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Opening Extract from...

S.N.U.F.F.

Written by Victor Pelevin

Translated by Andrew Bromfield

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Certain pastimes can be salutary in moments of inner tribulation. The perplexed mind understands which actions to perform in which sequence and for a while it finds peace. Such occupations include, for instance, playing patience, trimming one's beard and moustache, and Tibetan meditative embroidery. In this category I also include the art – almost forgotten in these times – of writing books.

I am feeling very strange.

If anyone had told me that I'd be sitting here in front of a manitou, like some lousy sommelier, stringing together little blocks of words, trimmed and polished on a creative articulator, I'd have spat in that person's face. Figuratively speaking, of course. I haven't become an Ork yet, although I'm more closely acquainted with that race than I might wish. But then, I didn't write this brief memoir for people. I've done it for Manitou, before whom I shall stand at some time soon – provided, of course, that he wishes to see me (he might turn out to be too busy, or perhaps a whole slew of people will show up for the meeting along with me).

The priests say that any appeal to the Singular should include a detailed exposition of all the circumstances. Slanderous tongues claim the reason for this is to hike up the charge for

declamation: the longer the supplication, the greater the cost of having it read out in the temple. But since it has fallen to me to tell this story standing face to face with eternity, I shall expound it in detail, explaining even those things that you might already know. For soon these jottings may be all that is left of our familiar world.

When I started making these notes, I didn't yet know how the whole story would end, and for the most part events are described as I experienced and understood them at the time they occurred. Therefore, in telling the story, I often stray into the present tense. All this could have been corrected during editing, but I think my account appears more authentic like this – as if through some quirk of fate my story had been imprinted on temple celluloid. So let everything remain just as it is.

The protagonists of this story will be the young Ork Grim and his girlfriend Chloe. A series of circumstances led to my observing them directly from the air, and virtually all their dialogues quoted here were captured through the long-range microphone of my Hannelore. That's why I'm able to tell the story as Grim saw it – which renders my task far more interesting, without undermining the veracity of the narrative.

To some people my attempt to see the world through the eyes of a young Ork might seem unconvincing, especially to the extent that I aspire to describe his feelings and thoughts. I agree – a civilised individual seeking to immerse himself in the nebulous states of the Orkish soul does look like a suspicious sham. But then, I'm not attempting here to paint the inner portrait of an Ork in the totality of his being.

An ancient poet once said that any narrative is like fabric stretched over the blades of several precise insights. If my insights into the Orkish soul are precise – and they are – the credit for that is not due to me. The credit doesn't even belong to our sommeliers that have spent century after century structuring the

so-called 'Orkish culture' so that its mental horizon would be absolutely transparent to appropriate oversight and monitoring.

It's simpler than that. The fact is that a substantial part of the work on these notes was carried out when the fates determined that Grim would be my neighbour, and I was able to ask him any question that interested me. And so if I write 'Grim thought . . .' or 'Grim decided . . .' that's not conjecture on my part, but a slightly edited transcript of his own telling of the story.

It's a difficult task, of course – trying to see the world familiar to us since childhood through Orkish eyes and show how a young savage, who has almost no concept of history and the order of the universe, gradually grows into civilisation, becoming accustomed to its 'miracles' and culture (I could quite happily set the second word in quotes too). But trying to see oneself through someone else's eyes is even more difficult – and I shall figure in this memoir in a dual role, as both the narrator and one of the characters.

However, the central role in this doleful tale of love and revenge belongs neither to me nor to the Orks, but to her whose name I still cannot call to mind without tears. Perhaps after ten or twenty pages I'll summon up the strength to do it.

A few words about myself. My name is Damian-Landolpho Damilola Karpov. I don't have enough manitou to spare on a full genealogy of the name – all I know is that some of these words are closely related to Church English, some to High Russian, and some have roots going back to ancient, forgotten languages that no one in modern Siberia has spoken for a very long time. My friends call me simply Damilola.

As for my cultural and religio-political self-identification (this is an extremely notional sort of thing, of course, but you need to understand whose voice it is that you're hearing across the ages) – I'm a post-Antichristian lay existentialist, a liberative

conserval, a humble slave of Manitou and simply a free non-partisan spirit, accustomed to using my own reason for thinking about everything in the world.

And as for my job, I'm a reality creator.

