

Anton Vidokle and Hito Steyerl

Cosmic Catwalk and the Production of Time

01/18

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A painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus* depicts an angel moving backwards, away from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. This is how the Angel of History must look. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment to awaken the dead and piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, towards which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. This storm is what we call progress.

– Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

Anton Vidokle: I have been thinking about Benjamin’s passage on Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* – the Angel of History. For Benjamin, what the angel sees as he looks backwards is a pile of rubble: death, destruction, failure. Everyone dies, all projects fail in the end, cities and empires collapse and become ruins and dust. History is a graveyard, a genocide. It’s hard to argue with this sublime spectacle: time conquers and kills all. Yet there is a very different view on history, on the past, developed in the nineteenth century by a little-known Russian philosopher, Nikolai Fedorov. Fedorov believed that death is not natural and is more like a flaw in our design. Like a disease, death is something to be fixed, cured, and overcome by technological, scientific means. This becomes the central point of his philosophy of the Common Task: a total reorganization of social relations, productive forces, economy, and politics for a single goal of achieving physical immortality and material resurrection. Fedorov felt that we cannot consider anyone really dead or gone until we have exhausted every possibility of reviving them. For him the dead are not truly dead but merely wounded or ill, and we have an ethical obligation to use our faculty of reason to develop the necessary knowledge, science, and technology to rescue them from the disease of death, to bring them back to life. From this point of view history and the past is a field full of potential: nothing is finished and everyone and everything will come back, not as souls in heaven, but in material form, in this world, with all their subjectivities, memories, and



One of several sea slug species that sequester chloroplasts from the algae they eat. Scientists have been trying to determine whether the slugs can use the chloroplasts to derive food from the sun.

knowledge. What appears to be a graveyard is in fact a field full of amazing potential.

Hito Steyerl: As a German person it's a bit hard for me to imagine a scenario in which all the old Nazis are brought back to life. There are enough new ones as it stands. Also, at what point would they be resuscitated? Would they walk around with a bullet in their heads? Okay, let's imagine everyone they killed is alive too. That's a plus. But what is the point one would bring them back to? Say, maybe 1932? But then the next batch, at which point would they be reanimated? 1943? How do we guarantee the Nazis don't just continue trying to kill everyone?

Probably these are technicalities. But the more general reason for my skepticism of the past's potential is that it keeps repeating anyways. Not in the same form, obviously, but in a different, sneaky form. Take Deutsche Bank. It is not the aryanized entity of the 1930s, which financed the Nazi regime. It is a conglomerate consisting of German and American banks plus Goldman Sachs and Qatari money. It financed the Trump campaign, which obviously is not a 1930s fascist entity either. Trump's "America First" slogan is not the same "America First" slogan that it was in the 1940s. But from my point of view none of these entities needed to be

rearticulated in the present at all – not even differently. I would very much prefer it if they hadn't been reincarnated – even imperfectly – and instead had remained in the past. As for Benjamin's angel: I think that the storm is no longer coming from the past. Today the storm is blowing from a future that has been depleted of resources and hope and it is driving people back into the past. People are driven towards the womb – or their assumed origins – not the grave. All these old people trying to look young and jaded are a sign that the storm is blowing from collapsing futures towards a fragmented past.

Benjamin also wrote something else. He said: "Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy hasn't stopped winning." I had to think about this as the Turkish army bombarded my friend's grave in Turkish Kurdistan. They had already killed her twenty years ago. So this is her second death – because the civil war itself has been revived. How often can a person get "killed"? If anyone tried to reanimate her, she wouldn't be "herself" anymore, but all mixed up with the other guys in the grave. After all, these were her comrades. They would be a collective body, not individuals anymore. Maybe as such they are alive anyway.

On the other hand the future offers no

03/18



A portrait of Eugenia Yarovskaya-Markon, date unknown.

refuge either. It's been depleted and sucked dry. You have to forgive me for being uncharacteristically pessimistic. There is too much past around these days and it is strong, smooth, and brutal. Let's keep trying.

AV: At first glance having Hitler, Stalin, Attila the Hun, or other mass murderers revived does sound absurd, and a more selective resurrection could be more appealing. Yet I think I understand Fedorov's conviction that nobody can be left behind in death, not even the monsters, because a universal project of this nature cannot be curated selectively, and present generations do not have the right to be such a curator. It's either everybody or nobody. There are several reasons for this.

First, nobody is evil from birth. This is what one can become under certain conditions over time, but no one is born a murderer. There is a really amazing document I came across recently, an eye-witness account of the execution of Eugenia Yaroslavsky-Markon in a labor camp in the early 1930s. She was married to one of the leading cosmist poets and tried to help her husband escape.¹ The attempt failed, and she was caught and sentenced to be shot. The commander of the camp wanted to kill her personally, because she was defiant and had publicly embarrassed him previously. But for some reason on the day of the execution he could not bring himself to shoot her and broke down. This event is described in detail in the diary of a camp guard who witnessed the executions. The guard writes that the commander had a nervous breakdown and could not pull the trigger, because even a person as evil as him was not a monster all of his life. In this way, perhaps nobody with a capacity for thought, memory, and feeling is totally beyond redemption?

Second, and to your technicality point, certainly a significant social restructuring has to take place before a project of universal immortality and resurrection can become possible. Technologically, scientifically, and economically, such a restructuring would result in a society in which historical villains could not do any damage. It would certainly not be a capitalist society, simply because the market economy is not efficient enough to generate the resources necessary for a task as enormous as resurrection for all. It would also not be a society of separate nation-states because all the resources of the planet and all productive forces will need to be pooled together in a kind of a planetary union. There will be no competition, no private property, no hierarchies, probably no ethnic or gender differences: nothing that can produce strife or war. Besides, everyone will be immortal, so you couldn't kill anyone even if you wanted to.

