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Tactile Communism: Keti Chukhrov's Post-Soviet Dramatic Works and the Legacy of Soviet Defectology

In this article, I analyze the character of hyper-naturalism and exaggerated tactility in dramatic poems by contemporary Russian-Georgian philosopher and writer Keti Chukhrov. I argue that, while descriptions of violence, physiological functions, and abject poverty are common for post-Soviet art, in Chukhrov's work these elements perform radically different task than in the pessimistic and de-ideologized *chernukha,* or the style of grim realism. Her approach to matter is also distinct from the historic Russian avant-garde tradition, which relished intensified sensations but did not offer constructive ways of inscribing their immediacy into coherent cultural continuity. Instead, her dramatic poems bear pedagogical, even rehabilitative stakes for recuperating the individual sensations of alienated people into meaningful and shared cultural experiences. In this article, I discuss her approach to drama as mobilizing the tradition of Soviet Marxist defectology, a special educational method of socializing disabled, cognitively impaired, or otherwise disadvantaged people. Pioneered in the Soviet Union in the 1920s by Lev Vygotsky and suppressed in the 1930s, defectology found further application in the 1960s and 1970s in the work of the Zagorsk boarding school for the deafblind, led by Vygotsky's student Alexander Mescheriakov and Evald Ilyenkov, a Marxist-Hegelian philosopher who is a central figure for Chukhrov's philosophical research. One of the key tasks of Meshcheriakov and Ilyenkov was to help their deafblind students to overcome isolation through learning to translate their purely tactile sensations into deliberate communicative acts. While Zagorsk offered Ilyenkov an opportunity to test and apply his theory of the collectivist formation of personality, for Chukhrov it is theater that has become the sphere for experimental, practical extension of her scholarly research into Soviet Marxist thought and socialist culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Her dramatic texts offer models of alternative subjectivization for post-Soviet people to allow themselves once again to recognize the presence of universal values and greater cultural commons behind individual, alienated sensations and experiences.

Keywords: Keti Chukhrov, post-Soviet subjectivity, disability and defectology, tactility, faktura, cultural-historical psychology, Marxist humanism, 1960s and 1970s Marxist philosophy and its re-actualization in contemporary Russian art, Lev Vygotsky, Evald Ilyenkov, Mikhail Lifshits, Metropoem.

The dramatic poems of Keti Chukhrov – a Georgian-born Russian philosopher, art theoretician, and playwright[1] – are replete with images of the cruel humiliation of post-Soviet subjects. Migrant workers maltreated by their rich Moscow clients, former teachers reduced after perestroika to abject poverty, young intellectuals falling prey to sexual blackmail by the gatekeepers of prestigious cultural institutions – these and others form, in these texts, a long gallery of people subject not only to physical and economic violence but also viscerally humiliating indignity. In a memorable scene in the dramatic poem "Communion" (2008), two rich and pious Moscow neo-conservatives rescind their invitation to baptize and name as their spiritual sister the menial laborer Diamara (a name derived from "dialectical materialism") after she uses the master bathroom and leaves behind the tell-tale smell of excrement. Batal, a homeless professor of political history in "Refugees Are Heading to the Bolshoi" («Беженцы идут в Большой», 2007), is chased away from a theater because his clothes are dirty and reek of urine:

> Вы лучше убирайтесь поскорее,
> сумасшедший покупатель.
> От вас разит мочой.
> Помылись бы получше.
>
> You'd better get out of here, and quick,
> you crazy customer.
> You stink of piss.
> Go wash yourself right now. [2]

Both of these examples are organized around the same intentionally schematic logic of the distribution of the ideal and the material, the abstract and the concrete. For Chukhrov, culture, spirituality, and universal values were privatized after the fall of communism, along with the apartments and factories that are now owned by the privileged few. Everybody else is left trapped in the degrading "real," in a materiality that is impenetrable for the ideal and that reifies and isolates them. If the poor fail to commodify themselves, they are simply rejected as waste, something repulsive and offensive to others. Magda from "Metropoem" (2013) describes the experience of the beginnings of capitalism in post-Soviet Russia as a hollowing out of self and soul, being reduced to a body that one must

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[2] Chukhrov (2011a), my translation.

strain to present as attractive and desirable, that is, marketable. She registers this effort of keeping up appearances as a distinctly physical shame:

> Ну это, как если бы нутро умерло,
> а тело осталось.
> Я вот сейчас покажу
> эту всеобщую ненужду:
> смотри…
> Как будто тебе в туалет пора давно,
> а тебя заставляют улыбаться,
> чтобы
> очень приличным запомнили твои имидж и лицо.
>
> It's like you're dead inside,
> but your body stays.
> I'll show you now
> this universal unneediness:
> look…
> It's like you've had to go to the bathroom for ages,
> but you're still forced to smile
> so they'll remember you looking decent – your face and style.[3]

Marx promised that the abolition of private property would bring about "the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities,"[4] for then everything observed by an eye or touched by a hand would tell the story of relations between people and not commodities. But Chukhrov's characters, living in the aftermath of the mass-privatization of their former physical as well as cultural commons, experience Marx's promise played out in reverse, as a sudden dehumanization and reification, involving an impoverishment of the senses, a degradation of self-worth, and profound loneliness – a world-shattering disability.

