Dark Cosmism

Or, the Apophatic Specter of Russo-Soviet Techno-utopianism

by

Taylor R. Genovese

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Gaymon Bennett, Chair
Alexander Aviña
Lisa Messeri
Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm

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ABSTRACT

By utilizing words, photographs, and motion pictures, this multimodal and multisited project traces a rhizomatic genealogy of Russian Cosmism—a nineteenth century political theology promoting a universal human program for overcoming death, resurrecting ancestors, and traveling through the cosmos—amongst post-Soviet techno-utopian projects and imaginaries. I illustrate how Cosmist techno-utopian, futurist, and other-than-human discourse exist as Weberian "elective affinities" within diverse ecologies of the imagination, transmitting a variety of philosophies and political programs throughout trans-temporal, yet philosophically bounded, communities. With a particular focus on the United States and Ukraine, and taking an apophatic analytical position, I dissect how different groups of philosophers, technologists, and publics interact(ed) with Cosmism, as well as how seemingly disparate communities (re)shape and deterritorialize Cosmist political theology in an attempt to legitimize their constructed political imaginaries.

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Shadid, Craig Calhoun, Carolyn Forbes, Mario Orospe Hernández, Jennifer Clifton, and Schuyler Marquez. I would also like to thank all of my undergraduate students who I've taught over the years at both Chandler-Gilbert Community College and Marist College for inspiring me with their incredible brilliance. I appreciate you all more than you could know.

Most of my coursework, thinking, and research for this project was conducted on the campus of Arizona State University in so-called Tempe, Arizona, which sits on the unceded, stolen Indigenous land of primarily the Akimel O'odham and Xalychidom Piipaash peoples. I also acknowledge that while Arizona State University gives liberal lip-service to its colonial violence, it unrepentantly profits from a continued legacy of white supremacism and Indigenous repression by engaging in real estate speculation, inviting known neo-Nazis to speak on campus, militarizing its private police force (to the tune of over $11 million a year), defending white supremacists over women of color when the latter attempts to establish a multicultural center, investing in uranium mining, pursuing Department of Defense contracts, operating a biological weapons lab on campus, and the list continues *ad nauseam*.

This dissertation was written primarily at my home in the so-called Hudson Valley, New York, which carves through the unceded, stolen land of the Muhheaconneok (Mohican and Munsee Lenape) peoples. I acknowledge that my ability to do any work at all is due to my own legacy as a white cis-man, which is inexorably linked to the violent colonial genocide perpetrated by North Atlantic colonists—settlers who continue to ravage and destroy Turtle Island while murdering and subjugating the rightful stewards of these lands.

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PREFACE

CLAWING FORWARD ON STRANGLED EARS

> "You say the ocean's rising—
> Like I give a shit?
> You say the whole world's ending—
> Honey, it already did.
> You're not gonna slow it,
> Heaven knows you'd try.
> Got it? Good.
> Now get inside."
> —Bo Burnham, "All Eyes on Me"

How does one conduct research and write a dissertation of the human sciences during an era of multiple pandemics, accelerating climate catastrophes, and socio-economic collapse? How does one not only negotiate the pragmatics of constantly articulating closures to travel, interviews, and fieldwork, but also, as a human being, turn to face the indescribable quotidian Beyond: the gaping obsidian void of demonic hopelessness that, once glimpsed— even as a wraithlike shade out of the corner of one's eye—latches onto the soul, tugging, rigid and unyielding, feeding, insatiable and unrelenting, on the growing and crippling despair which accompanies bearing witness to the veil of the universe as it begins to flutter, like a piece of tarpaulin covering precious firewood during a wintry tempest, revealing a spectral shadow beneath, on the event horizon of intelligibility; only through this un-veiling do we glimpse the *śūnyatā*, the presence of absence, the brilliant darkness: the unnerving truth that the whirling turbulent tendrils of our enchanted universe orbit around a supermassive black hole of uncompromising indifference.

<center>⸭</center>

I am not entirely certain that this dissertation will be considered an anthropological one—or one in science and technology studies, religious studies, visual arts, or philosophy. It shimmers between each of them and none of them. The only residue of disciplinal form

sticks to the fact that all these fields bestowed upon me the arrogance to try and understand facets of the human experience by intruding into the personal lives of others. I sometimes try to convince myself otherwise, but I am a tourist. I am an experiential thief.

What I have created in the following pages is not what I hoped to bring into the world. Many might counter that no research project ends up the same as it was planned. This is true. But the glaring difference here is that my generation of fellow graduate students were *robbed* of our projects. I do not mean to sound spoiled, entitled, or impetuous, but our collective experience as the COVID-19 Cohort had nothing to do with running into the normal vicissitudes of research. Our experience is not even about navigating multiple "once-in-a-century" global pandemics. Instead, our ability to do research was, and is, hampered by what these pandemics rendered into sharp clarity: political inadequacy, ineptitude of governance, increased economic instability, and the rigid capitalist pathology of "returning to normal" (expressed within the early 2020s American regime as either Make America Great or Build Back Better—Janus-faced biopolitical slogans that uphold the status-quo at the expense of human life).

Like most projects that take an anthropological approach, I am not the same person I was before I started. However, I would wager that unlike most anthropological projects, I do not yet know if the person that I have become is someone that I like. We do not always get to choose the outcome of our journey. Our collapsing world has inducted me into the apophatic way, and this has profoundly influenced the way I have completed this work. That said, the *via negativa* is not inherently nihilistic, nor do I approach it that way, and I am certainly not the first to analyze our contemporary world through this lens (see Miéville 2018; Morton 2016; Thacker 2011; 2015a; 2015b). The cloud of unknowing casts its shadow

over this work and the ghosts of Maimonides, Meister Eckhart, Dionysius the Areopagite, and others haunt its pages.

The form and modality of this dissertation is also a compromise. I am restricted from creating the way I would like to create, albeit not by my committee, who have been nothing but supportive and helpful. Rather, I am pressured (as every academic is) to submit to the decorum of the academy and the bureaucratic style guidelines of the university. So this document is a chimera—shifting between the academic voice, the artist statement, and the ramblings of an eccentric. I believe this can be attributed to (blamed?) on my affinity for, and consumption of, postmodern literature.

This genre of writing in the academy seems to have emerged as a niche style for Millennial scholars. Our writing reflects the fact that we have struggled through the devastation of late capitalism and the broken promises of a better life called down from the ossified ramparts of privilege. Our experience is informed by the fact that we are indentured servants shackled forever to an eternally ballooning student loan debt and an eternally shrinking job market. Yet, we refuse to shirk from injustice; we will not abide fascist violence nor the mask of false liberal tolerance. We are a carpet of ambitious termites and we will gleefully devour and topple the structures of the Old Guard.

We are Children of the Anthropocene and we have very little left to lose.

As Buenaventura Durruti said: "we are not in the least afraid of the ruins. We carry a new world here, in our hearts. That world is growing this minute."

I implore you to close your eyes for a moment before continuing, quiet your mind, and if you listen carefully enough, you may hear the blasting of the trumpets. *Selah.*

Poughkeepsie, NY
August 2023

Figure 1. The Monument of the Third Angel by Anatoly Haidamaka, installed in the town of Chornobyl' on April 26, 2011 on the 25th anniversary of the nuclear disaster. In Ukrainian *chornobyl'* means wormwood (literally "black stalk"—a reference to the mugwort *Artemisia vulgaris*) leading the artist to connect the meltdown of the nuclear reactor with the New Testament prophecy about the Apocalypse: "And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from Heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter" (Revelation 8:10–11). [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 250, *f*/6.4, 1/1100; September 29, 2021]

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION / ORIENTATION

The opening sentence to Michel de Certeau's (1982) *La Fable mystique* reads: "*ce livre présente au nom d'une incompétence*" (9).[1] Prior to reading these words, I was feeling trapped in a state of inadequacy and hopelessness; so much so that I seriously contemplated giving up on my doctoral studies. But reading de Certeau's admission of vulnerability (at the beginning of his magnum opus, no less) gave me the confidence to reconstitute my definition of a dissertation as something malleable, interpretative, and transitory. I realized what had kept me in my mental cell of paralyzed inaction was the false belief that a dissertation had to be a static tome of scholarly perfection—something that was, for me, unattractive and unachievable. As David Graeber (2018) once wrote: "Hell is a collection of individuals who are spending the bulk of their time working on a task they don't like and are not especially good at" (xix). Until my definitional transmutation, I was frozen with terror believing that the culmination of my doctoral experience would end up a product of the Inferno.

When I first proposed this project, it was one deeply embedded in ethnographic fieldwork. It was to be informed by the "deep hanging out" (Clifford 1996, 5) that constitutes the bedrock of anthropological research. However, when COVID-19 closed most global travel between 2020–2021, I found myself in limbo. As travel restrictions began to lift in late-2021 (with the notable exception of Russia), I was able to journey to Ukraine in September and October for what I thought would be an initial eight-week exploratory excursion. The intensification of the Russo-Ukrainian War, marked by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, indefinitely closed field sites in both countries.

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[1] "This book is written from an incapacity" or "This book presents itself in the name of incompetence." Both translations are applicable.

And so I must inevitably return to de Certeau's *incompétence*. Other than some short visits to local sites in Arizona and California—and similarly brief stints in Hungary and Germany—my eight weeks in Ukraine constitute the entirety of my physical fieldwork. The rest of my research has been conducted virtually—a trend that has necessarily increased in the human sciences generally, and in anthropology specifically (see Azevedo et al. 2022; Carney, Chess, and Rascon-Canales 2022; Lupton 2021; Perry 2022; Sriraman 2022, to name a few). Despite this, many anthropologists may still find only two months "in the field" "over there" lacking,[2] and so I found it necessary to rely more upon disciplines that have always been ancillary in my scholarship, but which require far less physical fieldwork: philosophy, visual arts, religious studies, and history.

Due to these limitations, this dissertation is necessarily an anthology. And more than that, this dissertation represents an intimate foundational document for the remainder of my intellectual career—whether that lasts thirty-seconds after the conclusion of my defense or for decades into our polluted future. In this chapter, I will elucidate several red threads that (hopefully) tie these seemingly disparate experiences together. First, I will give a traditional literature review of critical secular studies, since a familiarity with these conversations is necessary, as they are the intellectual foundation upon which this project rests. Then, I will give a brief overview of contemporary debates surrounding the Ontological Turn, particularly within anthropology, because the specter of that intellectual movement hangs over most scholarship in the human sciences that concerns itself with the nature of reality. Next, I will describe my positionality as a researcher, detailing the ideas that form the dialectical helix that spirals throughout this work: apophatic Marxism and uncanny

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[2] That said, I hope this trend will continue changing as we unfortunately settle into a world of rolling, permanent pandemics—to say nothing of the way that ethnographic fieldwork continues to benefit from a colonial/imperial legacy that draws from the economy of the exotic (Genovese 2022a; Bennett and Genovese, Forthcoming).

conceptions of "the weird." Finally, I will end this chapter describing my methods, including a note about my unorthodox multimodal approach to this project consisting of writing, photography, and filmmaking.

We Have Never Been Disenchanted

The debate in the social sciences between how to classify, problematize, define, and otherwise engage with the categorical spheres of "religion" (which historically included cultural belief systems, particularly if they interacted with the supernatural, and which understands the world to be enchanted) and "science" (which historically stood in for "The Secular,"[3] Western rationality/modernity, and a disenchanted world) can arguably be traced to the sociological work of Max Weber (1958; 2005) and Émile Durkheim (1957). Both Durkheim and Weber were interested in exploring and tracing the linkages between what they saw as the rise of Western modernity and the decline of traditional forms of religion.

Of course, before getting too deep into the Weberian/Durkheimian legacy, it should be noted that the emergence of projects attempting to construct separate spheres that could be labeled "science" and "religion" in the West began long before academic engagements in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is important to look back to the Reformation, and the rise of what Charles Taylor (2007) has called the "buffered self," as the genesis of looking at the world through a "religious" or a "scientific" frame. Taylor defines the concept of the "buffered self" as the point when one becomes aware of the possibility of disengagement from one's surroundings, both natural and social. It is when one begins thinking of oneself as an individual rather than as just one part of a social, participatory web. So, for example, when Martin Luther preached that God alone saves, not the (Catholic) Church, he lowered

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[3] It is important to lay down a few definitions surrounding the secular. Talal Asad (2003) has clearly and succinctly described some key differences. Following his theorizations, I see "secularization" as a modern philosophy of history, "the secular" as a modern epistemic domain, and "secularity/secularism" as a modern political doctrine.

the status and roles of the monks and priests and raised the status and roles of everyone else, especially ordinary people. While this may seem democratic at first, it also meant that the everyday person now had the responsibility to practice a disciplined life—a life that used to be reserved solely for the monks—since communication with God was now possible without an intermediary.

In many parts of the Medieval Catholic world prior to the Reformation, the laity was not required to attend mass every day, or even every week. It was the duty of the priests and the monks to take on that spiritual labor for their communities. The Medieval laity did not have to go to the monastery to watch the priests and monks do their magic in order to believe that their spiritual health was being looked after. The obvious saliency of an enchanted world and the reality of "holy matter" went hand-in-hand with this; for example, Caroline Walker Bynum (2011) recounts stories of farmers and beer brewers hiding their communion wafers under their tongues during the Eucharist in order to bury them in their fields or under their beer casks later, taking advantage of the inherent material magic evident in the communion wafer—a magic which would promote good harvests or batches of beer. Plainly: the sacramental matter was *literally alive*.

However, when Martin Luther's Protestant revolution disembedded scripture from social relations and elevated it to a disconnected source which anyone could turn to with their problems, he individualized and separated salvation from an innately participatory practice—an ontological shift from one in which humans must do good collective works to one in which God, in his semi-disjoined celestial Kingdom, saves humanity solely because of his unending love. The moment that God was removed from Earthly matter, "science," as a way of interacting with and interpreting one's reality, had the opportunity to move into that void and issue explanations for a world that was rapidly being experienced as disenchanted.

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However, if we might return to the 19th and 20th centuries, neither Weber nor Durkheim sought to offer a durable, teleological assessment of modernity. Weber especially was interested in expressly Western manifestations of historical development, which he believed were irreplicable. Yet, Weber's description of a rapidly disenchanting West is not a tale of victory; it is tinged with a fair amount of melancholic lament—a nostalgic dirge of sorts for a world being *agentially* drained of its enchanted qualities—while also describing how one might face this modernity with hard-nosed pragmatism so as to shape themselves into the kind of modern subject who might be capable of living a fulfilling life while whirling inside of a disenchanted universe.

His series of lectures in 1904–1905, which became the book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 2005), were delivered as a specific historical case study of Europe, rather than as a blueprint for how some kind of monolithic Modernity might manifest anywhere. Durkheim (1957), while venturing further than Weber into psychoanalytic expressions of the universal—with concepts such as social facts and collective consciousness—still remained largely grounded within, in particular, Indigenous concepts of totemism to explain his theories on religion. Prior to the rise of "political religion" in the 1980s (*à la* thinkers like William Connolly), theories surrounding secularization largely revolved around the supposed empirical evidence of decreasing religious participation and increasing apathy for organized religion in the West (e.g. Wilson 1966).

However, since the 1980s, anthropology and her sister disciplines have begun to reject this viewpoint. John Milbank (2006), for example, has shown how many of these past scholars of the secular approached their arguments through contested claims that the contemporary Western world has somehow developed the ability to see "actual material

reality" by tossing aside religion, which is often viewed as an endeavor of childish immaturity. As Charles Taylor (2007) points out, these ideas run the risk of becoming foundational to chauvinist race-science through a belief that religion (specifically Christianity in Taylor's example) "propagat[es] a comforting myth about human beings which obscures the hard truth" (636). The "myth" being that humanity has a propensity toward hope, community, and mutual aid while the "truth" is that humans are naturally drawn toward aggression, toughness, and a Spencerian conception of "survival of the fittest"—which is supposedly the basis of so-called "human nature."

This viewpoint was developed, in part, following a misreading of Nietzsche (a crime of which most reactionary philosophy tends to be guilty); much ethnographically informed anthropology tends to show the opposite to be the case—that the supposed "myth" in the previously described scenario actually approaches something of a universal "human nature," if one can even exist (see Blakeman 2015; Borck 2018; Graeber 2001; 2004).[4] Additionally, ethnographic studies have illustrated that while many people in the West will reject the term "religion," they will still form beliefs and perform cultural practices that many anthropologists would still classify as being "religious" (Luhrmann 1989). Jason Josephson-Storm (2017) has shown with survey data that 73% of Americans hold at least one paranormal belief and 55% of Britons believe in some aspect of the supernatural, leading him to conclude that "secularization seems to amplify enchantment" (32). Furthermore, Storm, Erica Lagalisse (2019), and others convincingly demonstrate the entangled and coterminous nature between the occult, science, and radical democratic politics, leading to the conclusion that discourse on religion and the secular is far more muddied than Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, and the rest of the New Atheists might claim.

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[4] In fact, the universality of social and biological cooperation over competition has been proposed as an evolutionary imperative of not only humanity, but all life on Earth (Gatti 2016; Kropotkin 1902; Nowak 2006).

In sociologist José Casanova's (1994) seminal book *Public Religions in the Modern World*, he begins by provocatively tackling this New Atheist contestation directly by asking: "who still believes in the myth of secularization?" (11). Casanova's book lays a strong intellectual foundation for researchers interested in the nuanced phenomena of secularization and the relationship(s) between science and religion. Not only does Casanova believe that secularization, as previously constructed, is a myth, he also argues that the theory itself is far too monolithic.

He asserts that secularization actually consists of three separate premises: (a) as religious decline; (b) as differentiation; and (c) as privatization. The first point— secularization as religious decline—is the point with which Casanova takes the most umbrage. This argument, dating back to Enlightenment philosophy, is a deterministic model that claims religious sentiment and spiritual practice always naturally fade as societies develop through politico-economic programs of progressive modernization. Casanova argues that this is empirically false and uses a bulk of his book to share five case studies that demonstrate how religious activity, particularly in Europe and the United States, are stable, and, in some cases, growing. In particular, he argues that Catholicism and Pentecostal Protestantism are rapidly expanding across the globe in sometimes novel, syncretic, and deterritorialized forms.

The second point—secularization as differentiation—speaks to the historical processes of differentiation within Western modernity, which have come to objectify and make discrete "religion" from other social institutions—notably economics and politics. This point Casanova essentially accepts as a matter of historical reality.

The third point—secularization as privatization—is the idea that, in our modern globalized liberal age, religion necessarily exits the public sphere and becomes integrated

solely within one's private life. This point Casanova also accepts as an established coercive liberal doctrine, although he makes it clear that this is only one possibility amid a range of actual historical outcomes that need to be explored. In other words, it is not essential to modernity, but is a part of what scholars talk about when they invoke the concept of "secularization." This last point in particular is one that anthropologists such as Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood (among many, many others) have committed to more nuanced, rigorous, and critical anthropological research.

Asad's (2003) *Formations of the Secular*, for example, explicitly contests prior theorizations of the secular and stands as a foundational text for anthropologists of the contemporary. Asad begins with an invocation of, in particular, two members of the anthropology canon—Marcel Mauss and Mary Douglas—as being exemplary in the anthropological tradition of comparing embedded concepts (or traditions) with/between societies separated by time and space. At the same time, Asad is highly influenced by Foucauldian anti-essentialism—as well as Foucault's conceptualization of power, particularly between sovereign power and disciplinary power—and, throughout his book, he leans more toward emphasizing complex differences rather than seeking universal similarities. Asad's chief focus is the way secularism intertwines with capitalist liberal democracies, and while he attempts not to essentialize a West/non-West dichotomy, he also vividly illustrates that secularism, as a concept, has sprung from particular geo-historical sites of capitalist inequality—first from Europe and later from the United States—and runs into conflict with/in the colonized world.[5]

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[5] Asad also has a particular focus on how these forces interact with Islam, which is one of his major research foci and was especially relevant so soon after the attacks of September 11, 2001. For context, his book was published in the same year that the United States began its decades-long illegal war and occupation of Iraq.

Asad begins by claiming that liberal secularism holds the nature/culture divide to be self-evident and that this divide is tied to a belief in the universality of "human nature." Secularism, according to Asad, is a constellation of hegemonic liberal projects that use the myth of "progress" to construct how certain ways of living and being in the world are acceptable, while inferring that other ways of being are unacceptable, backward, or forbidden. Asad focuses a majority of his book on the concepts of agency, rights, subjectivity, and pain, arguing that suffering is not assuaged under liberal democracies, as is often claimed, but instead the pain is frequently refracted onto the Global South and concealed in certain ways domestically, both overtly and covertly.

Asad also illustrates the ways that secular logics construct what it means to be "normal," particularly in the ways it withholds forms of "agentive pain." Asad focuses specifically on asceticism and childbirth by illustrating how the lattice of secularity labels them illogical, and therefore taboo. Asad is careful to separate himself from theologians who might make claims that religion has some kind of privileged view of reality, or even that it influences—or as Asad says "infects"—secular ideas (such as nationalism) through an argument that, following Milbank (2006), "'the secular' should not be thought of as a space in which real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of 'religion' and thus achieves the latter's relocation" (Asad 2003, 191).

One of Asad's students, Saba Mahmood, carried his theorizing forward into her ethnographically informed anthropological work. Her first book, *Politics of Piety* (Mahmood 2005), confronts her own progressive, feminist, secular assumptions about what women's agency should look like, drawing from her fieldwork within the women's piety movement in Egypt. Her second, and unfortunately final, monograph, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* (Mahmood 2016), examines what she calls the four cornerstones of secularism (political and

civil equality, minority rights, religious freedom, and legal separations of private and public domains) and shows how these liberal ideas actually exacerbate religious tensions and inequalities, rather than quieting them. She argues this through extensive ethnographic fieldwork with Coptic Orthodox Christians and Bahá'ís in Egypt—both religious minorities within a predominantly Muslim country ruled by a supposed liberal, secular government (at least at the time).

However, in Mahmood's (2005) first book, she notes that the demographic makeup of the women who participated in the mosque movement consisted of what one might expect to be avid adopters of secular values: they were middle class, urban, upwardly mobile, increasingly educated, and working professional jobs. At first glance, the women's mosque movement could be explained by secular, liberal political means: these were women teaching other women about Islam. While this might be a part of the story, Mahmood's deep ethnographic work finds the political explanations insufficient. This was a movement whose primary purpose was to become more pious—where success was determined by the embodied need for prayer and spiritual engagement.

