

The Resurgence of Russian Cosmism

Ellen Pearlman

The artists shall inherit the Cosmos.

Ben Goetzel

In 1991, *Perestroika* caused the vast Soviet empire to splinter into fifteen or more nation-states, with each spin-off shaped by its original ethnicity, language, borders, and various levels of involvement and interest in the global art and performance worlds. Where Marxist/Leninist socialism was born, a hybrid post-Soviet, or post-post-Soviet art scene was blossoming, its tendrils growing towards a former obscure incarnation of original Russian Cosmism or Cosmist thinking.

Originally, Cosmism developed roughly around the same time as Marxism through the musings of Nikolai Fedorov, born in 1829, a philosopher and librarian who worked at the Rumyantsev Library in Moscow, the first public museum and library in Russia. It affected visual artists, poets, filmmakers, theatre directors, novelists (Tolstoy and Dostoevsky read and were friends with Fedorov), architects, composers, Soviet politics, value systems, and many forms of speculative futurist technology. It offered itself as an alternative worldview, an odd visionary attempt to solve problems relating to humankind's condition on earth. By the nineteen thirties Stalin forbade it, as a number of its practitioners had regrettably aligned with Leon Trotsky, and he jailed, exiled, or murdered its most prominent adherents. But Cosmism was not totally eradicated, and has returned to permeate swaths of what is referred to in Russian as the "intelligentsia."

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY

The West is barely aware of Cosmism. It incorporates the deeply poetic Slavic feeling for unity, wholeness and applicable global solutions joined together through an array of wildly disparate views. Founded by Fedorov, it grew out of *mélange* of beliefs from the late nineteenth century. Fedorov pondered the state of humankind, included as an essay in the posthumous book of his writings as

The Question of Brotherhood or Kinship. He believed people were morally obligated to care for the sick and eradicate death through science and technology. Space exploration would assist in finding eternal life in the cosmos, enabling the harvest of endless resources. His thoughts were so profound he attracted the interest of Russian writers Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, the latter who wove Fedorov's ideas into his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Cosmism has three main tenants. The first is immortality, either by rejuvenating the blood through transfusions from the young to the old, or resurrection of the dead through scientific means. The second focuses on emerging from the confines of the natural world, namely, space and time. This "active evolution" believed humans of the past would evolve into humans of the future possessing unlimited abilities. The third is a mélange of Christianity, the occult, and asceticism mixed with a smattering of Marxism. Cosmism creates a moral and ethical system where "evolved" people set up a utopia, still tantalizingly out of reach. Among those who were inspired by these ideas was the astrophysicist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, one of Fedorov's students. In 1903, he invented rocket science, the idea of space suits, and ultimately the colonization of the solar system. That same year, Fedorov died and his adherents V.A. Kozhevnikov and N.P. Peterson began to compile *Philosophy of the Common Task*, an opus of his ideas, though it ceased publication during Soviet times.

THE CREATIVE WORLD

For the first quarter of the twentieth century, Russia was a hotbed of artistic, political, and philosophical activity, and even the early Communists flirted with Cosmism as its themes of embracing a new world were attractive. The nascent Cubo-Futurists used their agility in typography to herald breakthroughs in revolutionary thought through radical text, words, and sounds. But it was the big three of the avant-garde art world—the Futurists, Constructivists, and Suprematists—who embraced many aspects of Cosmism by using non-objective art as a backdrop to promulgate their visions.

Cosmism seeped into many aspects of creative life. In 1908, Alexander Bogdanov wrote *Red Star*, a science-fiction novel of utopia situated on Mars, and in 1913 he penned *Tektology, a Universal Organizational Science*, acknowledged as a precursor to cybernetics and systems theory. That same year, the artist Kazimir Malevich designed sets and costumes for the revolutionary Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*, with music by Mikhail Matyushin and texts by Aleksei Kruchenyk, who was the force behind *ZAUM*, or poetics beyond the mind.

