The Anarchist Potential through Critical Posthumanism in Contemporary Russian Cinema: An Analysis of D. Moiseev's Science-Fiction Film *Contacts*

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Introduction

In this article, I examine, from the perspective of cultural research, how science-fiction cinema, in its guise as a fundamentally semantically open genre, becomes a refuge for the anarchist imagination through a critical study of anthropocentrism in the context of political censorship. I will do so by analyzing contemporary Russian cinema, focusing on the film *Contacts* (2023), directed by D. Moiseev. My study will also briefly reference two other contemporary fantastic films: *Dust* (2005) by Sergei Loban and *Anna's Feelings* (2023) by Anna Melikyan.The relevance of this research stems from the current political climate in Russia, where freedom of speech is formally permitted but effectively suppressed. In such conditions, it is crucial to highlight successful examples of representing alternative perspectives on the state. This is significant not only because independent films continue to be produced but also because they are being released and remain accessible to a broad audience. My research is driven by an interest in uncovering traces of anarchist thought in places where it is not typically articulated explicitly. This is particularly relevant for the period of the Soviet Union (short for Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1922-91), when Marxism served as the foundation for suppressing anarchist projects and ideas.[1] Additionally, in the post-Soviet era, anarchism carries a stigma within academic discourse, often remaining latent rather than overtly expressed in various philosophical traditions. However, its influence is evident, shaping key directions in contemporary humanities and cultural studies, such as "new materialist" thought.[2]

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Film analysis serves as the central link in my work. The study of the science-fiction genre holds a special place in cultural discourse; while it was once regarded as a form of popular culture with limited political potential, with the advent of postmodernism, the fantastic in cinema has become the subject of intensive research concerning the presence of political resistance. In this regard, I build upon the anarchist perspective on cinema first proposed by Susan White in 1996. At the time, she wrote, "Today we are learning to look for revolutionary messages even in soap operas—and they are there!"[3] Later, James Newton expanded anarchist film analysis beyond critiques of capitalism and the state apparatus[4], bringing it into the broader field of cultural research. Following this approach, I examine film as a culturally determined phenomenon, focusing my analysis on narratives in which encounters with alien beings on Earth play a central role.

Before proceeding to the analysis, I want to examine some theoretical aspects in which the alien on Earth emerges as an ideal anarchist figure, enabling us to critically rethink both the phenomenon of the state and the concept of freedom. On the one hand, I will outline the conventional understanding of anarchism. On the other hand, I will trace anarchist interest in post-anthropology from the origins of anarchist thought, as seen in the works of P. A. Kropotkin and L. N. Tolstoy, to contemporary developments in critical posthumanism and anarcho-feminism.

Typically, the term "anarchism" refers to a socio-political movement that rejects any form of human authority over individuals, regardless of whether such authority arises from voluntary submission or coercion. According to the most universal interpretation of anarchism, the role of individual freedom and choice is fundamental to it. However, anarchists do not advocate pure chaos; rather, they seek to construct a social model based on voluntariness, free association, and collective cooperation. Within this broad traditional framework, the concept of freedom in anarchism remains deeply anthropological, as it is tied to human ethics and the construction of alternative social structures. Yet, even among the founding thinkers of anarchism, there exists a fundamental engagement with non-human species.

For instance, in the anarcho-communist doctrine of P. A. Kropotkin, ethical ideals originate in the historical development of humanity and are shaped by a biosocial law that highlights the central role of intra-specific mutual aid in the evolution of the animal world. In his work *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902) Kropotkin draws on Darwin's contributions, particularly the concept of the 'struggle for existence', which Darwin proposed as a unifying principle of progressive development. This concept allowed philosophy, biology, and social theory to integrate a complex system of phenomena into a single, interconnected process. Kropotkin emphasizes how this concept has been misinterpreted, noting that Darwin originally used the term metaphorically to include the fundamental interdependence of living beings, not just a struggle for individual survival or reproductive success. In other words, Darwin acknowledged 'collective interests' as integral to life.

Kropotkin practically criticizes anthropocentrism by highlighting how this broader meaning of Darwinian struggle was overlooked and distorted, particularly under the influence of economists who reinterpreted it as a struggle for personal gain. In response, he revisits the concept of interspecific struggle, presenting it from the opposite perspective—one of assistance and cooperation as essential factors in improving survival. He further argues that the source of human morality lies in the instinct of sociability, an inherent trait shared by all living beings[5]. This, he believes, directs human aspirations not only toward conflict but also toward solidarity. Consequently, the desire for solidarity and, by extension, mutual freedom, can be redefined in a post-anthropocentric framework as a relationship between humans and nonhumans.