On the other hand, what is worrisome is that if a certain form of biological longevity or digital immortality becomes possible much sooner, in the current state of society, then we may end up with the worst kind of oppression of all: an elite of immortal billionaires staying perpetually alive at the expense of enslaving everyone else. Interestingly, Peter Thiel is already using some type of blood transfusions from teenagers to keep himself rejuvenated physically and mentally. Apparently, the technique is effective and there is a commercial clinic in California offering this very expensive treatment to the very rich. In the mid-1920s Alexander Bogdanov set up an institute in Moscow to do precisely this, not as a commercial venture but as plan for rejuvenating blood banks to be set up throughout the USSR, for the entire population. Ironically or otherwise, he accidentally killed himself when he exchanged blood with one of his students who was sick with malaria.

I understand what you say about the past entering the present and the future in damaging ways, but there are two kinds of past: a mythologized past that all sorts of despots and fascists tend to evoke, the golden age that never really happened – a fabricated, whitewashed, curated fantasy designed to capitalize on today's fears; and the actual past – the lives of people that came before us, with all their pain, disappointment, and suffering as much as joy, hope, and love. Now, if all these people suddenly started coming back with their knowledge and memories, the mythical past would have no chance because we would begin to know what really happened. Interestingly, Fedorov does not locate utopia in the past. For him it's clearly in the future, but a future that somehow manages to fully recuperate the totality of past lives.

Your question as to which historical period the resurrected people will enter – this is interesting. It's something I've spoken about with Arseny Zhilyaev a number of times, because of his interest in museology.² Obviously, someone who lived in 1275 AD or 634 BC is going to have a rather difficult time if they are brought back in 2037: they may find it stressful, alienating, incomprehensible, and so forth. The evolved humans capable of technological resurrection may have already changed significantly from what we accept as the human form: they may have different bodies, entirely different ways of communication, no gender distinction or differentiation, and so forth. Fedorov does not write much about this aspect of things, but he does advocate space exploration and the settlement of other planets to house resurrected people, because Earth is simply not big enough to sustain such an enormous population. Arseny thinks that the solution may be in setting up



An illustration from a Soviet manual describes the setup for a blood transfusion.

these other planets as period-type reconstructions, essentially planetary museums, so that, for example, a resurrected Parthian peasant family would be housed on a planet that would reproduce the reality of their original time. And the whole thing can be managed by artificial intelligence.

When Arseny was talking about this, I had a thought that perhaps we are already living on one of these museum planets.

Regarding bodies with bullet holes, diseases, and other traumas – clearly it would be very cruel to bring people back in such a shape, and if there is going to be a technology to resurrect individuals who died hundreds and thousands of years ago, it will be sufficiently advanced to repair their bodies as well. The real question may be that, since the human form will continue evolving and changing, what body exactly is being resurrected – the old human or the contemporary one? In the writings of Fedorov and other cosmists, there are indications that we do need to evolve our bodies, at the very least to make the body strong enough to survive and live in space without oxygen and at extremely low temperatures. Some of the other ideas point to plant life as a better form, because plants are able to regenerate leaves, branches, and so forth, while we cannot regrow an arm or a leg. Yet other thinkers from this circle suggest that we should become self-feeding, so as not to kill and consume other organisms to stay alive – like some types of plankton that can derive sufficient energy from sunlight without the need to consume anything else. I think if I was resurrected as algae, I would be really shocked, because we are all so attached to our physical form. So it is an open question, how all these different forms of humans – the older ones and the future ones – could coexist and interact. There is a funny short story by Sorokin, a contemporary Russian writer that is influenced by cosmism, in which something goes wrong and people are being resurrected partly as household appliances: so someone is part human but they've got a fragment of a coffee maker stuck in their new body. That is also a possibility ...

As for Benjamin's fears for the dead if the enemy wins, for me this means that if the enemy wins there will be no resurrection. The dead are already unsafe because they don't have any rights in our society: they don't communicate, consume, or vote and so they are not political subjects. Their remains are removed further and further from places where most of the living are living, from the cities. Culturally, the dead are now largely pathetic comical figures: zombies in movies.

When we were filming the large ionizer dish in the cemetery in Kazakhstan, one of the

workers jokingly suggested that we should also build a big wall around us, because if we turned this device on, maybe it would make the dead rise from their graves and they would attack us like cinematic zombies. I was thinking that they would probably just want to go home, to their families and stuff. Financial capitalism does not care about the dead because they do not produce or consume. Fascism only uses them as a mythical proof of sacrifice. Communism also is indifferent to the dead because only the generation that achieves communism will benefit from it; everyone who died on the way gets nothing. It seems that only indigenous cultures at this point keep some reverence for the dead. Fedorov writes that a true religion is a cult of ancestors.

HS: I think we are getting to a place where a lot of this intersects in interesting ways with current mythology around AI, but also accelerationist lore – and this harks back to Peter Thiel, eventually.

I think everything can be drawn from this paragraph:

It would also not be a society of separate nation-states because all the resources of the planet and all productive forces will need to be pooled together in a kind of a planetary union. There will be no competition, no private property, no hierarchies, probably no ethnic or gender differences: nothing that can produce strife or war. Besides, everyone will be immortal so you couldn't kill anyone even if you wanted to.

So, the dangers emanating from the dead will be contained by a noncapitalist, non-national society? First one has to produce this society, and only afterward can one proceed to resurrect the dead because only at this point has one created the conditions to do it without further hardship for everyone. If this process is accelerated or bypassed, one will end up with a Peter Thiel-style vampire oligarchic resurrection, which will further exacerbate social inequality and tension.

