Making the Most of a Past’s Futures: Soviet Space Science Fiction between Projection and Recollection

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The flying worlds of science fiction films and series from the 1960s to the 1980s, popular on both sides of the Iron Curtain, today appear at least as alien to us, if not more so, than they did fifty years ago. However, their current alienness is usually described as “retro” or “nostalgic,” sometimes even (naively?) humanist as opposed to futuristic. Apart from a certain design or aesthetic, nostalgia for the space age of the twentieth century (https://site.com/technology/2021/05/space-program-a-future-and-landing-on-the-moon-how-nostalgia-for-the-apollo-program-deepened.html) is often linked to assumptions about a brighter, happier future that were once widespread and are now gone for good. This kind of “nostalgia for the past future” is commonly associated with Eastern European former socialist societies (https://www.selfgrape.com/gjg/book/0780302743?bl) and their popular cultural production. As films, television series, and music videos become increasingly accessible to wider audiences on digital streaming platforms, they transition from the “archive” to the “exhibition window,” inviting reassessment, including of collective memory, genre, and utopia. In this context, Soviet space utopias (https://www.jstor.org/stable/4889387?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents) attract a significant amount of attention, fuelling speculation about communism’s projected futures, Amero-Soviet cultural exchange, and details about the production and reception contexts of famous films, such as Andrei Tarkovsky’s Solaris (1972).

Popular-cultural references point to various aspects of the bygone space age, particularly its cultural and socio-political dimensions, and allow us to decode what kinds of philosophical, popular-scientific, aesthetic, technological, as well as the political and national imaginations to which a particular space age belonged. At the same time, all of these imaginations have evolved and been integrated into our collective memory (https://www.jstor.org/stable/4889387?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents), the assemblage of means or pathways into the past (media, technologies, and narratives) as well as the contents that relate to (words, ideas, plots, and physical objects either coming directly from the past or commemorating it). To cut a long theoretical discussion short: what is socially communicated about an event does not necessarily coincide with the event’s material ramifications. Collective memory and remembrance depend greatly on the policies and contingencies that allow certain texts to rise above the archives and other texts to be buried in them. Because of this, returns to the archives are particularly welcome during periods of debate over meanings and narratives, which are inevitably located at the crossroads of fiction and evidence, projection and historicization. It makes sense to reconsider the significance of science fiction cinema in the context of our collective memory of the space age, particularly as rumours about feats of new space exploration (https://www.space.com/wp-content/visualsCulture斯特瓦戈夫纳林斯) grow louder and are no longer reserved to national initiatives or governed exclusively by real-political agendas, and also as often nostalgic film productions about the history of the space race (https://space.com/11-must-see-space-movies-for-anyone-serious-about-space/) multiply.

Where to Begin Excavating Past Futures?

Science fiction cinema offered images and narratives about the space age from long before the launch of the first space programs, let alone satellites. The long history (https://www.jstor.org/stable/26304671?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents) of this cinematic genre further suggests that the space age perhaps even needed to be narrated and realistically visualized before its inaugural events could take place, and that these events had to be recorded, that is filmed, in order to be at first believable (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9C3kOnzCqNQ and then disputable (https://coviometropoible.com/fanfar/prepare-na-a-la)). Science fiction’s imaginary depiction of the space age thus oscillates between belief (in technical, sociopolitical, and/or mental progress) and doubt. Furthermore, literary and cultural studies scholars have convincingly shown the persistence of certain overlaps or at least correspondences between existing societal problems and concerns, and the preoccupations of science fiction productions (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/20531596209573690), books, films, series, videogames, etc.). It is therefore no surprise that utopian visions of spacefaring societies were a particularly common science-fiction trope of the twentieth century and its space age. The origins of the recent increase in popular and academic interest in past imaginaries of future societies are particularly interesting, as they coincide partly with a new interest in space exploration and partly with nostalgic postmemory (https://www.jstor.org/stable/4889387?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents) of twentieth-century utopias. All of these factors have contributed to a profound realignment of the symbols, technological, aesthetic, and political significance of the once vanguard (or at least current) and now archived twentieth-century popular culture and its (canons). Today these are being reenacted at the crossroads of industry (https://www.twistonline.com/rupling/Science-Aviation-Space-flint-and-visual-culture-strahovg⍵οικουβούκος/1098113588202/), and technology, drawing on the archives of archival material, convincing academic cases, and networks such as fan forums. Over the past two decades, these stakeholders have profoundly reshaped the international collective memory of twentieth-century space-age futures, creating space for an international polylogue between not only cinematic famous masterpieces — such as 2001: A Space Odyssey (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0062622/), Solaris (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1189487/), and Solaris (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0307479/?ref_=tt_sim_sims_tt) — but also between lesser-known productions from a range of national and ideological backgrounds. Finally, imaginaries of “the space-age future”, once predominantly considered in chronological order as a reflection of technological progression and sociopolitical transformation, now form an extraneous bricolage, a (media)archaeological site, and an exhibit of unexpected encounters between aesthetic styles, production contexts, and asexualised positions. Perhaps most significantly, this rearrangement intervenes into one of the most influential discussions about the political potential of science fiction utopias initiated by Darko Suvin and embraced by Fredric Jameson. In an essay published as part of The Bipopogicad Thaen, Suvin (https://d1.cuni.cz/plagiat.php?459304agt_resource/content/dлось.pdf), for whom utopia is “the sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction”, influentially remarked that:

