary world, where everything must be reconstructed and reinvented: a world that is analogous to modern art in that it is ideally constituted from top to bottom and therefore risks losing its substantiality. What is being so easily destroyed, must have been artificially created. The subject and the substance, which are constantly being lost in this world due, not just to the growing alienation of an individual, but equally to the rapid and plural development, return as sublime names and images of heroes/creators and of fetishized money. Apocalypse is not just motivated by the melancholic withdrawal of value, but by an active symbolic revolt of heroes against the world, which turns out to be *a* world, and against its masters. A constructivist, Cartesian, personalistic, Buddhist, theoclastic, materialist, mystical apocalyptica. Prose of fiasco, poetry of inversion, rhetoric of denunciation.

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