

Arseny Zhilyaev

Factories of Resurrection: Interview with Anton Vidokle

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Arseny Zhilyaev: Your recent films, which deal with the problematic of Russian cosmism, may come across as strange or even exotic. I know that your initial encounter with this topic was rather unusual. How did you start to work with this subject?

Anton Vidokle: About ten years ago Boris Groys told me about a very strange movement in Russia around the time of the Revolution. His description of it sounded so macabre and vampiric that I thought he had invented it. The story was too good to be real: the resurrection of the dead on spaceships, blood transfusions to suspend aging, and so on. It sounded like a science fiction novel. He said he had published a book on this in Germany, but unfortunately I do not speak German, so I did not pursue it. Then a few years ago I was doing an interview with Ilya Kabakov when he started talking about the same thing. I suddenly realized that it was not just Groys's invention, so looked it up.

What I found was Fedorov's book *The Common Task*, which was so intensely beautiful that it hooked me immediately. Also useful was *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers*, a history by George Young, who has been researching this topic since the late Seventies. I slowly discovered that this is actually a very massive layer of Russian and Soviet culture that I knew nothing about, and which seemed to explain certain inexplicable things about the motives and thoughts of the avant-garde, which has always interested me.

AZ: Can you tell me more about the origins of your film *The Communist Revolution Was Caused By the Sun*? Where did the idea come from? How did you develop the work? You chose to shoot the film in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, a rather unusual location. The landscape, with its Soviet industrial architecture and Muslim cemeteries, looks very weird even to Russians.

AV: At first, my plan was to make one feature-length film about cosmism. But as I started doing research, then filming and editing material, I realized that a single feature film would be impossible: the topic is just too vast, because there are so many different dimensions to this movement, from art to literature, poetry, theater, film, architecture, design, science and technology, medicine, philosophy, politics, social organization, and so forth.

So I decided to make a series of shorter films, about half an hour each. The first film, *This Is Cosmos*, dealt with the general ethos of cosmism: a collage of ideas from the movement's diverse protagonists. In a sense it's a kind of an introduction, with subsequent films addressing specific manifestations and ideas in depth.

The second film, *The Communist Revolution*

Was Caused By the Sun, is based on the work and ideas of Alexander Chizhevsky, a biophysicist who was exiled to Karaganda, which was a city populated primarily by political prisoners who were released from camps and prisons, but who were not allowed to return to Moscow or other central cities.

Kazakhstan was the site of a very large network of labor camps known as *Karlag*, similar to the better-known *Gulag*. It was also the key site of the Soviet space program, with most of the rockets launching from Baikonur and landing in the steppe surrounding Karaganda. Sort of like the American city of Houston, in Texas, the city was both an enormous prison and one of the first spaceports. Architecturally, it is dominated by vast coal mines, most of which are now shut down, as well as enormous cemeteries which evolved a very particular architectural style that I have not seen elsewhere: they look like miniature cities full of manifold mausoleum structures quoting various Islamic traditional styles, albeit all made from cheap, Soviet-era materials. It's a very unusual place.

AZ: Did you ever come across Chizhevsky's ionizer lamps when you were growing up in Moscow? I seem to remember that even in the Nineties, hospitals and schools always had them installed. These days they are not produced in their classical, Soviet version, though there are

many other commercial types of ionizers available. However, I heard that they do not seem to have the therapeutic effect that the device designed by Chizhevsky was supposed to have. The device in the film is probably one of the few authentic ones that exist. What will happen to it? Will it be used for treatment?

AV: I have some vague memories of something like these ionizer lamps. I was sickly as a child and my mother used to try various remedies to improve my health – for example, *mumiyo*, which is a black, tar-like substance from Altai, which apparently is petrified honey. You drink it with hot milk. Its tastes disgusting, but it's supposed to cure all sorts of ailments. From that time, I also remember something about the benefits of negatively charged ions of oxygen. But it's a very vague memory: I'm not really sure if I ever actually saw these devices.

Ionizer lamps were very popular in the Seventies and later. Many types have been produced: from things that look like Constructivist sculptures to devices disguised as painted porcelain vases or artificial palm trees, to blend better with the décor of your home. Most of these do not work, because they are not made according to Chizhevsky's original designs. Basically, it's a fairly simple device that creates an electric field, which changes the charge of particles in the air from positive to negative. It

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Anton Vidokle, *The Communist Revolution Was Caused By the Sun*, 2016, 34'42". Film still.

also cleans the air. This, in turn, helps the circulation of blood, which is supposed to produce rejuvenating effects in humans and animals. In nature, this happens on mountaintops, by the sea, and in forests. This phenomenon is related to the effect of solar particles on the ionosphere of our planet. Chizhevsky basically created a device that would reproduce this process indoors.

