

Oxana Timofeeva

Communism with a Nonhuman Face

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The title of this essay paraphrases the famous expression “Socialism with a human face,” which refers back to 1968, to the events in Czechoslovakia known as the Prague Spring, but also to the Soviet 1980s, the time of the late Soviet Union prior to perestroika, when the idea of changing the very nature of so-called “really existing socialism” from the inside according to human/democratic values was still popular among dissidents. Apparently, it was not a renewed and more refined socialism, but a good old capitalism which entered this space under the mask of the human. Apparently, something went wrong long before perestroika, when communism went in an unknown direction, like a strange animal that managed to escape from people and from the very really existing socialism. Here I would like to track this strange animal and read its traces as peculiar “signs from the future.”

I want to suggest not that something went wrong with socialism, but that something is wrong with the human face. Let me start from the argument, which sounds quite banal already, about the dialectical relationship between the ideology of democratic humanism and the racist social practices of neoliberalism.



Film still from Soviet director Valeri Rubinchik's *King Stakh from Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Дикая охота короля Стаха), 1979.

Questions are posed here and there, in the entirety of Europe and further to the West, across first world countries and around: What happened to our nice and glorious multicultural world? How is it that our multiple identities, subjectivities, cultural diversities, and irreducible singularities are no longer taken into account? Where has our welfare paradise gone? Is it already lost? The enemy is easy to locate: the one percent, the rich, the bankers, the absolute capitalist minority that owns the world, together with far-right governments and



Ilya Kabakov, *Heads*, 1967.

politicians who provide this minority with silent support and hardcore austerity politics. Right-wing governments never defend the interests of people; they only pursue their own interests – the power of the rich over the poor, the power of capital over labor, the power of the one over the many.

Austerity policy is another name for state racism, since its first targets are migrant workers, asylum seekers, and refugees. But it equally abuses artists, intellectuals, the precarious, the disabled, the sick, the poor, and the retired – all those whose very existence does not correspond to the holy land pictured by the perverse imagination of the right-wing. In brief, the far-right is the evil attacking the freedoms and rights won by the people in the course of twentieth-century class struggles, and then carefully guarded by social democrats.

My object of critique here, however, is not the evil of the right-wing, but rather the good of democratic universalism, since they both form part of one and the same dialectical chain. My argument is very simple: if humanism, often used as a slogan for struggles against racism and xenophobia, proceeds from the assumption that there is some exceptional dignity in human beings and some exceptional value to human life, then it is just one step away from putting into question the value of any nonhuman life.

The institution of human rights is based on recognition. Someone should be recognized in his or her human dignity. If this concrete biped is recognized as human, regardless of his or her gender, race, or ethnicity, then this individual must have documents and the right to vote, the right to life, the right to property, and so on. He or she pays taxes to the state to which he or she is attached as a citizen, so that this state will provide for his or her security. The rights of citizens are becoming practically equal to human rights. And there is a certain logic here. The state is a guarantor of human rights; therefore, a certain human can enjoy his human rights as a citizen of a certain state. Citizenship is becoming a legal condition for someone's *humanship*, so to speak. Hence the enormous difficulties faced by those who have no citizenship at all, or who have the wrong citizenship.

Today, illegal migrant workers are the most vulnerable in terms of citizenship. They are being massacred in high numbers at the borders of welfare states while trying to enter illegally. If they have already entered, they are constantly trying to escape the police. They are living in the streets, in the basements of houses, and in slums, even as they enable the prosperity and economic growth of these glorious states through their low-paid or unpaid labor. The institutions of human rights and citizen rights

are based on the exclusion of nonhumans and noncitizens.

However, my intention here is not to say that all we need to do is extend the realm of human rights to include animals, to bring them into the human universe – this is basically the agenda of animal rights defenders, which is totally fine. But if these changes were implemented within the existing capitalist regime, we would end up with something like animal citizenship, with related attributes like border control, dealing with illegal animals trying to reach happy European fields from forests on the global periphery, and so on.

I would rather like to claim that the class struggle has to be carried forward by those who appear as nonhumans, or even as unhuman monsters, like the Hollywood aliens that symbolized communism during the Cold War. Revolution does not have a human face. It goes beyond the human and human rights, towards animality. This idea was perfectly drawn by Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in his "Ode to Revolution": "You send sailors / To the sinking cruiser / there / where a forgotten kitten was mewing."

