

Towards a Cosmic Humanism

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When writing critically about the Russian avant-garde, one finds oneself inexorably drawn towards cosmism, as inexorably as the Earth towards the Sun. Russian cosmism has nothing to do with the thematisation of cosmic feeling, unity with the cosmos, or other kinds of mystical experience as we know them in, for example, the esoteric, occultist Theosophy that made its way through Russia at around the same time. What concerned cosmists the most was, in fact, the natural universe, of stars and Sun and Earth. To them, nature was an enemy. Nature, after all, let men die. Some might even say it killed them.

Like the Marxists, the Russian cosmists practised philosophy not as an explanation of things as they are, but as a project of their transformation. Unlike the Marxists, they relied not on the 'natural' development of technology, but the envisioning of a new, radically different kind of technology. At this point, philosophy begins to move into the terrain of science fiction, a genre which has always concerned itself with man's relationship with technology. This was also, as it happens, one of its entry points into the avant-garde movement. This piece will not be an exhaustive appraisal of their intersections, though it will touch on them where relevant. It will instead be an analysis of what Russian cosmism has to say about the human condition, about our relationship with space, and about our relationship with time.

Science fiction has traditionally also concerned itself with time, and with humanity's relationship with its past and future. The Russian avant-garde was similarly occupied with these questions. The Russian artists who called their art Futurist, Suprematist, Constructivist, and later Productivist understood the present time as a point of transition from the past to the future, and so they tried to liberate themselves from the past as far as possible. They created their art not for the audience of the present, infested as they were by the bacteria of the past, but for the audience of the future. This audience, a humanity of a constructed future, was to be liberated from the oppressive energies of the past. But a liberatory ideal on this scale raises questions. Will mankind exist in the future at all?

And if yes, how? There were no obvious answers. As Nietzsche had proclaimed, God was dead: the survival of mankind lost its ontological guarantee. The human race became subordinate to cosmic forces which cared not whether it lived or died.

The Russian cosmists understood the cosmic order as regulated by the force of gravity. However, gravity can also lead to a destruction of this order, a destruction of life. We might think, for example, of an asteroid drawn to Earth by the force of gravity, leaving devastation in its wake. If art and culture were made for the audience of the future, not the present, then one should take measures to guarantee the existence of this audience. However, to protect the Earth and its population means to liberate mankind from the ambivalent force of gravity. This is a necessary and urgent task—not least because gravity is a burden of the past, which the avant-garde despised—but an implausible one. A similar construction of social liberation was established in the mid-nineteenth century by Auguste Comte in his book *System of Positive Polity: Treatise on Sociology Instituting the Religion of Humanity*. At the beginning of the book, Comte formulates the main principle of this new 'religion of Humanity': reason must be subjected to sentiment, to feeling.¹ Here Comte redefines and expands the main principle of his philosophy, which rejects everything spiritual and inaccessible to our feelings, not least reason. Comte understands feeling not only as an empirical experience, but as a principle unifying human society. Social feeling is what binds humanity together.

Comte was, however, keenly aware of the limitations of social feeling. He believed that the intensification of social feeling leads to communism, which destroys a human society that, as we know, is based not on feeling but on the power of gravity. Individual human existence depends on the social order, and the social order is subordinate to the cosmic order. Comte reminds us of the old

¹ Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Polity: General View of Positivism and Introductory Principles* (John Henry Bridges tr, Longmans, Green and Company 1875).

laws of Newton: that we live under the same laws of gravity as the ever-active celestial bodies above us. Thus, it is gravity which orders our society. The communist revolution would be a revolution against gravity – and as such doomed to fail. Comte asserts that the ‘religion of humanity’ is the only true religion, as it is the only one whose object of veneration—humanity—undeniably exists. But if the reality of humanity in the present is a fact, its existence in the future is a matter of faith, of social myth. This social myth, or secular religion, is necessary for our species’ actions, because failing to believe in human perseverance would immobilise us. This faith relies not on the facts but solely on social feeling. Of course, gravity cannot prevent the cosmos from catastrophising humanity. The anticipation of such a possibility, Comte believes, makes the religion of humanity even more soberingly necessary. If we try to trace the source of this faith, however, we arrive once more at social feeling, which, without gravity, would become communism.

