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Is the Future Soviet? *USSR-2061* and the Reality of Utopia

USSR-2061 is a Russian futuristic online project that imagines a new USSR a century after Gagarin's journey into space. This article connects the project to Soviet space utopianism and the nostalgia that followed it, while seeing *USSR-2061* and its artefacts in the light of utopian studies. In particular, the project's hesitation with regard to utopianism and its thirst for realism are situated within a classical utopian problem of how to achieve real, not only imaginary, transformations. Such realism generally coincides with Levitas' (2013) framework of utopia as a method, and, as the analysis shows, it hinders the construction of "an image of a future" at which the project aims. Instead, the resulting narratives and visions commonly overlap with the official Russian political discourse that makes use of Soviet nostalgia, or fall into retrofuturistic replications of commonly satirized Soviet discourses. However, a different way of constructing utopia is also present in *USSR-2061*, even if it is never highlighted. To make utopia possible in anti-utopian times, one might need to rethink its place of possibility or *topos*. Theoretically, such an alternative is presented in connection to Latour's (2017) *Terrestrial*, a place with agency that in utopian terms presupposes a transgression of the boundary between the real and

imaginary, the political and cultural. In the same line, the paper argues that *USSR-2061* might attempt the construction of a new utopia through rethinking space. This might be fostered through the inclusion of cosmist ideas such as those of Vladimir Vernadsky and Alexander Chizhevsky, whose intersections with Latourian framework have previously been observed.

Keywords: utopia, space, USSR, Levitas, Latour

1. Introduction

In his 2003 text, the Marxist political and cultural theorist Fredric Jameson wrote: “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (Jameson 2003). The phrase has become ubiquitous, commonly attributed to both Jameson and Slavoj Žižek. Its popularity, in combination with uncertainties of its authorship, vividly illustrates a widespread anti-utopianism that has concerned scholars of utopia for some decades. When a system of relations different from capitalistic ones seems impossible, apocalypse paradoxically turns out to be an optimistic solution (Zhilyaev 2018).

This paper investigates the possibilities for a new utopia in times commonly labelled anti-utopian, when a happier today overweighs any brighter tomorrow (Levitas and Sargisson 2013; Bauman 2003). It shares the view that precisely at the time of approaching ecological catastrophe, of ever-growing economic inequalities, and of massive forced migrations, it is necessary to formulate alternatives for the transformation of systems that underpin these crises (Levitas 2013; Latour 2017; 2012). Therefore, the article aims to elucidate the ways in which utopia may be put into function today. It suggests that a long-lived focus of utopian studies on how to turn imagination into a real transformation, hereby denoted as realism, may be no longer productive. The key argument of this paper is that for utopia to function, its place of possibility, or *topos*, should be rethought. Theoretically, this position is drawn through engaging with the recent formulation of utopia as a method as advocated by Ruth Levitas (2013), and with Latour’s (2017) idea of the Terrestrial. While Levitas (2013) is concerned with a key utopian problem of how to make transformations real, manifested in the classic ambiguity of *eu-topos* (good place) and *ou-topos* (no place), Latour (2017) is read as a proposition for a new *topos*, presupposing a transgression of the boundary between real and imaginary, political and cultural. Through Latour (*ibid.*), utopia can’t be made *in* some place, but it can be made *with* it. The paper thus contributes to both utopian studies and cultural-political theory.

Empirically, this position is articulated through engagement with *USSR-2061*: a not-for-profit amateur online project¹ where artists and

1 One reviewer of this article has proposed fandom as a suitable frame for analyzing *USSR-2061*. While I agree that in some broad sense the project might be considered an example of fandom culture, I also see it as problematic to treat the artworks themselves as fan art. Besides, it is not clear how the inclusion of fandom would benefit the investigation of *USSR-2061*’s utopian potential beyond

writers imagine the Soviet Union of the future, following calls for thematic contests. The project's mission is to create "an image of a future" that "one aspires to see while alive" (*USSR-2061* 2020a), and outer space functions as a key location for such an image. *USSR-2061* is organized by two Moscow-based enthusiasts, Archie and Felix, who arranged the first graphic contest in 2011 as a hobby, and now refer to themselves as "service personnel" for the community around the project. An interview with the organizers, which was conducted in Moscow in 2019, allows the artefacts of *USSR-2061* to be contextualized and their analyses to be connected with the theoretical frameworks of Levitas (2013) and Latour (2017). Although both organizers share Marxist-communist views, the project seems not to have any clear political affiliation. As the organizers mention, the audience of the project is diverse in terms of both age and class: some upper-class, wealthier people also participate in *USSR-2061*. In terms of financing and funding, *USSR-2061* develops thanks to private contributions and the dedication of its organizers, who spend much of their free time on the project. Apart from visual and textual contributions online, the project has resulted in two edited print volumes: one published privately thanks to donations from the readers, another by the leading Russian publisher EKSMO (*Figure 1*). As the organizers mention, EKSMO became interested in the project due to the decreasing readership and low quality of their fantastic literature. Previously, *USSR-2061* was praised as "communist science fiction," an alternative to the imperialist and geopolitical fantasies currently prevailing in contemporary Russian culture; one able to set up an agenda of social development (Mitrofanowa 2020). Thus, *USSR-2061* is rather a unique project than a part of a wider trend in contemporary Russian culture, even though it clearly makes use of Soviet nostalgia.

USSR-2061 strives for realism,² and artworks which join the project

the already included concept of nostalgia. I leave the potential research on *USSR-2061* as fandom to others who might find it more fruitful, as it goes beyond the aims and limits of the present article.

2 This paper does not address the debate on realism as an artistic genre, which would go beyond its scope and aims. Realism here refers to the striving for real social and political transformation that characterizes much of utopian thinking, and to practices of "realistic" portrayal of possible futures that is based on elucidating the present conjunctures. I am aware that realism as a genre has been subject to significant debates in cultural studies and the theory of art, especially concentrating on socialist realism. Some contributions to these debates may be fruitfully juxtaposed with what this paper attempts to do in relation to utopian realism. For instance, see the excavations of late Adorno's realism by Wallenstein (2016), or the reflection on texts and images in socialist realism by Cavalcante Schuback (2016).

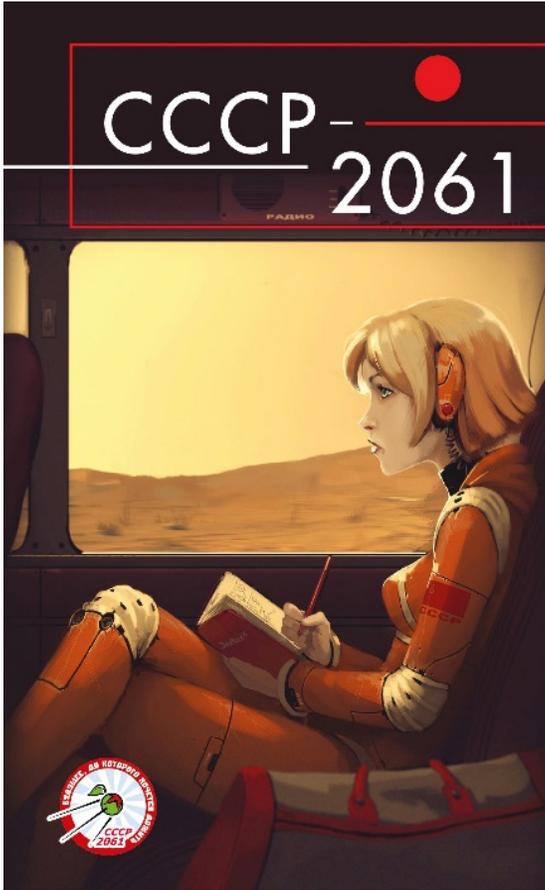


Figure 1. The cover of *USSR-2061* printed volume. Courtesy EKSMO (<https://eksmo.ru/book/sss-2061-ITD833451/>). The cover makes use of an artwork contributed to the *USSR-2061* project by the user SoftH (<http://2061.su/media/cache/4e/8d/4e8d7643cc11d97e5cbd1a0fb86cdb10.jpg>)

are supposed to be realistic. While visual art contests are less regulated, for short stories there exists an extremely detailed setting that describes the basic social, political and economic tendencies of the 2060s, both globally and in relation to the new Soviet state. For instance, the global tendencies include the privatization and corporatization of state functions, American cultural hegemony, the industrial domination of China, the continued use of coal and gas in the energy sector and the slow development of alternative sources, and slow progress in space exploration, with the first Martian settlements appearing after the 2050s. The appearance of a new USSR is also explicitly narrated: in Russia, the combination of growing horizontal social networks and a new global