The logic behind the opera's title was that the sun, especially in nineteenth-century Romantic idealism and Slavonic myth, was associated with nature, but now (and in the future) the machine would achieve dominance. Victory meant capturing the sun to leave the world in darkness, emancipating humans from nature, hurtling them into new beginnings. The large *Black Square* painting by Malevich framing the backdrop for the opera represented the purest of art forms, as it contained no subject matter and no story. It represented a spiritual journey the artist took into the depths of his mind that would ultimately lead to the fourth dimension. The characters in the opera wore rigid wire-frame and thick cardboard costumes, and resembled futurist robots with their machine-like movements. The opera was performed just twice in St. Petersburg's Luna Park, and briefly revived in 1920 by members of *OUNOVIS* (Proponents of New Art), founded by Malevich and his students in Vitebsk (now part of Belarus) when Malevich was on the faculty at Marc Chagall's radical People's Art School. The most dedicated proponents dressed in black uniforms, and had the infamous *Black Square* painting stitched onto their sleeve. *Victory Over the Sun's* reputation as a harbinger of things to come surely eclipsed the small number of people who actually witnessed its landmark performance.

In 1915, *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 (Zero Ten)* opened in St. Petersburg (Petrograd), heralding a total representational break with the past, and introducing Suprematist art to the world. The number "0" represented the start of a new world after the old world was destroyed, and "10" was the original number of artists to participate (though in the end that number reached fourteen). By 1923, Alexei Tolstoy, a distant relative of Leo Tolstoy, wrote the science-fiction novel *Aelita, or The Decline of Mars* as Mars was a favored destination point for Cosmists who were imagining this new world. Tsiolkovsky the astrophysicist and student of Federov, founded the Society for Studies of Interplanetary Travel, and Malevich began designing architecture for space stations and also put a new spin on the Russian word *sputnik*, originally meaning companion or fellow traveler. He used it as a reference to a type of artificial, or man-made celestial body that could be built as a Suprematist *sputnik* traveling between Earth and the Moon. In 1926, geochemist and mineralogist Vladimir Vernadsky wrote *The Biosphere*, a precursor of Gaia theory.

Cosmism was short-lived, as Stalin had no use, beyond an initial interest, of supporting fanatics and visionaries who wanted to leave the earth and inherit outer space, though of course those whose talents could foster scientific and military research about outer space were welcome. It also did not help that some of the Cosmists had supported his archrival Leon Trotsky. Starting in the late 1920s

Top: Exterior of the dome,
Lux Aeterna 360°+ Theatre,
St. Petersburg, Russia.
Photo: Ellen Pearlman.
Bottom: *Victory Over the Sun*,
2014, Stas Namin's Theatre,
Moscow. Photo: Courtesy
Wikipedia/Shakko.



Window To the Future—Soviet Engineering Design, Space Station on Mars. Photo: Courtesy Self-Id. Com.



many were exiled, jailed, executed, or murdered. Still, shards of Cosmism lingered on indirectly, despite the mandatory state approved artistic style of Socialist Realism. In 1936, under the auspices of the legendary production house Mosfilm, *Cosmic Voyage* (*Kosmicheskiy reys: Fantasticheskaya novella*), directed by Vasil Zhuraviov, featured prototype Russian Cosmonauts dressed in space suits. Cosmism also inspired the development of the first rocket launcher, the *Katyusha*, in 1939. During World War II, the film director G.V. Alexandrov imagined *The Cinema of the Future* with images projected on the walls and ceiling, and smells embedded into the celluloid of film stock. In 1957, *Sputnik 1* orbited the earth followed by *Vostok 1*, in 1961, and the very first cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. A dream of the Cosmists had finally come true; a Russian man had orbited the earth.

During the 1960s amidst the Khrushchev Thaw, Russian kinetists returned to the constructivist ideas of Naum Gabo, who had created the original kinetic construction sculptures in the 1920s as a tangential adjunct to Cosmism. In the same era the artist Lev Nusberg founded the *Dvizhenie* (*Movement*) group of kinetic art, or “playful bionic systems.” Between 1966 and 1967, Nusberg also created *Cybertheater*, an immersive theatrical experience along with other artists in what was then called Leningrad. It had “cyber-creatures” or “cybers” who moved, had internal pulsing or scintillating light of varying colors, and made sounds of pre-phonetic language. All materials such as television, cinema, special effects, chemical and physical phenomena, smells, temperature, wind or liquid, as well as multiple cybers up to one hundred feet high were connected through a tensile type of symmetry to a single whole. Participants were given special garments and boots to navigate pathways through water, flames, or gas. The audience could enter inside some of the larger cybers to experience various programmed actions, designed to induce the unpleasant emotions of fear and pain. The end point of this experience was supposed to result in joy at having survived such a troubling experience, certainly a unique Russian point of view.

