

ALIENOCENE – THEORY/FICTION

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TO THE MOON  
AND BACK?  
ON *RUSSIAN COSMISM*

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On *Russian Cosmism*, ed. Boris Groys  
(New York: e-flux and MIT Press, 2018)

“Philosophy must become the knowledge not only of what is but of what ought to be, that is, from the passive, speculative explanation of existence it must become an active project of what must be, the project of universal action.”

-Nikolai Fyodorovich Fedorov

The moon is back. *First Man* premiered in Denmark the other day, a movie about the moon landing starring Ryan Gosling. Also in the fall of 2018, the exhibition “The Moon: From Inner Worlds to Outer Space” opened at Louisiana, showing among many other things: The cover of British Bishop Francis Godwin’s science fiction book *The Man in the Moone* (1638), the Jules Verne-inspired movie *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (A Trip to the Moon, 1902) by Georges Méliés, and a William Blake engraving from 1793 with a boy trying to get to the moon with a giant ladder and a caption that reads: I want! I want! More or less simultaneously, visitors at Brandt, another Danish art museum, could walk through the exhibition “Into the unknown. A journey through Science

Fiction.” And earlier this year the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* was shown in movie theatres around the world. Clearly, mankind still dreams about space as evidenced by the dream factory of Hollywood. Or does it? To paraphrase William Blake’s little boy: What do we *want* from the galaxy today? Besides tapping into the changing tides of the art world’s fashions a couple of years too late, the two art exhibitions in Denmark were above all retrospectives: They gave the viewer the opportunity to stand in the present and look back at futures past. Watching the two films were no different. They prompted an acute yet long-lasting feeling of nostalgia. What ran across the cinema screen were not so much present dreams of the future as past dreams of the future; the dreams of a bygone era, more specifically the dreams of the Space Age. Those were the days, ah yes, those were days...

Another time, another dream, another moon, another mood: In 1871, the revolutionary Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881) sat in Fort du Taureau, a prison located on a tiny island in the Bay of Morlaix across the English Channel. Here, Blanqui – “the stern rebel who emerged from a lifetime in jail only when briefly liberated by revolutions”<sup>i</sup> – wrote a book called *Eternity by the Stars*, in the immediate aftermath of the Paris Commune. The book is about the infinity and eternity of the cosmos. Blanqui’s central argument is that there is only a limited number of simple bodies, as in the periodic system of chemical elements, and that infinity is thus reached through infinite combinations and re-combinations. Nature has, Blanqui writes, “little diversity of materials at its disposal,” “a meager assortment,” which means that repetitions are unavoidable:

“with such a monotonous plan and such a small variety of elements, it is difficult to engender enough different combinations to populate the infinite. Resorting to repetitions becomes necessary.”<sup>ii</sup> In this logic, infinity is based on repetition. Even if the universe is not just “nothingness, ice, void and darkness,” but also “force, light, weight and heat,” it is nevertheless depressing.<sup>iii</sup> Every combinatorial possibility in cosmos is eventually exhausted, and all there is left is something akin to Nietzsche’s eternal return. There is nothing new under the sun and all we can hope for are what Blanqui terms *lucky variations*. “At heart,” Blanqui thus writes, “man’s eternity by the stars is melancholic,” before ending the book in what Walter Benjamin called a state of utter resignation in the second preface to the arcades project, the so-called exposé of 1939: “What we call progress is locked up on each earth and disappears with it. Always and everywhere, on the terrestrial camp, the same drama, the same set, on the same narrow stage, a noisy humanity, infatuated by its own greatness, thinking for itself to be the universe and inhabiting its prison like an immensity, only to drown soon along with the globe that has borne the burden of its pride with the deepest scorn. The same monotony, the same immobility in the foreign stars. The universe repeats itself endless and struts on its legs. Unfazed, eternity plays the same performance in the infinite.”<sup>iv</sup> This is, in the book, the last sigh of a disappointed (and incarcerated) revolutionary, contemplating “the same monotony, the same immobility in the foreign stars” in the dungeon of the Fort de Taureau. A truly cosmic resignation.

