

Editors  
**Editorial –  
Russian  
Cosmism**

01/04

Some time around 1882, God was pronounced dead. For certain Russian thinkers of the era, this loss provided a building opportunity: where the place of one god closes, space for another one opens. Unlike most established schools of thought, Russian cosmism does not present a singular vision, a consistent epistemology, or a unified theory. On the contrary: the ideas of its nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century protagonists are often so divergent and contradictory that they appear incoherent, paradoxical, or delirious.

The name “Russian cosmism” itself is a contested label that was coined during the twilight years of the USSR, when religious and nationalistic tendencies reemerged amidst the decaying Soviet experiment. And while it is clearly indebted to the Christian notions of resurrection and apotheosis, its religious sentiments are largely heretical. Cosmism replaces God and divine providence with human labor and reason as the primary means for realizing eternal life, deification, and universal paradise. Similarly to Marxism, which sees labor as the engine of the emancipation of the proletariat, cosmism sees laboring towards resurrection by means of science, art, technology, and social organization as a way of collaborating with God, a collaboration that will result in the active evolution of humanity and the universe towards becoming a single interconnected, sapient organism, immortal and infinite like God.

Cosmism may have been inspired by the discovery of the Biela Comet, first recorded in 1772 and then, mistakenly, charted on a collision course with earth. In 1826, Wilhelm von Biela confirmed the comet as periodical; it was predicted to collide with the planet within the 1830s. The impending end of the world produced a worldwide panic (and several more thereafter throughout the nineteenth century), similar to the Y2K computer scare at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Awareness of Biela’s Comet and the planet’s impending collapse inspired several literary works written around 1830. One of these was an unfinished sci-fi novel by the Russian writer, philosopher, and music critic Prince Vladimir Odoevsky (1803–69). Originally published in fragments between 1835 and 1840, *The Year 4338* describes a futuristic society in the year before a comet emerges from the depths of cosmic space to destroy earth. The protagonist of the novel, a young man from Beijing, travels to St. Petersburg to meet with scientists who he thinks can prevent this impending cataclysm before doomsday in 4339. He travels on a high-speed electrical train under the Caspian Sea, through a futuristic Russia where all households

e-flux journal #88 — february 2018 Editors  
**Editorial – Russian Cosmism**

02/04



Harvard College Observatory members perform their opera *Observatory Pinafore* (a rewrite of Gilbert & Sullivan) on December 31, 1929. Photo: Charles Reynes.

are connected by telegraphs, and where people read newspapers made of liquid-crystal screens, have personal flying devices in the form of hot air balloons, eat synthetic foods, inhale special gas for recreation, and wear electric clothes that change colors and patterns. A moneyless economy has also been achieved. The few published fragments as well as the ideas behind this unfinished novel were almost certainly familiar to Nikolai Fedorov, who most experts credit with being the founder of cosmism. Fedorov worked at the very same library in Moscow as Prince Odoevsky.

Nikolai Fedorov developed his unusual set of ideas around the 1860s, while working as a teacher at various elementary schools throughout the Russian Empire. While a prolific writer, Fedorov did not publish during his lifetime, partly due to his modest character but also possibly because he suspected his radical ideas could lead to excommunication from the Orthodox Church, of which he was a devout follower. After his death, a volume of Fedorov's writings was published in Almaty, Kazakhstan, under the title *The Philosophy of the Common Task*. This first publication of less than five hundred copies included the inscription "Not For Sale," and did not circulate commercially. In brief, the common task is no less than a project of human immortality achieved by technological means. It involves materially resurrecting all human ancestors (starting with Adam and Eve), controlling all the destructive forces of nature (including death), and exploring and colonizing all the stars and planets in the cosmos. Fedorov's eschatology is a human-led spiritualization of all the inanimate matter of the universe: an intergalactic educational project whose aim is to turn the universe into a unified feeling and thinking organism, immortal, infinite, and selfsame with God, its creator. In other words, the horizon of the common task is the construction of God by scientific, technological, and artistic means.