This image of revolution is striking and powerful. It hits the mark. There is something absurd and irrational in the excessive generosity of the revolutionary gesture depicted by Mayakovsky – imagine how crazy an army commander would have to be to send a battalion of sailors, adult armed men, to risk their lives for the sake of some forgotten, tiny, politically insignificant creature. And yet, that's precisely how the drama of revolutionary desire should be performed.

Almost like these sailors, I will now try to look back to the sinking cruiser of the Russian Revolution in search of, if not a proper animal, then at least for its traces, almost erased by history. First of all, let's see how the Revolution dealt with animals and other nonhumans, or with those who were "not human enough."

After the October Revolution of 1917, the idea of a "revolution in nature" and even of a "struggle against nature" was continuously advanced in all spheres of the nascent Soviet society. Nature was supposed to have changed – liberated from its reliance on necessity but also preserved from the precariousness of contingency. A diffuse avant-garde attitude unconditionally sustained the idea of a point of no return, a "giving up the ship," a total transformation of the social and natural orders towards emancipation and equality. Nature was also considered a battlefield for class struggle. The central theme running through Soviet literature and poetry of the period is the potential or actual transformation of one species into another – of animals into humans, for

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example – accompanied by the acquisition of higher levels of consciousness and freedom.

Nature is not “nice”: the Russian Revolution sees nature, in a Hegelian-Marxist spirit, in terms of unfreedom, suffering, and exploitation, and the animal kingdom serves, in a way, as an example of society that should be transformed. It is not a matter of the predominance and superiority of one species over the other, but a matter of taking everything into account. As long as inequality remains untouched at the interspecies level, equality of people, too, can never be realized. Or, to put it in Adornian terms, history is the history of oppression, and the violent domination of humans over humans starts with the human domination over nature.¹

As the futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov puts it, “I see the liberties of horses / and equal rights for cows.”² In his poem *The Triumph of Agriculture*, Nikolay Zabolotsky, one of the founders of the Russian avant-garde absurdist group OBERIU, describes nature as suffering under the old bourgeois regime. He compares animals to proletarians and creates a utopia of their progressive liberation facilitated by technology:

I saw a red glow in the window
Belonging to a rational ox.
The parliament of ponderous cows
Sat there engaged in problem-solving ...

Down below the temple of machinery
Manufactured oxygen pancakes.
There horses, friends of chemistry,
Had polymeric soup,
Some others sailed midair
Expecting visitors from the sky.
A cow in formulas and ribbons
Baked pie out of elements
And large chemical oats
Grew in protective coats.³

Andrey Platonov deserves special attention in this respect. Among the numerous intellectuals, artists, poets, and writers who were inspired by the Russian Revolution and invested a great deal of creative energy and work in it, Andrey Platonov is a unique figure. Coming from the industrial proletariat, he became a major Russian writer for whom the Revolution consisted in crafting a truly Marxist literary practice examining topics like community, sexuality, gender, labor, production, death, nature, utopianism, and the paradoxes of creating a new (better) future.

In his writings, not only humans, but all living creatures, including plants, are overwhelmed by the *desire for communism*, a desire which, as Fredric Jameson pointed out, still has not found its Freud or Lacan.⁴ A passage

from Platonov’s novel *Chevangur* (1928–1929) is emblematic in this regard:

Chepurny touched a burdock – it too wanted communism: the entire weed patch was a friendship of living plants ... Just like the proletariat, this grass endures the life of heat and the death of deep snow.⁵

The desire for communism comes out of profound boredom (*toska*) in the face of the unbearableness of the existing order of things. “We should change the world as soon as possible,” proclaims one of the Bolshevik characters in *The Sea of Youth*. “Otherwise even animals are already getting insane.”⁶

Platonov’s expectations for communism go far beyond ideology and politics. The more depressive and tragic nature is, the stronger the hope for happiness and freedom. This hope is essential and it possesses all the force and passion of natural life. In animals, this hope consists in following their destiny without knowing any alternative besides death.