Same time, different place, different project: As the 19<sup>th</sup> century was coming to an end, something happened in Russia. An orthodox Christian philosopher, Nikolai Fyodorovich Fedorov, formulated a set of radical – and, as it were, unorthodox – ideas about the cosmos, ideas that provided the theoretical foundation for what was later to become known as Russian cosmism. Which is the topic of the present text: Russian cosmism. More specifically, it is a review essay of an anthology of the same name, edited by Boris Groys (who else?) and published in 2018, on the basis of an exhibition at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin 2017 and several texts in *e-flux*. In Russian cosmism, we find a very different view of the stars, the sun and the galaxies compared to the one in Blanqui's book. These avant-gardists dreamt a techno-scientific dream of defeating death; the very idea of space, not to mention outer space, was not a nightmare but a utopian dream. While some avant-garde projects waned over the years, other were realized in a perverted form. For instance, the dream of uniting art and life: Has this dream not morphed into the nightmare of contemporary work? Russian cosmism seems to have suffered a similar fate in the hands of capitalists like Elon Musk and kindred spirits in Silicon Valley, people who want – and have the money to actually try – to become immortal, or travel to Mars, or whatever. That should not lead us, however, to abandon the spirit and sink into a permanent state of cosmic pessimism.

Basically, Russian cosmism had a dual project of immortalism and interplanetarianism. It wanted to conquer both time and space. As for time, the enemy was death. Death was not simply a scandal, it was a completely unnecessary restriction in time. Why not turn irreversibility on its head, make time reversible, which is also to say, abolish entropy? They wanted immortality, they wanted everyone alive to be able to live forever. But not only that: They wanted to extend this project to all those who were already dead. They wanted resurrection for all and everyone, which could very well become a problem in terms of space. Because if no one ever dies and all the dead souls are brought back to life, planet Earth may soon find itself in a precarious state of overpopulation. The solution: To travel into space and populate cosmos. As Anton Vidokle and Brian Kuan Wood note in their foreword, the Russian cosmists had a “technoscientific vision of immortality, resurrection for all, and freedom of travel in universal space.”<sup>v</sup>

The project was deeply biopolitical, in the Foucauldian sense of the word. But in contrast to Foucault, cosmism, or biocosmism,<sup>vi</sup> does not have death as its outer limit. They do not agree that death is the one thing that cannot be subjected to biopolitical control. It could and it should, according to the biocosmists. The life *and* death of the population was at stake. This is where, to borrow from Groys’ own introduction, the cosmists tried to turn the state into a museum (6-7). In the ideal world of biocosmists there was no longer to be any separation between art and politics, life and technology, state and museum. As for the relation to death, it also marked a crucial difference between cosmism and Marxism. Even Ernst Bloch, who considered death

the “strongest Non-Utopia,” to cite one of the headings of his work *The Principle of Hope*, did not dream of overcoming death. The biocosmists did. In the words of one of the Cosmists, Valerian Muravyev, they craved nothing less than “a real and total victory over death” (104).

Evidently, the cosmists were not a humble and modest group of people, and they constantly found themselves on the verge of hubris. It must be said, though, that they were confident for a reason. Most of them were polymaths: They were engineers, cosmonauts – and artists. A famous Gesamtkunstwerk from the period is *Victory over the Sun*, an experimental opera staged in Saint Petersburg in 1913. The music was made by Mikhail Matiushin, the text written by Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchonykh who were involved as well. So was Malevich, who worked as stage designer, creating both the set and the costumes; it was also for this occasion that his black square was shown to the public for the first time. The black square: Total utopia and total abstraction in one. And the sun? During *Victory of the Sun*, this decadent symbol of the old world is torn down from the sky and buried by some Futurist Strongmen (alternatively, the Strong Men of the Future), proclaiming at some point: “All's well that begins well and has no end/ the world will perish but there is no end to us!” According to Groys, however, “Russian Cosmism proposed a counterproject” to this “futuristic project of Russian avant-garde.” (4) The cosmists did not celebrate “the extinction of the sun and the descent of the cosmos into chaos” (3); instead, they wished to go the other way, from chaos to order, from chaos to cosmos.