Ionizers are rather common these days. Many Japanese air conditioners include an ionization function, but the type Chizhevsky invented is hard to find. So for the film we had to build one ourselves. By incredible luck or coincidence we actually found the only industrial manufacturer who has worked with these devices, in Karaganda. It's a small experimental factory, which developed original designs and modified them to be used as air purification machines for factory chimneys. Apparently, this works to remove nearly all the carbon from polluted air and to release pure oxygen into the atmosphere.

The owner of the company is hoping that these devices will be adopted by all carbon-producing factories on the planet, because they are very economical and consume hardly any energy. According to him, this would drastically

reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere and return Earth to the climate conditions that existed before the effects of human activity. As a result, he thinks that the climate will improve and plants that have been extinct for many millennia will return, and Earth will become the Garden of Eden again: people will not need clothing anymore and we will all walk around naked, prehistoric plants and trees will grow plentiful fruit and we will not have to work for food, and so forth. So he is lobbying the office of the president of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev, to include this device in the World Fair that will take place in the capital city, Astana, next year.

He was excited we were making a film about Chizhevsky and built a giant version of this lamp, which we then installed and tested at a local cemetery. After filming we donated it to the local museum of science and technology. They wanted it as a kind of an alternative monument to Chizhevsky: a functional monument. Hopefully it has been reinstalled there by now.

AZ: In the first two films in this trilogy you use elements associated with psychotherapy. You speak of the effect of color on the human body, and use strategies of hypnosis. This emphasis on the utilitarian aspect of art, simultaneously sincere and critical, tests the



Arseny Zhilyaev, *Cradle of Humankind*, 2015. Installation view in the context of the exhibition "Future Histories," Venice Biennale. Photo: Alex Maguire. Courtesy of the V-a-C Foundation and the artist.

limits of our belief in the transformative power of art. At the same time I feel as though you genuinely prefer utility over aesthetics or poesis. Most often, utility in art brings to mind certain socially engaged practices, which refer to politics or relational aesthetics in one way or another. It seems to me that you are trying to approach this on an entirely different level: through a direct, material influence – material determinism. The notion of the Communist Revolution – a complex social phenomenon – as an event that could have been produced by the purely material, physical influence of the sun dovetails with this thinking. Tell me about your relationship to utility in art and to materialism in the context of your projects.

AV: Utility in art is something that probably needs to be described carefully right now: it seems to me that there is a tendency these days to put a lot of emphasis on the “usefulness” of some types of artistic projects. It still remains to be seen if these works are really useful or are merely an expression of insecurity about the elusive nature and value of art, or of a reluctance on the part of some public institutions to fund activities that do not appear to have immediate and direct benefits for their constituencies, that are difficult to understand or appreciate. What I have been observing is that over the past few years, cuts in cultural funding are slowly forcing

art organizations and some artists to adopt a certain stance that makes it easier to rationalize or justify their activities to government officials, sponsors, patrons, and politicians, and utility or usefulness are very instrumental terms here. While I do not believe that art should or could be completely autonomous from society, I do find this tendency simplistic.

With my films I want to come a little bit closer to the ethos behind cosmism, which is basically the desire to contribute directly and literally to the impossibly difficult project of immortality and resurrection for all, by any means possible, including art. It's interesting that many cosmists saw medicine as a field where the project of immortality, in the sense of the prolongation of life, could be most immediately deployed. It's not an accident that someone like Chizhevsky, who was really a physicist and not a physician, did most of his research in areas that could immediately improve human health, cure ailments, and in this way postpone death. Alexander Bogdanov was also a doctor – a psychiatrist, by education – and one of his most interesting projects was research into blood transfusion, through which he hoped to slow down aging and delay death.

So when I was editing the first film, it occurred to me that I did not want to make a mere documentary about the history of cosmism,



Sunspots, flares, and coronal eruptions

Anton Vidokle, *The Communist Revolution Was Caused By the Sun*, 2016, 34'42". Film still.



Detail of Arseny Zhilyaev's *Cradle of Humankind* (2015). Photo: Anton Kisilev. Courtesy of the V-a-C Foundation and the artist.

and that in order to transmit its ideas more accurately, I needed to somehow express its central desire, which is simply to prolong life. Essentially, film is light, color, and sound, and all of these means can produce a therapeutic effect on the human organism. We all know about light therapy for children and people who live in places lacking in sunlight. Color therapy has been practiced since the time of the ancient Egyptians. Sound also appears to have various medical uses. So basically the structural elements that make up a film can also be used for preventative or other types of treatment.

