

Between Parody and Pastiche: The Posthuman Biomechanics of Bulgakov's Novellas

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the birth of biomechanics in Soviet scientific discourses and how it was absorbed by the theater and literature of the day, in a reading of Michail Bulgakov's three novellas "D'javoljada" (1924), "Rokovye jajca" (1924) and "Sobač'e serdce" (1925), interpreting them as both products of and critical reactions to the transformational trends in early Soviet ideology. While artists and theorists like Aleksej Gastev worked to ensure the creation of the New Man by reshaping the human animal into an industrious mechanical man of steel, Bulgakov actively opposed such ideas. In his fiction, he exhibits a dialogical and contentious relationship to biomechanics. This reading argues that the novellas are paradoxically dependent on notions of mechanization and hybridity, aligning them with features of posthumanism, at the expense of Bulgakov's satirical attacks on Vsevolod Mejerchol'd and his theatrical biomechanics. The noisy soundscapes, metal tropes and mechanical motifs that shape the novellas, at times distract from Bulgakov's parodic affect and nurture instances of pastiche, making his early short prose indebted to none other than his avant-garde adversaries of the 1920s.¹

KEYWORDS

Diaboliad, The Fatal Eggs, Heart of a Dog, posthumanism, machines, metal, the new man, Gastev

0. Introduction

The Soviet vision of creating a New Man (*novyj čelovek*) emerged with the transition to industrial mechanization, a phase in which Soviet society began treating bodies and objects like machines. With the rise of *biomechanics*, this development impacted cultural and aesthetic

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practices.² Michail Bulgakov's three novellas "D'javoliada" (1924), "Rokovye jajca" (1924) and "Sobač'e serdce" (1925) are fascinating works in this context, as they engage concepts of biomechanics through the figure of the New Man. Bulgakov, himself nostalgic to the pre-revolutionary past, was a frank conservative, and opposed the transformative ideas that were taking root in the Soviet cultural landscape.³

Nevertheless, his fictional writings paint a much more conflicted picture. Bulgakov's novellas serve as fertile ground for posthumanist notions of hybridity, paradoxically aligning them with the transformative optimism of the time. Whereas their radical treatment of animality has been explored elsewhere (Fudge 2009; Mortensen 2016; Dame 2019), the current article discusses the other end of the spectrum of Bulgakov's posthumanism, i.e. the mechanical.⁴ The novellas' interaction with biomechanics relates to the salience of sound in Vsevolod Mejerchol'd's theatrics, as well as Aleksej Gastev's poetics, where rhythm and sound also play a key role (Vaingurt 2008, 228). The current reading thus downplays Bulgakov's comedic irony, exploring instead the ideas that were underpinning the Soviet sciences and their afterlife in the realm of theater and literature. Bulgakov, I claim, can here be read as someone who transcended the strictly anthropocentric concerns of his own political stance.

I first discuss the rise of the New Man and biomechanics as they pertain to Bulgakov's depictions. Second, I argue that the novellas comprise myriad mechanical transformations and hybrid tendencies, informed by the ideology of the Soviet New Man. How is the hybrid status of Bulgakov's mechanical creatures brought into question? I will approach this issue by examining mechanical tropes in the novellas, considering how these traits speak to Bulgakov's fraught yet playful engagement with biomechanics.

1. Tracing the new man

A prerequisite for understanding living beings as machines is the dualist Cartesian view of the body. Believing animals to be lacking a sensitive soul like the one humans supposedly possessed in the pineal gland (Finger 1995), Descartes' physiology reduced non-human animals

² The goal of reshaping the human largely dates back to Enlightenment thinkers, who saw man as principally shaped by his environment (Cheng 2009, 8).

³ Bulgakov, who openly supported the Whites, was a fervent believer in the historical figure of man and the achievements of human culture: "Ах, отчего я опоздал родиться! Отчего я не родился сто лет назад. [Я] консерватор до... 'мозга костей' хотел написать, но это шаблонно, ну, словом, консерватор" (Bulgakov 1997, 10 and 55).

⁴ Within a posthumanist ontology, all bodies and all matter, be it animal or machine, may be understood as possessing some form of vitality or agency (cf. Coole and Frost 2010, 20; Braidotti 2013, 66). Making the leap from animal to mechanical figurations within a continuum of bodies is therefore less of an illogical move than one might initially think.

to machines: seen as a stimulus-response device governed by material laws, this beast machine was deprived of subjectivity and sentience, rendering the animal nothing but an unensouled automaton. This mechanistic view shaped conceptions of the human body in the European medical discourse. In the nineteen-twenties, the age of engineering, this biomechanical strain of physiology became important for Soviet scientists seeing the body as soulless, expanding the idea of the animal-machine to also encompass the human body. Bolshevism was keen to embrace a scientific approach that saw the body in purely material terms, thereby espousing a central tenet of Cartesian dualism: the organism as a machine, making possible the self-sufficient iron body of the Soviet New Man.

