

The Dragonfly and the Ant

by S.M. Eisenstein

An unwritten page of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

An ant who became a person.

I think that an ant who becomes a person must be a very frightening person.

A person with blinders.

Without any outlook.

Moving over established roads.

Only ever over laid trails.

Coming into conflict with a moral problem of abominable rigor.

The writers of fables were subtle and crafty when they gave the debauched dragonfly the thrifty ant as her counterpart.

Between the two of them, the dragonfly was always considered the negative character.

But how much more nefarious¹ is the image of the ant – the do-gooder, the faithful agent of fundamental truths, nauseatingly virtuous in his duties.

Don't smoke... Don't spit. Don't drink raw water. Exit through the front.

Come in through the back.

Only cross the street at the corner.

Not a single deviation from the prescribed path in the name of the tempest of the spirit.

Never breaking the rules in the name of a flight of fancy.

And a total, self-absorbed faith in one's rectitude.

This type of person is a nightmare at operational meetings.

A plague at open meetings of domestic and cooperative organizations.

And God forbid they show up in a cohort of the People's Courts or on jury panels.

But it is exactly this type of person, by the way, who winds up in review committees and on the panels of the People's Courts.

¹ *vrednee*: could also be "damaging" (t/n)

Their kindred spirits on the other side of the globe are the armies of inspired women who shattered the devil hiding in wine bottles in all the bars of America, until they achieved the passage of the Prohibition.

But the worst thing, of course, is their righteousness. Their inhumanly formal righteousness.

There is no more fearsome image, more inaccessible and inhuman, than the image of the absolutely formally righteous person, the agent of all virtues, a knight of the letter of the law, without fear and beyond reproach.

Such an ant incarnated into human form is liable to make those who cohabit with him howl.

But it is not at all necessary to cohabit. And that which can be difficult to bear in a person, a life companion, can be an indispensable quality in a coworker.

It could be worse, after all.

Eugène Sue² took seven deadly sins and dashed off seven novels. And all the novels are built on the idea that the revelry of each sin becomes the foundation for the victory of good over evil.

If Countess X weren't prone to pride, Mr. Y to gluttony or M. Z to lust, we would not see such and such number of virtuous deeds depicted on the pages of the corresponding works.

If that is the situation with the seven deadly sins, then here it is more probable still.

Perhaps, here we are talking about... the seven deadly virtues!³

Whatever the reason, Fira⁴ Tobak contains in her small, delicate body all the vices of the ant person, magically transformed into the virtues of the film editor.

Even her height.

Even the ability to drag from floor to floor boxes of film, often stacked over her head.

Here, among film storage cabinets, her moral rigor becomes a painstaking system of rational placement of cuttings separately from trimmings, both in opposition to the systematized parings⁵.

² A French novelist famous for serial novels, including a series themed after the seven deadly sins (t/n).

³ I don't remember who and where first used this phrase as a disrespectful description of human virtues. Perhaps it was the sign on a Parisian tavern like the one across from Pere-Lachaise: "Au repos des vivants" ["the place where the living rest"]. (S.M. Eisenstein)

⁴ Esfir Tobak ("Fira" is a diminutive form of "Esfir") (t/n)

⁵ Hard to translate the wordplay here (srezki/obrezki/vyrezki). I'm pretty sure he's going for comedic effect (e.g., Tobak is the only one who can distinguish one from the other), rather than film terminology, so this substitutes something which would carry across the playfulness (cuttings/trimmings/parings – also all basically synonymous. (t/n)

Her pedantry, so unbearable in normal contexts, here means that at any moment, as with the wave of a magic wand, there flies out exactly the needed bit, like a rabbit out of a magician's hat, from the chaos of pieces of film curled in upon themselves like coiled snakes.

The laid paths of her narrow-minded thinking allow her to systematize all these many thousands of shots which nestle in round closets, rectangular shelves, and by wall closets.

“Any shot at any moment!” – that's not a phrase, not an idle boast – it's a terrible scourge forever hanging over the head of the film editor unlucky enough to work with a director such as the one whom evil forces threw across the path of the small defenseless Megaera by the name of Fira.

A devilish memory is needed in order to recall right away where and when someone put a section of a tape with the introductory beats of some musical number; the direction of the head turn in the continuation of a severed cut of some secondary character from the materials of the previous day's shooting.

Whether or not a long-discarded double take where an actor had stopped acting, but had happened to pause at the right angle to the camera, is a usable size. And all this in an atmosphere of wild impatience, malicious sputtering, and poisonous remarks if the needed box is not found immediately or if – what's worse – her wits or her memory fail her for a moment!

Fira Tobak's burden is heavy indeed!

But the antlike traits of her personality, inclusive of the occasional caustic sprays of ant poison, maintain her on her difficult and unthankful post.

“Any shot at any moment!” – this slogan over the army of tin boxes is answered by the negative traits of the ant-person, transformed into the virtues of the film editor.

But it is not only for that that I have for eleven years borne the pernicious temper of my most vertically challenged⁶ and treasured confederate.

The director with whom Tobak labors proclaimed long ago a suspicious program of mathematical calculation in filmmaking, a calculation as strict and antecedent as those used in the construction of bridges or known models of factory machines.

The programmatic slogans that were shouted out in the epoch when interest in technology, urbanism, and constructivism were ubiquitous – these slogans were immediately believed.