This intersects with thought experiments to contain the dangers of Artificial General Intelligences (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

07/18



08/18



Anton Vidokle, *The Communist Revolution Was Caused by the Sun*, 2016. Film still

exterminate humans and resurrect rich people as some sort of High-Net-Worth Robot race.

These eugenicist ideas are already being implemented: cryogenics and blood transfusions for the rich get the headlines, but the breakdown of health care in particular – and sustenance in general – for poor people is literally shortening the lives of millions, curtailing the possibility for them to pass on their genes. Negating, preventing, or destroying social health care programs is the most important accelerationist policy, and it has already been underway for some time.

There is another aspect to this: the maintenance and reproduction of life is of course a very gendered technology – and control over this is a social battleground. Reactionaries try to grab control over life's production and reproduction by any means: religious, economic, legal, and scientific. This affects women's rights on the one hand, and, on the other, it spawns fantasies of reproduction wrested from female control: in labs, via genetic engineering, etc. If the reproduction and maintenance of life is already a cosmist activity, then one has to recognize its strong connection to reproductive labor and so-called domestic activities. Caretakers, parents, nurses, nurturers, cooks, and cleaners are the first cosmists.

In the present reactionary backlash, oligarchic and neoreactionary eugenics are in full swing, with few attempts being made to contain or limit the impact on the living. The consequences of this are clear: the focus needs to be on the living first and foremost. Because if we don't sort out society – create noncapitalist abundance and so forth – the dead cannot be resurrected safely (or, by extension: AGI cannot be implemented without exterminating humankind or only preserving its most privileged parts).

The vital part of sorting out society is minimized in AGI mythology. People try to hastily accelerate in order to bypass it, thinking that there will be some sort of technological solution – for example, just getting rid of humankind by way of eugenic selection. But this is where the real technological challenge resides: How to create a just and abundant society? If the living want to offer it to the dead, then they should be able to create it for themselves. This is an immense technological challenge and this technology has nothing to do with computation or machines but with getting people to agree and collaborate with one another. It's not about the hardware but the programming. This indeed is an intractable problem which has never been solved by deploying technology in the narrow sense. Most people thought that the Industrial Revolution would have already enabled a much

more equitable society, but again, hardware outpaced software. I think that this is where the most urgent technological challenge lies. If this is solved, then everything else is a minor problem – for example, whether to resurrect Nazis on the same planet as techno-eugenicists without washing machines.

My question is: Why didn't it happen already? As far as I understand it, the project of Soviet socialism was supposed to create these foundations. At what point did the technology fail? Which parts would need to be developed to create the necessary social technology? Is cooking (or other so-called reproductive activities) potentially the more advanced technology in this respect?

AV: Soviet socialism failed for a number of different reasons. Most importantly, all the major capitalist countries wanted it to fail and actively worked to undermine it. But there were also deep contradictions internally. Certain people, like Alexander Bogdanov for example, who was very close to Lenin from the start, acknowledged very early on that a violent insurrection and a militant attempt to seize power would only lead away from the possibility of socialism and communism. He stepped away from the Bolshevik party as it was just being formed precisely over the use of force, because he felt that it was like cheating, a kind of violent acceleration of politics and social organization, whereas for him one could arrive at communism only through emancipation, education, cultural means, and so forth – not by forcing or killing people. Of course he was also a cosmist ...

Yet another side of this was human corruption: desire for power over others, desire for material goods, for privilege. By the late 1950s it became clear to some scientists and political leaders in the USSR that they would not reach communism while economic decisions were made by humans who made mistakes and had ulterior motives. A Soviet computer scientist, Viktor Glushkov, embarked on the construction of a vast interconnected network of computers distributed across the entire country, which would regulate all production and distribution of goods, food, energy, and everything else – a cybernetic control system.³ Interestingly, some of the core principles of cybernetics are apparently inspired by a book written by Alexander Bogdanov around 1918, called *Tektology*. This was Bogdanov's attempt to develop a science of sciences that would organize and synthesize all scientific knowledge into very basic principles of interaction between systems. *Tektology* was translated into German and came to the attention of John Von Neumann and Norbert Wiener, who later developed cybernetics and systems theory and all that. So

in the 1960s Glushkov tried to apply principles of cybernetics to enable computers to run the Soviet economy. While this was not precisely artificial intelligence in the contemporary sense, it was a pretty close approximation. By the 1970s the system was apparently fully developed and was nearly ready to be implemented, but was cancelled at the last moment because of certain political disagreements within the Politburo. I don't really know if it would have propelled the USSR and the world into communism, or resulted in a complete disaster that would have crashed an already flawed economic system. Interestingly, in the end this computer system was utilized to regulate Soviet gas and oil pipelines and is still in use apparently. So probably your apartment in Berlin is literally connected to this network.

The main principle of materialism – and both cosmism and socialism are deeply materialist ways of thinking – is that everything is matter and all phenomena are a result of material interactions, be it interactions of atoms or neurons or pixels or numbers, etc. It's a kind of a monism (and in keeping with the rest of this conversation, naturally the main philosophical book by Bogdanov is titled *Empiriomonism* – which Lenin attacked in his *Materialism and Empiro-criticism*), which is why I think that a lot of contemporary post-humanists and all these people hoping for some form of digital immortality are probably as off track as the Catholic Church was in the sense that they think they can separate consciousness from the body and transfer it into a different machine. Perhaps this is not very different from believing that the soul goes to heaven after death.

HS: So can we agree that to bring this into the present – or even into the future – one needs to start by creating an abundant, peaceful, nonviolent society? Because if the living can't do it, how could the revived?