The term *novyj čelovek* was cemented in the Russian context with the abolition of serfdom and the reduction of political repression in the 1860s (Paperno 1988, 5). The writers of the time envisioned the transfiguration of all human life, heralding the rise of a New Man. In Nikolaj Černyševskij's *Čto delat'?* (1863), subtitled *Iz rasskazov o novych ljudjach*, the protagonist Rachmetov represents a new breed with an iron will, ascetically pushing his body to its limits, while rejecting human affection (Cheng 2009, 17). Similarly, in *Literatura i revoljucija*, Lev Trockij (1923, 188) issued a grandiose prophecy of what lay ahead for man in the Soviet brave new world, envisioning a human species that would gain full control over its body. With persistence and dedication, he claimed, attaining control over automatic functions like breathing and digestion was well within reach. As such, Trockij paved the way for the cultural shift that Bulgakov would come to resist.

Bulgakov was deeply concerned about the Bolsheviks' revolutionary plans for the future.⁵ A case in point are the transformations found in his novellas: a bourgeois restaurant turned into a Soviet bureaucratic machinery in "D'javoliada," farm animals begetting monstrous beasts in "Rokovye jajca," and an adorable mongrel becoming a bloodthirsty party loyalist in "Sobač'e serdce." Far from everyone shared Bulgakov's reservations; writers like Gastev, Gladkov and Ostrovskij followed the Trotskyan vision of refiguring the human body, writing panegyrically about the mass-industrialization of life.

The New Man was not merely a utopian vision, but the expressed goal of Bolshevik ideologues. A fundamental problem, however, was the lack of clear ontological boundaries for the conception of this revolutionary species (Hellebust 2003, 59). Toby Clark sees "the

⁵ J.A.E. Curtis (2017, 46) gives an informative overview of Bulgakov's conservatism and patriotism, found e.g. in "Grjaduščie perspektivy," a newspaper opinion piece where he hailed the long, multigenerational struggle against Bolshevism. He also openly favored the whites, even when interrogated by OGPU, as reflected in the archived records.

recurring formula of the new man, that of the human-machine hybrid” from the twenties as a reductive understanding of human behavior, resulting in state-sanctioned veneration of industrial technology (1993, 36). These beliefs fostered notions of the body as a mechanism that could be manipulated at will, influencing Soviet medicine and the subfield of rejuvenation (*omoloženie*) – which Bulgakov explicitly deals with in “Sobač’*e* serdce” – where organs, sometimes from other animals, were grafted on to humans like defunct machine parts in order to create a more vital and thus productive Soviet citizen (Kremencov 2014). In this environment emerged a school of thought that sought to manipulate the body as one would a machine: biomechanics (*biomechanika*), first a theory of labor, and later a method used by actors in the theater, aiming in both cases to increase productivity and efficiency.

2. Biomechanics

The cultural reaction to the creation of the industrial body was therefore driven by the sciences. As Irina Sirotkina (2014, 156) notes, the term “biomechanics” first found its way to Russia through the medical discourse of the day, using the application of mechanical laws in the study of body functions, advocated in early twentieth-century Russia by anatomist Pëtr Lesgraft. Biomechanics then reemerged as a theory of labor, influenced by the standardization and systematization of mass production and workflow in Fordism and Taylorism, scientific strategies for maximizing efficiency.

An influential ideologue of Soviet biomechanics was revolutionary poet and theorist Aleksej Gastej, founder and director of the Central Institute of Labor, who developed his own system of labor management (1966, 51, 257). Mechanical production was thought to foster not only a new man, but new art, conceived as a transformational form of labor. Gastej identified a synergy between the two, where art improved production and production set the standard for the creative practices of the future (Sirotkina 2011, 112).

Through the metallization of language, Gastej fashioned a literary universe in which workers were engulfed and ingested by the factory, reshaping them into a single mass-man of iron, a unitary “we” (Hellebust 2003, 50, 54). Gastej sought to ensure human instrumentality by chastising the body, eliminating chaotic, biological impulses seen as obstacles for a smooth and continuous workflow, tweaking the human organism as if it were a machine (Vaingurt 2013, 36–38). His ideal Soviet worker was to meld symbolically with the machine, a subject lost in the enthralling rush of metallic voices. In his theoretical essays, Gastej (1966), like Trockij, imagines the body achieving full self-awareness, seeing his sharp poetry as a form of action. It compresses language for full efficiency in a performance capable of dealing with what

Gastev saw as weak spots of Russian culture, such as disorder and wastefulness, wanting to replace these shortcomings with the more universally valid and streamlined identity of the machine (Vaingurt 2008, 210, 215, 224).⁶