I bring up Comte because he was immensely influential, both in prerevolutionary Russia and Western academia (not least in sociology and positivism). He profoundly affected the thinking of Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first People’s Commissar for Education (whose purview included art and culture too). Lunacharsky had explicitly elucidated the relationship between communism and gravity in two volumes written before the revolution.² He wrote of Comte’s ‘religion of Humanity’ that it was the highest form of religious thinking because it predicted some crucial elements of materialist thought, despite being avowedly anti-communist.³ Lunacharsky writes later that the Newtonian model of gravitation is obsolete. Referring to Nietzsche as well as to ‘new achievements of physics’, Lunacharsky proposes that the cosmos is not ordered but chaotic, and that the cosmic space facilitates a polysemy of forces that oppose and fight each other. Humans are fighters in this grand cosmic architecture, a structure which rewards the most powerful force. In this respect, Lunacharsky professes his disbelief in the power of gravity as defining cosmic and social order. It is this disagreement about the relationship between cosmic order and social order that is central to the thinking of many intellectuals and artists before and after the Russian Revolution.

Similarly, Nikolay Fedorov, in an essay called ‘Astronomy and Architecture’ written at the end of the nineteenth century,⁴ calls for changing the trajectory of the Earth through the universe. The Earth should cease to be a satellite of the Sun, and should instead be turned into a cosmic ship that would travel free from gravity through the Cosmic space. Fedorov writes about the Earth: ‘it will begin sailing the celestial seas, with the sum total of the human race rendered as captain, crew, and maintenance staff of this Earth Ship.’ The energy for this free movement will come from the Sun.

Imagine now that the energy sent to the earth by the sun, which presently scatters off into space, could instead be conducted onto the earth, thanks to a massive configuration of lightning rod-aerostats, implements that will drive solar light to our planet. Imagine that this solar energy, once directed earthward, might alter the density of its new home, weaken the bonds of its gravity, giving rise in turn to the possibility of manipulating

its celestial course through the heavens, rendering the Planet Earth, in effect, a great electric boat.

Fedorov, we discern, sees the victory over gravity as the imposition of a new cosmic order, where humans have emerged the strongest fighters and are free to subjugate their universe with mighty, inconceivable technologies. To create this new order humans must be liberated from nature, an ambivalent power that manifests itself in gravity, sexuality, and death. That is why Fedorov wanted to turn the Earth into a museum of mankind in which every human being was guaranteed immortality – an hauntological gallery of ghouls. At first glance, the structures of the ‘ship’ and the ‘museum’ might seem oppositional—one travels while the other is fixed. Here, though, we might recall Foucault’s notion of heterochronic space. According to Foucault, both museum and ship are heterochronic spaces where we can witness the accumulation of time, where ‘time never stops building up and topping its own summit’.⁵

As a result of this museumification (or heterochronification) of humanity, one reaches not only freedom from gravity but total power over death. The totality of this power provides a possibility—perhaps even an obligation—to resurrect our ancestors too. This signifies the collectivisation not only of space but also of time. In eternity, the conflicts between individuals and society will be eliminated where they could not be eliminated in time. The goal of immortality and resurrection is the highest goal for every individual. For this reason, the individual will always remain faithful to society if society makes this individual’s own immortality a given. Only in such a transtemporal society can one live without either spatial limitations imposed by private property or temporal limitations. However, the communist society of immortals must also be ‘interplanetary’—that is, it should occupy and control the entire space of the universe. This is the only way that the security of mankind can be guaranteed. The theological guarantee prefigures the technological guarantee. After all, technology so often looks like divine magic.

But who can make such a guarantee? Socialism promised social justice, but socialism also promised progress. The latter implies that only our genealogical successors would live in an advanced socialist society and enjoy social justice. The generations of the past and of the present, by contrast, are left to play the role of the passive victims of progress. There can be no justice for them. In this hypothesis, future generations can enjoy socialist justice only by cynically accepting an outrageous historical injustice: the exclusion of all previous generations from the realm of the future. Socialism thus exploits the dead in favour of the living, as well as exploiting those alive today in favour of those who will live later. The socialism of the future can only be just if it artificially resurrects all those who established the foundation for its success. The perfect socialism must be established not only in space but also in time.