Descriptions of dreary and frightening everyday life in recent Russian literature are hardly unique to Chukhrov's work. After all, the style of pessimistic and graphic naturalism, the so-called *chernukha* (grim or "black" art), dominated Russian art beginning from *glastnost'* (1985–1991) and throughout the traumatic and disorienting transitional period of the 1990s and early 2000s. *Chernukha* literature and cinema indulged in exposing realities that were taboo in socialist realism yet all too familiar in daily life. It abounded in scenes of physical, sexual, and psychological violence of every bleak and rotten stripe – violence inflicted not only by the powerful against the powerless, but also, routinely, by the powerless against one another.[5] As Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers note, even

[3] The unpublished translation that I will be using here was made by Eugene Ostashevsky, Kevin M. F. Platt, and myself (with the participation of Keti Chukhrov) during the 2019 "Your Language My Ear" translation workshop organized by Platt and held in Princeton and the University of Pennsylvania.

[4] Marx (1976: 300).

[5] Leiderman / Lipovetsky (2003: 560-567).

more important than the hyper-naturalistic subject matter for *chernukha* was the investigation of discursive forms of this "decentralized violence" that did not stem from a single origin of repressive power, but permeated all social spheres and was devoid of "any ideological rhetoric (state or intellectual)."[6] Eliot Borenstein observes that over time, *chernukha* underwent a certain metamorphosis. From a moralistic critical exposition of the previously censored harsh realities and injustices (an indignant exposition that implied a hope for the better), it devolved into a prurient savoring of horror, a style in high demand among mass-media consumers.[7] In the early 2000s, when Chukhrov was writing her first dramatic poems, the New Drama movement introduced similar neo-naturalist critical tendencies into Russian theater. Despite Chukhrov's surface affinities with these trends, her work goes beyond them in crucial ways. While it is true that Chukhrov's dramatic poems feature a cast of characters typical of *chernukha* – Marijeta Bozovic notes that Chukhrov's poetic works "collect the voices of Moscow's subalterns: migrant workers, sex workers, and precarious surplus populations that can find no work at all"[8] – the purpose behind these portrayals of "the insulted and the injured" diverges from *chernukha* in decisive ways. Whereas *chernukha*, as Lipovetsky writes, is "a product of decomposition of ideologized consciousness"[9] and has no goal other than exposing, whether critically or with a sado-masochistic relish, the state of life and forms of communication during and after the collapse of the symbolic and ideological fields, Chukhrov's works aim precisely at the re-ideologization of consciousness, at the rediscovery of the foundations for shared discourse. Chukhrov wants to detect the persistence and universal accessibility of the ideal within post-Soviet bodies and subjects, seemingly stripped of ideology.

Writing about the first post-Soviet generation, Sergei Oushakine described it as suffering from aphasia, a discursive disability that was non-physiological in origin, but, rather, a "'pathology' of the 'symbolic,'" caused by the rupture of historical and cultural continuity.[10] Overcoming this condition, Oushakine writes, required unique compensatory mechanisms. Chukhrov's dramatic works, in turn, offer their own set of tools for helping contemporary Russians recover from the shock and disorientation of the collapse of the Soviet symbolic order. Her artistic and theoretical projects rehabilitate late-Soviet regimes of subjectivity and sensuality and, by extension, validate people whose imagination and material circumstances are, to a lesser or greater extent, shaped by them. In her most recent theoretical book, "Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism" (2020), Chukhrov maintains that Soviet cultural politics empha-

[6] Beumers / Lipovetsky (2009: 59-63).

[7] Borenstein (2007: 1-23).

[8] Bozovic (2019: 457).

[9] Lipovetsky (1999).

[10] Oushakine (2000: 994).