Theater director Vsevolod Mejerchol'd, who rose to fame around the same time with his visionary productions, picked up on these trends.⁷ Mejerchol'd's stylized stage movements came to be known as biomechanics, signifying the deliberate manipulation of an actor's bodily gestures.⁸ Actors under his tutelage were instructed to operate their bodies mechanically, inculcating routines by repeating a set of *études* performed to piano music – setting the emotional tone and uniting body rhythms and melody with contrasting breaks and breathing. The actor would translate these sounds into specific movements, which became its own kind of kinesthetic language (Law and Gordon 1996, 102). A key tenet for the theater of biomechanics was therefore: “Первый принцип биомеханики: тело – машина, работающий – машинист.” In sum, we could generally say that for Descartes the body is a machine; for Černyševskij, humans are machines; for Gastev (and the Taylorists), the worker should work like a machine; while for Mejerchol'd, the actor should move like a machine. Biomechanics, when used to manage labor, was first and foremost a means to increase efficiency, generating more profit (Taylor) or leaving time for other pursuits (Ford). For Mejerchol'd, the goal was to rapidly and efficiently communicate thoughts and emotions to the crowd through a language of standardized movements, rhythms and sound. In his novellas, as we shall see, Bulgakov plays with several of these elements at once.

3. Bulgakov's literary feuds

Bulgakov's first notable interaction with Mejerchol'd happened when Bulgakov's three plays were refuted by the Theater Division (TEO) of the Commissariat of Education and Enlightenment, at the time headed by Mejerchol'd (Curtis 2017, 49); in his diaries, he admits they were flawed and unpolished. Later, in 1922, prior to the attempted publication of his novellas, Bulgakov attended one of Mejerchol'd's production of Crommelynck's “Velikolepnyj rogonosec,” and was not amused, as evidenced in his feuilleton “Stolica v bloknote” from the

⁶ In “Sorok sorokov,” Bulgakov (1995–2000, I, 235) touches on a similar, metallic trope in which the individual is tempered and hardened: “Тело мое стало худым и жилистым, сердце железным, глаза зоркими. Я – закален.”

⁷ Mejerchol'd had read Gastev, but he also had other sources for his own theatrical strain of biomechanics, cf. Vaingurt 2013, 61. For more on Gastev's poetry, see Johansson 1983.

⁸ Note that Mejerchol'd and Bulgakov were adversaries for years, partly on account of Bulgakov's feud with Majakovskij, one of Mejerchol'd's closest associates, over Majakovskij's constructivist and formalist experiments, which Bulgakov vehemently opposed (Wright 1978, 46–47).

same year: “– Это биомеханика, – пояснил мне приятель. Биомеханика!! Беспомощность этик синих биомехаников, в своё время учившихся произносить слащавые монологи, вне конкуренции” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 220). Marietta Ćudakova (1988, 198) bluntly labels his attack as overly conservative in its view of art. She reminds us that Bulgakov harbored great antipathy for the politicization of the theater in 1920 that Mejerchol’d helped usher in. This entire chapter of the feuilleton, “Biomehaniĉeskaja glava,” is devoted to what Bulgakov saw as Mejerchol’d’s appalling aesthetics, where Bulgakov acknowledges Mejerchol’d’s genius, but prefers he die and be sent promptly into the future: “[...] пускай, пожалуйста, Мейерхольд умрет и воскреснет в XXI веке” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 220).

And his attacks did not end there. Bulgakov went so far as to incorporate his distaste for Mejerchol’d’s biomechanics into his fictional works, as evidenced by this striking passage in “Rokovye jajca”:

Театр покойного Всеволода Мейерхольда, погибшего, как известно, в 1927 году при постановке пушкинского “Бориса Годунова,” когда обрушились трапеции с голыми боярами, выбросил движущуюся разных цветов электрическую вывеску, возвещавшую пьесу писателя Эрендорга “Курий дох” в постановке ученика Мейерхольда, заслуженного режиссера республики Кухтермана. (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 337)

Bulgakov’s aversion to biomechanical theater thus had Bulgakov staging Mejerchol’d’s death, making his wish come true, albeit with a sense of humor.⁹ Their feud aside, as we look closer at Bulgakov’s three novellas from this era, the proponents of biomechanics had a lasting impact on Bulgakov’s work. In what follows, I show how Bulgakov’s early work incorporated gestural theater and expressive soundscapes through the mechanization of life. I argue that the ubiquitous machinery in his novellas tells of a writer who incorporated the biomechanical method into his writing, perhaps subversively, but to the point where these elements also transcend mere parody, and veer closer to pastiche.

⁹ Bulgakov is referring to Mejerchol’d’s productions of Il’ja Ėrenburg’s literary works. Although the novella was set several years into the future, Mejerchol’d was still alive and well when “Rokovye jajca,” and hence this passage, was written. Like Gastev, Mejerchol’d would eventually fall into disfavor with the Soviet regime: both were purged during Stalin’s terror in the late thirties. But before that, Mejerchol’d would forgive and forget Bulgakov’s insolence; Il’ja Ėrenburg would not (Belozerskaja-Bulgakova 1979, 104).

