



Resurrection After All: Russian Cosmism as an Intellectual History Project

Russian Cosmism is the subject of the widely-exhibited film trilogy by Anton Vidokle, which traces, or better, resurrects the presence of Cosmist ideas in post-Soviet art, engineering, and architecture. Alma Mikulinsky reviews the films' installment in an artist-run space in Toronto, as well as the theoretical corpus that has been developed around the subject in the last four years.

Review / Alma Mikulinsky June 18, 2019

Russian Cosmism was born in the late 19th century in the writings of Nikolai Fedorov (1829–1903). This forgotten writer, whose texts didn't get much exposure during his lifetime, has been resurrected in recent years thanks to Anton Vidokle and the full force of e-flux, "the publishing platform and archive, artist project, curatorial platform, and enterprise," which Vidokle co-founded in 1998.

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[1]“Anton Vidokle: Immortality for All: a film trilogy on Russian Cosmism,” installation view at YYZ Artists’ Outlet, Toronto, 19 January– 16 March, 2019
Photo: Allan Kosmajac. Courtesy of YYZ Artists’ Outlet

It was Boris Groys, Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at NYU, who had brought Cosmism to Vidokle’s attention through a story that sounds more like science fiction than history. It describes the leaders of the Bolshevik party experimenting with blood transfusions to maintain their youth. This tale piqued Vidokle’s curiosity and years later he orchestrated this revival of texts long forgotten, while also charting their traces in the 20th and 21st centuries.^{[1](#)}

Vidokle has summarized Russian Cosmism in the statement: “Immortality and resurrection for all,”^{[2](#)} an idea which both articulates the relationship between Cosmism and Marxism in its aim for equal distribution of resources, as well as Cosmism’s main goals: first achieving immortality and then resurrecting all previous life. In Fedorov’s view, evolution will be completed only when humans defeat death, a task that would be attained not during the Christian Last Judgment, but rather through human means such as technology and science.^{[3](#)} Immortality will be achieved once our bodies will be enhanced to extract energy directly from the sun (therefore eliminating the need for oxygen or consuming other living beings – animals or plants).

[ON4A7505\(S\).jpg](#) [2]



[3]“Anton Vidokle: Immortality for All: a film trilogy on Russian Cosmism,” installation view at YYZ Artists’ Outlet, Toronto, 19 January– 16 March, 2019
Photo: Allan Kosmajac. Courtesy of YYZ Artists’ Outlet

The physical qualities that allow for immortality are also at the base of Cosmism’s second tenet, that of universal resurrection. While Communism or Marxism imagined it would reach fruition in a distant future, unattainable to those living in the present, Cosmism found a way to share its utopian existence of immortality with all, including previous generations who were sacrificed in the attempt to reach this goal. The obligation of those who had attained immortality through science and technology is to resurrect everyone who has ever lived - in a totality that would make our species complete. But since our planet cannot accommodate an infinite number of living beings (human, animal, plant, and even bacteria), space travel and colonization of other planets would be the second phase; when no longer dependant on oxygen, we will roam freely in the universe, free from our attachments to this planet.

[ON4A7474\(S\).jpg](#) [4]



[5]“Anton Vidokle: Immortality for All: a film trilogy on Russian Cosmism,” installation view at YYZ Artists’ Outlet, Toronto, 19 January– 16 March, 2019
Photo: Allan Kosmajac. Courtesy of YYZ Artists’ Outlet

Russian Cosmism is the subject of the widely-exhibited film trilogy by Vidokle—*This Is Cosmos*, 2014; *The Communist Revolution Was Caused By The Sun*, 2015; and *Immortality and Resurrection for All!*, 2017— an installment of which I watched at YYZ Artists’ Outlet in Toronto. The trilogy traces, as well as stages, the presence of Cosmist ideas in post-Soviet art, engineering, and architecture. Vidokle is not a Cosmism follower, yet he traces, or better, resurrects, what he considers to be the enduring presence of the symbols and ideas of Cosmism—the sun, immortality, space travel—even though followers of Fedorov had been exiled or executed and his ideas all but forgotten. The films are part documentary, part travelogue, part re-enactment of a narrative that takes place throughout the landscapes and spaces of the former USSR, accompanied by quotes from Fedorov’s texts read by Vidokle himself.

[This Is Cosmos – Anton Vidokle, with Boris Groys](#) [6]

Video of This Is Cosmos – Anton Vidokle, with Boris Groys

هذا هو الكوزموس - أنطون فيدوكله الى جانب بوريس غرويس، عرض وحوار، يوم الجمعة، 10 نيسان 2015، فضاء الفنانين (Artist's Space)



At its core, Vidokle's project belongs to the realm of intellectual history. Russian Cosmism was the subject of an [e-flux Journal special issue](#) [7], [a dedicated website](#) [8], and a 2018 MIT-e-flux book translated some of Cosmism's original texts, essays that were first published in Russian in 2015 by Garage Museum of Contemporary Art.⁴ It was also at the heart of a 2017 [exhibition](#) [9] at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt, where—together with Vidokle's trilogy and a work by Arseny Zhilyaev—Boris Groys has selected historical works by Russian avant-garde artists that, arguably, reflect Cosmist thought, motifs, and philosophy. Moreover, following a conference that occurred in conjunction with the Berlin show, Sternberg Press published a volume with writing by contemporary authors on Russian Cosmism.⁵

The act of discovery of Fedorov's writing, and the attempt to trace the lingering effect of his ideas throughout history, is reminiscent of the revisionist project that has brought the dissident surrealist Georges Bataille back from oblivion; first the French publication *Tel Quel* resurrected Bataille in the 1970s among French-speaking academics, and then, in the 1980s and 1990s, *October* (that period's equivalent to *e-flux* in readership and influence). And with these efforts, Bataille's status had changed from a forgotten figure to a writer that was first embraced and then referred to *ad nauseam* by the English-speaking academia.

