



# NOISE ONTOLOGY AND YUSHKEVICH'S GLASS: AN INTERVIEW WITH PHILOSOPHER ALLA MITROFANOVA<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

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The interview discusses the problematic field of non-classical epistemologies, cyberfeminism, unstable ontologies and contemporary philosophy of technology. Alla Mitrofanova – philosopher, cyber theorist, one of the creators of the cyberfeminist International. Her scientific interests are the theory of technologically mediated culture and feminist philosophy. The interview begins with questions about how the cyberfeminist movement was shaped, how cyberfeminism can be integrated in the 20th century history of thought and also what cyberfeminism offers as a philosophical concept now. The main concepts of the interview are “noise ontology”, “intersectional feminism”, the epistemological “glass” of Russian philosopher P. Yushkevich, neorationalism. The meaning of these concepts unfolds through an appeal to the Mach-Marxist tradition.

## Keywords

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cyberfeminism; neorationalism; Soviet philosophy; epistemology; Mach; feminist philosophy; intersectional feminism; philosophy of technology



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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Alexandra Abakshina and Yozhi Stolet for the help with an interview transcription.



# «СТЕКЛО» ЮШКЕВИЧА И ОНТОЛОГИЯ ШУМА: ИНТЕРВЬЮ С ФИЛОСОФОМ АЛЛОЙ МИТРОФАНОВОЙ<sup>2</sup>

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## Аннотация

В представленном интервью обсуждаются вопросы неклассических эпистемологий, киберфеминизма, нестабильных онтологий, современной философии техники. Алла Митрофанова – философ, кибер-теоретик, одна из создательниц киберфеминистского интернационала, автор текстов о теории технологически опосредованной культуры в сборниках Медиафилософия (СПбГУ), Медиаархеология под ред. Зигфрида Зелинского (Кельн), а также по феминистской философии в журналах *n.paradoxa* (Лондон), Гендерные исследования (Харьков). Интервью начинается с вопросов о том, как формировалось киберфеминистское движение, как киберфеминизм может быть вписан в историю мысли второй половины 20-го века, а также что предлагает киберфеминизм как философский концепт сейчас. Основными концептами интервью становятся «онтология шума», «интерсекциональный феминизм», эпистемологическое «стекло» П. Юшкевича, неорационализм, значение данных концепций раскрывается через обращение к махо-марксистской традиции.

## Ключевые слова

киберфеминизм; неорационализм; советская философия; эпистемология; Мах; феминистская философия; интерсекциональный феминизм; философия техники



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<sup>2</sup> Мы благодарим Йожи Столет и Александру Абакшину за помощь с транскрибированием интервью.



**Alina:** *What is cyberfeminism?*

**Alla:** The emergence of cyberfeminism is traditionally connected with the Cyborg Manifesto, which was published in 1985 or 1986. In 1991 VNS Matrix for the first time introduced the term “Cyberfeminism”. I would associate the emergence of Russian cyberfeminist movement with the techno club «Tunnel» in 1993. Regarding international movement, we could mark 1997 as the start point. Then there were plenty of magazines and books: from Sadie Plant «Zeros+Ones» to Helen Hester's recent analytical review. What happened in the 80s? What do we know from such a greatly reduced academic philosophy? We know that this is a time of post-positivism and anarchist epistemology. The turning point is that there can be different codes of knowledge, and knowledge at the same time has constructive function to form reality. And so it turned out that we have a lot of realities (laughs). And nothing can be done about it. If you try to attack someone else's reality, you get kicked back. Other people's reality strikes back. Accordingly, the analytics itself must be rebuilt. And then sociology of frames, sociology of practices and sociology of materiality began to emerge.

**Alina:** *This turn to practices begins with Bourdieu.*

**Alla:** Yes, they all determine themselves through understanding practice and language. It is perfectly clear that this is also a period of critique of linguocentrism, critique of ideology. What this means is that the language mediation was replaced by operational, relational, communication. The philosophy of technology, practice and materiality was updated here. The theory of communication appears then. How else can we grab the notion of practice? Here we have Haraway's approach to consider modern techno culture as an interface of practices and operations. The mode of interaction between the subject and the object, between perception and vision ultimately takes us into modern data science, which already works with object-oriented programming. Accordingly, the choice of data itself and for what purpose we choose the data, how the object is installed – ultimately it turns out that we are also objectivated, because these ways of thinking as well as our social



programming make us an object. And thinking will leave from the side of the language towards analysis of operations. Interaction operations, configurations. That is, we configure each other from big data. This is a new idea that we recently discussed, noise ontology, which means that we don't have ultimate certainty, but all the time we reshape and reconnect objectivity, individuation, and relationships from the noise of informational, existential noise. This means that it is not installed definitely, but is installed sufficiently. This is also partly the ideas of radical constructivism of the 70-80s. You need to understand that cyberfeminism is not born out of nowhere, but it appears as the next stage of reflection. The fact that it appears in the 80s is no coincidence: collapse of previous ideologies, the multiplication of local worlds and the study of the constructive nature of cultural operations.