One of the chief contributions Mahmood (2005) provides through her study is her critique of anthropology's tendency to create and utilize binaries—common constructions being ritual/impulsivity, clean/dirty, agency/subservience. Part of the construction of these boundaries, argues Mahmood, is the intervention of the (liberal, secular) state, which determines what is acceptable and what is taboo, which values become enshrined in law and which are "backward," which practices deserve to be performed in public and which, for the sake of "freedom," should be relegated to the private sphere.

Ontological (U-)Turn

      The Ontological Turn (OT) in anthropology and her sister disciplines has attracted a great deal of attention in the past 10–15 years. Like most fashionable intellectual perspectives in academia, the stakes, meaning, and legacy of the OT continue to be hotly debated. However, since the dawn of the 2020s, the camps between the OT faithful and the OT skeptical have somewhat ossified within anthropology and debates over the "ontological" have mostly ebbed back to the interdisciplinary cracks from which it had first flowed—mainly within visual art, science and technology studies, posthumanist studies, multispecies ethnography, etc. Arguably, the high-water mark of OT engagement in anthropology was the courteous intellectual sparring in 2015 between Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2015) and David Graeber (2015a).

      Due to the nebulous nature of the OT, it is difficult to give a short synopsis of its arguments, but I will attempt to summarize at least some of the ways it has been used in anthropological research, as well as what I see are some of its strengths and weaknesses. With that said, it is important to remember that one of the long-standing foundations of anthropological research has been a focus on "society" and "culture," and while anthropologists continue to debate the meaning of these terms and how they may be constructed around the world, the most prominent understanding between anthropologists is that every human community has a "culture" or a "society," but the content of that "culture" and "society" is different and, therefore, the perspectives and norms of each society and culture will be different (Strathern 1995). However, at least in how I understand it, proponents of the OT argue that the very idea of socio-cultural *difference* actually reifies its opposite: mono-natural *unity* (Henare et al. 2007).

OTers argue that "non-ontological" anthropology subscribes to the idea that although people *see* the world differently, they are still existing and referencing the same, singular material world—in other words: there exists many epistemologies but only one ontology. According to OTers, this form of cultural relativism, which has been a mainstay in North Atlantic anthropology since at least Franz Boas, is not relativistic enough. Instead of many worldviews and only one world, OTers claim that, along with the worldviews, the *worlds themselves vary* (Hanare et al. 2007; Holbraad 2009).

Perhaps the most famous example to illustrate this point comes from one of the most vocal proponents of the OT, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014), in which he describes the Indigenous community he works with in the Amazon to be *naturally* relative, rather than *culturally* relative. All subjects, human or non-human, share the same culture, soul, and perspective; for example, they all see their limbs as hands and feet, they all see their shelter as houses, they all see what they drink as beer, and what they eat as manioc. However, if one's *body* is different—say, if I were to use Viveiros de Castro's example, I am a jaguar—then I will see beer when you, the human, sees blood; I see a home, you see a cave; I see manioc, you see the bloodied corpse of an animal. Viveiros de Castro dubs this "multinaturalist"— part of what he calls "Amerindian perspectivism," which hints at the OT's Deleuzian (1993) roots—and claims that it stretches back to an anecdote from Claude Lévi-Strauss (1952) in which he described the debates by the Spanish at Valladolid in the 16th century over whether or not Indigenous peoples in the Americas had *souls* like them (and were therefore human and could be baptized). Meanwhile, the Indigenous peoples of the Antilles were drowning Spanish colonizers in order to answer the same question, but in reverse—they were attempting to find out if the Spanish had *bodies* like them, or if they were ghosts.

Lucas Bessire and David Bond (2014) have identified two ways that the OT has activated pathways of engagement for anthropologists: (a) it attracts and acts as a hub for the discipline's posthumanist and multispecies avant-garde—as Eduardo Kohn (2013) asserted in his book *How Forests Think*: "an anthropology beyond the human is perforce an ontological one" (10)—and (b) the OT promises to restructure the progressive alignment of anthropology from a discipline that engages with the details of the present problems of the world and reorients its goal to imagining and depicting alternative futures. Bessire and Bond (2014) claim that the OTers fall prey to the worst excesses of utopianism, freeing themselves from the burden of contending with the material realities of their interlocutors and instead succumb to a "persuasive if unmoored form of speculative futurism" (441). Furthermore, as they have also acerbically (yet, perhaps truthfully) stated: for OTers, "to be radical, contra Marx, is not to grasp the thing by the root but to tend to a different plant altogether" (Bessire and Bond 2014, 441). That figurative plant, as it turns out, is premised on an imagined archetype of the "South American Primitive" and, in many ways, the OT, which claims to eschew all binaries under the guise of "radical alterity," ends up reifying the ultimate incommensurable modern binary—and, in my opinion, the most criminal and bloodstained binary within anthropology—that of the "modern" and "nonmodern" worlds.

Further afield, as pointed out by David Graeber (2015a), the term "ontology/ ontological" has also shifted in its meaning from an explicit form of philosophical discourse to "the—largely tacit—set of assumptions underlying the practice of natural and social science…and from there, to being the tacit assumptions underlying any set of practices or modes of being of any kind at all" (18). Through an adoption of that "tacit ontology," the OT in anthropology seems to actually turn its back on the *philosophical project* of ontology and instead becomes a re-branding of philosophical *idealism* through an implicit attack on

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materialist philosophies. For example, in Graeber's (2015a) textual analysis of the book that arguably established the OT, Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastel (2007) seem to always put words like "material" or "physical" in scare-quotes, while words like "concept" or "conception" (read: "ideas") remain free from the shackles of the quotation mark.

However, what Graeber perspicuously points out as being ultimately the conservative nature of the OT is how value-neutral it takes its project to be, effectively ignoring the power dynamics that, whether they like it or not, already exist within our world(s). Martin Holbraad has stated: "the ontological turn, in other words, protects our 'science' and our 'common sense' as much as it protects the 'native'" (quoted in Graeber 2015a, 7). Not only does this crystalize in place structures of authority that dictate there can even be something called "science" or "common sense," it also effectively discounts the analysis of the anthropologist—to say nothing of the interlocutor themselves. Essentially: I can only speak for myself; my interlocutor can only speak for themselves, or their people, or their "religion." More nefariously, because we *do* live in a world (or worlds) of inequalities and uneven power dynamics, no matter how "radical" the OTers think they can get with their "alterity," the structures in place tend to always favor hegemonic social orders—which, in the unfortunate case of our world today, is white supremacist, imperialist, Western, extractive, and capitalist.

This is not to say that everything about the OT should be relegated to the dustbin of history. There are redeeming kernels of insight that have strengthened anthropological discourse more broadly and this dissertation project more specifically. For example, as Graeber (2015a) has pointed out, the OT demands sincerely that the anthropologist take their interlocutors more seriously. And not only that, "it encourages what might be called a stance of creative respect towards the object of ethnographic inquiry" (Graeber 2015a, 21). The explanation of other worlds may always be impossible for the anthropologist, but the

OT urges us to conduct ethnography as a creative, experimental, and almost artistic project—that our familiar reality should be made so strange that we unleash in our minds, and in our ethnographies, what *could* exist. I think that the OT, when used as this kind of heuristic, yields generative and unseen results. It was one that I used productively in the film component of this dissertation (discussed further in Chapter 4). From a critical utopian perspective, I think the encouragement of the OT to utilize speculative thinking as an analytic is a good impulse. But the state of the OT today seems to be unable (or unwilling) to examine the questions of how and what kinds of differences get to matter within its framework. In particular, the OT seems to either completely ignore, or remain hostile to, considerations of class, race, and gender.

In recent years, especially since the emergence of the OT, Indigenous scholars in particular have pointed out that despite the fact that the OT strives toward the worthy goal of "ontological self-determination," many of its practitioners fail to respect Indigenous *physical and intellectual* self-determination by ignoring their political struggle and the continued effects of colonization—as well as their tacit relegation of Indigenous thinkers to mere "collaborators" or "interlocutors" instead of researchers in their own right (Todd 2016). This paternalistic engagement with Indigenous peoples is also quite widespread throughout global politics. Why, for example, is the face of climate activism bestowed upon the Al Gore's and Greta Thunberg's of the world while the long-term intellectual and political work of Inuit women like Rosemarie Kuptana and Sheila Watt-Cloutier remain in the relative shadows? This *mediation of knowledge*—the critique that in order for mainstream North Atlantic anthropology to take ideas seriously, they must first be filtered through (usually white, middle class male) intermediaries—actually invalidates the OT's claim that they are attempting to conduct a "symmetrical," "trans-epistemic" anthropology (Ahmed 2014;

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Ramos 2012; Todd 2016). And indeed, this critique seems hard to empirically refute. Other than a few Brazilian scholars, almost every author writing in the spirit of the OT has fit this demographic, and I know of no Indigenous scholars who take the OT seriously (in its present form).[6]

And so, if we necessarily shift our attention to decolonization and Indigeneity in anthropology, it is imperative that the political be reckoned with. That said, the project of decolonizing anthropology is not programmatic—as pointed out by Jafari Sinclaire Allen and Ryan Cecil Jobson (2016), decolonization is a project that must continually be refashioned and reinterpreted in accordance with the exigencies of the present. It takes seriously that which Franz Fanon (2008) expounded in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "Every human problem cries out to be considered on the basis of time, the ideal being that the present always serves to build the future" (xvi).

To make myself perfectly clear: my argument is not that the aims of the OT are necessarily wrong or misguided, but rather, I am arguing that they do not currently live up to the promises that they make. This is primarily due to the fact that the OT fails to ask why— given that the "otherwise" is supposedly everywhere—some "existents-existences" stay in place (Povinelli 2016)? And, if the OT is really about "the optimist (non-skeptical) hope of making the otherwise visible by experimenting with the conceptual affordances present in a given body of ethnographic materials [by stressing] that such material can be drawn from anywhere, anytime, and anyone…" (Holbraad et al. 2014, para. 5), then the significant question becomes: why is this not happening? Could it have something to do with who it is that is doing most of the describing? As Zoe Todd (2016) has asked: "What are the political-

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[6] As an example of this demographic disparity, anthropologist and Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson, in a private conversation with me at a conference in 2016, referred to OTers as "the Onto boys" while we were discussing who made up a majority of those who were thinking along these lines.

legal implications for Indigenous peoples when our stories, our laws, our philosophies are used by European scholars without explicit credit to the political, legal, social and cultural (and colonial!) contexts these stories are formulated and shared within?" (17).

Kwakwaka'wakw scholar Sarah Hunt (2014) refers to this misuse of Indigenous ontologies as "epistemic violence" that reinforces neo-colonial logics within the North Atlantic academy because it erases the embodied, performative, legal, and political structures that are intertwined within these ontologies as they are *actually practiced* by Indigenous peoples. If we are to carry on and decolonize the worthy ideas from the OT, we must approach them as "scenes of apprehension"—what Audra Simpson (2014) terms as the moments when ethnography and colonized peoples come into disciplinary being and are predicated on social and political relationships.

We must acknowledge that the dominant reality is that Indigenous peoples (and most working class people, especially in the Global South) are only one invasion or economic policy away from re-colonization at any moment (Todd 2016). If we are to take seriously that the climate, water, atmospheres, non-human people, spirits, ghosts, ancestors, etc. are not so separate or constructed as we have previously thought—if we are to take seriously Viveiros de Castro's (2014) call for the "permanent decolonization of thought"—then we need to do so without perpetuating the exploitation of Indigenous peoples. White anthropologists especially (myself included) need to not react so defensively, and we need to listen to Indigenous peoples *while also changing our behavior* if they tell us that our citational practices, our theoretical framework, and/or our research is contributing to *the extant and ongoing reality/ realities of colonialism.*

Apophatic Marxism: A Dialectic of Melancholy and Nostalgia

"Political humility demands not new certainties for old, but a new, less certain way. With such humility should come grief appropriate to the epoch. 'Don't mourn,' goes the Left

injunction, 'organise.' A bullying disavowal. How can we organise except through mourning?"

<div align="right">–China Miéville (2018, 116)</div>

"We are realists. We dream the impossible."

<div align="right">–Ernesto "Che" Guevara</div>

I would like to leave behind the traditional literature review in favor of a couple political, philosophical, and anthropological dispositions that have gripped ahold of my work before, during, and after research. The remaining sections in this chapter are both the connective tissue that intellectually hold together this anthology as well as a declaration of my positionality as a researcher. Like other radical scholars—or, I would wager, any scholar that is at least progressive minded—my life is deeply mired in the psychological tarpits of ecological grief. Sometimes it is hard to wade out of it. Living, watching, and experiencing our world burn in front of us with no substantial action being taken due to the inherent nature of capitalism leave many of us crippled with solastalgia,[7] as Glenn Albrecht (2005) has called the feeling of "homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home'"; the "pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault…" (49).

Solastalgia can fuel a diversity of motivations and perceived pathways for the future. For some, it can lead to an "eco-nihilism" (Lee 2017) that tends to be the foundation for both neoliberal policies ("we're fucked anyway, so we might as well capture as much capital as we can in the time we have left!") and climate change denialism ("global warming is nothing but another woke-liberal-globalist-communist plot to strangle liberty and freedom

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[7] Solastalgia is a neologism coined by Albrecht that combines the Latin *sōlācium* (comfort) and the Greek *-algia* (grief, pain, suffering). Although it has mostly been used to describe distress attributed to climate change, it can also characterize existential despair felt by communities suffering from the effects of, for example, colonialism, natural disasters, strip mining projects, industrial agriculture, etc. In this way, especially in how this pertains to the following section, it can be a foil to Mark Fisher's (2017) definition of the "weird" (that which does not belong).

for all!"). However, the most recent iteration of eco-nihilism has expressed itself as eco-fascism, an environmentalism that tends to equate certain humans with being the primary cause for climate change on Earth (and should therefore be subjugated) and others as the ethical inheritors of the Earth (and should therefore be in control). Most eco-fascist arguments place climate change blame on the Global South, despite the fact that (a) a majority of greenhouse gas emissions are produced through transnational energy conglomerates and militaries that, like the emissions themselves, do not care about geopolitical borders; (b) the Global South is most in danger for the immediate effects of climate change; and (c) the totality of the Global South produces well below 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions[8] (Boden et al. 2017). This dangerous ideology has already inspired several mass shootings, including at a Christchurch, New Zealand mosque in 2019 that left 51 people dead, an El Paso, Texas shooter that killed 23 in the same year, and a 2022 shooting of a grocery store in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Buffalo, New York in which 10 people were murdered.

As with all fascist ideologies, there is a favoring of certain people over others. Most eco-fascist screeds—including the manifestos left by the shooters in the terror attacks listed above—espouse a staple of fascist ideology: racial "replacement theory," the argument that race is stable and essential for national identity and those deemed "nonwhite" are both expanding and conspiring to eliminate the "white race" (Hancock 2022). Never mind the fact that those who are deemed "nonwhite" and "white" are wholly socially constructed and have varied substantially throughout history—in just the past 200 years, for example, the

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[8] By comparison, even conservative estimates (such as the cited 2017 study by the Oak Ridge National Laboratory) attribute 15% of total greenhouse gas emissions to the United States alone. This figure does not take into account the immense amount of emissions that spew out of the imperialist American military that is spread across more than 1,000 installations on every continent but Antarctica (Turse 2011).

nonwhite Other has been as diverse as Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Jewish, Irish, Italian, and so on (Olson 2004). We will return to these eco-fascist ideas in Chapter 5.

Conventional progressive politics, particularly liberal politics, tend to face our ecological crises by doubling down on a commitment to Truth, which itself is connected to a Weberian conception of a disenchanted scientism. Ironically perhaps, the way that liberals interact with Truth tends to be from one agent to another; Truth itself has an innate agency to motivate others (for the liberal, "speaking truth to power" is a statement of social/ontological fact rather than a first step in an emancipatory politics), as if the only thing that is necessary to win political victories is to utter the right incantation of Truth and it will break through the veil of incomprehension bewitching one's political adversaries. This elitist, coercive, and ultimately self-soothing political commitment is what Miéville (2018) has termed "revolt through the reveal" (116). As if we are not all ensnared within the hegemonic mists of forces beyond our control. As if all that is needed is for the liberal magician to expose the prestige, and all irreconcilable contradictions will be burned away by the blinding light of Truth itself.

Others, such as myself, have faced this solastalgia by refusing to succumb to the comfort of replicating and regurgitating the same totalizing systems of the 20th century, while also taking care not to dispose of some of their more indelible qualities. I am not speaking here of fascism, which contains no essential truths for humanity, but instead, of a transmutation and revitalization of Marxism that, like the perspective of many of my interlocutors, is seen as a heuristic system that is necessarily and inherently able to be separated from the material realities of the last century and reapplied to the crises of our present. This, in itself, may not sound any different than Orthodox Marxism—or what will be referred to henceforth as *cataphatic Marxism*. Yet, what I hope to do is build upon China

Miéville's (2018) proposal for an *apophatic Marxism;* a Marxism that takes seriously the plethora of aporias and uncertainties that seem to define the 21st century. In short: this ain't your granddaddy's Marxism.

Before getting too deep into what an apophatic Marxism might look like, it would be worth giving a brief overview of the rich history of apophatic theology. Apophatic theology is an attempt to reach the divine through negation—to follow the "negative path" *(via negativa)* which understands that the goodness of the divine is beyond that which is comprehensible, describable, or experienceable by humanity. This is in contrast to cataphatic theology, which is perhaps more recognizable, as a theology of affirmations—the *via positiva* attempts to describe all of the attributes of what God *is* as opposed to what God *is not*. Both approaches are attempting to connect with the divine, but in an apparent opposition to cataphasis, "the apophatic way, or mystical theology…has for its object God, in so far as He is absolutely incomprehensible" (Lossky 1957, 28). While apophasis as a philosophical school emerges with Neo-Platonism, the more familiar engagements within Western philosophy occur once it had fused with the Jewish tradition by Philo of Alexandria and with Christian thought by Dionysius the Areopagite (Carabine 1995). Yet, this is not to say that apophatic philosophy is strictly a Western phenomenon; apophasis is an important school of thought in many philosophies/theologies around the world, particularly throughout Asia (Franke 2018).

Often, apophatic theology expresses itself in motifs of "divine darkness" (Thacker 2015a), such as night, shadows, clouds, or mist. These motifs invite us to reflect on the mystery of darkness, which holds within it the "basic philosophical dilemma of a nothing that is something" (Thacker 2015a, 18). Darkness represents an absence, but within that absence is a presence: the presence of absence. Darkness is a useful apophatic theological

heuristic in that darkness not only represents the incomprehensibility of a very unhuman deity—such as the Abrahamic God—but it also provides us, as Angela of Foligno (1999) argued in the 13th century, a mode of ecstatically annihilating our humanness so as to strive to achieve a union with that which is so radically unhuman that it remains completely occluded through human categories. "And when I am in that darkness, I do not remember anything about humanity or the God-Man, or anything that has form. Yet when I am in that darkness I see everything and I see nothing" (Angela of Foligno 1999, 69). For many mystics, the consecutive emptying and negating of the self is a chief prerequisite in being able to receive divine presence. Meister Eckhart (2009) stressed:

> So in truth, no creaturely skill, nor your own wisdom nor all your knowledge can enable you to know God divinely. For you to know God in God's way, your knowing must become a pure unknowing, and a forgetting of yourself and all creatures…You cannot do better than to place yourself in darkness and in unknowing. (56)

It should come as no surprise then, that within our solastalgic age, there seems to be an enthusiastic revival to seek solutions through processes of negation. As William Franke (2007) pointed out: "apophatic reflection belongs particularly to periods of crisis, when confidence in established discourses crumbles, when the authoritative voice of orthodoxies and their official affirmations—and even affirmative, assertive discourse per se—begin to ring hollow" (31). In other words, to borrow a familiar axiom of the occult: "as above" with apophatic theologies, "so below" with radical political (a)theologies. In Catherine Keller's (2015) aptly titled *Cloud of the Impossible*, she succinctly voices this dialectic: "a voice in me shrills: let unsaying mean 'enough with the talking'—an activist apophasis! *Do* this truth, make it happen!" (26). This is reminiscent of another radical theologian who engaged with "activist apophasis;" the abolitionist John Brown, who, after becoming frustrated with the excessive loquaciousness of the New England Anti-Slavery Convention in May 1859, declared: "these men are all talk; what is needed is action—action!"

An apophatic Marxism, then, is a radical reengagement with Nicholas of Cusa's "learned ignorance" *(docta ignorantia).* Instead of remaining shackled to an enlightenment rationalism, we must start, strive, and apply change from a position of *lacking.* To clarify, the cataphatic Marxist attachment to rationalism and radical enlightenment is not an incorrect stance—and it does, in fact, give us solid analyses of the world and ways of moving forward —it is, however, a position that is incomplete and insufficient for the challenges of our time. "Lack," Miéville (2018) demands, "must be part of how we see the world, how we act in it, how we speak and change it" (118). "Yet," Vladimir Lossky (1957) reminds us, it is an *active* lacking, "this *ignorantia*, not only *docta* but charitable also, redescends again upon these concepts that it may mould them…" (49). We must, as Dionysius the Areopagite advised us, "strive upwards unknowingly" *(ἀγνώστως ἀνατάθητι),* to transmute the cataphatic material dialectic into *coincidentia oppositorum*—a union of opposites (Cusanus 2007).

Despite sometimes being labeled a cataphatic thinker, Marx himself understood the power of apophasis. For example, he famously never divulged his ideas on what a communist future would look like, despite being pressured to do so on many occasions, including in a letter from Friedrich Engels (1982) on November 27, 1851, pleading for him to expose "the much-vaunted 'positive,' being what you 'really' want" (493). Marx's refusal to delineate the specific contours of communist society was not only a bid to avoid what he saw as idealist projections, but was also a willingness to *unknow*—to gaze into the brilliant darkness of an aporetic futurity. In fact, Marx preferred to use the term "communism" to describe the *movement* that would defeat the capitalist order, rather than as a characterization of the *society* that would begin to emerge after. He made this perfectly clear in *The German Ideology:* "Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which

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abolishes the present state of things" (Marx 1998, 57). As pointed out by Colin O'Connell (1992), "what we have here is an image of the future primarily based on the *via negativa*" (200).