As stated above, the founding father of Russian cosmism was the Russian Orthodox Christian philosopher, Nikolai Fyodorovich Fedorov (1829 -1903). The authoritative source on the subject, George M. Young's *The Russian Cosmists. The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers*, describes how Fedorov, the illegitimate son of Prince Pavel Ivanovich and second cousin of the anarchist P.A. Kropotkin, was an obscure Moscow librarian, who lived on bread and tea and slept on "a humpback trunk, sometimes covered with newspapers, placing under his head not a pillow but some hard object, usually a book."<sup>vi</sup> Fedorov, who was known to both Tolstov and Dostovejskij, hardly published anything during his lifetime, and the few things he did publish were written anonymously and circulated in a limited number of copies. His main work, *The Philosophy of the Common Task*, was published posthumously. Here Fedorov argued that true knowledge is neither subjective nor objective but 'projective' and that the common task is one of radical life extension.

In the text that figures in anthology, "Astronomy and Architecture," Fedorov lays out his grandiose plan. After having deployed biology, the "art of resurrection," (57) to extend the lives of the living and bring back the dead, the plan is to free the Earth from gravity by using the technological instruments of a so-called "lightning rod-aerostat" and then to transform planet Earth into "a great electric boat," (56) an "Earth Ship," (56) intended to travel into space and around in space. Simple.

As if replying to Blanqui, Fedorov expresses, in the article "The End of Orphanhood, Limitless Kinship," which



is not reprinted in the book *Russian Cosmism*, his ambition “to populate the heavenly, starry worlds that are now without souls and that are now coldly and as if with sadness gazing down at us.”<sup>viii</sup> One can easily conceive of these ideas of becoming, in Fedorov’s own phrase “captain and crew of spaceship earth,” as nothing but the dreams of a ridiculous man.<sup>ix</sup> However, in the eyes of Fedorov, and his fellow biocosmists, they have science on their side. In “A Universal Productive Mathematics”, Valerian Muravyev bases his biopolitical vision of “mastering and managing nature” on mathematics (93). Similarly, in “Panpsychism, or Everything Feels,” Konstantin Tsiolkovsky explicitly announces that his idiosyncratic synthesis of materialism and panpsychism – which leads to the idea that matter is not devoid of feeling and that everything is thus, in a certain sense, alive – is not “a daydream, but a strictly mathematical conclusion based on precise knowledge.” (133) A positivist, he writes, could not be soberer than he is. On the one hand, Tsiolkovsky is deeply inspired by the writings of Jules Verne; on the other hand, he actually develops, according to George M. Young, “the mathematical formulas that would make the realization of some of his fantasies possible,” and writes “the papers that would eventually lay the foundation for the 1957 launching of Sputnik 1,” while in turn providing an endless source of inspiration for aspiring astronauts such as Yuri Gagarin.<sup>x</sup>

Alexander Svyatogor also goes to great lengths to convince his readers that his ideas are scientific and not utopian (like most Marxists, he uses utopianism as a term of abuse). He even sets up an opposition between realism and utopianism: Biocosmism is realistic, while anarchism is

utopian, which is why he considers cosmism nothing less than “an antidote to cowardly and weak-willed contemporary anarchists thought.” (72) Harsh words. But Svyatogor is a man who knows which way to go and which way not to. Not the least amount of ambivalence or doubt can be found in bold statements such as “The supreme good is immortal life in the cosmos. The supreme evil is death. We mean real life and real death here,” (74) and “The struggle for immortality and life in the cosmos is the true basis of the new social order.” (76) In the text “Biocosmist Poetics,” he emphatically declares, at the very outset: “Now let’s get down to the question of how to realize personal immortality.” (83) The goal is clear: “Our Earth must become a spaceship steered by the wise will of the Biocosmist. It is a horrifying fact that from time immemorial the Earth has orbited the Sun, like a goat tethered to its shepherd.” (83) Yet he does feel the need to add, a bit later: “But we are optimists, not madmen” (84) – what a relief.