But by no means am I some sort of madman who imagines he's a deity, the equal of Manitou. On the contrary, I'm quite sober in my appraisal of the work for which I'm paid so little.

Any reality is a sum total of information technologies. This applies equally to a star, divined by the brain in the impulses of the optic nerve, and an Orkish revolution, reported in a news programme. The activity of viruses that have colonised a nerve tract also falls into the category of information technology. And so I am simultaneously the eye, the nerve and the virus. And also the means for conveying the eye to the target, as well as (here I lower my voice to a tender whisper) the two rapid-fire cannons on its sides.

The official name for my work is 'live news cameraman'. It would be more honest here to replace the Church English word 'live' with 'dead' – simply to call things by their proper names.

But it can't be helped – every age invents its own euphemisms. In ancient times the happiness room used to be called the privy, then the lavatory, then the toilet, the loo, the bathroom and then something else – and every one of these words gradually became impregnated with the odours of the latrine and needed to be replaced. It's the same with the forcible taking of life – christen it what you will, the essential nature of what is happening requires a frequent rotation of tags and labels.

I'm thankful that I have the words 'cameraman' and 'video-artist' to use, but in the depths of my soul of course I understand only too well what it is that I do. All of us understand this in the depths of our soul, for it is precisely there, in the uncreated darkness, where Manitou dwells, and he sees the essence of things through the ragged tatters of words.

My profession has two aspects that are inseparable from each other.

I'm a visual artist. My personal studio is called DK V-Arts & All – the serious professionals all know its small, unostentatious logo, visible in the lower right-hand corner when the frame's blown right up.

And I'm also a combat pilot for CINEWS Inc. – a corporation that films news and snuffs.

This is a structure entirely independent of the state, which the Orks find rather hard to understand. The Orks suspect that we're lying to them. They think any society has to be structured along the same lines as theirs, only even more cynical and sordid. Well, what can you expect from Orks?

Our state is no more than a shady operation that plasters over the cracks at the taxpayer's expense. The whole world and his dog spits when the President goes by, and every year it gets harder and harder to find candidates willing to run for the post – these days state functionaries have to be kept hidden away.

But the guys who really have everyone by the throat are in the Manitou Reserve – they don't like people talking about them for too long, and they've even come up with a special law on 'hate speech': if you check it out, it covers just about any mention of them at all. That's why CINEWS couldn't give a shit about the government, but there's not much chance of it going head-to-head with the Reserve. Or with the House of Manitou, which under the law is not subject to control by anyone or anything, apart from the truth (so better not go searching for it too energetically – they might get the wrong idea).

I'm certainly a pretty good artist, but there are plenty of those.

But I'm also the best pilot there is, and everyone in the company knows it. I've always been given the most difficult and delicate assignments. And I've never, even once, disappointed CINEWS Inc. or the House of Manitou.

There are only two things in life that I really love – my camera and my sura.

This time around I'll tell you about the camera.

My camera is a Hannelore-25 with full optical camouflage, and it's my own personal property, which makes it possible for me to conclude contracts on far more favourable terms than steedless knights can.

I read somewhere that 'Hannelore' was the call sign of the ancient ace Joshka Rudel from the Green SS Party, who was awarded the Red Cross with Crowns and Hemp Leaves for his heroic exploits on the African Front. But I could be mistaken, because the historical aspect interests me least of all. For me personally, the word is a reminder of the name of an affectionate and intelligent guinea pig.

In appearance the camera is a fish-shaped projectile with optical lens systems on its nose and several stabiliser and rudder fins jutting out at various angles. Some think the Hannelore resembles the streamlined racing motorcycles of ancient eras. The camouflage-manitous covering its surface give it a matt-black colour. If it was stood on end, I would be two whole heads shorter than it is.

A Hannelore can manoeuvre through the air with incredible agility. It can circle around a target for a long time, selecting the best angle – for attack or recording. It does this so quietly that it can only be heard when it flies right up close. And when its camouflage is engaged, it's practically impossible to see. Its microphones can detect, differentiate and record a conversation behind a closed door, and it can see people's silhouettes through walls with its hyperoptics. It's ideal for surveillance, low-altitude attack and – of course – filming.

The Hannelore isn't the newest thing on the market. Many think the Sky Pravda has superior characteristics in most areas, especially in relation to infrared porn shoots. It has much better

optical camouflage – a 'split-time' system with silicon-based wave guides. The Sky Pravda's quite impossible to spot, whereas my Hannelore uses traditional metamaterials, so it's not a good idea for me to fly in too close to a live target. And it's always best to approach downsun.