Another compelling example of post-anthropocentrism resides in the works of Leo Tolstoy. Although Tolstoy identified primarily as a Christian, his ideas—especially his unwavering critique of the state, the prevailing social order, violence, and militarism—resonated with anarchists worldwide. One of his notable works, the 1886 novel *Kholstomer*[6], exemplifies this perspective. In the story, an old and sick stallion named Kholstomer recounts his life to other horses, expressing his bewilderment at the institution of property and the fundamental principles underlying human relations with the external world:

> At that time, I could not at all understand what they meant by speaking of me as being a man's property. The words "my horse" applied to me, a live horse, seemed to me as strange as to say, "my land", "my air", or "my water."… They have agreed that of any given thing only one person may use the word mine, and he who in this game of theirs may use that conventional word about the greatest number of things is considered the happiest[7].

I draw attention to two key features of this passage. The first is that Tolstoy structures the entire story around the animal's fundamental alienation from both the state and private property due to its inherent belonging to nature. Here, culture is depicted as a force that imposes restrictions on original freedom. The second key feature concerns the manner in which the horse's subjectivity is stripped away through his body. The body becomes politically objectified. This idea of bodily incarceration reaches its extreme in the story's conclusion: when the horse is killed, his corpse is transformed into horse meat—a mere commodity for human consumption. I will return to the theme of the body as a fundamental aspect of the problem of freedom later in my film analysis.

Thus, as early as the late 19th century, anarchists recognized nonhumans, represented by animals, as sources of reflection on the limitations imposed on original freedoms in the process of social organization—an organization shaped by human culture and consequently inherently anthropocentric. Nevertheless, in the examples considered, a firm boundary is drawn between humans and animals. P. A. Kropotkin primarily focuses on intraspecific rather than interspecific mutual aid, thereby overlooking the potential for cross-species cooperation as a means of establishing anarchist relations. Similarly, L. N. Tolstoy, following the literary tradition of realism, maintains an anthropocentric perspective; his nonhuman protagonist is ultimately denied freedom, as the humans slaughter and consume him.

After nearly a century, anarchist theory has evolved in the postmodern era and within the context of contemporary global environmental crises. Today, critical post-anthropocentrism has emerged as one of the leading currents in the humanities, often carrying traces of anarchist thought. For instance, the eco-philosophical critical posthumanism of Rosi Braidotti calls for a reassessment of humanity's relationship with animals, particularly in light of the global environmental consequences of advanced capitalism. In this economic system, the very source of capital is reduced to the genetic code of living matter, as the entire planet is commodified through the reproduction and genetic enhancement of various life forms[8]. The roots of this issue can be traced back to the very foundations of culture, which is grounded in language—a tool that, according to Braidotti, is inherently anthropocentric. Within this framework, the human is defined in opposition to all "others" in accordance with the concept of political anatomy, wherein the functional body is expected to conform to idealized standards of health, youth, and beauty[9].

Braidotti sees the solution in the project of an alternative epistemology that dismantles the hierarchy between biological species and abolishes the idea of "man" as the measure of all things. This concerns the concept of posthuman subjectivity—an idea of the subject as the result of mutually agentic and responsible relations between humans and nonhumans, including technologies, animals, and natural phenomena. The idea of the posthuman in critical posthumanism is fundamentally a political project, a kind of dream of a better world beyond existing forms of violence and domination. As M. Rachmaninova aptly demonstrates, although the text does not explicitly mention anarchists, it draws utopian inspiration for a better world through Donna Haraway, whose ideas are directly linked to the anarchist imagination of the science-fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin[10]. In this context, the fantastic emerges as a source of utopian thought, capable of transcending established epistemological principles—firstly, because of its openness and incompleteness, and secondly, as a cultural representation of the unlimited possible[11], bringing it closer in nature to the anarchist idea of freedom as a foundational principle.

The Italian researcher C. Bottici takes a more deliberate approach in uncovering the connections between critiques of anthropocentrism and anarchism. She conceptualizes the critique of anthropocentrism through anarcho-feminist principles, advocating for the attainment of freedom via an ontological shift toward transindividuality, wherein individuation is understood as the process of interaction among multiple bodies at the infra-, inter-, and supra-individual levels[12]. This framework challenges any hierarchical distinctions between species. Bottici highlights that bodies emerge as phenomena resulting from inter-individual interactions, as they are embodied forms shaped by supra-individual forces, such as geopolitical location. Simultaneously, the characteristics of embodiment are determined intra-individually, that is, within the bodies themselves, in conditions of dependence on air, food, or hormones that become integral parts of them. These levels are interconnected, and the capacities of external ecosystems as supra-individual structures influence modes of cultural production, which, in turn, determine, for example, dietary practices[13]. From the perspective of transindividual ontology, as Bottici clarifies, bodies are not separate from the environment but, rather, conceives of it as an extension of it.[14]