THE REEMERGENCE OF COSMISM

The 1970s saw the release of Andrei Tarkovsky’s film *Solaris*, a psychological drama set within an orbiting space station. This seemed to be a precursor for the impact of the 1979 publication *Nikolai F. Fedorov, an Introduction* by George M. Young, a professor of Russian language and literature, which allowed Fedorov’s ideas to become more accessible. In the next decade Daniel Fridman, a lighting director and sound engineer, created the *Lux Aeterna* theatre of lasers and sound. Its harmonious tones and tensile laser projections induced a feeling of cosmic wonder and awe.

Fridman credits the visual works of Malevich, as well as the sounds of Russian composer Alexander Scriabin as the source of his inspiration. Installing *Lux Aeterna* at the Kiev Planetarium from 2003 to 2007, he held more than six hundred séances, and began adding smells and specialized vocal techniques like throat singing to induce a transcendent atmosphere. In 2017, *Lux Aeterna*, as part of the Tessart project, a center of art and immersive technologies in St. Petersburg, expanded into the *Lux Aeterna 360°+*, a silver mobile dome, decamped into the Higher School of Light Design at ITMO University in St. Petersburg, where studies were conducted on how it enriched spectators' psycho-emotional states.

When the Iron Curtain fell, in 1989, the Cosmists became associated with the Soviet space program. The N.F. Fedorov Museum and Reading Room was established in Moscow in 1993. However, Cosmism still remained a niche underground reference until 2012, when Young published his more widely distributed book, *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers*. Suddenly those involved in techno-futurism and transhumanism around the world began referencing Fedorov's texts. His ideas continued to influence many futurists, including the creator of the AI Robot Sophia, Ben Goertzel, who was so inspired he wrote *A Cosmist Manifesto* in 2010. The contemporary Russian scholar Boris Groys recently edited a volume of writings on Cosmism written before and during the Bolshevik Revolution, many of them translated for the first time.

Since then many younger Russian-based artists have also become inspired by Cosmist ideas, using them in various aspects of their creative practice. At Cyberfest 2012, in St. Petersburg, Andrey Bartnev and dancer Larisa Aleksandrova, in collaboration with the "Drawn Sound" programming and design team of Patrick K.-H, and Oleg Makarov presented *Danish for 42*, a black-light dance piece redolent with Supremacist aesthetics. Three years later the Russian artist Arseny Zhilyaev created a four-room installation at the Venice Biennale titled *Cradle of Humankind*, devoted to learning the history of the fictional and non-fictional human interstellar empire. It included copies of Malevich's *Black Square*. One of his subsequent installations in 2017, *Intergalactic Mobile Fedorov Museum-Library*, was a recreation of a Fedorov library in the shape of a five-pointed star, or spaceship. It was part of an exhibition of Russian Cosmism, *ART WITHOUT DEATH*, in the *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* in Berlin that included rare works of early Cosmism from the George Costakis collection in Greece. The Russian website *self-id.com*, run by Russian artist and musician Taras Mashtalir, is an ever-evolving reference of cosmism-inspired art containing links to videos, music, books, and artifacts that offer a glimpse as to how pervasive its influence has become.

CONCLUSION

The rise of Cosmism with its distinctly Russian characteristics is a logical outcome of a specific sensibility that spans generations. Its overall view is expansive in its unique brand of mixing strains of the gnostic Russian esoteric, space travel, religion, and transcendent aspirations. It has presaged developments in the twenty-first century, such as breakthroughs in bio and nanotech, space travel, robots, artificial intelligence, eternal youth (blood transfusions), immortality (death) and resurrection, clearly demonstrating that what was once considered impossible is now within reach. It also introduces a new perspective on the Russian avant-garde's early cascade of art, music, theatre, performance, design and typography, framing Cosmist thought in light of early twentieth-century currents of utopianism, futurism, and Marxism.

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