
Ethics of Temporality : Total Biopolitics of Russian Cosmism

Soo-Hwan Kim

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea

1. Cosmic turn? : Growing interest in Russian cosmism

Russian Cosmism, one of the little-studied 20th century philosophical movements in Russia, attracts extraordinary academic and artistic attention today. Cosmism, developed by a few Russian thinkers before and after Russian revolution, had put forward philosophical ideas and scientific programs, the central tenet of which might be summarized as: “immortality for all” and “space exploration.” Among representative evidence that demonstrates growing interests in Russian cosmism and its broad presence in the international intellectual arena – new publication on Russian cosmism, firstly a collection of essays by Cosmist thinkers, compiled by one of the most influential contemporary cultural theorist Boris Groys, in Moscow 2015, and this year 2018 its English translation by same editor which was the result of collaboration with art journal *E-flux* and MIT Press. In line with these publication projects, various conferences, symposiums, exhibitions, and art projects on cosmism have been held intensively in the last 1-2 years, including international conference at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin in September 2017 titled *Russian Cosmism: A Work of Art in the Age of Technological Immortality*. Also a Post present event at MOMA in New-York, co-hosted by the publishing company *Verso*, and a special issue of *E-flux* journal, dedicated to the topic of Russian cosmism (88, February 2018) – all these are indicative of growing interests in Russian cosmism.

It is not difficult to assume that this apparent revisiting of cosmist legacy is related to the contemporary context, in which the philosophical imagination has again become entangled with scientific and technological imagination. Recent developments in biotechnology, genetics, and artificial intelligence suggest that the ancient myths of eternal youth, immortality, and material resurrection are now a tangible horizon of the technological imagination. But beyond superficial correspondence or relevance, elucidating what exactly links the problems of today with the issues that concerned the Russian cosmist more than a hundred years ago is a task that requires much deeper and thorough consideration than at first consideration.

Actually, Russian cosmism as a theoretical problematic or conceptual frame has a variety of

interesting aspects that demand separate explorations, from its revolutionary utopian characteristics to its post-humanistic and bio-political aspects. Of course, I can't and do not intend to cover all of these aspects together in this presentation. This is not meant to be a total picture of Russian cosmism. What I am going to offer today is very partial but - in my opinion - undoubtedly one of the most essential features of Russian cosmism that should be carefully contemplated when we talk about the politics and aesthetics of "life" in this transitional new world. In a word, it is about a moral or ethical aspect of Russian cosmism, that is, a specific type of social responsibility for a temporal axis, as well as for a spatial. That is why I have titled this presentation "Ethics of Temporality."

2. *Immortality for All* : Radical Museumification of Life

When Nikolai Fedorov, the renowned founder of Russian cosmism, developed his cosmic ideas around the 1860s, they did not attract much attention, although the group of his readers and regular attendants of his lecture included L. Tolstoy, F. Dostoevsky, young philosopher V. Solovyev, and also among his enthusiastic followers - K. Tsiolkovsky who later became the "grandfather of Soviet rocket science" and A. Bogdanov who was a close comrade of Lenin and prominent leader of *Preletkult*, and a director of the *institute of blood transfusion* as well. But after his death in 1903, popularity of his ideas had grown noticeably and he had become one of the most influential figures among pre- and post-revolutionary intellectuals, scientists and artists. Actually the first post-revolutionary decade saw an explosion of cosmist ideas and their application in very diverse areas of life, from art and science to the practical organization of labor, time management and so on. At a certain moment in the mid-1920s, it was in fact difficult to find a creative thinker in the USSR who was not influenced by this set of ideas.

Nikolai Fedorov, an Orthodox Christian philosopher and professional librarian, came up with a very unusual (to a certain extent even weird) set of ideas on humankind and cosmos: the core of *Philosophy of the Common Task* (the phrase which subsequently came to designate Fedorov's doctrine) lies in the possibility/necessity of *the immortality for all*. In brief, the common task is no other than a project of human immortality achieved by technological means. It involves materially resurrecting all human ancestors (to emphasize again, *all* human, not just those who are living now, but all people who have ever lived on Earth, starting with Adam and Eve), and exploring and colonizing all the stars and planets in the cosmos (the colonization of other planets is an inevitable consequence of the lack of space after the resurrection of the dead).