sized the values of universalism, idealism, humanism, altruism, realism, and de-alienation – notions that were all but discarded in post-Soviet Russia but that, she argues, must be defended.[11] Her relationship with Soviet history and culture, however, "stands in stark opposition to the mainstream phenomenon of Soviet nostalgia."[12] The lineage of Soviet thought that Chukhrov is working with is Marxist-Hegelianism – an anti-Stalinist tradition, suppressed in the 1930s, that had a revival during the 1960s and 1970s in the work of the two central figures of Chukhrov's scholarly writing: Mikhail Lifshits and Evald Ilyenkov. This lineage, suffused with the pathos of emancipation, the desire for freedom, the resistance to dogma, and strongly opposed to the Soviet mainstream – all qualities typical of the Thaw period – was also decisively anti-modernist (and, therefore, anti-avant-garde). Chukhrov's poetic texts do not reconstruct the myths of lost Soviet grandeur, a soothing practice in the face of post-Soviet challenges. Nor is she interested in merely reporting the cruel injustices and sufferings of the "little people" (despite how popular this theme may be with both domestic and Western audiences) or with revitalizing or shocking the senses in the avant-garde vein. Instead, her dramatic poems are primarily concerned with staging a dialectical process of subjectivization in the post-Soviet world. They are suffused with a constructive – perhaps even overly optimistic – pedagogical pathos, and present scenarios of the emergence of political eros on ideological ruins. These texts are meant to help post-Soviet subjects recognize themselves as belonging to an evolving, dynamic ideological and cultural commons, and to offer them a glimpse of emancipation and dignity.

Chukhrov's polemic with *chernukha* is very explicit. In her "To Be and To Perform" (2011) – a book of theoretical meditations on theater and performance – she criticizes such classics of this style as Alexei Balabanov and Ilya Khrzhanovsky for what she sees as their elitist condescension toward the common people.

> Художник пытается как можно дальше отойти от зон жизни, подавляя и вытесняя свою чувственно-реактивную и аффективную связь с человеческим множеством. Возможность общности с ней, прецедент собственного, а тем более чужого аффекта, граничит с жесточайшим страхом энтропии и потому создает самые гротескные образы простонародья, как, например, в фильме Балабанова «Груз 200» или в фильме Хржановского «Четыре».
>
> The artist [of *chernukha*] tries to step as far away as possible from the zones of life, supressing and restricting his sensual, responsive, and affective connection with the human multitude. The possibility of entering into a communion with it – or, worse, of feeling somebody else's affect – borders here on the most severe fear of entropy, and, for that reason, creates extremely grotesque images of the common people, such as we find in Balabanov's "Cargo 200" or Khrzhanovsky's "Four."[13]

[11] Chukhrov (2020: 23).

[12] Bozovic (2019: 456).

[13] Chukhrov (2011b: 242), my translation.

What *chernukha* lacks, for Chukhrov, is a willingness to enter into contact with others. Khrzhanovsky and Balabanov regard but do not touch their subjects, as if fearing contagion. They maintain and re-assert the distance between the presumably educated, intellectual filmmakers and viewers and the frightening and repulsive human masses. *Chernukha* may represent violence and victimization, but, regardless of whether it does so coldly or indignantly, it does nothing to disrupt this reification and crumbling of human relations. As an example of an alternative approach to representing destitute subjects, Chukhrov names Boris Mikhailov, a photographer famous for his portraits – intimate, unflinching, yet not devoid of humor – of homeless people, drunkards, and glue-sniffing street children, as well as for his self-portraits, which are just as unflattering as the rest of his work. Unlike Balabanov and Khrzhanovsky, Mikhailov does not assume a position of superior distance from the people in front of his camera. He is neither repulsed by them, nor afraid of them – nor even made sentimental by them. Instead, he creates a space for his subjects (and, at times, for himself) to perform themselves, to stage their lives, and, through play, to restore what Chukhrov sees as an essential human dimension, despite even the most squalid Soviet and post-Soviet material circumstances.

> Вместо фальшивого журналистского сочувствия, вместо анимализирующего карнавала сорокинского типа в фильме «Четыре» Михайлов создает виртуальную сцену, на которой его герои способны восстановить свое «человеческое» через игру…
> Чтобы не раствориться в энтропии, не погибнуть, надо играть, становиться другим.
>
> In place of false journalistic compassion, in place of animalizing carnival of the sort we see in Sorokin's "Four," Mikhailov creates a virtual stage on which his protagonists are able to restore their humanity through performance [lit. "play"]…
> In order not to be dissolved into entropy, not to perish, one needs to play, to become the other.[14]

Chukhrov's own approach to drama is to open such "virtual stages" for decentering one's narcissism, for playfully regarding one's life from somebody else's perspective and for becoming the other. Theater for her is an "anti-utilitarian space"[15] where the familiar commercial rhythms of production and the exchange of commodities are suspended, so that the relations between people themselves can become visible. It is a space that foregrounds processes of mutual human influence and collective development, where one becomes aware of one's ever-evolving position within the social collective. In this sphere, it is possible to practice a shift away from crippling individualism and the reifying logic of the market toward the awareness of mutual social interdependence and the common good. As she writes in her manifesto "The Nomadic Theater of the

[14] Ibid., 244.

[15] Ibid., 15.