The problem to solve first is how to keep humans from killing one another and making each other miserable. The explanations we get for this situation are very dull and unsatisfactory: the right says that it is human nature and the left says it is a result of unfortunate circumstances. So, what if one does not want to accept either? What does one need to look into? Are social physics a sort of alienating device that could help understand what this is about? How about social simulations with a wide range of possible outcomes? Cooking and game playing? How does one reprogram social dynamics?

AV: What Fedorov suggests as a model for such a society is the divine family: the father, the son, and the Holy Ghost. I am not a Christian, so for me the Triune God is a really weird concept that is difficult to get my head around. From

what I understand, the three divine entities are not identical and can act independently, yet there is a total union and there are no disagreements among them. They are immortal and what binds them together is love. Can one model society on this? What kind of script do we need to game a model like that?

I also feel that maybe the reason why both the left and the right have sort of accepted killing as part of human nature has something to do with how powerful the death drive is. Our bodies are programmed to die on a genetic level, as is almost all other living matter on this planet. Unlike other living matter, humans are capable of a certain type of reflection, and yet we are for the most part resigned to death. We do not question it. We are like farm animals: we are okay with being slaughtered as long as we get some time to live, feed, play a little, feel affection, reproduce, etc. What were the most popular song lyrics with teenagers you found – “hell,” “fuck,” “die”? We see others being slaughtered but rationalize this as something natural because it seems unavoidable and because nobody escapes it in the end. I think if one is resigned to the inevitability of death, killing can be accepted as just another part of the package – painful and tragic, but somehow natural.

So maybe the first step has to be a movement towards a worldview within which death is not natural, where it is an enemy that has to be resisted and fought collectively. There needs to be a rebellion against death. This cannot be done by force, but through education, through ideas, through conversation, through literature, cinema, art, and so forth – in other words, by cultural means. I guess this is what I am working on.

It takes a really long time to change people's views of the world, but I think it is not entirely hopeless. Humans largely overcame slavery, even if this took many thousands of years. Gender and racial rights are gradually moving towards equality, even if this movement is more a zigzag than a straight line. The idea of representative politics has more or less become the norm in most places, even if it is imperfect and is being challenged and subverted by the elites, by the oligarchs, by fascists. I think it is possible that our views on death will change and that the right to rejuvenation, immortality, and resurrection will one day be recognized as an inherent right of all living beings and everyone who came before them. Biocosmists wanted to inscribe this into the Soviet constitution. They did not succeed at that time but this does not mean that this will not succeed eventually. For many centuries the notion of democracy existed solely as passages in obscure manuscripts preserved in monasteries, and it was inconceivable as a viable



A detail of Andrei Rublev's icon *Hospitality of Abraham* in which the three angels represent the three persons of God.

political system. Then suddenly it comes out from the pages of old books and is embraced as the dominant model of social organization. It is very strange how certain ideas play out over time.

HS: This takes us into a tangle of complex and contradictory ideas about the economy, excess, the gift, and mortality, pioneered by Bataille and others.

Lets start with this proposition: “Death is capital” (or “Capital is death”).

This can have many implications: death can be managed using capital as a kind of fake immortality. But death in the form of giving your life is also the only form of currency many otherwise deprived people have. It can be a gift, a release of energy, a foundation for all sorts of community, including the fascist community. Death has a function in the cosmic circulation of energy, it can be a form of generosity or gluttony, a violent spending spree.

The energy and especially the fear of death has been “managed” by a lot of different economies: fascist ones tend to identify surplus energy with surplus people and try to kill them off. Many people argue that the current US government is a result of rising mortality rates for a segment of the white population that was

until now comparatively shielded against the risk of premature death. They basically “invest” in a scheme that tells them that actually other people “deserve” to die instead as a form of “terror management.” There is no mystery in this kind of process – the consequences are clear.

Economies of heroism work differently in that they are about giving your own life as an act of “generosity,” leading to some form of immortality in circulation. Interestingly, there is also the opposite form of “hero” whose appeal relies on retention: on not giving, on being able to accumulate endlessly without choking – like Midas, who could even digest gold – or not even needing to eat, thus already being immortal.

But according to Bataille, death and especially the death of others is not the only process by which excess energy is managed. The art world, design, fashion, sex, and so on are different schemes by which surplus energy/capital is redistributed and “wasted.” According to this, we can make sense of why contemporary art markets have been so inflated in recent decades. The worse or rather the more “worthless” the art, the higher the gratuitous expenditure. A part of excess capital is “wasted” in auctions, dinners, philanthropy, and, to a much lesser extent, in biennials and so on. Art thus

12/18



The eight researchers chosen as “biospherians” inhabited the self-contained ecosystem of Biosphere 2 in 1991 for two years.

becomes a part of so-called terror management, a means to channel death drives.

Essentially, this is neither pro-death nor anti-death. It shows the different functions of death in material economies. But the return of these discussions – which originally culminated around the time of European fascism – not only comes at a time when fascist forces are winning out once more, but is also accompanied by many of the aesthetic/artistic concerns of that time, especially a resurgence of surrealist and animist tendencies. The digital surrealism of recent years (“data as dada”) is just one very scattered example. We can add to this a new emphasis on ritual, sorcery, transgression, and meme magic. In a way, a lot of the ingredients of 1930s surrealism are present once again in the cultural debate; historically, we know that some surrealists went towards supporting communism and others towards supporting fascism, and others again went to the library. This is happening today as we speak within contemporary forms of surrealism, where a similar fracturing is starting to happen. Ten percent of post-internet artists go bro fascist, another ten percent go “*nouvelle gauche*” (left identitarian ethnoculturalist), twenty percent go communist, and the rest go into ceramics, fermentation, and art fairs.