The most notable point here is that for Cosmists *immortality for all* was considered not just a *possible* option for a utopian future, but in terms of *necessity*, that is, as a sort of *practical imperative* that should come true at any rate. For instance, this characteristic of cosmism was also ensured by their attitude to the notion of technology: Fedorov evaluated the technology of the XIX century as internally contradictory. In his opinion, modern technology primarily served only

fashion and war - that is, a limited, mortal life. Exactly in regard to such technology one can speak about “progress,” because that type of technology constantly changes with time. Furthermore, such technology divides generations of people. Each generation has its own technology and each new generation is bound to despise the technology of its predecessors (Fedorov 1990:53-4). Practically, what Fedorov proposes here is another technology or other way of using the technology that could serve a no longer finite, but infinite, immortal life. This other type of technology might be called art. The technology of art for Fedorov is a technology of preserving and reviving the past. (in this respect cosmism should be differentiated from so-called radical avant-garde project that primarily aimed at total destruction of the past, so-called “zero-degree” of memory, although cosmist ideas unquestionably had an direct influence on Russian avant-garde artworks, for instance on Malevich’s famous *Black Square*).

And this is also the reason why the institution of the “museum” played a central role in Russian Cosmism as well. Museums are not focused on progress but dedicated to the preservation of memory, of the past. Given that museums are already able to preserve the past, then, according to Fyodorov, their technology needs to be radicalized for not just preserving artifacts but actually bringing back life. Universal museum that would be able to reconstruct the past in its entirety was what Fedorov literally envisioned. Here naturally arises a question: who will take charge of this total project? Who is supposed to be the *subject* of this universal “curating job”? The only possible answer to this – government, in fact not merely a state’s government, but at least a global (or universal) one. This is the point where we should address the problematics of *the biopolitical* in Russian cosmism.

3. Total biopolitics of Russian cosmism

According to the introduction of Boris Groys, one of the main academic voices of Russian cosmism today, the idea of Russian cosmism is a radicalized version of Foucault’s famous thesis on biopolitics (Гройс 2015:7). More specifically, it amounts to a third variation (type) of governmentality. The first one, that is, the traditional type of sovereign states, in contrast to which Foucault defines the principle of modern state’s governmentality, could be formulized as: “take life or let live.” Meanwhile, the modern state, that is, second type of governmentality is primarily concerned with birth rates, health of its population, and providing them with the necessities of life. The functional principle of the modern state is “to make live and to let die.” Worth noting here: in this formula “natural death” of any individual is accepted as an unavoidable event and thus treated as a private matter of that individual. But what if it might be possible to envision a third type of governmentality which doesn’t want to accept this natural limit and will not permit itself to allow an individual to die privately and peacefully in their grave? What if a state is “making [the population] live and does not let [them] die”? As a matter of fact, it was precisely this requirement of absolute biopower that Russian cosmism

formulated through the slogan of “immortality for all.” From this principled position the idea of “radical museumification of life” naturally follows: “All technology must become art technology, and the state must become a museum of its population.” Only under the condition that this total state-museum proclaims as its explicit goal “eternal life on Earth for everybody”, could it cease to be a partial, limited biopower of the sort described by Foucault. Only by overcoming death, could the biopower become *total*. (Гройс, 15)

However, this definition almost automatically prompts us to ask about another: what is the nature of this state-governed total biopower? It is not difficult to assume that such power, of course, is no longer a “democratic” power. After all, all these projects envision the future society as centralized, collectivist and hierarchically organized one (probably, at the head of this society – scientists and artists who will determine its organization and its goal). A. Svyatogor, one of the leading theorists of “biocosmology” and founder of the Biocosmist movement in the 1920s, seriously argued that in order to ensure the right of every individual to immortality and freedom of movement in space, a “central authority” is needed (СВЯТОГОР 1922). V. Muravyev, a Russian philosopher and cosmist, also viewed a global, centralized, unified political power as an indispensable condition for the solution of cosmic common task (МУРАВЬЕВ 1934).

Arguably someone might be reminded of Foucault's famous thesis that modern biopolitics can also bring death if it begins to motivate them through racial differences, while others, more directly, would be able to recall Stalin's concentration camp (gulag), following John Grey's warning that if a power can resurrect everyone, then it can also kill everyone. Or probably we might contemplate in a more contemporary context, a situation in which “venture capitalists and technofuturists from Elon Musk to Ray Kurzweil and J. Craig Venter still dream of space colonization and human immortality which would only serve to advance privatized dispossession and the expansion of the capitalist market rather than socialist redistribution of wealth and labor.” (Winslow 2018) In such a situation, one might even examine collective biopower of communism and the private biopower of capitalism to determine which is the worst. But Instead of drawing hasty conclusions on the (bio)political nature of cosmist idea, I would like to direct your attention to another tremendously interesting point, which is related to practical governmentality, but which apparently goes far beyond it as well. It is Fedorov's specific conception of history and time, which could be termed “engineering of time” (Paglen 2018).