This approach resolves a crucial issue in Bottici's analysis—namely, that various levels of interaction shape the formation of the individual body. The crux of the matter is that inequality, the central object of anarchist critique, is already manifest at the infra-individual level, where bodies, even at a molecular scale, experience the adverse effects of political objectification within capitalist production. Some bodies, for example, are exposed to toxic substances such as pesticides in food, which result from the use of low-quality fertilizers. Others, though more privileged yet no less politicized, may be subject to the effects of antidepressants or testosterone-enhancing substances. Thus, Bottici identifies a gap in existing research on inequality, even within approaches rooted in Michel Foucault's philosophical ideas on biopolitics as practices of control in the discursive organization of bodies. While these approaches most consistently explore the relationship between corporeality and the restriction of freedom, they focus primarily on individual and inter-individual levels, thereby perpetuating an anthropocentric perspective on inequality and ultimately reinforcing

hierarchical relationships between species. Since all beings are susceptible to infra-individual influences, there is a need for a philosophical foundation that grants any body not only agency but also subjectivity in its relation to culture. For my research, this understanding of critical post-anthropocentrism proves particularly relevant in the analyzing of medium aspects, which, as a unique extension of the body, become especially vulnerable to external influence—for example, in the case of blood or similar bodily fluids. For R. Braidotti and C. Bottici, the defining condition of primordial equality and freedom lies in the concept of vital matter as mutable modes of embodiment that foster the emergence of a unified and agentic materiality. Rooted in new materialism, they emphasize that all phenomena, including theoretical knowledge, manifest in diverse material forms. Within this perspective, the interaction among embodied agents is not merely an event that takes place within the world but rather an act of world-making itself. This perspective, therefore, abolishes the fundamental hierarchical premise that privileges things over their expressions.

Having briefly examined the historical connections between anarchism and post-anthropocentrism, I would like to emphasize that these discourses have always been intertwined in their fundamental conceptualization of freedom and ethics in interspecies interaction. They remain relevant today as a possible epistemological framework for addressing the global challenges of contemporary society, particularly in the context of postmodern logic, which critically reexamines the foundations of corporeality as well as the peculiar marginalization of this category in academic discourse. The latter, for the most part, continues to inherit a worldview shaped by social constructivist approaches. As observed in contemporary humanities, particularly within anarcho-feminism and critical posthumanism, the new emphasis on a unified corporeality and the recognition of bodies as participants in interactions based on vital materiality extends the anarchist potential beyond the human and thereby justifies the pursuit of freedom for nonhumans. In my analysis, I will further explore how the bodies of nonhumans in cinematic representations actualize this anarchist potential, briefly outlining the logic of film analysis from anarchist and posthumanist perspectives and highlighting the role of semantically open images in this process.

Anarchist approaches to cinema studies frequently engage with surrealist cinema. In accordance with its political program, surrealism overcomes the violent order in images that build upon (fr. sur-) reality as a culturally conditioned phenomenon for humans (-realism). In studies of this kind, the focus is often on free, collective, and self-managed modes of production, such as those characteristic of the French avant-garde.[15] At times, these studies embark on consistent critiques of institutions, hierarchies, and systems of power pointing to narrative-driven and audience-accessible forms of surrealist cinema. The most striking instance is the work of L. Bunuel, whose films offer a sustained critique of bourgeois culture[16]. What interests us here are surrealism's characteristic stylistic techniques, which can serve as a source of anarchist imaginaries—specifically, the expression of the "miraculous" as a rupture in the system. In the case of the Surrealists, such techniques often involve a playful subversion of realism, which is typically achieved through expressive means such as romantic fantasy and irony, images of hallucination and illogical juxtapositions, as well as symbolism.

The experiences of cinema research in posthumanist optics, however, intersect with the anarchist imagination from a different perspective, namely, in the philosophical proposal to think about cinema together "with…"[17] wherein, after the ellipsis, any agents can be present, be they plants, animals, technology, or even the earth as a whole. In this perspective, the history of cinema is re-examined for the presence of post-anthropocentric elements in films. The aim is to identify materials that offer a subjective position to nonhumans within the filmic space, thereby undermining the conventional political order. Firstly, representations become a key area of research interest. As noted above, posthumanism asserts post-dualism and abolishes the fundamental hierarchical assumption of the superiority of things over their expressions. Consequently, representations of nonhumans are not seen as mere copies of referents that weaken reality but, on the contrary, as phenomena that maintain a direct connection with their referents, affirming their presence at the moment of their appearance on screen. The foundation for such a connection is provided by cinema itself—this constitutes the second research aspect within the posthumanist perspective. As a technological medium, cinema facilitates the

coexistence of different forms of life, blurs the boundary between self and other for humans, and yet preserves the unique features of the "other"—whether through a scientific, research-oriented, or entertainment-based lens, depending on the film's genre.