Despite rarely seeing publication, these revolutionary ideas influenced numerous key figures in the Russian intelligentsia, including such writers as Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, religious philosophers such as Solovyev and Florensky, as well as numerous members of the artistic, scientific, and political avant-garde such as Tsiolkovsky, Bogdanov, and the novelist Andrei Platonov, among many others. These ideas also influenced many in the Russian visual arts, and are partially responsible for the fascination with zero gravity, flight, and the cosmos that we can clearly observe in numerous artworks, from Malevich's *Black Square* to Tatlin's *Letatlin*. In a more subtle way, the influence of cosmism can be felt in the sensibility behind constructivism

and productivism, which treat a work of art not as a mere fetish of sublimated sexuality in a consumer economy, but as a microcosm of world-building and God-building.

While the cosmist's techno-futurism might remind us today of similarly – even absurdly – large-scale visions emerging from Silicon Valley and the likes of Elon Musk, Ray Kurzweil, and Peter Thiel, the crucial differences between cosmism and these ideas are far more revealing than their similarities. Precisely because of cosmism's ecclesiastical or religious roots, its ecstatic scale was driven by a spiritual reverie that transcends mere political and economic command and control. The encompassing scale of cosmist visions seems to ask us to admire their sheer ambition in straightforwardly posing questions of human equality in relation to divinity, causality, and mortality – questions that have since become more successfully suppressed than addressed in all their complexity. Faced today with ambivalent liberal platitudes of resistance or the disposable instrumentality of "disruptive tech," we might wonder more generally how artistic and creative thought could have been so heretical to Marxist-materialist and religious orthodoxies alike, while simultaneously believing so completely in their unified capacity for advancing human civilization.

Following the October Revolution, the materialist nature of Fedorov's theories appealed to many in the new Soviet state, and his universe-scale ambition did not seem out of place in a radicalized society that had abruptly overcome such seemingly intractable obstacles as private property. While it never became a part of official Soviet doctrine, much of cosmism dovetails with the ethos of early postrevolutionary utopian socialism in its drive towards a classless, egalitarian society completely dedicated to the emancipation and self-transformation of humanity, and to the construction of a man-made paradise on earth. The first postrevolutionary decade saw an explosion of cosmist ideas and their application in very diverse areas of life, from art and science to the practical organization of labor, time management, and the health system. This period also sees the emergence of biocosmism – an atheist, anarchist-infused variant of cosmism strongly influenced by futurism in poetry and art. At a certain moment in the mid-1920s, it is in fact difficult to find a creative thinker in the USSR who is not influenced by this set of ideas. However, by the early 1930s, much like most other intellectual movements that differed from the "scientific Marxism" embraced by Stalin's government, cosmism becomes a subject to be

purged, along with its protagonists and practitioners – most of whom end up in jail, in labor camps, or in front of firing squads.

*e-flux journal* no. 88 is based on an international conference on cosmism that took place at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin in September 2017. The issue is not only dedicated to resurrecting the cosmic and practical visions that the movement's fallen initiators began to develop last century. It also aims to provide a launchpad for contemporary reflections on the continued, vast, and tangled influence of Russian cosmism on historical revolution (within and beyond the Russian Revolution one century ago), historical and contemporary artistic and political discourse, technology, and scientific innovation.

We begin by providing an illustrated timeline of Russian cosmism, starting with Biela's Comet and extending into the movement's continuation into our time. The timeline was researched and compiled by Anastasia Gacheva, Arseny Zhilyaev, and Anton Vidokle. From this starting point, essays by some of the contemporary philosophers, writers, and artists who are giving shape to and reactivating the fibers and contours of this still little-known movement trace its past and its present through the means of art, cinema, geography, history, positivism, revolution, and beyond.

To be continued ...

x

04/04

**e-flux journal #88 — february 2018** Editors  
**Editorial – Russian Cosmism**