

The Future is Fixed

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ABSTRACT: Isaac Asimov once commented that nothing ever changed in the science fiction of the former Soviet Union. Any suggestion that the future might be different brought the risk of censorship. Soviet cinema could not take place in time. As a result in films like *Mechte Navstrechu* (1963) erratic and discontinuous plot devices allowed a vision of the future in which no alteration of the present occurred. The future remained the same as the present: No change was allowed.

Martin Heidegger made a similar observation about the inability to change as a key characteristic of any environment in his 1929-30 lectures on metaphysics. Heidegger differentiated between the environments of the animal and of the human by noting that both were trapped in a set of fixed relationships. However, the human could imagine the possibility of changing the environment. Heidegger thus defined humanity by a capacity not to change but to envision the present differently. Read closely, these transitional lectures reveal the inability of technology to offer anything new.

Curiously, Soviet-era science fiction worked critically within a previously established future condition. These fictions deployed the future as a signpost from which detours could be taken. Breaking the narrative allowed for seemingly unimaginable alternatives to be presented without truly effecting any change. The future was never a goal to be obtained within the context of these films. It was an orienting distraction, and as such it offers a new way of thinking about the intent of computation for architecture. If the image, model, simulation are conceived as orienting distractions from the ensnarement of time—*αχρoνία*—can they be used to displace the future from the present and restore critique to the architectural *utopia*?

KEYWORDS: utopias, time, drawing, science fiction

INTRODUCTION

In Soviet era science fiction the prohibition of a future, which differs from the one already known, reveals a problem for the creation of a contemporary utopian critique. Isaac Asimov once commented that nothing ever changes in the science fiction of the former communist state. Any suggestion that the future might be different brought the risk of censorship. (Asimov 1962, 12-13) Soviet science fiction cinema needed to take place outside of time. As a result, in films like *Mechte Navstrechu* (1963), erratic and discontinuous plot devices allowed a vision of the future in which no alteration of the present occurred. The future remained the same as the present: No change was allowed. If Soviet science fiction only draws out possibilities that are already known, what critical function does it offer? Films like *Mechte Navstrechu* offer insight into the potential of a replacement for the now dysfunctional utopian literature with drawings that are *αχρoνία*. These drawings out of time form a second-order critique that became necessary when no other place existed from which a utopia could function.

1.0 Out of place

In utopian discourse, removing the utopia from the space of the real creates a distance from which reality is critiqued. In Thomas More's text, *Of a Republic's Best State and of the New Island Utopia*, the island that interrogates and makes sense, or non-sense, of sixteenth-century Europe is located somewhere on Earth. In this sense, the utopia—*ουτοπία*—is the other place. But Copernicus's decentralization of the earth within the universe and Descartes's reduction of place to space initiated a process by which no other place on earth could be postulated as the location for the utopian project. Utopia was displaced from the earth to the wandering stars—the planets. The possibility of this shift can be seen in works like Athanasius Kircher's *iter extaticum coeleste*, where the seventeenth-century Jesuit writes about a flight through Tycho Brahe's solar system framed within a dream. In effect the space race of the late 1950s and

1960s completed this historical arc in which the other place became a non-place. When the earth could be imaged as no different from any other planet, the possibility of locating a utopia anywhere completely disappeared.

In response to the lack of place from which to be critical, the dislocation of the utopia in space had to be supplemented. The utopia became an other place in an other time. The utopia as place dislocated in time is precisely how the Soviet author, Ivan Yefremov, framed the work of science fiction. In the introduction to his novel, *Tummanost Andromedy* (1957), Yefremov describes the goal of science fiction as the revelation of humanity's ultimate potential, which demonstrates the *happy future* that will result from the progress of communism (Yefremov 1980, 17). It is important to remember that More's own utopia was etymologically slippery; the *ou* of *ουτοπία* can also be translated as 'good'. This is the positive interpretation of the utopian critique, where the other place is bound to Plato's *Republic* as the place of the good.