Notably, research in posthumanist cinema frequently intersects with studies of early French cinema linked to surrealism. For example, the works of Jean Painleve, a pioneer of documentary filmmaking associated with the early phase of French surrealism, are of particular interest. Painlevé, known for his celebrated films about the underwater world, saw cinema as a means of identifying and critiquing societal problems. The underwater life of seahorses, jellyfish, algae, and other organic and inorganic forms he captured appears as a surreal manifesto of creative evolution against the primacy of culture. From a contemporary perspective, the content of his films aligns with posthumanist themes. In his works, underwater creatures emerge as wondrous, almost alien life forms, as their world has virtually no intersection with the human world. They move, contract, and appear to dance in the water surrounding them—often eluding both the camera and the viewer's gaze. Dance and performance, as modes of existence governed by the principle of "here and now," assert these beings' freedom within their environment, as they do not conform to the structures of a state or notions of purposeful human action in culture. Furthermore, lacking anthropomorphic features, their unusual bodies and movements in space remain enigmatic to the viewer. The idea of the miraculous reveals a characteristic intersection between the fantastic and the documentary. The existence of various life forms on screen attests to the presence of wonder. In this sense, Painleve adhered to the articulated concept that science, even in its documentary form, is fiction at its core. Researchers frequently interpret his films—depicting the free and marvelous life of bizarre underwater creatures—as a challenge to indifference.[18] The rejection of indifference, in turn, aligns with anarchist sensibilities. In a posthumanist reading, the documentary properties of film and their connection to real, embodied experience become crucial.

Having explored how anthropocentrism manifests through specific cinematic techniques in early films from anarchist and posthumanist perspectives, it is equally important to consider science-fiction as a genre. The alien is one of its most characteristic and key figures. By definition, an alien is an entity that is "other" with subversive portent for human society. However, cinematic narratives often depict alien societies as mirrors of the human, even exaggerating various features, such as hierarchical order. For instance, the first on-screen appearance of aliens occurs in one of early cinema history's most famous productions—Georges Melies *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). In the film's second half, humans engage in a struggle for territorial supremacy with the Selenites, the Moon's insect-like inhabitants, who are organized under a monarchical system. The plot projects themes of fear and perceived threat: in the film's conclusion, one of the aliens makes it to Earth, where he is captured and ceases to pose a danger to humanity. Regardless of anthropomorphic qualities, these aliens remain inhuman, and from the perspective of posthumanist philosophy, this invites an anarchist analysis, which I will explore further.

In his article, "Democracy in Popular Culture," James J. Hughes, a bioethics researcher and sociologist, notes that during the 1950s, cinematic representations of aliens often symbolize fear of collectivism or, conversely, present aliens as revolutionary agents of class and/or anti-imperialist struggle.[19] A striking example of American anxieties regarding collectivism is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), directed by Don Siegel. The film's plot revolves around the inhabitants of a Californian town, who are gradually replaced by alien clones that emerge from pods and operate within a collective consciousness. Hughes discusses the film's political anxieties, but I would also like to highlight the profound distrust of the body which drives the plot: the clones resemble humans in appearance and behavior, yet their bodies are ultimately "fake" due to mutation, rendering them unreliable vessels for individuality. A "revolutionary" counterexample Hughes discusses is *Childhood's End* (1953) by Arthur C. Clarke, which offers, I would argue, the first positive depiction in film of collectivist posthumanism. In this narrative, Earth falls under the patient stewardship of extraterrestrials, whose intervention to stem planetary strife fosters a higher level of empathy and morality in humans.[20] Thus, the idea of aliens as

extraterrestrial yet anthropomorphic-thinking beings in addition to the "human" allows for an ambivalent interpretation: they can either serve as agents of humanization or, conversely, as forces of dehumanization.

Analysis

With these themes in mind, I will now turn to the film that concerns me within the political context of Soviet and post-soviet Russian culture. Science-fiction holds a special place in Soviet and post-Soviet cineotography due to its long-term subjugation to political censorship. In the early USSR, the government did not view science-fiction films positively: rather, the genre was denegrated because it distracted people from the important task of building a socialist society. Later, in 1934, following the First Congress of Soviet Writers, which codified the tenets of "socialist realism," a specific directive was issued decreeing the popularization of Soviet scientific and technical achievements. This led to a shift in the science-fiction genre's focus toward youth and adolescent audiences. Fantastic cinema, with scientists, researchers, and their inventions taking center stage, began to proliferate in the 1950s and 1960s, however space exploration in Soviet films largely avoided depicting encounters with aliens. If aliens do appear, they were almost always humanoid[21] and devoid of external features of otherness (see the films of P. Klushantsev, R. Viktorov and G. Danelia). The only exception is the Soviet hit *Through Thorns to the Stars* (1981), based on K. Bulychev's novel, in which antagonistic extraterrestrials wear masks to conceal their ugly faces. The conspicuous absence of alien imagery in Soviet fiction suggests that even the mere representation of otherness was an unspoken taboo.

