



Cosmism: Against Perma-Death

by Adam P.

I remember my dad making me believe the Russians had turned the moon red. “A blood red commie conspiracy,” he chuckled. This was back in the day, pretty much the last days of the Soviet empire, when, if I think about it, anything seemed possible in a lazy, routine kind of way that characterised much of the second half of the 20th century. There was a blood-moon over Baltimore and he and I were standing outside the Bloomberg Center for Physics and Astronomy in John Hopkins University, he was taking a very long time to say goodbye to some of his pals from the physics department and I no longer recall — so much of my memory is out of reach — why he pointed up at the sky and said, “Look Adam, see what the Russians have done to the moon?” It was not like him to invent stories and tell me untruths, especially of a political nature.

Perhaps dad was just preparing me — preparing all of us like he did in so many ways — for how to be discerning and objective in an era of Fake News and rampant conspiracy theory paranoia?

But all that aside, what I’m interested in talking about now is Russian Cosmism, the philosophical and speculative scientific movement — with often outright neo-religious advocacy — that spanned the latter half of the 19th century and first decades of the 20th. Its grandmaster was a brilliant, humble librarian called Nikolai Fedorov (1829-1903) and if today’s transhumanist movement has a precursor or godfather this Russian Orthodox Christian philosopher and futurist is their man: his understanding of the past, through his careful study and preservation of the books in his care, led him to understand man’s relation to the future and the cosmos, humankind as an active agent in the world’s making and where it is heading.¹

Russian Cosmism has been deemed a ‘false start’ by some, a movement of human thought and imagination that almost burned out and disappeared completely by the mid 20th century. In the last decade or two it has made something of a comeback, particularly in the west. But what was it exactly? In short, Russian Cosmism had its founding principle embodied in Fedorov’s ‘Philosophy of the Common Task’, which posited a future in which humanity would rally behind a collective project that would direct all of human endeavour — technological, social, scientific, cultural — to enable the technological means to *resurrect everyone who has ever lived*. His proposition was simple: we are evolutionarily incomplete because we are mortal and we should not rest until death has been overcome, and in doing so we should expand our habitat into the cosmos as beings who are free to live in

this universe. So this core tenet of his 'common task', the concerted effort to find a means for human resurrection, led to cosmist thinking on space exploration, rocket technology and cosmic colonialism, as well, obviously, life extension and the quest for immortality.

You cannot have one without the other after all: the bio-engineering project of resurrecting the dead and extending life indefinitely led directly to the world-engineering project of cosmic colonisation. If all the people who ever lived were to be brought back to life, they would have to go somewhere and space would have to be found to accommodate them: that is where the *cosmic corollary* comes into the picture — new worlds in outer space would be reached and the resurrected would be settled there. 'Cosmist philosophy is sufficiently insane to affirm the idea of the globe as a unity while simultaneously looking for ways to escape its closed bubble.'² I don't see the insanity in such an affirmation, especially when one considers all the human activity that arises due to the idea of our globe as a *disunity* while simultaneously not looking for ways to escape its closed bubble — now that is insane!

And do not forget that this is the current world order: nation states at war with each other, floundering space programmes, global climate degradation, etc.