Counterintuitively, it is precisely when *USSR-2061* skips the problem of realism that it can ground “an image of a future”. The striving for realism, on the other hand, tends to navigate the project into the contemporary political discourse or flood it with nostalgia, and to glue it into the general condition of the cancelled future that worries utopian scholars so much.

recession brings to power the “red” forces, which nationalize the key industries and start building a “social state.” The new Soviet political system is described in detail, summing up the USSR as “a hybrid of a corporation and a social network,” based on the ideas of direct democracy. Economically, socially and technologically, the new USSR is not a global leader but rather a country with a decent quality of life that is embedded in a global system while striving for a clear alternative to 21st century capitalism.

While *USSR-2061*’s realistic concerns generally coincide with Levittas (2013), parts of the project can also be understood as search for a new *topos* in a more Latourian sense. The analysis of the project’s contributions shows how, counterintuitively, it is precisely when *USSR-2061* skips the problem of realism that it can ground “an image of a future.” The striving for realism, on the other hand, tends to navigate the project into the contemporary political discourse or flood it with nostalgia, and to glue it into the general condition of the cancelled future that worries utopian scholars so much. As space is a key location for *USSR-2061*, it is argued that an engagement with some cosmist ideas might facilitate the search for a new *topos*, more specifically with Vernadsky’s noosphere and Chizhevsky’s heliobiology, both of which can be fruitfully juxtaposed with a Latourian framework.

2. *USSR-2061* and Utopia

The year 2061 marks a century after Gagarin’s journey into space, an event commonly commemorated in Russia as one of the country’s key historical achievements. The project’s organizers mention a “forgotten” 50-year anniversary of 2011 among their stimuli for launching *USSR-2061*, but generally they downplay the importance of space for the project. In their eyes, space exploration should be appreciated as an economic activity on a par with air flights or as a project necessary to protect the Earth from asteroids. Any major plans of extraterrestrial colonization in the nearest future are both unrealistic and not necessarily desirable. In spite of such a view, the connections between *USSR-2061* and space exploration are apparent, not only in the name of the project, but also in its logo—a stylized image of Sputnik-1—and in the popularity of space topics among the writers and the artists of the project.

The ubiquity of space in *USSR-2061* suggests seeing the project in connection with Soviet space utopianism and the nostalgia that suc-

ceeded it. The decade that followed the first ever launch of an artificial satellite in 1957 and the first ever manned flight of 1961 is often called the “golden decade” of Soviet space, during which utopian visions blossomed in Soviet culture, conflating the technological conquest of outer space with the final victory of communism (Siddiqi 2011). While the Soviet space enthusiasm began to wear off in subsequent years, with the 1969 Apollo Moon landing often portrayed as a breaking point, the “golden decade” left a profound mark on socialist and post-socialist cultures. In post-Soviet nostalgia, the successes in space exploration often mark a future that only seems possible in the past. Nostalgia stimulates whirling discussions on what went wrong in the past and at which point the correct road was not taken. In post-Soviet Russian culture, which is characterized by nostalgia, space performs several functions simultaneously: comforting those longing for an imaginary Soviet past, mobilizing the public discourse, supplying a common ideological construct (Gerovitch 2017b), and, last but not least, commodifying the heroes of Soviet space for consumption in a new neo-liberal context (Engström 2019). Post-Soviet audiences seem to exist in a “no(w)stalgia” where the Soviet space myths get actualized from time to time as mere sets of appealing symbols (Gerovitch 2017b). Thus, nostalgia offers an obvious and recognizable way of framing the (Soviet) space, but also one that disallows any linear utopian projections characteristic of the Soviet space narrative. Now, any futuristic attempt seems to be already looped back into the addictive, irresistible scrutinization of the imagined glorious past.

Seemingly against this trend, *USSR-2061* strives for a futuristic breakthrough a hundred years after the Gagarin’s flight. The project’s organizers emphasize that they don’t intend to “exploit nostalgia” in order to construct unrealistic futures—ones they ascribe to “retrofuturism.” Retrofuturism appears as a genre or a way of narration that exploits nostalgia. It either concentrates on alternative historicizing (what would have happened if the USSR had not fallen apart) or on a futuristic reincarnation of bygone Soviet realities (such as strictly regulated media production, or shortages in basic supplies). Retrofuturism seems to be a key problem for *USSR-2061*, as the organizers pay a great deal of attention to it, both in the interview and in the guidelines for their contests. However, they also present nostalgia and retrofuturism as unavoidable, as a “posttraumatic syndrome”³ that expresses a longing for a stable world, a desire to take rest. Hence, the

3 Quote from the interview.

goal is to avoid “drawing the future with the language of the past,”⁴ which is the major application of nostalgia in Russia, and to let the syndrome pass. In Boym’s (2001) terms, the organizers recognize both restorative nostalgia, which pretends to bring past to life, and reflective nostalgia, which recognizes the impossibility (and often undesirability) of returning the past. As the organizers rhetorically ask, “Who is nostalgic for the Soviet dental drill?”⁵ However, Boym also only attributes restorative nostalgia—that which allows the nostalgic functioning of space discourses in the Russian public sphere and which the organizers of *USSR-2061* catch in retrofuturism—with the ability to ground forms of collective belonging (Boym 2001). Later in the analysis it will be shown how restorative nostalgia makes its way into the project, despite all attempts to confine it.

In an attempt to fight retrofuturism through adherence to realism, the organizers define the genre of *USSR-2061* as “futuristic realism.” Three key strategies can be identified that buttress the realism of *USSR-2061* as a way to construct “realistic” futures. First, the choice of USSR as a common frame that the organizers connect to a real-world large-scale political project, remnants of which still lie at the base of the modern Russian economy and society. Second, the imposition of pre-defined settings to which the artworks are supposed to adhere; generally, very coherent and comprehensive for short stories, while simple, specific and open for the visual arts. Third, the call for authors and artists to base their works on the actual tensions and problems existing in Russian society, thus responding to actual social needs. “Cutting off the unrealistic,”⁶ the organizers do not understand *USSR-2061* as a utopia, even though they recognize that utopia has the potential for social critique. Realism is of key importance here: the desire to make world a better place (understood as more conscious and more rational) does not require any supernatural intervention, and it makes the label of “utopia” unnecessary.

The problem of the utopian and the real is adjoined by another problem of the political and the artistic-aesthetical (*chudožestwiennyj*). While the description on the project’s website clearly states that the project is not political but aesthetical, in the interview the organizers specify that they are not against politics but against “intrusive politicizing” (*политота*). The latter refers to writing obsolete programmatic

4 Quote from the interview.

5 Quote from the interview.

6 Quote from the interview.

statements or descriptions of perfect social orderings instead of concentrating on exciting narratives and characters. The setting for short stories also asks for works of fiction and not for “constitutional projects of non-existing states” (*USSR-2061* 2020b). However, the setting itself could easily be considered precisely such a project. Thus, the political and the aesthetic seem to fit together as long as political aspects operate through aesthetic ones – indirectly.