However, I would like to focus on the aspects that are new in relation to the 1930s: digital disruption and another historical push for globalization and circulation. What kinds of new elements do they bring into the picture?

And very clearly I have never been very much attracted by the bombastic and baroque aspects of Bataille’s ideas and style, nor by their continuation in – let’s call it nihilist and postmodern media theory, in Baudrillard, etc. It’s way overproduced. Too many synth violins and too much death metal.

A very different document from these times that I think is valid today is George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, which is a sober documentary account about both the struggle against fascism and persecution by Stalinism. Why is it relevant? Because it is actually about lived experience. It is lived experience. It is life plus, very essentially, form – the contrary of the entropy and spending spree of death. To me it feels luxurious, both in relation to a bare life that is deprived of any choice regarding its own form, but also in relation to the baroque formlessness of death-spending. Perhaps the luxury lies in being able to spend one’s life rather than spending one’s death (or more likely, the deaths of others).

So, basically, to apply this back to our question: the fight against death. Today, to fight death first means to fight new fascisms.

AV: This is interesting. *The Accursed Share* – Bataille’s last book where he speaks about surplus energy, the sun, death, and so forth – is one of my favorite books of his.

It’s the one where he comes very close to the worldview of cosmists in the sense that life on Earth is very much shaped and controlled to some extent by celestial, cosmic forces, specifically the effect of the sun on our planet. The sun is super generous in the sense that it gives Earth an incredible abundance of energy, more than we can actually use safely. Energy in the form of sunlight is converted to plant life, animal life, and, through the death of all this living substance, into coal, oil, gas – all these fossil fuels, which are essentially sunlight trapped below Earth’s surface. The surplus of this energy needs to be spent through extravagant activities that require expenditures of huge amounts of energy: violence, war, sexuality, and so forth. Bataille sees art as one of the ways to expend this surplus energy non-violently.

Fedorov’s conception is similar and slightly different: he sees the entire surface of our planet, the biosphere in which we live and the planet’s organic layer, the soil, as a kind of enormous cemetery where everything is made up of the remains of people, animals, plants – all the living matter that has died. We live in these remains, we literally eat, drink, breathe our ancestors, we are completely surrounded and entrapped in death and the remains it leaves behind. It is a horrific vision. So for Fedorov, the fight against death is a fight to liberate ourselves from the cycle of consuming the dead and being consumed ourselves, from being stuck in this swamp of dead bodies and misery.

Certainly, the fight against death has to start with a fight against militarism, fascism, racism, sexism, because they kill and keep killing. But I am not sure that fascism is winning. To me it looks like the Alamo – a kind of a last stand before its final obliteration. For decades it was able to exist in a veiled way and now it has come out in the open, largely because it feels it will not have another chance. But what has come out is kind of ridiculous, amateur, buffoon-like. I was just reading an interview in *Der Spiegel* with the older brother of Geert Wilders. It’s really interesting what an isolated, solitary, pathetic figure Wilders is – someone completely removed from contact with the “people” on whose behalf he claims to speak, someone whose main talent is coming up with short provocative slogans that circulate widely but contain no real plan or program. It’s very similar to Trump and many of the other figures that have emerged on the right. It’s entirely desperate. I don’t want to just dismiss this or be too optimistic, because it’s

nasty and will take time and a lot of fighting to defeat. But it will be defeated, and then we are still in the cemetery eating the remains of our fathers and mothers ... So, how to really move forward?

Death is capital quite literally, because everything we accumulate – food, energy, raw material, etc. – these are all products of death. But there is something else which seems to be fully in the realm of the living – labor, reason, love. I think maybe if the digital disruption you mention could be directed to amplify the latter and reduce dependence on the former, then this could be a step in the right direction. One of the scientists in the cosmist movement was Vladimir Vernadski, a geologist who developed the notion of the noosphere during the middle of the Second World War. It's a profoundly optimistic theory of how life on the planet will be transformed by an emerging sphere of reason and communication whose relationship to life will be similar to the relationship that the biosphere has to the geosphere.⁴ Arseny says that noospheric theory is like an optimistic version of Anthropocene theory.

HS: Buffoons kill. Being ridiculous unfortunately does not inhibit an autocrat's efficiency. Look at all the people recently killed in Turkey's new civil war. So unfortunately, the autocrats will not somehow implode or just go away. There are very strong organizational formations behind these movements: religious, commercial, military. And just as we see everything changing, fascism too is undergoing major mutations. One of the most important – besides its traditional infatuation with death – is its creation of updated fascist versions of the life sciences and also of digital communication. We can observe an impoverished form of the noosphere in social media, whose fascist potentials are rapidly being expanded: divisiveness, fragmentation, the exploitation of affect, etc. This is definitely not to say that it is not necessary to keep striving for different forms of mediated consciousness, but only that this is just another arena where the fight against fascism needs to take place.