This makes the low-budget, full-length post-Soviet Russian fantasy film *Contacts* (2024) directed and written by Dmitry Moiseev, particularly interesting, as one of its main characters is an alien. As the director himself clarifies in an interview, he references Soviet fiction in his film as a byproduct of the story line. Additionally, the film plays with intertextual references to the Strugatsky brothers' renowned sci-fi novel *Roadside Picnic* (1972) which further embeds it within the tradition of Soviet-era fantasy under conditions of censorship and political dictatorship.

According to the film's plot, the aliens, called "biopogs", arrive on Earth in 1980 and settle in various locations, including the USSR. The main action takes place in a fantastical version of post-Soviet Russia in the early 2000s. Visually, traces of the Soviet state are hyperbolized in the daily lives of the characters, not as a reflection of contemporary reality in Russia but, rather, as a means of stylizing this reality through nostalgic retro motifs reminiscent of post-Soviet fiction literature. This technique lends the film a documentary-like authenticity, even as it adopts an ironic stance toward this nostalgia. For instance, a significant portion of the film consists of segments styled as Soviet-era popular science programs. These inserts explain the history of the aliens' arrival on Earth and capture enthusiastic Soviet expectations regarding how contact with extraterrestrials might solve social and personal problems. The experts providing scientific assessments of the alien arrivalists deliver their insights with extreme seriousness. However, this seriousness is ironic and subverts the discourse's pretense to objectivity, exposing its function as a construct embedded within Soviet ideology. Scientific knowledge emerges as a tool of an entrenched and repressive order which perpetuates itself through systemic violence.

In the imagined post-Soviet present depicted in the film, society has grown disillusioned concerning the import of alien contact:

> *Alien research has stalled, no benefits have been found, initial enthusiasm has been replaced by paranoia, and the anticipated "second phase of contact" has never materialized. The euphoria of first encounters has faded into a melancholic denouement—depression.*

Equally significant is how the film's timeline spans from the late 1980s—the period marking the beginning of the Soviet Union's collapse—to the 2000s, coinciding with the shift in power and transition to a new political regime. In Russian-language journalistic discourse, it is customary to contrast the so-called "*rakish nineties*" with the "*stable zeros.*" In this reading, following the formation of the Russian Federation in 1991, the decade was marked by chaotic privatization, the painful transition to a market economy that impoverished people,

and a constitutional crisis that led to the entrenchment of organized crime. In contrast, the 2000s are framed as a period of socio-economic stabilization and development, a theme that is particularly evident in the discourse of Russian politicians who champion liberalism.[22] *Contacts* plays with this dualism, presenting the structure of the 2000s state as a direct inheritance of Soviet times which merges with the unstable lawlessness of Russia in the 1990s.

In the first two scenes of the film, space is shown first through the eyes of a little boy secretly observing an event at a closed Research Institute adjacent to an alien ship hovering in the air. The perspective then shifts to the protagonist, Nina—a nurse working at the Institute—who prepares a syringe of medicine for her ailing father in a modest apartment. The subsequent scene depicts a provincial Russian town, characterized by dilapidated infrastructure, empty streets, nondescript buildings, and rusting playgrounds. Against this backdrop of poverty and bleakness in which a sick old man, a street child, and a weary nurse occupy the foreground, a giant, Christmas-decoration-like alien ship soars into the air in defiance of gravity, like a wondrous promising artifact. As the film unfolds, this miraculous puncturing in the fabric of reality is revealed to be a romanticized fantasy of a better world beyond the current system.

The structure of state power is depicted as an instrument of confinement, a theme explicitly conveyed through the film's central point of conflict. Inside the Research Institute, which functions as a symbolic penitentiary system, an anthropomorphic alien named Vitalik is held captive and subjected to cruel experiments. Most interactions with him involve coercive procedures emblematic of biopolitical control: his body is restrained, wired to machines, injected with substances, and force-fed. In effect, his role in the film aligns closely with that of a colonized animal: stripped of any human rights, his body is viewed as a resource for human exploitation. Vitalik's representation fits within the established typology of alien imagery: and he is the quintessential victim of human cruelty. According to the plot, studying his biology is of secondary concern for the laboratory; the primary goal is the extraction of "prak"—a special liquid forcibly harvested from the alien body which is analogous to human blood. The extracted substance,

which deprives the alien of vitality and health, is of high value on the black market, because it is shrouded in a mythos that it can cure any disease.