Generally, the problem of utopia as a blueprint for a perfect society, which the organizers so clearly want to oppose, has already been resolved in utopian studies. In fact, the realism and political—if hesitant—ambition of *USSR-2061* rather bring it very close to the latest outlines of utopia. On the same basis, Ruth Levitas (2013) developed the framework of utopia as a method, theorized as the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society (IROS). Earlier, Levitas (1990) objected to the view of utopia as a blueprint for a perfect society, either escapist or totalitarian, and instead identified utopia with a desire for a better way of being that can be manifested locally and is open to debate. The organizers of *USSR-2061* nearly coincide with Levitas when they aim at “not a totally ‘good’ environment, but more friendly,” and when they recognize desire as “what distinguishes living from non-living.”⁷ IROS implies holistic thinking about the connections between economic, social, existential and ecological processes in an integrated way (Levitas 2013, 19). The framework stretches along the archaeological dimension, which generally coincides with social critique, the ontological dimension, where alternative modes of existence are explored, and the architectural dimension, which denotes the imagination of alternative institutional arrangements.

The utopia of IROS is not a “blueprint” for a perfect society, but is rather a coherent futuristic model that is based on profound social critique and is open to democratic deliberation. In this sense, IROS is clearly utopian and political. That the organizers of *USSR-2061*, whose ambitions and practices seem to generally match those of IROS, are hesitant to call the project utopian and political might be explained by a desire to avoid unnecessary political confrontation, allegations of totalitarianism and escapism. However, I will try to show that the problems of defining *USSR-2061* in IROS terms indicate a larger issue. More specifically, the dichotomies of real and imaginary, and of political and artistic-aesthetical, which have been haunting utopian thought since its inception, remain unresolved in IROS.

7 Quotes from the interview.

3. From Imaginary to Real: The Problem of Forgotten *Topos*

Since its inception, utopia included the ambiguity of *eu-topos* (good place) and *ou-topos* (no place) (Ågren 2014). The place that utopia portrays has connotations of both normative ambition and impossibility. Early Marxist critique laid a foundation for the denunciation of utopias by confronting them with the science of historical materialism. Marx and Engels rejected “utopian socialism,” arguing that it distracted the proletariat from the actualities of class struggle by portraying the picture-perfect worlds of social harmony between the classes and hiding the ways of actual social transformation. While this critique, troubled with the question of transition to communism, was only aimed at utopias as “blueprints” of perfect societies, the legacy of utopia as a weapon of invalidation in political struggle spread much further. Especially after WWII, anti-utopianism was widely employed in the anti-socialist struggles in the West, sealing off the possibilities for alternative future planning⁸ (Sargent 2006; Suvin 2013). The critics of utopia have made use of both *eu-* and *ou-* connotations, accusing utopia of suppressing some desires in favor of others that pave the way to totalitarianism, and of a radical break with reality that offers an escapist retreat into imagination.

A different intellectual movement, which one might call the apologetics of utopia, developed in response and in parallel. From this perspective, anti-utopianism is rather an ideological current that seeks to enclose the social and political status quo and to disallow social transformations. The apologetics of Ernst Bloch, Karl Mannheim, and Miguel Abensour are brought up by Levitas (2013). Mannheim’s discussion of utopia concentrates on transformative political ideas (Levitas 2013, 94). Bloch investigates a “cultural surplus” that is reified in “not-yet,” a future in the present (ibid., 5–6). For Abensour, utopia provides education of desire through estrangement, a disruption in the taken-for-granted (ibid., 4), and thus a real transformation of the desiring subject through open-ended education (ibid., 15).

On this basis, IROS seeks the legitimation of utopia as a repressed form of knowledge about possible futures (ibid., xv). This task is approached by complicating the division between the real and the imaginary: on the one hand, IROS highlights the socially constructed nature of reality, which is disclosed through elaborated critique; on the other hand, it renders parts of the imaginary real, by for instance postulating dre-

8 As Levitas (2013) notes, utopianism was rarely attributed to the projects of the political Right, despite their often no less clear normative ambition.

aming about and planning of the future as common human activities. Imagining a better world is no longer entirely separated from real transformations: imagination offers alternative configurations of needs, wants and satisfactions that are real. This move counteracts the allegations of escapism. Accusations of totalitarianism are fought through recognizing that such configurations are necessarily limited, contingent and open to public debate. *USSR-2061* makes similar moves: the organizers consider the altered imaginations of their audiences as a result valuable in itself (“good that they will at least think this way”)⁹ and acknowledge that the development of the project largely depends on its authors and audiences.

Nevertheless, IROS maintains the separation between the real and the imaginary underlying the criticism of utopia. Levitas talks about utopian functions (compensation, critique, change (Levitas 2013, 4), suggesting the existence of something exterior to which these functions are applied. IROS is “concerned with society as structure, not (just) the realm of aesthetics” (ibid., 19) and with the risk that labelling something art reduces its political force (ibid., 16). Levitas characterizes the move from abstract to concrete utopia as a move from imagination to reality (ibid., 17), guided by a key question of “how the aspiration for a transformed existence moves out of the realm of culture through the formation of the political subjects and agents” (ibid., 16). Making a shift from the aesthetic and existential to the social and political, IROS acknowledges their interdependence (ibid., 19), but it equally endows political change with a quality of the real by differentiating it from cultural transformation that is imaginary and fictional, unless one focuses solely on the subjective structure of desire. Introducing intermediaries and describing the mechanisms of utopian transformation, in the end IROS reinforces the dualism of the real and imaginary as political and cultural.

In this light, the contradictions of *USSR-2061* appear more substantial than a simple desire to avoid criticism. Rather, they indicate a continuous non-acceptance of utopia as a cultural-political hybrid. In its pursuit of realism, or of a concrete utopia, *USSR-2061* has to take up the political. But if it is real and political, how imaginative can it be? The undecided fluctuation between labelling the project political or cultural-aesthetic elucidates the limits of real-imaginary dualism embedded in IROS. The separation of the project setting, a clearly political text partly resembling a constitution, to a meta-level, followed by a prohibition on “intrusive politicizing” for fictional narratives, is a climax

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9 Quote from the interview.

of this logic. Through it, dualism is reached literally: there is a separate part that is political, and a separate part which is artistic, and although some intermediaries are necessary to connect the two poles, ultimately they should stay separate. In this way, *USSR-2061* attempts to be real while not sealing off the possibilities for imagination. In the next section, the analysis shows how the project does not succeed in this task. The functionalistic approach to fictional narratives as instruments of legitimizing the political “core” of the project, of making it real, fails to uphold the clear separation. Instead, it drives the fictional narratives directly into the present Russian political discourse, or reinvigorates nostalgia through retrofuturistic visions.

