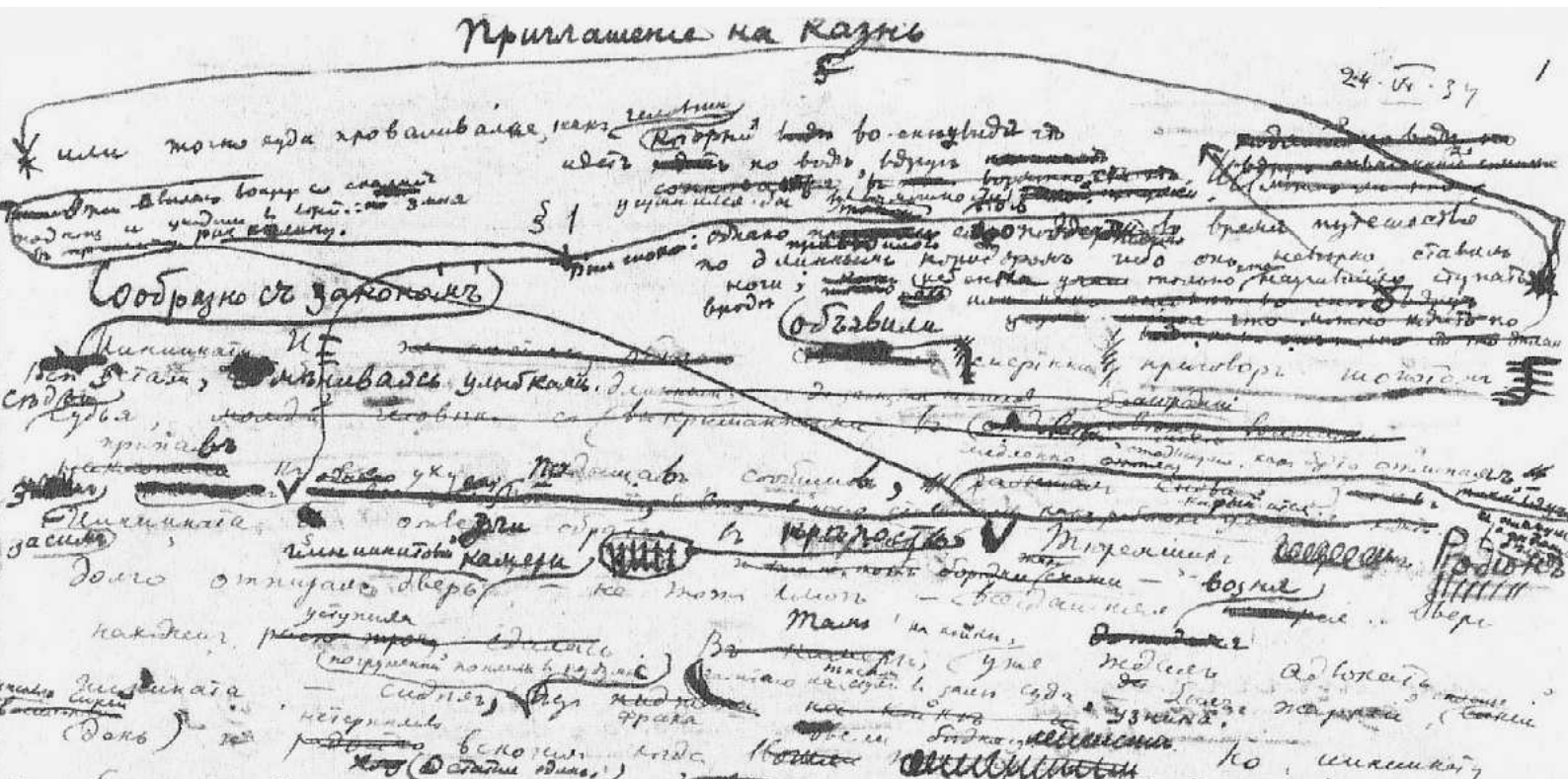


# How to Leave the Theater without Getting Beheaded

Nika Dubrovsky



“The show is a scam, and the props are cheap.”

— Holly Wood, private conversation, January 2021

Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935) tells the story of a thirty-year-old teacher sentenced to death for the crime of “gnostical turpitude,” or non-transparency to otherness. At first, everything reads in the vein of other dystopian novels from Yevgeny Zamyatin to George Orwell, but it ends on a surprisingly optimistic note: instead of punishment and death, the execution becomes the teacher’s liberation. He discovers that the world around him is just a poorly made theater set. The props collapse one after another. The stage buckles, backdrops fall, and the figures of terrible tyrants prove to be no more than cardboard cutouts. As soon as the protagonist realizes the surrounding reality is all artifice, *he becomes free*.

This is a little like when Neo is liberated in the Wachowski's film *The Matrix* (1999), upon realizing that his world, too, is merely a simulation. Like Nabokov's teacher, Neo was already free—all he needed to do was wake up to the truth, to stop complying with rules both ridiculous and cruel out of fear and uncertainty instead of trying his best to change the game.

Nabokov wrote *Invitation to a Beheading* while living in Nazi Germany with his Jewish wife and son. Within just a few years, he had gone from Russian aristocrat to outlaw, a story that ended with him trying to flee the Nazis to seek asylum in the United States. To him, “reality,” “execution,” and “liberation” were practical matters and not merely literary fantasies.

