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Research article

Recombinant Agency. *Divine Comedy* Meets Upcycled Comics Art in *Pink Mouse*, a Meta-Mediaopera

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Abstract

A prose poem adapted to the ›mediaopera‹ format as interpreted by participant spectating – this paper reflects on metric composition in generative fields of practice across varied technological modalities. It seeks to characterise workings of ›agency‹, conceived in both embodied-human and disembodied-machinic terms. *Pink Mouse* (2017) has been translated by composer Iraida Yusupova into a pictorializing aural-optical digital idiom. The resulting artwork can be read as meta-mediaopera in that it affords opportunity to explore form-theoretical features of the genre it instantiates. Besides being an object lesson in how to interpret virtual artwork, this interpretative exercise also addresses a more general challenge of pressing urgency in the post-pandemic era, namely how to extract sensual order from the virtual noise of online communications. The metrics in play in this case study encompass lyrical, graphical, and social articulation, i.e. cadences seemingly inflected by intentionality. Except metric inflection no longer vouches for subjective cogency. Now that reflexivity has taken an instrumental turn, we essentialize agency as an expression of purposiveness, be it immaterial or material, at our peril. This paper attempts to decipher agency by recourse to an objective ground of material practices rooted in constructive semiosis – here dubbed ›recombinant agency.‹ This concept takes agency to be emergent patterning made up of myriad vectors of functionality, merged in tool-use, bound by inculcated social context. Factored together, these parts yield a whole in the moving target of felt lucidity. Yusupova's mediaopera holds agency to be irreducibly *human*. She upholds an analogue sense of cultural reproduction within the extant, digital logics of cultural annexation. Yet, a participant spectator, viewing *Pink Mouse* online, might well reckon that the piece strikes a more speculative chord, perhaps inadvertently, that preferably can enlist users, facing inexorable automation, in the service of creative autonomy.

Keywords: Mediaopera; Recombinant Agency; Digital Imaginary; Participant Spectator; Semiotic Surround; Socio-Kinetics; Kayfabe

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Научная статья

Рекомбинантная агентность. “Божественная комедия” встречает переработанное искусство комиксов в “Розовой мышь”, мета-медиаопере

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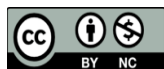
Аннотация

Прозаическая поэма, адаптированная к формату медиаоперы, интерпретируемая участвующим наблюдателем, – статья представляет размышления о метрической композиции в генеративных областях практики в различных технологических модальностях. Она стремится охарактеризовать проявления агентности как в воплощенно-человеческих, так и в бестелесно-машинных терминах. Роман “Розовая мышь” (2017) был переведен композитором Ираидой Юсуповой в изобразительную аудиально-оптическую цифровую идиому. Полученное произведение искусства можно читать как мета-медиаоперу, поскольку оно дает возможность исследовать формо-теоретические особенности жанра, который оно представляет. Помимо того, что это наглядный урок интерпретации виртуального произведения искусства, это интерпретационное упражнение также решает более общую неотложную задачу в эпоху после пандемии, а именно, как извлечь чувственный порядок из виртуального шума онлайн-коммуникаций. Метрики, используемые в данном случае, охватывают лирическую, графическую и социальную артикуляцию, т. е. каденции, по-видимому, сознательно измененные. За исключением того, что метрическая интонация больше не гарантирует субъективную убедительность. Теперь, когда рефлексивность приобрела инструментальный характер, мы на свой страх и риск придаем значение агентности как выражению целеустремленности. В этой статье делается попытка расшифровать агентность, обращаясь к объективной основе материальных практик, укорененных в конструктивном семиозисе – здесь названном “рекомбинантным агентством”. Согласно этой концепции, свобода воли – это возникающий паттерн, состоящий из множества функциональных направлений, объединенных в использовании инструментов и связанных с внедренным социальным контекстом. Собранные вместе, эти части дают единое целое в движущейся цели осознанной ясности. Медиаопера Юсуповой считает агентность нередуцируемо человеческой. Она поддерживает аналоговое чувство культурного воспроизводства в рамках существующей цифровой логики культурной аннексии. Однако зритель, просматривающий “Розовую мышь” онлайн, вполне может подумать, что произведение затрагивает скорее спекулятивную струну, возможно, непреднамеренно, что, скорее всего, может побудить пользователей, сталкивающихся с неумолимой автоматизацией, служить творческой автономии.

Ключевые слова: Медиаопера; Рекомбинантная агентность; Цифровое воображение; Зритель-участник; Семиотическое окружение; Социокинетика; Кейфеб

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INTRODUCTION

Opera is *meta* by definition. Arguably the most integral artform, it insinuates world in all registers. If heads of state assume power over an opera-house, they do not just seek a stage for the razzle-dazzle of self-promotion that surrounds them in gold-plated opulence. The stage touts political clout. Its extravaganzas trade on high drama – and rouse powerful emotions by way of scripted human dilemmas and predictable destinies. The spectacle on view in an opera house flaunts the supremacy of artifice over authenticity. In the following discussion, not the personal but the aesthetic is political. When audiences protest the political affiliations of star sopranos, this illuminates with blunt clarity a long coming and now established socio-technical condition. Human/machine coordination pulls the strings of automatic operations that, under the outsize influence of digital systems of mass distraction (Galloway, 2022), are steadily colonizing ever greater shares of the legacy mindscape.

The mediaopera *Pink Mouse*, by Russian composer Iraidia Yusupova based on Victor Erofeev's prose poem of the same name, is a tragicomedy in which a doomed party of Russian passengers, travelling on a luxury yacht, capsizes at high sea. It plays in post-soviet Russia and premiered in Germany in 2024 (fig. 1).¹ This liminal object – part and parcel of the digital world it instantiates – preserves a moment of inflection at which the culture of reference seems to be drowning in a semiotic deluge of its own creation. *Pink Mouse* reads like an exuberant meta-reflexion on this incumbent, alien subjectivity extracted from the online activity of the very users it is engulfing. A study in irony, right for the times. The virtual coliseum of online traffic – the mediaopera's habitat – prefers a mode of participant witnessing that is double-edged. It draws on rhetorical strategies from pro-wrestling and opera, mediated or otherwise, embracing fraudulent veracity. »No opera plot can be sensible, for in sensible situations people do not sing« (Auden, 1967/2020, p. 1037). In pro-wrestling a similar phenomenon has been dubbed »kayfabe« – the mentality of a crowd, which colludes in treating a match, whose outcome is fixed in advance, as a display of knuckle-biting suspense, not the swindle everyone knows it to be (von Xylander, 2021). These orgies of falsehood flaunt their showmanship and favour irrational affiliation. Socrates might have concluded that a life Second-Lifed² is not worth living.

¹ Spoiler alert: This essay may sway your impression of the mediaopera. Readers who would first like to form their own opinion – or wish to look up scenes discussed in the following pages – will find a link to the piece here (with English captions): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwnTUqvkv_Q – The premiere of *Pink Mouse* took place in Lüneburg, Lower Saxony, not in a conventional opera setting but in a university lecture hall decked out with high-tech audio-visual equipment, which seemed more befitting a mediaopera. Attendance was open to the public and free of charge.

² »Second Life« is a metaverse comprised of virtual worlds built by users/players who interact with each other via surrogate avatars. At the height of its popularity in 2007, it had 1,7 million users who had built *ad hoc* continents that replicated the existing world map, in part, but also appended fantasy lands that covered a territory many times the surface of the earth. This reality gameplay introduced its own currency system and sparked off a veritable political economy (Köver, 2007).

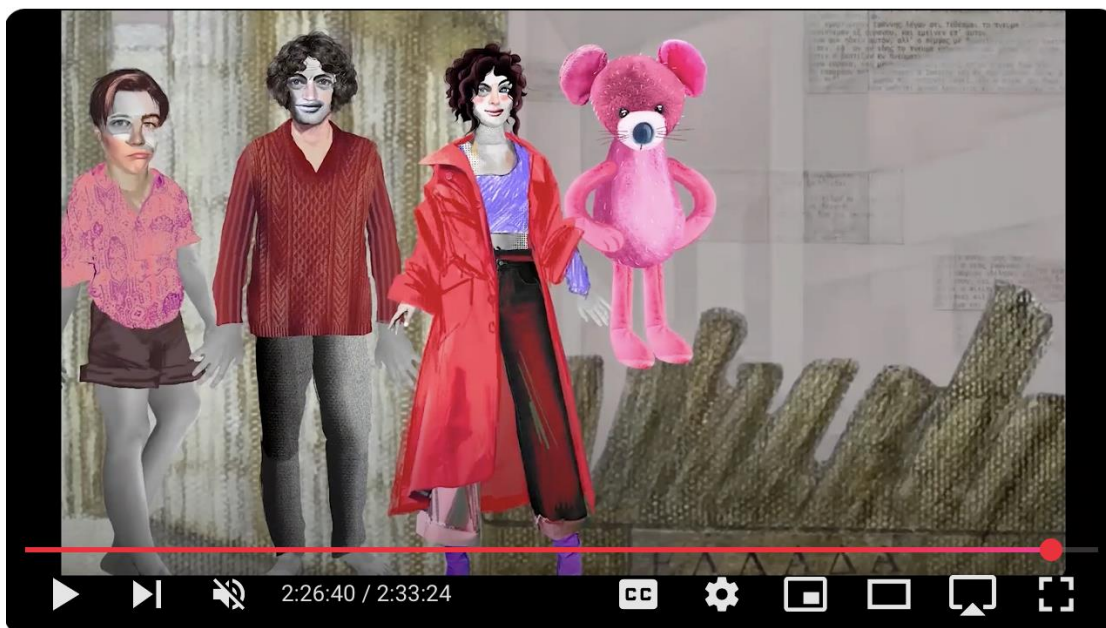


Figure 1. A tragicomic cast of character at 2 hours, 26 minutes, and 40 seconds of the *Pink Mouse* mediaopera, used with permission by the composer. © Iraida Yusupova

The medial multifarity and suasion of operatic art is ubiquitously acknowledged (Kotnik, 2013). »I have always believed that opera is a planet where the muses work together, join hands and celebrate all the arts,« to quote Franco Zeffirelli, famed Italian film and opera director, a cultural populist whom by the composer and fellow director Pierre Boulez already detested long before Zeffirelli finally became an active member of Berlusconi's centre right *Forza Italia* party (Boulez, 1967). This holds in spades for mediaopera, a made-for-the-internet entertainment format. When Roland Barthes declared authorship »dead« in 1967 (Barthes, 1968), the verdict applied to composers too (Wuggenig, 2004). An act of composing doesn't grant final interpretative authority to the originator or preclude subsequent interpretative appropriation. The authors contributing to the discussion of *Pink Mouse* in this and the subsequent issue of *Technology and Language* apply vastly differing frames of reference. But they approached the enigmatic, 188-minute long feature in the same manner, namely by replay. Their criss-crossing skips and jumps effectively reconstitute *Pink Mouse* as a meta-mediaopera instantiated in so many compositional co-creations. These human/machine interactions enact what I propose to call ›recombinant agency,‹ a concept spelled out in reading the digital artwork at hand. It remains to be seen to what extent, if at all, such interpretative activity may prove to be self-actualizing.

DIVINE COMEDY AND MEDIA REVENANTS

Erofeev's *Pink Mouse* (*Rozovaia Mysh'*) mixes high and low cultural icons interweaving a cosmos of Russian cultural allusions with *Alice in Wonderland* motifs, borrowings from mass culture, and references to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The melange



of registers picks up on an aesthetic idiom advanced by the French/Russian filmmaker Roger Vadim (1928-2000) from the 1950s, in Erofeev's youth. Vadim forged a type of cinematic story-telling that grafted titillating visuals and suggestive plot-lines on scenarios from classical literature, painting and sculpture. His modern adaptations of Emile Zola's novel *La Curée* (1871), Arthur Schnitzler's play *Der Reigen* (1920), Choderlos de Laclos's *Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) challenged established cultural boundaries between pornography and art and helped usher in a new era of permissive sexuality that came with the invention of the birth control pill. *Don Juan, or If Don Juan were a Woman?* (1973) runs through the role-reversal of wickedness. *La Vice et le Virtue* (1963), a film set in World War II, explores the polarity of annihilation and eros through *Justine* by the Marquis de Sade.

Vadim was the son of a French mother and Russian prince who escaped to France after the Russian revolution. His life and work encapsulates a cosmopolitan milieu that overlapped with Victor Erofeev's upbringing. The author of *Pink Mouse* spent some of his childhood in Paris; his father, a high-ranking Soviet diplomat, was the French interpreter of Stalin and Molotov. Men of Erofeev's generation grew up on the female heroines that Vadim canonized – Brigitte Bardot, Catherine Deneuve, Jane Fonda – a new edition of the femme fatale (Kennedy, 2012). Engaged to all three, Vadim married two of these film stars (Vadim, 1986). Vadim's iconic image of womanhood casts the female seductress as servile domina whose ability to anticipate, incite, and thwart male desire, seemingly at will, rests on a dirty little secret that complicates these power relations. Women are groomed to please the men whose strings they pull. In this libidinal protocol, seductive tactics employed to tame feral manhood are stipulated by the men themselves. Numerous versions of this mating game ruled for approximately three decades, from the early 1950s to the late 1970s, when second-wave feminism dismantled the libertine fantasy.³

Erofeev's *Pink Mouse* (fig. 2) appeared in 2017. It is one of few texts by this Russian dissident author not yet available in translation though plans for a German edition are underway. The delay may be related to the heightened metric and literary challenge of rendering poetic prose in a foreign tongue. In any event, a different kind of translation was effected, when the Tatar-Russian avantgarde composer Iraida Yusupova created a mediaopera adaptation of the prose poem in 2017.⁴ Her visual score features a twofold protagonist that consists of the main character, a young Russian girl named Maroussia Mendelejeva, and her *alter ego*, Pink Mouse, guardian friend or self-soothing illusion she projects on a hostile world. This literary device – a fictive character inhabiting the

³ One of the leading voices of the movement was Simone de Beauvoir whose analysis had been trained on the films of Vadim and how they depicted male desire in the construct of the feminine as personified by Bardot (de Beauvoir, 1959/1961; 1949/1972; Evans, 2013).