IROS is not the only possible answer to anti-utopianism, and not the only possible way to rethink the reality of utopia. In fact, while Levitas (2013) scrutinizes the “u” of u-topia, equally referring to the normative aspirations of *eu-* and to the imaginary, non-real quality of *ou-*, she does not address the critique of *topos* in any serious way, or the place of utopia, even though she mentions it. Bauman (2003) concentrates on the disappearance of place for utopia, arguing that territoriality and finality were necessary conditions for modern utopian visions that followed the association of power with space. Utopian “good societies” were populations inhabiting a plotted and mapped territory (Bauman 2003, 14), which was translated politically into a project of a nation-state occupying a particular space. In the globalized world, power is appropriated through displacement, as embodied, for instance, in transnational corporations belonging nowhere. In such a world, imagination is necessarily disengaged and unattached, and utopia becomes impossible, as there is no space for it. The disappearance of space necessarily affects the logics of time, and we witness how the quest for a better tomorrow is replaced with a constant search for an ever happier today. Later, making use of Boym’s (2001) analysis of nostalgia, Bauman coined the term “retrotopia” to label those visions that no longer look onto the improbable future but in the “lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past.” The emergence of retrotopia is also related to the crisis of territoriality and the detachment of power from politics, previously united in the idea of territorially defined nation state.

This line of criticism couples the possibility of utopia to spatiality and not to the debate of what should be accepted as real. Indeed, while Bauman distinguishes between an “urge to transcend” that is always present, and projects-visions of change that are articulated, he also places the latter “out of reality,” later attributing utopias of modernity with the “absence of clash between the possible and the real” (Bauman 2003,

16). In this logic, it doesn't make much sense to talk about whether and how utopias are realizable or not, since in the course of modernity they were *possible* but no longer are. Were Soviet space utopias real? No, because what they portrayed was never realized. But also yes, because they structured—and, residually, continue to structure, as *USSR-2061* conveniently exemplifies—relationships in Soviet and post-Soviet societies. The key point is that they had a *place* that made them possible, whether we consider that this made them real or not, or whether such a distinction makes any sense at all.

Following Bauman, the return of utopia might be possible if one proposes a new *topos*, transgressing the real-imaginary divide. While Levitas (2013) largely ignores the issue of the disappeared *topos*, Latour (2017), if seen through the lens of utopian studies, seems to engage with it precisely. Levitas and Latour share key concerns: both seek a remedy for the approaching global crises, and both want to see real change. However, Latour's use of realism involves a conceptual break with Levitas. The term Terrestrial, with which he signifies Earth systems understood as active political agents, from the IROS point of view seems to thoroughly conflate the real and the imaginary.

Latour's idea of space or territory having agency started as a response to global ecological crises, in which the reactions of Earth cannot be any more ignored. It has developed from the earlier idea of Gaia that sought to replace a disengaged and deanimated "nature." Latour claims that he does not attribute agency to the "material world" but simply cancels the operation of deanimation through which non-humans are deprived of agency in scientifically based political theory. Through examples of both scientific and cultural texts, Latour shows how the Earth and its systems are de facto approached as actants by their performances, but later denied agency as lacking a set of competences made to fit only humans. One such key competence is human language, which restricts signification to discourse. Latour claims that Earth systems perform signification as well, but they do so through extra-linguistic means such as forces that have to be taken into account by human actors (Latour 2012). The Terrestrial is Earth taken as a political actor, equally different from the modernist conception of the Global and the reactionist idea of the Local, which both pretend to see the planet from the outside, "objectively" or as a social construction (Latour 2017).

To be sure, Latour is militant against utopia and claims his project to be truly realistic, in comparison to the fake realism of "old" or "ordinary" epistemology. However, in terms of utopian studies and political theory that both subscribe agency to human actors, Latour's "true"

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realism is thoroughly imaginary. The Terrestrial is not a territory-container that merely hosts political processes, neither it is a space-canvas painted by political actors when constructing their identities. Instead, it possesses agency, not metaphorically, but literally, and engages with other actors and actants¹⁰ in processes of signification. Considering the Terrestrial as an answer to the critique of the disappeared *topos* of utopia, one can see Latour's anti-utopianism as a tactical move aimed at the broader acceptance of Earth as a political actor, a view that currently can only be assigned to imagination. Latour tries to defeat political theory with its own weapon, by naming the whole field of contemporary politics—summed up by the Global and the Local—utopian in derogatory sense. If we consider the Terrestrial as a utopian idea in Levitas' terms instead, it becomes clear that utopia is no longer possible *in* some space, but only *with* some space. Latour transgresses the border between imaginary and real by proceeding directly to the new *topos*.

While this paper does not continue Latour's ecological reasoning,¹¹ it takes up his re-animation of space (exemplified in the Terrestrial) as possessing agency. At this point, there seem to be intersections between Latour and some cosmist ideas, especially in relation to the "geocosmists" Vladimir Vernadsky and Alexander Chizhevsky. A short exposition of how *USSR-2061* could be seen through the cosmist legacy will follow after the analysis of the project's artefacts. In the analysis, I will first try to show how realism, understood in terms of IROS and cultural-political separation, hinders *USSR-2061* from building "an image of a future," and brings nostalgic retrofuturism and current political discourses to the fore instead. Then I will seek traces of and possibilities for a new *topos* in the Latourian sense.

4. Retrofuturism and Nostalgia of *USSR-2061*: Obsessive Realisms

In what follows, I will examine several artefacts of *USSR-2061* to see how the strategies of ensuring overall realism are implied in them, and

10 Latour makes a distinction between actors and actants through Greimas, which is essential for his thinking but does not need to be taken up here. For a short overview of this distinction, see *Facing Gaia* (2017, 57).

11 I should thank Professor Inga Brandell for noting that ecological reasoning might connect *USSR-2061* and Latourian thought more than might be apparent at a first glance. Indeed, even the logo of the project includes a green leaf attached to *Sputnik-1*, which suggests a clear ecological manifesto. I chose not to investigate these connections further as they would go beyond the scope of this article, and as I lack substantial knowledge on Soviet ecological culture.

how such implications affect the three dimensions of utopia understood as a method. I will try to show that emphasis on realism, connected to the separation of the real-political from the cultural-imaginary, hinders the operation of utopia beyond social critique. In case of *USSR-2061*, the key symptom of such a complication is the appearance of nostalgia through retrofuturism, driving the project's artefacts into contemporary Russian political discourse or pretending to reconstruct the past. In Boym's (2001) terms, it is a restorative nostalgia that paradoxically appears through the project's desire of realism. Afterwards, I will explore the possible articulations of alternative *topoi* in the artefacts of *USSR-2061* to see if the project can reinvent its utopia not in an IROS sense, but rather in a Latourian one.

While this article can by no means offer an all-embracing analysis of the works present in *USSR-2061*, it can discuss a reasonable selection. Examples were chosen both from the literary part of the project (short stories) and from the graphic part (visual images). In both cases, the winners of different contests were considered, chosen both by the organizers and by public voting. In the literary part, the final selection included only two stories, since the overwhelming majority of the texts published by the project are thoroughly nostalgic and retrofuturistic, as was also confirmed by the organizers.

4.1 Soviet future in texts

Two winning short stories will elucidate how the new Soviet society is mediated through texts: *Zaryanka* (Gorbov 2016), from the latest literary contest "Stories of a bright future," and *Show Me Your Documents!* (Shpakov 2013) from the first literary contest. While the former winner was chosen by the public, the latter was highlighted by the organizers during the interview.

Zaryanka presents a heroic space romance where the key character is a "grandma" who makes a "calming impression" yet is extremely persistent in her quest to join a mission to Mars. She participates in a contest by means of which the Soviet government responds to a wave of public dissatisfaction with the entirely professional nature of space exploration. After successfully passing all the necessary tests, she is persuaded by the space committee officers to go to the Moon instead, as her mission to Mars would be too risky. While on the Moon, she launches the educational show "Space Grandma" that starts a movement of young cosmonauts. A parallel line describes how her wise advice also changes the life of another contestant, an undecided narcissistic poet, who becomes a successful cosmonaut and realizes his creative potential.

The story ends with a foreword to his volume of poetry, in which he thanks the “Space Grandma” both for changing his own life and making space into home for a whole generation.