4. The novellas

In order to demonstrate the full thrust of the mechanical transformations at work in these texts, I focus on the following processes: 1) flesh to metal and 2) metal to flesh, within the narrative itself and on the level of tropes. I discuss different forms of transformation interchangeably, while dealing with tropes and narrative separately.

In terms of tropes, “D’javoliada” takes place at the heart of the Soviet state machinery. This term should be seen as the conceptualization of a function, and not merely a metaphor, demonstrating how the concept of the machine has wide-ranging consequences, through Bulgakov’s literary lens, for how Soviet society perceived itself at the time. This bureaucracy was the legacy of an absurdly intricate tsarist state administration, widely known for its incomprehensible chancery language. To follow Vladimir Lenin’s definition, cited by Kornej Ćukovskij (1963, 138): chancery language, “это механическое повторение штампованных, застывших словесных формул.” This language epitomizes the stringency, long-winded tedium and mechanical character of state bureaucracy. Its motor is made up of human cogwheels spinning repetitively with one sole aim: *prinjat’ mery*.¹⁰ Whether or not taking these measures will have any real effect is quite beside the point to the bureaucratic machinery, as long as it preserves its ability to take ever new measures and ensure its institutional status as indispensable.¹¹ Bulgakov, in “D’javoliada,” aptly demonstrates how the system functions as a self-sufficient apparatus.

Bulgakov pointedly makes use of the expression in the three novellas, as in the following scene from “D’javoliada,” where chancery language has permeated every aspect of life in the state-run administration and has thus become an internalized, automatic part of every worker’s speech: Korotkov’s superior, Kal’soner, summons a guard to help him escape his bothersome underling: “– Товарищ! – заревел, как сирена, ничего не слушая, Кальсонер и, на ходу обернувшись к Пантелеймону, крикнул – Примите меры, чтобы меня не задерживали!” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 421). Kal’soner is compared to a siren – we will later return to the connection between sound and machinery – his voice hypnotically drawing Korotkov closer, but it also has a metallic, repelling effect: “Этот голос был совершенно похож на голос медного таза и отличался таким тембром, что у каждого, кто его слышал, при каждом

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt (2006, 289) touches on the same trope: “[T]he essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them.”

¹¹ Such measures are taken countless times also in “Rokovye jajca” for example when a loud-mouthed prophet appears in the midst of the chicken plague, pointing fingers at the commissars, or when some people revolt by breaking a few windows, whereupon local officials take measures and he is never seen again (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 339).

слове происходило вдоль позвоночника ощущение шершавой проволоки” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 416).

Kal’soner’s deafening voice оглушая Короткова кастрюльными звуками (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 417) is described in purely metallic terms, employing a copper pan and a rough metal wire: anatomically, it is as if the human vocal chords have been replaced by the hybrid combination of a vibrating voice (*golos*), analogous to metal strings, and the echoing sound of the copper pan, similar to percussion.¹² As Korotkov hunts him down in the office labyrinth, Kal’soner’s name is metonymically displaced: “– Хорошо, грохнул таз” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 429). In Korotkov’s first encounter with his recently instated boss, Kal’soner’s little green eyes issue sparks, while the reflection on his bald, egg-like head resembles электрические лампочки (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 236), giving him the appearance of a traffic light as he refuses to let Korotkov pass.

Similarly, in “Rokovye jajca,” Professor Persikov, who lives on a street jam-packed with “механических экипажей” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 309), appears as a machine-man of sorts: his head is like a “толчак”¹³ (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 305), his index finger morphs into a крючок (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 305) whenever he converses “скрипучим, тонким, квакающим голосом” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 305). The professor not only resembles, but behaves like a crushing pestle with his proclivity for flunking students. Speaking at once in the voice of a machine in need of lubrication and in that of a quacking duck, while displaying little or no human affection for his wife or co-workers, his distinctly human features become difficult to discern.

Even the creatures spawned in the professor’s laboratory are hard to distinguish from machines. The first giant snake to appear from the thicket hisses “как будто высочилось масло и пар из паровоза” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 359). When it finally shows itself to Rokk, before devouring his wife, it has the height of “электрический московский столб” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 360), leaping forth “как пружина” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 361). Later, when two police officers, armed with electric revolvers, arrive on their motorcycles to inspect the *sovchoz* premises, the electrical equipment in the greenhouse has merged with the snakes, slithering along the cables that power the enormous light bulbs: “На самом электрическом шаре висела совершенно черная, пятнистая змея в несколько аршин, голова ее качалась у шара, как

¹² In his retrospective feuilleton from 1922, “Kiev-gorod,” Bulgakov paints the same picture of the German soldiers in one of his many historical flashbacks to the struggles that had taken place in Kiev those past years: немцы, железные немцы в тазах на головах (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 299).