I would like to stress again that my focus on apophasis is not a reaction to any kind of *inaccuracy* in Marxism's historical relationship with cataphasis. Rather, focusing on apophasis is an attempt to offset the political reliance of cataphatic thought on the various Marxisms. Additionally, striving to leverage cataphatic/apophatic approaches as a dyad of opposites betrays the very thinking that I am attempting to point us toward. This confusion is not a unique problem and is one that apophatic theology has wrestled with since the beginning: "Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations…" (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 136). Dionysius, along with apophatic theologian John Scotus Eriugena, understood that a negation of all created affirmations therefore implies a kind of dialectic super-affirmation—what Deirdre Carabine (1995) calls a "*hyperphatic* theology, in which both theologies are ultimately transcended" (312). This is a philosophy which reaches negation *through* affirmation, a twisting of doctrines in which the *via positiva* and *via negativa* are not opposing routes, but merely switchbacks upon the same mountain path which ascends through the cloud layer of unknowing toward the Sisyphean summit of transcendence. Ultimately, I agree with Miéville (2018) in his assertion that "what may be most effective is a hyperphatic Marxism" (129).

There is, of course, a danger in rejecting a purely scientific explanation of the world —and we see that danger made manifest in the proliferation of conspiracy theories and climate change denialism today. But relying purely upon scientism is also dangerous, and turns a blind eye to the more holistic reality of our universe and the politics enacted within it. Miéville (2018) stresses "there is to the social world something surplus to any reductive

literalism, and that thus the supple deployment of apophatic techniques—because each

usage must be ruthlessly evaluated—allows for *greater* precision" (124). In other words, to

borrow a phrase from Gaymon Bennett (2021), we are not telling a "mere subtraction story

in which superstition is stripped away and nothing of real value is lost" (7). Rather, our

understanding of the world through this "reductive literalism" is *produced* through pathways

of power which must be adaptively and constantly reenacted so that they may be crafted into

our scientific common sense. Within this arena of power, an apophatic receptivity broadens

the ways in which we can know and change the world by taking seriously aspects of the

unsayable and unknowable that exist outside of a strictly scientific materialist framework.

After all, secularization, as a modern philosophical project, is also a kind of apophasis—a

political and ontological stance of unsaying. However, what secularism as a political project

lacks is its own "*docta ignorantia*, its knowing what in its moment it does not know" (Keller

2018, 160). For an example of a political *docta ignorantia*, let us take one of the important

apophatic characteristics of power—that of political intuition—which Marxist theorist

Antonio Gramsci (1971) argues

> is not expressed through the artist, but through the "leader"; and "intuition" must be
> understood to mean not "knowledge of [humanity]", but swiftness in connecting
> seemingly disparate facts, and in conceiving the means adequate to particular ends—
> thus discovering the interests involved, and arousing the passions of [humanity] and
> directing them toward a particular action. The "expression" of the "leader" is [their]
> "action" (in a positive or negative sense, of launching or preventing a particular
> action, which is consistent or inconsistent with the end which one wishes to attain).
> (252)

The twisting of the vines of cataphasis and apophasis transcends and transmutes

into an unbreakable rope called *praxis*, that ideal combination of political education and

action. "Such a theology performs its *negations* for the sake of the most *positive* relations

possible" (Keller 2015, 3; emphasis mine). Opening the ways of knowing beyond cataphatic

thought allows us to parse subtle distinctions; for example, let us examine the nuance

between that which is *unspeakable* and that which is *unsayable*. The "unspeakable horrors" (Lenin 1974, 165) of Marxism's ideological enemies—oppression, war, imperialism, racism, sexism, etc.—have been examined extensively within the political left canon. The word "unspeakable" is not a throwaway term, but one that expresses an inherent particularity within the depravities of capitalism. These depravities are difficult to describe due to their systemic expansiveness, which is perhaps why theologians like Paul Tillich (1971) describe the capitalist system as "demonic." Perhaps this agentive ascription is also why Walter Benjamin (1999), during the first rise of fascism, asserted "that capitalism will not die a natural death" (667). Apophatic mystery is an important component to systemic analysis "because 'mystery' is polysemic, and though it is certainly not opaque, as lived social reality there is always something more to that oppression than can be said. There is a mystery of iniquity" (Miéville 2018, 138). In this way, capitalism's "unspeakable" horrors are a foil to Marx's "unsayable" description of communism.

Perhaps there exists more clarity on why I started this chapter with de Certeau's *incompétence*. A politics of the unsayable, of incapacity, of unknowing, an openness to being surprised, is a necessary condition for an effective politics and is one that Marx (1976) also argued for in *The Poverty of Reason:* "Human reason, which is anything but pure, having only incomplete vision, encounters at every step new problems to be solved" (172). The more that we claim to know, the more the unknown reveals itself. For Étienne Balibar (1995), this incompleteness *(inachèvement)* is not only necessary for philosophy, but must be made active, into a verb: to incomplete *(inachever)*.

> Marx *incompleted Capital* (and toiled all his life to incomplete it)…One might go even further and assert that the nature of a great philosophy is not only to incomplete itself, but to *incomplete others*, by introducing itself or by being introduced in their writing…And if it is true that the regulating idea of "system" is fundamentally a modern version of the old *imago mundi*, the meaning of all these aporetic

undertakings is, if not to "transform," probably *to incomplete the world*, or the representation of the world as "a world." (Balibar 1995, 146)

The incompleting of the world in the 21st century is a project profoundly influenced by the reciprocal apophatic amalgam of *nostalgia* and *melancholy*. We live in the ruins of hegemonic ideologies—haunted by the specters of the totalizing systems of the past century, whether they were/are victorious, vacillating, vanishing, or vanquished. Nostalgia and melancholy profoundly influence the material ideologies of our world(s), but their influence cannot be pointed to, unmasked, and captured. Rather, we must empty and unknow ourselves so that we may catch a fuzzy glimpse before, as Slavoj Žižek (2008) might say, "this being dissolves itself into nothingness or, more precisely…changes into another kind of reality" (25). However, as I will discuss in ethnographic detail in Chapter 3, the traits of nostalgia and melancholy are not universal; they have a strong relationship to *place*, and are therefore also agents of placemaking.

Philosophers and cultural geographers have robust distinctions between what is considered a *space* versus what is considered a *place*. As Lisa Messeri (2016) succinctly summarized: "space is universal, empty, and a priori, while places are meaning-filled subsections of space" (13). But as she also points out, this is a problematic distinction since space becomes associated with "the global, the objective, and the masculine" and place gets attributed to the local, the subjective, and the feminine (Messeri 2016, 13). Despite this, I agree with Messeri (2016) that place remains a helpful category and I likewise intend to destabilize it, to treat it as "multiple and varied, constantly being made and altered" (13). Indeed, I believe this flux can be assigned to, amongst other factors, the similarly fluctuating union of nostalgia and melancholy. Place is both constructed by, and constitutes meaning for, the practices of everyday life (de Certeau 2011).

The importance of place to nostalgia in particular is a factor that is often glossed over due to the way the term is used within our common vernacular. Yet nostalgia's essence is dependent on the activity of placemaking, a practice in which it is necessary to secure a deep, emotional connection to occupied spaces. The subsequent severing of place from being therefore becomes the initial trauma that fuels feelings of nostalgia. As Edward Casey (1993) has argued: "nostalgia, contrary to what we usually imagine, is not merely a matter of regret for lost times; it is also a pining for *lost places*, for places we have once been in yet can no longer reenter…" (37). This "pining" for places that no longer exist within space and/or time is why melancholy is inseparable from nostalgia.[9]

This last point, in particular, is important within a post-Cold War/post-Soviet context. I intentionally use these two terms interchangeably. The trauma that was the collapsing of the Soviet Union, beginning in 1989 and fully crumbling by 1991, is an event that profoundly reshaped the material and affective geopolitics of our planet. Even though the term is often used as a (frankly, imperialist) descriptor of the non-Russian member-states that were part of the Soviet Union, I argue that the entirety of this planet exists as a post-Soviet space (place?). The consequence of losing a major superpower that, for nearly the

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[9] Although place is usually dependent upon both space *and* time, since place is not a static category and the same space within a place becomes a different place in a different time. Hence why one's "return" always holds within it at least a *soupçon* of sadness. This is also why spaces that seem to deviate from this affective reality tend to give us uncanny feelings of liminality. The most obvious and interesting examples of this are within generic zones of transit (e.g. airports, shopping malls) which have come to dominate the late capitalist landscape—locations which Marc Augé (2009) called "non-places." Mark Fisher (2014) added another important layer to non-places, namely, the commercial flattening of our perceived passage of time—starting during the advent of neoliberalism in the late-1970s—which he hinted at calling *non-time*. He argued that we have lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present, and therefore, we are unable to reconcile the passage of time outside of a corporate calendar. Time now passes according to quarterly reports and fiscal years. And because of this, we have lost any kind of idea of "progress" (or, perhaps, "progress" has abandoned us). This is what Fisher (2014) has called "the slow cancellation of the future." Or, as David Graeber (2012) asked, in his beautiful way of always being able to cut through the bullshit: "where, in short, are the flying cars? Where are the force fields, tractor beams, teleportation pods, antigravity sleds, tricorders, immortality drugs, colonies on Mars, and all the other technological wonders any child growing up in the mid-to-late twentieth century assumed would exist by now?" (66).

entire 20th century, opposed the capitalist order is one that we continue to reckon with today. Whether that capitalist opposition was in practice or in name only does not even empirically matter if one analyzes how quickly and brutally—following the disappearance of that dissenting geopolitical voice—capitalism has mutated, subjugated, and colonized the world, along with the minds of most everyone in it, over the course of these past 32 years. The intensification of neoliberalism might better be understood as a refinement of what Aimé Césaire (2001) called the "terrific boomerang effect" (36) of colonialism wherein North Atlantic foreign policy has come home to roost domestically. The effects of this super-colonization is what Mark Fisher (2009) has called *capitalist realism*: "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). An anecdote from the former Chancellor of Germany, Willy Brandt, further supports this line of reasoning.

> [Brandt] never forgave Gorbachev for allowing the dissolution of the Communist bloc—not because Brandt was a secret believer in Soviet Communism, but because he was well aware that the disappearance of the Communist bloc would also entail the disappearance of Western Europe's social-democratic welfare state. That is to say, Brandt knew that the capitalist system is ready to make considerable concessions to the workers and the poor only if there is a serious threat of an alternative, of a different mode of production that promises workers their rights. To retain its legitimacy, capitalism has to demonstrate how it works better even for the workers and the poor, and the moment this alternative vanishes, elites can proceed to dismantle the welfare state. (Žižek 2022)

This kind of capitalist realism presents a very different kind of apophasis: its broken, mutilated dialectic between past and future has created an annihilation of hope and a hegemonic feeling of an eternal present. I have called this capitalist apophasis *cannibal dialectics* and I will go into further detail about it in Chapter 3. This is why an apophatic Marxism is so crucial to articulate, and why it has an important relationship to the genealogy of Cosmism, as will become clear. Through mourning, a melancholic approach to history allows us *to remember* as a form of praxis. Walter Benjamin (1969) is perhaps the most

significant Western theorist of this kind of active "remembering" *(Eingedenken)*, in which historical facts are not firm and static, but are the "convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data" (157). Benjamin's (1969) practice of remembering as a militant melancholic lament was almost certainly drawn from Jewish mysticism—in particular the act of *zekher*, that is, re-actualizing memory within one's present experience—and is about the shaping and transmitting of history, rather than passively preserving it, so that one could "pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand" (159).

Before continuing, I wish to take a brief tangent, for it would be intellectually and ethically irresponsible to not point out that recent revolutions throughout Latin America have already innately mobilized this kind of active Benjaminian melancholy and nostalgia in highly effective ways. By "waking up the shadows" of people like Augusto César Sandino, Farabundo Martí, Emiliano Zapata, Simón Bolívar, José Martí, Pancho Villa, and scores of Indigenous figures, the continuing revolutions in Chile, Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Mexico, among others, have been able to enact social movements in the present while *actively* using the lessons of the past (Traverso 2016, 74). This kind of "insurgent critical thinking," as Alexander Aviña (2018) has termed it, allowed revolutionaries in Mexico, for example, to find in Marxism effective tools for explaining contemporary conflicts *through* their 1910 revolutionary constitution—the ideals of which were betrayed in favor of neoliberal *Yanqui* collaboration in recent years by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*.

Peasant radicalism, in particular, has a deep revolutionary tradition in many parts of Latin America and the concept of a living past which acts upon the present and future—an ontological reality which may seem like a novel concept to theorists in the Global North—has always been an innate and integral component to social movements in the Global South.

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This is a reality that Aviña's (2014) aptly titled book *Specters of Revolution* brilliantly covers. It is also a reality that Guillermo Bonfire Batalla (1996) has termed "deep Mexico" *(México profundo)*, the occluded reality that Mesoamerican Indigenous ontologies dialectically permeate throughout, while also consistently resist, Mexican (and, indeed, all Latin American) elite nationalist institutions. This idea was expounded upon by Subcomandante Marcos, the enigmatic former military leader and spokesman for the ongoing revolutionary organization which continues to hold substantial territory in the Mexican state of Chiapas since 1994: the Zapatista Army of National Liberation *(Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional,* EZLN*)*. Expanding upon Batalla's proposition, Marcos argued that Indigenous peoples are a part of what he termed "basement Mexico," a state of nonbeing to the state, but one that has also existed before its establishment (Maher 2022). However, this temporal disruption and embracing of a living past has always been, and continues to be, the revolution's strength. Revolutionaries are able to, through memory, preserve hope for the future without falling victim to the Western trap of teleological thinking (Traverso 2016). Or, as it was beautifully stated in an EZLN communique: "a rebellion with mostly Indigenous blood has defied the present disenchantment by putting one foot in the past and the other in the future" *(una rebelión con sangre mayoritariamente indígena ha desafiado el desencanto presente poniendo un pie en el pasado y otro en el futuro)* (EZLN 1997, 257).

Capitalist realism, on the other hand, is more coercive of the past, hoping to place history in a kind of stasis. Starting well before the fall of the Soviet Union, but intensifying as it crumbled, there has been an attempt to ontologically and epistemologically collapse

communism to an historical existence of unceasing alienation and oppression.[10] This not only ignores the rich, global diversity of communist experimentation, but even within Soviet historical space, it flattens the diverse experiences of those living all over the vast Soviet Union, many of whom, even during the stagnant latter years of the Soviet experiment, had found great hope, joy, and pride in their contributions to the building of socialism (Ghodsee 2015; 2017; 2018; von Eschen 2022; Yurchak 2005). By casting itself as the natural victor, apophatic post-Soviet capitalism has ushered in yet another disenchantment of the world. While Weber lamented 20th century capitalism's dehumanizing need for instrumental rationality, 21st century capitalist realism signifies a second order disenchantment brought on by the failure of its alternatives on a global scale (Traverso 2016).

In a capitalist realist world, the past is permanently encased behind a plexiglass display case, eclipsing the brilliant shadow of death. It appears as Benjamin's (1940) Angel of History—reigning over a place of limitless ruin—yet, capitalist apophasis negates Benjamin's inherent messianism; there is no longer the "now-time" *(Jetzt-zeit)* speaking back to the defeated ancestors of the past and carrying their banner forward into a hopeful future that may lead to their redemption. Capitalist realism takes the opposite approach and depends on the flattening of past tragedies to promote an inactive remembrance that is much easier to categorize and control. Enzo Traverso (2016) argues this salient point, a detail that intensely resonates in the 2020s as we see a renewed commitment, particularly in the Global North, to

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[10] As I have written about before (see Genovese 2020), this irony seems to be a case of psychological projection since capitalism empirically produces alienation and oppression on a much wider scale. The attempt at delegitimizing current radical experimentation (particularly throughout Latin America) continues today through violence that is both direct (e.g. Operation Gideon, the 2020 U.S.-backed failed *coup d'état* of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela) and indirect (e.g. the attempt to legitimize so-called "Havana Syndrome" starting in 2016; unsubstantiated claims that Cuban sonic weapons are being used against Western embassies). This latter example is another perfect instance of psychological projection, since the U.S. regime has been using long-range acoustic device (LRAD) weapons against its own people since at least the 2009 G20 Summit protests in Pittsburgh and I have personally witnessed LRADs being deployed by the Phoenix Police Department against peaceful protestors between 2016–2021.

inaugurate a third Red Scare against communism/socialism, a threatening of Jewish existence, and state retaliation against Black social movements (particularly Black Lives Matter) and Indigenous sovereignty (e.g. water protectors battling the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline):

> The memory of the Gulag erased that of revolution, the memory of the Holocaust replaced that of antifascism, and the memory of slavery eclipsed that of anticolonialism: the remembrance of the victims seems unable to coexist with the recollection of their hopes, of their struggles, of their conquests and their defeats. (10)

In 1959, Theodor W. Adorno (1998) recognized this creeping flattening of history, as nations began to initiate programs to "work through their past" as a way of foreclosing an active relationship to traumatic memory: "in this usage 'working through the past' does not mean seriously working upon the past…on the contrary, its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory" (89). One of the best examples of this can be found in Spain's "pact of forgetting" *(pacto del olvido)*, a bipartisan political decision to not address atrocities committed by the Spanish state following the fascist coup of Francisco Franco in 1936. This "pact" was institutionalized in the 1977 Amnesty Law which, only two years after Franco's death, guaranteed impunity for all fascist crimes during the Civil War and during Franco's reign. It should be pointed out that an overwhelming amount of Francoist Spain's victims were socialists and communists. However, through this melancholy, and putting "one foot in the past and the other in the future," many of the victims have been fighting for justice, and in 2010, they convinced Argentinean criminal courts to begin an investigation to indict surviving Francoist officials and charge them with crimes against humanity (Carracedo and Bahar 2018).

As cliché as it sounds, we live in dark times. It can often feel alienating, and indeed, as I have discussed, it has been *built that way*. But there is a certain kind of hope in that place,

there is light beyond light emitting rays of brilliant darkness. It lies within the quotidian, within occluded familiarity, within the obnoxiously obvious. As David Graeber (2015b) so poignantly put it: "…the ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently" (89).

In 1919, in commemoration of the founding of the Communist International, amongst the blood and hunger of the utterly brutal Russian Civil War, Soviet artist V.V. Spassky created a work that perhaps epitomizes an apophatic Marxism (Figure 2). In the illustration, a lone figure seems, at first glance, lost at sea. Amid turbulent waves, a heavily damaged ship flying the tattered banner of Tsarist Russia is being swallowed by the inky darkness of the night, and in the foreground we have that hunched survivor, gripping a makeshift oar that is festooned with a red handkerchief and a black wreath, standing atop a rather peculiar life raft: an open copy of *The Communist Manifesto*. On the verso is written the rallying call "Proletarians of all countries, unite!" *(Proletarii vsekh stran, soyedinyaytes'!)* and on the recto, the name of the man who coined it, Karl Marx. But this depiction is an unusual one, especially for an artwork created in the spirit of celebration. The scene is melancholic and dangerous, a far cry from archetypical depictions of the New Soviet Man or the idyllic glory of socialist achievements. The figure is shirtless, hunched, disheveled, in pain. There is a glimmer of hope on the horizon—the lighthouse—but it is quite far away, leading one to surmise that there are no guarantees that it can even be reached.

Enzo Traverso's (2021) analysis of the image is that "the message of the poster is clear nonetheless: the socialist future is not compromised, since the Communist International embodies a light of hope" (7). Yet what I see in this work is the anxiety caused by the vicissitudes of war, especially considering the time period in which it was created. In 1919, the Russian Revolution was being ideologically and materially attacked by not only the
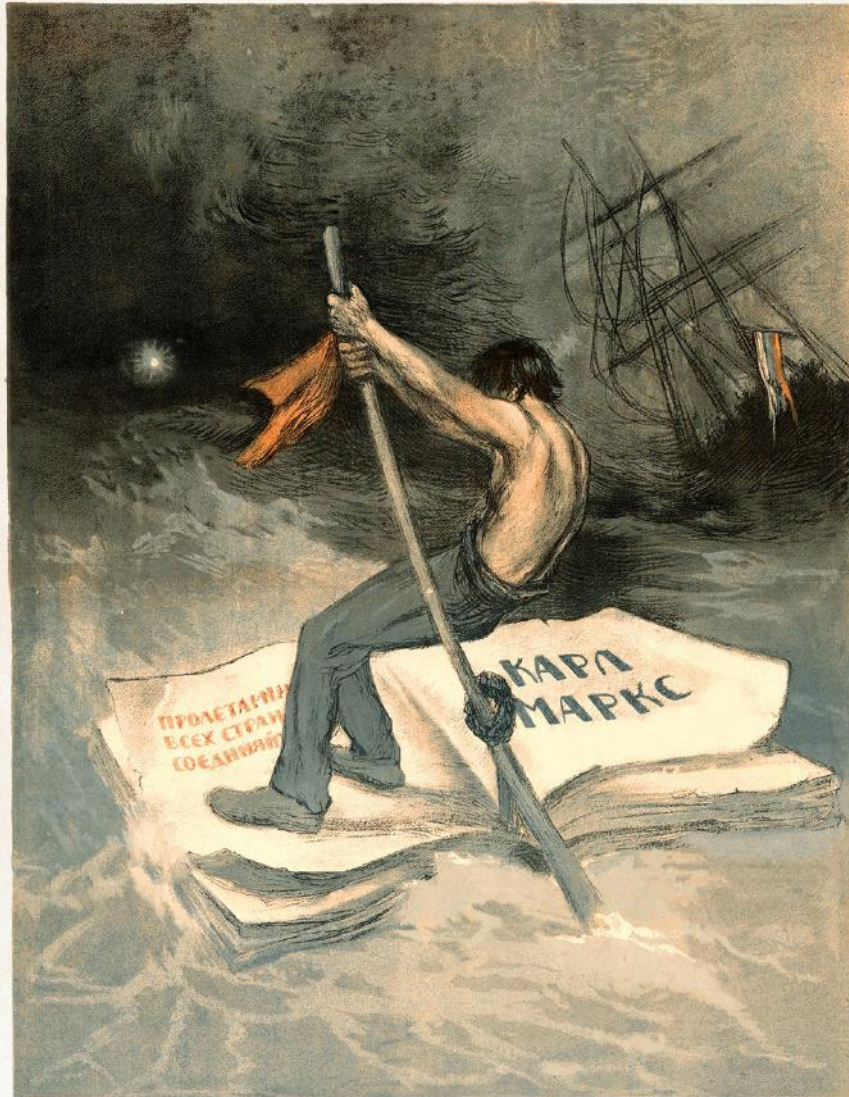
Figure 2. V.V. Spassky, "To the Lighthouse of the Communist International," 1919. Lenin Library, Moscow.

remnants of Tsarist loyalists, but also the entirety of the reactionary world: the United

Kingdom, the United States, France, Sweden, Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman

Empire, as well as fascist paramilitary groups like the Black Hundreds and even the nascent

Freikorps. This savagery, compounded by the stalling out of the initial wave of other

internationalist socialist revolutions in Europe, constrained and forced the workers' state to

ossify and enact repressive measures that were quite far off from the Bolshevik leaders' ideas

of building socialism (Miéville 2022). Instead, amongst this confusion, what we have in this

image is a depiction of escape from the "unspeakable" and a gamble toward the

"unsayable." The revolution, personified in this weary survivor, has not sunken into the

waves of depression and defeat, but is persisting in active apophasis, a praxis of melancholy:

"poised between triumph and catastrophe, this is an expression neither of optimism nor of

defeat but of a superposition between the two" (Miéville 2022, 40).