In the first film in the series, I used red screens because of a red light treatment system developed by NASA to speed up the healing of skin wounds. They discovered this accidentally, while looking for a way to heal cuts and abrasions in conditions of zero gravity, where the body heals very slowly. They found that red LED light, of a certain frequency, accelerates healing. At the same time, video projectors these days often use an LED light source, and the usage of HD LED screens is becoming more affordable and common each year. So I hope that in the near future, when this film is screened on an LED screen at some museum, it can be calibrated to also produce prophylactic and therapeutic effect

on the viewer. Even if you don't like the film, it can have a positive effect on your body, on your cells and organs.

Similarly, the second film uses elements of clinical hypnosis that are commonly employed to break addictions. I try to use a hypnosis script at the beginning and the end of the film to break the addiction to mortality – the death drive. In the next film I plan to use a sound technique that has been used clinically to alter memory, which appears to be one of the reasons for drug and alcohol addictions and other self-destructive behavior. This is not to say that the main value of my work is medical. That would be charlatanism. But I use these techniques to express the desire implicit in cosmism to rejuvenate, cure, heal, improve health, and delay death for as long as possible and by any means possible.

AZ: In your films there are many references to works by members of the Moscow conceptual school. In one way or another Ilya Kabakov, Boris Groys, and Andrei Monastyrski with Collective Actions Group are all present in these films. Can you tell me more about your relationship to this tradition? Do you think of yourself as belonging to it artistically?

AV: Well, this project was largely started through a conversation with Kabakov. However,

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This view of the Chizhevsky Museum, Kaluga, Russia displays a series of the scientist's ionizing lamps, including a camouflaged palm tree version in the upper-left corner. Photo: Arseny Zhilyaev.

Ilya has a very negative relationship to cosmism; for him it's as "evil" as communism, which he despises. Basically, his take on it is that it reduces humanity to a speck in the vastness of the cosmos, and in this way human existence becomes very marginal. He illustrates this idea very literally in some of his paintings, where tiny human figures form a kind of a thin border around the edges of the canvas, while the center is filled with a giant white void. I love these paintings, although I suspect that he misreads cosmism entirely. It seems to me that Ilya is very much a humanist, and while humanism never totally leaves the project of cosmism, it is a very hybrid version of humanism, which probably makes Ilya uncomfortable.

Andrei Monastyrski is a very different figure. When I started working on this project, I asked one of the researchers who was helping me gather material, a young artist named Anastasia Ryabova, to ask Andrei about Fedorov and cosmism. At the time, he said that it had nothing to do with his work. But just a couple of months ago, I spoke with him again and this time around he told me that he was actually reading Fedorov in the late Seventies, and that some of the ideas did influence him.

I refer to both Ilya's and Andrei's work in the

first film, and will actually restage a version of one of Monastyrski's actions from 1979 in the next film in the series, with his consent. I admire these artists, but I really do not think that I belong to the Moscow conceptual tradition in any way. Most of it is rather hermetic and based on post-structuralism, the analysis of language and systems, and so forth. I think I come from something else artistically, although I am not exactly sure what that is.

AZ: You may have heard that during the past couple of years there has been quite a public discussion of cosmism in Russia. This started when the entire editorial team of an independent political web journal, *Russian Planet*, was fired, having been accused rather facetiously of being "weak cosmists." Subsequently, the label "weak cosmist" went viral, and is now usually used as a derogatory term. I have heard numerous sarcastic remarks about cosmism, mainly from the liberal intelligentsia, regarding the Soviet space program as well as the philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov and his followers. For them, cosmism is synonymous with obscurantism and charlatanism. On the other hand, there is clearly a renewed interest in the cosmos as evidenced both by statements from the Russian government and by Russian culture at large. For



Anton Vidokle, *The Communist Revolution Was Caused By the Sun*, 2016, 34'42". Film still.

example, the most successful Russian cartoon of the last few years, which has been nominated for an Oscar this year, is called *We Can't Live Without Cosmos*. I guess this is not only a Russian phenomenon, as the success of movies like *Interstellar* suggests. I am curious about how your projects on the cosmos and Russian cosmism are perceived in a more international context.

AV: I have not encountered anything particularly dismissive or hostile yet. Just perhaps a bit of disbelief. Like: this story is too strange to be true.

Immortality and resurrection are very ancient topics and have always provoked controversy. It seems that it's very ingrained in almost all cultures that the desire for immortality is a sin, a transgression against nature, god, the essence of humanity, and so forth. So people are often ambivalent about this. And the cosmos is also something that most people view with a bit of fear. Just think of all the popular movies about something horrible coming from outer space to destroy Earth and humanity: all sorts of meteorites, monsters, aliens, and so forth. Furthermore, there is a certain degree of suspicion of things that are Russian. In Europe and America, where I spend most of my time, leftists dislike Russia because they think it ruined the possibility of communism, while

people on the Right suspect that all things Russian are still secretly Communist. There isn't really all that much sympathy from either ideological camp, and the current political situation in the world does not help this.