In the final years of the USSR, Nabokov became a cult writer, especially among the generation of the Soviet 80s. *Invitation* was one of the favorite books of my eighteen-year-old self and my friends. I imagine Gen X and the millennials felt the same having seen *The Matrix* in their teens and twenties. The former bastions of exclusive power and knowledge, who used to scorn us artists and dissidents, had begun looking around in fear and confusion. Everything Nabokov described in his novel—that depiction of the cardboard theatre, the ersatz atmosphere—was exactly like what was happening during those tumultuous times, not a hypothetical literary construction. It seemed that long before 1985, Nabokov knew precisely how and why the Soviet empire would die.

Samizdat was the only way to read Nabokov's books in the USSR. Without the benefit of today's photocopiers, the process of copying smuggled books was not only highly illegal but also time-consuming and tedious. To produce a bootleg copy of a contraband novel, somebody had to copy out each page on a typewriter loaded with five or six sheets of paper, alternated between costly sheets of blue carbon paper. The copies were then collected and bound into homemade books. The first copy was always more expensive than the others, because all the letters and words were cleanly copied. In the subsequent copies, the pages would become increasingly blurred and sometimes whole sentences disappeared. Often, all that remained of whole pages was a thin purple haze, a kind of typographical frost.

As an unemployed squat-dweller, I could only ever afford the very last, most smudgy-purplish copies. Often, I had to reconstruct entire paragraphs that had turned into illegible scrawl, tracing them with a ballpoint pen and guessing what a particular word might be. I felt myself part of a secret cult, in possession of the true knowledge of reality. And this was indeed the case. Miraculously, *Invitation to a Beheading* gave us a set of keys or, even spells,

that cracked the once unbreakable Soviet reality, with its cheap props and scam show.

During the first coronavirus lockdown, my husband David Graeber and I often talked about the last years of the Soviet Union. It felt like we were reliving what we experienced throughout the USSR collapse. More or less everyone I knew in Soviet Russia had sensed the absurdity of it, but who would say it out loud? Only a few dissidents. The artist Igor Vamos of The Yes Men once said that the Soviet Union was destroyed by people constantly making fun of it. Gradually, life in the late USSR itself came to feel like a joke. I recall a giant banner hanging across the façade of the Leningrad Circus for quite a long time, stating: “We are celebrating 70 Years of the Soviet Circus!” Thousands of people passed by every day and laughed in agreement.

A few decades later, my future husband would become known around the world for his talent as a writer and his jester-like activism, daring to say out loud what everyone knew but could not say: we are living in an illusion. We did not invent it, and it was never intended to benefit us. His last book, *Bullshit Jobs* published in 2017, gained sudden popularity during the coronavirus lockdown. With Western governments failing to respond adequately to the severity of the crisis and so many questioning what was “essential work,” much of what was once taken for granted was now being upended. The everyday inequity of the system sharpened into cruel, senseless nonsense. The idea that ours was a civilized society might have seemed like a joke to many if so many people hadn’t died from its failure.

At the beginning of lockdown, requests for interviews about *Bullshit Jobs* poured in every day from all over the world. Most of the journalists asked David the same questions over and over again, hitting the same themes: “How could you have foreseen all this?” Indeed, as the pandemic revealed, so many of the global West’s jobs are bullshit. And most of the jobs in the global South are shit. Finally, we can see how everything works. The people who do the most useful and necessary work for our survival—couriers, nurses, cleaners, electricians, and so on—receive the lowest wage. In contrast, the higher the job in the administrative hierarchy, the closer to power and violence, the more well-paid it is, and the least essential. But David avoided talking to reporters. “Why don’t they write it themselves? Why do they want me to repeat what I’ve already said lots of times, in videos and presentations during the book tour?”, he complained.

A few weeks before his death, David was working on a text where the main shtick—as he called it—was the following:

We are told that COVID-19 and quarantine are a dream, and before COVID, our life was real. They told us that soon we would wake up from this dream and continue as usual—an expanding economy, increasing production, growing stock indexes. In fact, what is presented to us as the normal and moreover only possible social reality is a nightmare. We have been living in a dream and we woke up during quarantine. I hope we don't fall asleep again.

In this text, David planned to dismantle the cardboard theatre set by dispelling the myths keeping it together, myths that propagate fear and make people bury their heads in the sand, refusing to face the truth: “We need to understand that focusing on local life during lockdown—reducing production, travel, capital movement, advertising—this is awakening. It's as if we were traveling on a high-speed train which was about to crash into a wall, and someone miraculously pulled the emergency cord a few seconds before the crash.”

David wrote about how “everyone tells us money doesn't grow on trees. You have to earn money, repay debts, the government can't start printing money because inflation will be unavoidable. But look at what's happening now,” he pointed out: “Suddenly we can all see how magical money trees have sprung up all over the world's capital cities. Just think, where did the governments get all these ‘stimulus packages’ of billions? And where is inflation? Let's wait for inflation—it won't come, of course! Because money is not an objective reality but a political instrument.”

“The science of ‘economics’ is just as good a science as alchemy, or actually, alchemy is much more of a science than economics,” David would say. He explained that the very design underlying our social reality is doomed to crumble. “Let's hope that the show falls apart before we're beheaded,” he joked.