Platonov’s communists and Bolsheviks are revolutionary animals. They literally recognize themselves in animals’ faces and project onto animals their own revolutionary passion. And if, as human beings, they are ascetic and refuse the immediate gratification of bodily desires, they do so because their greater desire, or their *unbearable* desire, is the desire for communism. They are moved by their passion for the realization of happiness for everyone, including the smallest animals.

The necessity and urgency of revolution as a planetary change is already inscribed in unconscious animal nature, which seems to expect from humans, from communists, from *us*, a kind of salvation. Platonov’s historical materialism is animated by the force of an anxious animal’s intolerance against all that is and towards the happy anticipation of all that should be:

The desert’s deserted emptiness, the camel, even the pitiful wandering grass – all this ought to be serious, grand, and triumphant. Inside every poor creature was a sense of some other happy destiny, a destiny that was necessary and inevitable – why, then, did they find their lives such a burden and why were they always waiting for something?⁷

From this perspective, revolution is not so much a move forward, but an absurd gesture of turning “back” – towards these weak forgotten creatures who are awaiting help, towards Mayakovsky’s kittens, but also towards ourselves as those

unhappy animals. The only problem is that it is always already *too late*. The tragedy of animality consists in the fact that an impossible catastrophe happens at every moment. The animal (or the slave, or the poor) dies of sorrow and misery without achieving its long-awaited happiness.

Mourning functions as an internalization or preservation of what is lost. Memory is a faithful thought: by preserving what is lost, the one who remembers saves it from the emptiness of oblivion. Memory is a fidelity to what is no longer there, but what nevertheless endows us, as Walter Benjamin would say, with “weak Messianic power”:

The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.⁸

The claim of the Benjaminian past is that it affects the present and relates it to the urgency of revolutionary action, which can answer to the hope of those whose lives were interrupted by death. If the chance of life was lost, if the creature, in whose heart unknown happiness throbbed, died in poverty, sadness, and slavery, then only those who are alive can live up to its expectations. Platonov shares with Benjamin this paradoxical view of the materialist dialectics of history, when, for example, he writes about the responsibility of living people to those who died during the war:

The dead have no one to trust except the living – and we should live now in such a way, that the death of our people was justified and redeemed through the happy and free destiny of our nation.⁹

In these lines, Platonov identifies himself with a certain nation, and the dead, too, are part of this nation. However, in his prose he does not describe some actual, existing nation, but rather, to put it in Deleuzian terms, he “invents a people.”¹⁰ (This is similar to Kafka, who invents a Mouse Folk.) Deleuze describes this invented people as follows:

This is not exactly a people called upon to dominate the world. It is a minor people, eternally minor, taken up in a becoming-revolutionary. Perhaps it exists only in the atoms of the writer, a bastard people, inferior, dominated, always in becoming,

always incomplete. *Bastard* no longer designates a familial state, but the process or drift of the races. I am a beast, a Negro of an inferior race for all eternity.¹¹

It is precisely to this kind of bastard people that Platonov dedicates his novel *Soul*. Its protagonist, Nazar Chagataev, who was trained as an economist in Stalinist Moscow, is instructed by the Party to go to the desert and find a small nation in order “to teach it socialism.” His novel *Soul (Dzhan)* is a generalized personification of the Soviet people, as well as an unexpected metaphor for the Jews (wandering around the desert in search of freedom). It is also a literary figure that gathers under the name of “nation” all the unhappy and lost humans and animals:

Seven days later, after taking the most direct footpath, Chagataev reached Tashkent. He went straight to the Central Committee, where he had been expected for a long time. The secretary of the Committee told Chagataev that somewhere in the region of Sary-Kamysh, the Ust-Yurt and the Amu-Darya delta there lived a small nomadic nation, drawn from different peoples and wandering about in poverty. The nation included Turkmen, Karakalpaks, a few Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Persians, Kurds, Baluchis, and people who had forgotten who they were ... The poverty and despair of the nation was so great that it looked on this work, which lasted for only few weeks in the year, as a blessing, since during these weeks it was given nan bread and even rice. At the pumps the people did the work of donkeys, using their bodies to turn the wooden wheel that brings water to the irrigation channels. A donkey has to be fed all through the year, whereas the workforce from Sary-Kamysh ate only for a brief period and would then up and leave. And it did not die off entirely; and the following year it would come back again, after languishing somewhere in the lower depth of the desert.