⁴ On the occasion of the work's premiere, March 21, 2023, Yusupova's *Pink Mouse* libretto was translated into English by Anna Rush with the generous assistance of the Leuphana University Lüneburg. The premiere was followed by an international, philosophical and theoretical workshop on the very conception of mediaopera with the following invited speakers from different institutional contexts: Alfred Nordmann (Technical University Darmstadt), Steve Fuller (Warwick University), Evgeniya Lianskaya-Lininger (Sirene Operntheater, Wien), Anthony Sellors (BBC Radio 3, London), William Mival (Royal College of Music, London), Victor Erofeev (Leuphana University Lüneburg), Ulf Wuggenig (Leuphana University Lüneburg), Cheryce von Xyländer (Leuphana University Lüneburg), Iraida Yusupova (via Zoom).



poem's fictional cosmos – troubles such familiar psychological conceits as personal identity and self-continuity. In the tale's pictorial scoring, Maroussia and Pink Mouse will appear as two and as one, in league with other shape-shifting figurations in-between the poetic libretto and its pictorial translation. The who-is-who of this mediaopera dissolves into an indexical conundrum open to construal.



Figure 2. Book cover of Victor Erofeev's *Pink Mouse* (2017)

Pink Mouse was not Yusupova's first mediaopera, nor has it been her last. It is, however, the first mediaopera that she composed ›on her own‹, as it were. The notion of *solitary* credit is flexible, a socio-cultural construction that varies, considerably, from one artistic field to another, depending on the preponderance of »charismatic ideology« (Pierre Bourdieu) versus the belief that art production is a type of collective action (Becker, 1974). In film, supporting roles appear in long credit lines at the end of the work. In the traditional fine arts as well as in contemporary Western visual art, by contrast, all credit obtains to the conceiving artist while any craftspeople involved or persons in the cooperative network (frequently hired in executing an idea) remain forever unmentioned. One glance at an opera brochure will confirm that opera more closely tracks the rules of film than those of visual art: director and conductor are mentioned as well as singers, orchestra, stage design, costume design, dancers, and special effects. Yusupova credits numerous associates at the end of *Pink Mouse*. But artistically, *Pink Mouse* demanded a new artistic autonomy in that she worked out the visual and musical scoring of *Pink Mouse* by herself. Her husband and longtime project partner, cameraman Alexander



Dolgin, had died during their work on a prior mediaopera, *The Planet of Pi*, leaving her to go solo.

Pink Mouse can be taken as a work of mourning. In reinventing herself as a one-woman, musical-pictorial composer of this poetical phantasmagoria, she plotted out an experience of bereavement. The resulting piece can be understood as a quasi-collaborative artistic dialogue with the deceased. Her animation sequences use stock visual material from Dolgin's archive, which gives her former companion a preternatural, graphic life-after-death. Joint artistic agency, coalescing around the libretto in consonance with Erofeev's storyline, and perpetuated by way of technological mediation. Yusupova (2025) describes the exchange of husband and wife in mystical terms. Felt complicity, reified in works of art, speak to the workings of agency. Humanity can be understood as a mirage that arises from transactional practices involving exchange, tool-use, and negotiated purposiveness. The revenant quality of the making of this mediaopera might also be cast as an instance of a cultural epiphenomena rooted in today's computational infrastructure, an instance of digital sampling, cultural upcycling and archival reassembly – practices that have roused new notions of afterlife. While such spiritual experiences hearken back to ancestral religious beliefs, they also further a pictorial lifeworld predicated on materialist imperatives, i.e. microchip-driven infrastructures relying on the commodification of agency.

Alice in Wonderland, or the Male Gaze Revisited

Alice in Wonderland and its Russian derivative *Pink Mouse* are children's tales for adults, brim full of philosophical import. Both have been remade as operas, by female composers – and both lend themselves to critical gender analysis. The South Korean composer Unsuk Chin (2007), one of the favourite pupils of György Ligeti, premiered her *Alice in Wonderland* at the Munich Opera House in 2007. Chin portrays the *Alice* story (accessible, online, in full length) in a mesmerizing estrangement that approaches the subject as a thought experiment, an idea she borrows from that paean to computational creativity, Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach*. Chin's libretto highlights philosophical nuances of the popular children's book, rather than its storyline or dialogical elements; her scoring, musical and visual, situates the tale in a dreamworld. The singers are outfitted to resemble puppets. Alice moves in the staccato cadence of marionettes. This enchanting girl-doll recalls the storied inner child in us all. On a darker note, her Alice-doll also conjures up the spectre of paedophilia: A gnarly old man who may or may not be a stand-in for the author haunts the theatrical production. His physiognomy spells perversion: He wears a mask showing a nose that looks like a semi-tumescent penis, erect enough to suggest a lack of impulse control, limp enough to give the impression of a man past his prime, age and ardour out of step (fig. 3). This artistic exploration neither condones nor condemns the intimation of an everyday paedophilia, which pervades our cultural order. Her *mise-en-scène* implies that the conditions of possibility within which the *Alice* tale endures may be archaic, archetypal and universal. The mirror her opera holds to the audience reflects covert, even anathema, cultural dynamics.



Figure 3. Masked figure in Unsuk Chin's (2007) *Alice in Wonderland*

Both composers, Chin and Yusupova, shift the sexual politics of their operas away from the original novels. Chin's piece is not a mediaopera in Yusupova's understanding of the genre. She did not compose her piece for a virtual online audience or re-invent the opera house as an institution without physical walls and fewer social barriers or challenge extant conventions governing the analogue/digital divide or use upcycled comics art and celebrity culture in a cyber-mix containing real world elements – all of which occurs in *Pink Mouse*. Whether or not Yusupova saw Chin's work before embarking on her own musical-graphical interpretation, their pieces bring a similar, gender-critical spin to stories about young girls told by men. When we meet Maroussia in *Pink Mouse*, she has just started puberty. She witnesses relational dynamics between her parents and adults in general. Older women are unfaithful (see her mother and the queen of the underworld). Older men seek to steal her virginity at a house party by a beach and later in the under-sea world (see the guitarist Thum-Strum as well as the older prince of the underworld Johnny Depp). She clings to Pink Mouse, her imaginary companion, as to a stuffed animal, her secret weapon against lecherous stratagems. The guitarist will have his way with her in the course of events, though we are not privy to any rape scenes or presented any details. There is no recorded trauma. Meanwhile, Maroussia joins forces with her cousin, Runt, who is her sidekick throughout the tale of sexual misadventures that have or have not occurred. As spectators, we are never quite sure. Events unfold in a twilight zone of impossible simultaneity: the girl seems dead but also very much alive; she dwells in the real world but also in a fantasy sphere; her home is Russia but she also inhabits an Americanized subcontinent situated on the bottom of the ocean, the »Bottom«.



Yusupova's mediaopera shuns ontological constancy. Her visual score oscillates between footage of real performers, landscape, film and photography, graphic illustrations, cartoon figures, collage-stills, and in-video image macros of the captioned libretto. In this semiotic universe, signifier and signified appear as doubles – the same lines of narration are elaborated in real and pictorial allusion, simultaneously, in counterpoint. In this fractal imaginary, experience fragments form a surrealist dreamscape. Central protagonists – like Pink Mouse, Crab, and Maroussia herself – are shape-shifting referents.

One certainty persists throughout the piece, however. Maroussia is an object of desire for those around her. The girl does not feel comfortable with her sexual persona. Having entered puberty early on in the story, she spends much of the piece looking like a dishevelled puzzle (fig. 4). Early on, we see her doll-face morph into a »scarecrow« (17:17-17:20). Her »ugliness« concerns the libretto, and the visual score. Maroussia is no Lolita. Yusupova's graphic casting of the girl's budding sexuality does not imply nubile curiosity. The shame incumbent on being deemed »ugly« is portrayed as a cultural mechanism, which entraps the fertile half of the population in strictures of gendered convention.

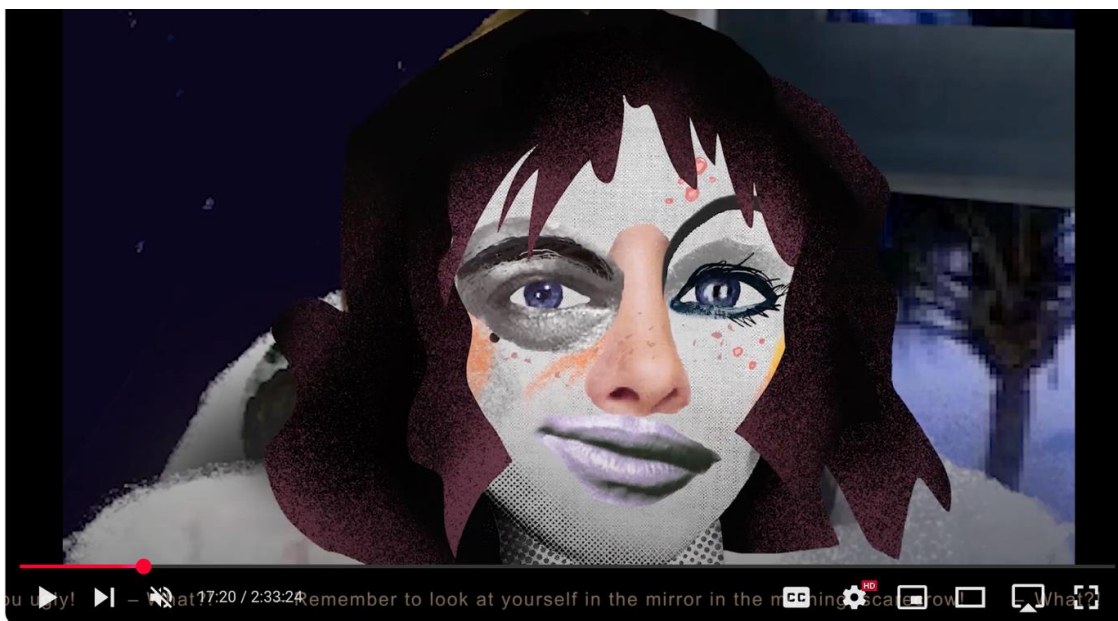


Figure. 4. A dishevelled puzzle, used with permission by the composer. © Iraida Yusupova

Yusupova does not expect her female characters to be virgins, madonnas, or asexual neuters. Girls like Maroussia deserve to reach adulthood in their own time and on their terms. But her heroine is being socialised in a milieu of ubiquitous grooming. A common female plight: Older males – family friends, authority figures, personages from public life – abuse their positions of power and authority for sexual access. Yusupova's Maroussia deplores this state of affairs and does what she can to avoid being the target of unwanted attention. In Yusupova's adaptation of *Pink Mouse*, young girls do not collude in their sexual exploitation. Indeed, the infidelities of older women come across as late acts of



defiance for the ways in which they too will have been taken advantage of in their younger years. An apposite side-effect of interpreting *Pink Mouse* as a mediaopera is that its premier was never destined to take place in a grand opera house. The audience on opening night – which occurred at 10 am in the morning – did not involve a long parade of suited men with bejewelled female companions wearing ball gowns and high-heeled shoes. Mediaopera, a genre less dominated by male composers, producers, and directors, breaks with institutionalized practices that leave space for women only in the capacity of singers and support staff.

Erofeev uses sex as a metaphor in his writing. He found literary notoriety for translating the *Marquis de Sade* into Russian, an author deemed inimical to the moral order of the Soviet Republic. As literary critic working for an underground magazine, Erofeev brought these forbidden writings to public attention by *samzidat*, meaning a small circulation of typewriter-produced copies that could easily be traced to their source. This kind of lettered pursuit was generally tolerated in the Soviet Block. But Erofeev's literary excursion resulted in a family calamity: he was accused of seditious activity; his father lost his diplomatic post; and the family, having fallen from grace, forfeited its privileged lifestyle. With no hope of a future as a scholar or public servant, this devastating development launched his career as an oppositional figure – he found his voice as a gadfly. Belonging to a generation of male authors whose gaze had been trained on the erotic sensibility of Roger Vadim,⁵ later vulgarized by Hugh Hefner, Erofeev brought an anti-establishment outlook to the literary conventions of Socialist Realism. Schooled in the erotic-philosophy of the Marquis de Sade, he never minces words regarding demands of the flesh. His male protagonists might trifle with seeing rape as a crude kind of flattery and his victims come across as rather more complicit in their ruin than propriety might suggest.

Their respective critiques of entrenched sexual hypocrisies – Erofeev (male author) and Yusupova (female composer) – diverge. But they agree in the aesthetics of their compositional approach. Both narrative poem and its mediated translation show layered themes braided together in a fanciful plot with the result more resembling a palimpsest of words and images than a conclusive whole driving towards an inevitable conclusion. *Pink Mouse* riffs on national identity. Maroussia can be taken to be an emblem of the nation. Already her name sounds like ›Russia.‹ Her progression through adolescence parallels the country's changes and growing pains through Glasnost and Perestroika. We see post-soviet Russia corrupted by the market economy and venereal temptations of Western consumerism, which were unleashed on this innocent land in the late 90s and noughts. The reign of oligarchs with luxury yachts – central motifs in *Pink Mouse* – began at this time. A spectacle of »conspicuous consumption« (Veblen, 1899) brought vast wealth to

⁵ The fame of Vadim's vamps (specifically, Bardot, Deneuve, Fonda) far outstripped that of their creative promoter. While they are considered great actresses, he is remembered as a second-rate director of B-movie soft erotica. Their careers advanced without him. Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard or Alain Resnais, recognized visionaries of the *Nouvelle Vague*, stand as the iconic film makers of that period. They have art acclaim while Vadim enjoys only marginal cinematic standing even though at least Truffaut drew inspiration from the latter's work. Little critical literature speaks to Vadim's legacy and it is not possible to purchase an edition of his collected work. Indeed, many of his films are difficult to obtain (Mancini, 1988).

the privileged few. The majority of the population was left to fend for itself in an impoverished economy that no longer insured their basic needs. Average citizens still had no easy access to those Western luxury items that, under Soviet rule, had long been maligned as corrupting tokens of capitalism. Maroussia's mother is always dressed in finest couture fashion; the family feasts on delicacies (fig. 5). Signifiers of a new class order: Russia-Maroussia, ravaged by powerful forces in the global capitalist world order, has lost her innocence.