**Alina:** *In other words, the fact that there are many realities and there are privileged ways of seeing become quite basic premise of non-classical epistemologies. How does cyberfeminism fit into the paradigm of non-classical epistemologies?*

**Alla:** And a surprise, if different worlds and identities are not considered naturally done, they become politically (socially and even class approach)? culturally and the gender framed. All that should be added to the analytics of the object, to the post-positivist policy of the object. And when it also became gendered, there was a very strong capture of feminist philosophy.

**Alina:** *So, what feminism stands for here?*

**Alla:** And feminism is very important here, because to capture these changes in pure abstraction is quite a little. We need to understand how this directly affects our lives. And feminist epistemology criticizes the scientific object, it turns out, that the scientific object is always set not in a neutral way, but in a political-gendered-cultural way. It is most evident from the perspective of those, who were excluded with their perspectives and needs, and became victims of this established state of affairs. From here starts the critique, whose science? The science belongs to a European white heterosexual man who has expert



position about pregnancy, about psychology, about education, about the complexity of social connections, about the reproduction of society (laughs).

**Alina:** *I would then go a bit back to objects, to interaction analysis and social programming. This, of course, is all very connected with my interest in Bogdanov. But here is the question of the theoretical framework, how do you feel about actor-network theory, could we think it politically?*

**Alla:** It seems to me that here we should make a move into intersectional feminism. Anarchist epistemology arose, followed by an arising of a system of different identities, and this is all built on the basis of a holistic object, and, in principle, only very radical political thought can provide reassembling those objects and see how they are assembled within it-selves. How is this objectivity or identity established? Naturally, from the side of black feminism, Kimberly Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality arose. And then it turned out that we have an excellent political tool for rebuilding identity, hence individuality. It is clear how it works: you and your social status crack into a scale of privileges and vulnerability and you feel never again wholeness. And moreover, now you have social functions included that you would generally never attribute to yourself. That is, you begin to identify your own privileges not with yourself, but with your social position, vulnerability not your sin, but solidarity with other vulnerable, oppressed; there is no longer either an object or an individual on the political level. It never happens purely from academic abstraction, this is the one thing, and when there is no political authority to maintain its wholeness, it starts a completely different process. And here it is given to us directly. And this reduction of distance, adding new data, conflicts and controversy and even gender panic always says that you are on the right track.

**Alina:** *What happens with identity? Can we talk about identity policies? When I feel my various vulnerabilities and I associate myself with a group, I fall into the feeling of a solid narrative at the time of connection. For example, Russian LGBT+ film festival «Bok o bok» («Side by side») brings me into this state*



perfectly. You fall into a vivid sense of solidarity and stability in your identity. That is, I sit in a cinema and 60 girls like me sit next to me and we all sit and watch a film about a 61st girl. And in that meaning it is a kind of stabilization.

**Alla:** Because this is tactical stabilization, which knows well, there is a different attitude, different realities, but we can use tactical identity as a political language, but it is not the only language of truth. And this is another point that all of our yesterday's stable categories and stable codes for describing ourselves become unstable. This is a very powerful traumatic statement in modern ontology, which pulls a huge amount of everything, such as postgender sexuality. Constant skepticism to those who are in power... Skepticism to any privileges, because it is clear that they are situational and not universal. This creates a finely textured dynamic of the social, and on the other hand, it always forces to rewrite its borders. And this is what most injures and leads to superstitions and to fundamentalism also. And so on. And then there is the need for a new rationality, which will allow differences, but at the same time maintain local, safe social ties. In the logic of mathematics this is now a fashionable term – Homotopy of types, and Vygotsky proposed the term – the univalence of relations. Stabilization occurs all the time, but as if in the formula of the sufficiency of stabilization, and not in the absolute.

**Alina:** *And speaking of programming: is this essentially a new epistemological strategy? How has it emerged?*

**Alla:** Of course, such a proposal, an epistemological proposal, is Haraway's idea and I don't know who else introduced that in such a direct way. This has been discussed quite a lot, but indirectly, it has not been brought to a direct and artistically accurate form, but in general the story is rather long. Even at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when all philosophy schools fought against dualism metaphysics and stability of its foundations, it was necessary to come up with some other epistemic concept of reality. And we have a constructivist proposal or a phenomenological proposal. Reality is not a done thing. And that means what reality, from the status of the horizon to which we



strive, falls on our daily lives and political struggle. All this reflection is involved in micro-politics, social and in the analytics of the micro processes of reality, consciousness, perception. This is a phenomenological approach - reality is a phenomenon. A constructivist is a little different; it is connected with post-positivism, with Mach, and in my opinion, with Mach-Marxism (Bogdanov, Yushkevich..). In the Mach-Marxist writings this new idea was constructed: reality can be rewritten politically, socially, we can create a new person, a new sexuality, a new identity. We connected two lines of thoughts here: Marxist on the one hand, that reality is an institutional, ideological, political social system, but a system which is closed. And it will change only when those, excluded from the system enter the system, then the system must change. This is a Marxist approach. Mach's approach adds to this a technology analysis. In his book «Critique of Newtonian Mechanics» he considers the 18<sup>th</sup> century compared with the 20<sup>th</sup> and says that mechanics are thought differently. And accordingly, scientific objects, science that establishes a "natural object", is limited by its way of thinking, its discourse, its technologies. That is, he summed up the theory of science and technology under Marx - how it was taken by marxists-mechanists. That is, they all came from different sides to the fact that you can observe only in state of included observation. But this means that the universal (god) is again lost. There is no universality and stability. You see only what you can see, but this does not mean that you get a truthful and stable place. It means that you are included in that reality as an active agent, who takes part in constructive approach and responsible for own reality.