And the biocosmists were optimists. The anthology leaves an impression of an almost relentless and sometimes comical cosmic optimism. Tsiolkovsky, for example, this “self-educated eccentric school teacher working with wooden models in a homemade laboratory in Kaluga,”<sup>xi</sup> writes that “all that survives” in the new world, in the biocosmist future, is “happiness and pleasure.” (151) At the end he ultimately concludes “that the cosmos generally contains only joy, satisfaction, perfection and truth.” (155) This is a fairly unwarranted optimism, even for a cosmist. As an antidote to that, the anthology includes two theoretical texts and a short science fiction story by the writer Alexander Bogdanov, author of the first Bolshevik Utopia,

*Red Mars*, a 1908 science fiction book about a communist utopia on Mars, and one of the people in prerevolutionary Russia who fought with and eventually lost to Lenin in the fight for control of the Bolshevik party. In the first one of the theoretical texts Bogdanov is, among other things, interested in the historical moment when “*the given* stopped being the sole goal and norm of life” (this could in fact stand as a kind of slogan for biocosmism as such: A movement that does not accept the given, or what is, as the sole goal and norm of life). In the second one – part of his groundbreaking work on tektology, a precursor to systems theory and cybernetics – he writes about fighting the problem of old age through the transplantation of “fresh testicles” and the transfusion of blood from young to old people (205). In hindsight this reads fairly tragicomical given that Bogdanov died of one such transfusion himself in 1928. The sci-fi short story, however, is the glory of the three texts by Bogdanov and of the anthology as a whole.

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Titled *Immortality day*, Bogdanov’s story is set in a distant future, where death has been defeated and the dream of “eternal blossoming youth” has come true (215). Yet this story, the last text in the anthology, shows that the technoscientific utopia of eternal life is not pure bliss but rather boring. One day, the main character Fride who is over 1000 years old is simply not “interested” in his life and work anymore. There is a “heavy and anxious emptiness in his soul,” (217) and all he can see and feel is “a hermetic cycle of monotony.” (221) The feeling is one of

*déjà dit*, the feeling that everything has been said before (including the sentence that everything has been said before). Or in the words of Fride: “Our thoughts, feelings, desire, actions, all get repeated, even the very idea that ‘everything repeats itself’ returns to my mind for the thousandth time.” (224) Everything repeats itself, everything returns; endlessly, eternally. *Same same but same*. As McKenzie Wark writes in the book *Molecular Red*, there is “a pessimism in Bogdanov that is sometimes lacking in his Proletkult followers.”<sup>xii</sup> There is, in other words, a fundamental sadness to the world of *Immortality Day*. The nearly heartbreaking sadness of immortality. Instead of singing a hymn to the universe, to eternal life, Fride thus curses it: “Eternal life is an unbearable torture.” (223) The only solution he can come up with is suicide. This idea harbors a double irony. The irony of even wanting to kill oneself in an age of eternal life, and the irony of being, most likely, resurrected after having killed oneself, making the suicide pointless in the first place.

This problem is not unfamiliar to the genre of science fiction: In the speculative and satirical *The Futurological Congress* (1971) by Stanislaw Lem, who wrote his masterpiece *Solaris* ten years earlier, the cosmonaut Ijon Tichy, having attended a futurological congress gone grotesquely wrong, suddenly wakes up in the year 2039. This future society is a thoroughly “psychemized society” where death is a thing of the past and where suicides thus face the problem of being brought back to life *against* their will, unless they use a bomb to make sure that no remains are there to resurrect.<sup>xiii</sup> In *Immortality Day*, Fride first writes a suicide note reminiscent and worthy of Blanqui: “After one

thousand years of my existence I have come to the conclusion that life on Earth is a cycle of repetitions, especially intolerable for a man of genius, whose entire being yearns for innovation. This is one of nature's antinomies. I resolve it with suicide." (225) Then, in a final act of irony, like some Prometheus from the future, he sets himself on fire: "Divine Prometheus stole fire and led people to immortality. Let this fire grant the immortal people what wise Nature had intended for them: death and the renewal of spirit in eternally living matter." (225) His last words: "Everything repeats itself." (226)

