

## *Anton Vidokle: Citizens of the Cosmos*

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- 1 The vacuum left by the reported death of God in the late nineteenth century prompted all number of spiritual and moralist agendas, designed to give meaning to human existence. They ranged from the wildly esoteric to the merely pragmatic promotion of austere pursuits like teetotalism, vegetarianism, and dancing barefoot in the morning dew. The theological guarantee was replaced by a myriad of alternatives. Among the many cults of the period – Spiritualism, Panpsychism, Transhumanism and similar – one of the more extravagant was Cosmism, which has been characterized as “a highly controversial and oxymoronic blend of activist speculation, futuristic traditionalism, religious science, exoteric esotericism, utopian pragmatism, idealistic materialism – higher magic partnered to higher mathematics.”<sup>1</sup> The inventor and promoter of Cosmism was the Russian philosopher and educator Nikolai Fedorov (1829-1903), whose goal was the immortality and ultimately the resurrection of all humans, present and past, and liberation from the constraints of death, gravity, and sexuality. According to Fedorov, humanity had not reached its end point, and the evolutionary past was to be incorporated into the future. He proposed that dispersed matter – the bodies of the dead and historical artefacts – could be “recombined” through advanced technology. This would transform earth dwellers into immortal cosmic beings, freed from the burdens of earthly existence, and able to fly through space, live in new environments, and direct and shape their own futures. The resurrection was to be enabled by two notionally opposing devices: the museum and the spaceship. The museum, where nothing dies, houses the fragments of memory, which were to be recombined into new human collectives and set free to roam the cosmos in spaceship earth. Such visions of intergalactic travel echoed not only the popular fictions of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, but also the cosmonautic research of the Russian revolutionary and explosive expert Nikolai Kibalchich, who was advocating rocket propulsion in the early 1880s. A century later, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the intellectual constraints that went with it, Fedorov’s Cosmism was rediscovered and has enjoyed a resurgence in the realms of both scholarly research and creative speculation. One recent convert is the artist Anton Vidokle, founder of e-flux, and chief curator of the 14<sup>th</sup> Shanghai Biennale in 2013-2014. He was introduced to Cosmism by Boris Groys, the media theorist and

expert on Soviet-era culture, and the Russian/American artist Ilya Kabakov. Vidokle's creative engagement with Cosmism prompted him to think about films that would explore revolution, immortality, resurrection, planetary exploration, and museology. *Citizens of the Cosmos*, is an account and critique of Vidokle's Cosmist films, namely: *This is Cosmos* (2014), *The Communist Revolution Was Caused by the Sun* (2015), *Immortality and Resurrection for All!* (2017), *Citizens of the Cosmos* (2019), *Autotrofia* (2020-2023), and *Gilgamesh: She Who Saw the Deep* (2021, with Pelin Tan). In addition to an interview with Vidokle and perceptive critical essays, one by Groys himself, the book has powerful stills from the films, and, most importantly, the full texts spoken by the actors, voiceovers, and details of the settings. Architecture and landscape play important roles in the films: the backdrop for the first scene of *This is Cosmos*, for example, is described as "A vast necropolis. A multitude of graves, monuments and more elaborated mausoleums [...] The scale of the structures is diminutive: it looks like a giant architectural model for a fantastical city for very small people." And the voiceover begins: "This is Cosmos. We are here to make a film about invisible energy, immortality, and the resurrection of every human being who ever lived". In similar vein, the opening backdrop to *The Communist Revolution Was Caused by the Sun* is a "Black and white image of a vast landscape shot from a high vantage point. In the foreground, a coal mine shaft with a five-point star at the top." Although shown in monochrome, the star is clearly the red star of the USSR. The scenario that follows explains: "We are here to build an aero-ionization dish, an electric chandelier of invisible energy that emits a field of negatively charged particles. It will follow the designs of the Soviet scientist who worshipped the sun". *Citizens of the Cosmos* is not a straightforward, academic account of the Vidokle films. Rather, it is a collection of component parts, out of which the bigger picture, in every sense of the word, can be assembled. It is well worth the effort, and a careful reading leads to a good understanding of Vidokle's Cosmist sources, his films, and his message for the contemporary audience. As one of the commentators in the book notes: "Vidokle's films translate [the] widely felt contemporary despair into a utopian imagination of resurrection and immortality for all, and for collective expansion into the distant areas of the universe. This is a technological utopia that strangely resonates with the present utopian zeitgeist."<sup>2</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Young, M. George. *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 3. This is the best account in English of the origins, development, and influence of Cosmism.
2. Berardo, Franco "Bifo". "A Cosmist Imagination in the Time of Extinction", in Vidokle Anton, *Citizens of the Cosmos*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2024, p. 48