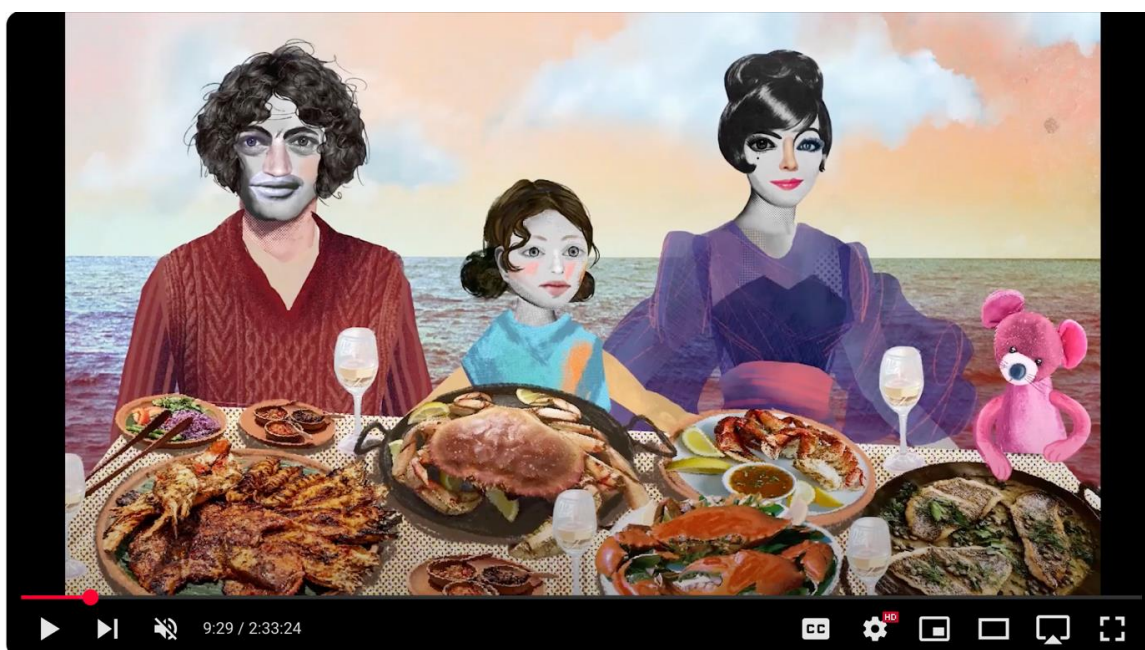


Figure 5. The family feasts on delicacies, used with permission by the composer.
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A further emblem of the oft-cited ›Russian soul‹ in *Pink Mouse* is a spate of boiled crab collages, often bright red, signal colour of the Communist Party around the world. It appears time and again, here and there, throughout the piece. Sometimes the crab is assembled from props that appeared in other scenes, like an ashtray, excavator pinchers, or red hot lips (fig. 6). Crab meat is a national institution in Russia that carries culinary, historical, economic and political import. The invention of the crab stick was a major achievement of Soviet rule that helped quell public discontent when the political system was unable to supply fresh lobster and crab meat (Syutkin, & Syutkin, 2022). Crab meat is also one of the country's key export items, with the animal stock involved causing friction and prompting debate in respect of a host of ecological, economic, and political concerns (Dickie, 2020; Strauss, 2004).



Figure 6. The Thrum-Strum figure sports a crab head-covering, used with permission by the composer. © Iraida Yusupova

In its visual composition and pictorial commentary, *Pink Mouse* evokes Russia as a hybrid place, a ›Eurasia,‹ or – as Nicola di Cosmo would specify the matter – an »Inner Eurasia,« that »constitutes one of the basic units of Eurasian and of world history.« Yusupova’s scoring assembles visual and acoustic tropes to evoke this charged idea – which is not national or ethnic but geographic in origin (Christian, 1994) – as both composite singular and mishmash of disjointed elements. The mediaopera presents an imaginary whose political and cultural self-understanding teeters between West and East, past and future, Europe and the Orient. Ancient Egyptian statues conjure the world of pharaohs early on in the score and cross-fades into a stray nomad leading a brightly clad camel (19:00-19:15) to an unknown destination to the left, off screen, possibly walking back in time (fig. 7).

A latent Orientalism recurs with the figure of the Prankster-Clown who dominates the scene for a minute and a half (1:37:31-:1:39:02), quite a duration in this fast-paced mediaopera. This Prankster-Clown, decked out in turban and Muslim robes, dances through cross-blending images suggesting that the tale’s heroine may be being violated, though not by the oriental daemon who is merely a party to this act. A cartoon key appears alongside these images further highlighting the importance of this oriental influence within the compositional logic of the cultural tableau exhibiting a westernized party of Russians on a luxury yacht, now capsized, and dwelling on the Bottom where a Disney-regime rules. The troubled political implications of this Eurasian self-conception find abbreviated expression in the figure of Reginna, the Siamese twin-pig regent of the underworld, a two-headed monster whose political instincts pull in two opposite directions. A mythic creature, unreconcilable with itself (fig. 8).



Figure 7. An Inner Eurasia and oriental scenes, used with permission by the composer.
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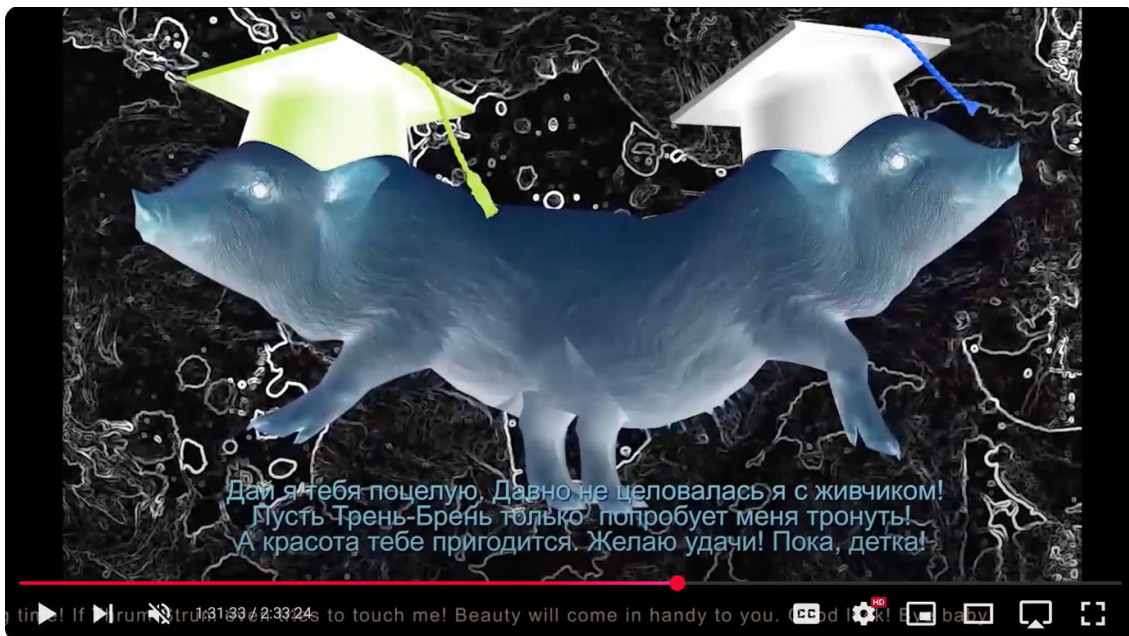


Figure 8. A mythic creature, unreconcilable with itself, used with permission by the composer. © Iraida Yusupova



Digital Afterlife

Dante is referenced by name in the libretto of *Pink Mouse* and so is the *Divine Comedy*, which serves as a structuring principle for the narrative poem's plot. Maroussia's journey to save her parents from eternal oblivion plays in a twilight zone of characters who may or may not be dead or dying. Like Dante's poem, *Pink Mouse* can be read as a reflection on the ›afterlife‹ – but this notion, once synonymous with metaphysical debates, has acquired a novel phenomenal heft in the world of virtual interactions. Facebook users die in the real world but their accounts remain ›active‹, simulating the living presence of a deceased person (presuming they ever truly existed and weren't always already a bot simulating a user). AI can imitate a loved one's figures of speech, expound on their topics of interests, and imitate their verbal mannerisms. Transhumanist reveries extend the mechanisms of selfhood to an ethereal realm of supreme invulnerability. Some versions of this vision are wedded to a person's physical incarnation; they focus on techniques of perpetual rejuvenation (to keep the body renewing itself), or cryogenic suspension of decay (to allow for a future resurrection), or storage of one's personal DNA (to re-generate full embodiment at later time). The machinic extension of the digital lifeworld gives the concept of afterlife qualitative materiality, time delayed and at a distance, in vivid communication uncoupled from responsive immediacy. Sometimes the remaining just want to bury their »dearly departed« in the readily accessible and literally *connected* forum of an online memorial site (Huberman, 2017). And with digital enhancement technologies, the biological reality of aging need no longer appear on screen (Holliday, 2021-2022).

Like the literary classic on which it is modelled, *Pink Mouse* courts different types of exegesis. Four main hermeneutic traditions have developed around the *Divine Comedy* – they can be grouped into *historical*, *moral*, *literary*, and *anagogical* exegesis. In this case, however, the interpretative modalities probe a phenomenon born of our computer-augmented lived reality. A new kind of afterlife interferes with the interrogating subject; it emanates from the sense of transcendence that has re-entered quotidian life through the backdoor of a technological sublime. The awesome predictive and imitative inveiglement of the technoscientific surround that we have put in place and that now comprises our lived habitat cannot be shrugged off. Every click feeds the fetich that we installed yet whose uncanny force we fear for the »omniscient and omnipotent« control it exercises over us. A proven way to subdue this almighty threat is not just to compel »benevolence« by way of a putative covenant⁶ but rather to diminish its hold by means of old style demystification (Hornborg, 2001; 2013). Interpretative recasting of the inverted causality here on display, i.e. recollecting who installed the fetich, will serve the cause of self-defence and increase the capacity to act. With the spectator's participant re-composing of Yusupova's mediaopera adaptation of Erofeev's narrative poem, agency grows. The reception history of Dante's classic shows possible routes of elucidation. This modern retelling of the *Divine Comedy* examines the conditions of the afterlife across disparate virtualities not from a medieval world view (hell, purgatory and paradise) but from the contemporary outlook of users linked to each other in networked disconnection on the

⁶ See also: Bylieva, & Nordmann (2023)



basis of algorithmic discretion. Interpreted in *historical-digital* terms, for instance, Maroussia's plight resembles the Cold War and its aftermath from a Russian national perspective. Seen as a *moral-digital* tale, *Pink Mouse* examines the afterlife as a problem pertaining less to what may transpire after the finality of death but rather to the extension of life in digital doings that have unintended consequences in the present. On a *literary-digital* interpretation, this mediaopera follows a girl into adulthood to explore the sexual hypocrisy of modern Cosmopolitan societies. The female composer breaks with the author in her adaptation of the piece. A rupture recorded in the recurring lifelike dance scenes punctuating *Pink Mouse* and showing two female characters locked in uncertain gyrations. Are they friends or rivals? The choreography is ambiguous, simultaneously collaborative and adversarial. However, one of the dancers is the author's wife, his ›better half‹. Her movements can be viewed as an extension of the author's will while the other dancer plays the piano, sings, and more likely stands for the will of the composer. These scenes reflect on the act of composing across symbolic fields as one artist revisits, and adapts, the work of another.

An *anagogical-digital* reading of *Pink Mouse* requires the most analytic conversion in that allegorical/spiritual dimensions of the *Divine Comedy* have no obvious equivalent in today's technologically mediated way of life. Personhood does not hold up to scrutiny in this mediaopera. Unique individuation may be a mere quality of experience – an artifact of self-perception – not an accurate reflection of how mindful intentionality actually arises and perpetuates itself in social settings. Perhaps human spiritual capacities are not superterrestrial in origin, but rather phenomenal habits acquired and cultivated over time, passed on from generation to generation? The sense of selfhood may be a compelling conceit arising amidst interference patterns rooted in language, tradition, practice, semiotic systems, architecture and untold registers of meaning-making. Differing cultural practices have generated and continue to uphold homologous conceptions of selfhood across a worldwide patchwork of populations. Whereas computational machines can emulate intelligent expression and problem-solving, automated mind will not recombine in spontaneous self-assembly because it lacks bodily constraints. This is not to put the body forward as primal source of wisdom and insight. Rather, the claim pertains to the sociality of mind as it manifests in human agency: Carnal limitation necessitates affiliation. But digital platforms – the place where the mediaopera lives – are fuelled by a human-machine interface that parses agency along systemic principles shrinking the afterlife down in metaphysical size to a digital artifice. Yusupova's *Pink Mouse* shows this newfangled afterlife to be strangely entangled with the lived present of its viewers and, in so doing, agitates against the virtual milieu of which it is a part.

Humanity's Sublimated Voice

Opera extols voice – and *Pink Mouse* is no exception. Real-life actors, photo-collage effigies, and cartoon figures serve as so many vehicles to celebrate classically trained singing. She virtualizes the operatic stage, decouples delivery and reception of the opera experience, pictorializes the libretto by appending a graphical commentary to the musical score and more. But one liberty Yusupova doesn't take with the operatic form is to de-centre the human voice. The human/machine boundary holds firm – only human



beings sing in this production. No transhumanist or post-humanist dalliance with synthetic voice generation enters her musical score. Agency sounds intrinsically human in Yusupova's piece, which re-enshrines a distinctly humanist conception of said phenomenon in the mediated context of the digital surround with its online services optimized to hijack attention (fig. 9).



Figure 9. Digital framing of the human voice, used with permission by the composer. © Iraida Yusupova

To comprehend meaning intoned as song, it is not necessary to understand the words spoken. The international opera canon, according to a study is mainly based on four languages. Italian still has a leading position, English, French, and German come next, Russian, Czech and Spanish are following (Heaney, 2023). Melodically inflected voice complemented by orchestral accompaniment makes librettos all but impossible to follow even to the native ear. Audiences know the plot summary in advance or find it summarized in an accompanying booklet.⁷ More recently, digital overtitles supply captions during a live performance. Operatic singing computes in its own vein, distinct from pure diction; it conveys dimensions of human experience that map onto language but are not phenomenally commensurate with the qualitative information coded in syntax, grammar, and vocabulary (Kluge, 2001, p. 36). A similar effect arises when watching foreign films where the original vocal enactment has an emotional heft that a dubbed film with lip-synched voices of doubles can never match.