¹³ The word *tolkač* also means “pusher engine,” a railway locomotive assisting trains through steep terrain.

маятник” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 364). The snakes are intertwined with the electrical cables, as if charging their batteries for the battle to come, creating a gargantuan serpent-pendulum casting an eerie shadow, a clock mechanism counting down towards the end. And when Persikov is confronted with a picture in the newspaper of the snakes, the animal is described as a “страшный пожарный шланг” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 370).

The insufferable Alfred Bronskij – a news journalist who disseminates his articles through his “говорящая газета” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 322) – comes to see the professor a second time, “сложив руки щитком” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 333).¹⁴ During their meeting, the professor’s eyes repeatedly emit sparks in moments of metallic friction between the two (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 334–335), mirrored in Bronskij’s eyes shortly thereafter (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 335). The first time they meet, the young journalist, whose “глазки колесом прошли по всему кабинету” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 318) as they scan Persikov’s laboratory, filled with instruments for conducting his experiments.¹⁵

In “Sobač’e serdce,” Professor Filipp Filippovič is subject to Bulgakov’s numerous devices, as he “машинально запел сквозь зубы” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, III, 94), “и голос его, как командная труба, разносился во всему жилищу” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, III, 75). Like a scratchy record, or a music box, he is stuck in a loop, and waltzes around the apartment humming the same lines from Verdi’s *Aida* over and over: “С железной твердости произнёс” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, III, 99).

Šarik the dog spins around the professor’s apartment “как кубарь под кнутом” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, III, 55); his artificial, inner monologue in the first chapter is what Susanne Fusso (1989, 390) calls a “kind of ventriloquism,” highlighting the artificiality of his speech. Šarik’s mechanics is that of a toy or a puppet. As noted by other critics, the donor, a petty criminal from whom the dog Šarik receives his testicles (*semennye železy*) and pituitary gland (*gipofiz*), has an interesting name: Klim Grigor’jevič Čugunkin, a play on *čugunnyj*, “cast-iron.”¹⁶ His metallic name lends new meaning to the donated sex glands, given the close phonetic (though etymologically unrelated) semblance between the Russian *železo* (Bulgakov 1995–2000, Iron) and *železa* (gland). But far from being a Soviet New Man that the revolutionary masses could

¹⁴ *Ščitok* denotes both a machine “dashboard” and an “animal thorax.”

¹⁵ We find a similar reference in the secretary of the house committee: he assists the secret police in rooting out a spy who tries to bribe Persikov and is named Kolesov, “Mr. Wheel” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 329–30).

¹⁶ Cf. Hellebust 2003, 60; Burgin 1978, 500. On Burgin’s reading, the unyielding qualities of cast-iron—the criminal donor’s obstinate nature—precludes any possibility of a successful transformation: “Here is one base metal which apparently even the most talented alchemist cannot turn into gold.”

proudly emulate, the donor Čugunkin, and the heir of his organs, Šarikov, are anything but impressive creations.

Instead of turning into hard-working and rational men of steel laboring for the fatherland, as Gastev's biomechanical utopia would propose, we are presented with a pair of degenerated, selfish brutes, led by animalistic instincts of dogged drunkenness, aggressive sexuality and violent encounters with anyone who stands in their way. The patience of the professor and his assistant, Bormental', eventually runs thin. In a final confrontation between the scientists and their unruly creation – where the eyes of Bormental' “напоминали два черных дула” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, III, 127), like guns pointed directly at Šarikov – the scientists end up reversing the medical procedure, relieving the dog of his human parts.¹⁷ Šarik the dog is tweaked like a mechanical device, where broken parts can be changed at will.¹⁸

Professor Preobraženskij seems prone to regard the body in such a fashion. This would explain his perplexity when Šarikov rebukes him for having performed an operation that Šarik the dog never asked for in the first place: “Как-с, — прищуриваясь, спросил он, — вы изволите быть недовольным, что вас превратили в человека?” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, III, 97). In the end, the scientists have created a machine they are unable to control, a being with a will of its own and the iron force to back it up.

5. Literary personae as machines

Mechanization in “D'javoliada” is chiefly actualized by tropes, rarely materializing on the narrative level; it reads as a mixture of a dream logic and chancery language. But as Korotkov – now out of breath, “рычащий, как кузнечный мех” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 445) – delves deeper into the maze-like building in search of his boss, the typewriters start to undergo a form of prosopopoeia: “Лишь машинка безмолвно улыбалась белыми зубами на столе” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 435).