Continuous with the romanticization of the alien ship, prak functions as a miraculous liquid capable of healing broken bodies and a crippled society. For the viewer of the film, the critical relation to the "hope" it represents is ironized: a side effect of "prak" is the rapid, grotesque overgrowth of human fingernails. In the diegetic space of the film, scientists report on television how they are studying the length and properties of nails because it is a rare and important phenomenon. From the perspective of Bottici's transindividual ontology, nail growth is nothing more than an infra-individual bodily response to the placebo effect—exploited by the state to pacify its citizens through mass media. Within this framework, the alien's extracted, depleted blood serves as a reflection of the Russian citizen's place within the state—naive, hopeful, and deceived into believing in the power of an ineffective cure. Citizens, desperate to obtain "prak" from underground sources, remain entangled in a system where organized crime and state authority are inextricably interlinked and both thrive on sustaining the illusion of a miraculous remedy for what ills people. The film's narrative is constructed in a documentary-like style, as though the viewer is watching a real scientific research program that provides facts about how interaction with extraterrestrials has become part of scientific governmental-adjudicated industry. In this context, biopolitics functions as an ever-growing system of domination, metaphorically extending its reach to cosmic proportions—an ironic nod to the defunct USSR's real-life imperial ambitions in space exploration.

Within the film's diegetic space, resistance to state violence emerges through acts of empathy. The protagonist, Nina (Irina Salikova), initially serves as a laboratory assistant tasked with monitoring the alien's vital signs to ensure he remains alive for continuous extraction of "prak." However, she gradually begins to interact with him outside of her official duties. Observing his behavior, she frequently remarks, "You are strange." Yet, rather than recoiling from his strangeness, she is intrigued by it. Her recognition of the alien's strangeness transcends the institutional dehumanization imposed upon him, granting

him a semblance of subjectivity. Although he does not understand human speech and does not speak, she tells him about herself and asks about his well-being, thereby violating the established institutional order of interaction. The humanoid reciprocates and, in return, gently pats her on the head while she sleeps.

Further interaction between the characters reveals anarchist inflections from early post-Soviet Russia in the 1990s. The social, political and economic uncertainty of an emergent state in formation coexisted with the political and civic imagination of a better life displacing the rigid mechanisms of dehumanization that had sustained hierarchy in the former Soviet Union. The radically liberal imperative of the new Russian government was the decision to denounce any official state ideology, contra the Marxist USSR. As expressed in the Constitution of the Russian Federation, "*no ideology can be established as that of the state and mandatory*."[23] Absent any ideological direction, the state offered its citizens the hope of prosperity through the adoption of a market economy. Under circumstances, the concept of individual freedom, as well as society's reordering, remained rather vague. This lack of clarity in the 1990s led to a pervasive sense of societal disorientation, a diminishing of civic engagement, and an infantilized reliance on the state as a political institution capable of solving citizens' vital problems.

At first glance, such a historical and cultural landscape appears to depict an anti-anarchist situation. Firstly, there is the absence of civic consciousness and, secondly, there is the very chaos with which anarchism is mistakenly equated in everyday discourse. Can an anarchic imagination emerge under these circumstances? Arguably, yes. In a situation of isolation, with lack of experience in community-building, the newly minted Russian citizen could compensate for this loss by romanticizing new elements within their culture. For example, the 1990s were characterized by a kind of cult—an exalted form of consumption—focusing on rapidly spreading foreign products (chocolate bars, Coca-Cola, chewing gum) and toys (Lego, Tamagotchi, Nintendo, Sega), which became symbols of freedom from the infamous former state power, as preserved in collective memory associated with the Soviet Union, and its repressive regime.

The director of *Contacts* captures this sentiment in a scene that does not fundamentally influence the further development of the story but subtly reinforces its themes. In the middle of the film, Nina, following the laboratory protocol, must spend the night with the humanoid in order to monitor his well-being. Finding himself alone with her in a semi-abandoned laboratory warehouse locked from the outside, the alien wanders among shelves of stored items and points to something. Responding, she retrieves a plastic bag with a photograph of a kitten (**Fig. 1**).

The alien points to the kitten, and it is the image that interests him. Kittens as pets are a cultural phenomenon associated with transcending one's anthropocentrism through empathy based on aesthetic pleasure. Following the implied perspective of the film, the image of the kitten—a defenseless animal that naturally elicits sympathy -- functions as an associative parallel to compassion for the humanoid, Vitalik. However, for the Russian viewer, the kitten is also symbolic of the recent past. Kitten imagery was widely replicated in the late 1990s