But, firstly, my Hannelore is much better armed. Secondly, its customised features make any comparison with standard models meaningless. And thirdly, I feel as much at ease with it as with my own body, and it would be very hard for me to switch to another camera.

When I say 'combat pilot', that doesn't mean I fly through the sky myself, fat paunch and all, like our hairy ancestors in their kerosene-burning gondolas. Like all the progressive professionals of our age, I work from home.

I sit beside the control manitou, with my legs bent at the knees and my chest and stomach resting against a heap of soft cushions – people ride high-speed motorcycles in a similar posture. Under my haunches I have an absolutely genuine Orkish prince's saddle from ancient times, bought from an antique dealer. It's black with age, with precious embroidery that can barely even be made out, and it's fairly hard, which provides effective prophylaxis against prostate problems and haemorrhoids if you work in a sitting or half-lying position.

I have lightweight glasses with stereoscopic manitous perched on my nose, and by swivelling my neck I can see the space surrounding the Hannelore as well as if my head was attached to the camera. Hanging above the control manitou is a woodcut print by an ancient artist, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. I got a sommelier I know to remove one of them, to transform my workstation into a continuation of the metaphor, as it were. This sometimes inspires me.

Aerobatic flying is a complex skill, like horseback riding; I have a handlebar with curved levers in my hands and silver

Orkish stirrups under my feet – I bought them together with the saddle and attached them to the control manitou. The complex, dancelike movements of my feet control the Hannelore. The buttons on the levers are responsible for the camera's combat and filming systems: there are scads of them, but my fingers have them all off pat. When my camera's flying, I feel like I'm flying myself, adjusting my attitude in space with super-light movements of my feet and hands. But I don't feel any g-forces: when they reach a level that's dangerous for the camera's systems, the reality in my glasses starts turning red, that's all.

Interestingly enough, a less experienced flyer is also far less likely to smash the camera, since it has fail-safe idiot-proofing. But I have to disable that system to perform certain highly intricate manoeuvres – and also to acquire the capability to descend almost to ground level. If the camera gets wrecked, I'll still be alive. But it would cost me so much manitou that it would actually be better if I died. That's why I really do all the flying myself, and for me the illusion is absolutely genuine reality.

I've already said that I carry out the corporation's most complex and delicate assignments. For instance, starting the latest war with the Orks.

I need to tell you about them right at the beginning, of course, or else you won't understand where the word came from.

Why are they called that? It's not at all that we despise them and regard them as racially inferior – we don't have any prejudices like that in our society. They're people, the same as we are. At least physically. The fact that the word is formally identical to the ancient word 'ork' (or 'orc') is purely coincidental (although, let me remark in an undertone, there's really no such thing as a coincidence).

It's all a matter of their official language, which is called Upper Mid-Siberian.

There's a science that goes by the name of 'linguistic

archaeology' – I took a slight interest in it when I was studying Orkish proverbs and sayings, with the result that I still remember a whole slew of all sorts of curious facts.

Before the collapse of America and China, there was no such thing as an Upper Mid-Siberian language. It was invented in the intelligence service of the narco-state Aztlan, when it became clear that the Chinese eco-kingdoms fighting each other behind the Great Wall wouldn't interfere in events if the Aztlan naguals decided to have the Siberian Republic for lunch. Aztlan chose a traditional approach – it decided to dismantle Siberia into a series of Bantustans by forcing each of them to talk its own dialect.

Those were times of universal decline and degradation, so Upper Mid-Siberian was invented by moonlighting migrant dopeheads from the shores of the Black Sea, who were paid, following the custom in Aztlan, in narcotic substances. They were members of the cult of the Second Mashiah, and in remembrance of him they based Upper Mid-Siberian on Ukrainian, larded with yiddishisms, but for some reason or other (possibly under the influence of those substances), they tacked on an extremely complicated grammar, an erratically wandering hard consonant sign and seven past tenses. And when they thought up the phonetics, they threw in an aberrant vowel reduction from 'o' to 'u' – apparently they couldn't think of anything better.