Zaryanka follows a convention of heroic space romance stemming from the master narrative of Soviet space. In Russia, Soviet space heroism has been extensively promoted in recent years by a plethora of state-sponsored blockbusters, deploying nostalgia for political and economic capitalization. Instead of a young or middle-aged family man, a stereotypical character of Russian space heroism, *Zaryanka* brings to the fore a hero that is both female and aged. The “grandma” highlights several problematic issues of contemporary Russian society, fulfilling the utopian function of social critique. Through her, the story discusses the possibilities for seniors, continuity in communication between the generations, and public involvement in decision-making. In the logic of *USSR-2061*, this critique ensures the realism of a future socio-political regime through responding to the problematic issues of the present one. The claims made by the “grandma” are secured at the end of the story, when we learn that her statue joined the monuments to Gagarin and Armstrong on the Moon, thus admitting her to the heroic pantheon of space exploration.

The idea of public contest to change the entirely professional nature of space exploration also appears close to the project’s setting, which presents a new USSR as based on the principles of direct democracy. Lengthy passages describe how the space officials prove unable to simply make a decision they consider right—to disqualify the “grandma” from the competition—and how they have to take public opinion into account. Adhering to the overall political setting, these parts do not provide a comprehensive idea of a new institutional arrangement and thus hardly enter the architectural dimension of utopia. However, the ontological dimension appears clearly through focusing on the new people who populate *Zaryanka’s* USSR. The consciousness of “grandma” is indispensable in reaching the compromise of sending her to the Moon. She understands the risks of space officials, takes them into account and in this way prevents a possible undemocratic decision to cut her out the program completely.

The ontological dimension is even more clear in the plot line of another character: the narcissistic poet who turns into a successful cosmonaut by encountering the “grandma.” His line elucidates the key problem of *Zaryanka*, which, despite critical attention to contemporary issues, cannot avoid the common clichés from the Soviet past. The poet’s character is constructed as a parasite on society, like hipsters

and hippies in Soviet discourse. His progressive improvement is embodied in his change of haircut: the grandma finds his hair “not suitable for space,” and at their second meeting we are specifically told it has been cut short. The inspection of appearance was an important practice of social control within Soviet society, commonly satirized in both Soviet and Russian culture. Moreover, grandma’s advice is written as a clearly moralizing piece:

Nobody will work for you. If you want to achieve anything, work – [grandma] smiled and patted him on the head - do so, and you will succeed. Try hard. This is your dream. If she [Muse] is waiting for you there - you must do everything to reach her. Correct? (Gorbov 2016)

This is a clear example of retrofuturism, related to an overall idea of ensuring realism through references to the Soviet project. Even if employed to discuss the contemporary issues, such references bring in a restorative nostalgia. Couldn’t a story of a “space grandma” exist outside of the new Soviet Union? Such a possibility is precluded by the separation of the cultural-imaginary and the real-political that *USSR-2061* performs through placing its “realistic” political setting on a meta-level. This is, of course, an approach much more radical than the separation embedded in the theoretical discussion by Levitas (2013), but it is very useful to highlight the critical limits of the IROS framework. The very coherent, detailed, comprehensive, and most importantly political-realistic setting of *USSR-2061* nearly monopolizes the architectural dimension of utopia. Its cultural-imaginary counterpart, which is supposed to bring that setting to life, drowns in a nostalgic retrofuturism that complicates even the functioning of the critical-archaeological and ontological dimensions clearly present in the story. Paradoxically, the rush for realism appears to feed nostalgia.

Show Me Your Documents! is a comic piece centered around an old policeman who works at a cosmodrome. There, school children come to illegally join a transport to other planets, risking their lives. The key narrative conflict occurs between the policeman representing the older generation and the two arrested youngsters. This conflict is markedly comical and rests on the clownish use of language, both in dialogues and descriptions, but the narrative does not go as far as to mock the stereotypical conventions and thus does not become ironic. Rather, it marks the progressive continuity from one generation to another, represented in the admiration that the older policeman has for the arrestees. The youngsters are unable to read his

approval behind striking reproaches, and this constitutes the story's humor.

As in *Zaryanka*, one could see several problematic issues of the contemporary Russian society addressed by *Show Me Your Documents!* Apart from the generational differences, these include the educative focus of law enforcement institutions, ethnic and national equality, and creativity in education. While these contemporary issues fulfill the function of social critique, the story also touches upon the architectural dimension of utopia by providing some hints at the organization of school and higher education in the new USSR, and at the transition of law enforcement from a predominantly punitive institution to one focused on developing better citizens. These descriptions are very limited in comparison to the project's setting, and, as in *Zaryanka*, the ontological dimension is developed much further through the characters of the policeman and his colleagues.

However, this story also gives way to nostalgia by including a heroic narrative of War inside the comedy. This inclusion is necessary to perform the Soviet frame in a space comedy story: the two conventional ways of representing Soviet space are heroic storytelling and satirical mocking (Siddiqi 2011). A part of the story describes the policeman's memories of his own childhood, in which his main concern was food and not some self-sacrifice on a distant planet in the name of progress. As we are told, this was a period directly following a war with "fascists," during which the policeman's father lost one leg but even in such condition joined the all-national attempt of rebuilding the country. The sharp contrast between the life aspirations of different generations is most visible in a question that the policeman asked his father when they first met after the war: "Father, did you eat the whole leg?"—while the arrested youngsters seem not to care about their own lives at all.

The heroic war narrative follows the Soviet convention of depicting WWII that is well-embedded in Russian political discourse. Here, the father conventionally represents a nation that paid an enormous price for its victory and built everything anew, suggesting a need to appreciate and guard the current social and political arrangements. Such representations have been commonly employed in contemporary Russian nation-building and were commodified for both political and economic capitalization on behalf of the current elites. Often, such capitalization works through practices of exclusion: the place of the enemy, necessary for war narrative, is filled with enemies abroad and traitors within. Walking in the already appropriated narrative of War, and not offering any alterna-

tive readings of it, *Show Me Your Documents!* paradoxically repeats the mantras of the very regime it supposedly tries to replace with something better. Moreover, while the current regime clearly refers to WWII for political and economic benefits, it is not at all clear which war is so recognizably described in this story. We are told it was a war with “fascists,” but it could not possibly be the actual WWII. Published in 2013, the story could potentially refer to Russian involvement in some contemporary conflicts, for instance with Georgia or Ukraine, but such comparisons would once again coincide with the official discourse. This example shows how the adherence to the Soviet frame literally ensures the realism of the story: it simply reproduces the very real present political discourse.

To sum up, both *Zaryanka* and *Show Me Your Documents!* follow the identified ways of making *USSR-2061* realistic. Both stories also clearly operate within the archaeological and ontological dimensions of utopia described in IROS: they offer social critique, specify the points of social improvement and construct new personalities whose ways of being are different from those taken-for-granted. Applications of the architectural dimension in both stories are very limited, as it is predominantly attributed to the explicitly political setting. Instead, *Zaryanka* and *Show Me Your Documents!* introduce the retrofuturism of restorative nostalgia and slide into contemporary political discourse. In this way, they mark the critical limits of separating the political-real and the cultural-imaginary, although the literal separation performed in *USSR-2061*, and the insurmountance of its realism by references to the Soviet project, form a clearly extreme case in comparison to the theoretical framework of IROS. “The images of a future” that the texts of *USSR-2061* try to construct seem to have one leg stuck in the past.