“I know this nation,” said Chagataev. “I was born in Sary-Kamysh.”

“That’s why you’re being sent there,” the secretary explained. “What was the name of the nation – do you remember?”

“It wasn’t called anything,” said Chagataev, “though it did give itself a little name.”

“What was this name?”

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“Dzhan. It means ‘soul,’ or ‘dear life.’ The nation possessed nothing except the soul and dear life given to it by mothers, because it’s mothers who give birth to the nation.”

The secretary frowned, and looked sad. “So there’s nothing they can call their own except the hearts in their chests – and even that’s only for as long as the hearts keep on beating.”

“Only their hearts,” Chagataev agreed. “Only life itself. Nothing belonged to them beyond the confines of their bodies. But even life wasn’t really their own – it was just something they dreamed.”

“Did your mother ever tell you who the Dzhan are?”

“She did. She said they were runaways and orphans from everywhere, and old, exhausted slaves who had been cast out. There were women who had betrayed their husbands and then vanished, fleeing to Sary-Kamysh in fear. There were young girls who came and never left because they

loved men who had suddenly died and they didn’t want to marry anyone else. And people who didn’t know God, people who mocked the world. There were criminals. But I was only a little boy – I can’t remember them all.”

“Go back there now. Find this lost nation. The Sary-Kamysh hollow is empty.”

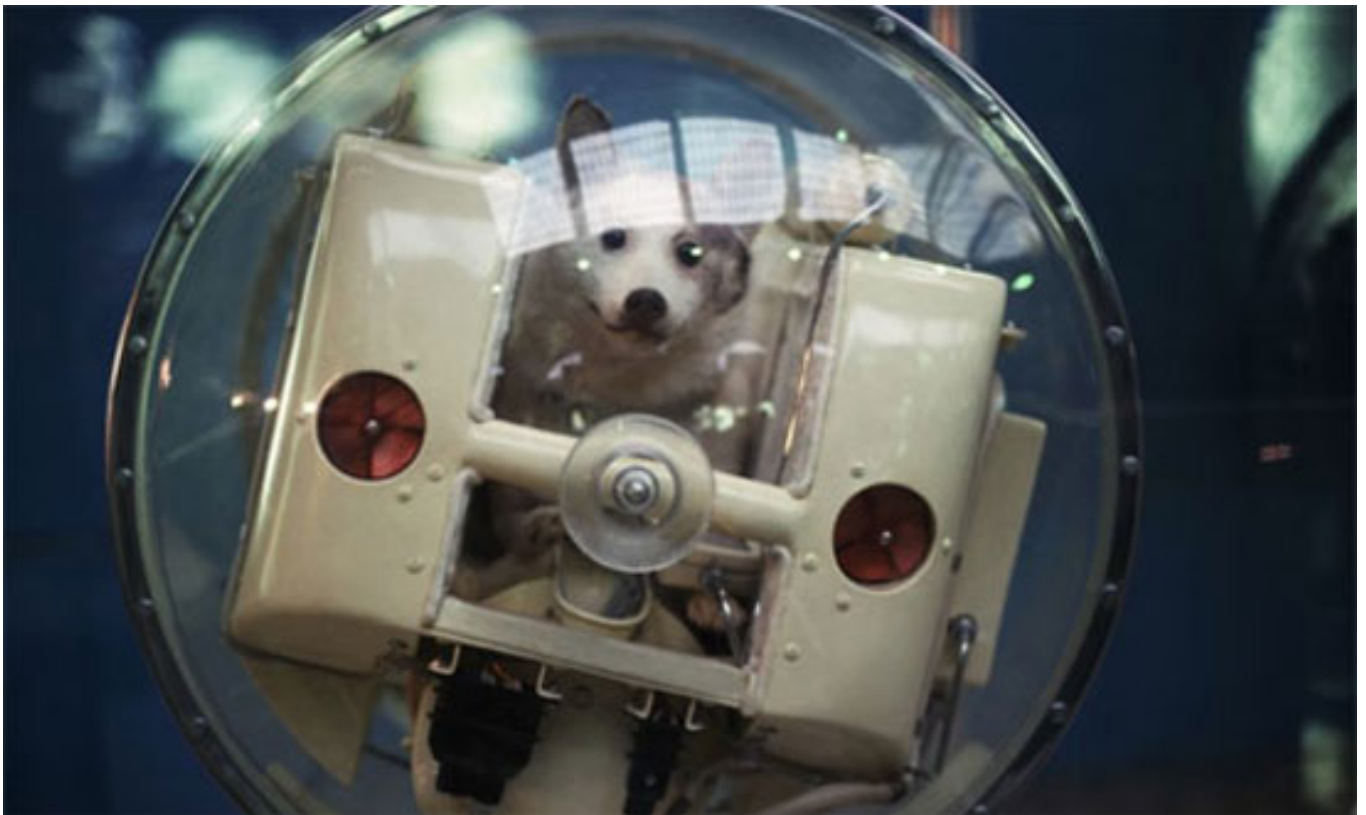
“I’ll go,” said Chagataev. “But what will I do there? Build socialism?”