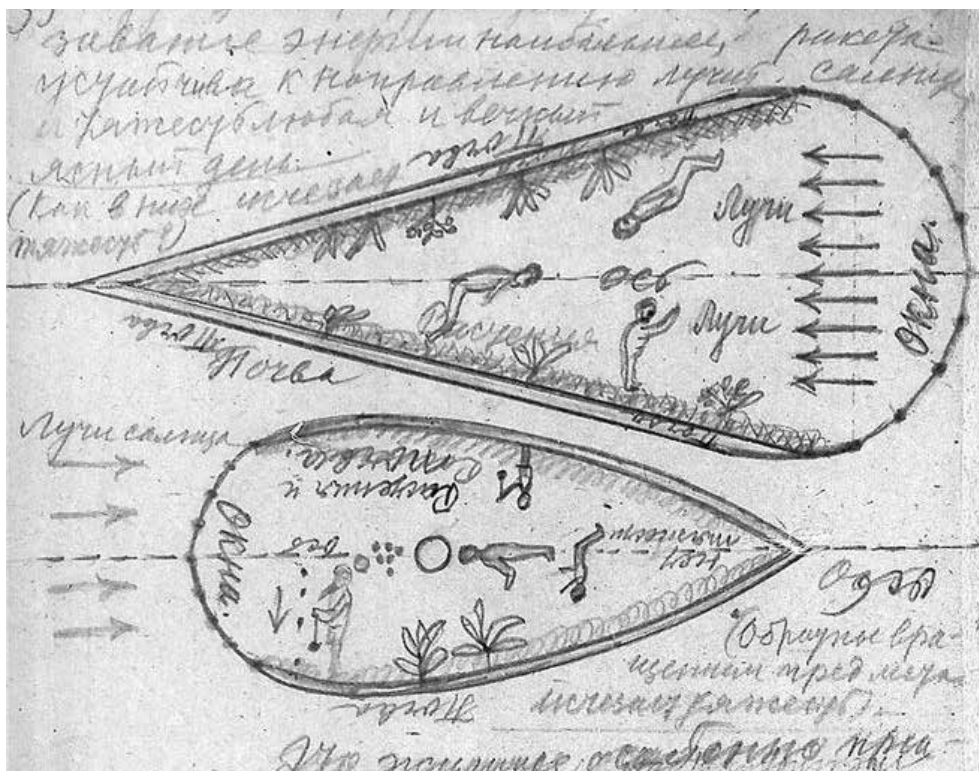


Image: From Tsiolkovsky's 1933 paper "Album of Space Travel", manuscript page 55, drawing of a greenhouse in space. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tsiolkovsky_Album_55.jpg Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935) was one of the earliest rocket scientists and major proponent of Cosmism. Something of a recluse for much of his life, as well as being deaf from the age of 10, he was a self-taught scientist who as early as the 1880s was designing airships, multistage rockets, space stations and spacecraft. He met Federov in a library and became an early adherent to the latter's 'philosophy of the Common Task.'

The geo-engineering aspect of Cosmism saw a serious consideration of world-building, and indeed 'god-building', which historically is very interesting because it in turn influenced Bolsheviks such as Lenin and Gorky. It took the idea of labour to mean something radically transformative, in a transcendent way as opposed to the Marxist concept of alienation (that labour led to an estrangement between man and the world he worked and lived in) and this transformation was thanks to a radically creative labour, alchemical almost, turning the seemingly impossible, possible. Federov's thought was seriously considered in the 1930s and led to the beginning of what would become the Soviet space programme after the Second World War.

One interesting result of both these strands is the cosmist thinking that was applied to the difficulty in conceiving how say an Ancient Egyptian or an Aztec would fare if they were resurrected in 2149? Would they be unable to function, confused and terrified by the strangeness of such a new reality, radically different from the world they left behind? This future shock would sure be substantial: Federov's thinking may have been firmly rooted in religious philosophy but it's radical difference was that the dead would come back to this physical world, the kingdom of heaven would be made up of corporeal bodies and all that entails. There was talk of the planets colonised in outer space to act like museums that would offer period settlements in the styles of earth's historical ages and civilisations, a bit like the television show *Westworld* perhaps, although the analogy is incorrect: the idea of museology, not fairground, is used and explored by Cosmists more than any other with regard this aspect:

Fedorov believed that such technology directed toward the past is possible — and, in fact, already exists. For him it takes shape in art technology and, particularly, in technology used by art museums. The museum does not punish the obsolescence of individual items by removing them and destroying them. Thus the museum is fundamentally at odds with progress. Progress consists in replacing old things with new things. The museum, by contrast, is a machine for making things last, making them immortal. Because each human being is a body among other bodies, a thing among other things, humans can also be blessed with the immortality of the museum. The Christian immortality of the soul is replaced here by the immortality of things or bodies in the museum. And divine grace is replaced by curatorial decisions and the technology of museum preservation.³

This rises interesting questions related to technology and indeed teleological progress: notions of ever increasing progress, dating from the start of the Industrial Revolution, would seem to suggest that it is indeed only a matter of time until we reach a point that we will be able to resurrect the dead, the past, and create new homes offworld for them. And

yet, we're so very far away from the 'common task' oriented and unified world that is free of nation states that the project seems to call for. Hito Steyerl, an artist who is interested in how technology and politics can impact art and vice versa, has raised the comparison between the danger involved in Federov's seemingly utopian 'common task' and the risk of accelerationist theories of 'oligarchic resurrection, which will further exacerbate social inequality and tension.' She states that any thinking about how to fight such oligarchic projects of a rich elite

[I]ntersects with thought experiments to contain the dangers of artificial general intelligence (AGI). People think AGI could be dangerous and override human control and even extinguish humans. Like the dead, AGIs are seen as potentially dangerous creatures and there are questions of timing or containment.