4.2 Visualizing the Soviet future

The graphic part of *USSR-2061* is impressively diverse. Various styles may co-exist within the same contest, and often the winners selected by public and by the organizers (jury) appear very different. The project’s organizers express a preference for the graphic part of *USSR-2061*, as it allows more freedom: of “interaction,” of “creativity,” and of “interpretation.”¹² However, such freedom may counteract the desire for realism: a picture is harder to confine within a pre-given setting than a story, and even harder when it comes to ensuring its interpretation. Generally, the settings for graphic contests are very specific, up to the point of descri-

“The images of a future” that the texts of *USSR-2061* try to construct seem to have one leg stuck in the past.

12 Quotes from the interview.

bing a particular situation such as the design of a new car,¹³ and they impose far fewer social, political or economic limitations. In this situation, the connection to the overall Soviet frame becomes even more important, but also possibilities open up for a less confined imagination.

In IROS terms, the key utopian dimensions to expect from visual art are archaeological and ontological. Pictures can provide social critique, elucidate the utopian possibilities or what is left unsaid in them, and they can provide representations of new people and different ways of being for a proposed utopia. Imagining alternative institutional arrangements through the architectural dimension, however, would generally require articulation beyond visualization.

Due to these specificities of visual art, in this section I will concentrate only on how the images of *USSR-2061* are made realistic through references to the Soviet project, and on how they operate in the archaeological and ontological dimensions of utopia. Although not all contests and not all works in contests are related to space, space exploration is clearly an important topic for the graphic part of the project. Moreover, both the contests and the works that contributed to them seem to make use of several key themes in representing Soviet space, focusing on ordinary people, women and technology. Reliance on these topics, as well as the appearance of Soviet symbols in many images of *USSR-2061*, provides connections to the Soviet project.

The winners of the first graphic context, which was dedicated to Mars exploration, offer clear examples of representing future Soviet people engaged in mundane activities while located in extraordinary settings (*Figures 2 & 3*). *Figure 2* resembles a tourist photo: the cosmonaut here could be any Russian tourist doing some sightseeing. His smile and a high-collar space uniform also recall associations with Soviet cosmonauts and sportsmen in training. An emergency aboard the space station in *Figure 3* stages an essential home-fixing situation in an apartment or a summer house, in which the sudden confusion is met with savviness. Its ordinary, down-to-earth character is mediated through several details: the outfits of the characters, with the male cosmonaut getting around the space station bare-chested (a usual summerhouse situation); his working around the tube with an insulating tape (*izolenta*, the ultimate fixing device in a Soviet household); the sudden appearance of the “do not lean” symbol on the space station illuminator (a typical feature of Russian metro trains, in this case taken from the St. Petersburg metro).

13 A contest for a new Soviet all-road-vehicle: <http://2061.su/konkursy/uazik/>.



Figure 2 (up). Winner (jury) of the first graphic contest of *USSR-2061*. “Here it is, the red one” (*Wot on, ryžen'kij*), artwork by Igor Savin (<http://2061.su/konkursy/first-contest>).

Figure 3 (to the left). Winner (public voting) of the first graphic contest of *USSR-2061*. “Serezha, our ionazor is broken again!” (*Sieriož, u nas opiat' ionizator poletiel!*), Artwork by Artyom Bizyaev (<http://2061.su/konkursy/first-contest>).

Such representations can be traced to cosmonauts modelling the New Soviet Man¹⁴ (Gerovitch 2017a), a practice oscillating between the portrayals of both physically and morally perfected future citizens, and their close relation to the present, every day Soviet life (Kohonen 2017a). The characters in *Figures 2* and *3*, especially male ones, seem to reinvigorate such modelling, thus both making a connection with Soviet representations of space and performing the ontological function of utopia.

While *Figure 3* may obscure it, a strong female representation is common to the graphic part of *USSR-2061*, which also resembles Soviet imagery. In Soviet space culture, mothers of the male cosmonauts often embodied their Motherland (Kohonen 2017b). For female representation, the first female cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova was an important icon of Soviet space culture (Sylvester 2011). Tereshkova's visibility in Soviet space imagery differed significantly from her male colleagues: her independence was highlighted by predominantly single appearances, or in the company of colleagues, Party members or female friends. Even after the marriage and the birth of her daughter, the public role of Tereshkova continued to get attention: she could equally appear in a home kitchen setting and while meeting officials. As the model of modern Soviet femininity, Tereshkova's image conflated official and family roles, the role of fashion icon, and the taboo on female sexuality (Kohonen 2017b).

The organizers of *USSR-2061* dedicated a separate contest to the pictures of future women in space settings.¹⁵ In the project, the future women space explorers often appear alone, highlighting their independence. In addition, *Figures 5* and *6* present motherly figures, who do

14 New Soviet Man is a debated concept that might seem to be more an analytic invention than a historical project. Its opponents emphasize that a project with such a name, or even the concept itself, never existed in the Soviet Union. Besides, it is rarely clear what New Soviet Man actually refers to: a fantasy, an idea of perfecting the human being, or a stage of evolution. Here, it is brought up as a representation of morally and physically superior human that was mediated, inter alia, through the Soviet cosmonauts. I thank Marina Simakova for this observation.

15 While the ubiquity of female representation in the project offers a fruitful ground for a feminist analysis, limitations entail that this article cannot cover this issue. Instead, it simply aims at elucidating female representation as a way to establish a connection with the Soviet space frame. Nevertheless, it is absolutely clear that a feminist analysis would be indispensable to exploring the utopian possibilities through female representation and women's involvement in *USSR-2061*. I thank Iril Hove Ullestad for this observation.

not seem, however, to be actual mothers. In *Figure 5*, it is an older colleague who takes on a role of a mother, and in *Figure 6* it is a projection of a little girl in the mirror: a fantasy of her own future. These can be read metaphorically as representations of the Motherland, although not through the actual mothers as in case of male Soviet cosmonauts, but through a figure of a colleague or a female friend, more appropriate for the Tereshkova canon. In the same line, *Figure 7* seems to include a fatherly figure, represented by the Gagarin portrait in the background. Importantly, women's independence in *USSR-2061* does not equal the loss of femininity, evident in the choice of clothing, appearance of make-up or specific accessories such as a soft toy in *Figure 4*.



On this and the next pages: *Figures 4-7*, winners of the “Girl from the Earth” graphic contest of *USSR-2061*. Courtesy *USSR-2061* and the authors (<http://2061.su/konkursy/devushka-s-zemli/>)

Figure 4: Winner (jury), “Thoughts about home”, artwork by Ivan Yakushev.

At the same time, none of the winning contributions can be seen as explicitly sexual, and *Figure 6* seems to specifically downplay sexuality. Overall, *USSR-2061* addresses the key features of female representation that are significant for Soviet space culture. These pictures function as a social critique of the professional choices expected from women, and of their career opportunities in modern Russia, in comparison to alternatives stemming from the Soviet project (especially obvious in *Figure 6*). But they are not limited to this function: arguably, *Figure 5* is clearest in its attempt to operate in the ontological dimension through offering a significant private and emotional attachment. The strong emotional

bond between the two women can be read in different ways, depending on how its context is understood. In any case, however, it seems hard to avoid thinking of modes of being and relations with the world that women have in the new Soviet utopia.