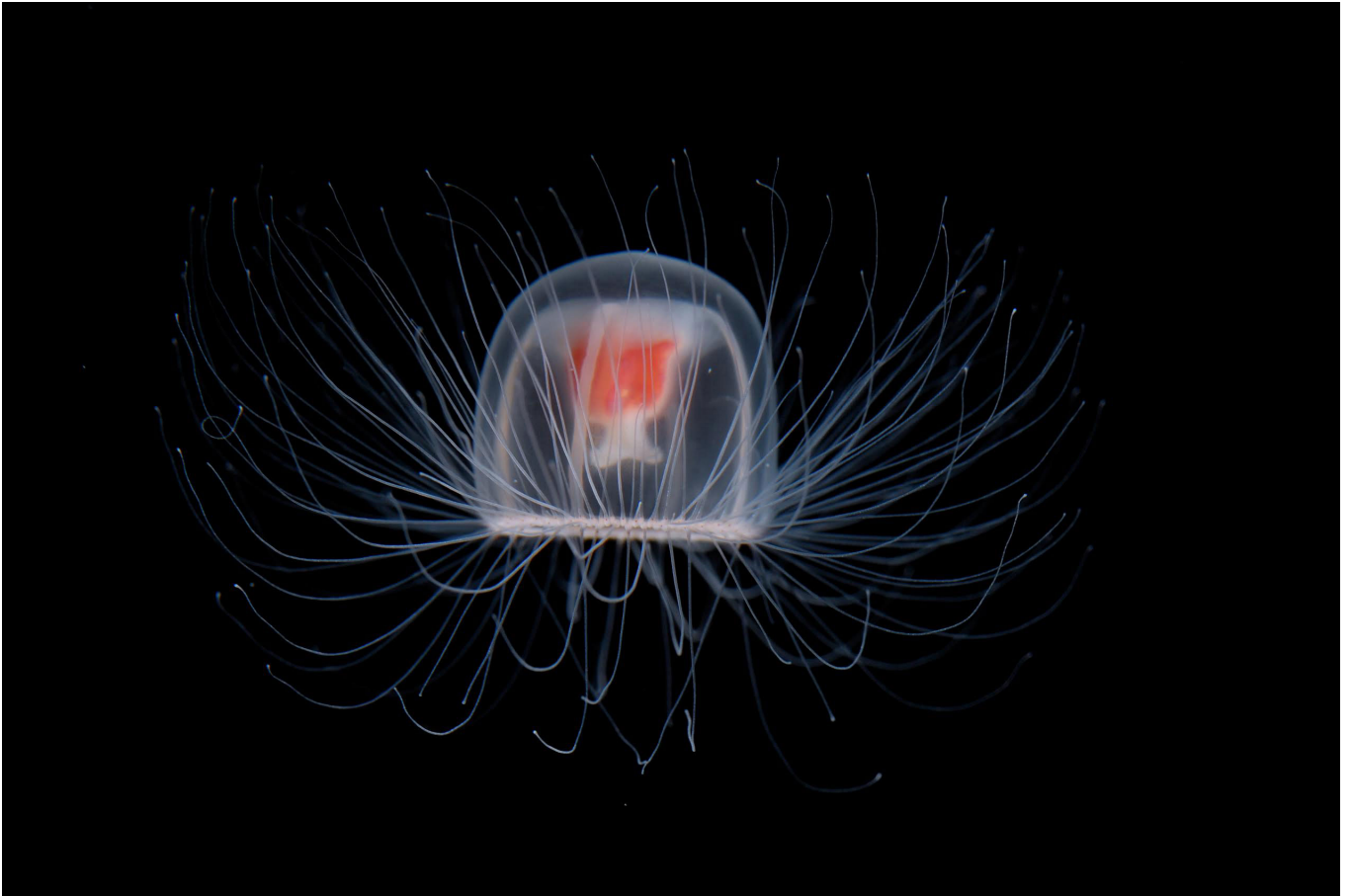
Speaking of the biosphere – and changing topics – there is an example that keeps fascinating me: Steve Bannon actually managed the Biosphere 2 experiment for a while. People were locked into a greenhouse sphere and had to be completely self-sustaining, including the production of food and atmosphere. It was an oligarch-funded experiment, a test for space colonization. Could they produce oxygen? Sustenance? Social bonds? The answer is that it all failed and that cockroaches and ants were the species that turned out to be best adapted to the oligarch space colony. Oxygen dropped to

dangerous levels. The climate was completely fucked up. I think it's a great metaphor for technofascism. That's what happens if you try to breed a superior race – say, storm troopers with tentacles for faces. You get a lot of cockroaches, which actually in terms of Darwinist survival abilities are probably one of the most superior species on Earth. You actually get cockroaches in a huge filtered bubble, the perfect isolationist master race.

(Perhaps I need to apologize to the ants and cockroaches. The ants especially had really great social tactics – they practiced a form of cross-colony solidarity, which made them very resilient. The humans just divided and fell out; of course the ants won).

It would be easy to keep gloating over this outcome, but since I am not a cockroach, the results are not encouraging. So one needs to go back and look at how to actually get it right, right from the foundations, minus the extreme capital techno-eugenics advocated by alt-right forces. These guys have already started to seal the windows of the country they are running. The climate is changing ever faster. There seems to have been an uprising against Bannon and the oxygen ban he imposed back then. At a certain point the windows were opened by some renegade scientists. Other windows were even broken. The woman that led the revolt was later threatened by Bannon. She more or less said that it was her ethical duty to protect her fellow scientists from becoming human guinea pigs for bankers. So this episode is an interesting precedent for how to combat financialized techno-eugenics.

AV: Cosmism is biopolitics because it is concerned with the administration of life, rejuvenation, and even resurrection. Furthermore, it is a radicalized form of biopolitics because its goals are ahead of the current normative expectations and extend even to the deceased. It is a commonly acknowledged view that political power makes a biopolitical turn from simply exercising the sovereign right to kill its subjects without being responsible for their health or life, to governments accepting the obligation to care for the health and welfare of their citizens, to extend their life by administering health services and medical care, securing food supplies, maintaining clean water and air, and so forth. This has been an enormous shift – from the administration of punishment and death to the administration of biological life, upon which the consent to be governed is founded. The next logical step would appear to be for society to guarantee perpetual life for its members and then to extend this to the dead: parents and grandparents and so forth – basically everyone.