“What else?” said the secretary. “Your nation has already been in hell. Now let it live in paradise for a while – and we’ll help it with all our strength.”¹²

Nation here is a kind of “substance,” matter which can build communism out of itself, but which can also exhaust itself as a natural resource, since the poorer the life of a people is, the more greed it provokes. Nothing prevents the reduction of the substance of nation to pure labor force.

The life of this small population is disappearing; it literally disappears in the sands of the desert, together with the naked or almost naked people in rags. The reader of Agamben will

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Laika, the first dog in space. Photo: Marc Garanger/Corbis

immediately recognize here the idea of bare life. Platonov starts the history of his people from this zero-level of life, or as Agamben would put it, from the grey zone in between life and death. This life is not properly human; it is deprived of symbolic, real, and cultural wealth. It has nothing to identify with and nothing to defend itself against exploitation, which, according to Platonov, exhausts the living soul:

Chagataev knew from childhood memory, and from his education in Moscow, that any exploitation of a human being begins with the distortion of that person's soul, with getting their soul so used to death that it can be subjugated; without this subjugation, a slave is not a slave. And this forced mutilation of the soul continues, growing more and more violent, until reason in the slave turns to mad and empty mindlessness.¹³

This is how Platonov inverts the dialectic that, from Hegel to Marx, claimed that labor transformed an animal into a man and a slave into a master. The Hegelian slave changes the world with his labor and acquires self-consciousness, whereas Platonov's human-animal works to maintain its life and hopes for a better world, but finally exhausts himself and falls into despair, paradoxically finding his last refuge in the dumb body of an animal.

Platonov's escape route from the human is described in his story "Rubbish Wind," written in 1934. Its main character, Albert Lichtenberg, a physician of cosmic space, transforms little by little into an indefinite animal because he is unable to stay human in fascist Germany. He finds his last refuge in this animal body, which no one can recognize any more. And if in *The Sea of Youth* the zoo technician Visokovsky dreams that "the evolution of the animal kingdom, stopped in former times, will recommence, and all poor creatures, being covered with hair, who are now living in distemper, will finally achieve the fate of a conscious life,"¹⁴ in "Rubbish Wind" we see the inverse process:¹⁵ a man becomes covered with hair and loses his sanity, so he is put in a concentration camp because he is no longer human enough:

The judge announced to Lichtenberg that he was sentenced to be shot – on account of the failure of his body and mind to develop in accordance with the theories of German racism and the level of State philosophy, and with the aim of rigorously cleansing the organism of the people from individuals who had fallen into the

condition of an animal, so protecting the race from infection by mongrels.¹⁶

Paradoxically, this unrecognized animal, or animalized man – or, to put it in Agambenian terms, this Muselmann¹⁷ – performs a feat at the end of the story: he saves a Jewish communist woman and helps her escape from the camp, and then finally sacrifices himself in vain when he tries to use his own flesh to feed an insane woman who lost her child. He exhausts himself to the extent that when his wife, who is searching for him with a police officer, finds his dead body, she cannot recognize it as human.