But I do feel that many people respond to the kind of poetry and wild imaginative power that permeates Fedorov's ideas and cosmism in general. So there is quite a bit of curiosity.

AZ: Your films about cosmism make me think of Situationist experiments and the French New Wave. Firstly, this is because of the collage-like structure of the content of your films, and the emphasis you put on research. It's also because of your rejection of mimetic acting, your use of estrangement in the Brechtian sense and the direct address to the audience. And finally, it's because of the way you combine nearly abstract images (for example, landscapes shot from a great height) with a rather complex narrative about theoretical and scientific questions. On the other hand, having watched Russian television in the Eighties and Nineties, as well as Soviet science fiction films, I can't avoid mentioning works by Pavel Klushantsev in the context of your films. Klushantsev was one of the first directors to make films about the exploration of space. Many people think that his film *Path to the Stars* influenced Stanley Kubrick and George Lucas. Another one of his films, *The*



Anton Vidokle, *The Communist Revolution Was Caused By the Sun*, 2016, 34'42". Film still.

Stormy Planet, went on to become an international hit under different titles – *The Planet of Prehistoric Women* and *Voyage to the Prehistoric Planet* – and without mention of its original author. Apparently, Klushantsev was the first director to use special effects in cinema, and some of the techniques he invented are still used in contemporary cinema, in a more technologically advanced way. Unfortunately, as was often the case in the USSR, his international success backfired and he was banned from making feature films; he was only allowed to make educational documentaries. But he went on to make more than one hundred film essays about the cosmos and various scientific problems, which, despite the ban, still feel more artistic than educational or documentary. I feel there is a similarity between your films and these documentary films by Klushantsev. Can you tell me more about who you feel affinity with in terms of the history of cinema? Who did you learn from?

AV: I think the films I make accidentally fall into the genre that used to be called “scientific-popular films,” something unique to the Soviet film industry, which does not quite have a parallel in American or European cinema. These films were a bit different from the sci-fi genre, which was really embraced and highly developed in the USSR. Similar to what you say about Klushantsev, these scientific/educational films for mass audiences were a kind of a refuge for certain filmmakers who could not get permission or support to develop their ideas within the feature film studios, like Mosfilm or Lenfilm, but were able to work at special studios set up for the production of this type of educational material. Perhaps because this was perceived as a lesser genre, it was not subject to the same kind of scrutiny from the censors as feature films. So certain filmmakers, like Sobolev for example, were able to make wildly experimental, expressionistic essay films, which would have never been allowed otherwise.

To be honest, I actually do not really remember seeing them when I was growing up in the Soviet Union, and I only discovered them recently because certain colleagues said that they have similarities with my work. So I looked them up. None of them are really “great” films in the sense of the history of cinema, and they do not compare to Pasolini or Godard or Tarkovsky, but they are remarkably imaginative and really interesting to watch. What is particularly interesting for me is that these films do not fall within the documentary or journalistic genre, while at the same time they are not fiction. They are a little bit of both. A lot of times, these films address a theoretical or philosophical topic that is difficult to reduce to the kind of story one

needs for a narrative film, yet they are narrative and communicate very interesting, complex, abstract ideas. Usually, they are not feature length, but short – twenty to thirty minutes. In this sense, the format of these films is actually very suitable for the kind of films that work well within art exhibitions.

AZ: One last question about the future. If I understand correctly, you are planning to shoot the next film in this series in Moscow, and it will be about museums. Is that true?

AV: Yes, the next film will be shot in Moscow, at the Museum of the Revolution, the Museum of Zoology, and the modern collection of the Tretyakov Gallery. The film will be called *Immortality and Resurrection For All*, and it is based on passages from Fedorov’s essay about museums. For Fedorov, the museum is a key institution in society, unique insofar as it’s the only place that does not produce progress (which for him implies an erasure of the past), but rather cares for the past. He felt that museums needed to be radicalized such that they would not merely collect and preserve artifacts and images, but also preserve and recover life itself – resurrect the past. In this sense, museums should become factories of resurrection.

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Arseny Zhilyaev is an artist who lives and works in Moscow. With his recent projects, the artist casts a revisionist lens on the heritage of Soviet museology and the meaning of the museum in Russian cosmism. Zhilyaev is the editor of the book *Avant-Garde Museology* (e-flux with V-a-c Press and University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

Anton Vidokle is an artist and editor of *e-flux journal*.

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