 Traverso (2021) laments that "at the end of the twentieth century, we have

experienced a similar revolutionary shipwreck, but there is no visible lighthouse yet" (8). But

perhaps he is looking too hard for the cataphatic light, when the rhizomatic rays of

melancholic darkness are already here—or perhaps, they never left—pointing us toward the

gray in-between. As Miéville (2022) correctly asserts: "To live according to radical politics,

perhaps more than with any other approach to the world, can be to experience moments in

which hope and lament, utopia and apocalypse, are inextricable" (40). This is the

"hyperphasis" that Carabine (1995) eluded to; the middle way that has stored enough

revolutionary force so as to attain escape velocity from the paralysis of liberalism. This is the

essence of a generative melancholy and nostalgia; for melancholy, at its root, is an

identification with that aforementioned *lack* rather than a *loss* (Žižek 2000). An apophatic

Marxism, following Marx himself, identifies with communism as it *is* dreamed and expected, not as it *was* realized and attempted.

So, may we head toward that faint gleam in our misty future—that subterranean light buried beneath the horizon which promises nothing to us except the possibility of something radically different and darkly beautiful, if only we might wield our eternal imaginations to materially enact its spectral desires. It is the only promise that can be made in our liminal time of apocalypse and utopia—our "apocatopia" (Miéville 2022, 40). Indeed, this potentiality should not be squandered. It may very well be our last opportunity.

Weirdly Weird Weirdness

"It's only going to get weirder. The level of contradiction is going to rise excruciatingly, even beyond the excruciating present levels of contradiction. So I think it's just going to get weirder and weirder and weirder; and finally it's going to be so weird that people are going to have to talk about how weird it is."

—Terrence McKenna interview in 1998

The Anthropocene is *weird*. In fact, journalist Thomas Friedman (2010) has suggested we avoid referring to climate change as global warming and instead—borrowing a phrase coined by environmentalist Hunter Lovins—we should call this era *global weirding*, because "that is what actually happens as global temperatures rise and the climate changes. The weather gets weird. The hots are expected to get hotter, the wets wetter, the dries drier and the most violent storms more numerous." This aspect of the weird is about estrangement (Noys and Murphy 2016); yet that estrangement is infused with almost perverse feelings of fascination and trepidation (Fisher 2017). There is an attractive mystery to weirdness—suggestive of the supernatural—gesturing, swerving, and veering both toward and away from Earth (Luckhurst 2017). This (un)earthly belonging is indicative of the crossing and blurring of boundaries, of unceasing interruption and change (Turnbull 2021).

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This weird curving is what philosopher Timothy Morton finds most interesting. They remind us that "weird" is derived from the Old Norse word *urth*, meaning "a twist or turn or loop" and, as Morton (2016) argues, biological and ecological systems themselves exist as loops, leading to their conclusion that "to exist at all is to assume the form of a loop" (6). This weird Escherian keeling over is what Morton (2016) terms a "dark ecology," signified by a *strange loop* in which two objects, or actions, appear discretely separate but end up flipping into one another like a set of Penrose steps. This generates three interconnected kinds of weird that we, as a human race, are directly reckoning with in our current apocatopia: (a) an otherworldly turning, (b) a strange appearing, and (c) the weird gap between the two (Morton 2016). For example, we used to think of (a) *geology* and (b) *humanity* as being distinct categories, yet (c) *anthropogenic climate change* has weirdly shimmered between them, closing the loop.

Therefore, this weird shimmering illumin(at)es a "dark pathway" (Morton 2016) between causality and the aesthetic dimension. This linking of *doing* and *appearing* is often eschewed by Western philosophy. Yet, according to Mark Fisher (2016), this is precisely the work that weirdness does—the weird operates as a *montage* to superimpose "two or more things which do not belong together" (11). The "weird" refers to a strangeness of appearance while "weirdness" is concerned with the turning of causality (Morton 2016, 7). Examples of montages between weird and weirdness are wide-ranging—for example, it could be the unsettling appearance of the Dust Bowl throughout the midwest in the 1930s caused by top-down approaches to agriculture; or, it could be the increasing proliferation of terrifying wounds of necrotizing fasciitis (flesh-eating bacteria) caused by bacterial virulence due to the overprescribing of antibiotics; or, it could be the rotting of unproductive crops (and the corresponding gaunt of hunger) caused by the heavy use of pesticides which

generate concurrent genocides of necessary pollinators. This kind of "unexpected fallout from the myth of progress" is described by Morton (2016) as *"weirdly weird"* (7). Montages of the weirdly weird will play a prominent role in Chapter 3 (causally) and Chapter 4 (aesthetically).

Yet so far, a piece of the genealogy of the weird seems to be glaringly missing. Any discussion of the weird must reconcile with the Freudian legacy of *unheimlich*—often translated as *uncanny*, but is more accurately expressed in English as *un-homely* (and here we return, much like with nostalgia and melancholy, to the importance of place within any discussion that concerns weirdly weird weirdness). Sigmund Freud (2003), following F.W.J. Schelling, proposes that *unheimlich* "applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open" (132). Here Freud is proposing a psychoanalytical double move that is familiar to many anthropologists: making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Fisher (2017) argues that every one of Freud's described phenomena of *unheimlich* contain, at their core, *repetition* and *doubling*, which themselves tend to double and repeat upon each other in uncanny loops.

One of the most generative distinctions between *unheimlich* and the weird exists in the apophatic characteristics of the latter. An apophatic approach to the weird resembles a complete freezing of all affect, which in turn generates an experiential looping between dread and fascination, terror and ecstasy—a theological concept that Rudolf Otto (1924) has termed *mysterium tremendum*. This kind of aw(e)fulness is how Otto describes "the holy," which he argues is too often attributed to moral perfection, when in actuality, it must be understood as a truly "negative" experience—not only in the affective sense, but also as something profoundly ontologically apophatic. The holy is not natural to humans, *nor is it for us*. It is telling that, scripturally, angels first greet humanity with the words "be not afraid."

The holy, like the weird, is non-rational, *sui generis*, and its existence has "immediate and

primary reference to an object outside the self" (Otto 1924, 10). Otto uses the term

"numinous" to describe this phenomenon which is "shadowy, excessive, and non-human"

(Thacker 2015b, 176). In fact, he argues that "the feeling of 'something uncanny', 'eerie', or

'weird'…[is]…the starting-point for the entire religious development in history" (Otto 1924,

15). Ultimately, the weird, like the holy, presents itself as that which is "wholly Other" *(ganz*

Andere) and this quality of the weird also becomes the foundation for mystery.

> The truly "mysterious" object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not
> only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we
> come upon something inherently "wholly other", whose kind and character are
> incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder
> that strikes us chill and numb. (Otto 1924, 28)

Otto's description of mysterious objects have dark resonances with Morton's (2013)

definition of "hyperobjects," that is, "things that are massively distributed in time and space

relative to humans" (1) that are "exhibiting non-local effects that [defy] location and

temporality, cuttable into many parts without losing coherence" (47). Weirdness and mystery

influence the conditions of hyperobjects—"because they so massively outscale us,

hyperobjects have magnified this weirdness of things for our inspection: things are

themselves, but we can't point to them directly" (Morton 2013, 12). It seems that

hyperobjects present themselves as a weird montage, particularly within Cosmism, where, for

example, Nature becomes an important entity which is thought to solely exist for human

manipulation. But Nature is not a neutral hyperobject—it is a human product through and

through, one that is geological as well as discursive. And there exists a weird montage

between Nature (expressed as geological) and the Anthropocene (expressed as discursive)

because in actuality, they are a superimposition. As Morton (2016) has so poignantly argued:

"The Anthropocene doesn't destroy Nature. *The Anthropocene is Nature* in its toxic nightmare form. Nature is the latent form of the Anthropocene waiting to emerge as catastrophe" (59).

As Erik Davis (2019) has pointed out, there is often an instinct for us Moderns to "'kill' the weirdness" (7), usually by trying to explain away weird experiences as being psychological breaks, pharmacological side effects, and/or inventive storytelling. While I do not deny that skeptical analysis is important, it is equally important to remember, as Bruno Latour (2013) reminds us, "*all beings* insist equally in the expectation of receiving from us their exact ontological pasture" (199). Davis (2019) argues that the weird is constantly in motion and mutating upon the fields of this ontological pasture, but it is ultimately characterized by three dimensions of meaning, which follow from Morton's theorizations: (a) *aesthetic*, where the weird is essentially a genre, not only of cultural production, but also of affect and possibility; (b) *deviancy*, where the weird deviates from norms and expectations— yet, despite its numinous qualities, the weird also sits at the margins of what is perceived as "the actual" and; (c) *ontological*, where the weird is the way things actually are, or the way things appear to be. This last dimension, in particular, seems to address two sides of the same coin, and illustrates how the weird is a rhizome of loops all the way down. If the weird is the way things *actually are*, it is inter-looped to dimension "b" and if the weird is the way things *appear to be*, it is inter-looped to dimension "a." Yet, here is the kicker: these are also not connections which consist of an either/or relation, but rather a both/and. They are loops within loops. And weird entities are able to traverse these inter-dimensional monkey bars with ease. This is why I accept Davis' argument that rather than subscribing to Graham Harmon's (2012) "weird realism" or Morton's (2015) "weird essentialism," it is better to speak of a "weird naturalism," rooted in the history of things, both human and unhuman.

> Our experiences of the weird—as aesthetic encounter, as deviation from the social norm, as inexplicable *factum*—may *point* beyond, but they are perhaps better seen as

an unnerving and enigmatic warp or wiggle in the web of reality itself…[they] open up a space of encounter and evolution that does not transcend so much as loop together culture and consciousness, sacred and profane, romance and realism, gnosis and nature. (Davis 2019, 11)

Antonio Gramsci, while suffering in a fascist prison cell in Rome, is said to have written "the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters."[11] This is empirically hard to refute, both politically and experientially, but monsters (like Otto's conception of the holy) are complex unhuman entities. Encountering them signals something important, much like Morton's (2011) argument that hyperobjects not only become visible during times of ecological crises, but they also alert humans to the ecological dilemmas defining the times in which they live. Monsters are within the genealogy of the weird, for they too have a double meaning. They help us pay attention to the quotidian entanglements which are often occluded by the repetition of normalcy and they also help highlight the near constant atrocities being committed by segments of modern humanity (which, to close the loop, happen at a horrifyingly regular rate). As the editors of the important book *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* have stated: "Monsters ask us to consider the wonders and terrors of symbiotic entanglement in the Anthropocene" (Swanson et al. 2017, M2).

As signaled by the title of this project, and to tie this into the previous section, weirdness is a kind of darkness, and weird darkness is expressed as a multivalent montage of entitic superimpositions, like in Dziga Vertov's *The Eleventh Year* (1928), in which darkness loops between despair, mystery, and redolence (Morton 2016). Despite this tripartite expression of the weird, in analyzing our day-to-day experience, it may often seem like

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[11] This quote is presumably an original translation by Slavoj Žižek (2010). The original Italian is: *"La crisi consiste appunto nel fatto che il vecchio muore e il nuovo non può nascere: in questo interregno si verificano i fenomeni morbosi piú svariati."* This more accurately translates to: "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

Figure 3. Frames from Dziga Vertov's *The Eleventh Year* (1928), an avant-garde documentary celebrating the eleventh anniversary of the October Revolution.

darkness only bounces between its first two qualities: despair and mystery. Take Marx's (1990) famous formula for capitalist accumulation, M–C–M', where money loops through capital/commodities and then multiplies upon itself to generate more money. The exploitation hidden within C–M' is filled with anguish, and the looping pathways of capital —particularly when we encounter finance capital and grapple with Marx's (1993) concept of "fictitious capital" *(fiktives Kapital)*—are filled with mystery; for generating something from nothing (which, in turn, becomes a nothing again) is a prerequisite for supernatural encounters. There is a reason Marx chose the word "fetishism" to describe the sometimes animistic qualities attributed to human interactions with commodities and capital under capitalism, and I do not believe this attribution was meant to be off-handed, disparaging, or paternalistic.

But there is the oft-ignored third quality of darkness that must not fade from our vision and I have chosen the word *redolence* for a reason. In one sense, it can be defined as a kind of nostalgia, to reminisce. And yet, it is also suggestive of something fragrant or sweet. We can extract a honeyed aroma out of darkness—a transmutation of the past to the future that does not lose its melancholic or mysterious qualities. We travel through them and loop in-between each of these traits in order to fully embody the limitless shadows of our world, the shades of which are so often burned away by the blinding and immaculately constructed veneer of consumerism. The redolence of darkness reckons with the well-known Kantian distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. "The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in limitation; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it, or at its instance, and yet it is also thought as a totality" (Kant 2000, 128).

It should come as no surprise that what I am arguing here is that the weird weirdly

loops between the beautiful *and* the sublime. In particular, Cosmist hyperobjects like the

cosmos, physical immortality, planetary geoengineering, etc. are, like the sublime, difficult to

rationalize and comprehend. Yet, like the beautiful, hyperobjects are not limitless; "what they

offer instead is *very large finitude*" (Morton 2013, 60). A weird entity ontologically and

aesthetically presents itself with form but is affectively felt as sublime. This sublime

apophasis is described well by Thacker (2015b): "we can, at the very least, comprehend this

incomprehension—we can think the failure of thought" (117). Yet there is a discomfort to

the darkness of the weird sublime because, lest we forget, the redolence of darkness must

not be separated from its other uncomfortable characteristics. Therefore, the apophatic

affective response to sublimity is akin to what Kant (2000) has called "negative pleasure":

> …the feeling of the sublime is a pleasure that arises only indirectly, being generated,
> namely, by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the
> immediately following and all the powerful outpouring of them…the satisfaction in
> the sublime does not so much contain positive pleasure as it does admiration or
> respect, i.e., it deserves to be called negative pleasure. (128–129)

Kant was describing the sublime in the context of the natural world—a resplendent

sunset or the vastness of a desert vista—yet starting in the 20th century, we have a

widespread shift in sublimity toward the "technological sublime," mostly due to the

emergence of atomic weaponry and crewed spaceflight (Nye 1994). This feeling of the

sublime aligns more with Arthur Schopenhauer's (1969) conception of the term: "…the full

impression of the sublime…is caused by the sight of a power beyond all comparison

superior to the individual, and threatening [them] with annihilation" (205). Here apophasis

turns toward the possibility of the existential destruction of the individual. For

Schopenhauer, this would bring about a sublime pleasure derived from the knowledge that

one's ultimate nothingness equates to a kind of supreme oneness with the universe (Stanley

Kubrick's subtitle to *Dr. Strangelove* is perhaps a pure example of this kind of technological sublimity). As Miéville (2009) has put it: "The weird is a radicalised sublime backwash [that] allows spillage of that awe and horror from 'beyond' back into the everyday" (511). Especially when one considers the technological sublime, Otto's definition of the numinous echoes with familiarity, in that it comprises of concurrent feelings of terror *(tremendum)* and fascination *(fascinans)*.

> The daemonic-divine object may appear to the mind an object of horror and dread, but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm, and the creature, who trembles before it, utterly cowed and cast down, has always at the same time the impulse to turn to it, nay even to make it somehow [their] own. (Otto 1924, 31)

This kind of agentive interaction leads to a useful foil to the weird that has thus far only been hinted at; that is, an ability to pass porously through, and lurk within, the realm of the supernatural. For Eugene Thacker (2015b), the supernatural is "duplicitous; it is the name for something that is indistinct and yet omnipresent, something that defies easy categorization and that is nevertheless, inscribed by a kind of logic" (114). Yet Thacker makes an interesting claim about these logics of the supernatural. One of the most common ways the supernatural is experienced is in an either/or relation with the natural—that is, an agent experiences something that exceptionally differs from the laws of nature in which they are familiar. This produces what Thacker calls a "wavering." *Either* this experience was merely an instance of *unheimlich* and can therefore be explained rationally *or* the experience was somehow truly exceptional and one's normative framework of reality must be reexamined.

While this theistic relationship to the supernatural might be the one most commonly experienced, Thacker also argues there is a pantheistic relation that exists: the previously described logic of both/and—that is, an agent experiences something that reveals that *both*

the supernatural/natural coexist together *and*, while the natural is always there and available, the supernatural is not always accessibly experienced or sensed. However, Thacker then makes an interesting argument for what one could call an apophatic relation to the supernatural: a logic of *neither/nor*. He argues that perhaps the supernatural "actually bears little or no relation to the natural, in which what is experienced by a human subject has no correlate in the world or in thought" (114). For Thacker (2015b) "it *neither* stands in relation to the natural, *nor* is it an autonomous entity in itself" (115; emphasis mine). Yet the supernatural eerily persists, despite having tendencies that are both anti-empirical (it is unable to be experienced directly) and anti-idealist (it is unable to be engaged in the scope of human thought).

The supernatural just *is*. Yet this does not mean it is passive. The neither/nor relation is when the shadow side of the weird makes itself known. Fisher (2016) has named this entity the *eerie*. For Fisher, in contrast to the experiential affect of the weird, the eerie is fundamentally intertwined with questions of agency: what kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all? If so, is it malicious? Is my Being a free agent? Was that decision truly my own? Fisher's eerie is in close dialogue with Thacker's supernatural double negation, for unhuman interactions on a human register tend to cross our eyes and confuse our minds. They make manifest the "strange, unhuman catatonia of an impossible experience. The supernatural is another name for this enigmatic state of suspended animation, of frozen thought" (Thacker 2015b, 115).

Yet, there exists a second-order double move to the supernatural; eerie engagements are not only on the psychoanalytic/ontological register, but they also apply to everyday forces which we often attempt to give human logics, such as capitalism. "Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than

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any allegedly substantial entity" (Fisher 2016, 11). Indeed, capital seems to move between all the relations of the supernatural while also nesting fittingly into Otto's concept of a "daemonic-divine object." And thus, we close the weird loop with an apophatic Marxism.

The Consubstantiality of Words, Photographs, and Moving Images

Before moving on to methods more broadly, I wish to explain the unorthodox format of this project. This written document constitutes only one-third of the entirety of my dissertation. The remaining 66% takes the form of two visual projects: a 39 minute film, *Stones in Cold Water*, and an 81-page photography book, *The Land of Sunflowers and Steel*. These latter components are *not* auxiliaries to the dissertation. Rather, they should be engaged with as integral modules to the written portion of this project. These three components are separate, but unified. They are distinct but consolidated. They are three-in-one and one-in-three. An interdisciplinary program, if administered properly, necessitates a culminated project that must also embrace interdisciplinarity, and my film and photography works should be engaged with, judged, and consumed with the same intellectual gravity as the written word. This may sound like a difficult task, particularly since the hegemony of the written word has been so deeply engrained into the genetics of academic legibility, but, as I will cover at the end of his section, this was not always the case, especially in the field of anthropology.

Photographs—whether they are still or moving—are objects of meaning, operating in the same capacity as words. In fact, in 1839, the early photography pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot named the medium of photography "words of light" (Schaaf 1992, 65). Furthermore, the bedrock of academic production—citational practice—is itself a principle of photography; it is the (re)production of an artifact in an attempt to craft and impart a memory. Or, as Walter Benjamin (1999) has pointed out: "to write history thus means to *cite*

history" (476). Language, light, image: these are each Benjaminian technologies of reproduction. Importantly, however, although we are always citing, reproducing, and photographing, "the historical object in each case is torn from its context" (Benjamin 1999, 476). This severing actually becomes the academician's *craftwork* while constructing meaning and concepts—no matter the modality. That said, images, in this case, may have more of an advantage. For example, Benjamin (2010) called photography "the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction" (16) and he also astutely pointed out that the medium emerged at the same time as socialist revolution.

This severing of object and context, particularly with images, can sometimes create second-order (re)constructions that lead to the creation of unintended acts of meaning-making. Take, for example, the announcement of the death of Che Guevara. After his execution by the CIA and Bolivian military in 1967, Che's body was displayed to journalists on a concrete slab in the laundry room of a hospital in Vallegrande (Figure 4). What was intended as quite literally a trophy photo of the dead revolutionary, the image instead took on the likeness of Christian martyrdom (Figure 5) (Castañeda 1997; Traverso 2016). As Régis Debray (2007) commented: "That Christ-like cadaver from which a legend emerged— eyes open, head supported by a plank, stretched out on a cement slab for display—was offered to the world by his enemies" (103). Our images, like our words, do not always belong to us in how they are interpreted, but these modalities are more integrated than they may seem. "That photographic technology belongs to the physiognomy of historical thought means that there can be no thinking of history that is not at the same time a thinking of photography" (Cadava 1997, xviii). I have approached this project with the belief in this inseparability of images and words.