They smile secretively in anticipation of the chaos that is about to ensue, as thirty typewriters play a foxtrot with their tinkling bells, spurring the typists to dance the can-can with swaying hips. Immediately thereafter, animal and machine are welded together: “Белые змеи бумаги

¹⁷ This motif of the gun barrels may perhaps be traced to Zamjatin (1989, 211) and his quirky novella from 1923, “Rasskaz o samom glavnom,” featuring a man named Dorda: “Вскакивает, весь заряженный, револьверный, пули из глаз[.]”

¹⁸ Julia Vaingurt (2013, 35) identifies a similar poetics of changeable parts in her reading of Dziga Vertov's film montage, “Kino-glaz” (1924): “In such a montage, the “perfect man” is an assemblage of perfect parts harvested from various bodies. It stands to reason that the remains of these donor bodies are discarded, like defunct machines cannibalized for useful parts. Thus perfection by means of technology entails that man should regard violence done to his body merely as a kind of industrial reassembly.”

полезли в пасти машин, стали свиваться, раскраиваться, сшиваться” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 441). Just like the iron maw of the elevator, ready to devour its passengers (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 423), the typing machines come to life, adopting an animal morphology, where even the paper slithers in and out in the shape of a serpent.

Bulgakov takes his mechanizing devices to a new level in “Rokovye jajca,” epitomized by a mysterious character with a robotic prosthesis, a man who lurks in the background throughout the entire story, his body half-human, half-machine, and whose presence is betrayed by loud machine sounds:

[П]ослышалось за дверью странное мерное скрипение машины, кованое постукивание в пол, и в кабинете появился необычайной толщины человек[.] Левая его, механическая, нога щелкала и громыкала, а в руках он держал портфель. (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 320) [...] Тихое механическое скрипение послышалось за спиной Персикова, и кто-то потянул его за рукав. Обернувшись, он увидел желтое круглое лицо владельца механической ноги. (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 322) [...] И механический толстяк скрипел и ковылял, показываясь то здесь, то там. (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 368)

This mechanical leg can also be found in one of Preobraženskij’s well-connected patients in “Sobač’е serdce” receiving special rejuvenation treatment, a man who cannot bend his left leg, dragging it along “как у детского щелкуна” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, III, 58). There is something degenerate about this recurring man-machine in both novellas. The obese machine man in “Rokovye jajca” remains unnervingly human, his eyes wet with tears and his lips trembling as he finds out that Persikov granted Bronskij an interview, and not him.

We are in other words far away from Gastev’s (and some futurists’) panegyric descriptions of the machine body that would free man from his mortal chains and elevate him to a new life, marked by machine-like rationality, bodily strength and an unwavering faith in the future. The creaking that accompanies the man’s steps is controlled and measured, like that of a well-oiled machine. Bulgakov paints a terrifying tableau; the metal man working behind the scenes foreshadow the coming ecological disaster, as his noisy machine body thumps and rattles ominously on the path to catastrophe.

The attempt to improve Šarik the dog by changing a few machine parts, reassembling him into Šarikov the dog-man, is performed with all the tools from the professor’s chamber of horrors. The helpless dog is left with a ring around his muzzle, completing the

transmogrification from dog to a mechanically altered weredog. The result is an uncanny zoo-mechanical human, a far cry from the glorious New Man to be assembled by only the finest machine parts. The poor creature automatically regurgitates certain phrases: first a mixed-up form of Glavryba, “Abyr-valg,” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, III, 87), followed by all kinds of swear words he picked up on the street. In his medical journal of the events, Doctor Bormental’ compares Šarikov’s behavior to a phonograph: “Ругань эта методическая, непрерывная и, по-видимому, совершенно бессмысленная. Она носит несколько фонографический характер” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, III, 90). In the end, Šarikov has been turned into a killing machine bent on eradicating every last cat in the city. Suggestive of Iosif Džugašvili’s transformation – taking for himself the revolutionary pseudonym Stalin, the man of steel, in 1912 – Šarikov adopts the name Poligraf Poligrafovič, inspired by a Soviet calendar of technology, indicative of *poligrafija*, the industrial production of printed materials. Eric Laursen (2013, 43) points out how Šarikov, in his vindictive scheme to undo his creator, makes use of the printed press in order to spread damaging rumors about Professor Preobraženskij and smear his name.

As a prolepsis to this ensuing defamation, right after the operation, gossip circulates in the press about what might in fact be going on in the apartment after the professor has fallen ill, leaving his assistant, phono- and photographically recording the events (Bulgakov 1995–2000, III, 88, 93), to tend to the clinic while the professor is indisposed. The newspaper gossip becomes a prolepsis to the advent of the printed press-man, Poligraf Poligrafovič, with his penchant for spreading vicious rumors in the ideologically biased Soviet papers. In this way, Šarikov bears resemblance to the fat mechanical journalist in “Rokovye jajca,” intimately connected to the noisy printing press working at full speed to cover the latest news of the monstrous invasion. One newspaper reports that the professor has delivered, or perhaps even fathered, an unnatural infant who plays the violin (Bulgakov 1995–2000, III, 89). These derisory pieces of news subtly hint at the rise of the mechanical man-dog, preprogrammed in the life of his forefather, Čugunkin, to play the steel strings of the balalaika. That Bulgakov chooses to focus on sound in both instances, is no coincidence.