The question that has propelled this review but remains to be confronted directly is the following one: How are we to understand Russian cosmism today, this controversial blend of "higher magic" and "higher mathematics"?<sup>xiv</sup> Some of the ideas are clearly Pre-Einsteinian – that is to say, developed before the theory of relativity (although esoteric Marxists like Muravyev used Einstein's theories in his attempt to control time as a way of solving the problem of the scientific organization of labor). Others are plainly Pre-Stalinist – that is to say, developed before Josef Stalin's regime of terror, this biopolitical Gesamtkunstwerk that did succeed in transforming the state into a gigantic museum, if not mausoleum. By the same token, some of the basic tenets of Russian cosmism – immortalism and interplanetaryism – have historically been perverted, corrupted and appropriated by forces more or less foreign

to it, NASA, Nazism, capitalism, and other imperialist endeavors etc. Of course, quite a few of these tendencies were there to begin with. Biocosmism's frontier myth and the ambition to conquer space and achieve complete and total control over nature. Its positive view of a potentially very totalitarian state: "some form of coercion is necessary," writes Svyatogor in his polemics against anarchism, before adding: "Any objections to the Soviet state as an oppressive system acting to suppress individual freedoms and the like are therefore nonsensical." (79) On top of that, there is the Promethean technorationalism, which Bogdanov does problematize in his sci-fi-story but which nonetheless lives on in contemporary forms of accelerationism and speculative realism. This is certainly not unrelated to the macho-core of Russian cosmism: The aspiration to become (white male) masters of the universe.

Or simply to become immortal. "It's interesting, isn't it?" a female character asks in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, "About men and immortality."<sup>xv</sup> Around W2K (the novel is from 2003), ideas of immortality suddenly sprung to life. In the appropriate year of 2000, Jean Baudrillard's book *The Vital Illusion* is published, based on a series of lectures delivered at University of Irvine in 1999. This is the time around which cloning and Dolly the sheep are all the rage. In the opening lines of the book, in a chapter called "The Final Solution: Cloning beyond the Human and the Human," Baudrillard states: "The question concerning cloning is the question of immortality. We all want immortality. It is our ultimate fantasy."<sup>xvi</sup> As if responding to that question in a novelistic form a couple of years later, Michel Houellebecq writes the sci-fi novel *The Possibility of an Island* in

2005, where this fantasy of immortality is realized, although life in this fantasy world turns out to be quite dull. Just as it was in Bogdanov's *Immortality Day*. The novel's epigram – "Who among you deserves eternal life?" – is in fact more a question of who really *wants* eternal life.<sup>xvi</sup> And it is no exaggeration to say, that men usually do want that. To live forever. To defeat death. That fantasy mainly thrives among contemporary venture capitalists. Ray Kurzweil, who plans to live forever with the help of biochemistry, digests around 250 pills every day, and he is not the only one with such dreams. As an article in Newsweek details: "Peter Thiel, the billionaire co-founder of PayPal, plans to live to be 120. Compared with some other tech billionaires, he doesn't seem particularly ambitious. Dmitry Itskov, the "godfather" of the Russian Internet, says his goal is to live to 10,000; Larry Ellison, co-founder of Oracle, finds the notion of accepting mortality "incomprehensible," and Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google, hopes to someday "cure death."<sup>xvii</sup> The article goes on to explain that this immodest fantasy of immortality is not unfounded in science, nor is it really new. In fact, the fantasy might be as old as mankind: "These titans of tech aren't being ridiculous, or even vainglorious; their quests are based on real, emerging science that could fundamentally change what we know about life and about death. It's hard to believe, though, since the human quest for immortality is both ancient and littered with catastrophic failures. Around 200 B.C., the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, accidentally killed himself trying to live forever; he poisoned himself by eating supposedly mortality-preventing mercury pills." The article does not mention Bogdanov but

it easily could have (in the tragicomical tradition of men accidentally killing themselves in the attempt to overcome death). It also does not mention Elon Musk, the famous entrepreneur who wishes to leave Earth behind and travel to Mars in his SpaceX-rocket. This is now a real possibility – at least for people with ample amounts of money.