So now they've been 'u-ing' away for about three hundred years, if not all five hundred. Aztlan and the Siberian Republic have been gone for a long time – but the language is still there. In everyday life they speak High Russian, but the official language of the state is Upper Mid-Siberian. Their own Department of Cultural Expansion keeps a strict watch on this, and we keep an eye out too. But we don't really need to, because the entire Orkish bureaucracy feeds entirely off this language and is ready to wade through bloody corpses for it.

An Orkish bureaucrat has to study the language for ten years at first, but after that he's the lord of the world. Every official document must first be translated into Upper Mid-Siberian and then officially logged as received, following which a decision from the executive authority must be appended, in Upper Mid-Siberian – and only then is it translated back for the petitioners. And if there is even a single mistake in the document, it can be declared invalid. All the Orks' official commissions and translation bureaus – and they have more of those than they have pigsties – live and grow fat off this.

Upper Mid-Siberian has made virtually no inroads into colloquial speech. The only exception is the name of their country. They call it the Urkainian Urkaganate, or Urkaine, and they call themselves Urks (apparently this was a hasty revamping of the word '*ukry*' – a High Russian name for an ancient Slavic tribe – although there are other philological hypotheses). In everyday speech the word 'Urk' is unpopular – it belongs to high-flown, pompous style and is regarded as fusty, bureaucratic and old-fashioned. But it was the origin of the Church English 'Orkland' and 'Orks'.

The Urks, especially the urban Urks, who absorb our culture through every pore of their skin and try to follow our lead in just about everything, have called themselves Orks, after the Church English manner, for centuries, deliberately exaggerating the 'o' sound. For them it's a way of expressing their protest against authoritarian despotism and emphasising their own civilisational preference – all of which suits our motion picture industry just fine. And so the word 'Ork' has almost completely supplanted the term 'Urk', and even our news channels start calling them 'Urks' only when the dark storm clouds of history gather and I am ordered into the skies.

When I say 'ordered into the skies', that doesn't mean of course that they instruct me to carry out the initial attack. Any

novice can handle that. The task I'm entrusted with is filming events on temple celluloid for the news immediately before the war. Anyone in the information business will realise how important this work is.

In fact, an immense number of people work on every war, but what they do is invisible to outsiders. Wars usually begin when the Orkish authorities suppress the latest revolutionary protest too harshly (they don't know how to do it any other way). And it just so happens that the latest revolutionary protest occurs when it's time to shoot a new batch of snuffs. About once a year. Sometimes not quite so often. Many people can't understand how it is that the Orks' revolts break out at precisely the right time. That's not something I take care of myself, of course – but the mechanism is clear to me.

To this day people in the Orkish villages still have fits of religious terror at the sight of microwave ovens. They can't understand what's happening: there's no flame, no one touches the hamburger, but it keeps getting hotter and hotter. It's very simple to do – you just have to create an electromagnetic field that induces violent agitation in the hamburger's molecules. The Orkish revolutions are cooked up in exactly the same way as hamburgers, with one difference: the field that makes the particles of shit in Orkish craniums vibrate is not electromagnetic, but informational.

We don't even need to send any emissaries to them. It's enough for some global metaphor or other – and all of our metaphors are global – to hint to the proud Orkish countryside that if the love of freedom should suddenly awaken there, certain people will be on hand to help. And then the love of freedom is guaranteed to awaken in this countryside, purely in the hope of making a profit – because the central authorities will pay the village elders more and more every day not to awaken completely, but the advance of history will be impossible to halter. And what's

more, we won't spend a single manitou on all this, although we could print absolutely any amount for them. We'll simply sit back and observe the events with interest. And when the process attains the required intensity, we'll start bombing – whoever we need for the footage.

I can't see anything especially reprehensible about all this. Our information channels don't lie. The Orks really are ruled by exceptionally vile scumbags, who deserve to be bombed at any moment, and if their regime isn't actually evil in its pure form, that's merely because it's significantly diluted by degenerative senility.

In any case, we don't have to justify ourselves to anyone. Condemn us if you like, but unfortunately we're the best thing this world has to offer. And we're not the only ones who think so – the Orks do too.

Informational support for the revolutionary movement in Orkland is provided by sommeliers from a different department, and I'm responsible solely and exclusively for the video footage. Which is substantially more important, from both the artistic and religious points of view. Especially at the very beginning of the war, when the high tide of the initial headlines has already receded ('THE WORLD HAS WARNED THE ORKS…'), but there isn't any decent feedback as yet.