Figure 4. Soldiers pose with the body of Che Guevara in a stable in the town of Vallegrande, Bolivia, October 10, 1967, Freddy Alborta.

Figure 5. Andrea Mantegna, "The Lamentation over the Dead Christ" (c.1480) Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, Italy.

To end this section, I wish to provide a concise critical history of visual approaches within anthropological research, so as to further justify their inclusion in this project. I will also show how visual methods were once held up as valid and necessary scholarly contributions before their relegation to the auxiliaries of ethnographic research in the latter part of the 20th century. Although I focus specifically on anthropology's relationship to visual methods, these arguments could be integrated into any humanities or social science discipline.

In one form or another, visual methods have been part of anthropology from the very beginning. Photography and written ethnography both emerged right around the same time and have jostled with one another as anthropology's preferred analytical tool (Edwards 1992; Pinney 2011). This dynamic has changed over time. Today it is the written word that reigns as anthropology's authoritative media of choice. In the 19th century, however, photographs were considered far more objective and reliable than the kinds of testimonies that could be obtained from people (Pinney 2011). At the time, Pinney (2011) explains:

> Anthropologists were suspicious of verbal data and "personal observation" lacked the methodological rigour that it would later acquire. There was a twofold problem with "native testimony": anthropologists were quite likely not to understand it because most lacked the necessary linguistic competence, but they were also sceptical of the transparency of "natives," assuming that irrelevance, deviation and untruth were likely to predominate. W.H. Flower's observation that "physical characters are the best, in fact the only tests…language, customs, etc. may help or give good indicators, but they are often misleading." (14)

Pinney (2011) goes on to cite E.H. Man, who argued that "more correct information [can] be obtained from photography than from any verbal description" (14–15). This was a time when a systematic study of "culture" was not a central, let alone defining, characteristic of the field. Anthropology of this era was "little more than a form of comparative anatomy," in which anthropologists focused on the human body as a prime site for data collection, and photography was seen as an accurate, reliable tool for gathering and

transmitting data (Pinney 2011, 15). Photography, then, was a prominent, if not dominant, methodological tool in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as exemplified in the work of James Mooney, Franz Boas, and Torii Ryūzō (see Odo 2013; Pai 2009 on Ryūzō specifically; Pinney 2011). E.B. Tylor (1876) once proclaimed that "The science of anthropology owes not a little to the art of photography" (184). How times seem to have changed.

Tensions between text-based and visual-based approaches to anthropology continued into the 1940s and onward. Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead (1942) famously contrasted the embodied and visual learning practiced by the Balinese to the theory and verbal-based learning utilized throughout classrooms in the United States. Throughout her career, Mead championed the use of visual methods, and chastised her fellow anthropologists for their methodological reluctance. In the mid-1970s, she called out the discipline for depending on "words, words and words" and limiting itself to becoming merely a "science of words" (El Guindi 2004, 6; Mead 1975). Despite such efforts, the disciplinary move away from visual methods continued. By the mid-1960s, MacDougall (1997) argues, the discipline as a whole had shifted well away from visual methodologies. At the same time that Mead was still advocating for visual and photographic methodologies, anthropology began its move toward interpretive approaches that were largely framed in terms of textual metaphors.

In the early 1970s, Mead's "behaviorism" was displaced by Clifford Geertz's model of "interpretive anthropology," which encouraged the discipline to move from seeing culture as something to be documented (e.g. Boasian anthropology) to seeing it as something that should be read and interpreted like a text. Geertz recalls a letter sent to him from Mead in which she said pointedly: "there are two kinds of anthropologists, looking anthropologists [Mead] and talking anthropologists [Geertz]" (quoted in Howes 2019, 19). Geertz's (1973)

symbolic/interpretive anthropology—the method of which is summed up well as "the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (452)—became somewhat hegemonic, especially within the United States.

In 1986, the interpretive school was displaced by the postmodern representational school, culminating in the publishing of *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus. This representational mode and method of ethnography placed the ethnographer and their writing at the forefront of how anthropological research should be conducted. Noticeably absent from *Writing Culture* was any discussion on modes other than writing, despite the fact that multimedia devices utilizing film, video, and audio recording were increasing in portability and affordability throughout the 1980s and were already being used by anthropologists as a primary mode of ethnographic inquiry. Also notably absent in *Writing Culture* were women; the entire Table of Contents consisted of men. This led Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon (1995) to edit *Women Writing Culture* to offset the misogyny. It was also during this time that visual methods became entangled within broader conversations about anthropology's "ocular-centrism," its relationship with postmodernism's effect of collapsing the scientific paradigm, and the broader politics between the observer and the observed (Edwards 2015).

In many ways, visual methods became the discipline's scapegoat. Attempting to utilize a hermeneutics of suspicion, critiques of photography and film unfortunately slid into over-determined, reductionist, ahistorical, and reifying interpretations that enabled many Old Guard anthropologists to vent their angst over anthropology's political and methodological changes without disturbing the disciplinary core (Edwards 2015). The colonial gaze remained largely intact, but visual methods were made to be the stooge due to the fact that

the camera's colonial entanglements left visceral, affective, tangible artifacts that clashed with the cultural politics of the 1970s and '80s. Meanwhile the discipline's mountains of textual records could be hidden away and forgotten more comfortably. Visual methods may have hit a low point within the discipline by the late 1980s and early 1990s, when, for example, Kirsten Hastrup (1992) argued that ethnographic images are little more than "thin description," (10) and Maurice Bloch proclaimed that "when anthropologists begin to dedicate a large part of their time to ethnographic films it is usually because they have lost confidence in their own ideas" (Houtman 1988, 20). Visual methods had gone from falling out of favor by the 1960s to becoming targets of outright denigration by the 1990s.

Lucien Taylor (1996), in response, grew wary of the "linguification" of anthropological research and the disparaging attitude mainstream anthropology castigated upon photography, film, and video. Taylor (1996) argued that film especially shared an apparent affinity with life itself and that "ethnography can itself be conducted filmically" (86). Ten years later, Taylor seemed to have been proven right when he was able to found the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University, which has produced many award-winning ethnographic documentaries, a majority of them *absque lingua*.

Around the early 2000s, a wave of new work and publications highlighted various aspects of visual anthropological approaches, including Banks and Morphy (1999), Ruby (2000), Pink (2001), El Guindi (2004), Edwards and Hart (2004), and Pink (2006) again, among others. This included important work centering on the anthropology of visual culture and media (e.g. Askew and Wilk 2002; Boyer 2010; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). In 2008, Gareth Davey conducted a content analysis of the first twenty volumes of the journal *Visual Anthropology* as part of an effort to document and analyze the transformation of visual anthropology from a "neglected and marginalized presence to an

established and respected subdiscipline of sociocultural anthropology" (189). The publication of *Righteous Dopefiend* (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009) was indicative of renewed interest in visual approaches and methods. The wave of publications that built upon or expanded visual approaches continued through the early to mid-2010s (e.g. Banks and Ruby 2011), including publications of monographs such as Jason De León's (2015) *The Land of Open Graves* and Danny Hoffman's (2017) *Monrovia Modern* which used photographic methods as part of a primary research agenda.

As Ruby (2005) points out, and others highlight as well (Askew and Wilk 2002; Boyer 2012), this renewed anthropological interest in the visual has resulted in various related approaches, encompassing everything from what is referred to as "visual anthropology" all the way to "media anthropology" and the "anthropology of media." Visual anthropology, these days, can refer to everything from ethnographic filmmaking and photography-based ethnographic research to the analysis of the materiality of archival photographs (e.g. Edwards 2005; 2012; 2015). There are, as always, differences in opinions, approaches, methods, and preferred terminologies. These changes bode well for the future of the discipline, which has until relatively recently ignored and dismissed visual methodologies and materialities for far too long. Thankfully, it seems that anthropology is turning a corner toward bringing visual methods back into the center of disciplinary practice, training, and theory (for recent examples, see Astacio, Dattatreyan, and Shankar 2021; Chin 2017; Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017; 2021; Gill 2019; Lynteris and Stasch 2019; Smith 2013).

Another Brief Note on Methods

The way that I have approached the historical and anthropological methods of this project stem from a technique articulated by Talal Asad. Following Foucault and Nietzsche, Asad (2003) proposes an historical genealogy as a method: "genealogy is not intended here

as a substitute for social history ('real history,' as many would put it) but as a way of working back from our present to the contingencies that have come together to give us our certainties" (16). This is a part of pursuing the study of the secular "through its shadows." In this way, the genealogical investigation I have undertaken for this project also borrows from Max Weber's (2005) concept of *elective affinities*, in which he proposes that there are resonances between aspects of the teachings of Protestantism and the ethos of the capitalist enterprise. The spirit of one system of meaning—in my case, Russian Cosmism—generates tendencies that allow for the construction and propagation of other system(s) of meaning.

Since I was unable to pursue a traditional ethnographic project, I also found inspiration from Stefania Pandolfo (2018), who argued that "imagination is both a capacity and a modality of being" (234). Ethnography has always been about reporting what we experience with our "perceptive powers"—or our sensuous instincts of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—but Pandolfo and her interlocutors implore us to also tap into our "internal senses." These "internal senses" express themselves within our imagination and became integral for my project, as I was unable to carry out an abundance of physical fieldwork. As Pandolfo (2018) relates to us from her Moroccan colleagues, "only the faculty of imagination (*al-quwwa al-muṣawwira*) has the power to preserve, store, combine, interpret, and operate on the forms it receives from the organs of sense, and to perceive 'the non-sensible intentions that exist in the individual sensible objects,' discerning situations and intentions in a semiotic activity" (239)

That said, I was (and am) still committed to the somatic necessity of ethnographic fieldwork. During the times in which I was able to engage in that practice, I was committed to connecting any intellectual exercises with the exercise of my flesh and bone. On average, I walked eight miles every day during fieldwork. I was particularly inspired by the work of

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2015) and the practice she calls "sociology of the image" *(sociología de la imagen)*. At its root, this practice attempts to connect mind and body, methodology and pedagogy, epistemology and ontology in order to disrupt the Western conceptions of "history" as existing only within the written word. She describes this method as an "intellectual craft" *(artesanía intelectual)* which must be practiced through repetition in order to deprogram the hegemony of Western modes of research. Part of my attempt at this craftwork was to treat ethnographic fieldwork as a method of performative movement—or, more specifically, to approach any ethnographic encounter through Cusicanqui's (2015) mantra "to walk, to know, to create" *(caminar, conocer, crear)* (8).

Finally, by way of a boilerplate ending, it is important that I commit to the record that this research was carried out under the auspices of the project "Beyond Secularization: Religion, Science and Technology in Public Life" housed in the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict at Arizona State University, which received human subjects IRB approval (Study #00012288) on August 19, 2020. All photographs that include the image's metadata in brackets at the end of the caption were taken by me during fieldwork. All other images have been attributed to their creators and are permitted under fair-use.

And with that, please silence all cell phones, unwrap any loud candies, and take a moment to locate your nearest exit. Note that the closest exit may be behind you.

CHAPTER 2

THE COMMON CAUSE

A man stands on a windswept staircase outside of the Rumyantsev Museum in Moscow, staring up at the sky. His shoulders are raised high and his frail frame is occasionally exposed as the simple rags he is wearing whip about him in the May squalls. He ignores the whistles and moans of the wind as it plays its ghostly song through the enormous stone columns holding up the building. His hands are gently clasped behind his back and he cranes his neck back, raising his face toward the heavens. On the street below, a pair of lovers giggle and twist into each others arms. A horse whinnies somewhere in the distance, pulling a gilded carriage to the ballet. In an alley nearby, a peasant starves. Overhead, the Milky Way turns gently in its Sisyphean rhythm, rolling slowly through the obsidian blackness. Transfixed, the librarian-philosopher Nikolai Fyodorovich Fyodorov watches our galaxy for a long time. It watches him back.

<p style="text-align:center">⁂</p>

What is now labeled as "Russian Cosmism" originated from a set of ideas that formed a political theology developed by Nikolai Fyodorovich Fyodorov (1829–1903).[12] Fyodorov was born the illegitimate son of Prince Pavel Ivanovich Gagarin, the black sheep of one of Russia's oldest noble families, and Elizaveta Ivanova, the daughter of a minor official. As an adolescent—thanks to the interest of his princely uncle—he studied at the prestigious Richelieu Lyceum in Odessa, although he never graduated due to his insubordinate temperament. His outspoken disgust at the notion of property, individualism, and material excess led to his expulsion from the school and remained constant convictions throughout his life. Despite the fact that his communal propensities were also shared by

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[12] Fyodorov has been transliterated into English many different ways, with the most common being Fedorov. I will be using Fyodorov and Fedorov interchangeably throughout this work.

many of the burgeoning radical social movements in Russia at the time, Fyodorov also held deeply conservative and patriarchal views;[13] it is important not to integrate Fyodorov into the same revolutionary milieus of his contemporaries, such as that of his unacknowledged second cousin, the famous anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin (Young 2012).

After just over a decade of working as a teacher in rural villages, Fyodorov joined the staff of the Rumyantsev Museum in Moscow as a librarian, where he remained for the rest of his life. It was here that he began to form the constellation of ideas that, in the 1970s, would be retroactively constructed and named "Russian Cosmism" *(Russkii kosmizm)* and would subsequently lead to Fyodorov being branded *Moskovskii Sokrat*—the "Moscow Socrates" (Gacheva and Panfilov 2018).

While there is some debate over whether Cosmism can even be labeled a homogenous philosophical school, there remains one common thread binding all Cosmist philosophies: that of *active evolution* (Bernstein 2019; Hagemeister 1997). Instead of living life passively, Cosmism evokes a holistic, anthropocentric, and teleologically determined effort to expand humankind's potential from a people anchored on Earth to the recognition that we are agentive cosmic citizens (Hagemeister 1997; Semenova and Gacheva 1993; Young 2012). While this is often conflated as a humanist philosophy, philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev (1948) —an admirer of Fyodorov—argued that humanism was a uniquely European phenomenon and did not apply to the "Russian soul," which he argued often confused humanism for humanitarianism: "Humanism in the European sense of the word formed no part of the experience of Russia. There was no Renaissance among us, but we did experience, and it may be with some particular sharpness, the crisis of humanism, and its inner dialectic was disclosed" (86). This crisis of humanism, according to Berdyaev, was the contrast between

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[13] For example, following the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, Fyodorov condemned the Tsar's reforms, suggesting that "instead of freeing the serfs, the Tsar should have enserfed the free" (Young 2012, 59).

the indigenous Russian concept of "humaneness" *(chelovechnost')*—exemplified, according to Berdyaev, by the charitable values of the Orthodox church—and the colonial ideals of European humanism *(gumanizm)*, which the Russian imperial state attempted to mimic, but due to its foreignness, was only expressed as cruelty and violence (McQuillen and Vaingurt 2018).

For Berdyaev, the concept at the heart of European humanism was rational self-interest, which expressed itself in society through the elevation and adoration of the individual. This individualism was antithetical to "Russianness." For Berdyaev (1948), the Russian Idea, which he also named his book, was "that individual salvation is impossible, that salvation is corporate,[14] that all are answerable for all" (200). Berdyaev then argued that the philosopher who exemplified the Russian Idea above all others was Fyodorov, and more specifically, Fyodorov's paramount project for humanity, which he christened the "common cause" *(obshchee delo)*. For Fyodorov, all human beings—even those who were dire political enemies—shared one universal, common enemy: death (Young 2012). The most important —and ultimately unifying—duty for humanity was to collectively create the technological, social, and political conditions under which it would be possible to resurrect and make immortal every human being who has ever lived (Groys 2018). Fyodorov believed that humankind's creative potential was unlimited, and therefore, he argued his project was not a utopian fantasy, but could be imminently accomplished if humanity's intentions were turned from warfare and hatred to resurrection and universal "kinship" *(rodstvo)*.

For Fyodorov, *rodstvo* is quite literally what binds us to everything in the universe. He professed that every particle of matter in the cosmos may contain the dispersed "dust" of

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[14] The word Berdyaev uses here is *kommunotarno*, which is a bit hard to translate, so I can forgive the translator for using the word "corporate" here; a direct translation cannot be expressed in English without inventing new words (it would read something like "salvation is achieved communatarily"). Regardless, Berdyaev's argument here is that, for Russians, salvation can *only* be pursued through collective experiences with one's community.

one or more of our ancestors (Young 2012). The true nature of this ancestral dust would be revealed through an embodied sonic shimmer as it was collected by related individuals. Fyodorov elucidates this point in a short essay called "Parents and resurrectors":

> The reverberation and quivering (vibration) of which molecules and the ashes of the dead are capable, and which cannot as yet be picked up by microphones since these are still a crude means of picking up sound, find a corresponding echo in the way in which particles shudder within live beings who are linked by kinship to the dead to whom these particles belonged. (Fedorov 1990, 191)

This reconciliation between spirit and matter is not strictly a Fyodorovian concept—here he is drawing from Orthodox Christian theology, particularly the idea that matter can be "spirit-bearing" *(dukhonosnaya)* and is capable of acquiring spiritual characteristics (Bernstein 2019). This is where the cosmic becomes foundational to Fyodorov's philosophy; humankind must become interplanetary so we might more easily facilitate the collection of our ancestors' "soul stuff"—a necessary component for resurrection and immortality—thereby allowing us to fulfill our duty to our kin and to God. Becoming a cosmic species also necessitated ultimate filial devotion and a forsaking of one's sexual and parental desires. For a patriarchal thinker like Fyodorov, a son's chief purpose in life must be the material resurrection of their father in a divine path back to Adam. Pursuing the common cause thus perfects a divine dialectic; it guarantees that "the relation between son and father will be perfect, for the son will be as a father to the father, and the father as a son to the son" (Chekrygin 2015, 190).

Although Berdyaev argued that humanist ideas were foreign to the Russian people, he and Fyodorov nevertheless relied on foundational tenants of humanism, such as free will and creative agency. Fyodorov and Berdyaev may have been expressing a primordial eastern version of "immanentizing the eschaton," but Cosmism has always ultimately rested on a belief that humanity creates its own fate.

[Humankind] is not merely a product of the natural world, although [they] live in it and participate in the processes of nature. [They] are dependent upon [their] natural environment and at the same time [they] humanize it and introduce a new principle into it. [Humanity's] creative activity has significance for the whole world and indicates a new stage of cosmic life. [Humankind] is a new departure in nature. (Berdyaev 1960, 46)

These kinds of ideas enticed even the Russian celebrities of Fyodorov's time. For example, they attracted the likes of Fyodor Dostoevsky, who said Fyodorov "aroused my interest more than enough. I am essentially in complete agreement with these ideas, I have accepted them, so to speak, as my own" (quoted in Berdyaev 1948, 209). It has also been insinuated that Fyodorov inspired Dostoevsky to center central Cosmist ideas—such as the importance of father-son relationships and the ethics of brotherhood being the foundation of collective responsibility—in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (Koutaissoff 1990; Lord 1962). Lev Tolstoy also developed a personal relationship with Fyodorov; Fyodorov being one of the few people who would dare criticize Tolstoy to his face. Despite this—or perhaps because of it—Tolstoy always remained impressed by Fyodorov and his ideas, particularly the fact that he rejected all property and slept on a humpback trunk in a small, barren one-room apartment for his entire life (Young 2012).

When Fyodorov died of pneumonia in 1903,[15] his unpublished writings were compiled by Nikolai Peterson and Vladimir Kozhevnikov—both of whom were friends and pupils of Fyodorov—and they were arranged into several volumes titled *The Philosophy of the Common Cause (Filosofiya obshchago dela)*. Peterson and Kozhevnikov funded the printing of 480 copies of the manuscript to be published without copyright, stamped "Not For Sale," and distributed to libraries, select institutions, and individuals who requested copies (Young 2012). The printing and distributing of Fyodorov's work, which allowed for a broader

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[15] Ironically, Fyodorov contracted pneumonia soon after well-meaning friends finally convinced him to wear a winter coat over the light outer rags he wore year-round and to start taking a cab to work instead of walking (Young 2012).

audience to engage with his philosophies upon the eve of the 1905 Russian Revolution, has

been classified by Cosmism scholars as the first of three waves of Russian Cosmism

(Bernstein 2019; Young 2012).

Early Soviet Cosmism

Throughout the revolutionary period in Russia,[16] Fyodorov's ideas were adopted

and/or appropriated by Marxist and anarchist revolutionaries. Fyodorov's view of science—

as with his view of religion—rested on the tendency to view every *-ology* as an opportunity

for an *-urgy*. For Fyodorov—and indeed for many Russian intellectual traditions—it was

unthinkable to engage in the epistemological *sans* praxis; that is, to ask "What is true?"

without also asking "What must we do about it?" (Young 2012). This political model was

highly attractive to a range of social revolutionaries and artists who were actively engaged in

overthrowing the Tsar. This infusion of Cosmist ideas with political theories being

developed during the early years of the Soviet experiment have been classified as the second-

wave of Russian Cosmism.

Perhaps no other group exemplified this political mobilization of Cosmism more

than the anarchist "Biocosmist-Immortalists." Led by the activist, polemicist, and poet

Alexander F. Agienko—who took the *nom de guerre* Svyatogor, and who also called himself

the "Rooster of the Revolution"—the Biocosmists rallied under the slogan "Immortalism

and Interplanetarianism" (Young 2012, 197–199). They published a journal called

Immortality *(Bessmertiye)* and declared in their manifesto that the two fundamental human

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[16] For the purposes of this dissertation, I will be bracketing the "revolutionary period" in Russia between 1905–1935. These dates range from the first mass uprising of worker strikes, peasant unrest, and military mutinies in the beginning of 1905 until the arrest and interrogation of Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev in 1935 that initiated the Moscow Trials. This series of trials resulted in the purge of many Old Bolsheviks and solidified Joseph Stalin's control over the upper echelons of the Communist Party. Importantly, by the mid-1930s, every tendency of Cosmism was suppressed, its adherents purged, and the philosophy was driven underground until the 1970s.

rights were "the right to exist forever, and the right to unimpeded movement throughout interplanetary space" (Siddiqi 2014, 107–108). Instead of relying on *rodstvo*, the Biocosmists proposed the notion of "companionship" or "comradery-in-arms" *(soratnichestvo)* as a replacement for the theological Fyodorovian concept (Bernstein 2019; Young 2012). Svyatogor was one of the principals in the Bolshevik-established Union of Militant Atheists and declared that, unlike Fyodorovians, "we are not getting caught in the quagmire of religion or mysticism. We are too rational [for that] and declare war on religion and mysticism" (Krementsov 2014, 29).