At any rate, there is no doubt that we are witnessing an increasingly deep entanglement of human and inhuman, man and machine, body, mind and computer. The question remains, though, what kind of dreams (or nightmares) these technological advancements rouse. For example: Where is the dream of immortality more present than in the digital world, with its world of zero and one; where is it more alive than in the vampires of Silicon Valley, with their thirst, to quote Marx's famous lines, for the "living blood of labour"? What is infinity if not, to quote from *Cosmopolis* yet again, a "medium for corporate growth and investment, for the accumulation of profits and vigorous reinvestment"?<sup>xix</sup> What is capitalism if not this final solution?

These critical questions and reservations should not lead us to dismiss Russian cosmism altogether. After reading the anthology *Russian Cosmism*, I have come to the conclusion that there are basically two ways of interpreting biocosmism from a contemporary standpoint. There is a skeptical, pessimist interpretation where one would point to its settler colonialism, its aspirations towards what is in Stark Trek called the final frontier, or its unfortunate tendency to promote a eugenic utopia of white supremacy. One



would ask: Who has access to this biocosmist and communist future and who does not?<sup>xx</sup> One would, in short, put emphasis on the toxic aspect of the utopia of biocosmism, on the moment when the utopia turns into a dystopia. And one would not be entirely wrong, of course. Yet it would not be the whole story.

The story of Russian cosmism does not (only) end in what the writer Aaron Winslow has aptly called *capitalism cosmism* in a review of the anthology edited by Boris Groys in *Los Angeles Review of Books*.<sup>xxi</sup> There is another way of understanding and reactualizing Russian cosmism, there are other lessons to be drawn. First of all, it is worth nothing that its project was not utterly *unrealistic*. Quite a few of the things the biocosmists suggested or envisioned have in fact become reality. Recall how the scientific writings of Tsiolkovsky was pivotal in eventually sending the first Sputnik into space. Yet the voice of historical reason and common sense is always in a rush to pass judgments on which things can and cannot be done, always in a hurry to give a verdict on the question: Is this realistic or not? It is not only important to realize that this question is a deeply ideological question, but also that it is in actual fact a question that can only be resolved in retrospect. By this I mean that whether or not something is realistic or not can only be established retrospectively. We cannot determine in advance – despite our precious experience, accumulated knowledge and common sense – if a *present* proposal regarding a *future* solution is realistic. But some people, people who both want to show that they have everything under control and that nothing ever changes, are so cocksure that they are not afraid to declare: No, it cannot be done. It is

unrealistic. Naïve. Utopian. These are the people who since the beginning of time have said the same thing over and over again. When someone approached them to say that the Earth is round and not flat, they said: No. When someone talked about democracy, votes for women, the abolition of slavery, the internet, gay marriages, or space travels. When someone said, maybe there is another way to do this. When someone challenged consensus, when someone dared to question common sense. No, they said. Throughout history they have rejected such proposal, how foolish and childish to even suggest such a thing. They have said that – and the future proved them wrong, made a fool out of them. But in their own age, in their present, they were the realists, the ones who had History and Logic on their side. And said inventions and discoveries were undoubtedly perceived as unrealistic and utopian science fiction, until they became (the new) reality. Until consensus changed. It is pretty much the same with capitalism today, alternatives (if it is at all possible to imagine alternatives to it) are treated the same way. Capitalism is the only realism, it is realism as such, as Mark Fisher pointed out in his book *Capitalist Realism* from 2009. Or as science fiction-writer Ursula Le Guin said in a speech at the National Book Awards in 2014: “We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable; so did the divine right of kings.” In the same talk, she spoke about how in these dark times we “will need writers who can remember freedom: poets, visionaries—the realists of a larger reality.”