A *turritopsis dohrnii* jellyfish, known as the only immortal animal. Once the *Turritopsis dohrnii* have reproduced, they don't die but transform themselves back into their juvenile polyp state.

The technological development necessary to accomplish all these goals may have less to do with the industrial production of devices, machines, and all sorts of stuff that is reliant on the exploitation of raw materials, carbon energy, and so forth, and more to do with certain modifications of our biological bodies. One way to prevent hunger is to produce a lot of food, but another way is to adapt the body to not require food, to be self-feeding somehow. Similarly, one way to solve housing shortages is to build a lot of housing, but a more advanced way is to make the body stronger in such a way that it does not require shelter at all – like most other animals. I do not mean some type of a Terminator-type armored body, but the biological organic body we already have, only made better and stronger. Other life-forms on our planet suggest interesting possibilities in this respect. There are organisms that simply don't die – like the immortal jelly fish that reverses its life cycle perpetually, or those minuscule water bears who apparently are able to live even in outer space on the surfaces of satellites and other orbiting space craft. Or even common houseplants that are able to derive energy from photosynthesis. We share some of the genetic code with all this life and I do not think it is completely impossible to adopt some of their amazing abilities to our basic biology. I realize all this sounds like sci-fi, but our capacity for thought enables a lot of possibilities.

HS: I completely agree about the biopolitics part. Yesterday I talked to TSC, my protagonist from *Factory of the Sun* about this. He had two very interesting comments.

First, he argued that humans actually do not have enough body surface to be able to photosynthesize sufficient energy. They would need leaf extensions of some kind to provide that kind of surface. (He also said that lobsters are technically immortal already, due to some genetic features, but they die anyway because of accidents.)

The other point he made was also extremely interesting. He said that future developments hinge on one factor: What will we achieve first, superintelligence or the resurrection of the dead?

Because the resurrection of everyone would force a major slowing down of research. All these people with old or even ancient worldviews would cause a major cultural slowdown that would make the current exponential increase in technical knowledge unlikely. So most probably, if immortality was first, superintelligence would be much delayed or even not happen at all. On the other hand if the superintelligence was developed first, it would have its own agenda. And that would probably not necessarily include

the immortality or even survival of humankind, so that would maybe be delayed or not happen. A fascinating aporia. What happens if neither happens or something completely different happens, which is the likeliest outcome? Will the ants take over? Or will someone smash the locked windows?

AV: We can imagine solutions for the lack of surface area: either by designing a more efficient form of photosynthesis or growing some type of folding extensions. Wings could work very nicely and could also enable one to fly.

The question of superintelligence is interesting. I think the singularity people and various post-humanists are very concerned with this. They are also obsessed with transferring human consciousness into computers and resurrecting the dead through the use of something like interpellation algorithms, etc. But this may be on the wrong track because many of these ideas are based on thinking about intelligence, consciousness, memory, and thought, as immaterial phenomena that can be programmed into various types of hardware, like the religious idea that there is a material body and an immaterial soul that can exist separately of the body, enter other things, and so forth. These kind of divisions between matter and spirit create a lot of confusion. Boris Groys thinks that this is a kind of a medieval thinking that shows how young the field of computer science is and that it has not yet reached the contemporary level of reflection.⁵

I have not found detailed descriptions of exactly how cosmists imagined resurrection technology would work. Fedorov writes a lot about museums using their techniques for preservation, conservation, and restoration to not just maintain and repair artifacts, but to radicalize this technology to bring people back to life. He does not elaborate on how. One possible reference to a method that I came across is in a small book by Valerian Muravyov about the production of time.

Muravyov was a theorist, a social-democrat, and was part of the February Revolution. After the October Revolution he was immediately arrested by Bolsheviks and was sentenced to be executed. Apparently Leon Trotsky visited him in his jail cell, where they had an overnight discussion, as a result of which he was released and given a job as a researcher with the ministry of labor. In his treatise about the production of time (which he means literally), he talks about how some events and phenomena recur when the same conditions are reconstructed: for example, water always boils when the temperature of 99.98°C is reached. It transforms into vapor and can condense into water again when the temperature is lowered. He wonders if

water produced by the condensation of vaporized water can be regarded as the same water. He suggests that it is the same and this seems to imply to him that a recreation of certain conditions can result in the recreation of more complex systems, even humans who “evaporated” in the past. He sees this as the control and production of time. He also makes a point of differentiating this from shamanism, which believes that the reproduction of certain sounds, movements, or utterances, or mixtures of ingredients, can result in the production of unrelated actions or objects elsewhere. He stays more on the scientific side of things.

Oh, and I would not worry so much about bringing back people with “ancient” thinking. It seems discriminatory and presumptuous to think that we are now or will be in the future smarter than Socrates or Aristotle and so many others ... but separate museum planets are a must!

I think Bannon was brought in on the second attempt to live in the Biosphere in 1994. The original experiment in 1991 also ended badly – apparently a love triangle among participants in the dome resulted in a stabbing and the experiment had to be stopped. I did not know that there was an earlier Soviet experiment like this, but it makes sense because of the space program and the obsession with control over complex systems, etc. It may have been successful because people in the Soviet Union were a bit more patient and used to put up with much more discomfort than probably most American scientists in the 1990s. I am sure it was just as miserable though.

HS: The other interesting detail is that *Big Brother*, arguably the first reality TV show, was based on Biosphere 2 (which already had a large entertainment component, including live broadcasts and *The Theatre of all Possibilities*, from which crew members were drawn, etc.). Probably one could say that a lot of contemporary politics is modeled on similar aesthetic forms, starting from Berlusconi’s emergence out of trash TV. Certainly Trump is nothing without *Celebrity Apprentice*. So this was basically bred in the Biosphere as an unforeseen side effect in the wider noosphere. Even if the sphere would have been perfectly sealed, this effect would still have escaped. One wonders what kind of “thing” will “escape” from AI labs, and which unforeseen side effects this will have on the cosmosphere.