6. Mechanical soundscapes

Throughout Bulgakov’s authorship we find numerous references to classical music, jazz standards, popular music, and Russian folk tunes. His literary attunement to sound is especially salient in view of the abovementioned mechanical devices. As demonstrated, the Bulgakovian strain of biomechanics is distinctive in its tendency towards sonority and expressive noises, that

is, its emphasis on the sonic aspects of the bureaucratic machinery and creatures of metal. As soon as the presence of metal or machines is established in his stories, a polyphony of voices ensues: rhythmic, metallic pounding, howling sirens, and the rumbling roars of motor engines.

The automatic organ in “D’javoliada,” left behind from the days when the office space had been used as a restaurant, suddenly begins to sound out the tones of a Russian folk song about Napoleon’s siege. The organ floods the chancery halls “тысячеголовым, лвиным ревом и звоном” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 432), its status as lifeless automaton bordering on that of an animal. Rokk, Persikov’s sworn rival in “Rokovye jajca,” was formerly a professional flutist in the ensemble of a certain Maestro Petuchov (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 354), and plays small snippets from Čajkovskij’s operas with his metal instrument in a futile attempt to tame the snake, its eyes burning with hatred for the music (Bulgakov 1995–2000, II, 360). The serpent *mechanimal* is fundamentally hostile to the human sentimentality expressed in the opera; like Šarikov’s animosity towards cats, the snake’s principle impulse is to eradicate anything human. Šarikov in “Sobač’e serdce” whistles the Ukrainian folk song “Èch, jabločka” during his recovery after the initial operation. The song is a vestige from his donor, the criminal Čugunkin, known for having played the steel strings of his balalaika in the filthiest bars around town.

In “D’javoliada,” an ensemble with no conductor performs, as it were, a literary concert made up by a metallic cacophony of frantic voices and typists busy at work in the MACENTSUPMATMAT offices:

В третьем царил дробный непрерывный грохот и звоночки – там за шестью машинами писали и смеялись шесть светлых, мелкозубых женщин[.] Невыносимый треск машин стоял в воздухе, и виднелась масса голов, – женских и мужских[.] (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 423)

The sound of the typewriters and the secretaries laughing provides a clue to the dehumanization about to commence; their voices and laughter and the bells of the typewriters coalesce into a single mechanical din, reminiscent of Gastev’s unitary mass man. Among the countless office workers in the story, we find Genrietta Potapovna, тихо мурлыча песенку (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 433), a woman with the telling last name of Persimfans. Short for *Pervyj simfoničeskij ansambl’*, Persimfans was a Moscow-based symphonic orchestra founded in 1922, its most prominent feature being its deliberate lack of a conductor.

As the story progresses, this torrent of sound is only amplified. If we are to think about the allusion to the Persimfans orchestra productively, how then does the absence of a conductor

affect the musical whole, dependent on a firm hand, clutching the baton? Elena Loghinovski (1993, 283) contends that what dominates on the extra-diegetic level of “D’javoliada” is the safe and conventional voice of the omniscient narrator. We could dub this authorial, all-knowing narrative voice as the literary conductor, seeing the omniscient narrator as the person in possession of the full score, and like the conductor, the one in charge of its interpretation.

Loghinovski notes how the voice of the all-knowing narrator is present in the introductory lines: “Но, увы, вышло совсем не так...” However, her claim that the voice of the omniscient narrator persists throughout the text is, in my view, a truth with notable modifications. As we delve further into the novella, the coherent narrative voice quickly begins to fade out. The separate voices of the orchestra novella lose sight of the conductor, generating discord and chaos. Towards the end, the sheer power of these brassy auditory formations dominates to the point where the noise drowns out the witty commentary of the once so prominent narrative voice. Not only do we find extremely diverse verbs of speaking, as Proffer (Bulgakov 2012, xiv) points out, everything around comes alive and contributes to a sort of auditory spectacle.

Перекатывающийся стук покрыл лестницу, и в ответ ему, как оглушительная зингеровская швейка, завыл и затряс все здание пулемет. [...] – Сдавайся! – завыло спереди, сзади и сверху, и все покрыл невыносимый оглушающий кастрюльный бас. – Конечно, – слабо прокричал Коротков, – конечно. Бой проигран. Та-та-та! – запел он губами трубный отбой. (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 447)

We should note how the human voices are intermingled with the mechanic vibrations from the machine gun, whose automated nature is further exaggerated by being compared to a sewing machine. The dehumanization of voices detected in the office workers in the beginning is now complete. Omnipresent commotion “спереди, сзади и сверху” has replaced the omniscient narrator and veritably pushes Korotkov off the parapet in a wave of sound.¹⁹

7. Conclusion

Through highly stylized gestures, Korotkov uses his body like a theatrical machine, the type of transformative action advocated by Bulgakov’s contemporary proponents of biomechanics.