The anthology does an excellent job of showing how the Russian cosmists can be considered such realists of a larger reality – even if the cosmists do not exactly fit Le Guin’s

model of fabulation as laid out in her carrier bag theory of fiction from 1986, in which she calls for un-heroic myths that do not put emphasis on the Things, the hunting sticks, the phallic objects, but on carrier bags, containers and bottles, the things to put things in. Several intellectuals have noted how, in the context of the current climate crisis, the science fiction-element of biocosmism seems more relevant than ever. In *Molecular Red* Wark writes that “the Anthropocene makes Bogdanov our contemporary,”<sup>xxii</sup> while Eirik Høyer Leivestad writes in the Norwegian magazine *Vagant* that “in the light of the thesis of Anthropocene, the common task [the one proposed by Fedorov] announces itself as a new project of survival, albeit not in the form of the revelation of an eccentric reader of the Bible.”<sup>xxiii</sup> As the latter, however, also perceptively points out, the question at the dawn of the twenty-first century is no longer how we can become a cosmic force, but how we are to deal with the fact that we have already become one.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In this logic, then, the Russian cosmists remind us that the sun, the moon and the galaxies can be, to borrow a phrase from the foreword to the anthology, a territory of “infinite resources.” (viii) Cosmos is not necessarily a pure dystopia: the cold and silent infinity that filled Pascal with horror and dread in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (“The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread”), the never-ending *Nichts* in front of which Schopenhauer resigned in utter pessimism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or the interstellar space of pure repetition and monotony that Blanqui saw or imagined he saw from his prison cell across the English Channel.<sup>xxv</sup> Biocosmism offers an alternative ontology, a different cosmology or eschatology,

or, in the case of Bogdanov, a tektology, with which to rethink the common task *today*. While we do not need to become Prometheus or Icarus, and while, moreover, writer Kim Stanley Robinson<sup>xxvi</sup> may be right in claiming that space travel is a luxury we cannot afford ourselves (let us leave that to Elon Musk), we still need realists of a larger reality. We need science fictions that can counter capitalist realism on the one hand and capitalist cosmism on the other. We need to oppose the anti-utopianism that simultaneously dominates and destroys our world, and one way of doing that, one way of being anti-anti-utopian is, as Robinson has pointed out in another context, in a recent article in Commune Magazine called “Dystopias Now,” to be(come) utopian. It is as simple as that. Otherwise we will never go beyond our beyondless condition. Otherwise communism will be forever out of reach. And that is indeed a luxury we absolutely cannot afford.

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<sup>i</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Capital* (London: Abacus, 2000), p. 37. For an original contemporary perspective on Blanqui and his vision of “capital, cops and comets,” and his insurrectionary imaginary and intergalactic dialectics, see Sean Bonney’s two texts on metamute.org (<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/comets-barricades-insurrectionary-imagination-exile>; <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/reviews/eternity-to-here#sdfootnotelanc>).

<sup>ii</sup> Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars. An Astronomical Hypothesis* (New York: Contra Mundum Press, 2013), pp. 111; 120; 113.

<sup>iii</sup> Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*, p. 88.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>v</sup> *Russian Cosmism*, ed. Boris Groys (New York: e-flux and MIT Press, 2018), p. viii. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>vi</sup> For heuristic purposes alone, I am going to pass over the distinction between cosmism and biocosmism and use the two terms interchangeably, just as the group of (bio)cosmists will be taken, somewhat misleadingly, as a homogenous one, despite their internal differences and the

movement's various, prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary, stages or waves.

vii George M. Young, *The Russian Cosmists. The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 69. In his book, Young focuses on the esoteric dimension of Russian cosmism: Its mystical, occult, religious, spiritual, shamanistic dimensions. Its relation to theosophy and anthrosophy, to thaumaturgy, gerontology and eschatology – “the kingdom at the end of history” (Young, *The Russian Cosmists*, p. 27). Young's general claim is that “the Cosmists offer far-sighted and carefully considered answers to the most frequently asked question in Russian intellectual history, *Chto delat'?* – “What Is To Be Done?””, and, also, an alternative to “Western doom and gloom” (Young, *The Russian Cosmists*, pp. 6-7)

viii Quoted in: Young, *The Russian Cosmists*, pp. 80-81.