We can understand progress as the substitution of old things for new ones. Can we find a technology that would not be subjected to this logic? Fedorov asserts that such a technology exists in preservation, as used in the gallery and the museum.⁶ Fedorov is right that the very existence of the museum contradicts the utilitarian, pragmatic spirit of the nineteenth century. That is because the museum preserves with great care that which is useless or superfluous—things of the

2 Anatoly Vasil’evich Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1* (Shipovnik 1908); Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2* (Shipovnik 1911).

3 *ibid.*

4 Nikolai Fedorov, ‘Astronomy and Architecture’ (first published 1906; Ian Dreiblatt tr) in Boris Groys (ed), *Russian Cosmism* (e-flux and MIT Press 2018) 56f.

5 Michel Foucault, ‘Des espaces autres’ (1984) 5 *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 46.

6 Nikolai Fedorov, ‘The Museum, 1st Meaning and Mission’ (first published 1906) in Arseny Zhilyaev (ed), *Avant-Garde Museology* (e-flux and Minnesota University Press 2015).

past that no longer have any practical utility. The museum does not accept death and decline of the object as they are accepted 'in real life'. The museum is fundamentally at odds with progress, little more than a machine for making things last, for making them immortal. Because each human being is also a body among other bodies, a thing among other things, humans can also be blessed with the immortality of the museum. For Fedorov, immortality is not a paradise for human souls but a museum for living human bodies. Divine grace gives way to the museum curator, to the ambivalent technology of preservation.

From this, we see that technology as a whole must become the technology of art. Just as the museum administration is responsible not only for the general holdings of the museum's collection but also for the physical integrity of every given work of art, making certain that the artworks are conserved when they threaten to decay, the state should bear responsibility for the resurrection and continued life of every individual person. The state can no longer let individuals die privately, or let the dead rest peacefully in their graves. The state must overcome the limits placed by death. Power over life and death must become total. This totality is achieved by equating art and politics, life and technology, state and museum, chronic and heterochronic. This overcoming of the boundaries between life and death leads not to the introduction of art into life, but to the very transfiguration of life into art. Human history becomes art history, after a fashion—every human being becomes a passive vessel of aesthetic beauty. Humans will understand themselves in terms not of biology but of the technology of art.

In their first manifesto, the representatives of the biocosmists—a political group from the sphere of Russian anarchism—wrote: 'We take the essential and real right of man to be: the right to exist (immortality, resurrection, rejuvenation) and the freedom to move in cosmic space (and not the supposed rights announced when the bourgeois revolution was declared in 1789)'.⁷ Aleksander Svyatogor, one of the leading biocosmist theoreticians, pointed out that the classical doctrine of anarchism requires a central power to ensure every individual's immortality and freedom of movement in the cosmos. He thereby criticised the doctrine's foundations. Svyatogor took immortality to be at once the goal and the prerequisite for a future communist society, since true social solidarity can only be cultivated among immortals. Death separates people, and private property cannot truly be eliminated if everybody owns a private share of time.⁸

The first proclamation of the new cosmic humanism was made by the radical Russian avant-garde even earlier, through the performance of the mystery-opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913).⁹ The opera was written and staged with the participation of some of the most prominent members of the prerevolutionary Russian avant-garde movement: Kazimir Malevich, Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexei Kruchenykh, and Mikhail Matyushin. At once, we encounter the usual themes of the cosmists: capturing the Sun and liberating the Earth from gravity, establishing revolutionary anarchy instead of the traditional cosmic order. One can say there is no notion of immortality in *Victory over the Sun*. Nonetheless, the text of the opera begins with the words 'everything is good that begins good

and never ends.' Even if an individual is mortal, the reign of anarchy will never end. And men, at least the four strongmen who capture the Sun in the play, will never end, because they made the Sun their eternal prisoner. With this, we come some way to articulating a cosmist vision of humanism.

7 'Kreatorii Rossiiskikh i Moskovskikh Anarchistov-Biokosmistov, Deklarativnaia rezolyutsiia' (1922) 1 Biokosmist 1.

8 Alexander Svyatogor, 'The Doctrine of the Fathers and Anarchism-Biocosmism' in Groys (ed, n 4).

9 Various, *Victory Over the Sun*, vols 1 and 2 (first published 1913; Patricia Railing ed, Evgeny Steiner tr, Artists . Bookworks 2009).