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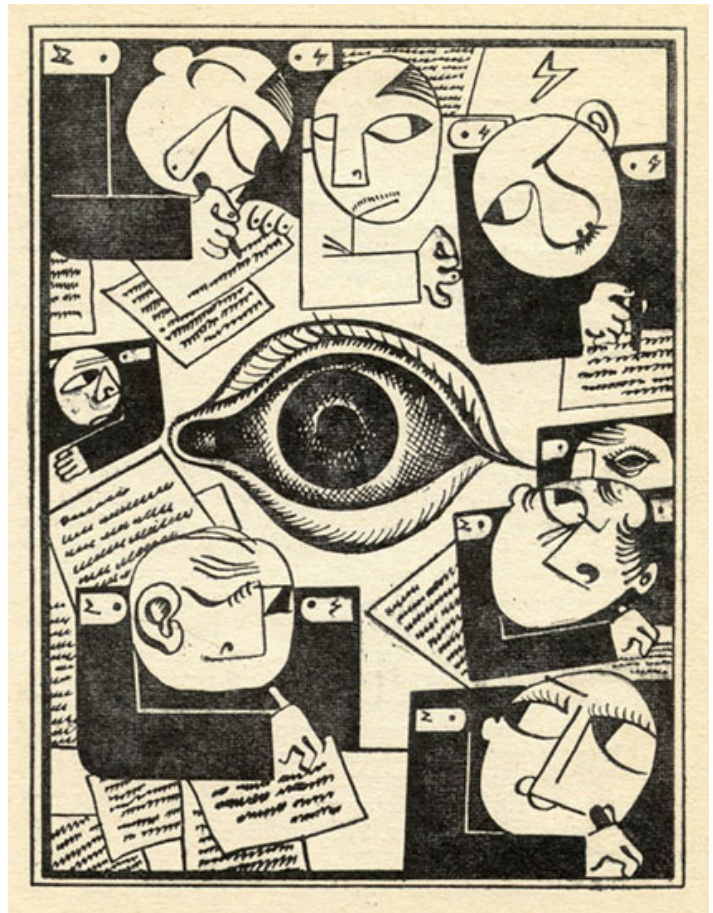


Illustration from L. Davidichev's *Hands Up! or Enemy No. 1, A Novel for Young Adults* (1971). Illustrations and typography by R. Bagautdinov.

Rubbish Wind is one of the most hopeless of Platonov's works. In it, he inverts the entire picture and opens up – for a moment – the secret world of a human being "in distemper," a human hidden in an animal body. He writes for this dying creature – as Deleuze would put it, "one writes for dying calves" – in order to fix the possibility that was not recognized and is already lost. The human becomes animal and then finally becomes waste, similar to Kafka's Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*. What is recognized is the animal. "Like a dog" – these are the last words of

K. in *The Trial*. When someone puts a knife in his heart, he says: "Like a dog." To this Kafka adds: "It was as if the shame of it was to outlive him."

Commenting on this passage, Walter Benjamin relates this shame to Kafka's "unknown family, which is composed of human beings and animals," and under the constraint of which Kafka "moves cosmic ages in his writings." According to Benjamin,

To Kafka, the world of his ancestors was as unfathomable as the world of realities was important for him, and, we may be sure that, like the totem poles of primitive peoples, the world of ancestors took him down to the animals. Incidentally, Kafka is not the only writer for whom animals are the receptacles of the forgotten.¹⁸

Thus, Kafka's animal is the "receptacle of the forgotten." Not of the *being* as forgotten, but rather of the forgotten as such, as a meaningful nothingness, around which our being constitutes itself as negativity, desire, and memory. Does that oblivion not come from the fact that "I am the other," which points to, among other things, what Žižek calls "the un-human core of humanity"? Memory is restlessly lurking through the forgotten. The self-relation of the human cannot but confront this paradox – the unhappy animal which we retrospectively produce out of our own despair dies ingloriously before we manage to fulfill its anticipation of freedom. The gates of *terra utopia*, where we might realize the last hope of our desperate animality, are always already closed. And on these gates, it is written: "Animals are not allowed."