This allergy to any philosophy that engaged with "religion" as its theoretical foundation was common during the Revolution since the institution of Russian Orthodoxy was heavily implicated in the state and served as the chief pillar in the tripartite reactionary political program of the imperial Russian Empire since Nicholas I—that platform being Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality (Riasanovsky 2005). Anything that was perceived religious, spiritual, or mystical was further looked upon with suspicion because it appeared antithetical to the proposed counter-hegemony of the Revolution, the bedrock of which was scientific socialism, dialectical materialism, and later, Marxism-Leninism. However, Cosmism has always straddled the permeable boundary between the categories of "science" and "religion" in an attempt to lend academic legitimacy to thaumaturgy and to urge academic knowledge to become more thaumaturgical (Young 2012).

This straddling of the mystical and the scientific actually led to many medical and artistic advances within the newly established Soviet Union, exemplified by the work of Aleksandr Bogdanov. Bogdanov was an economist, cultural theorist, science fiction writer, and political revolutionary. He developed an original philosophy called "tektology" *(tektologiia)*, which was a forerunner of modern systems theory and cybernetics. He was also

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one of the founders of the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party with Vladimir Lenin in 1903, although he soon fell out of favor and was expelled from the Party for having numerous political disagreements with Lenin—and because his research methods were deemed to be adversarial to Soviet Marxism (Bogdanov 2022; White 2019).[17]

Bogdanov's ultimate goal was to destroy the bourgeois elements in both science and art and reconstitute them as proletarian endeavors. Building upon his theory of tektology, he argued that a proletarian science must reject specialization and jargon—these being the two pillars of bourgeois science—and every scientific endeavor needed to become generalized, simplified, and universal (Krementsov 2011). As pointed out by Nikolai Krementsov (2011), this was not a particularly revolutionary proposal—in fact, the etymology of the Russian word for "science" *(nauka)*, much like the German *Wissenschaft*, means a systematic pursuit of knowledge in any and every possible area. Bogdanov was also one of the co-founders, and leading theoretician, for the Proletarian Culture *(Proletarskaya kultura)* movement. Known more widely by its portmanteau in Russian (Proletkult), this organization emphasized the cosmic collective over the individual, and stressed the need for an avant-garde revolutionary arts movement built by workers, for workers (Bogdanov 2022; Smith 2014).

In 1908, Bogdanov published a science fiction novel called *Red Star* in which he imagined a communist society on Mars where "mutual" *(vzaimnye)* blood exchanges between the young and the old were practiced as therapeutic rejuvenative procedures that could lead to immortality—or as he described it, "comradely exchanges of life [that] extend beyond the ideological dimension into the physiological one" (Bogdanov 1984, 86). His novel became wildly popular after the Revolution, much to Lenin's chagrin. But his ideas did not remain within the realm of his imagination; Bogdanov began to personally experiment in blood

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[17] For a more comprehensive description of Bogdanov's fascinating life, see my Translator's Introduction in *Art and the Working Class* (Bogdanov 2022).

rejuvenation research. He hoped that his experiments in blood exchange could become a revolutionary shortcut to socialism. The transmission of ideas would no longer be necessary to develop a species solidarity if communists could be produced through bodily *action*, rather than through intellectual inquiry into communist theory. Sergei Prozorov (2016) has succinctly described Bogdanov's intentions as resting on the fact that "the idea of communism would itself be entirely actualised in the materiality of blood transfusion" (117).

Bogdanov tested his theories largely on himself—participating eleven times in experimental blood transfusions and exchanges by the beginning of 1928—and noted that, following multiple treatments, his eyesight improved, his balding suspended, and friends commented that he looked and acted ten years younger. Following a successful blood exchange with Leonid Krasin, a high level Bolshevik official, Bogdanov's experiments began to attract the attention of the upper ranks of the Soviet state, many of whom were suffering from an epidemic of poor health (and even sudden death) from what Party doctors described as revolutionary "exhaustion and attrition" *(iznoshennost' or utomleniye)*, which was eventually labeled "Soviet exhaustion" (Jarovsky 1989; Krementsov 2011; Prozorov 2016; Zalkind 1925). After hearing about early successes in curing "exhaustion" with blood rejuvenation, the General Secretary of the Party, Joseph Stalin, tasked Bogdanov with founding the Institute for Hematology and Blood Transfusions in 1926 (Krementsov 2011).

In the spring of 1928, Bogdanov decided to exchange blood with a student who was suffering from malaria and tuberculosis in an attempt to assist with their affliction. Although the student ended up making a full recovery after the transfusion, it has been suspected that Bogdanov suffered a hemolytic transfusion reaction. Two weeks later he was dead at the age of 54. With Bogdanov's death came the termination of state-sanctioned Soviet rejuvenation experimentation. This period of time also coincided with Stalin's rapid ascendency within the

upper strata of the Soviet political system. His leadership initiated widespread political

purges, particularly toward individuals and groups engaged in perceived "mysticism."

In an additional unfortunate turn of events, many Cosmist philosophers and organizations

—including the Biocosmists—had thrown their support behind Lev Trotsky and his Left

Opposition during the post-Lenin power struggles and were viciously persecuted for their

choice.

And it is no wonder why Trotsky was so appealing to many of the Cosmist thinkers,

despite his direct criticism of the philosophy itself. Interestingly, he was one of the few

Bolshevik leaders who directly addressed the philosophy at all. The "flat romanticism of

'Cosmism'," Trotsky (2005) claimed in 1924, "seems or may seem, extremely bold, vigorous,

revolutionary, and proletarian. But in reality, Cosmism contains the suggestion of very nearly

deserting the complex and difficult problems of art on Earth so as to escape into the

interstellar spheres. In this way Cosmism turns out quite suddenly to be akin to mysticism"

(173). In this last line especially, we see the similar critique leveled against Cosmism shared

by most of the Soviet leadership, no matter the faction, and was one of the few agreements

had by Trotsky and Stalin. Despite this direct objection, Trotsky had always espoused a kind

of proto-transhumanist belief that humanity was destined to take hold of its own evolution,

and this idea in particular greatly appealed to those sympathetic to Cosmist ideas.

> [Humankind] at last will begin to harmonize [themselves] in earnest. [They] will
> make it [their] business to achieve beauty by giving the movement of [their] own
> limbs the utmost precision, purposefulness, and economy of [their] work, [their]
> walk, [their] play. [They] will try to master first the semiconscious and then the
> subconscious processes in [their] own organism, such as breathing, the circulation of
> the blood, digestion, reproduction, and, within necessary limits, [they] will try to
> subordinate them to the control of reason and will. Even purely physiologic life will
> become subject to collective experiments. The human species, the coagulated *Homo
> sapiens*, will once more enter into a state of radical transformation, and, in [their] own
> hands, will become an object of the most complicated methods of artificial selection
> and psychophysical training. This is entirely in accord with evolution. (Trotsky 2005,
> 206)

These dreams were not had by Trotsky alone. Aleksei Gastev, an associate of Bogdanov and member of Proletkult, was one of the pioneering "bioengineers" in the early Soviet Union. Beginning his career as a revolutionary poet, Gastev's poetry—namely, his collection *Poetry of the Worker's Blow (Poeziia rabochego udara)*—was the first book ever published by Proletkult in 1918 (Bogdanov 2022). Yet Gastev, much like Bogdanov, was interested in more than artistic works. For Gastev, his poetry and his future career, which was dedicated to streamlining and manufacturing labor efficiency, were each part of the same aesthetic and political project. This is evident in, for example, his poem entitled "The Whistles":

> When the morning whistles blow in the working-class suburbs, it is no longer the call of slaves. No, this is the song of the future.
> We once labored in miserable workshops, starting work at different times in the morning.
> And now, at eight o'clock in the morning, the whistles are screaming for millions.
> Millions grab hammers at the same instant.
> And their first blows thunder together.
> What do the whistles sing?
> The anthem of our unity.
> (Bogdanov 2022, 52–53)

By 1920, however, Gastev decided to abandon poetry altogether and focus on reconstituting Tayloresque labor methods into the socialist project by developing novel instantiations of factory-floor ergonomics (Hellebust 1997). Thanks in part to his long-standing close relationship with Lenin, Gastev was able to secure funds to establish a laboratory for his theories: the Central Institute of Labor. While there, Gastev used photography and movie cameras to study the motions of various human movements in an attempt to develop ergonomic solutions that would lessen worker fatigue and increase efficiency. His 1924 book *Labor Configurations (Trudovye ustanovki)* was filled with diagrammatic

Циклограмма рубки зубилом (А. К. Гастев в педагогической лаборатории
ЦИТа)

Figure 6. Illustration in *Labor Configurations*. A photograph of A.K. Gastev himself performing a "chisel chopping cyclogram" at the Pedagogical Laboratory housed in the Central Institute of Labor.
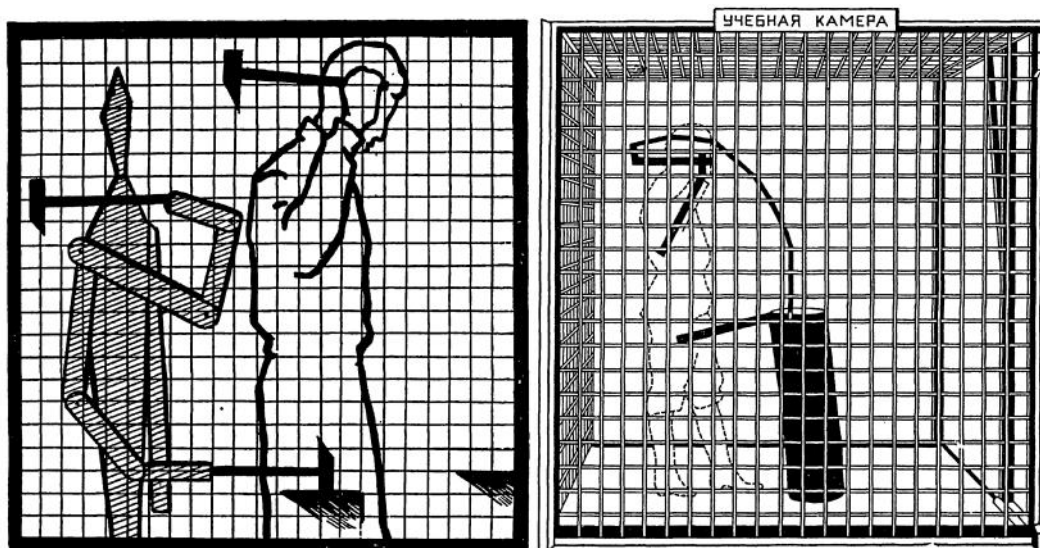
Figure 7. Illustrations in *Labor Configurations* demonstrating how to analyze hammer swings in a "training chamber."

analyses on ways of cybernetically molding the human body to achieve machine-like efficiency, while hopefully still retaining dignity and fostering a desire to build socialism.

Despite drawing inspiration from Frederick Taylor's system of labor, Gastev found that attempting to fuse humans with machines in a socialist context actually required a forsaking of central tenants of Taylorism. Taylor's principles of motivating workers to be the best among themselves was ultimately predicated on the achievement of monetary gain in the form of bonuses—a unique capitalist system of incentives—while Gastev saw the point of socialist labor as being based on workers viewing achievement by becoming the best possible version of themselves across the entire cybernetically connected workforce of the Soviet Union (Velminski 2017). While this ultimately was a political and economical undertaking, Gastev (2011) also saw it as a project of active evolution:

> The whole history of humanity *(Homo sapiens)* is a history of the development of biological adaptation *[sozdaniya bioprisposoblenyy]*. Strictly speaking, all of the latest biological doctrines (Darwinism, conditioned reflexes, rejuvenation) have either studied the spontaneity of biological adaptation (Darwinism) or they created other methods of biological adaptation (conditioned reflexes, rejuvenation, therapy, surgery). (185)

One possible reason why Fyodorov's ideas seem so aligned with Russian revolutionaries like Bogdanov and Gastev, even if they were implicit or repressed, was because his theology actually compliments dialectical materialism quite nicely, where matter is capable—if prompted and shaped by human action—of transformation to a higher level of organization (Bernstein 2019). Fyodorov defends his ideas through an articulation of the Orthodox Christian concept of *theosis*—that is, a deification of the human, or an attainment of divine "likeness," defensible through Christ's presence on Earth (Ware 1986). However, Fyodorov's theosis—arguably the foundation of his entire "common cause"—calls for a materialism beyond the mere *interaction* with divine matter and instead calls for the active *transformation* of matter through a dialectics of transfiguration or transmutation. These

positions, stripped down to the constructed secularity of scientific materialism, pair

excellently with works such as Friedrich Engels' (1960) *Dialectics of Nature*, which served as

the foundation for natural scientific inquiry within the Soviet Union for decades.

Additionally, despite their differing analyses on class and inequality, Fyodorov and

Marx actually align on quite a few pragmatic points. For example, both men believed the

most fundamental building block of social change was human labor. As Berdyaev (1948) said

of Fyodorov: "…there are entirely revolutionary elements in him, such as the activity of

[humankind], collectivism, the determining importance of labour, his ideas of economic

management, and the high value he places upon positive science and technical knowledge"

(209). If one were to attribute this quote to Marx and not Fyodorov, I doubt this citational

mistake would be caught. Like Marx, Fyodorov was devoted to a singular idea, with the

ultimate goal of both philosophers being the liberation of humanity from undesirable

material conditions.

To achieve these goals, each thinker was devoted to the pursuit of a particular

biopolitical regime to facilitate the coming of their respective utopian futures—Fyodorov

concentrated on the abolition of sexual reproduction in favor of paternal resurrection, Marx

on the control of human labor and production; Fyodorov saw labor as a means of uniting

humanity to his common cause, Marx stressed the need to regulate the laborer's body in

order to subsequently regulate economic outputs (McQuillen and Vaingurt 2018). The

Cosmist elective affinities within the Soviet system seemed to take one of two broad

pathways: that biopolitical regimes should either pursue the goal of machine-like humans

(Trotsky, Gastev) or they should focus on the development of humane machines

(Bogdanov). After 1922, following the Red Army's victory in the Civil War, the goals of

initiating mass industrialization had *hopes* to tread the latter path, seemingly cementing

Berdyaev's argument that the Russo-Soviet interpretation of humanism may have been reduced to a conception of "humanitarianism." Whether those hopes were materially enacted or not is an entirely different conversation.

Enchanted Biopolitics

George M. Young (2012) has described Cosmism as "occupying a unique borderland, a crossover area between science and magic" (9). These borderlands are often filled with a yearning for a re-enchanted world, which can lead to affective ontological engagements by their adherents, particularly in how one formulates life and bodies. However, Fyodorov himself was against all forms of naturalism, which he saw as nothing but Romanticist idealism suited only to the rich and privileged who lived far from the everyday brutality of nature (Prozorov 2016). Those who experience any kind of direct contact with nature, argued Fyodorov, understand that it is a constant struggle between life and death, and so anyone who idolizes nature therefore possesses the worst quality a human can have: a death wish (Young 2012). This ultimately tracks as the fundamental logic within Fyodorov's philosophy, for if death is a natural phenomenon, then the abolition of death is a victory over nature.

Throughout *The Philosophy of the Common Cause*, Fyodorov repeatedly calls nature "our temporary enemy but permanent friend" *(priroda nam vrag vremennyy a drug vechnyy)*. According to Fyodorov, because humankind is imbued with reason, we are meant to control and regulate an irrational nature, but we have yet to live up to that destiny. Once we have become nature's master, then we will have recreated paradise, and nature will become our eternal friend—although this itself is a bit of a misnomer since within Fyodorov's taxonomy, nature would always remain both an object as well as merely a tool for human intervention (Prozorov 2016). Fyodorov's imagined ways of submitting nature to human creativity range

from planetary geo-engineering projects, the ability to manipulate weather, and even controlling Earth's magnetic field so that we might literally steer the planet through the cosmos—or, as Fyodorov said, we would succeed as a species only when we finally escaped the "slavish orbiting of the sun" (Young 2012, 79). At the same time, humankind, nature, and nonhuman people are all kindred manifestations of the same living "spirit-bearing" energy. However, Fyodorov also proposes that following the unification of humanity in the common cause, we will gain the ability to direct the energy that we call "spirit" or "soul." As Vasily Cherkygin (2015)—another follower of Fyodorov—put it, "to study nature thus means seeking a means of stripping the power of thunder, converting it from one that destroys to one that recreates, resurrects" (184).

Thus far, it seems the magical borderlands of Cosmism exhibit a tension between vitalism and mechanism; an ontological chasm which opens between the opposing peaks of anesthesiology and aesthesiology. That said, many artists, philosophers, and scientists who exist within the Fyodorovian genealogy struggled to overcome the pater's rigid disgust for the nonhuman. For example, Proletkult writer Andrei Platonov (1978) wrote in 1928 of affective multispecies solidarity in his revolutionary novel *Chevengur*: "[Chepurny] touched a burdock. It too wanted communism. The entire weed patch was a friendship of living plants…just like the proletariat, this grass endures the life of heat and the death of deep snow" (198). For Platonov, it was not only human beings, but all living creatures (including plants), that are molecularly intertwined in proletarian comradeship—all life is overwhelmed by the "desire for communism" (Timofeeva 2018, 167).

Likewise, Vladimir Solovyov wrote intensely that humanity's ultimate task needed to be devoted to the "spiritualization of matter" *(odukhotvorenie materii)*—the active infusion of the "spirit" or "soul" into all of materiality, thereby spiritually linking the entire world,

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including nonhumans (Smith 2011). Although Solovyov shared Fyodorov's goal of creating a program to achieve human immortality, he denounced Fyodorov's insistence on science and technology as the principle instruments for achieving that goal. Solovyov was more interested in ways that *aesthetics* could counteract the process of dying; although he did share Fyodorov's anti-naturalism and proposed that humankind alone was uniquely positioned to reintegrate the physical world with God in order to achieve "all-unity" *(vseedinstvo)* (McQuillen and Vaingurt 2018, 21).

Writer and playwright Sergei Bulgakov (2000) also argued for a completely interconnected, enchanted universe:

> Every living organism, as a body, as organized material, is inextricably connected with the universe as a whole, for the universe is a system of mutually connected and mutually penetrating forces, and one cannot disturb so much as a grain of sand, destroy so much as an atom, without, to one or another degree, disturbing the entire universe. (95)

For Bulgakov, who also shared Solovyov's suspicion of science and technology, part of fulfilling the "spiritualization of matter" was the simple act of eating food, for lifeless things become part of life through the act of consumption within our body—"all that is accessible to our cognition and that somehow affects our sensuality and thus enters the illuminated sphere of life, all of this, that is, potentially the entire universe, can become our body, its external, peripheral extension" (Bulgakov 2000, 99–100). This "ontological communication" or "communism of being" was the foundation of all life processes (Bulgakov 2000, 102). In order to conquer death, humankind needed to devote itself to "caretaking" or "management" *(khoziaistvo)* as a way of humanizing nature (McQuillen and Vaingurt 2018). This humanization was not only a political project, but also the natural state of things: "the kingdom of life constantly intrudes on the kingdom of nonlife, seizes and

carries away cold, lifeless matter with its warm tentacles, and transforms it into living

material, organizes dead matter into a living body" (Bulgakov 2000, 97).

In the 1920s, geochemist and Cosmist Vladimir Vernadsky theorized that the

emergence of a unified cognition amongst all of humanity (a prerequisite for the common

cause) would fundamentally transform the biosphere in a similar way that the "biosphere"

fundamentally transformed the "geosphere," a term he used to described the previous phase

of planetary development exemplified by a planet consisting of an overwhelming amount of

inanimate matter (Samson and Pitt 1999; Vernadsky 1998). According to Vernadsky, when

humans begin to realize we owe allegiance to our cosmos and planet over our nations and

ethnicity, we will gain the ability to transmute matter and develop into autotrophic beings,

with the ability to live off sunlight and air rather than cannibalizing our fellow nonhuman

people (plants and animals) for energy. As he wrote in his article "The Autotrophism of

Humanity":

> As soon as we discover how to synthesize food directly, without the help of organic
> substances, the future of [humankind] will change in a fundamental way…To a large
> degree, the future of [humankind] is always made by [humanity themselves]. The
> creation of a new autotrophic being will give [humanity] opportunities, absent until
> now, to realize [their] eternal spiritual yearnings; it will effectively open the path to a
> better life before [them]. (quoted in McQuillen and Vaingurt 2018, 25)

Focusing specifically on Earthly interconnections, Vernadsky (1998) essentially

outlined a version of the Gaia Hypothesis fifty-three years before James Lovelock released

his book on the topic. Vernadsky argued that the assumed opposition between humankind

and nature was intrinsically illogical and a false dichotomy. The forces of nature and

humankind were fundamentally linked, which, according to Vernadsky, meant that the

unique properties of human intellect were becoming a central driving force within the

evolution of our entire planetary system, slowly creating a new geological era which he

termed *noosphere*—the "sphere of reason."

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During the same time period in the 1920s and '30s, other scientists, such as historian and biologist Aleksandr Chizhevsky, were attempting to illustrate a fundamental link between collective human actions on Earth and events in the cosmos. He argued for a concept he called "heliobiology" *(geliobiologiya)*. Using (selective) empirical data from historical incidents of social unrest between primarily the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries (although he also studied ancient Chinese and Roman sources), Chizhevsky (2018) claimed that "the historical distribution of popular mass movements is determined by solar force via its impact on the human neuropsychological apparatus—by increasing excitability and sharpening the people's reflexes…" (17). He asserted that the rise and fall of social movements corresponded to the natural solar cycles of the sun. He divided each of these 11.1 year "world-historical cycles" into four epochs: the epoch of minimal excitability (lasting three years), mounting excitability (lasting two years), maximal excitability (lasting three years), and diminishing excitability (lasting three years) (Chizhevsky 2018, 18).