...[w]e need radically liberating novums only. By ‘radically liberating’, I mean not only a new quality as opposed to a simple marketing difference, and I mean a novelty that is critical opposition to the
In order to master the future, it is necessary, in the first place, to turn it into the past (as it is based on the 'known', the past does not scan), and, second, to sacrifice the present (which turns out to be irrelevant from this future-directed perspective as everything is done for 'the bright tomorrow' and for future generations!) (Dobrobenko 2008 (https://edinburgh.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748634453.001.0001/upo:9780748634453).)

Although the Stalinist doctrine of socialist realism was denounced by Nikita Khrushchev at the 20th Communist Party Congress in 1956, this mnemonic future-oriented agenda appears to persist in certain later, post-Stalinist productions, notably in the genre of space-concerned popular science and science fiction films, as if the intent of the films were to equip Soviet citizens with instructions for how to approach the coming space age. Until the 1970s, Soviet science fiction films were mostly illustrations of gentle, didactic narratives that offered a distanced perspective on the "now" in order to inspire faith in an even better, communist future. In fact, they were often straightforward - and often in contrast to the literary texts they were based on - framed as the dream of one of the protagonists, who was supposed to be regarded as afar, rather than actually visited or experienced. This device probably ensured the reception of the film as pure fiction, unrepresentative. Despite this disclaimer, it was a film (and sometimes theatre, though not literature) that often got accused of simplicity in its visualizations of alien life. It should be noted that the static form and traditional orientation of the majority of Soviet space utopias need not be considered a peculiarity of cinematic worldbuilding but it can be a reflection of the films' socialist mnemonic function. Instead of offering "radically liberating" novums, socialist-realist-inspired science fictions and narratives of the history of the Soviet space program seek to reinforce the stability of a certain traditionalist, and future-oriented, symbolic imaginary (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtOQgQz7F6Q) across time, genre, and aesthetic preferences. As if remembering these "instructions" in an invariant way, the Soviet space utopias, especially of the 1960s, have repeatedly informed recent Russian historical space thrillers such as The Age of Flames (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0464665/) and The Spacewalker (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0637384/) (also known as The Spacewalker) (2017) and Savvy 7 (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt653738/), which follow the same idealistic logic of prompting the viewer to create a better future. However, the fictional narratives are "based on historical events" rather than manifested as dreamy visions of the future.

In the context of this discussion on the presence of the space age in post-Soviet collective memory, these space thrillers articulate a nostalgia for a certain historical narrative (of Soviet suprequency in the space race), and for the form of the idealistic, dreamy films that were popular in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. This twofold nostalgia for a lost utopia, detectable in these recent action films, differs from the characteristic of the reflexive, insouciant productions from the 2000s such as the aforementioned Dreaming of Space and First on the Moon, which are comparable in their restless impulse but very different in form. Having emerged in a different form, having emerced in a different form, the utopian impulse can be reconstructed in a better way (albeit not utopia as a predefined form), these films attempt to align nostalgia with the past with a diverse, as opposed to a particular interpretation of the past. In this context, their immediate successors, the fantastical blockbusters about the glory of the Soviet space program, historical fiction science fictions, can hardly be interpreted as a stydistically transformable.