4. Ethics of Temporality

As I already mentioned before, the obvious radicality of Fedorov's proposal consists in that he wants to eliminate the distinctions between the past, the present, and the future in a great project of temporal engineering. According to him, “death can be called real only when all means of restoring life, at least all those that exist in nature and have been discovered by the human race, have been tried and have failed.” (Fedorov 1990: 98) What does that mean? It means that the dead

aren't really dead. Because we don't know whether we can resurrect the dead, we don't know if the dead still have the possibility of life. If we can raise the dead at some point in the future, then that means that death might not be final after all. And if death isn't necessarily final, then the dead aren't actually dead (Paglen 2018). This idea of "the dead-not-really-being-dead" is central to Fedorov's conception of history and time itself. But that is not all. More interestingly, it also constitutes his specific notion of "Justice." According to the conception of Fedorov, time and justice are inseparably linked with each other in a mutually constitutive relationship.

The problem is that so-called "social justice" of Socialism stands on the basis of acceptance of shameful historical injustice. Socialist utopia promised perfect social justice, but it was always a delayed utopia for future generations. Socialist belief in "progress" implies that only future generations are supposed to enjoy all the benefits of future utopia, whereas current and past generations should accept without complaint the role of passive victims of progress. The exclusion of all previous generations from the realm of socialist utopia – this is the fatal weakness of socialist justice in regard to temporality. The only possible alternative to this undesirable situation in which the dead are exploited in favor of the living, and those alive today are exploited in favor of those who will live later, - is to resurrect all those generations who had laid the foundation for future well-being and let them also enjoy the benefits of future socialism. If then, finally we could be able to eliminate discrimination between the living and dead, and establish social justice in time as well as in space with the help of technology that will make it possible to turn time into eternity.

What we see here is an extraordinary mixture of various elements from Christianity, occult doctrines, and Marxism. (or I am sure that this reminds some of you here of W. Benjamin's famous conception of "redemption") In this extremely radical version of the notion of justice, whether to view just another line of romantic fantasy or to find useful resources for the utopian political project – depends on our own perspective and choice. But I think, there can be at least two things that we can state without hesitation.

The first: what we are dealing with here is a special type of social responsibility that emerged only when individuals became aware of their close and continuous link with civilization, with the humankind of past, present, and future. And this type of responsibility put a premium on the "fraternalism" which explicitly implies an unwillingness to separate the human of the present from the human of the past, as well as the destruction of all obstacles standing between people, so they could easily feel as one. Apparently echoing some of the more stupid versions of "Anthropocene" theory, this attitude seems to be much more radical: humans have to take responsibility not only for spatial axis of the climate, the planet, the solar system, and even the universe, but also for the temporal axis of the past, present, and future— we have to think about how to develop an "ethical relationship" to the temporality itself.

The second: In spite of the spectacular future images of all sorts of sci-fi novels and films, and apart from the fact that Russian cosmism certainly had an indirect impact on transhumanists today, now we are obviously facing an utter lack of futurological project. The future as a project, even

a romantically tinged project, has been simply lacking nowadays. Consequently, we are suffering from a crisis of the utopian imagination. As is well known to everybody, one of the few available therapeutic remedies for dealing with such situation is to working with the future inherited from the past. “Revisited” Russian cosmism today - one of such prescriptions lips for us.

References

- Avant-Garde Museology, ed. Arseny Zhilyaev (New York: eflux classics, 2015).
- Andrews James T., *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011).
- Fedorov N. F., *What Was Man Created For? The Philosophy of the Common Task: Selected Works*, trans. Elisabeth Koutaissof and Marilyn Minto (London: Honeyglen, 1990)
- Simakova Marina, “No Mans Space: On Russian Cosmism,” *E-flux journal* #74, June 2016.
- Winslow Aaron, “Russian Cosmism Versus Interstellar Bosses: Reclaiming Full-Throttle Luxury Space Communism,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (August 18, 2018).
- Russian Cosmism, edited by Boris Groys (E-flux/MIT Press, 2018).
- Русский космизм. Антология. Борис Гройс, Москва: Ад Маргинем Пресс, 2015.