Something strange happened as Yefremov was writing *Tummanost Andromedy*. He was unable to maintain the spatial and temporal distance from his projection of a happy future. In his introduction to the novel, Yefremov notes that he began writing the story to be published serially in 1956, but the progression of the nascent space race kept forcing him to rewrite and adapt the timeline of the novel. Yefremov comments that events like the launch of the Sputnik satellite forced him to revise how far ahead in time the events of his novel could be placed (Yefremov 1980, 16). What started as thousands of years shifted closer and closer to his present day, and as a result Yefremov could not hold open the temporal distance that differentiated his *happy future*. It continuously collapsed back into the conceptual framework for contemporary Soviet life and culture. This is why Asimov could comment that nothing changes in Soviet science fiction. (Asimov 1962, 12) The utopia that attempts to present a happy future is already the happy present. Not only is there no other place to locate the utopian critique, there is no other time, no future other than the present.

2.0 Out of time

The 1963 film, *Mechte Navstrechu*, relies on a narrative structure that builds from Efremov's lack of a differential future. To overcome the lack of any time in which to situate the possibility of a future different from the present, *Mechte Navstrechu* places itself outside of time.

The film opens with a scene of the earth from space and zooms into scenes of everyday life in the Soviet Union carefully narrated as if they represent not a specific city or place, but one typical of all places on the planet where men and women from diverse backgrounds and disciplines join together in a harmonious life. Following this presentation of the perfect potential of contemporary communist society and life, the archetypal team of cosmonauts—including the computer operator, the commander, the mechanic, the engineer-painter, the radio astronomer and the academician—who explore the universe for signs of other life is introduced. The narrative then shifts to a conversation between the academician, Krylov, and the ominous and foreign Dr. Laungton.

Laungton and Krylov have an ongoing argument over whether the discovery of alien life in the universe will result in catastrophe or will simply provide a wondrous extension of the already harmonious existence on Earth. Laungton, standing in for Western ideology, believes aliens will only destroy the Earth. For him there is neither happy present nor happy future. Suddenly their conversation is interrupted as Tanya, the radio astronomer, receives a signal from another world. The scene shifts to a conversation with her lover, Andrey—the mechanic—at an ambiguously located boat in a lagoon, which prefigures the film's unannounced rocketship, *Ocean*. Is the signal real? Andrey believes it is, and thus the narrative arc of the story begins as a worldwide announcement is made about the aliens who have crashed on Mars during their trip to the Earth. Preparations are made to advance the launch of the *Ocean* already under construction through the cooperation of all the nations of the Earth, in order to rescue the aliens now stranded on the red planet.

The narrative progresses as one might expect with a series of scenes depicting the overcoming of the challenges to space travel, arrival at Mars, and the rescue of the one alien still alive from Mar's moon Phobos. Having successfully completed the mission and negated

Dr. Laughton's pessimism about the possibility of an alien encounter leading to the destruction of the Earth, the narrative arc effectively ends in the preservation of the Earth in its state of happiness. The future has been proven to be the same as the present in this sense. Even Dr. Laughton must now be happy.

But one thing has gone wrong. In the course of rescuing the alien, Andrey is trapped on Phobos and unable to return to the Earth. Tanya must return to the Earth without her lover. In the only plot twist of the movie, the film cuts back to the scene of Andrey and Tanya at the boat, but Tanya is now crying as she had been on the return trip from Mars that left Andrey behind. Tanya announces that we should not let Andrey die. The narrator intervenes and announces that we have spent an hour in the dreams of Andrey while his companions have been in reality singing songs of the universe. This in turn will sing more new songs of the universe. Suddenly, as in the opening of the film, a worldwide signal announces that the rocketship, *Ocean*, has launched on its way to Mars.