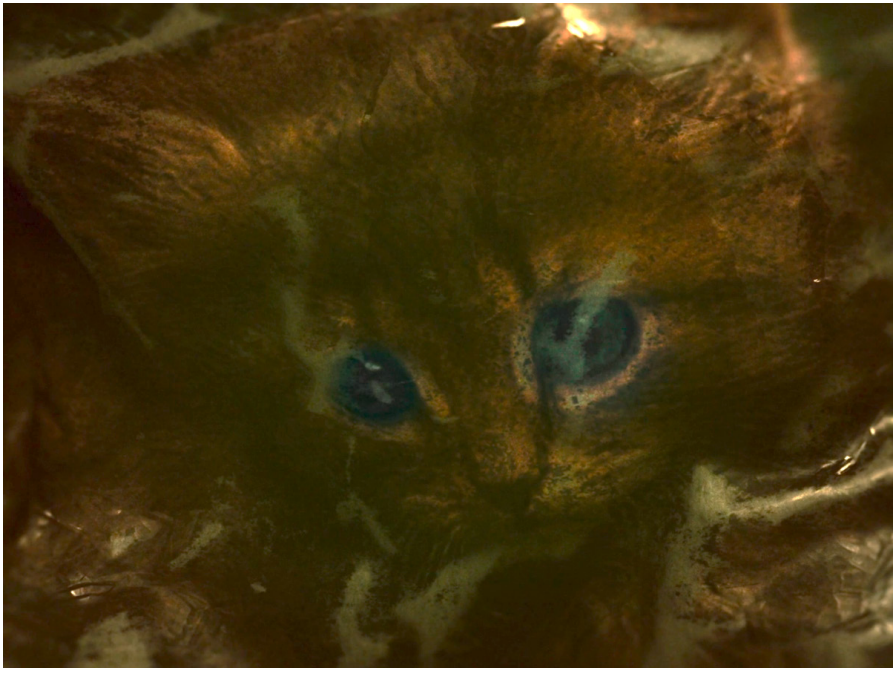

Figure 1. The kitten photograph in the film "Contacts", 2024, directed by D. Moiseev.

on consumer products—packaging, calendars, and posters—and signifies the romanticized notion of freedom after the Soviet Union that permeated the popular imagination. Furthermore, kitten imagery also figures in films that critique the Soviet era directly.

For example, in Sergey Loban's 2005 anarchist Russian science-fiction film *Dust*, which exposes the entire social project of the USSR as an experiment on those within its borders, action is set in the early 2000s. The protagonist, Alyosha, an infantile, overweight man with a distracted expression, lives with his grandmother and imagines participating in a Soviet-era study that he believes will make his dreams come true. In one scene, his grandmother takes him to a second-hand store and selects new clothes for him. She chooses a T-shirt with a kitten print (**Fig. 2**). Although Alyosha does not want to wear it, he has no choice but to do so, because he did not pay for the purchase himself and has no agency in the selection.

Dressed in this T-shirt and thus visually associated with the kitten, Alyosha later voluntarily responds to an invitation from the Federal Security Services[24] (FSB) to take leave from his factory job and participate as a test subject in an undisclosed experiment. In a closed laboratory room during the procedure he gazes at his reflection, in

Figure 2. Kitten on the t-shirt of the main character in the 2005 film "Dust", directed by S. Loban.

which he appears as a strong, beautiful man with a penetrating, direct gaze. Once again, the film emphasizes themes of state experimentation, bodily transformation, and the unattainable fantasy of beauty. Additionally, in *Dust*, the protagonist is metaphorically depicted as an animal (cat t-shirt) —easily manipulated by the state. At first glance, this infantilized character, passively integrated into the post-Soviet social structure and fixated on his insecurities, seems incapable of political resistance. However, his obsessive desire to see himself as someone else eventually leads him to perceive the state as an obstacle. The once-docile kitten begins to scratch — learning to pay bribes, evade surveillance, and push forward with his dream. And although *Dust* seemingly depicts the state as an inescapable, airtight structure, the film's conclusion ultimately deconstructs and critiques post-Soviet power through the hallucinatory, unstable nature of both the protagonist, Alyosha, and his symbolic counterpart, the kitten.

In *Contacts* and *Dust* kitten imagery does not play a pivotal role in the plot, yet it emerges as a historically grounded, meaningful symbol of anarchist inspiration, a non-human agent that blurs the binary opposition of nature and culture through its animal essence. Moiseev, in *Contacts*, pushes this motif to its limit in the film's finale. After the narrative concludes, the screen alternates between images of three kittens and characters that have rejected continued participation in the violent society they are part of. Firstly, there is a madman, a child, and the alien's friend, Nina, sitting around a campfire: this is from the film's final scene. Secondly, we are presented with the film's penultimate scene in which the alien, Nina and a child, have locked themselves in a room. Deploying feline imagery charged with political associations, the film embraces a new kind of sincerity, rejecting postmodern irony in favor of a perspective that reinterprets nostalgia with understanding and empathy. Abandoning the hierarchical priviledging of humans above all other spieces, anarchism in the film manifests through the inhuman from two directions: through animals and aliens—creatures 'made strange' that are both capable of evoking sympathy.