Communist" (2009), the purpose of theater is to allow one to "witness the development and improvement of others."[16]

In this article, I consider the combination in Chukhrov's poetic texts of post-Soviet suffering and humanist pedagogical pathos as mobilizing the tradition of Soviet Marxist defectology, an unfortunately named special-education method for socializing physically disabled or socially disadvantaged subjects though encouraging their engagement in purposeful, teleological contact with culture, understood broadly as objects and environments shaped by human labor. Developed in the 1920s by Lev Vygotsky and suppressed in the 1930s, defectology found further application in the 1960s and 1970s in the work of the Zagorsk boarding school for the deafblind.[17] This school was founded in 1963 by Alexander Mescheriakov, a student of Vygotsky, and Evald Ilyenkov, a Marxist-Hegelian philosopher and a central figure for Chukhrov's philosophical research. The Zagorsk school offered Ilyenkov an opportunity to apply in practice his philosophical theory of the collectivist formation of individuality. By successfully working with the deafblind – people who, like the dispossessed characters of Chukhrov's works, are forced into a world "where there is matter but no spirit… where there are only primitive organic sensations of one's body and its physical states but no image of the external world"[18] – Ilyenkov hoped to demonstrate that a human personality is empty until it becomes aware of the existing social and cultural worlds and begins to translate immediate physical sensations into conscious experiences and acts of communication. While Ilyenkov's concern was with physical and Chukhrov's with cultural-ideological disabilities, they both worked to counteract the effects of isolation and reification caused by the de-idealization of the material world and the loss of contact with others and with one's cultural-historical environment. In what follows, I provide a brief summary of the main positions of defectology and its principles as they were applied in Zagorsk – an experiment about which Chukhrov writes extensively in her theoretical texts[19] – and then trace the presence of these themes in her "Metropoem" («Метропоэма»).

Vygotsky's work in the sphere of defectology and disability in the 1920s began in circumstances that invite a parallel with Russia in the 1990s. The poverty and post-revolutionary devastation of society made the question of the harmonious development of a new subjectivity in exceptionally difficult conditions extremely acute. Importantly, while each form of physical disability, according to Vygotsky, inevitably poses its challenges and requires corresponding attention and adjustments of treatment, broadly speaking, physical disabilities are never-

[16] Chukhrov (2009).

[17] It is still in existence, but has been renamed Sergiev Posad School for the Deafblind, after the monastery located nearby.

[18] Ilyenkov (2021: 204).

[19] In particular, see her recent volume "Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism" (2020).

theless analogous to all social disabilities, such as poverty, illiteracy, lack of access to resources, hostile social environment. A "defect" or disability, within the Vygotskian approach to psychology, is anything that disrupts the normal integration of subjects into culture. In this sense, 'deficitology' would have been a better name for the discipline that does not at all view disabilities as defects, but, rather, as consequences of privations and deficits – deficits of physical abilities, but also social support and cultural horizon. We find the same view of disability among his followers in the 1960s and 1970s. Reflecting on his experience in Zagorsk, Ilyenkov emphasized that the experience of the deafblind is different from the experience of the seeinghearing only by degree of the intensity of the challenges:

> Чем пристальнее всматриваешься в суть дела, в работу воспитателей и учителей Загорского интерната, тем отчетливее выступает на первый план то обстоятельство, что врожденная (или рано приобретенная) слепоглухота не создает буквально ни одной специфической психолого-педагогической проблемы. Специфической оказывается тут исключительно техника общения с детьми, а суть дела, суть работы с ними и ее результаты не заключают в себе ровно ничего специфического.
>
> The more one looks into the heart of the matter, into the work of the teachers and staff at the Zagorsk boarding school, the clearer it becomes that, from the standpoint of psychology and pedagogy, inherited (or early) deafblindness does not cause a single unique problem. The only thing that is specific here is a technique for communicating with these children, but otherwise there is nothing special about the nature of the tasks, work, or the results accomplished.[20]

More recently, Alexandr Suvorov – one of the four deafblind students from Zagorsk boarding school, who, in 1971, under Ilyenkov's supervision, enrolled in Moscow State University to study psychology, and who at present is a writer, poet, and professor at Moscow State University of Psychology and Pedagogy – also describes physical disability as an extreme case of a universal condition:

> […] главной целью (моего творчества) я всегда считал объяснение зрячеслышащим, как именно в ситуации слепоглухоты обостряются те же проблемы, которые людям приходится решать и в любой другой ситуации, тоже экстремальной или вполне ординарной.
>
> […] I always regarded it as my main task to explain to the seeinghearing how the condition of deafblindness exacerbates the same problems that people have to solve in any other situation, whether it is extreme or quite ordinary.[21]

Disability within the tradition of defectology is regarded not as a radical exception from the norm but as a condition that provides the most vivid illustration of the challenges and principles of universal human development. By extension, I will attempt to demonstrate how instances of graphic violence and suffering in Chukhrov's poetic works are not meant to shock but rather to provide the most

[20] Ilyenkov (2021: 195).