Mechte Navstrechu ends where it begins with the same present and seemingly with the same future. There is no indication whether the launch of the rocket, *Ocean*, at the end of the film initiates the modified rescue mission or if it begins the original mission planned for the ship. The argument between Krylov and Dr. Laughton about whether the happy present will be a happy future remains unresolved as is the case in real life, outside of the film, where Western influence continues to be the only force that might undermine Soviet progress. No time has transpired. No events have taken place. No change has occurred, so what has happened? *More new songs of the universe have been sung*. This is an odd utopia.

4.0 Drawing out time

In fact *Mechte Navstrechu* is not in any way a utopia. The film has a place. It is located on Earth, not in an other place or no-where but in an everywhere that includes the possible other planets where we might meet aliens that are just as happy as us. This expansion of where the narrative of *Mechte Navstrechu* has the potential to play out transforms place into homogenized, universal space. But that space, the space of the film, has a strange relation to time. *Mechte Navstrechu* is structured by the dream of Andrey, beside which *new songs of the universe are sung*. As such it exists outside of time. It is an achronia—*αχρονία*—but what on Earth is that? To understand what an achronia is, and how it is a critical supplement to the utopia, the linear, historical nature of the narrative has to be abandoned. Achronias draw out time. This requires confronting an image not a text.

Alberto Perez-Gomez has noted that Piranesi's etchings like those of the *Carceri* series questioned the relationship between the Cartesian explication of space and the possibility of drawing (Pérez-Gómez 2006, 87-88). Piranesi's *Carceri* etchings reveal an excess outside of the assumed homology of descriptive geometry and lived-space. Within the logic of drawing, impossible spaces are created by manipulating the disconnect between the rules of perspectival representation and what is actually perceived in experience. These impossible spaces only exist in the other place of the etching, and in this sense the excess space of Piranesi's *Carceri* can be understood as utopian. But like the other place of More's utopia, Piranesi's excess space is confronted by a problem of time.

With respect to the space of drawings like Piranesi's, Roger Penrose has explained away the excess that the *Carceri* present to the viewer. Penrose has noted that if one breaks up drawings like the *Carceri* into fragments, one can make sense of them as perceived moments in time. Any given fragment of the drawing makes sense with respect to spatial habitation (Penrose 1992, 245-47). Penrose's critique makes sense if one thinks about the infinite stair drawings by M.C. Escher that he inspired. If you take a single flight from one of Escher's stairs by itself, it makes spatial sense. It stops making sense when assembled with other stairs that are temporally incompatible with it. Penrose calls this effect the cohomology of impossible figures. In combination with his notion of twistor space, this cohomology explains away the excess space of Piranesi's etchings in a manner that Cartesian space is unable to accomplish.

The shift from the inexplicable space of Piranesi's etchings to the impossible figures of Penrose and Escher is a second-order collapse of lived-space. Where Piranesi's etchings

drew upon our assumption that descriptive geometry and lived-space are homologous, Pernose's cohomology of impossible figures represented by Escher's stairs is explained away by a collapse of multiple relationships to time. The spatial homological reduction becomes a temporal homological reduction. As in Yefremov's struggle with maintaining a temporal distance for *Tummanost Andromedy*, Pernose/Escher's drawings struggle with maintaining the difference that critiques our assumptions about spacetime.

Mechte Navstrechu posits a present and future without any spatial or temporal difference at all, but in spite of a lack of difference the film manages to question the relationship between time and the possibility of drawing. By temporally displacing the entire movie into a dream, the film reveals an excess outside of the assumed homology of relative time and lived-space. The dream within which the narrative arc of the movie exists has some other time, but there is no where for that time to go. It cannot progress. It simply is. Tanya knows that this other time, drawn outside of her own, exists. At the end of the film, unlike at the beginning, she is crying and implores that Andrey not die. This small change is happening in the space of the film as the narrator tells the audience that it has inhabited Andrey's dream, but this does not explain the excess time that has been created within the dream. The time that does not *run*.

The narrator of *Mechte Navstrechu* provides the only clue to what might be happening in the film with its strange structural displacement of a time outside of the movement from present to future that remains fixed at the moment of the rocket launch from beginning to the end of the movie. *More new songs of the universe are being sung*, but what can this possibly mean within the context of a time with no when?