Within the AGI debate, several 'solutions' have been suggested: first, to program the AGI so it will not harm humans, or, on the alt-right/fascist end of the spectrum, to just accelerate extreme capitalism's tendency to exterminate humans and resurrect rich people as some sort of high-net-worth robot race.⁴

Well, this really does make me laugh (although I find it harder and harder to actually laugh)! There are many things I would like to touch on more, such as current notions of artificial general intelligence and its 'containment' or indeed accelerationist thought (in all its guises) but they fall outside the scope of this article on Cosmism. But what these thoughts do reflect is an unease about the current state of the world and the human in the wider frame of the cosmos: it's not a coincidence that Federov and the early cosmists were deeply influenced by religion, for religion offered — and still offers to many who embrace it — a way of understanding their place in time and space. With the collapse of religion in many of our societies, new ways of thinking about our own subjective and collective futures are desperately needed.

There is no world religion today that has an ethics or moral code for how we should relate to that part of us which is digital. This is a crisis looming on the horizon. There are no proper religious tools to deal with our relationship to climate change or mass species extinction. How do we resurrect or bury that large part of ourselves bound up in our social media accounts, our online banking, or credit ratings? We need neo-museums of the future for this, we need a new relationship to time itself. As another artist Trevor Paglen put it when assessing Russian Cosmism:

We need to think about time differently, so that the future does not become the enemy of the present...Perhaps this involves a different kind of resurrection: by developing a more ethical relationship to the environment and to technology, can we resurrect ourselves from the

accumulated data about us that the future will weaponize against us? Should we, perhaps paradoxically, demand the right to digital death at the touch of a button, to wipe our metadata signatures clean? On the other hand, can we resurrect the people who have not been born yet, but who nevertheless died prematurely due to environmental devastation, hunger, racism, and inequality? Perhaps by learning from Fedorov to think about time as a landscape—one that we shape in the same way that we shape the earth's surface—we can develop a framework for thinking some of our most urgent crises.⁵

After all there is also a clear impetus to reevaluate how we think about history if we take the idea of resurrection seriously: it has been pointed out that many aspects of thinking and social organisation have come and gone, fading from sight and becoming obsolete or long forgotten. We can take democracy as an example: violently extinguished in Ancient Greece, it would be next to impossible to convince someone in the 9th to 16th centuries that it would one day become wholly normative and the political organisation the world one day would become obsessed and driven by, namely our own present moment. The same of course is said about Marxism, and the same can be said about Cosmism.

It seems ideas have a kind of tenacity, for better or worse. And specifically in terms of cosmism: as you say it was interrupted — suppressed by Stalin's government in the 1930s. Almost all its protagonists ended up in labor camps or in front of the firing squads: books and art were taken out of circulation; manuscripts were confiscated and destroyed. The destruction was very comprehensive, and it's really a wonder that we have anything left to consider at all. We can only speculate about what could have been accomplished had cosmism been allowed to develop as, for example, psychoanalysis has.⁶

Notes

1. 'A human is a creature on whom the fates of history and the final destinies of the universe alike depend. As Fedorov puts it, man is "Born by the tiny earth, a spectator of the boundless space, a spectator of the different worlds which are part of this space, must become their resident and master."' Anastasia Gacheva, *Art as the Overcoming of Death*, e-flux journal 89, March 2018
2. Natalya Serkova, 'Learning from Machines, Seeing with a Thousand Eyes: On the Relevance of Russian Cosmism', e-flux journal 89, March 2018. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/89/179971/learning-from-machines-seeing-with-a-thousand-eyes-on-the-relevance-of-russian-cosmism/> Last accessed, October 2018.
3. Boris Groys, 'Introduction: Russian Cosmism and the Technology of Immortality', in *Russian Cosmism*, MIT Press, 2018
4. Hito Steyerl in 'Cosmic Catwalk and the Production of Time', *Art Without Death: Conversations on Russian Cosmism*, e-flux and Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2017.
5. Trevor Paglen, 'Geographies of Time' eflux 88, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/88/173480/fedorov-s-geographies-of-time/>
6. Anton Vidokle, in 'Cosmic Doubts', *Art Without Death: Conversations on Russian Cosmism*, e-flux and Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2017.