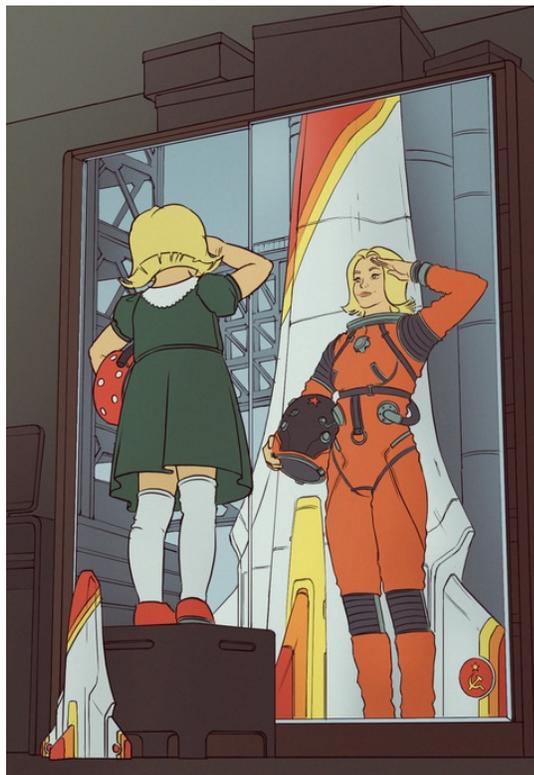


Figure 5 (up): 2nd place (public), “The second wave of colonization”, artwork by Aleksei Yakovlev.

Figure 6 (to the left): Winner (public), “Before the mirror”, artwork by Alexander Bogoslov



Figure 7 (to the left): 3rd place (public), “Girl from the Earth”, artwork by Ruslan Smak.

Figure 8 (to the right): 2nd place (jury), “Test Pilot”, artwork by the user softH.

Finally, the omnipresence of technology and the ambiguous attitude towards it is reminiscent of Soviet space culture. Technology and machines were a significant part of the Soviet space imagery. They were portrayed separately, for example in posters with Sputnik and rockets, or photographed together with humans, in the latter case either highlighting the enormity of technology or presenting a nearly cybernetic unity of human and machine (Kohonen 2017c). A different line of representation existed in Soviet popular science journals that often operated between science and pseudo-science, craving for wonders while presenting their materials as topics for serious scientific discussions (Schwartz 2011). Their fantastic cosmic drawings¹⁶ clearly include a wondrous gaze that already existed in picturing the outer space landscapes (Kohonen 2017d), at the same time providing schemas, tables and other “scientific” elements that supposedly ground the realism of what is portrayed.

Machines and technology are nearly always present in the graphic art of *USSR-2061*. Some contests are entirely dedicated to technology, such as “Martian robot”¹⁷ or “Venusian transport”.¹⁸ However, the visions of the technological future are highly ambiguous. *Figures 9 and 10* show two winner contributions portraying the transport to Venus, which are obviously different. The dark, heavy, detailed and more “realistic”

16 Widely available on the Russian internet; for instance, a collection of the cosmic covers of *Science for Youth* journal: <https://fishki.net/1853265-kosmicheskie-oblozhi-tehnika---molodezhi---chast-1.html>.

17 See <http://2061.su/konkursy/mars-robot/>.

18 See <http://2061.su/konkursy/venus-transport/>.

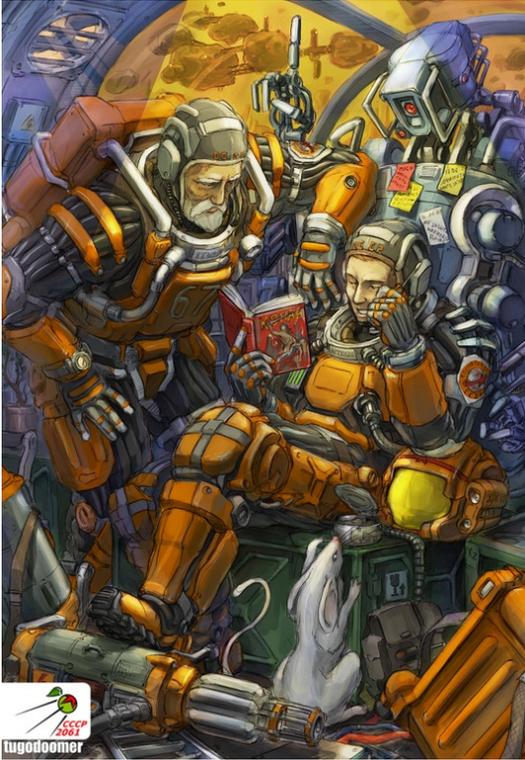
machine chosen by the organizers contradicts the bright, light and fantasy-like choice of the public. Similarly, the strikingly different perceptions of the man-machine interaction are obvious in *Figures 11* and *12*.



On this and the next pages: Contest “Venusian Transport” (<http://2061.su/konkursy/venus-transport/>). All courtesy of *USSR-2061* and the authors.

Figure 9: Winner (jury), “First autonomous expedition to the planet of Venus!”, artwork by Dmitry Tsarev.

Figure 10: Winner (public), “Venus73”, artwork by Irina Gard.



Contest “Stone belt” (<http://2061.su/konkursy/kamennyj-poyas/>). All courtesy of USSR-2061 and the authors. *Figure 11 (to the left):* Winner (jury), “Here are the heroes!”, artwork by Vasily “Tugodoomer” Khazikov.

Figure 12 (below): Winner (public), “Asteroid B-612”, artwork by Max “Dalaukar” Olin.



The cybernetic dream preferred by the organizers, in which humans seem inseparable from automatons, is in stark contrast to the public choice, which is a clear manifestation of living human agency compared

to the “dead” technology. The Soviet ambiguity in representing technology seems to continue in *USSR-2061*, where the public and the organizers disagree as to whether wonder or hard science, man or machine should be emphasized. This dispute can be situated in the ontological dimension of utopia.

It is not very common for the graphics of *USSR-2061* to directly borrow the styles of Soviet posters, or to mimic the covers of popular science journals, although such contributions also exist.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the appropriation of recognizable Soviet symbols often occurs. The pictures above provide several examples: the school uniform in Figure 6, Gagarin’s portrait in Figure 9, red stars, the hammer-and-sickle symbol in Figures 9, 10, 12 and 13. In another study of Russian nostalgic visual content, it was suggested that on the level of cultural production, nostalgia borrows shared cultural forms of the past, but detaches their original contexts, omitting any obvious ideological strategy of interpretation (Oushankine 2007). In this regard, the problem of appropriating Soviet symbols in the images of *USSR-2061* is that the past Soviet visuals are also ordinarily commodified in contemporary Russian culture, offering a popular niche of nostalgic consumption. While the imaginary new Soviet society does not have many specific, interconnected and emotionally appealing visual references, the bygone one offers plenty, and they threaten “the image of a future” to be turned into a mere nostalgic attraction. At the same time, the freedom of interaction and interpretation that the organizers mentioned might foster reflective nostalgia rather than restorative nostalgia, in this case contributing to a personal negotiation of the past and its representations, an “education of desire” in Abensour’s terms. Moreover, in many pictures no Soviet symbols appear at all. In short, the visual part of *USSR-2061*, despite the attempt to ensure its Soviet realism, is generally less confined by the separation of the political-real and the cultural-imaginary than the literary part of the project.