Human exceptionalism turns on language. Large language models can replicate meaningful lexical utterance. But they cannot give expression to the negotiated emotional affiliation that staves off mortality and distinguishes human intentionality from intelligent automation. Embodied, vulnerable intelligence secures its survival by way of alliance.

⁷ For a deconstructive reading of the opera brochure and the institution to which it belongs, see: Kluge (2001).



This most human of human urges – negotiated relationality – finds articulation in all manner of modulating conduct of which lexical utterance stands out both for the sheer physical dexterity of the mastery acquired over the voice box and for the intellectual quickness of using signs to encode meaning with the instantaneity of conversational speech. Opera singing elevates this one, outstanding human attribute, verbal expression – and makes the medium in which humans compose their humanity the message. In its most bombastic projection, the human voice can fill vast architectural spaces while pressing the emotional urgency of a dramatic moment and communing with an orchestral plurality. Said simultaneity of effect (amplification, accentuation, association) exposes the social adhesive function of language in a show of vocal agility that evidently also fosters voluptuous commingling, to judge from the enduring popularity of this art. What is more, the human capacity for vocalization, stretched beyond its innate limitation, becomes supercharged with symbolic potency. The sound intensity, the emotional timbre, the complex sonority seems preternatural – at times even sublime. This transfixing virtuosity conjures human agency in its pre-digital formation.

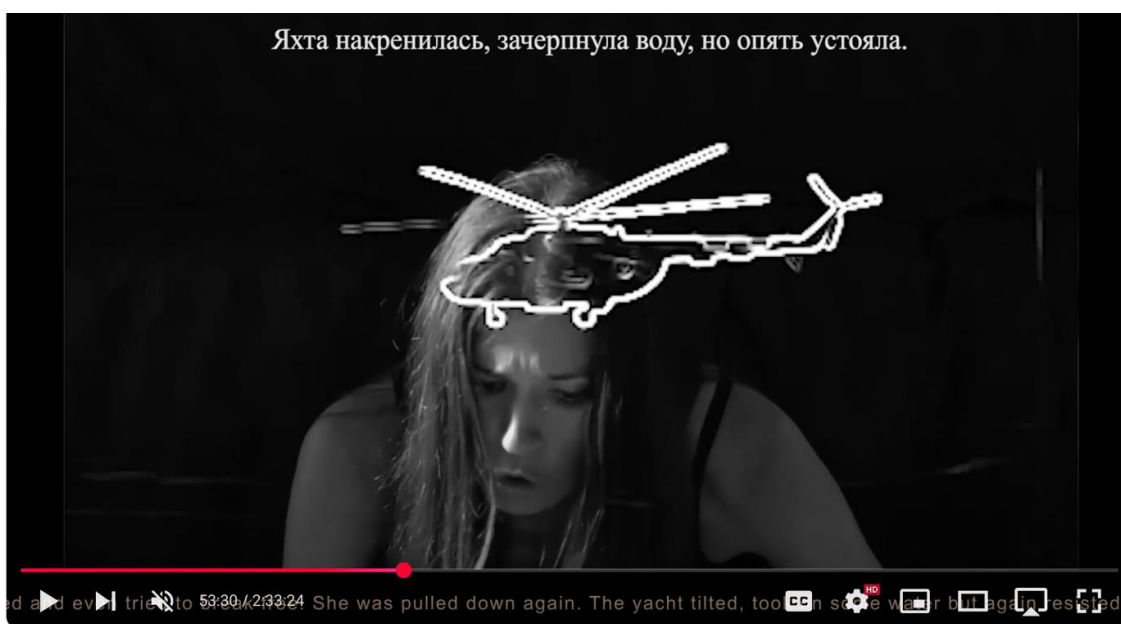


Figure 10. Technology rarely enters the scene, used with permission by the composer.
© Iraida Yusupova

If opera exalts this driver of human self-invention – i.e. the anthropogenic effect of voice – then human singing might seem to jar with the preponderance of animal figures in the *Pink Mouse* storyline and with the machine-mediated delivery of its mediaoperatic adaptation. Animals lack the symbolic proficiency required for the use of lexical signs but they share with humans an experience of lived embodiment. Machines, conversely, lack the gestural gravity associated with embodied, reciprocal exchange but they have mastered, indeed surpassed, the human gift of gab. But the animal-machine framework adds conceptual embellishment bringing a complementarity to the spectacle on view that offsets human agency as such. Specifically, the triangulation of these elements –



animal/machine/human deliberation – showcases how reflexivity enters into the verbal exchange of one but not the others. As in *Alice in Wonderland*, to which *Pink Mouse* refers, anthropomorphic animals figure prominently in Yusupova's musical-pictorial translation. This bestiary has expository import deserving in-depth exploration elsewhere. For now suffice it to say, they congregate, scene-by-scene, forming a tacit social commentary. Machines are conspicuously absent from the mediaopera appearing only intermittently in the visual score as vehicles of transportation, i.e. airplane (fig. 10) and yacht with only the latter being relevant to the plot, or as musical instruments, i.e. piano and e-guitar, or as devices, i.e. computer and gun whereby the gun plays only a bit part. There is no sense of an urban jungle or metropolis pulsing through this mythic land, neither utopia nor dystopia, except by inuendo.

Can a chatbot do Callas? The answer, no doubt, is yes. And the mediaopera might seem a promising context in which to experiment with synthetic voice generation. To the extent that vocal embodiment nurtures community, however, the proliferation of digital assistants with synthetic voices, compounded by AI voice generators, would seem to pose a formidable challenge to human self-constitution (Böhlen, 2008). The digital art curator and mindscape artist Peter Weibel takes up this line of enquiry in his sound art studies. He produced mediaoperas and put forward his own conception of the genre in several manifestos, the first one published in connection with *Der künstliche Wille* presented at the *ars electronica* festival in Linz, Austria in 1984 (Weibel, 1984/2016a; 2014/2016b; 2020). His views on the aesthetic specifications of this genre are revisionist; he questions the anthropocentric bias and adopts a critical stance on vocal embodiment in general. Taking this position to its logical conclusion, Weibel maintains that a radically self-mediating mediaopera breaks with personified notions of agency even dispensing with human vocalization altogether (or incorporating indigenous voices not usually heard in opera productions). His mediaopera *Amazonas* is a case in point (although one could also group this piece to ›digital opera‹); it puts trees at the centre of action. They vociferate in synthetic sound. When the dying forest is the tragic hero, then let the forest be heard.

Yusupova's mediaopera, by contrast, urges the preservation of real human voice, with its unique modulation, in a world increasingly inundated by the noise of intelligent simulation, or humanoid illusionism. Voice figures programmatically in *Pink Mouse*: the maelstrom of moving images conveys graphic ›noise‹; ›sound‹ works as a corrective force imparting regulation, emotionally, on the mayhem.⁸ There is a creative tension in her work between the graphical score in which shape-shifting figures morph into one another and the acoustic score which casts agency as a force that self-promulgates by way of vocal embodiment and so preserves a humanist world order. Online communication takes place within a sensory matrix that is upheld, synaesthetically, by two kinds of input for the most part: graphic and acoustic (tactile feedback hardly factors). Mediaopera instantiates this context. The placement of humans in such simulated environs leaves much room for interpretation. Weibel and Yusupova have pursued two contrasting intuitions on how the deployment of synthetic voice impacts the mediaopera as a genre: one rejects the anthropocentric premise of opera as an art form on formal and media-theoretical grounds

⁸ This accords with Walter Benjamin's neglected reflections on music, which he deems the only form of communion that can pit hope against hopelessness. For further discussion, see: Matassi (2013).



(Weibel, 2020; von Xylander, 2020); the other perpetuates the premise of human exceptionalism in its sensory logic. Yusupova's sound score intimates that humanness can outlast its disembodied simulated surround. But where does this proposition leave a fictional device like Pink Mouse? Might such a thing of pure fabrication lend itself to the transmission of voice as artifice (fig. 11)?



Figure 11. Questioning the voice as artifice, used with permission by the composer. © Iraida Yusupova

UPCYCLED COMICS ART

Pink Mouse's Ontological Status

The category of being to which the figure Pink Mouse belongs remains a mystery throughout the narrative poem and its adaptation as mediaopera. Is Pink Mouse a thing, idea, fancy, or premonition? The baffling character seems to epitomise poetic licence as such. It is unclear if Pink Mouse exists in the story or the heroine's mind alone. Its ontological status resembles that of Hobbes, stuffed tiger, in the now discontinued daily comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* and Harvey, rabbit friend, in the play of the same name, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1945. When the first edition of *Harvey* (fig. 12) appeared in print, this invisible companion entered popular culture as a large pink rabbit drawn in the naïve sketch of a child's illustration. Although Pink Mouse is a mouse, not a rabbit, there is a family resemblance to Harvey.

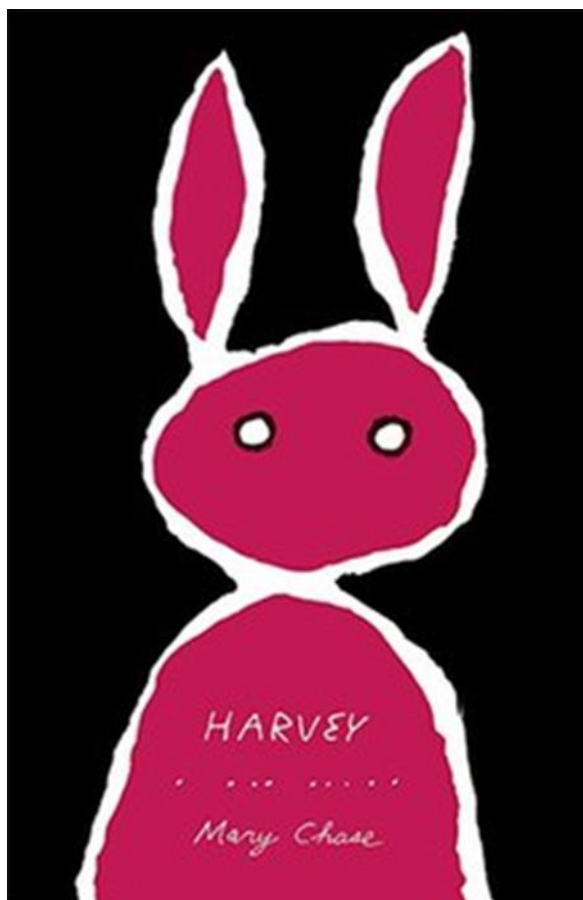


Figure 12. Book cover of Mary Chase's *Harvey* (1953), illustr. by Blechman, R. O. Acorn

Maroussia's animal sidekick takes on a life of its own. Mostly showing up as a playmate, it also turns out to be a significant trouble-maker in the tale. Pink Mouse betrays her bestie for a bribe, specifically ten kilograms of Parmesan cheese. Beset by regret for this act of treachery, Pink Mouse later apologises for having succumbed to its baser instincts. But the harm is done: Maroussia has lost her virginity. One can't really fault Pink Mouse for the breach of trust, however. A mouse is still a mouse, after all, even if only imagined. How is a mouse to resist its rodent nature? How can any living creature resist its most deep-seated instincts? Erofeev, the author, and Yusupova, the composer, seem to have diverging perspectives on the extent to which this excuse may exonerate the impulse-driven actions of others in the tale, say maybe the adult males preying on Maroussia.

In the context of our virtualized lifeworld, upheld by microchip-driven infrastructures, Pink Mouse signifies a novel reflexive condition whereby online activity manifests the reality of the make-believe commons in which we congregate. No need to conjure fictive buddies when they are surrounding us already: Apple's Siri, Amazon's Alexa, Google's Assistant, Samsung's Bixby, Microsoft's Cortana, varied AI-driven chatbots, and hordes of customer support services. Only that this coordinated social



activity, real and imagined, is now preformatted by automatic default settings that channel the traffic of attention while collecting hard data on the proclivities of users. Denizens of the internet spend many waking hours in the hallucinatory companionship of avatars, anonymous followers, and AI-driven consorts whose ontological status is akin to that of Pink Mouse. And this semi-delirious state of mind – progressing Pink-Mouse-ification – rests on same systems of technical delivery as Yusupova’s mediopera.

The figure Pink Mouse reifies a techno-social phenomenon with deep anthropological ramifications. Users find themselves engaging with new configurations of agency arising within a field that is in large measure make-believe. Unlike Hobbes and Harvey, Pink Mouse has no given name; its designator is generic like the algorithmic attendants guiding and tracking user activity online. The moral ambivalence that surrounds this figure is humorous because it is familiar not just in its flawed character but, perhaps more importantly, in its instrumental capriciousness. A whole host of ethical dilemmas map onto the antics of Pink Mouse, a figure whose propinquity to Maroussia addresses problems of accountability newly incumbent on the massively multi-user agency formations that have emerged through social media. How to reconcile the power of coercion and determinist causation in cultural affairs with the imperative of free will on which modern claims for human autonomy rest? It remains uncertain how the perennial preoccupation of major world religions, juridical institutions, and philosophical inquiry with reason applies to systems of networked communications that provide a fertile breeding ground for intractable mouse nests of fleeting agency-figurations.

Mixed-Reality: Heroes/Villains

Visual allusions abound in Yusupova’s *Pink Mouse*. While the soundtrack chooses its emotional registers carefully and arranges them in a varied progression, the visual score is superabundant. It cannot be processed in one sitting. As the locus of popular entertainment has shifted from stage to cinema to television to computer monitor, the fabric of celebrity culture has changed, accordingly. Public attention now materializes in disconnected, non-concurrent witnessing of entertainment spectacles: computer monitor has replaced opera stage, metal frame has replaced proscenium, a spinning white circle for a file being streamed has replaced front curtain. These material transformations bring new aesthetic conventions to the artifice of opera and the hucksterism of online storytelling. In the context of this poem reinvented as mediaopera, context itself turns out to be a critical factor in nudging users to get actively involved in generating coherence as participant observers of the piece.

The most striking and recurring real footage and photography that appears in Yusupova’s *Pink Mouse* features recurring dance scenes, for one, and cutouts of iconic celebrities, for another. The dance scenes allude to a nostalgic past, pre-Soviet Russia. Two, beautiful, young women are seen singing and dancing and often wearing masks in a villa decked out in aristocratic regalia. A grand piano dominates these lyrical sequences, which enact a life of ease and luxury associated with elite class orders such as the landed gentry in classical Russian literature, bourgeois professionals before the revolution, or *nomenklatura* of the Communist Party.