A striking contrast to *Contacts* in its depiction of an anarchist sensibility is Anna Melikyan's 2023 film *Anna's Feelings*. The plot follows a woman alienated from her own emotions by mechanical labor in a chocolate factory. One day, she faints in the street, after which she begins writing automatic letters at night, claiming they are dictated to her by aliens. These letters become public, making her famous. At first glance, the film aligns with an anarchist logic of critique and appears to reference early surrealist experiments. However, unlike the aforementioned films, *Anna's Feelings* lacks sympathy for its protagonist. Instead, she is portrayed as naive and superficial, undone by her desire for approval and her indulgence in erotic and consumerist pleasures, which lead to her moral/psychological downfall. By the film's end, she undergoes shame, atonement, and an acceptance of the inappropriateness of her feelings. She recognizes the violence of the state system in her own formulation: "I am lost, I cannot be loved, I want to go home." This admission signals her lack of agency, her victimhood, and her attachment to a place that has stripped her of the right to feel. When her husband takes her out of the psychiatric hospital, she asks him for guidance. He replies, "We will continue to live as everyone else does; that's what we'll do." Within the framework of liberal logic, Anna is offered no path beyond the false freedoms of the existing system. The film persistently conveys that any attempt to challenge the state's control over one's body will be punished and condemned—presenting submission as the only viable outcome.

Returning to *Contacts*, which treats its characters' right to freedom with greater humanity, I want to revisit the theme of freedom and consider how the alien communicates with Nina. The first time, he strokes her head as she falls asleep from exhaustion. This gesture is later repeated several times, gradually gaining significance. After each touch, Nina experiences disorienting, seemingly inhuman dreams filled with abstract imagery, hinting at the unnaturalness of the order she navigates daily. With each subsequent dream, she resists the system more, aligning the film's visual techniques with the idea of transcending cultural constraints through the free play of unconscious processes initially revealed in dreams. The first conscious explanation of this act is related in a monologue delivered by the head of the laboratory, in which he speculates concerning the meaning of the alien

Vitalik's gestures. He suggests that Vitalik is transmitting knowledge, programming Nina to serve the aliens. Notably, this interpretation of the alien's touch as an act of coercion comes from an authoritarian figure associated with the social system—the one overseeing the experiment—who deliberately allows contact between Nina and Vitalik to order to observe them from a "scientific" standpoint. In the penultimate scene, as bandits and later the police attempt to break into a room where Nina, Vitalik, and the boy are hiding, the alien, already fatally wounded after having his hand severed for profit, performs his final act. With his remaining hand, he transmits blue electrical impulses—visually depicted for the first time—by stroking Nina's head. Once again, the miraculous is invoked, but now not through his blood, "prak", but through his voluntary action, which imbues it with power. What unites Nina and the alien is empathy. Metaphorically, he restores her capacity for free action and political subjectivity.

The film's finale vividly portrays an anarchist society existing beyond the state. The protagonists have peacefully left the city and taken refuge in the forest. Sitting around a campfire, Nina strokes the head of the small street boy who helped her rescue the alien. "Where are we going?" he asks. "I don't know," she replies. They are joined by a madman now freed from his role of serving the state's desires. "We'll take you with us," the boy says, adding, "A useless body." The man repeats, "Useless body." Evoking the freedom of a body with no 'use' highlights that escaping political entrapment is a subjective choice to refuse being reduced to an object of control.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of Dmitry Moiseev's *Contacts*, I sought to demonstrate how anarchist critiques of the state as a form of violence persist in contemporary Russian-language cinema under conditions of tacit censorship. I've explored how the film's fantastical setting and accessible cinematic language did not prevent it from remaining documentarily plausible in relation to Russian cultural and political contexts. The film's narrative structure ironically imitates nostalgia for the Soviet era as expressed in contemporary fantasy troupes while deconstructing the violent nature of the post-Soviet state, particularly

the emptiness of modern ideological pronouncements on television. The film's state-funded production by the Russian Ministry of Culture suggests that its metaphorical depth was ambiguous enough to get a 'pass' as apolitical mass entertainment. Ultimately, *Contacts* raises questions of humanity, empathy, and freedom by challenging anthropocentrism through its representations of animals and aliens. The film implicitly evokes the intersection of critical posthumanism and anarchist philosophy, depicting freedom as inherent to all embodied beings. In this context, anarchism is revealed to be possible only through cooperation based on empathy. Freeing the alien, Nina finds her own freedom in creating the possibility of a truly anarchist society.

Notes

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24 The Federal Security Services is the policing agency in charge of internal and border security, surveillance, and counter-intelligence operations.