4.3 Space as new topos?

Some visuals of *USSR-2061* appear well-suited for the reinvention of utopia through rethinking *topos*. In Latourian terms, this rethinking would mean acceptance of places as political actors, so that utopia is constructed not *in* some place, but *with* some place. For a clearly space-oriented *USSR-2061*, such a move would involve change in attention

¹⁹ For instance, this piece presented as a cover for *Young Technician* magazine: <http://2061.su/media/cache/b9/3a/b93a793575119d8e4a557547d6bbea0a.jpg>.

to space. It was noted previously that the project's organizers generally downplay the importance of space for the project, concentrating on its economic and defensive uses. In the artefacts of the project, space becomes a showcase-container of desired social arrangements. However, there is a potential for alternative development, more obvious in images than in texts. *Figure 10* provides a very unfamiliar landscape, the relationship with which is not yet established, the intentions of which are not yet known, and which offers both fascination and fear. Mars in *Figure 2* might be comprehended not only as a consumable background for a tourist photo, but also as a destination that has a significant emotional appeal. It is a place whose risks and wonders are not yet understood, and interaction with which has not yet begun, apart from observing it from the outside. The title given to this artwork suggests a clear emotional attachment to the planet seen through the illuminator. Likewise, the Martian research station in *Figure 5* seems to be a place involved in many personal and professional histories that produce a wide range of emotions that can be attributed to the portrayed women. It is also not any "usual" workplace: its systems are thoroughly connected to the human life cycles both physically and psychologically, as we learn through the complexity of its cables, tubes, and life-protecting systems, and through the peculiar ways of dressing that its inhabitants show. In the midst of this environment, and by associating with it, the two women form a certain emotional bond, but also another two figures in the background share a moment of union, while others seemingly have a friendly or professional conversation. Even within the much more problematic textual part of *USSR-2061*, the "grandma" from *Zaryanka* is told to "make space into home." "Home" is a place clearly different from a rationalized economic representation, and it differs from treating *topos* as a silent, unimportant object.

The making of space into home especially echoes the cosmist idea of a de-alienated universe as a form of common inhabitation (Chukhrov 2018). Besides, the focus on inter-generational continuity, which both the analyzed stories highlight, could be read with the "common task" of the key cosmist thinker Nikolai Fyodorov in mind (Fiodorow 1995). Plenty of connections between cosmist and communist projects have been observed before (Zhilyaev 2018; Chukhrov 2018; Simakova 2016). *USSR-2061* could potentially make great use of cosmist thinking in its construction of "an image of a future." Cosmism was criticized for making no separation between art and politics (Groys 2015), but in the case of reinventing utopia through rethinking *topos* this might be considered an advantage.

Cosmism was criticized for making no separation between art and politics, but in the case of reinventing utopia through rethinking *topos* this might be considered an advantage.

The change of attitude towards the space of utopia could be facilitated through “geocosmists” such as Vladimir Vernadsky and Alexander Chizhevsky, who engaged with the agency of the cosmos. Vernadsky worked with the concept of biosphere, a planetary system interrelating humans, living matter and inert materia in the task of continuing and developing life. With humanity becoming a geological force,²⁰ the biosphere transforms into the noosphere. The noosphere presupposes a much stronger evolutionary process, but not the one exactly imposed by humans, as scientific thought and its applications are developments of life and the biosphere themselves (Wiernadskij 2013/1944). Human action in the noosphere is measured not against some effectiveness of manipulating nature, but against adherence to the laws of nature that can only be observed if all of the biosphere is treated as a living organism. Chizhevsky had a theory that connected the major events in human history with solar activity, thus postulating the Sun as a major actor in the course of revolutions and other significant events. His position follows “not out of weak self-affirmation,” but from “the ability to subtly feel the structure of nature and directly understand the world as an inseparable whole” (Czizewskij 2015/1924). Together these two ideas could form a framework through which *topos*, such as the places mentioned above, would no longer be separated from utopia but would instead be its active agent.

How could new *topoi* be practically articulated in the absence of such separation? While by now the key connection between the textual and the visual parts of the project has been producing illustrations for short stories, an inverted procedure from images to texts might be a step towards utopian practice in Latourian and cosmist terms. However, such an opening might well result in the disintegration of a coherent setting and potentially in giving up the Soviet frame as such. The question arises as to whether the organizers of *USSR-2061* and the community around the project are willing to continue with 2061 even if it is no longer Soviet.

20 Connections have been observed before between Vernadsky’s use of the biosphere and the noosphere, on the one hand, and the Anthropocene, on the other. However, they seem not to correlate exactly: as Marina Simakova observes, first, Vernadsky’s framework presupposes no radical break, as scientific and industrial development is a part of the evolution of the biosphere; second, the Anthropocene lacks a normative element that exists in Vernadsky’s texts as the “laws of nature” and eventually comes down to a vitalist argument of life as a reason for itself.

5. Conclusion

This article argued that if we want to reinvent utopia as a way to imagine alternative futures in the conditions of approaching ecological catastrophe, rising economic inequalities and massive migrations, we should engage seriously with the problem of the disappeared *topos*, or the place of utopia. As yet, utopian studies have not developed in this direction, preferring to continue the debate over normative aspirations and the possibilities for their realization, dating back at least to Marx and Engels, and recently reapproached by Ruth Levitas (2013) through the framework of IROS. For all its innovation, IROS continues the separation between real political change and the imaginary transformations of cultural artefacts, even if it seems to introduce innovative intermediaries. An alternative to IROS can be found in Latour's (2017) recent proposal of the Terrestrial as a political actor, which in utopian terms turns *topos* into an agent of constructing utopia.

The artefacts of *USSR-2061* can be understood as utopian in both IROS and Latourian terms, although the project's obsession with realism make the latter less obvious. It was shown through the analysis of both textual and visual contributions how the desire for realism, clearly manifested in the literal separation of the political-real part of the project from its cultural-imaginary part, and in the related imposition of the Soviet frame on cultural production, actually hinders the appearance of "an image of a future." Instead, it gives way to the nostalgia characteristic of post-Soviet space culture. An alternative articulation of space, possibly in terms of Russian cosmism, could potentially allow the development of the project through rethinking *topos* as a place *with* which (not *in* which) the future better society will be built.

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Tytuł: Czy przyszłość jest radziecka? *USSR-2061* i rzeczywistość utopii

Abstrakt: *USSR-2061* to rosyjski futurystyczny projekt online, który prezentuje nowy ZSRR, wiek po locie Gagarina w kosmos. Artykuł łączy projekt z radzieckim kosmicznym utopizmem oraz nostalgią, która po nim pozostała, badając *USSR-2061* i jego artefakty przez pryzmat studiów nad utopiami. Szczególny nacisk położony zostaje na przenikające projekt napięcie pomiędzy jego utopizmem a pragnieniem realizmu, które usytuowane zostaje w ramach tradycyjnego toposu utopii, tj. tego jak osiągnąć rzeczywistość, a nie jedynie wyobrażeniową zmianę świata. Ów wymiar realistyczny powiązany jest z koncepcją utopii jako metody u Levitasa, co – jak dowodzi artykuł – utrudnia konstruowanie „obrazu przyszłości”, do którego zmierzają projekt. Zamiast tego, powstałe wizje i narracje albo pokrywają się z oficjalnym rosyjskim dyskursem politycznym wykorzystującym radziecką nostalgię, albo popadają w retrofuturystyczne powtórzenie satyrycznego ujęcia radzieckich dyskursów. Jednakże w *USSR-2061* występuje również inny sposób konstruowania utopii, choć nie zawsze jest on podkreślany. Aby uczynić utopię możliwą w anty-utopijnych czasach, należy przemyśleć jej warunki możliwości czy jej topos. W sensie teoretycznym, taką alternatywę przedstawia Latour w idei Ziemskości (*Terrestrial*) (2017), oznaczającej miejsce, które w utopijnych kategoriach poprzedza przekroczenie granicy pomiędzy rzeczywistym i wyobrażonym, politycznym i kulturowym. W tym

samym duchu, artykuł ukazuje *USSR-2061* jako próbę stworzenia nowej utopii poprzez przemyślenie przestrzeni. Pomocne w tym są odniesienia do idei kosmizmu u Władimira Wiernadskiego i Aleksandra Czyżewskiego, których związki z podejściem Latoura były już przedmiotem badań.

Słowa kluczowe: utopia, kosmos, ZSRR, Levitas, Latour