¹⁹ Korotkov sounding a “трубный отбой” (Bulgakov 1995–2000, I, 447), phonetically evocative of the Russian adjective for denoting a corpse (*trupnyj*), further suggests his imminent death. His lips, now a brass instrument, issue a military fanfare, ironically lamenting his cruel fate. The rooftop in this scene is incidentally the same as the one in “Sorok sorokov.”

Gastev's utopian hopes for the biomechanical man involved writing a sharp, compact and dynamic literature of action. Meanwhile, Mejerchol'd brought the notion of biomechanics into the realm of theater, training his actors to treat their bodies like machines, often to music. Julie Curtis (2017, 61) underscores Bulgakov's "actor-like capacity to simulate a whole range of voices." In the novellas, biomechanics takes the leap from a science of labor and style of theater to vibrant prose, with the distinction that Bulgakov hardly attains any measure of efficiency, but rather reassembles key elements of biomechanics into a chaotic literary cacophony.

Bulgakov's affinity for the stage here comes to its right,²⁰ as well as his passion for music and sounds: the journalist Bronskij utilizes his hands like flaps to form an instrument to amplify his voice; Korotkov plays a trumpet fanfare with his bare lips, and the members of the housing committee in Professor Preobraženskij's building sing, like Gastev's mass-man, "хором ответили все четверо" (Bulgakov 1995–2000, III, 65). As such, Mejerchol'd's gestural theater of exaggerated pantomime biomechanics is not only present in Bulgakov's fictional universe, but gets further developed within a literary framework of both parody and pastiche, combining elements from Gastev's theory and poetry with Mejerchol'd's musical *études* and expressive theater. What bridges these diverging conceptions of biomechanics is Bulgakov's ingenious use of sonic devices to portray these would-be machine men and their gestural mechanics, occupying an ambiguous zone in-between human and machine, both laughable and ingenious.

Bulgakov's negative assessment of the transformative, hybridizing and transhumanist ethos of the Soviet nineteen-twenties suggests that he initially turned to machine motifs in an effort to ridicule biomechanics and satirize his contemporaries. But if we allow ourselves to look past his anthropocentrism, the multitude of non-human devices in his work can be read in a more positive light, not solely fueled by Bulgakov's various feuds, but shaped also through the many reverberations of a biomechanical aesthetics that still reverberates in his work. In that way, the novellas can take their place as works of art in their own right, and not just as a means to settle an old score.

Bulgakov's imaginative machine assemblages exhibit a myriad of hybrid formations taking center stage, destabilizing the ontological categories of man and machine. The interplay of technics and living creatures in the three novellas is found both on the tropological and narrative levels, played out in figurative language and through specific characters and objects. There is also a tendency toward degeneration in the Bulgakovian mechanical creature – a warning of where things might end up if humankind fails to check its urge for perpetual mechanization – found in the form

²⁰ Curtis (2017, 35, 68, 71) sees this theatricality and dramatic quality as a general trend in his prose, especially prominent when we compare "Dni Turbinych" and *Belaja gvardija*.

of the pendulum-shaped, the steel spring anaconda, the obese man with a prosthetic leg or Šarikov who phonographically regurgitates dirty street slang.

The wide array of literary creatures in constant metamorphosis turn out to be among Bulgakov's most noteworthy and interesting achievements from his early years, even if these biomechanical New Men were once conceived to function subversively. As this reading shows, Gastev and Mejerchol'd's mechanistic ideas about the body echo throughout Bulgakov's novellas with unabated potency, with characters tending to utilize themselves as mechanical contraptions, rendering their bodies as instruments. This mechanized instrumentality is closely connected to sounds and music. Metal tropes or concrete pieces of machinery, interspersed with brassy rhythms and piercing noises, at times flood out the authorial narrative voice. Meanwhile, diverse verbs of speaking – exemplified in the automatic repetitions of machines – function as dehumanizing auditory devices, or vice versa, as a manner of endowing machines with the semblance of life.

Bulgakov repeatedly employed these devices in his early works so artfully that the literary output, at times bordering on pastiche, undermined his position in ongoing feuds. In portraying these machines, the novellas performed their task of ridiculing people like Gastev and Mejerchol'd so well that what Bulgakov was subverting and even perverting, turns out to be among his most valuable and interesting creations. Bulgakov is hence deeply indebted to none other than the biomechanical engineers of the 1920s.

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