[21] Suvorov (2012: 119).

schematic and vivid example of the challenges and limitations that all post-Soviet subjects face, regardless of whether they are privileged or not.

According to Vygotsky, under perfect (physical or social) circumstances, biological and cultural developments are synchronized. With disability, cultural and social development begin to lag behind physical development. It then becomes the task of therapy to invent supplementary tools, specific for each disability, that enable a child to "grow into culture."[22] In Zagorsk, one such tool was dactilologia – a technique of communicating through tactile contact, by spelling letters on the palm of another person's hand. It is a very intimate manner of mediating language that requires the direct, physical assistance of benevolent others. For example, the Zagorsk students who, together with Suvrov, graduated from Moscow State University were able to complete their degrees thanks to the assistance of specially provided secretaries trained in dactilologia. The transmission of culture and knowledge – something that eventually becomes internalized by individual erudition, intellect, and personality – is here quite directly accomplished thanks to the physical presence of others who unlock otherwise foreclosed cultural horizons, without, however, dominating or patronizing.[23]

Restoring and enriching one's awareness of not only the immediate but also the diachronic cultural-historical environment that one inhabits are key requirements for the harmonious development of an individual, in the view of both Vygotsky and Ilyenkov. In Vygotsky's words, "[t]o build even the most modest defectological educational plan, it is essential to lift the limitations of the cultural and social horizon (*krugozor*)."[24] Individuality is impossible in isolation; subjectivity emerges dialectically, as one interacts with others and internalizes their cultural relations and accomplishments.

> Специфически человеческая психика со всеми ее уникальными особенностями и возникает (а не «пробуждается») только как функция специфически человеческой жизнедеятельности, то есть деятельности, созидающей мир культуры, мир вещей, созданных и созидаемых человеком для человека.
>
> The specificity of the human psyche, with all its unique particularities, develops (instead of being "divinely sparked") only as a function of the specificity of human activity, that is, activity that tends to the world of culture, to the world of things made and cared for by one person for another.[25]

Accessing culture provides an otherwise limited individual with collective senses – a boundless reserve of experiences, moral examples, and support. To illustrate this point, Ilyenkov cites a response that young Suvorov once gave during a public lecture. Somebody asked whether perhaps the success of the Zagorsk ex-

[22] Vygotskii (1983: 23); Ilyenkov (2021: 200).

[23] Stimulating students' initiative without (quite literally) forcing their hands was one of the main pedagogical principles at Zagorsk.

[24] Vygotskii (1983: 47).

[25] Ilyenkov (2021: 210).

periment proved not the dialectical-materialist formation of individuality in interaction with others but just the opposite: whether the accomplishment made by its deafblind patients only demonstrated the innate nature of consciousness. Suvorov spoke into the microphone: "And who told you that we neither see nor hear? We see and hear with the eyes and ears of all our friends, of all the people, of the whole of humanity."[26]

Black-and-white footage from an educational trip that the students of the Zagorsk school took to Leningrad in the late 1960s[27] shows many close-ups of the hands of young people touching the richly ornamented surfaces of the city's treasured historic public sculpture and architecture. Their hands examine the marble urns in the Summer Garden, the golden, gilded wings of the griffons on the Bank Bridge, and the ornaments of the gates to the Winter Palace. This was neither vandalism, nor playful defiance of the "do not touch" interdiction typically posted next to art objects, but a learning process, a part of the pedagogical method designed by the founders of the Zagorsk experiment. Within its program, the key to helping the deafblind escape from the prison of matter and absolute isolation lies in coming into tactile contact with tools and cultural objects – things made by people for people – and developing a sense of purposeful activity.

One of the most memorable scenes in this film shows a deafblind teenager climbing over one of the four equestrian sculptures designed by Peter Klodt on the Anichkov Bridge over the Fontanka River and touching the bronze horse's head as well as the muscular arms and face of its proud young squire. For the film's audience, this scene carries an element of the transgressive, playful pleasure of coming into direct physical contact with a public sculpture. But what is even more prominent here is humanist pathos. The victory of culture over nature and matter – the theme of Klodt's magnificent work – is reflected and performed in real time before the camera by a deafblind child. In this intimate proximity, standing side-by-side with Klodt's proud horse tamer, the deafblind teenager, balancing without the patronizing support of his teachers, independent and triumphant over nature in his own right, appears as his spiritual equal.

The images of the hands of deafblind students moving inquisitively over the gates of the Winter Palace and running over public sculptures cannot help but recall scenes from Sergei Eisenstein's "October": the hands of sailors shaking the gate separating them from the palace or street urchins playing among the ruins of the monument to Alexander III. However, the underlying relation to the monuments in the films is radically different. In Eisenstein's avant-garde films, we find the ecstatic joy of dismantling objects and images of authority (whether religious

[26] Ibid., 220.