Beyond this footage with human actors, *Pink Mouse* introduces photo-stills of celebrities, which blend ontological registers – figurative and naturalistic. These mixed-reality icons, immediately recognizable, do not figure in the original poem. They represent A-list actors Johnny Depp and Ashton Kutcher (fig. 13), and supermodel Naomi Campbell (or a lookalike) (fig. 14). These characters populate the Bottom alongside Disney-like cartoon figures in a world under the sea distinctly reminiscent of the glitzy Westcoast culture of Hollywood. Depp married a French actress and spent decades living in Europe; his Francophile leanings resonate with those of the author of *Pink Mouse* making his avatar-signifier perhaps a natural fit for the mediaopera. While other figures in Yusupova’s visual score of *Pink Mouse* are merely generic symbols of various demographics or cultural abstractions – i.e. father, mother, Maroussia, Thrum-Strum (the guitarist), crab, Runt, nanny, uncle, uncle’s female partner, king and queen of the underworld, Evil Goose aka Holy Goose, and so on – the three, cutout image-stills (Depp, Kutcher, Cambell-twin) are public personas with popular cultural reputations and personal baggage.

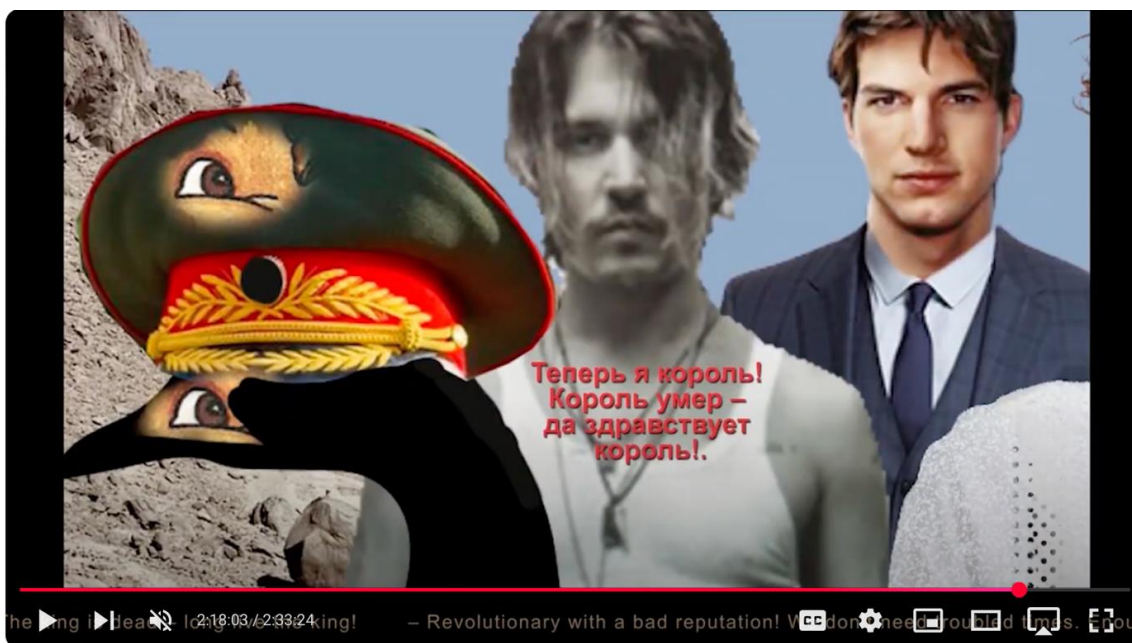


Figure 13. A-list actors in *Pink Mouse* mediaopera, used with permission by the composer. © Iraida Yusupova

The culture industry megastars that appear in *Pink Mouse* have carefully crafted images maintained by marketing teams. Depp and Kutcher, two pictures of masculinity, are household names; their acting careers were forged in an old-Hollywood movie star arena quite unlike the space of new media celebrity whose personalities are shamelessly self-promoting. Asking fans to hit a subscription button or to like their online channels would be anathema to their brand of celebrity. They need not solicit support, they have popularity and even charisma across broad swaths of social space, meaning paid professionals who shore up fandom on their behalf. The same holds for Campbell, an icon



of glamorous femininity. The sociological fabric of the two types of celebrity culture fused in Yusupova's mediaopera are orthogonal in style but not substance. Both realms of influence radiate from one geographical region that stretches from Los Angeles to Palo-Alto in California up to Seattle, Oregon. This industrial entertainment complex, which the sociologist Nick Turse abbreviates to ›The Complex,‹ comprises old and new mass media enterprises with global reach (Turse, 2008). Kutcher's brand of celebrity bridges the divide between old and new media offerings. His investment fund, A-Grade Investments finances start-up ventures. Besides fiscal capital, he invests his celebrity status in highly competitive markets, thus boosting the profiles of the enterprises in his portfolio. Like other modalities of capital, celebrity, too, partakes of that self-perpetuating market logic whereby an established industry drives related business opportunities arising in connection with new socio-technical infrastructures. Depp made his fortune playing the swashbuckling pirate Captain Jack Sparrow in the Hollywood franchise *Pirates of the Caribbean*. His public persona connotes an ocean imaginary. The rising appeal of maritime sagas (see also the *Aquaman* film series) surely reflects immersive fantasies associated with online access. Information inundation 24/7 conjures up the watery element. This idiom of the digital condition arises from an iterative logic whereby users find themselves ensnared in data streams generated from their online activity.

A large portion of Erofeev's prose poem plays in a world at the bottom of the sea. This choice of setting anticipates the poem's eventual translation to a mediaopera, where digital fluidity holds sway over users. One mythic being whose image has seen an extraordinary surge in popularity over the last three decades is the mermaid – and, not surprisingly, it makes an appearance in the libretto.⁹ This fictional character, the quintessential expression of present circumstances, glides through the ocean like users surfing the internet (von Xylander, 2023). Meanwhile, Big Tech trawlers patrol the commercial waterways of digital traffic collecting traces of agency, which they trade like so many humanoid fish. The plot of *Pink Mouse* culminates in Maroussia realising that her parents have drowned: »What has happened to my parents? Can I save them?« This undertaking propels her towards the central challenge of the piece, namely to resist the lure of the »Bottoms«, where Depp and Kutcher dwell, a sphere governed by the corrupting influence of celebrity, mass-media and the digital-industrial entertainment complex. In this dangerous environment, where human relations are disembodied and truth has been replaced by the rule of opinion, people soon change beyond recognition. The whole story can be read as a quest to ward off the digital turn with its sociotechnical ramifications:

Hurry before mum turns into a marriageable mermaid and
dad into a sea water scholar with a special opinion. (Yusupova, 2022, p. 12)

Why insert old school celebrities into a mediaopera appealing to online audiences?
The media consumption habits of social media users gravitate towards bloggers and

⁹ The rising popularity of this fictional character is well documented in the time series curves given by Google's ngram viewer for the English-speaking world:
https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=mermaid&year_start=1800&year_end=2022&corpus=en&smoothing=3&case_insensitive=true



v(ideo)-loggers who come across as fallible, raffish and off-the-cuff. They like their influencers to be relatable and to come across like virtual buddies who stop for bathroom breaks and complain of bad hair days. Online story-telling must adapt to its conditions of delivery – and this shows in the rhetorical gambits that succeed in the public sphere. In a full-fledged economy of attention, rankings steer user traffic as measured in units of arrested attention (Goldhaber, 1997; Goldhaber & Warzel, 2021). Online messaging turns on eyeball-count. Public attention is a limited resource – curbed by waking hours and lifespans – and the capacity to absorb this vital variable is what makes or breaks companies. Attention is the most sought-after asset worldwide because it is terminally non-renewable: Every second of life ticks towards certain death. Scripted plots thrive in this arena for, to quote Coleridge again, they make »suspension of disbelief« effortless and turn »poetic faith« into a given. Enter the artifice of traditional opera – and similarly aforementioned kayfabe of pro-wrestling – where typecast agency plotted for a knowing audience easily gains traction. An epic battle between two chief characters has proven to be a predictable formula for snaring attention. In pro-wrestling jargon, the stock characters carrying this basic storyline are known as the ›dish‹ (hero) and ›heel‹ (villain). Yusupova casts Kutcher as the *dish*, good prince of the undersea world, and Depp as the *heel*, bad prince and older brother. In the cosmic scheme of *Pink Mouse*, Kutcher and Depp serve as torchbearers of a moral order where good battles bad and outcomes seem predictable due to coded archetypes being in play, which are known in advance. By inserting conspicuous celebrities into her visual script, Yusupova makes the mediaopera's interpretation a function, in part, of the spectator's information-consuming habits. Knowing the reputations of Depp, Kutcher, and Campbell, both as public and private figures, prods viewers to anticipate the moral tenor of their scripted exploits.

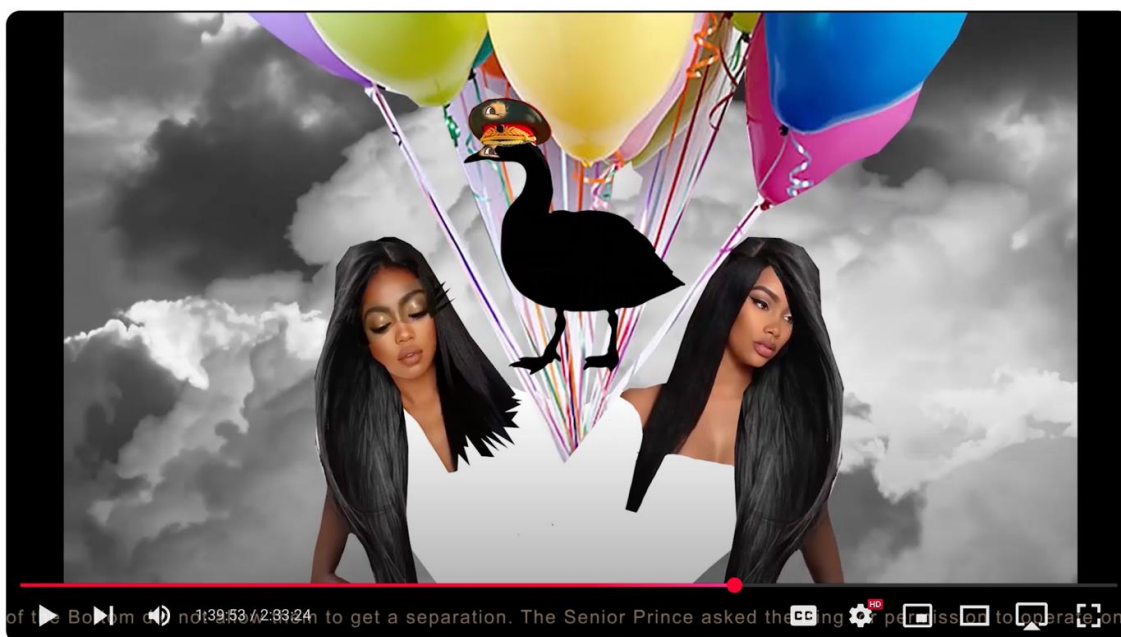


Figure 14. A media star in a mediaopera, used with permission by the composer.
© Iraida Yusupova



Yusupova's celebrity-signifiers are not self-contained referents but indexicals pointing to relational dynamics on a storyboard designed for online delivery and broad public consumption. They inhabit a blended discursive arena of the fictional and the real, the analogue and the digital, and tap into cross-national imaginaries of mediated suasion. Yet the complexion of celebrity is as variable as the news of the day and, consequently, the interpretative filter-effect of the referential kayfabe in Yusupova's mediaopera, to some extent, arbitrary. The scripts of heel and face have been flipped since she completed her adaptation of *Pink Mouse*. Depp was exonerated of domestic abuse in court of law while Kutcher, philanthropic investor in an anti-child-sex-abuse-organization, stands accused of gross hypocrisy for condoning sexual violence against children.¹⁰ This role reversal does not materially alter the structural logic of her gender-critical take on *Pink Mouse*, however. Her visual composition invites spectators to ruminate on the Hollywood-driven cult of celebrity in relation to online culture and the power vested in cultural icons of ambivalent moral standing. No later than when the Campbell look-alike cutout shows up as a Siamese twin with eyes blinking out of synch, a double of the Reginna pig, is the spectator made aware that this musical-graphical composition blurs the boundaries of reality and fiction.

IP and AI

Pink Mouse relies on overt cultural aggregation. In so doing, the mediaopera thematizes a set of vital concerns troubling the creative industries, specifically the problem of intellectual property rights. Today's ready availability of information and images is offset by ever more inscrutable claims to licensing rights that govern the reproduction of visual material. Whole new sectors of legal services have arisen around searching for copyright violations, pre-empting copyright conflicts, settling picture rights licenses and so on. Juridical precedent asserted in this domain is grounded as much in the commercial clout of those claiming copyright as in legal principle. Coercive litigation allows corporate interest to maintain proprietary control over large and growing portions of the semiotic surround.

Of course, the protagonist of this tale is not a tiger or a rabbit but precisely a mouse. The history of contractual practices governing intellectual property rights begins with a landmark case that ushered in a climate of corporate intimidation around copyright protection and trademark registration: Mickey Mouse. This figure first appeared in the cartoon *Steamboat Willy* in 1928. Copyright ran out in 2024, well after completion of the mediaopera adaptation of *Pink Mouse* (Jenkins, 2024). Disney's 98-yearlong iron grip on the exclusive usage rights to this figure produced unintended consequences for intellectual property rulings, including the codes and regulations that pertain to digitizing and preserving cultural heritage. It also raised thorny issues of why Disney was allowed to appropriate material from the public domain in its commercial productions over which it then held exclusive rights (see *The Snow Queen* by Hans Christian Andersen, *The Lion King* drawn from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and *Fantasia* which features public domain classical music based on an *Alice in Wonderland* orchestration). Having

¹⁰ See scandals involving Jerry Sandusky, Danny Masterson, and Sean Combes.



successfully lobbied the United States government to extend copyright protections, the Walt Disney Corporation then zealously guarded its exclusive claim to this lucrative character. This piece of legislation, known as the »Mickey Mouse Protection Act«, had far-reaching consequences for the culture of citation worldwide (Skladany, 2018, p. 32). Related claims were successfully defended before the EU and apply, variously, throughout Europe.