And believing in them, we brought under fire these principles of engineering, technology, and constructivism, which were evident in every creative work of the one who had shouted them.

In his works were found a cold calculation, a dry mathematical prejudice, and the sharp corners of construction which poked through the material of the living action.

⁶ Short, or diminutive

Many people thought to throw doubt on the programmatic points of the theses.

But somehow no one doubted the adherence of the author of these theses... to the theses themselves.

So very often, so very markedly, so very shrilly did he put them forward and undersign them...

VALYA KUZNETSOVA ⁷

She has a strange habit of breaking off conversation mid-phrase in order to stop and stare with wide-open, slightly bulging eyes.

Harpies, sphynxes, and other sundry supernatural vermin of the ancient world must have stopped their eyes in exactly this way, selecting a victim and paralyzing it with their gaze. You turn your head.

Yes, it's so.

A strange, lanky figure pops into Valya's field of vision.

You could almost say that Valya's stopped gaze snaps closed like a camera shutter.

A silhouette is recorded in her mind. The silhouette is numbered and registered in her memory.

Her eye comes to life and starts darting around, while Valya explains fervently that this strange silhouette is the "spitting image of... von Paulus".

Valya's cranium is filled to the brim with the shadows of such "doubles".

Sometimes they are doubles of specific people: three doubles of Paulus, five Goerings, one Mendeleev, two Chkalovs (one with a slightly boozily off-kilter lower jaw), one Repin (but only in profile!), and as many Gogols and Lermontovs as you please.

Sometimes unnamed "types". Courtiers. Knights. *Streltsy*. Ladies. Executioners. Monks.

Blacksmiths. Jesters. Chinese.

It's true that clever Valya once tried to pass off an Estonian in a glued-on mustache "as a Chinese man" in "Alexander Nevsky", but I pressed her until she found us an authentic one – a professor of Chinese language – to play the role of a messenger of the Golden Horde. But that was in the time of our early acquaintance. It didn't happen again.

In Hollywood, they have a complicated card-catalogue system that accomplishes the same goals.

⁷ The text included these two "end notes" about other women, which we're including even though there's nothing further about Tobak. (t/n)

In Potylikha⁸ there are some fairly disordered heaps of notes, descriptions, and yellowed photographs.

Valya carries in her head a veritable Scotland Yard.

She knows the addresses of some strange, superhumanly tall people; she has found burrows housing especially malicious-looking old women; she knows where lives the old ragpicker with the head of a rare 16th-century saint, as well as the exact address of a humble accountant suitable for the role of a holy fool.

But her passion is – doubles.

Doubles for actors from other cities, who are often difficult to obtain; doubles for famous portraits; even doubles for doubles in case a double goes on a bender...

LUKINA

An orchestra. A chorus.

A chorus! An orchestra!

This sounds like something whole, organic. Like something indivisibly of the body.

Like Ivan, Peter, a cathedral, a bridge, a monument.

But it would be more accurate to call it an anthill.

How many egos there are here, how many individualities, personal hurts, private interests, extramusical cares, everyday relationships, human fates and lives which sometimes, for a few moments, blend together into one whole in the magical moments when the music is played.

So – an organism. A body. More than that: one collective soul.

The rest of the time – chaos.

As many personalities as there are people. As many forms of behavior as there are personalities.

Sometimes it seems that the instrument grows over into the person who plays it. Isn't my old friend Yuriev a trumpet player, from head to foot?

Isn't his laughter, his habits, his fanfaronade⁹, his demagogically exact phrase before which all lose their nerve, – aren't they the same as the furious, roaring sound of his incomparable trumpet which so mercilessly rips apart the massive fabric of sound of the other instruments in the overture to "Ivan the Great"?

⁸ A neighborhood in Moscow which houses Mosfilm film studio (t/n).

⁹ This is a weird word, but an exact translation (fanfaronada in Russian). (t/n)

And doesn't Iosif Frantsevitch Gertovich¹⁰, with his deep humanity and his musical insight, seem to be of the same flesh as those tragically weeping musical sequences lead by the contrabasses in Prokofiev's amazing music during the scene of Ivan's illness?

All these people are united by one orchestra.

Not an orchestra, but people.

But before their union under a collective movement under the magic wand of the conductor can occur, they must be collected, coordinated, invited, often – convinced.

Individuality bristles archaically – it doesn't want to join in the unity.

One needs a steadiness of character, a softness of approach, a melodic sequence of persuasion and the staccato of the disciplined “call to order” to bring into one counterpoint this whole host of separate entities which together make up the collective creator: the orchestra, the chorus.

It seems that the hands of the brilliant musician Lukina continue to masterfully run over the keys as, endlessly tactfully but at the same time inexorably, she weaves together the orchestra members, the orchestra with the chorus, the orchestra and chorus with the microphone, the performers of the piece with those who record it for posterity, the conductor with the audio engineer, the conductor with those who personify him, and all of them in the end with the director, who is wound tight, nervous, intransigent and cantankerously demanding of his whims, tortured with every second of the work and with his eventual final plans as to how the element of music will merge together with the image. With the same craft and ease, she can catch the needed nuance of the director's idea and to retell it – while finishing working through the thought and the story – to the army of musicians in “their language” and in the imagery of their conceptions. That which the director, who isn't a musician and often lacks even the basics of musical “jargon”, mumbles, inarticulately, irritated and tongue-tied, slurring his way through this “creative direction”.

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¹⁰ A well-known contrabass player (t/n).