For the last few wars I've worked as a team with Bernard-Henri Montaigne Montesquieu – a name that you've probably heard. In fact, Bernard-Henri was my neighbour (the rumours of his lavish lifestyle are greatly exaggerated). We didn't become friends, because I didn't approve of some of his habits, but we were close acquaintances, and in the professional sense we made a good, solid team. I doubled as trailing wingman and cameraman and he was the frontman-gunlayer (or, as he himself once dubbed it in some esoteric mix of Church English and Old French, the *aimer d'aimer*).

He preferred to call himself a philosopher. That was how he was presented in the news. But in the payroll register, which is kept in Church English, his job title is given unambiguously as 'crack discoursemonger first grade'. In actual fact he's another military man, just like me. But there's no contradiction in this. We're not children after all; we understand that the power of contemporary philosophy lies not in syllogisms, but in close air support. And that's the reason why the Orks frighten their children with that word 'discoursemonger'.

Just as every genuine philosopher is supposed to do, Bernard-Henri wrote an obscure book in Old French. It's called *Les Feuilles Mortes*, which means 'Dead Leaves' (he himself translated it slightly differently, as *Dead Pages*). Crack discoursemongers pride themselves on their knowledge of this language and trace their family trees back to Old French thinkers, inventing similar names for themselves.

Of course, this is unadulterated travesty, burlesque – pure and simple. They, however, take the matter very seriously – their special assault group is called *Le Coq d'Ésprit*, and in public they constantly toss around incomprehensible phrases punctuated with guttural 'r' sounds. But I know for certain that Bernard-Henri knew only a few sentences in Old French and even listened to songs with a translation. So, putting two and two together, the book must have been written for him by a creative articulator with a French language module.

We know how these treatises in Old French are composed: take some obscure ancient quotation, stick it into a manitou, tap your fingers on the menu for a couple of seconds, and it's done – heap the blocks of words all the way up to the ceiling, if you like. But the other gunlayers of our aerial strike force don't even go to that much trouble. So Bernard-Henri was a conscientious professional, and if it wasn't for that grim hobby

of his, the on-screen dictionary would devote a lot more space to him.

To this day many people regard him as some kind of altruistic knight of spirit and truth. He wasn't. But I don't condemn him for that.

Life's too short, and the sweet drops of honey along the way are all too few. A normal public intellectual prefers to spin his lies comfortably along the force lines of the discourse, which start and end somewhere in the upper hemisphere of Big Byz. Sometimes, in a safe area, he allows himself a free-spirited crow – usually in Old French, to avoid accidentally hurting anyone's feelings. And also, obviously, he denounces the repressive Orkish regime. And that's all.

Any other behaviour is economically unjustifiable. In Church English this is called 'smart free speech' – an art mastered to perfection by all participants in the global Spirit Pride.

It's not as simple as it might seem. A certain internal flexibility isn't enough, you also need to know something about the way these force lines actually curve, which the Orks can never understand. The lines also have a persistent tendency to shift their position steadily, so the work is almost as edgy and risky as a stockbroker's.

Ah yes, by the way – the creative articulator surmises that the word 'smart' (meaning 'astute'), was formed from the ancient sign for a 'dollar' (as a manitou once used to be called) and 'mart' – an abbreviated form of 'market'. It could well be true. But on its own, a mastery of 'smart free speech' is a rather low-paid skill, since the supply significantly exceeds the demand.

Don't get the idea that I look down on all these guys, though. Basically I'm no better than them. As a commercial visual artist I'm undoubtedly a cowardly conformist – a state of affairs that I'm just fine with. But I'm also an audacious and experienced flyer, and that's a fact. As well as being a resourceful and ardent

lover, although it's unlikely that she to whom my love aspires will be able to appreciate that adequately. But more about that later.

Anyway, it all started with Bernard-Henri and myself being given an assignment for the newsreels – to film the formal video-pretext for War No. 221, the so-called 'casus belly' (the dictionaries claim that this Church English expression derives from an ancient idiom meaning 'to tear [the enemy's] stomach'). To film actually means 'to organise'. Bernard-Henri and I understand this without it needing to be said, since we have already started two wars together – No. 220 and No. 218. As for No. 219, it was started by our creative competitors.

Organising a casus belly is an esoteric, delicate assignment and by no means easy. An assignment that is only entrusted to the very finest specialists. That is, to us.