Figure 15. A cosmology of trademarked cartoon characters, used with permission by the composer. © Iraida Yusupova

Conflicting institutional interests, corporate and public, concerning transactions in the public domain are today litigated through an organisational network first established in connection with this case. Recent lobbying on the legal frameworks that govern proprietary data and its regulation on social media platforms in Europe, i.e. Digital Markets Act (European Commission, 2022) and Digital Data Act (European Commission, 2024), drew on legislative bodies (from expert consultants to advisory committees) first put in place in the context of shepherding the deliberative process around the Disney verdict. This bureaucratic apparatus consisting of think tanks and legal services, is substantially financed and backed by the very technology concerns whose services are supposed to be regulated in the public interest. Corporate lobbyists and representatives shaped the expert policy recommendations that went into drafting the EU mandates on digital data regulation (Schyns, 2023). A mouse trope enabled the legalized digital data accumulation and trade taking place on social media platforms today.

Pink Mouse hardly resembles the Disney figure that spawned not only cartoons, films, and merchandising but also theme parks, television shows, and video games over the 20th century. This cartoon mouse, appearing in the experimental context of a mediaopera, is not a mass cultural phenomenon and iconic branded character serialized



by syndicated-media conglomerates. Yet its eccentric, countercultural presentation draws attention to the conditions of possibility – sociocultural and techno-aesthetic – that have allowed a cosmology of trademarked cartoon creatures (fig. 15) to colonize our collective imaginary although the elements of which they are composed were extracted from our cultural commons. Born in a rhythmic poem that merges classical, modernist, and popular art and brought to life in a pictorial-musical composition that celebrates cultures of open access expressed in collage, cut-and-paste, sampling, the figure of Pink Mouse undercuts the rampant commercialism of all proprietary, datafied, ad-driven content by way of ironic subversion.

META-MEDIAOPERA

Technology mediates agency; for better or worse, it has punctuated and informed human self-conception forever (but certainly since the species took note of time, rhythm and cadence to synchronize experience). *Pink Mouse* advances an argument on the mediation of agency through tool usage – and puts spectators through corresponding paces that uphold the supporting claims, tacitly. The composition amounts to a form-theoretical study, or meta-mediaopera, of themes bearing directly on the artistic process in which Yusupova's graphical-musical productions arise. Beyond Maroussia's adventures in the world of adults or the literary machinations of Pink Mouse, the piece addresses perennial questions such as: What constitutes partnership – romantic, artistic or otherwise? How are the living changed by internalizing the dead? How does agency coalesce around compositional techniques and how, specifically, is mediated agency quickened by words, sounds, and images? How does the human interface with analogue musical instruments differ, in quality, from comparable interactive protocols with digital computational instruments? And to what extent does mediaopera, the artform, manifest creativity as a force in the world, of the world, neither, or both? This last question presumes a conversancy with the contexts in which the piece was produced, including Russian conceptualism, Western (post)conceptual art, and traditions of modernist, as well as postmodernist musical composition. In short, the historical roots of the rival strategies used to make one's mark as an artist or movement in the musical field. Over and above the musical-visual overtures in which this mediaopera has been plotted out, it participates in epistemic practices related to the constitution of self and others, revelation and concealment, and libidinal vagaries.

A manifest choreography of the human-machine relationship informs the very conception of mediaopera as artform at point of delivery, a synchronic plotting of the graphical-musical ensemble put forward as a compositional whole. It finds expression in patterns arranged both synchronically and diachronically in *Pink Mouse*. Synchronically, mediaopera presupposes a digital literacy, which also shapes the horizons of comprehension. *Pink Mouse* deconstructs, by way of semiotic encoding, the Wi-Fi-enabled data carriers on which the delivery of such cultural offerings is reliant. As a consequence, interpretation of the piece hinges, at once, on functionalities of the apparatus used for access and on affiliated dispositions of the spectators who make use of said apparatus. In the collusion of hardware, software and wetware, *Pink Mouse* can serve



as a demonstration piece for the workings of recombinant agency. Diachronically, the logic and progression of Yusupova's adaptation of Erofeev's metric composition lays out a developmental account of human agency here exemplified in formative instrumental interdependencies with computer (fig. 17), e-guitar, and grand piano (fig. 16).



Figure 16. Classical piano and electric guitar, used with permission by the composer.
© Iraida Yusupova

Yusupova's juxtaposition of grand piano and e-guitar turns these instruments into signifiers for the civilizing process as such. They stand for different historical epochs but also, more importantly, for distinct world views with varying national and ethno-cultural implications.¹¹ It is worth noting that she showcases e-guitar, not classical guitar. The latter would sit comfortably alongside the grand piano in terms of gender connotations. Both the string guitar and piano gained popularity in 18th century Europe and were deemed appropriate activities for young ladies in privileged circumstances. As accomplished musicians, they were expected to entertain family and guests in observing the ritual of *Hausmusik* – variously adapted, by region, to family cultures across the continent – for leisure and diversion (Doubleday, 2008). The grand piano is heavier, more expensive to acquire and maintain, hard to move, and takes up expensive living space. Its stature emphatically asserted a timeless, landed, convention-bound domesticity, which was associated with stabilising the nuclear family nexus of an emergent bourgeoisie as recounted in literature and memoirs of the period (Walker, 2014). The guitar is portable, more affordable, and unassuming. Neither of these instruments causes performers to assume attitudes deemed »unbecoming« for females – to contort their faces, as when

¹¹ *Hausmusik* practices were adapted to Russian family life in ways still reflected in the institutional memory of the country's musical history (Bullock, 2012; Mannherz, 2017; Streatfeild, 2011).



blowing into a wind instrument, or to assume a suggestive posture (for instance, playing the cello¹²).

But *Pink Mouse* plays in the day of microphone voice amplification and karaoke singing with boom-box (10:54). The guitarist, Thrum-Strum, is a key figure in Erofeev's poetic scheme. In Yusupova's rendering, he fits the cliché of globe-trotting hippie who plays e-guitar. This instrument is not only associated with a distinct style of music, artistic persona, and musical happening, it gave expression to a youth movement whose emancipatory ideals ushered in a political rebellion that changed the fabric of civil society. The instrument came to be male dominated. Indeed, in its association with technology and social upheaval, e-guitar kinetics are so testosterone charged that strumming one's midriff in simulating air-guitar action amounts to a latter-day mating call. E-guitar is the very emblem of a countercultural revolution also associated with the computer. Not only is it portable and electronic, like the computer. But, according to Fred Turner, it defined that storied countercultural movement whose ideas of »freedom« and »autonomy« actually came to culminate in portable computing and ubiquitous access (Turner, 2006). Today these entrenched values, foundational to the ›Californian Ideology‹ (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996; Uluorta, & Quill, 2022), are prospering in our digital data-driven economies and continually fanned by the psychogenic illusionism of ›free services‹.

Yusupova casts the e-guitar as an instrument of seduction and aggression while the grand piano figures as source of emotional comfort, a coherence-generating machine (Sellors, 2025). Culturally-speaking, e-guitar and computer are close cousins. The *Grateful Dead* playing *Russian Lullaby* breaks seem closer in spirit to the lifeworld of 24/7 content streaming than a grand piano standing in the corner of an elegant, old-world boudoir. But instead of associating e-guitar and computer, her account of our tool-using, cultural evolution sets piano and computer against each other. Both instruments require ten digits for tapping; they are *digital* and *incremental* in that they are played key-by-key. And both instruments are intimately fused with how we externalize our interiority and show up as semiotic creatures. Yusupova leaves the spectator in no doubt as to which of the two is her preferred child. Whereas the grand piano is the single most visible prop in her graphic score and the computer makes but two cameo appearances. But the computer is written into the mediaopera's DNA. It is conditional to its production and its reception. No computer, no mediaopera. In the anthropological order of *Pink Mouse*, these two devices command similar semiotic authority. Although one is showcased in Yusupova's visual scoring and the other barely features, they lie on a continuum of world-making and agency-enabling contrivances.

With the insertion of the grand piano as musical protagonist in her visual score, she takes considerable liberties with the original text. There is not a single mention of grand piano (or computers or laptops, for that matter) in the libretto of *Pink Mouse* as compared with 9 references to guitar/guitarist. Yet, her pictorial commentary conjures up two rivalries on screen that stretch through the entire mediaopera: one involving e-guitar and grand piano finds articulation, explicitly, in images; the other involving grand piano and computer features tacitly and plays out mostly by implication. It would be easy to

¹² See period commentary by J. von Wasielewski, as cited in Hoffmann (2007/2010).



overlook the juxtaposition of grand piano and computer but for two crucial scenes in which the significance of these signifiers is asserted in no uncertain terms. Yusupova shows the cartoon-father typing on his cartoon-laptop in the first minute of the mediaopera (00:53-01:00) – it is one of the first objects fully on display. Later, we see Maroussia, personified as the singing dancer, suddenly no longer fingering the keyboard of the piano she has been playing until that point but typing on the keyboard of a laptop that is now placed on top of the piano (29:07-30:14). The elision of these two activities, piano-playing and computer-typing, in one show of dexterity – fingers on keyboards – can be read as a reflexive commentary not only on the piece itself but on the very genre of mediaopera. This superimposition of two pivotal instruments invites comparison of their semiotic functions in relation to each other and within the visual score of Yusupova's *Pink Mouse*. Grand piano will be foregrounded, thematically, for the duration of the virtual dramatics (in oscillation with e-guitar here serving as stand-in for the computational surround) while laptop and related accoutrements remain tacitly acknowledged, instrumentally, in the conditions of mediation.

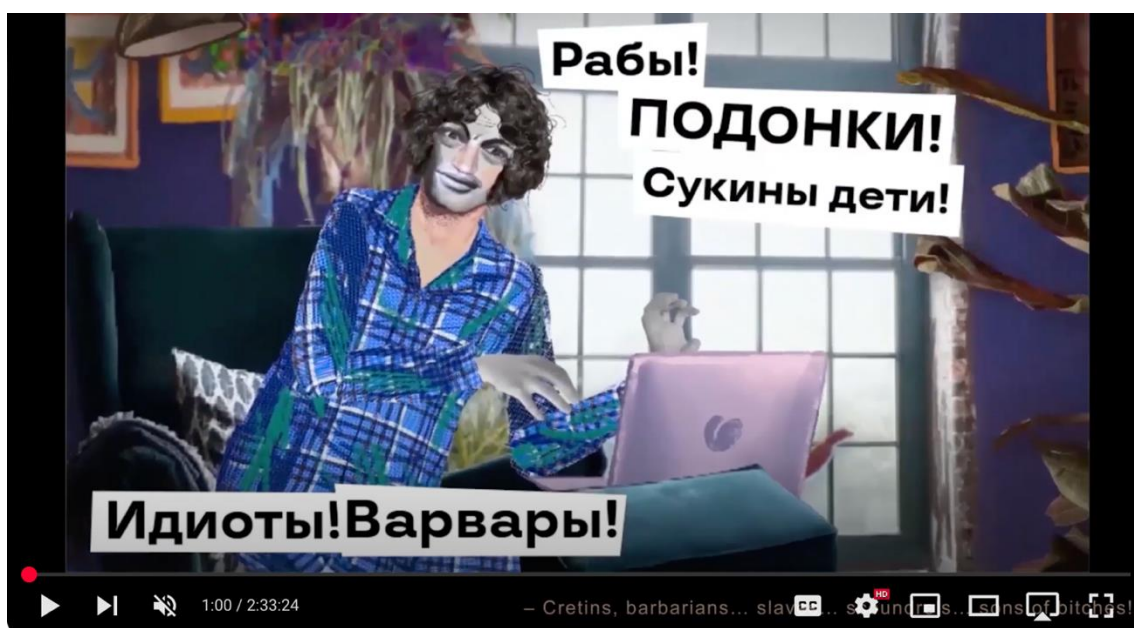


Figure 17. Another human instrument, used with permission by the composer. © Iraida Yusupova

These showcased instruments – grand piano, e-guitar, laptop – exemplify different world views and corresponding practices around the aesthetics of selfhood. What unfolds is a study in contrasts. As mood-setter, the e-guitar's elongated riffs and chord sequences brought a generation together that worshiped ›individuality‹ whereas the grand piano has for centuries amassed a pious repertoire of counterpoint compositions expounding polyphony in homage to a heavenly order held to defy human comprehension. But the action rises around the human/machine interface in particular: Not all keyboard-sporting instruments are created equal in Yusupova's visual score. Their differences go to the heart of her mediaopera practice. Whether depicted in acted scenes as a real instrument or in a



cartoon or in an illustrated abstraction, player-and-piano constitute a creative partnership fashioning the world in their own image. No comparable intimacy and ardency articulate the user-laptop collaboration. Also, the deep grammar of this composition seems to associate the acoustic score with the piano, an instrument of sound, whereas the instrument of image-generation, the computer, manifests in the graphical score. Two keyboard instruments operated in a similar fashion; yet one brings order and serenity to an analogue world, the other simulates worlding in a flurry of digital noise (Moseley, 2016). The difference consists in the feedback yielded by these instruments. Each tap on the keys of a grand piano is responsive to the pressure applied in qualitative terms, the mechanism reciprocates the player's actions. By contrast, taps on the keyboard of a laptop merely trigger functionalities that then transpire regardless of how fast or hard the user types. The exception being an e-piano, or other devices with sensate technology, in which case the non-responsive machine has been augmented with reactive-functionalities. As organs of self-expression, they differ on the score of reflexivity. Although both piano-metaphors (Anger, 2018) and computer-metaphors are used to symbolize capacities of mind in literature, painting, and science, the piano connotes an emotional sensorium, the computer neurobiological circuitry. Yusupova's comparative analysis of instruments and technological practices effectively advances an anthropological idea by way of an aesthetic programme – her adaptation of *Pink Mouse* amounts to an analogue mediaopera for a digital environment.