**Alina:** *What I noticed, for example, in Bogdanov's constructivist writings I've read, that when they talk about social technology, they say that technology forms relationships between people, between people and things, for example, Moisei Ginzburg says that we need to bring movement out of things. And it turns out that there is an economy of movement. We must remove from human movements all superfluous; create machine movement in order to give harmonious expediency.*



**Alla:** It seems to me that here we shouldn't rush into concrete works right away, but we need to catch the moment when reality becomes a system, a system of relations and connections without absolute reason. But how will it be kept if it has no foundation of reason? It should be kept at the density of connections. And there connectivity and complexity analytics begins. Moreover, it begins immediately as a system proposal. According to phenomenology, the early one, this is the observation of pure consciousness. According to Mach, this is the observation of perception and of a changes in the paradigm of a scientific object, and of a change in the types of mechanics. But how does he understand mechanics? We can now from the 21<sup>st</sup> century see that this is a theory of operations. But it goes directly to programming, it is in mathematics, what launches the programming of the post-war period is the theory of operation or management theory.

**Alina:** *But all this logic leads to what neoliberalism offers us: «rational» actions, a score of efficiency, the profit-loss calculations. There is a trap of neoliberalism in such rhetoric, isn't it?*

**Alla:** There is a trap. But the macho-marxists have done a very good job with this paradigm shift. The trap itself arose in the end of 1920th in Russia, when the NEP<sup>3</sup> was over and the whole complex epistemological strategy became unnecessary. Stalin said that language is not a superstructure, language is an instrument of building the world; Wittgenstein said the same thing. Philosophy and politics moved to linguocentrism. Linguocentrism immediately attracted previously thrown out metaphysic universality of power. Metaphysic reappeared with totalitarianism of ideology and naturalisation of capitalism (market, competition), both models pretended to be only possible truth. And then when this stability dried up, got into dystrophy and fictitiousness, it became clear that there was no need to do it – to reduce all operations to universality. We again fell into the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a complication from irrationality, and one of the important re-discoveries is that

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<sup>3</sup> The New Economic Policy (NEP) was an economic policy of the Soviet Union proposed by Vladimir Lenin in 1921 as a temporary expedient.





science and politics interact with each other; it is simply not always obvious. But it is clear that, as Karen Barad says, many scientific discoveries were known (but as a spam or mistakes) before their conceptualisation, for example, in physics effect relativity or Wave-particle duality. But scientists could not create a theory, because it did not fit into consciousness and was perceived as garbage, just as errors. However, during the period of political, cultural transformation in an avant-garde radical way, suddenly it became possible to launch the concept. And this is not with regard to universals, but with regard to the objectivity and locality of our bodies, we are also restarting the same thing, the Mach - Marxist program, previously neopositivist constructivism: how the object relates in perception, we draw boundaries or we stretch configurations between ourselves and objects. And for this we need, firstly, relationships, processes of reality producing; we must pay attention to how reality is programmed and produced. Whose reality is this, what agencies have gained access to its production? And how can reality be produced differently?

**Alina:** *What does «stretch configuration» mean?*

**Alla:** Pavel Yushkevich, friend of Bogdanov, made such a good explaining concept. He said that the epistemologically old categories worked as if the glass were placed between the subject and the object. This glass didn't allow us to grasp the inner interaction. Mach removes this glass, and it turns out that there are actually no objects but there are ... Well, as if there is no chair, but there is our way of perceiving and practicing the chair, where we are getting also affected actors. That is, the shaping of our corporeality and of objects is the one process. But the whole difficulty of this kind of analytics is that there are too many registers of inter-relationships connections. And we can't classify them in any way – there are too many of them. We can't even keep all the time our boundary configuration between each other and with large objects such as environmental objects or technical objects... With technical objects it is easier, with ecological objects there is a complete failure.



**Alina:** *That is, it turns out such an analysis of connectedness. And how can we classify the interest of actors?*

**Alla:** Connectedness and configuring are dependent operations. Here again, there is a noise ontology, these all are registers of different intensities. There is no linguistic belief: what cannot be said, that does not exist. On the contrary, you can grasp a lot of things, but it will be a partial connection. The configuration arises from a noise and it arises topologically in the place where that Yushkevich's glass was- filling the gap in the dualism of metaphysics. Yushkevich invented such an explanation in 1905. Barad calls it «agential cut», where new multiple agencies could produce own ethic and ontology.