But also, most people agree that after the premises of Biosphere were taken over by different universities, very interesting research took place, mostly about the effects of climate change. One didn’t need to rely on computer simulations, since one could create micro-atmospheres and study the effects. And

interestingly, as climates change outside, in the future some species might have better living conditions inside than outside ...

In the last few days I was reminded of Gayatri Spivak’s idea of “strategic essentialism.” This is about a tactical politics of identity for oppressed people in a colonial or postcolonial context, sort of like an identity politics in brackets. Now, in many places the brackets have come off and minority identity politics have been appropriated by reactionaries of different kinds in the form of men’s rights, white separatism, and extreme religion. All of these groups pretend to be oppressed minorities in a takeover of 1980s leftist identity politics. So, while in the ‘80s “strategic essentialism” may have been a progressive strategy for some (or not), now it definitely isn’t.

I think that right now one might need to reverse this term – with full respect to its original inventor – and call for a *strategic universalism*, no brackets necessary. Everyone should be considered equal, period, even though we know that of course everyone is different. And of course, the term “universalism” has been attacked many times as deficient, incomplete, Western-biased, and so on. Actually, as far as I know cosmism too has been described as a very culturally specific set of ideas, tied to the Eurasian movement, with its ideologically dubious and Duginist offspring.

So, let’s confront this. Universalism refers to the universe and cosmism to the cosmos. Neither of them is tied to any specific human cultural identity per se.

How to create a set of positions that claims that everyone is an equal and constituent part of the universe/cosmos, not only humans but also other elements and different spheres of the cosmos? Connected, transindividual minds, as well as all the other strata of universal matter? A biopolitics that understands life as anchored in material and energetic processes that go beyond what is currently understood as such.

Is this a way to redeploy cosmism as an answer to current pressing problems?

By the way, did you know that “cosmos” also relates to women’s fashion? The Greek ‘kosmos’ meaning order or adornment becomes the French cosmetique which finally becomes cosmetics in the 17th century! This is wonderful! It connects all the dots! We have to think of cosmism (or strategic universalism) as consisting of advanced experiments in reproductive activities. By this I do not mean genetics, even though it could eventually form some part of it. I mean, for example, the whole range of reproductive labor, which recreates and rejuvenates humanity. It is the labor of life, of creating society and relations, in contrast to the

labor of death of the soldier and banker. The labor of love, obviously. And of course these activities were domesticated, feminised, relegated to slaves etc. So these are the high-end technologies we need to build on. Actually cooking is the only technology in human history that literally changed – or really created the human body as we know it. Cooking provided the calories needed to sustain the brain size of our present species. It precedes our current form. Humans are a by-product of cooking. And fashion, dressmaking, food preparation, child care etc. could be a huge part of another push to transform human existence into something way more pleasurable and sustainable; whether this involves bodily transformation or not. So, basically, cosmist fashion is a pleonasm. Fashion (as short cut term for all these activities) is a high tech enterprise to recreate and reprogram the living, their relations and their shared minds. It is egalitarian and allows for everybody, including, if needs be, winged ones. I mean, fuck Artificial Intelligence, when you can have Artificial Elegance!

AV: Yes, “cosmos” means beauty in Ancient Greek. It also means harmony. Fedorov and his circle were keenly aware of this and constantly referred to the cosmos in opposition to chaos. I guess the name for this movement could have been Harmonism rather than Cosmism ... Also, the Russian word for universe literally means “populated” or “settled” – the emphasis is on people rather than just place or space. “Universal” was also the title of the orthodox patriarch in Constantinople – a religious claim to the totality of the universe, to all people. The Russian Orthodox Church thinks that it inherited this claim after the fall of Constantinople. This is partly why some right-wingers, since the fall of communism and its particular universalism, have become interested in cosmism, like the Duginists and so forth. It seems to me that they are aware of the gaps in their belief system, which is no match for Marxism, so they try to borrow something to fill the holes, like the Nazis did with Nietzsche.

What you say about reproductive labor is extremely important. It is by far the most potent, powerful, existential force – more potent than anything else humanity and possibly the whole planet, the biosphere, has. It is life, it is also love. Because of love, we must resurrect our ancestors: from cosmic particles, as minerals, as animated plants, solar, self-feeding, collectively conscious, immortal, trans-sexual, on Earth, on space ships, on space stations, on other planets. So, is your next film going to be *Biosphere 3*?

HS: Yessir! And it’s going to have a long catwalk!

x

18/18

e-flux journal #82 — may 2017 Anton Vidokle and Hito Steyerl
Cosmic Catwalk and the Production of Time

1
See
<http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/2008/1/ma11.html> (in Russian)

2
See Arseny Zhilyaev, “Tracing Avant-Garde Museology” in this issue of *e-flux journal*. See Oleksiy Radynski, “The Great Accelerator: Notes for a Film” in this issue of *e-flux journal*.

3
See Oleksiy Radynski, “The Great Accelerator: Notes for a Film” in this issue of *e-flux journal*.

4
From a geological point of view, the biosphere (the part of the planet in which life can exist) is minuscule compared to geosphere (the solid earth, as distinguished from the atmosphere and hydrosphere). Yet the biosphere has developed to such an extent that it has a controlling relationship over the geo-mass of the planet, including an ability to destroy it.

5
See Boris Groys, “Art Technology, and Humanism” in this issue of *e-flux journal*.