Figure 18. Symbolist allusions, used with permission by the composer. © Iraida Yusupova

This semiotic hybridity – superimposition of symbolic forms (analogue/digital) – recapitulates bygone media practices of collage and montage in conceptual abstraction. Yusupova's implicit cultural history recalls the print culture of high modernism in the 1920s, except that her cut-and-paste practices (te Heesen, 2002) operate across the vast



range of mass media inputs, now available; and they incorporate a solid legacy of upcycling semiosis across visual and acoustic fields of art that she melds with exceptional expansiveness. The techniques she uses for amassing parts into wholes pick up on configurational traditions and paradigms of assembly that have a developmental history in their own right. Her mediaopera productions adopt an unalloyed modernist posture in that they eschew conventional tropes of legibility.¹³ Her work, in keeping with a certain notion of Russian conceptualism differing from the »Romantic« interpretation initially put forth by Boris Groys (1979), for instance, promotes the epistemic virtues of encryption and concealment. She quotes symbolist style experiments (fig. 18) to articulate and stir emotions, not to depict the natural or social world from an ›objectivist‹ standpoint (itself a moving target as Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have shown (Daston & Galison, 2007)). Regardless of the higher estimation in which she may hold her acoustic score over its visual elaboration, the spectator of *Pink Mouse* experiences a pageantry of graphical fanfares with an hallucinatory quality unto itself. Her style of metric composing amplifies the role of pictorialism by translating the poetic libretto in a simultaneous flow of both aural and optical tropes. The libretto is thus doubly exemplified. This distinctive feature of her work breaks with radical modernist theories of opera that insist on a minimalism that shuns conspicuity in the acoustics. According to radical modernist opera theory, graphical allusion and scenography distract from the true structure of musical utterance, which in its purest forms focuses on exploring proportionality through minimalist abstraction.¹⁴ Yusupova's pictorial overabundance amounts to a stylistic mannerism that might lead an art theorist to classify *Pink Mouse* in the canon of postmodern composition. In this respect, too, her mediaoperas defy simple classification. She has forged a postmodern-modernist hybrid that pulls in countervailing aesthetic directions.

Recombinant Agency

Data pays the tariffs we owe as licensees of the technological systems that sustain the workings of agency as we know it (or, depending on one's theory of mind, as it owns us).¹⁵ Erofeev's *Pink Mouse* runs counter to the isolationist current of attention-fuelled, technology-driven, rent-seeking commons. This prose poem – and *Pink Mouse* as its standout literary device – celebrates currents of »autopoiesis« (Varely, et al., 1974) that also require autonomous engagement on the part of readers. But the quality of attention needed to implement such engagement atrophies in disuse. Ironically, it is for lack of company that autonomy finds itself consigned to oblivion in the virtual world. Self-paced involvement in epistemic mind-games draws incentive from being in contact with others who are similarly caught up in parsing out a shared experience. By attending the world

¹³ For the distance of the radical modernist musical avantgarde including its theoretical defenders like Theodor W. Adorno from the audience's expectations as well as reception capabilities, see Born (1995).

¹⁴ This modernist thesis, which promotes a radically sublimated vision of sound-text-image triangulation unique to the operatic form and exalts pure structure (or structured materiality) over all manifestations of the pictorial, can be found in the writings of Theodor W. Adorno (1954/1999; 1968/1990), whereby he only exemplifies a music historical and music theoretical debate that began much earlier.

¹⁵ Problems raised for social science research are discussed in: Koch & Kinder-Kurlanda (2020); Barrowman (2018); Halford & Savage (2017).



premiere of *Pink Mouse* in Lüneburg on March 21st, 2024, participants witnessed not just a seemingly antiquated thespian ritual. They were party to a sociological happening. This ›opening night‹ – it actually took place as an early matinée – offered a public screening of the mediaopera followed by a shared meal of Russian-themed crepe, topped off with two rounds of digestive philosophizing on *Pink Mouse* in a circle of knowledgeable guests. The interest there generated and carried over in solitary reflection and prose commentary arose from a congenial, experiential context. Curiously enough, premiering the mediaopera in real time and space with a seated crowd proved key to its coming into its own as a work of art making the circuit of festivals. Participant observers constitute themselves as vectors of embodied, social apprehension despite the fact that the mediaopera projects them as solitary spectators consuming video-content on screen real-estate crowded with other applications such as email inbox, search engine and virtual desktop trash can.

Erofeev's poetic curiosity flirts with this social dimension of interactive mind-making that presents as human agency. The heroine of his tale is Maroussia. Her full name, Maroussia Mendelejeva, recalls Dimtri Mendeleeyev, Russian chemist known for devising the periodic table of elements, which classifies molecular elements according to their relative atomic weight. The physical qualities of matter can be accounted for by combining the elements in this table. Complex chemical reactions allow these elements to cohere in compound structures. These reaction-chains are described in terms of bond-making and bond-breaking principles that can hardly be articulated without invoking the realm of lived social relations (Neale, et al., 2019). The language of chemical science as codified by Mendeleev is inseparable from the language – and experience – of human affiliation. Erofeev mentions Mendelejeva's ›famous name‹ in passing, a mere insinuation. No circumstantial information in the libretto of *Pink Mouse* explains why Maroussia carries such a weighty moniker or why this historical personage in particular should be summoned. Be that as it may, the family name acquires signal surplus value in the mediaopera adaptation of *Pink Mouse*: ›Mendelejeva‹ resonates with social imaginaries still rooted in a world of analogue social liaising (where human constellations make and break connections of variable size and resilience), which are steadily being replaced and hence eroded by automated routines. The table of elements alluded to only obliquely by Erofeev, but connoting a social semantics, stands out more tellingly in a mediaopera whose automated reading and writing procedures blur said principles of socio-chemical composition. It is increasingly difficult to parse agency in the user/laptop dyad. Who is in the driving seat of this epistemic exchange that appears putatively intentional, user or machine? AI-powered information engines contest the locus of agency.

In tendency, mediaopera obviates shared witnessing of a theatrical performance in time and space. Yet, Yusupova's *Pink Mouse* asserts that the triangulations of yore – namely, embodied exchange, tool-use, and negotiated purposiveness – have a future in the periodic table of our newly mediated cultural commons. A newly virulent factor has arrived on the scene of human communing, namely automation, and it stands to erode the adhesive power of felt connections. In supplanting the social dimensions of work with automated routines of task execution and decision-making, the new technologies also



suppress connective feedback loops of judgement. Much of the combinatory work that has traditionally grounded agency in sociality is being supplied by instrumental protocols of automation instead. These simulate social intelligence when in fact they are steered by private rationales operating off screen – unfelt, unseen, unheard. Yusupova's *Pink Mouse* amplifies the lived reality of humanity's existential entanglement with self-fashioning tools. Her mega-score of sound and image makes the complex tonalities of instrumental expression tangible in a synaesthesia of aesthetic elocutions, which are indivisibly visual and acoustic. The formatting of piano-generated imagery remains unstintingly mental and private, in playing and hearing alike; the images mobilized by invariant tapping on our digital devices correlate with preformatted commands that trigger automated routines and yield compartmentalized results, which are embedded in infrastructures that are public-facing, albeit proprietary.

While piano-playing arguably manifests combinate agency in formation (mental images brought into circulation by an audience listening to a piano concerto arise from direct corporeal gestures, mechanically translated, and spontaneously issuing in associative impressions), computer-using activates myriad, multifunctional, microchip-driven chain reactions that have been optimized to commodify agency in dispositional increments of *information* (image tropes coordinate the user-computer interface and are floated as thumbnails and adverts nudging the actions of users while the trace history of all past actions taken in that visual ›surround‹ (Turner, 2015) are logged, tallied, and applied in furthering operational advantage). The difference between *agency in formation* and *agency as information* is one of degree: Sociality matters. Whereas the player/piano dyad is ›unmediated‹ with respect to subjective expression, the user/computer dyad is mediated by transactional protocols that replace the agency of subjects with an artifice of subjectivity based on human-inflected natural language processing, stochastic language modelling, and algorithmic protocols, which are devoid of reciprocal intentionality. The ingress of automated procedures in the composing of thought leaves less room for the ›responsive exchange‹ and spontaneity of ›negotiated purposiveness‹ that couple expression and meaning to human affiliation. Heinrich Kleist's (1878) notable essay on composing thoughts while speaking describes the construction of an idea in a face-to-face interaction between brother and sister (paying heed to the choreography of minute gestures that are being noted, subliminally, between them as their sibling rumination spells itself out in words). Today, with *the gradual completion of thoughts while typing*, Kleist's observation no longer applies. The conversational modality of tele-transported messaging entails little exposure to the fractional intimate exchange observed by Kleist. Video-calls could be seen as a Kleistian technology in that they show the speakers while speaking but filter-effects, time-delays, and other glitches give the machine artefacts an intimate heft that is hardly able to overcome the palpable absence of holding space, together, in immediate presence.

Yusupova has long been interested in the dyadic movements of encryption and decryption that set subliminal-dialogical artmaking apart from more tutorial traditions (Kozel, 2017). Yusupova's (1999) »Thoughts on Cryptophony« appeared at a time when she was already testing aesthetic propositions put forward in her musical output. The crypto-cultural tactics deployed in *Pink Mouse* not only match but arguably even surpass



ideas she espoused at the time: »In this manner, our cryptophonic method is a means to bring out the hidden substance of the manifestation of the Spirit, which take place in the world of the Beyond«. Her ethereal purchase on symbolic systems, modular information design, and serial patterning engages a decidedly enigmatic source of inspiration. Kindred cryptographic techniques have long been of interest in cognitive engineering, computer science, and information technology where the »agencies« under investigation comprise both artificial and human intelligence. The divide between subjective and objective modes of information processing is of critical importance in these fields. Subjective discernment pertains not only to the domain of felt experience but, critically, also plays a key role in the exercise of judgement needed when making category distinctions. Referential context may be tacitly given, but not explicitly stated or known in advance. Accordingly, coded messaging takes for granted an implied agent that has the requisite mapping capacities to resolve possible impasses of reference by making an informed subjective judgement as to the lines of situated embodiment that apply.

Yusupova uses bricolage, expressive appropriations and constructivist grammars in building dynamic propositions that she entrusts to the audience, isolated spectators for the most part, who are invited to deconstruct and recover the encoded import. A striking example of this technique in *Pink Mouse* occurs in a scene that quotes the film *Titanic* (1997): Maroussia and her cousin Runt can be seen standing on the helm of the vessel in the exact pose of open-armed, expectant intimacy that graced the film poster accompanying that box office hit (fig. 19).

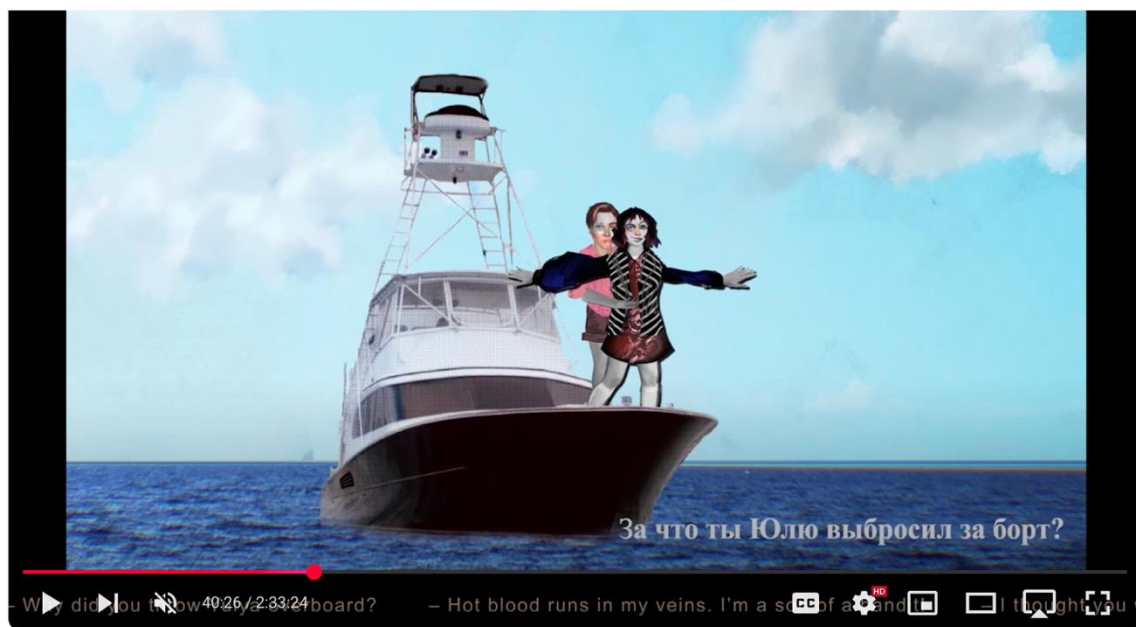


Figure 19. A familiar pose, used with permission by the composer. © Iraida Yusupova

Yusupova's reception aesthetics accord with received postmodernist art practices. Creative output that seeks critical acclaim in this discursive field aims to facilitate modes of co-composition on the part of spectators has variously been called »active audiences«, »negotiated meanings« or »emancipatory decoding«. Such terms reference semiotic



conventions that promise to empower the spectator, sometimes to the point of asserting the death of the author. Ultimately, such pronouncements attempted to elevate the consumer of a work of literature, film, or media production with respect to the semiotic production at hand. Similarly, Yusupova's *Pink Mouse* can be read as a sustained invitation extended to the generalized spectator of online ›content,‹ a spirited reminder to the person behind the screen to get personally involved in assessing the meanings of her piece. In this sense, *Pink Mouse* recalls the demands of Brecht's ›epic theatre‹, which renounced the traditional bourgeois separation of the stage and the audience in a relationship of reciprocal dependency. Like Brecht, Yusupova's treatment of *Pink Mouse* dispenses with the division of creative labour that would segregate the world of appearances from the world of being, embracing instead a theory of dynamic, meaningful co-production where acts of imagined congruity are coeval with scalable agency formations.

Mediaopera, as genre, brings diminished social communing to light, symptomatically – triggers a remedial response. The piece exacts an in-depth interpretative engagement; it re-energizes a zest for developing perspectives, reciprocally contested, that foster resilient agency. Presumably, Yusupova plays the piano while composing. But spectators transact with *Pink Mouse*, and her other mediaoperas, on yonder side of the human/machine exchange with production context and reception context falling on opposite sides of analogue versus digital tool use. Her bifurcated conception of mediaopera as an analogue sanctuary in a digital danger zone has to be decoded by the spectator, which can only take place in socially structure fields of subjectivity. The practices of multi-sensory collage deployed by Yusupova are genealogically related to the navigational intuition behind the graphical user interface (von Xylander, 2007; Kramer (von Xylander), 2007). Functional control of the multifunctional, computational machines as widely in use as bicycles leans on socially inculcated and situationally encultured acts of transference that have to be effected by lay users on the basis of visual cues. Graphical tropes and situated desk-top related metaphors from the analogue world have been codified in pictures on screens. Users rely on these signposts in deciphering prompts and divining the likely sequence of action-instructions, which will allow them to operate machines that would otherwise be far too complex for casual use in the form of personal laptops and cell phones. In its visual functionalism, Yusupova's mediaopera reads like a microcosm of the extant cybersphere, meaning the totality of visual conventions governing the virtual world. Her postmodernist pastiche on the materiality of ›spirit,‹ here also evinced in a deeply personal encounter with ›digital afterlife‹ and related artifacts of networked communication (Yusupova, 2025), challenges spectators to reflect on the divine comedy of social media relations. The artificial agency that is lampooned in her adaptation of *Pink Mouse* begs the question of whether at all, and if so by what means, spontaneous socially constituted agency might be re-designed for sustainable non-oblivion (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009).