[27] Puteshestvie uchastnikov Zagorskogo eksperimenta v Leningrad (n.d.). A digitized version of the film was posted on the YouTube channel of the Russian Society of the Deafblind.

or political) – dispersing their energy and destroying their aura; behind the encounter that the Zagorsk pedagogues orchestrate for their deafblind students, in contrast, is a calm interest and trust in *all* culture, regardless of whether it is "proletarian" or "bourgeois." The latter presupposes a very different starting point for relating to the heritage of past art forms, including those created by regimes antithetical to socialism. Instead of hostility toward and simple rejection of these cultural objects as oppressive and false, the Zagorsk film represents a collective learning practice through which disadvantaged members of society can appropriate the history of cultural and artistic forms for their own subjective development.

Suvorov also passionately insists on the need to have unmediated access to all cultural forms. In a text-letter addressed to the already deceased Ilyenkov, written after perestroika, Suvorov suggests a parallel between the avant-garde's calls to throw classics overboard from the ship of modernity and the post-Soviet dismissal of socialist culture:

> В эпохи потрясений обществу свойственно шарахаться из крайности в крайность. После семнадцатого года раздавались призывы «сбросить с борта парохода современности» всю прежнюю культуру, в том числе Пушкина. Нынешние «демократические» радетели культуры в этом отношении ничуть не лучше: они норовят выбросить «за борт» всю – без разбора – советскую культуру. Как же мы себя гробим! Все надо знать, все должно быть доступно, иначе ни о какой духовное свободе не может быть и речи. Духовная свобода – это прежде всего, свобода знакомства с первоисточниками. Долой посредников!
>
> At times of great upheaval, it is typical for a society to swing from one extreme to another. After 1917, one could hear calls to throw the entire earlier culture, including Pushkin, "overboard from the ship of modernity." Present-day "democratic" defenders of culture are hardly any better: they strive to toss all Soviet culture "overboard" without the slightest discrimination. How we dig our own graves! One needs to know everything, everything should be accessible – otherwise, one cannot even begin to speak of spiritual freedom. Spiritual freedom is, first of all, the freedom to know first sources. Away with the mediators![28]

Suvorov is defending a communism of culture: the right of everyone to claim access to the history of artistic forms and imagination and, therefore, to all the varied models of human relations that they contain. Chukhrov, in her "Nomadic Theater of the Communist," echoes the idea that communism entails universal access to all art:

> Недавно ко мне пришло ясное понимание того, что искусство не может не быть коммунистическим. Это вовсе не проявление идеологии, как кажется некоторым. Это также не догмат. Просто вдруг стало очевидным, что все искусство – от Древней Греции до сегодняшнего дня – то искусство, которое преодолело в себе эгоизм и самомнение – содержит в себе потенциальность коммунистического. […] Когда я говорю коммунистический, то, конечно, имею в виду не принадлежность к партии, а мировоззрение. Именно эта мировоззренческая широта, превышающая границы одного государства, нации,

[28] Suvorov (2003: 23).

> класса, художественной школы, частные или даже духовные интересы конкретного индивида, предполагает потенциальность коммунистического в художественной работе.
>
> Recently I understood clearly that art couldn't help but be communist. This is not at all a manifestation of ideology, as it would seem to some. Nor is it dogma. It is just that suddenly it became obvious that all art – from Ancient Greece to the present day; that art which has overcome the egoism and conceit in itself – contained the potential to be communist. […] When I say communist of course I have in mind not membership in a party but a worldview. It is this breadth of worldview, which exceeds the boundaries of a single state, nation, class, artistic school, and the private or even spiritual interests of a specific individual, that predetermines the communist potential in a work of art.[29]

Suvorov and Chukhrov both defend the right to an open-minded exploration and appropriation of Soviet culture and claim that, like other historical-cultural sedimentations, it should be studied for the humanist, universal content and promise of spiritual emancipation that it carries.

The validation of Soviet socialist culture as part of the re-assertion of humanism is a central theme of Chukhrov's "Metropoem." This poetic text may be read as a parable of collective dialectical development – imperfect and incomplete but nevertheless offering the post-Soviet dispossessed a glimpse at the possibility of stepping out of their self-centered solitude. This play takes place on a late-night subway train. The Moscow metro – that grandiose space of mosaics and sculptures, built as a palace for the masses and now a relic of an earlier ideological order – appears as hostile and uninviting, the opposite of the welcoming urban environment that Leningrad was for the visiting Zagorsk students. "Do Not Lean" («Не Прислоняться») signs on the train doors begin to read as a reminder to the passengers to keep to themselves and stay on guard against others.