ix As is well known this was the title of a short story by Fyodor Dostoyevsky: *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*. I am indebted to Eirik Høyer Leivestad for this reference (Eirik Høyer Leivestad, “Gud er død, lenge leve Gud!,” in *Vagant* 4, 2017, p. 38). Apropos Dostoyevsky and Russian literary history, it must be stated, however, that the cosmists's emphasis on collectivity contrasts strongly with canonical works such as Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and Yevgeny Zamyatin's dystopian novel *We*, a critique of the communist utopia written only a few years after the Russian revolution but immediately banned and then smuggled into the United States, where it was published, in translation, in 1924 (cf. Young, p. 213).

x Cf. Young, *The Russian Cosmists*, pp. 147-151.

xi Young, *The Russian Cosmists*, p. 150.

xii McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 45.

xiii Stanislaw Lem, *The Futurological Congress* (New York: Mariner Books, 1985), p. 82.

xiv Young, *The Russian Cosmists*, p. 3.

xv Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 103.

xvi Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 3

xvii Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island* (New York: Vintage International, 2007).

xviii <https://www.newsweek.com/2015/03/13/silicon-valley-trying-make-humans-immortal-and-finding-some-success-311402.html>. I picked up the reference to this article from Barbara Ehrenreich's *Natural Causes: Life, Death and the Illusion of Control* (London: Granta Books, 2018), p. 77-80.

xix DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 207. The novel also addresses the dream of living “outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from void,” (206).

xx In her new book, Alexis Lothian asks a lot of analogous questions in relation to future and fiction: Who is excluded from futurity? Who is denied access? In the book, she confronts and challenges “capitalist and colonial temporalities” in her overall attempt to shed light on various afrofuturist projects (Alexis Lothian: *Old Futures. Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), p. 19). To that end, she quotes William Gibson: “The future is already here. It just isn't very evenly distributed.”

xxi Aaron Winslow, “Russian Cosmism Versus Interstellar Bosses: Reclaiming Full-Throttle Luxury Space Communism,” in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 18, 2018 (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/russian->

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cosmism-versus-interstellar-bosses-reclaiming-full-throttle-luxury-space-communism/).

<sup>xxii</sup> Wark, *Molecular Red*, p. 49. The idea is that a lot of original and useful thoughts on ecology, Gaia and geological and biological co-evolution can be found in Bogdanov's works, for example *Red Star* (see also: Leivestad, "Gud er død, lenge leve Gud!", pp. 42-43).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Leivestad, "Gud er død, lenge leve Gud!", p. 47 – the original quote is in Norwegian; the crude translation is mine.

<sup>xxiv</sup> One figure conspicuously absent from Groys' anthology is Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky. This polymath who reportedly spoke at least fifteen languages developed the influential ecological concepts of the biosphere and the noosphere, the latter designating the first time in history that mankind has become a geological factor on planet Earth. He also had some fascinating thoughts on the topic of autotrophy, the somewhat Houellebecqian idea (at least in *The Possibility of an Island*) that "humans can be transformed from heterotrophic to autotrophic beings, subsisting as some plants and bacteria now do, on air and sunlight instead of on other living matter." (Young, *The Russian Cosmists*, p. 162).

<sup>xxv</sup> Pascal, *Pensées* (London: Penguin, 1995), 66; Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 412.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Word for word, Kim Stanley Robinson, who has used Bogdanov as a model for a character in his *Mars*-trilogy, said as follows: "We don't need space. We need sustainability in this biosphere. Space is a luxury problem and a luxury opportunity." (quoted from: <https://slate.com/technology/2017/12/space-isnt-a-void-its-a-canvas-for-human-imagination.html>).