The most convincing and indisputable video-pretext for a war, on which absolutely all the critics, commentators and pundits in modern visual culture are agreed (as they have been for centuries) is considered to be the so-called 'damsel in distress'. I apologise again for the Church English, but there's no other way to say it. And I also actually like the sound of these menacing words that positively reek of gunpowder smoke.

A 'damsel in distress' is not simply 'a young woman in anguish' as this phrase is translated. Let's just say that if an Orkish maiden is sleeping in a hayloft somewhere and has a nightmare that makes her break out in a sweat and sets her trembling all over, you can't start bombing because of that. If the young Orkish maiden has fallen into a pile of shit, been given a thick ear by her granny and is sitting in a puddle, roaring her head off, that's no help to you, although her anguish might be entirely sincere. No, a 'damsel in distress' presupposes, firstly, offended innocence and, secondly, heavily armed evil hovering over it.

Generating a scene like that at any required degree of resolution is a simple five-minute job for our sommeliers. But CINEWS Inc. only does that sort of thing in its entertainment schedule. Everything that finds its way into the news clips must actually happen on the physical plane and become part of the Light of the Universe. 'Thou shalt keep thy newsreel wholesome,' said Manitou. Well, perhaps he didn't actually say it, but that's what we've been told.

It's for religious reasons that news clips are shot on temple celluloid film. Photons burn their way into a light-sensitive emulsion prepared according to ancient formulae by votaries of the House of Manitou, precisely as it was done many hundreds of years ago (even the width of the film is devoutly reproduced).

The film has to be flammable – because the Formulations contain the phrase 'it blazes like the blood of Manitou'. And the reason why a living imprint of light needs to be preserved is explained during initiation into the Mysteries, but I've been out of short pants so long now that I can't remember it – and anyway, I don't wish to stick my nose into questions of theology. The really important thing here is that a film camera takes up an awful lot of space in my Hannelore. If not for the camera, plus the rockets and the cannons, the rest of the technology could be tucked away in a container the size of a standard dildo – but there's nothing to be done, if that's what Manitou wants.

When it comes to the news, we can't falsify the representation of events. But Manitou, as far as the theologians' understanding goes, won't object if we give these events a little nudge to help them happen. But no more than a mere smidgen, of course – and here you have a borderline that can only be sensed by genuine professionals. Such as Bernard-Henri and myself. We don't falsify reality. But we can arrange a caesarean section, so to speak, to reveal what it's pregnant with – in a convenient place and at the right time.

We waited several days for a suitable moment for the operation. Then an informant in the Urkagan's retinue informed us that Torn Durex, whose hands were already stained with the blood of rebel Orks (a wing of combat cameras had managed to forestall a massive bloody massacre with a missile strike, but the Kagan still had the collateral casualties on his conscience) was returning to Slava (that's what the Orkish capital is called) by the northern road.

Bernard-Henri and I immediately flew out on an intercept course.

When I say 'we', it means that my Hannelore flew there, armed with film and shells, and taking my conscious perception with her, while my body stayed at home, swivelling its head in combat glasses and pressing buttons on levers. But Bernard-Henri was actually delivered to Orkland in person. That's his job: it's a risk, of course, but with my Hannelore there, only a very small one.

The transport platform dropped Bernard-Henri off at the side of the road a couple of kilometres from Slava – and then rose back up into the clouds to avoid wasting its battery on camouflage.

The mission had begun.

Bernard-Henri told me to survey the terrain and locate some suitable material while he prayed. Prayed, indeed… In reality the old satyr was simply tanking up on dope, the way he always did before a combat shooting. But the senior sommeliers turn a blind eye to that, because it makes Bernard-Henri look better on camera. And it goes without saying that the most important thing of all in the work of an on-screen discoursemonger is the way he looks while he's talking. Expansive gestures, open posture, a calm, slow speaking voice, a confident manner. No scratching your head or sticking your hands in your pockets. We live in a visual culture, and the semantic content of on-screen babble accounts for only fifteen per cent of the overall effect. All the rest is in the picture.

Bernard-Henri's substances start taking full effect after about an hour, or an hour and a half – exactly when the Kagan's convoy was due to appear. There was plenty of time, but I couldn't afford to waste it – I had to get everything set up urgently.

I climbed higher.