Human Skeuomorphs

Constructivist accounts take humanity to be an acquired trait (Rockmore, 2020; Laland, & Brown, 2018). A vast body of literature in philosophy, psychology,



ethnography, anthropology and cultural theory has arisen around explaining how a »second nature« compensates for the lack of instincts with which human babies are equipped at birth (Testa, 2017). This second nature also makes human beings especially adaptable as a species: We learn to survive in environments for which we are not biologically outfitted. The bio-fictional hybridity of which we are all, though variously, comprised consigns us to a category of mixed being that lies outside the binomial system of Linnean classification. We are myth-cyborgs comprised of mammalian embodiment and socially constructed suppositions or, as Ernst Cassirer (1944) writes in *An Essay on Man*, »Not nature but society is the true model of myth« (p. 106). The mythic component of human self-invention arises out of the kinds of sociotechnical interactions that are canvassed in Yusupova's figuration of piano, e-guitar, and laptop in *Pink Mouse*. Her constructivist collages reflect this tradition of thought, which in its most vulgarized form easily falls prey to accusations of relativism, on one end, and technological determinism, on the other. It is either alleged that the human condition can be twisted into any shape that the powers that be may choose, or that the instruments utilized for our species survival have quasi-invincible character-forming potency. This is not the place to attempt to arbitrate this fundamental, philosophical controversy. Rather, the limitations of both positions come to the fore in light of the putative anthropomorphisms animating the figurations in *Pink Mouse*, and this includes the figure of Pink Mouse itself. In deeming these animated cartoon props simply or straight-forwardly »anthropomorphic,« as the term is commonly understood, spectators of this mediaopera commit the fallacy of human essentialization (Scholte, 2017; Landgraf, 2017).

The only way for the grand piano or Pink Mouse to be anthropomorphic, i.e. to be invested with human traits, is to assume that there are identifiable human universals that can be mapped onto these surrogate carriers of agency, to essentialize the projection as an ahistorical expression of quintessential humanity. But smart computing – the mediaopera's natural habitat – challenges this conceit. It is unclear where the line between human and non-human agency can be drawn. With the influx of artificial intelligence and prosthetic ideation, the boundary is set to shift. New configurations of humanoid myth-making may already be incumbent on the virtual environment that increasingly separates us from our fellow earthlings imposing new degrees of separation (the mathematical measure of »social distance« which is held to be logarithmic to the size of the population (Samoylenko et al., 2023)). If there are »six degrees of separation« now, it may be a greater multiple in the future. The visual score of *Pink Mouse* reveals a fundamental attribution error pervading the discourse on anthropomorphism and related claims alleging our computational machinery to be anthropomorphic. The »human traits« we see the piano and Pink Mouse acting out in this graphico-musical plunge into Erofeev's poetic reverie show themselves, on closer inspection, to be not so much *anthropomorphic* projections as *skeuomorphic* affordances. »Skeuomorphism,« a term coined in the late 19th century by an English anthropologist, describes a phenomenon observed in tool evolution where material features of an artifact tend to outlast the actual material instantiation of that artifact because the original function morphs into a functional ornament conveying purposiveness with respect to a relevant domain of problem-solving practices (Blitz, 2015; Colley March, 1889). Skeuomorphism explains why primeval clay pots feature



woven wicker patterns as if they were woven from plant material, as they originally were, and why some digital cameras make a click sound even though they have no aperture that closes mechanically. The wicker patterning of clay pots and the acoustic design of a digital camera attest to the functional design of technological instruments operating on a timeline that is not congruent with the material reality of tools in use but that consolidates lived arrangements reflected in a sphere of aesthetic surrogacy that travels under the radar of consciousness (the skeuomorphic conception of selfhood goes mostly unmentioned in cultural studies and philosophical anthropology).

Conversely, skeuomorphism is a hot-button topic in the arena of digital interface design (Darius, 2023a; 2023b). The wholesale migration of real-world practices to virtual correlates upheld by visual metaphors on screens involves extensive skills and experience with respect to skeuomorphic transitioning (Taylor & Dell'Unto, 2021). Does the online calendar need to feature torn-page optics? And how much shadowing should be added to the buttons on a virtual synthesizer, so they resemble the original three-dimensional object? Sensibilities vary between engineers, designers, and lay people, and they also skew generationally (Pereira Urbano et al, 2020). Whole industry brands and product lines arise from different design intuitions around the degree of skeuomorphism that are appropriate to users being able to adopt new digital services with ease and comfort (Manjoo, 2012). Those discussions and investment decisions determine if specific tools and technologies are ready for market, which limits the conversation about skeuomorphic feature design to the plethora of computational devices developed for specific applications in science or the commercial sectors. Mediaopera as genre – and *Pink Mouse* as exemplary case in point – invites us to expand on this limited conception of tools and technologies in commodity form and to adopt a conception of »technics« that encompasses ourselves, too. In the self-constitutive entanglement we – players, users, problem-solvers – have with instruments in social arenas of shared experience lies a unique ability to survive (albeit at great cost to the planet and other species). Given the hybrid constitution of humanity, skeuomorphism is not only a technological phenomenon but significantly also a human-apparition effect. The analogue conception of humanity that Yusupova's *Pink Mouse* situates in the digital lifeworld may finally amount to what I propose to call a »human skeuomorph.« This conceit of agency arguably informs the rendering of the mediaopera because, as functional default setting of a sensory formatting that is still widespread, it points to forms of sociality that continue to feel familiar and agreeable even after being discontinued in practice. The analogue sensitivities presumptively guiding the anthropomorphic characters in *Pink Mouse* have grown obsolete in exact measure to the material cultural practices, to which they were originally tethered, being replaced by social mediation.

Pink. Mouse.

The title lands a double punch: Pink. Mouse.

In the chart of colour symbolization, »pink« has advanced from girlie connotations of »sugar and spice and everything nice« to a bold statement of political convictions. It is the colour of non-binarity. When the Kant statue in Kaliningrad was vandalised for representing unwelcome Western influence in 2018, a bucket of pink paint was emptied



on the memorial. Images of the political statement circulated through the media worldwide (Chaly, 2020).

If ›pink‹ celebrates non-binarity (and is the target of its critique), ›mouse‹ bifurcates the world between digital practices and analogue givens: The term designates both a computer appliance and a kind of rodent whose newborn litter is so pink that the babies are called ›pinkies‹. Presumably, this is why we think of mice as being pink though they are predominately white, brown, and grey in the wild. The mouse occupies pride of place in the bestiary of modern childhood, being one of the first pets that an obliging parent will bring into the home. In fables, too, this animal has become supercharged with political associations. From ›The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse‹ in *Aesops Fables* to ›The Old Cat and the Young Mouse‹ (1668-1694) in Jean de la Fontaine's compilation of animal allegories to *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman, graphic novel on the Holocaust memory serialized from 1980 to 1981.

The challenge of ›pink‹ and the dual nature of ›mouse‹ are taken up in *Pink Mouse's* libretto when it alludes to one of the most influential essays of ecofeminism and technoscience: Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985). Art manifestos have punctuated the drumroll of modernity since the onset of industrial alienation. Futurists, Constructivists, Cubists, Vorticists, Dadaists, Surrealists - these aesthetic and anti-aesthetic movements were first asserted as programmatic provocations. Both iterations of *Pink Mouse*, Erofeev's and Yusupova's, mimic such saber-rattling postures in lexical, acoustic, and pictorial metrics. But the Haraway citation is not just postural, it is assertive. At a certain point, *Pink Mouse* reveals to Maroussia: »I am a mouse cyborg!« (Yusupova, 2022, p. 11). Before Haraway, the cyborg was a fever-dream of science fiction writers, mostly male, who projected fantasies of racist, patriarchal, and anthropocentric domination onto the image of a future incarnation of humanity augmented by machine parts. Haraway determined that the cyborg – this »condensed image of both imagination and material reality« – was being hijacked to further a reactionary ideology. Her manifesto re-inscribed this figure with an alternative, techno-utopian aspirationalism that would be inclusive, anti-authoritarian, and non-exploitative, thus ushering in a progressive »historical transformation« (Haraway, 1985).

And as it happens, an actual ›mouse cyborg,‹ i.e. the first patented animal, stands at the centre of another essay by Haraway, *Modest Witness@Second Millennium. FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™* (1996). In this piece, she ponders the cultural significance of a technologically modified laboratory mouse commonly used in medical research. The species has a gene mutation resulting in an inhibited immune system, which allows for the testing of a wide range of tissue, tumour grafts, and genetic disorders, like cancer. The organism does not reject foreign cell matter. Some variants are hairless so the pink skin tone is visible. A memorable experiment involving this animal yielded a reality stranger than fiction, a Frankensteinian monster known as the Vacanti mouse (named after the scientist brothers who conducted the experiment) (Haraway & Goodeve, 1996/2018). The mouse seemed to have a human ear growing out of the side of its body. In reality, the ear had been grown by implanting cow cartilage cells under the skin of a nude laboratory



mouse and attaching an ear-shaped splint to the outside of its body into which the cartilage then moulded itself (Famous Pictures, 2013).¹⁶

The image of the naked mouse with a human ear protuberance made the rounds in 1997, when the Vacanti brothers published their findings. It prompted much outrage and public protest against genetic engineering run riot although no genetic manipulation was involved (Noah, 2015).¹⁷ Grafting and growing – the skills of plastic surgery but also of gardening – were the only techniques utilized in making this arrestingly poignant monstrosity: do we see ugly Maroussia’s plight, the grooming violence inflicted upon her and her struggle for transformative growth, in the laboratory animal which, according to Haraway, establishes a new kind of kinship between humans and mice, between cancer patients and animals for cancer research who are sisters in suffering? (Haraway, 1996)

CODA

Grafting is of course also a principal manoeuvre used in art and culture. Grafting a Erofeev’s book onto Yusupova’s oeuvre and growing a mediaopera from it. Grafting an analogue operatic art onto a digital media platform, grafting a children’s book onto an adult contemporary media culture.

Yusupova’s transmutation of *Pink Mouse* entered the public sphere in a precarious geopolitical constellation: a Russian mediaopera furnished with English subtitles screened at a German university. The 2024 world premiere of a mediaopera that was finished and openly available since 2021 also raised pressing questions about art, technology, semiosis, witnessing, and the constitution of an audience in an age of dwindling budgets for state-sponsored institutions of legitimate culture. A very different approach to the challenge of composing for an audience that no longer constitutes itself as a collective gathered together in time and space has recently been put forward by filmmaker Gary Hustwit with *Eno* (2024), a documentary biography on Brian Eno, another renown composer in the mediaopera field. In reflection of Eno’s artistic agenda, the film uses generative AI to recompose itself with every showing. The mediaopera is a genre still in formation. Whatever movements of mind the poet may have intended to stir with the fictive rodent nested in the head of a fictive girl, and the composer amplified with pictures and sounds, their combined artistic effort partakes of an epistemic whirl in which childhood sexuality, the human/animal continuum, the user/machine interface, and the compositional phantasmagoria of automated creativity converge in a generative hub of assemblage.

Now that machines have acquired problem-solving skills akin to, and even outstripping, the human capacities they plagiarize, old notions of anthropomorphism no longer hold up to scrutiny. Universalist, ahistorical conceptions of agency do not take the social dimension of combinatory personhood sufficiently into account. Yusupova

¹⁶ See, *The Famous Pictures Collection. 1000 words behind the photos.* May 16, 2013. <https://www.famouspictures.org/ear-mouse/>

¹⁷ Pink mouse cyborgs recently made the headlines again, not in the context of genetic engineering but another kind of culture wars. When laboratories were closed down because they allegedly promote the creation of »transgender mice,« howls of derision filled the blogosphere: The culture warriors had confused the intentions of the researchers who were working not on »transgender« but on »transgenic« mice (Smith, 2025).



positions the mediaopera as an analogue haven in a vaguely hostile digital environment and thereby draws attention to the workings of agency in relation to tool use. Compound humanity forms around principles of aggregation that have an instrumental dimension and recall the periodic table of elements devised by Mendeleev, family name of Maroussia, the heroine of *Pink Mouse*. In concert, Erofeev and Yusupova have authored a meta-mediaopera that reflects on the conceit of human self-understanding as a form of anthropomorphism. Pink Mouse is a literary device that exemplifies the attribution of human qualities to an unspecified carrier, an imaginary friend. In the original prose poem, a fiction within a fiction enacts the mechanism of transferral within the pages of a book. *Pink Mouse* rendered as mediaopera ascribes human traits to the genre itself and thus conveys the projective mechanism via a techno-functional logic more in line with *skeuomorphism*. Human agency as projected in and by Yusupova's semiotic specifications shows itself to be a metaphysical conceit whose nostalgic appeal is no longer in alignment with the lived conditions of sociality from which patterns of agency are finally generated. The sensorium of analogue experience is, arguably, a ›human skeuomorph,‹ that is to say a mythic remnant of a former way of being.

Like other functional attributes of superannuated contrivances, human agency comes to be sublimated in ideas of self-referential personhood (in effect, ›cognitive devices‹) that are prone to outlast the spontaneous, combinatory reality of the material relational networks to which they once obtained. What *Pink Mouse*, the mediaopera, finally exposes is the run-a-muck aggregating that pervades our digital commons. The broadband mash-up of parts and wholes incessantly pounding at attention spans, sustained in generational succession, and non-renewable in every instance, calls for new ways of parsing the social-technical-human continuum. A future touchstone for expressing individuated agency may lie in counter-composing the morph-imperative of that AI-shaped splint now attached to the social body.

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