Lee Smolin offers potential insight in his geometrical description of the boundary at spatial infinity. Smolin notes that this type of bounded infinity is necessary to solve the equations of general relativity. To understand what this boundary condition is, Smolin offers the following explanation:

Imagine a flat two-dimensional plane. Pick a point, then pick a direction going outward from that point. That defines a line in the plane. Follow that line as far as it goes. It goes an infinite distance, but in the mind's eye of the mathematician it nonetheless goes somewhere. Where it goes is called a *point at infinity*. Pick another direction from the original point. You get another line. Follow that as far as it goes; it takes us to another point at infinity. The points at infinity make up a circle. The directions you can go from a point in a plane define a circle. Following those directions as far as they go, you reach the boundary of points at infinity. The same thing obtains in flat three dimensional space, except that the points of infinity make up a sphere (Smolin 2013, 291-292).

For Smolin, the description is a way of understanding the limit that exists at the end of space, but has no other space beyond it. In the case of relativity, only information crosses that limit. I am interested in his description for another reason. Smolin describes bounded infinity as if it were a drawing. Make a line from here to here. Go back and make another line from here to here, and so on. The problem, of course, is that to draft such a drawing would take an infinite amount of time. The drawing of infinity can be conceptualized, but only if it is divorced from temporality. The drawing has to exist outside of time, otherwise it will never exist as it will always fail to be complete.

Transposed to *Mechte Navstrechu*, Smolin's drawing of the boundary at spatial infinity starts to make sense of the film's structure. The dream can only exist if it is drawn out from the space of the film. In order for this to happen, no time can pass within the space of the film. If time happens within the film, the representation of time that is the dream can never be fulfilled. It will always fail prior to appearing. Time in this sense is drawn out from the film itself. When time returns with the launch of the rocket at the end of the film the infinite labor that is the attempt to complete the drawing of infinity within time resumes. This infinite labor that will never be completed is the infinite harmony of the songs sung by Andrey's companions. Only Tanya, left in tears, and the audience know what the completed drawing might appear to be.

For both the dream of Andrey is the achronia, the no-other-time that reveals life outside of the labor of history. But what is the critical role of this strange representation of time that replaces the utopia?

5.0 Being human by withdrawing time

In his 1929-30 lectures on metaphysics, Martin Heidegger stated that the fundamental attunement to world of the human being is the *langeweile*, the long while, boredom. Heidegger explained this ontological state, unique to the human, through the experience of waiting for a train at a station. In the terminal, you wait for the train to arrive. The clocks on the platform reveal time to you as you wait, but the time that they present to you is disconnected from your lived experience. Despite what the clocks tell you, you do not know if the train will arrive or not (Heidegger, 1995). This is an elision of your future into the representation of time. The clocks steal your future. Waiting without a future is being bored, inhabiting the long while. Recognizing that one is trapped in the long while without time and without a future is being human.

The problem with being trapped at the train station in the long while with no time is that the train will never arrive. The world cannot change from the present to the future when the train would be there at the platform. The future is fixed. It is not simply subsumed within its representation, the clock face. It has no means to come into being. This is not just the space of the train station. It is also the space of *Mechte Navstrelu*. But in the film Andrey's dream is not the same as the clocks in Heidegger's train station.

Andrey's dream is otherwise located. It draws out a future to completion even if it exists outside of human time and space. By doing so it recreates the possibility of a future that does not exist in the train station. But it is a strange sort of future. The dream does not give a future to the Earth of the film and to the cosmonauts. It only provides a possible orientation away from Tanya's and implicitly the audience's suffering that will never be achieved.

This possibility of orientation seems to be what the achronia creates. By pointing outside of the present the achronia reveals a time outside of the clocks that ensnare Heidegger in his station. Even if that outside never appears or never offers a future, it suggests humanity can turn away from the long while.

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