Chizhevsky was inspired to pursue his line of cosmic reasoning after the success of the 1917 Russian Revolution (which did occur during a period of heightened solar activity), yet some of his most interesting conclusions came out of a demonstrated solar correlation not between revolutionary change and status quo, but between the normalcy of who operated the ruling bourgeois government of the English parliamentary system. In fact, over a century's worth of solar data can be nearly transposed over whether or not the English parliament would have a liberal or conservative government.

> [Chizhevsky] shows that for a period between 1830 and 1924 the summary activity of the Sun during the rule of liberal governments was 155.6% higher than it was during the rule of conservative governments. Conservative governments never had power when the number of sunspots was over 93. (Groys 2020, 163)

Chizhevsky, and some of his students, including Nikolai Kondratiev, then began to move toward predicting future periods of not only political upheaval and apathy, but also

world economic cycles. Kondratiev, utilizing his teacher's theories of heliobiology, spookily predicted all the economic downturns since the 1930s, including the 2009 economic crisis (Barnett 1998). In the sphere of global politics, Chizhevsky and Kondratiev predicted that there would be periods of disruptive global social movements in the years 1968, 1989, and 2010 (Groys 2020). And it is perhaps worth mentioning that today, in the early 2020s, we are in a period of very weak solar activity, which Chizhevsky may have concluded as correlating with a period of political passivity and indifference.

Yet, this constellation of revolutionary, scientific, and religious imaginaries moved beyond artist circles and scientific labs. They also circulated freely and intersected often within the public sphere in revolutionary Russia; so much so that the preservation of Vladimir Lenin's corpse was, at the time, understood as being pursued because of the very real possibility of his eventual reanimation (Bernstein 2019; Yurchak 2015). In fact, the Communist Party Central Committee—at the insistence of Anatoly Lunacharsky and Maxim Gorky—initially *cryopreserved* Lenin's body before finally deciding on embalming him (Gray 2011). Placing Lenin's body on display in a mausoleum on Red Square could further be read as the creation of a politico-religious relic (Tumarkin 1997). His body was able to be venerated by the public in all its "miraculous materiality," in much the same way that pilgrims formed affective ontological connections with a variety of reliquaries in the late Medieval period in Europe (Bynum 2011).

These metaphysics adjoining discourse on human immortality reshapes ontological formations around not only *life*, but also *time*. Walter Benjamin (1969) famously stated that it might not be the hope for one's liberated descendants that drives people to political action, but instead the memories of one's oppressed ancestors—a very Fyodorovian premise. This also led to Benjamin's torment over the Marxist problematic of the "victims of history"—

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that deceased generations would never enjoy the "realm of freedom" after the revolution

had finally dawned (Marx 1993). But the Fyodorovian project seems to reconcile this

injustice rendered upon past generations through a focus on parental resurrection and

rodstvo. This intergenerational solidarity took a variety of forms and was expressed by

Bogdanov (2022) in terms of how to reintegrate "bourgeois art" into a revolutionary setting:

"The proletarian must never forget that, in the present, *collaboration between generations* is the

opposite of collaboration between classes. The poet does not have the right to disrespect the

great dead who bequeathed their souls to us" (128–129).

　　　　Even further afield, with the ontological reconfiguration of life and time, some were

even beginning to think beyond the nature/culture divide entirely and attempting to

formulate how *objects* might be (re)structured within the affective ontologies of everyday life.

Frequent Proletkult collaborator and designer Alexander Rodchenko theorized alternative

ontologies with/of objects:

> The light is from the East…not only the liberation of the working class. The light is
> from the East—in a new relation to man, to woman, and to objects. Objects in our
> hands should also be equal, also be comrades, and not black, gloomy slaves like they
> have here…Objects will be understood, will become people's friends and comrades,
> and people will begin to know how to laugh and enjoy and converse with things…
> (Rodchenko 2005, 169)

　　　　Following the Soviet Union's adoption of the New Economic Policy and its

subsequent need to commit to rapid industrialization throughout the 1930s and '40s,

Rodchenko's yearning for objects to also become comrades *(tovarishchi)* was never able to

escape from the etymological object-subject tension at the root of the word *(tovar)*.[18] But I

find interesting Rodchenkoan resonances within the 21st century philosophy of "object-

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[18] The Russian word for "comrade" *(tovarishch)* is derived from the noun *tovar*, which means an "object in
exchange," such as a commodity or piece of merchandise. Prior to the word being adopted by revolutionaries
sometime prior to the 1905 Revolution, *tovarishch* was used primarily to mean a business or trade associate
(Kravets 2013).

oriented ontology" (OOO). Originally developed by philosopher Graham Harmon (2002), an OOO similarly rejects Kantian anthropocentrism, whereby phenomenal objects conform to the mind of the subject, and instead proposes that objects exist independently of human perception. Therefore, all relations, including nonhuman relations, distort their related objects in the same manner as human consciousness and exist on equitable footing with one another. It would not take much of a philosophical step in OOO to then argue for the inherent necessity of comradeship with these objects—or "entities" as Harmon's former student Timothy Morton (2016) now prefers to call them.

The Miraculous Museum

If the common cause did not represent a utopian dream to Fyodorov, but rather, an attainable imminent reality, then what already existing contemporary analogs might be used as tools for such a cause? A project at the scale of universal resurrection and immortality would require not only a completely holistic philosophy, but also pragmatic strategies, and for Fyodorov, the most visible ideal fusion of art and science was the field of architecture (McQuillen and Vaingurt 2018). More specifically, Fyodorov idolized projects which he saw as being committed to "celestial architecture" *(nebesnoyu arkhytekturoyu)* which did not "reduce the heavens to the Earth [but rather, elevated] the Earth and all worlds to the celestial heavens" (Fedorov 1995, 234). This kind of cosmic cathedral was most inspiring to Fyodorov in the religious context, but he also saw considerable potential in, of all things, secular Earthly museums.

Fyodorov thought that museums, both as institutions and as ontological constructions, were sites which already rested on the foundations of Cosmist thought. Museums were impossible to annihilate, for they were life's shadow. Inside each of us, a museum. And more pragmatically, museums, as institutions, were already primed to begin the

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groundwork of researching and cataloging the histories of each human who has ever lived, a necessary step in resurrecting all those who have already died (Prozorov 2016). According to Fyodorov, the act of conservation was a primordial and divine force in itself. But perhaps most importantly, museums were *visible material reminders* of the project of resurrection and immortality, the common cause. Their existence acted as a constant nudge, reminding us that we should act as if overcoming death is simply a given, not merely a philosophical exercise. Museums already granted a degree of immortality to the objects within them—why, then, should humans not also be added to its ever-expanding archive (Hurwitz 2021)?

> The museum is the collection of everything outlived, dead, unsuitable for use; but precisely because of this it is the hope of the century, for the existence of a museum shows that there are no finished matters…For the museum, death itself is not the end but only the beginning…The museum is the highest instantiation that can and must return life, not take it. (Fedorov 2015, 64–65)

For Fyodorov, a museum should not be merely an aggregate of objects, not only an accumulation of dead things, but rather, it needed to be viewed as a congregation of people, and the purpose of a museum was—like the goals of the common cause—the first step in restoring life. In particular, a museum consisted of living workers devoting themselves entirely to reestablishing the dead through a manipulation of their material memories. But Fyodorov was not centering his conception of a museum solely on scientific materialism. The work itself was also about religious devotion: "the museum is the first scientific and artistic attempt at communion or education in unity, and thus this attempt is a religious, holy task" (Fedorov 2015, 89–90). Museums had the potential to become the launchpad for the common cause, for they, when conceptualized properly, were the immaculate sites of active evolution.

> Investigation gives sacred direction to human thought and sets a goal of congregating all people in a common house of the fatherland, in a museum, in a home of the Heavenly Father, the God of all earthly fathers, in a house which, being a museum, is at the same time a temple. A museum, as we have seen, cannot only be

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a depository; it must also be investigation; this *is the communion of all learned societies.* (Fedorov 2015, 95)

This transmutation of museums from depositories to active sites of communion would naturally begin to break down the material, ideological, and ontological walls which represent inside/outside, mundane/sacred, Earth/cosmos, and living/dead. As Fyodorov put it: "when the plan is implemented, the contradiction between what is in a museum and what is outside of it will be annihilated…a museum, indivisible from a temple, is the force transforming society from the judicial and economic regime to the kin and moral regime" (Fedorov 2015, 100–101). This kind of dialectical engagement is, perhaps ironically, also utilized in Vladimir Lenin's analyses about a communist future.

Despite the fact that Fyodorov viewed any socialist analysis with disgust, Lenin nevertheless used a similar dialectical method concerning the withering away of inside/ outside. In particular, Lenin tread a comparable line of reasoning to Fyodorov—albeit with very different conclusions—when it came to Enlightenment ideas like "individual rights," particularly in their simultaneous conclusions that rights were ultimately founded upon "bourgeois fictions" (Genovese 2020). Where Fyodorov argued that the suppression of individual rights was necessary in favor of the dictatorial rule of a Tsar to direct projects like the common cause, Lenin argued that citizens of bourgeois states appeal to individual rights precisely because we do not live under communism—it is because the framework of rights is the sole legal recourse we have under a system rife with inequalities. However, according to Lenin, as the state withers away and the higher phase of communist society emerges, there would be no reason for rights to exist because inequalities themselves would be annihilated, thereby creating the "kin and moral regime" so important to Fyodorov.

For Lenin, individual rights can be seen as a bourgeois fiction because when the working class focuses all their attention on using the bourgeois political framework of rights,

it simultaneously legitimizes the bourgeois state while closing off communist possibilities for the future.[19] Fyodorov, on the other hand, also despised liberal political frameworks, such as rights, because they closed off the possibility of universal human unity in exchange for the elevation of individual differences. Fyodorov and Lenin, while ultimately both wanting an international order based on human solidarity, appear on opposites sides of the dialectical spiral arguing against bourgeois liberalism as a useful system for achieving human liberation.

To return to the museum specifically, there were other thinkers operating in the early days of the Soviet experiment who also subscribed to the Fyodorovian belief in the transformative power of combining art and science. In the early 1920s, an eclectic collective called *Makovets* created various artistic and intellectual contributions in an attempt to advance many of Fyodorov's arguments. Additionally, quite a few of its most prominent members had either studied with Fyodorov personally or had extensively read his posthumous writings, including the religious philosopher Pavel Florensky, the Futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov, and the artist/poet Vasily Chekrygin (McQuillen and Vaingurt 2018). Chekrygin (2015), in particular, directly advanced Fyodorov's museum arguments in his 1921 work entitled "On the Cathedral of the Resurrecting Museum" *(O sobore voskreshayushchego muzeya),* in which he dedicated the book "to the memory of the great sage and teacher Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov, whose wisdom created it" (172).

Chekrygin was interested in carrying forward not only Fyodorov's physical conception of what a museum should be, but also its divine materialist qualities. Similar to Fyodorov's previously discussed ontological articulation of "kinship" *(rodstvo),* Chekrygin advanced Fyodorov's theorizations of *sobornost*—from the word *sobor*, meaning a cathedral— which held great ontological significance in both of their arguments. As George M. Young

[19] For more on this specifically, see Genovese 2020, 25; 33–34 n.18.

(2012) has described the term: "For Fedorov and most of the religious Cosmists…
Orthodoxy [relies on] *sobornost*, the synthesis of freedom and unity, wholeness, communality,
spiritual consensus" (33). So Fyodorov and Chekrygin's "cathedral," much like their
"museum," had to become more than just a building; it was to be a reorientation of
humanity's goals, which would then dialectically loop back into the material culture of the
physical structure itself. "There is no real work of art that does not produce some sort of
action, some change in life…a work of art is a project of new life" (Fedorov 2015, 113).

Of course, we should also not ignore that these are ultimately arguments for a kind
of totalizing biopower. As asserted by Boris Groys (2020), when it comes to Fyodorov's
proposal to universalize resurrection and immortality, it should also be remembered that it is
a proposal for the suspension of any kind of democratic decision making. After all, works
of art are not able to democratically elect who their curator will be; likewise, to reach our
potential as Moderns, we must similarly see ourselves like a curatorial state—as "bodies
among other bodies, things among other things" (Groys 2020, 160).

> The state can no longer permit itself to allow individuals to die privately or the dead
> to rest peacefully in their graves. Death's limits must be overcome by the state.
> Modern biopower must become total. This totality is achieved by equating art and
> politics, life and technology, state and museum. The overcoming of the boundaries
> between life and art is here not a matter of introducing art into life but is, rather, a
> radical museumification of life. By unifying living space and museum space,
> biopower extends itself into infinity. (Groys 2020, 160)

With other comrades from *Makovets*, Chekrygin had planned to actually construct his
Cathedral of the Resurrecting Museum, inside of which he had intended to paint enormous
frescoes depicting the lifting of resurrected bodies up toward the cosmos. In his poetic work
about the project, Chekrygin (2015) describes the cathedral's purpose: "The true plan:
gatherings of the arts, of their recondite meanings. The true plan: defeating time and space,
abolishing the Universe's law of gravity and falling bodies. The plan of the world's

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Figure 8. Vasily Chekrygin, "The Participation of Science in Resurrection," illustration in the manuscript *On the Cathedral of the Resurrecting Museum*, 1921. Private collection.

transfiguration and liberation from death" (174). Not only is this polemical statement suffused with fellow *Makovets* poet Khlebnikov's (1985) proposals on temporality, it also builds on Fyodorov's theory that the common cause is ultimately intertwined with humanity's ability to control all natural forces, including the falling of human and natural bodies.

> The temple from its artistic side…is reduced to one thing: to keep bodies from falling. If the architecture of [this temple] is to counteract the fall, to lift, support from falling, to triumph over the fall of bodies, then the real architecture will be to counteract the fall of the Earth itself. (Fedorov 1995, 235)

Cosmist Migration

Despite Fyodorov's insistence that his philosophy was not utopian, thus far, the expressions of his ideas by his admirers seem to have remained purely within the realm of the imagination. However, this is not ubiquitous. The most influential interpreters of second-wave Cosmism were those that brought about global material changes, and the best example of the materialist Cosmists was the early rocket scientist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky. The historical record is somewhat contested on whether or not Tsiolkovsky had direct contact with Fyodorov—some historians say he only read Fyodorov's writings, while some, such as Young (2012), claim that Tsiolkovsky was directly tutored by the Moscow librarian in the 1870s. Regardless of which narrative is to be believed, Tsiolkovsky's philosophy—and more importantly, his scientific outputs—radically changed the world and spread a Cosmist-inspired gospel well beyond the insular community of the Muscovite intelligentsia.

At the age of 16, Tsiolkovsky left his rural village to become a student in Moscow, for there was little that a provincial schoolhouse could provide for a boy that was both extraordinarily gifted and rendered mostly deaf from a bout of scarlet fever (Young 2012). It was during this time that Tsiolkovsky poured over books about mathematics and philosophy. After learning about the common cause from Fyodorov (either directly or indirectly)

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Tsiolkovsky began to piece together a Cosmist philosophy, as well as develop some of the earliest examples of rocket science. This latter point is where he differed from many other Cosmist dreamers, for he not only desired a world in which humanity could achieve what Fyodorov referred to as the "'patrification of the heavens' (that is, the transformation of the planets into habitable places for our resurrected fathers)" (Groys 2020, 164), but he also began to develop technical sketches and mathematical formulas in order to pragmatically pursue that goal. And, indeed, Tsiolkovsky's list of scientific accomplishments are staggering, considering that these discoveries were made prior to the actual invention of modern rocketry; as Michael Holquist (1987) recounts:

> Tsiolkovsky was the first to do most of the things necessary to make, launch, and sustain life inside rockets as we now know them. The list of his original contributions is overwhelming: he developed aerodynamic test methods for rigid air frames; he solved the problem of rocket flight in a uniform field of gravitation; he calculated the amount of fuel needed to overcome the earth's gravitational pull; he invented gyroscopic stabilization of rocket ships in space; and he discovered a method for cooling the combustion chamber with ingredients of the fuel itself (a method still widely used in most jet engines). (78)

Tsiolkovsky's discoveries remained largely ignored by the Tsarist regime, mainly due to his humble origins and his lack of concern over appearance and convention—for example, he was widely known as the "Kaluga eccentric" *(Kaluzhkii chudak)*, after the small town he lived and worked in south of Moscow (Young 2012, 145). However, he found enormous success after the revolution, for there was nothing that embodied the proletarian spirit more than a self-taught eccentric peasant who built his own wooden rocket models in a homemade laboratory. Not only were his discoveries potentially useful to a revolution that yearned for scientific and technical achievement, he also served as "an ideal model of the new Soviet intellectual worker, a democratic rocket scientist, a genius emerged from the proletariat" (Young 2012, 150).

But it was not only his scientific discoveries that began to disseminate around the newly formed Soviet Union, but also his Fyodorovian inspired philosophy. This included his belief—obviously taken from Fyodorov's professing of "ancestral dust" that floats through the cosmos and must be captured in order to fulfill resurrection—of the existence of "atom spirit" *(atom-dukh)*; that is, every particle of matter throughout the universe is both alive and interconnected (Young 2012).

> I am not only a materialist but also a panpsychist who acknowledges the sensitivity of the entire universe. I consider this property inalienable from matter. Everything is alive, but conventionally we regard as living only what demonstrates a sufficiently intense power of feeling. Since all material, under favorable conditions, can always go into an organic state, theoretically we can say that inorganic matter is potentially alive. (Tsiolkovsky 2018, 136)

What makes Tsiolkovsky's interpretation significant—especially considering that it became one of the more dominant Cosmist narratives throughout the Soviet Union and beyond—is his explicit departure from Fyodorov regarding the necessity of *universal* immortality, resurrection, and cosmic travel. Instead, Tsiolkovsky took an exceptionally Spencerian stance on the time to come, espousing that the perfect society of the future must remain highly selective. Our cosmic garden must continue to be, as it always has been, constantly weeded; the weak must be eliminated so that the strong may flourish.

> Future technologies will make it possible to overcome Earth's gravity and travel through the entire solar system. All its planets will be visited and researched. Imperfect worlds will be eliminated and replaced with our own population…Billions of billions of beings will grow and evolve around the Sun near the asteroids. A variety of breeds of perfected beings will be produced…When they encounter a desert or immature, ugly world, they will painlessly eliminate it, replace it with their own world. (Tsiolkovsky 2018, 144–145)

The incestual nature of Cosmist thought during this time was also abundantly present.[20] Not only do we see Fyodorov's obvious influence on Tsiolkovsky, but there was

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[20] Perhaps unsurprisingly, Tsiolkovsky personally tutored a 17-year old Aleksandr Chizhevsky and almost certainly inspired the development of his theory of heliobiology.

also inspiration from his Cosmist contemporaries, like Vladimir Vernadsky and his theory of autotrophism: "the most dominant breed, however," Tsiolkovsky (2018) asserts, "will be the most perfect type of organism, dwelling in the ether and nourished directly by solar energy like a plant" (144). With consequences that I will expand upon later in this work, Tsiolkovsky's colonial framework being nested inside of a monist understanding about the architecture of the universe led to a kind of gnostic supremacism that found traction in both his own time and culture, as well as among the Cosmist diaspora, especially as these ideas began to spread abroad.

For Tsiolkovsky, the human brain was a material entity; and being a material entity, it was merely a part of the interconnected atom-spirit lattice of the universe. Therefore, any advancement of human thought represented the natural processes of the universe, which might, for example, subsequently contribute to the construction of Vernadsky's noosphere. For Tsiolkovsky, the will of one human's thought must necessarily represent the will of the universe. As Groys (2020) has described it: "If the human brain is a part of Cosmos and transmits Cosmic energies, then human beings become Cosmic. [However,] natural selection must of course decide whose brain best expresses the will of the universe" (165).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the manager and designer of the Soviet space program, whose early successes goaded the American government to invest in their fledgling space ambitions, was directly inspired by Tsiolkovsky. Sergei Korolev, originally an aircraft designer, is quoted as saying that "after my acquaintance with Tsiolkovsky's work…I started rocket development" (Harford 1997, 14). With the inseparability of Tsiolkovsky's scientific and philosophical work, it could be argued that Fyodorov's theological Cosmist ambitions had tacitly smuggled their way into one of the most supreme achievements of the supposedly atheist Soviet Union. And, indeed, this unspoken and infused quality of Cosmist

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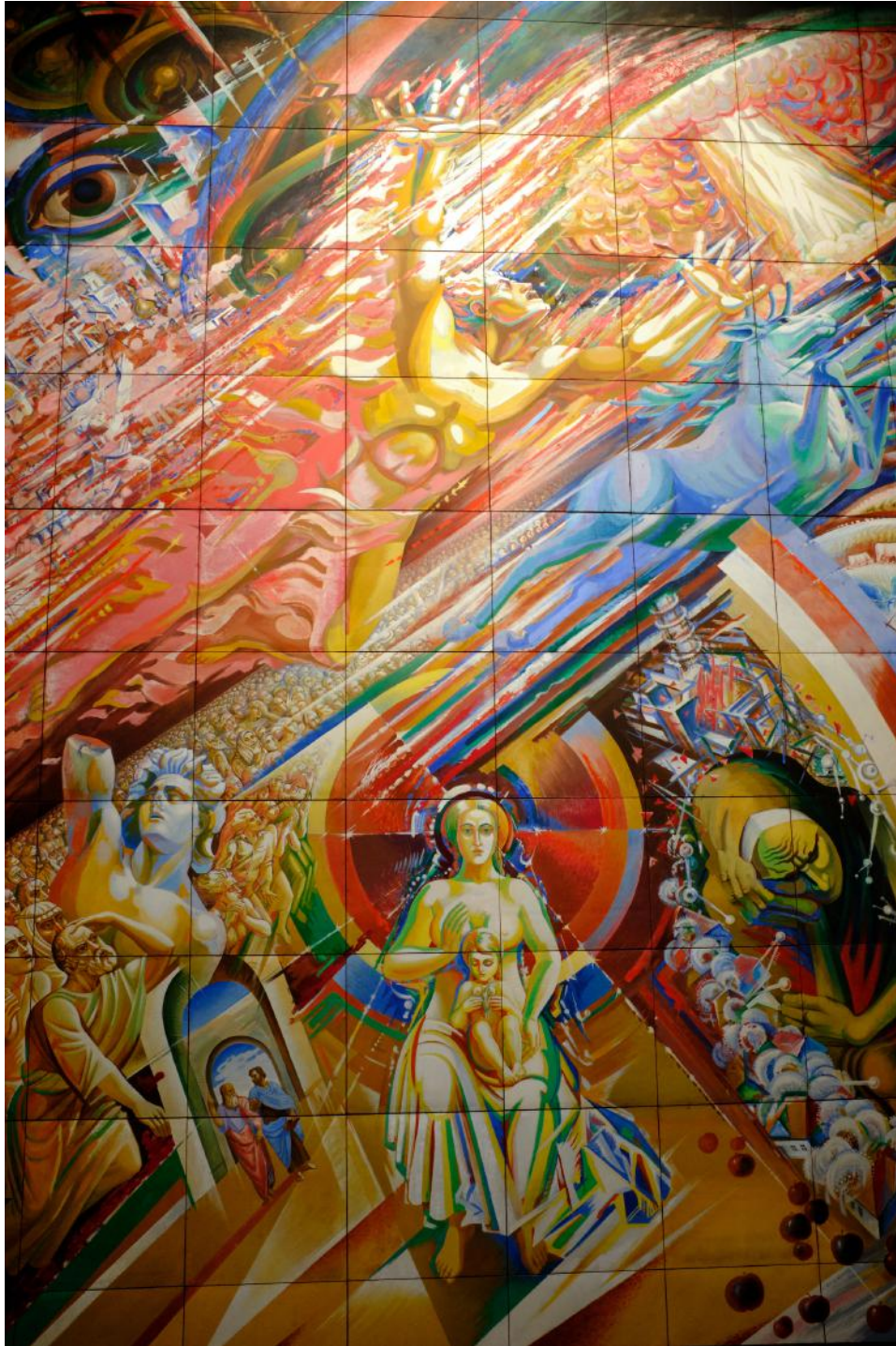
Figure 9. A portion of the enormous mural entitled "Earth's Pain" by V. Pasyvenko and V. Pryadka, created with a technique called hot wax painting. It is displayed at the entrance of the V.I. Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine in Kyiv and seems to contain Cosmist elements of the library's namesake. Its artists say the composition explores the main duty of science: to save life on Earth (Oms and Lysenko 2020). [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 2000, *f*/11, 1/60; September 14, 2021]

transmission was how the ideas of Fyodorov and his admirers tended to spread, including beyond the borders of the so-called Iron Curtain.