The terrain was rather depressing. That is, on one side of the road it was actually quite picturesque, as far as that word can be applied to Orkland – there were hemp and banana plantations, a little river and a couple of stinking Orkish villages. But on the other side lay Orkland's most dismal jungle. It's not dismal simply on its own account, but because of what comes after it. After only a few hundred metres the trees thin out, giving way to an immense swamp which also serves as a cemetery.

The Orks call it the Swamp of Memory – this is where the whole city of Slava buries its dead. From the air it looks like a murky, grey-green lake, with the veins of narrow streams running into it. It's dotted all over with dark specks – from the air they look like freckles. These are floating Orkish coffins, the so-called 'sputniks' – round boats covered with a roof of straw with four sticks jutting upwards. The Orks believe that in these garbage pails their souls fly off into outer space to Manitou. I'm not so sure about that.

The Orks deliberately planted the forest along the edge of the swamp (yes, such things really do happen – an Ork planting a sapling). They did it to drive back the stinking, bluish-green slurry from the road and their vegetable gardens. When the Kagan passes by, he's always accompanied by bodyguards, since it's easy to set up an ambush here. And the area is thinly populated in any case: the Orks are afraid of their own dead. Someone once hammered it into their heads that each generation inevitably betrays the one before it, and fear of their ancestors has assumed the proportions of a collective neurosis for them. A neurosis supported by the fat crocodiles living in the

swamp, although they don't bother to come out of the water: the sputniks are more than enough for them.

In ancient times, so-called 'sages' used to settle here in an attempt to enhance their spiritual status by daily proximity to death. And the urban Orks used to come to them to have their fortunes told from *The Book of Orkasms* – they believed that in this way they could ask Manitou Himself a question (I'm not joking, the Orks really do have such a book, although it was very probably written by our sommeliers).

But under the Orkish emperor Loss Solid, the free-trading sages were abolished, and all fortune tellers were made subordinate to the General Staff. Since then the only people who go into the cemetery forest are young couples who have nowhere to be alone. They're afraid of dead people and crocodiles, of course, but love is stronger than death. If I was a philosopher, like Bernard-Henri, I would definitely sing a hymn of praise in Old French to the secret festival of life that blossoms so brightly in these thickets of decay.

I could search for suitable material near the villages, where Orkish wenches of a tender age wander, pasturing their cattle. Or I could fly above the margin of the jungle, along the road. I chose the latter course, and after flying literally for only five minutes, I came across what I needed.

An Orkish couple – a boy and a girl of the same age, about sixteen or slightly older – were walking along the verge of the road. I can be so confident about their age, because this is the Orkish 'age of consent', and if either of them was younger, they would almost certainly never have dared to be seen together. The Orkish authorities imitate our mechanism of sexual repression with obtuse zeal – they'd adopt our age of consent too, if our advisers would only allow it. Apparently they think that's how they'll get on the road to a technotronic society. In any case, there's no other road left open to them.

The couple was carrying fishing rods. That immediately made everything clear – for young Orks 'fishing' takes the place of a back-row seat in a movie theatre.

I switched to maximum magnification and studied their faces for a while. The boy was an ordinary Orkish lad, with clean good looks and flaxen hair. They're all like that, until they start drinking *volya* and shooting up *durian*. But the damsel was absolutely ideal.

She looked just great in shot. Firstly, she didn't look like a child, and that was good, because they'd shown minors before the last two wars, and the audience was tired of them. Secondly, she was very pretty – I mean for a biological woman, of course. I was sure that Bernard-Henri would immediately get the urge to protect a little piggy like this from any kind of distress.

I glanced at my manitou. The Kagan was still a long way off, and I had time to spare. But there wasn't really any point in looking for other material. I informed Bernard-Henri briefly about my find and transmitted the damsel cutie to his manitou, and he was hooked instantly, I could tell from the way he was breathing. Then I engaged maximum camouflage, cautiously flew round the couple, came up to them from behind and started following, listening to their prattle.

They turned into the forest and soon found a clearing on the bank of one of the streams flowing into the swamp. And there they immediately started… fishing. Apparently the lad was a keen angler, and he was trying hard to put other ideas out of his head. The girl soon became conspicuously bored, and so did I, but he just kept on fishing. And the fish were biting.

When there was half an hour left until the convoy arrived, they started getting into more interesting things. But by then, unfortunately, it was time for me to interfere.