There is one important difference between these two resurrection projects: Bataille's ideas have lived and are still positioned side-by-side André Breton's version of surrealism, which favors sublimation and salvation. Fedorov's Cosmism, as it is being recounted today, obliterates other narratives of the period: the well-known stories of Russian avant-garde art as a tool for developing new Bolshevik consciousness or the period's art as a journey towards abstraction are both swallowed up by Cosmist ideas, mythology, and symbols: the motif of the sun in the Malevich-designed opera *Victory over the Sun* is read through the lens of Cosmist symbolism; similarly his suprematist architectural models are seen as foundations for space stations; the same Erik Bulatov image that advertised the current "[Victory over the Sun](#)" [exhibition](#) [10] at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, is now at the center of yet another article revising the place of Cosmism in Moscow Conceptualism.⁶ This was heightened in the historical part of the Berlin show, where works were taken out of their historical context and harnessed to the Cosmist narrative.⁷ If Russian Cosmism offers "a different kind of modernity altogether, beyond right or wrong sides of history, without victors and victims",⁸ the contemporary intellectual apparatus that propels Russian Cosmism forwards obliterates other narratives.

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[12]“Anton Vidokle: Immortality for All: a film trilogy on Russian Cosmism,” installation view at YYZ Artists’ Outlet, Toronto, 19 January– 16 March, 2019
Photo: Allan Kosmajac. Courtesy of YYZ Artists’ Outlet

The alleged omnipresence of Russian Cosmism becomes especially clear when progressing in its timeline. While the phenomenon of Russian Cosmism began with obscure events and small edition publishing of texts, it continues to encompass events such as the Cold War’s space race —with American astronauts and Russian Cosmonauts sent to space— and reaches its peak in the present with contemporary scientific advances such as artificial intelligence and nano- and biotechnology, as well as attempts to encompass some Silicon Valley trends such as Elon Musk’s Space X and Ray Kurzweil’s posthumanism. The open-ended, all-encompassing nature of Vidokle’s Cosmism is both the project’s power and its weakness, propelling it from a forgotten historical episode to a widespread phenomenon central to neo-liberal imaginations.

“Anton Vidokle: Immortality for All: a film trilogy on Russian Cosmism,” YYZ Artists’ Outlet, Toronto, 19 January– 16 March, 2019

- 1. “Alexander Bogdanov, who cofounded the Bolshevik party with Lenin and experimented with blood transfusions to rejuvenate one and all”, in [Editorial - Russian Cosmism](#) [7], *e-flux Journal* #88, Feb 2018. The Groys connection was described on this [e-flux podcast on Russian Cosmism](#): <https://player.fm/series/h-k-w/russian-cosmism-technology-of-immortality> [13]
- 2. Said on the e-flux podcast on Russian Cosmism on: <https://player.fm/series/h-k-w/russian-cosmism-technology-of-immortality> [13]
- 3. Anastasia Gacheva, “[Art as the Overcoming of Death: From Nikolai Fedorov to the](#)



- [Cosmists of the 1920s](#) [14],” *e-flux Journal* no. 89, Feb 2018.
- 4. Boris Groys (ed.), *Russian Cosmism*, Boston, MA; MIT Press, 2018. for the Russian edition see <https://garagemca.org/en/publishing/boris-groys-russian-cosmism-by-boris-groys> [15]
 - 5. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Stephen Squibb, Anton Vidokle (eds.), *Art without Death; Conversations on Russian Cosmism*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017
 - 6. Alessandra Franetovich, “Cosmic Thoughts: The Paradigm of Space in Moscow Conceptualism,” *e-Flux Journal*, #99, April 2019.
 - 7. This model is more reminiscent of that which Groys (the godfather of Cosmism, curator of the Berlin show and active contributor to many of the books described above) has done in his seminal *The Total Art of Stalinism*, where he had argued that the Russian avant-garde was competing for the same turf as the Stalinist regime in its quest of producing world-transformative art. See Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, New York: Verso, 1992.
 - 8. Brian Kuan Wood in <https://www.e-flux.com/books/151809/art-without-death-conversations-on-russian-cosmism/> [16]

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- [7] <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/88/176021/editorial-russian-cosmism/>
- [8] <https://cosmism-timeline.e-flux.com/#/>
- [9] https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2017/art_without_death_russian_cosmism/start.php
- [10] <https://www.imj.org.il/en/exhibitions/victory-over-sun>
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- [13] <https://player.fm/series/h-k-w/russian-cosmism-technology-of-immortality>
- [14] <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/89/180332/art-as-the-overcoming-of-death-from-nikolai-fedorov-to-the-cosmists-of-the-1920s/>
- [15] <https://garagemca.org/en/publishing/boris-groys-russian-cosmism-by-boris-groys>
- [16] <https://www.e-flux.com/books/151809/art-without-death-conversations-on-russian-cosmism/>