However, as Žižek notes, it is precisely and only among animals that Kafka was able to imagine a utopian society.¹⁹ His last story – the one he wrote in March 1924, just a few months before his death, when he already knew he was dying – was "Josephine the Singer, or The Mouse Folk." At least three contemporary philosophers – Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, and Mladen Dolar – have written about this story, in which there are basically two protagonists: Josephine the singer and her fellow "mouse folk." Of course, the mouse folk here constitute the kind of small "subhuman" nation which, in Deleuze, is invented by literature. The first-person protagonist in the story is one of the mouse folk. They wonder to themselves about Josephine's posture, her role in the society of mice, and her historical fate. One of the mice asks how it is possible that Josephine's voice is so attractive to her fellow mice. There is nothing special about her voice; she does not possess any talent as a singer; she is not an outstanding person. Apparently, she is just piping, like all mice do, except that the other

mice don't pay so much attention to their own piping and sometimes are not even conscious of it. But when Josephine sings, they stay silent. The secret is probably in her special posture – she is an artist, an exceptional individual, she maintains an exceptional and marginal position in relation to the whole of the mice people. It is precisely this marginal position which makes the immanence and heterogeneity of the mice people possible.

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Russian director Sergei Eisenstein with a mexican candy skull.

This, claims Dolar, is the position of the artist, who produces a readymade, an artwork as the "non-exceptional exception, which can arise anywhere, at any moment, and is made of anything – of ready-made objects – as long as it can provide them with a gap, make them make a break, it is the art of a minimal difference."

According to Jameson, the mice people praising Josephine is a paradoxical example of the utopia of radical democracy: Josephine's singing is a kind of excessive sacral performance that allows the mice people, through abandoning their individual identity, to finally become who they are. The essence of people appear in the essential indifference of the anonymous. "She constitutes the necessary element of exteriority that alone permits immanence to come into being."²⁰

Žižek further radicalizes Jameson's statement and claims that this is an example of what communist culture should look like. "The mouse community is not an hierarchic community with a Master, but rather a radically egalitarian 'communist' community." Žižek calls Josephine "the People's Artist of the Soviet Mouse Republic," and asks: "What would a communist culture look like?"²¹ He even provides an answer to his question – but I will not do that. Instead, my claim is that in order to answer this

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question, which is the question of both theory and art praxis, one needs, as Kafka's famous dog would say, more philosophy – more interpretation of what precisely an artist can and should borrow from the beast.

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Oxana Timofeeva is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Philosophy of Russian Academy of Science and currently a Humboldtian Fellow at Humboldt University in Berlin. She is a member of the Russian collective "Chto Delat?" ("What is to be Done?"), and the author of *Introduction to the Erotic Philosophy of Georges Bataille* (Moscow, 2009, in Russian) and *The History of Animals: An Essay on Negativity, Immanence and Freedom* (Maastricht, 2012).

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1
See Vincenzo Maurizi, *History of Seyd Said, Sultan of Muscat* (Cambridge: Oleander Press, 2013), 67–103.

2
Eugene Ostashevsky, "Selections from the Triumph of Agriculture," *The American Poetry Review* (July 2005)

3
Ibid.

4
Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 97. See also Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) 180.

5
Andrei Platonov, *Chevengur*, trans. Anthony Olcott (Ann Arbor: Ardis Press, 1978), 198.

6
Платонов А. Ювенильное море // Платонов А. На заре туманной юности. 294. (Trans. by author.)

7
Platonov, "Soul," in *Soul and Other Stories*, trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), 27.

8
Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 254.

9
Платонов А. Взыскание погибших. (Trans. by author.) See http://www.aplatonov.ru/read_plat/182.

10
Gilles Deleuze, "Literature and Life," in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 4.

11
Ibid.

12
Platonov, "Soul," 22–24, italics added.

13
Ibid., 103.

14
Платонов А. Ювенильное море // Платонов А. На заре туманной юности, 302.

15
"The regressive metamorphoses of 'Rubbish Wind' suggest that in the fascist 'kingdom of appearances' all is not as it seems. In this kingdom of beasts evolution moves on the opposite direction, i.e. toward a human degradation, and this results in the animalization of man and a racist society that expels defective "subhumans" as extraneous zoomorphic beings" Hans Günther, "A mixture of

living creatures: Man and Animal in the Works of Andrei Platonov," *Ubandus: The Slavic Review of Columbia University* (2012), 14, p. 271..

16
Platonov, "Rubbish Wind," in *The Return and Other Stories*, trans. Angela Livingstone and Robert Chandler (London: Harvill Press, 1999), 82.

17
See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Boston: Zone Books, 2002).

18
Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 132.

19
Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (New York: Verso, 2010), 370.

20
Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, 125.

21
Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 368.

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