"Metropoem" tells the story of an encounter between five people, all lacking the firm sense of shared cultural horizon that made it possible for the children of Zagorsk to scale Leningrad monuments without fear. It begins with an interruption: their train stalls in the tunnel. In this pause, there emerges an opportunity for unexpected and genuine, albeit difficult, communion between strangers. Among the passengers are Zoya and Seryozha, young and tipsy leftist intellectuals, returning from a discussion about "the new immaterial proletariat," and Khalil and Magda, two migrants from Central Asia. Khalil is in his mid-twenties, a construction worker, and a Lenin-reading graduate student at the Polytechnic Institute, and Magda is a fifty-five-year-old former teacher of mathematics earning her living as a street sandwich vendor. The fifth and the most eccentric passenger is Tonchik, short for Platon (Plato). He is part homeless holy fool, part itinerant philosopher: a Platon Karataev-like prophet of humility and a peddler of absurd and useless goods who can recognize the presence of the Platonic ideal behind each item. Except for Zoya and Seryozha, none of them is ac-

[29] Chukhrov (2009).

quainted with each other, but as the story progresses it becomes clear that even these two, despite being lovers, are estranged and harboring many unspoken resentments against each other.

From the very beginning, we are made aware of the dense, dirty, forlorn faktura of the setting. The text opens with Magda advising Khalil, who is moving from one temporary accommodation to another, not to place the mattress he is carrying on the train floor:

> Да не клади ты на пол,
> на нем же спать,
> а тут наплевано.
>
> Don't put it on the floor,
> you're gonna sleep on it.
> And here, it's all covered in spit.

To this, Khalil indifferently responds that the mattress is "dirty anyway." The sense of visceral disgust is a dominant sentiment not only toward the physical setting but also of the passengers toward each other and even themselves (saintly and mad Tonchik is perhaps the only exception). Drunk Seryozha trades casually racist comments with Zoya about Khalil and Magda. When, to spite Seryozha and make him jealous, Zoya begins to flirt with Khalil, she touches his hand "with repulsion, for his clothes appear dirty" («с отвращением, ведь он в несвежей с виду одежде»). However, behind Zoya's and Seryozha's brash arrogance and aggression hides gnawing anxiety about their place in the world. Zoya confesses that she "is scared all the time, afraid even to swallow" and knows that Seryozha "feels even sicker." She realizes that their engagement in politics remains a form of entertainment and distraction that does not bring them any closer to others or even each other.

> Мы все время обсуждаем проблемы социума,
> финансовый капитализм, труд,
> стратегии, технологии, тактики и приемы,
> мы хотим прогресса и улучшений,
> говорим об эмансипации общества,
> образовании, активизме,
> хотим участвовать везде
> всюду и постоянно, иначе забудут.
> А ведь мы друг другу не очень нужны.
> И как-то даже противны.
>
> We're discussing social problems all the time,
> finance capitalism, labor,
> strategies, technologies, tactics, and moves,
> we want progress and improvement,
> we talk about social emancipation,
> education, activism,
> we want to be involved in everything,

everywhere, and constantly. Or else, we'll be forgotten.
We do not really need each other all that much.
And even find each other repulsive.

Khalil, too, admits to fearing emptiness but of a very practical, rather than existential nature: the horror of having no prospects in life, "when you understand that you're nobody, / that you're going nowhere…" And, yet, he stoically – and not without cruelty – rejects Magda's generous invitation to shelter him for a few days.

Unlike Seryozha, Zoya, and Khalil, who all are in their twenties, the older characters – Magda and Tonchik – are capable of recalling a sense of emotional plenitude, but for them it is located in the past: in either socialist everyday life (Magda) or in its utopian dreams (Tonchik), which they cannot reconcile with or actively revive in the present. Magda cannot even articulate the nature of this former fulfilment, let alone re-create it:

И муж с гастритом и пыльная ботва и
ситцевая простыня – давали радость. Только незаметной она была тогда.
Полнота какая-то была, а какая забыла.

My husband with gastritis, and the dusty beets and
cotton sheets, they gave me joy. Only it went unnoticed then.
Some plenitude existed, but I forgot what kind.

Tonchik chooses to live underground in the Moscow metro under a beatific spell, seeing in this space only the transcendent utopian promise and not the material squalor:

Я практически живу в Метро,
потому что здесь всё:
газеты, люди, божественная архитектура,
скорость, глаза,
дети, любовь людей…

I practically live down in the Metro,
because there's everything here:
newspapers, people, sublime architecture,
speed, and eyes,
children, people's love…

Tonchik, who often provides lyrical-philosophical commentary to the proceedings, echoes Zoya's intuition that most contemporary initiatives, institutions, and activities are only cosmetic measures meant to cover up the absence of actual human connections and one's concrete entanglement in them. They only provide distractions from a state of profound dis-union between people. And, once again in this text, he expresses his hope for breaking this spell of solitude as a hope for a *touch:*

Глубокий раскол между людьми,
не помогает ничего – он изнутри.
Что угодно снаружи лепи,

инфраструктуру, институции, интернет,
а получается совсем не так.

А мир, который ты же и есть,
откройся мне и прикоснись,
какой-нибудь
банальностью хотя бы.

There is a deep rift between people,
nothing helps – it is within them.
You can plaster anything you like on the outside:
infrastructure, institutions, internet,
But you won't get it right.

The world, which is you yourself,
open up and touch me,
even if only
with some banality.

Suddenly, the lights in the train car go off, and in the darkness the temporarily blinded passengers engage in a series of tactile actions. Zoya approaches and touches Khalil again – but this time carefully running her fingers over his face as if to meet him anew. At midnight, Tonchik reminds the others that it is the dawn of April 22, Lenin's birthday, and suggests that all five of them hold hands to form a five-pointed star; this perhaps all-too-idealistic union is quickly interrupted when Seryozha discovers that his wallet has been stolen by Magda. Khalil and Zoya make out in the dark, and when the lights come back on, Seryozha first beats Khalil and later cuts the palm of his own hand with a pocket knife in apology, and Khalil shakes it. This activation of hands – in gestures of tenderness, sexuality, crime, violence, remorse, and forgiveness – unfolds according to the rehabilitative logic of Zagorsk: as a struggle to translate, however awkwardly and crudely, the immediate and confusing sensations into rituals of legible human relations. These gestures are not meant to shock so much as to show somewhat convulsive yet sincere attempts to reach each other in a direct way, to overcome the spell of distance and abstraction. For instance, Magda confesses that she stole Seryozha's wallet not for the sake of his money but as a provocation for some form of non-indifferent contact, perhaps even intimacy:

чтобы что-то хотя бы было сказано,
А то сказать совсем нечего,
А так, что-то хотя бы началось.

So that at least something would be said,
otherwise there's nothing to say,
but now at least something has started.

This movement out of oneself and toward others in "Metropoem" follows Vygotsky's and Ilyenkov's ideas about the development of subjectivity through continual expansion of the horizon of awareness of others – those immediately present as well as a broader cultural context enfolding them – and the eventual

internalization of their experience. In the moment of their intimacy in the dark, Khalil cites the troubadour poetry of Bernart de Ventadorn and Nizami's tale of Layla and Majnun, transforming what otherwise would have looked like a squalid sexual encounter on a dirty subway seat into a story of transcending physical desire in favor of courtly and spiritual longing. In another nod to humanist culture, this time of the late-Thaw, Khalil uncovers another cultural relic: a page from a 1968 newspaper that he had found at a client's summer house and used to wrap his kitchenware. He reads it to everyone. It contains stories – perhaps idealized but nevertheless appealing, if only as an aspirational ideal – of common Soviet workers who achieved harmonious personal development, because their familiarity with labor not only enabled them to excel in the factories but also stimulated their artistic and aesthetic sensibilities and curiosity. All of these texts, imbued with humanist pathos, provide support for the "Metropoem's" characters, allowing them to re-frame and reinterpret their lives by internalizing and appropriating these models and fusing them with their daily existence.

By the time the train begins to move again, a delicate yet precious change has taken root within the characters: a de-centering of the self that permits movement outward toward the general and which, in turn, enriches and ennobles them individually. "How can I take all that grows within you inside of me / into myself," exclaims Zoya to Khalil. But the final words belong to Seryozha:

> Собственное бытие-то есть,
> А вот несобственного
> нет ни у кого.
>
> Everyone has their individual being,
> But the universal being
> Belongs to no one.

This ambiguous coda can be interpreted either as a pessimistic diagnosis of the predicament contemporary Russians find themselves in, or as a hopeful promise that the shared horizon of communist culture (understood as a totality of historic world culture addressed and open for all), ultimately cannot be privatized and therefore remains within reach. One just has to stretch out her hand.

Chukhrov's treatments of the sufferings of the post-Soviet period highlight her peculiar seam of discontinuity between the dominant pessimistic and naturalist tendencies of the Russian art and theater of the 1990s and 2000s. Instead of emphasizing the grotesque abjection of the impoverished, Chukhrov's dramatizations of material suffering provide a starting point for the possible re-creation of social and ideological ties in an atomized society. The movement from physical privations and loneliness to recognizing the presence of a collective historical spirit at work within one's concrete immediate surrounding follows Hegelian logic and is inspired, in Chukhrov's case, by the Thaw-era Marxist-Hegelian pedagogy of socializing the disabled. The exaggerated graphic scenes of physical humiliation in

her texts merely emphasize the principles of dialectical movement as it extends materiality into culture and history. Chukhrov's attention to the humble, the unattractive, and the physically unappealing is also a critique of the avant-garde aesthetics of estrangement, which is another readily available option for engaging extreme materiality in Russian cultural context. To make a stone stonier and dirt dirtier, to intensify sensations, is not her objective. Instead, Chukhrov's poetic texts are extensions of a humanist project: helping post-Soviet subjects reappropriate an idealistic socialist culture that asserts the value of the human.

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