The intertwining of religious syncretism with technological innovation is not unique to the Soviet experience. In fact, "hippy spirituality" within the broader American counter-culture movement of the 1960s has been directly traced to the birth of the personal computer industry in the Santa Clara Valley (Markoff 2005; Turner 2008). The birth of micro-computing in the United States, much like the rapid advancement of the Soviet space program, is not often thought as having a religious component, despite the abundant rhizomatic overlaps between technology and spirituality. The Bay Area's recent entrepreneurial computing industry combined elements of radical individualism, right-libertarianism, techno-utopianism, and the rising tide of neoliberal economics to form what Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron (1995) have dubbed the "Californian Ideology."

The Californian Ideology of this rising "digirati," combined with New Age spirituality prevalent within the Bay Area, gave rise to a uniquely American brand of Cosmism (Harrison 2013). However, the emergence of these ideas do not seem to be an instance of multiple discovery, but rather, they seem to be inspired by a kind of Cosmist panspermia from the Soviet Union to its capitalist rival. The Californian Ideology is often said to have domestically disseminated primarily from the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, where nouveau riche technologists attended retreats with spiritual gurus and researchers in an attempt to seek enlightenment for themselves and their technologies. This retreat center subsequently became the center of the Human Potential Movement during the 1960s and '70s (Kripal 2007). Most importantly, however, Esalen was the sponsor of the Soviet-American Exchange Program, which was born out of a trip to the Soviet Union in 1971 by several Esalen members, including the institute's co-founder Michael Murphy.

The timing of this exploratory trip was fortuitous, as this was about the period when Cosmism was beginning to publicly resurface in the Soviet Union—what Cosmism scholars have defined as the third-wave of Russian Cosmism (Bernstein 2019). While there, Murphy was "deeply moved" by Soviet researchers who described the work of most of the previously described Cosmist thinkers. In particular, Murphy was intrigued by the ideas of Vladimir Solovyov—a direct disciple of Fyodorov—who wrote that Christianity was not so much about the immortality of the soul, but instead a "resurrection of the flesh" (Kripal 2007, 320). This introduction to Cosmist philosophers inspired Murphy to co-sponsor a small library of Russian philosophical and theological works with Lindisfarne Press upon his return to the United States (Kripal 2007).

Murphy also found state-funded Soviet research into "hidden human reserves" to be discursively similar to the human potential research he and his colleagues were engaged with at Esalen (Kripal 2007). Despite the fact that the Soviet rhetoric had to be crafted to align with the dominant hegemony of scientific socialism—much in the same way American research has to be crafted to align with marketability and commerce—Murphy remarked that Soviet research on "maximum performance" resembled American studies of "peak experience;" "bioplasma" and "distant bioinformation interactions" coded to American "energy fields" and "remote viewing;" "physical self-regulation" was similar to "stress management" (Kripal 2007, 331). These Soviet ideas materialized out of the reemergence of both Cosmist thought and "God-Building" *(bogostroitel'stvo)*—a philosophy heavily intertwined with Proletkult and Bogdanov—which called for people to worship not God, but humanity's own potential to commit to active evolution (Bernstein 2019; White 2019).

By the early 1980s, Esalen had formally established the Soviet-American Exchange Program with tacit permission from the Reagan administration (Kripal 2007). Also known as

"hot tub diplomacy," or "track-two diplomacy" (Davidson and Montville 1981), this program facilitated informal conversations and cultural exchanges between Soviet and American scientists, politicians, and spiritual researchers. The program is perhaps most famous for the fact that it culminated in Esalen's sponsoring of Boris Yeltsin's fateful 1989 trip to the United States, which subsequently sent him on the trajectory of developing his reactionary campaign to collapse the Soviet Union from within (Kripal 2007). According to Douglas Rushkoff (2017), however, many leading American technologists and venture capitalists attended these exchange gatherings and were inspired by the Cosmist philosophies introduced to them by their Soviet colleagues while soaking in the hot springs of Esalen in Big Sur.

Not only do researchers like Kripal and Rushkoff seem convinced of the exporting of Cosmist philosophy to the United States through Esalen's exchange program, it also lines up with the material evidence of Cosmism's resurgence within the Soviet Union itself. For example, in 1982, the Soviet cosmonaut Vitaly Sevastyanov convinced the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union to publish, for the first time since the Revolution, a 700-page volume of Fyodorov's selected works, which began to circulate widely amongst Soviet academicians (Koutaissoff 1990). The publication was eventually noticed by Party officials—most notably, Mikhail Suslov, the "chief ideologue of the party"(Medvedev 1982, 56)—and the unsold copies were taken out of circulation for being "untimely" and "misguided" (Koutaissoff 1990, 13). Despite this, Fyodorov's ideas had emerged out of the shadows of history and they seemed to do so not only right at the peak of the Soviet-American Exchange Program, but also during a time in which these Cosmist ideas would be most appealing to the types of people Esalen was targeting for their program.

While a direct, documentable transmission of Cosmist ideas from the Soviet Union to the United States may prove impossible to furnish, it is demonstrable that Fyodorov's ghost found in the United States a particularly fertile haunting ground. After Esalen's exchange program, we begin to see an explosion of ideas which construct a constellation of convergences, relations, and elective affinities between Cosmist theology and American techno-futurist imaginaries.

Although Stewart Brand's *The Whole Earth Catalog* had been published since 1968, its tone took a marked shift after 1972, when Brand began to belay his insistence on rugged individualism in favor of a species-wide communal approach to the future—this also included a conspicuous emphasis on human expansion into space, particularly in the 1977 and 1980 catalogs. In 1974, Gerard K. O'Neill published his influential article "The Colonization of Space," in which he argues for the immediate pursuit of permanent human migration into the cosmos by constructing enormous space stations. A year later, the L5 Society is founded to lobby for O'Neill's vision, naming themselves after one of his proposed sites for these vast cosmic habitats, the L_5 Lagrange point, a stable gravitational position between the Earth and the Moon that allows spacecraft to "park" without expending energy. Also in 1974, the United States establishes the National Institute on Aging, an agency which perceives aging as an inherent problem to be solved (and deserving of state funding). In 1986, K. Eric Drexler published his book *Engines of Creation*, in which he not only argues for the inevitability of nanotechnology, but also advocates for space travel and life extension.

One of the most striking establishments of American Cosmism, however, is the techno-utopian pursuit of *cryopreservation* as a possible program for resurrection and immorality. In 1972, Fred and Linda Chamberlain founded the Alcor Society for Solid State

Hypothermia, later changed to Alcor Life Extension Foundation in 1977. Originally

headquartered in Riverside County, California, it was eventually moved to Scottsdale,

Arizona in 1993–1994 in order to avoid risk of natural disasters (particularly Californian

earthquakes). Their concern for natural disaster was greater than mere destruction of

property. Rather, their concern stemmed from the fact that Alcor, at the time of this writing,

stores just over 200 cryopreserved "patients" in their facility—that is, members of the

Foundation that have elected to freeze themselves after medical death in the hope that

science will advance and allow for their eventual resurrection in the future. More specifically,

as I have written about before:

> Cryopreservation is the practice of accepting a body after medical death and cooling
> a patient's body to -196°C in order to "vitrify" them: to replace over half of the
> water in the human body with chemicals that prevent cell damage caused by ice
> crystals, and freezing the body to a stable, ice-free state. After vitrification, the
> patient is stored within vacuum-insulated dewars stabilized at a temperature of
> -196°C with liquid nitrogen in order to await a future in which biomedical
> technologies may be able to reanimate them. (Genovese 2018, 52).

Although Alcor remains at the fringes of broader American society, it has still made

a substantial cultural impact. This is primarily due to several celebrity affiliations, including a

handful who are active "patients" being stored in their facility. These include the Emmy

Award-winning sitcom writer and producer Dick Clair, who co-created *The Facts of Life*

(Kunen and Moneysmith 1989) and the Hall of Fame baseball star Ted Williams, who

elected for "neuropreservation," in which just the member's decapitated head is preserved

(Bradlee 2013). With over 1,400 members signed up to be cryopreserved at the time of this

writing, it is also notable that one in five of its membership reside in the San Francisco Bay

Area (Guynn and Lee 2002).

Soon after establishing themselves, Alcor caught the eye of Timothy Leary, who,

following his release from prison in 1976, took a rather sharp turn away from psychedelics

and into American Cosmism. This can be partially attributed to his reading of Gerard O'Neill while in federal prison in 1975–76, who Leary (1982) described as being "a diamond-clear thinker and writer. A good-looking, graceful man with a good-looking cosmopolitan wife" (231). In particular, Leary was interested in O'Neill's thoughts on permanent human space habitats, which O'Neill called "mini-Earths." As Leary recounted in one of his memoirs:

> O'Neill's proposal for mini-Earths was obviously the next step in human evolution, the next ecological niche into which DNA would push. From that time I have been an active "booster" of the O'Neill project, serving as traveling advertising agent, alerting millions of young people to the next stage in the higher and faster human voyage. To be candid, I now consider those who fail to understand the liberating inevitability of space migration with the amused curiosity with which we regard members of the Flat Earth Society or, at best, the gentle Amish who serenely turn their back on technological expansion of intelligence. (Leary 1982, 231)

Instead of "turning on, tuning in, and dropping out," Leary began to advocate for what he called "SMI²LE": Space Migration, Intelligence Increase, Life Extension (McCray 2016). This also began Leary's hard swerve into the world of American right-libertarianism, which seems to feature prominently in the American version of Cosmist philosophy, as I will discuss in further detail in Chapter 5 (Romain 2010). Leary (1982) was an unabashed colonialist and anti-communist, who said the Russians would "*steal the whole solar system from us*, unless we're alert" (233) and dedicated one of his books to "Christopher Columbus, genius navigator, indefatigable scientist, whose optimism, courage, interpersonal skill and sense of genetic mission produced the New Worlds in which new visions, new cultures, and new intelligence could emerge."

Leary's pivot to American Cosmist goals in the 1970s became a lifelong passion, and he subsequently became involved with Alcor in the 1980s, helping them open a new building

in 1987 and signing up for their neuropreservation services himself in 1988 (Darwin 1988).[21]

In September of 1988, Leary held a fundraiser for the Libertarian Party and its presidential candidate Ron Paul, acting as an intermediary between those in American politics and the techno-libertarians that were increasingly filling his social circles. The connections between these two spheres of individuals became integral components in the primordial goo that was, by the end of the 1970s, beginning to ooze silicon in the Santa Clara Valley. But more on that later…

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[21] Leary eventually changed his mind entirely on the feasibility of cryopreservation. Instead, rather predictably, he opted for something more spectacular. Before dying of prostate cancer in 1996, Leary contracted with Celestis Inc. to have his ashes launched into space. On April 21, 1997, twenty-four small canisters of cremated human remains were strapped to Spain's first satellite and launched into orbit—on board were 7 grams of Leary's ashes, along with the ashes of Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry and twenty-two others (Conners 2010).

CHAPTER 3

THE BLACK STALK

I feel like my insides are falling out. The roads in northern Ukraine's *Poles'ye* region are snaking ribbons of deeply grooved washboards, but they feel more like an expanse of never-ending, tightly packed potholes. The bus I am riding is transporting a small international contingent of "dark tourists" (Lennon and Foley 2000; Robb 2009) deep into the irradiated forests that extend like an enormous viridian finger from the eastern border of Poland, through northern Ukraine and southern Belarus, and into western Russia.

As we lurch forward at around forty kilometers-per-hour, the rhythmic slamming of the tires into the ruts of the road generate a tortuous soundscape of rapid metallic booms that resonate with the high-pitched fiddling of squealing iron. This assaulting noise paired with the somatic pogoing of our battered tailbones and asses on uncushioned seats makes it hard not to label this wretched goddamn bus some kind of mobile Machiavellian torture chamber. I mean, Christ, after 90-minutes of this I would almost rather walk the 130 kilometers back to Kyiv. But then I remember the very real specters that lurk unseen outside the dirt-specked windows—radioactive ghosts that need only time to fully possess our bodies and proceed to impassively claw apart both our cellular walls and our souls.

<p style="text-align:center">⁂</p>

The Chornobyl[22] Exclusion Zone is a vast and verdant human-made nature preserve in northern Ukraine. It is also a wilderness that encompasses the site of the worst nuclear accident in history, when, during a safety test at 1:23am on April 26, 1986, the Vladimir

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[22] I have opted to use the Anglicized Ukrainian spelling for this region *(Chornobyl')* as opposed to the more familiar Russian transliteration *(Chernobyl')*. This slight variation can sometimes cause tragically comic results, such as when, on June 11, 2023, following the existentially and ecologically devastating Russian attack on the Kakhovka Dam, Time Magazine published an article with the headline: "How Ukraine's dam collapse could become the country's 'Chernobyl'."

Lenin Nuclear Power Plant near the city of Pripyat suffered an unforeseen nuclear chain reaction inside its number-four RBMK-type nuclear reactor. A violent steam explosion was followed by an open-air core meltdown for nine days that released a considerable amount of airborne radioactive contamination across Ukraine, Belarus, into Europe, and eventually—in much lower levels—around the entire globe.

Eventually, a 30 kilometer-radius exclusion zone was created, displacing around 117,000 people, generating—for the first time since the U.S. criminally dropped atomic weapons on Japanese civilians—nuclear refugees. Thus set into motion a series of historic events which led to me and six others to pay a tour guide the pleasure of being crammed into a vehicle with seemingly nonfunctioning shocks to satisfy our "weird" affective desires that Mark Fisher (2017) may have accurately described as oscillating between "fascination" and "trepidation" (17).

Chornobyl as a Magic Site

The Zone, as it is known colloquially, is a place of abundant contradictions—and thus, it is ripe for dialectical analysis. On one end of the spiral, it is a highly technocratic space, managed by the State Emergency Service of Ukraine as a setting for quantitative scientific research and rehabilitation. On the other end, the Zone is what Eugene Thacker (2011) might describe as a "magic site":

> [a] place where the hiddenness of the world presents itself in its paradoxical way (revealing itself – as hidden)…it may be an accidental or unintentional site…the anonymous, unhuman intrusion of the hidden world into the apparent world, the enigmatic manifesting of the world-without-us into the world-for-us, the intrusion of the Planet into the World. (82)

The Zone is a place populated by otherworldly manifestations, apocalyptic warnings, and unsettling apparitions of the "unhuman"—an analogue of a primordial "world-without-us;" with "us" being a philosophically constructed universal conception of humankind. This

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conceptual construction is legible to scientific communities as well as former residents, since the Zone, despite its higher than normal radioactivity, has become a thriving sanctuary for both flora and fauna. In fact, this swath of land boasts some of the highest biodiversity and thickest forests in the entire country—largely attributed to the fact that it has been fashioned as a "world-without-us."

Yet, the Zone is a place of occlusions, of covering over. A power plant that once produced 10% of the country's electricity now requires enormous amounts of energy to help with perpetual containment efforts. It also oozes with what Russians and Ukrainians call *toska*. *Toska* is a difficult word to translate into English. It is characterized by longing, melancholy, anguish, and homesickness. Yet the spiritual ache of *toska* can sometimes manifest itself as boredom—a kind of melancholic monotony—which is an uncomfortably felt temporal lacuna between past, present, and imagined future.[23] In the Zone, *toska* emerges from a place beyond the human; yet, it is humanly felt precisely as a reaction to our inability to peel off omnipresent unhuman entities. Especially within a materialist wasteland filled with the literal and figurative specters of techno-utopian dreams, *toska* reveals itself primarily due to the heightened fact that, as Cary Wolfe (2003) has put it, "the 'human' is inextricably entwined as never before in material, technological, and informational networks of which it is not the master, and of which it is indeed in some radical sense 'merely' the product" (6).

The mundane aspect of *toska* is not to be underestimated, for it is within the banality of the mundane that these unhuman specters are able to surround and penetrate us. In a constructed "world-without-us" such as the Zone, this is particularly salient because

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[23] *Toska* is often compared to the Portuguese word *saudade*, which is similarly an untranslatable affective compound related to nostalgia, sadness, boredom, etc. Much like the embodiment of *toska* in Slavic peoples, *saudade* is said to be an integral component to Portuguese/Brazilian temperament. However, I think there is a nuanced material notability to *toska* within the post-Soviet context—especially in places like Chornobyl.

Chornobyl is—in various ways—the shadow of Cosmist aspirations. As Timothy Morton (2016) has said of a comparable boredom felt by *ennui*:

> I am "bored" by it in the sense that I find it provocative to include all the beings that I try to ignore in my awareness all the time. Who hasn't become "bored" in this way by ecological discourse? Who really wants to know where their toilet waste goes all the time? And who really wants to know that in a world where we know exactly where it goes, there is no "away" to flush it to absolutely, so that our toilet waste phenomenologically sticks to us, even when we have flushed it? (125)

In the Zone, the mundanity of phenomenological interconnectedness is expressed less as toilet waste and more as the omnipresence of radioactive isotopes. In Morton's ecological example, one's bodily refuse can at least be seen with human eyes, even if we choose to shield it from our view. While walking through the Zone, the eerie nature of radioactivity makes it feel at once both ever-present and non-existent. This expression of the Fisherian eerie is compounded with his conception of the weird since the radioactivity itself not only contributes to the agentive vitality of bursting biodiversity, but it also begins to interfere and inhibit the microbial and fungal processes of decay, leading to the uncanny conservation of dead things within the Zone (Mousseau et al. 2014).

For example, many felled trees within the most irradiated sites in the Zone—namely, the Red Forest *(Rudyi lis)*, a pine grove that was directly downwind of the breached reactor and was given its name because of the reddish-brown color the trees developed immediately after the accident—continue to lay undecayed for years.[24] Additionally, there are over 200 species of unique radiotrophic fungus that seem to be thriving on the higher-than-normal radioactivity in the Zone. The high radiation seems to be causing these strange jet-black mushrooms to produce an abundance of melanin, which has caught the eye of the space

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[24] This phenomenon has led to additional devastating ecological consequences, such as when wildfires break out inside the Zone. After a fire started in 2020, burning 11,500 hectares and spiking the radiation levels by as much as 16 times the usual levels (Roth 2020), it was determined that the fire spread quickly in part thanks to the abundance of dry tinder in the form of the eerily preserved downed trees. A similar situation happened in March 2022 when a fire broke out during the Russian occupation of the Zone (Milman 2022).

Figure 10. A section of the Red Forest can be seen across the railroad tracks, with signs indicating that this area is highly radioactive. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 250, *f*/8, 1/220; September 29, 2021]

industry as a possible solution to help block the high levels of radiation experienced during crewed spaceflight (Dadachova and Casadevall 2008).

While in Ukraine, I re-read Jeff VanderMeer's (2014) *Annihilation* and as I was experiencing the weirdness of the Zone, I was reminded of an excerpt from the book that appeared at the end of a long scrolling passage produced by the mysterious entity called the Crawler: "that which dies shall still know life in death for all that decays is not forgotten and reanimated it shall walk the world in the bliss of not-knowing" (172). The Zone's dizzying wave of vitality, which crashes upon the shores of unnatural preservation, had me experiencing an unhuman Cosmism, and I began to feel like the biologist in that novel after she found a rare starfish: "the longer I stared at it, the less comprehensible the creature became. The more it became something alien to me, and the more I had a sense that I knew nothing at all—about nature, about ecosystems" (VanderMeer 2014, 175).

This affective reality is felt by many visitors to the Zone, as well as its former residents, who are granted the right to enter once per year to visit their ancestors in the dozens of graveyards peppered throughout its irradiated fields and dense forests. These former residents are able to visit not only sites of remembrance for important people in their lives, but also memorials to where they used to live—names of villages that are now swallowed by forests, or that had been razed by bulldozers in the months following the accident. They frequently interact with installations (Figures 11 and 12) to mail letters to people who are no longer alive in places that no longer exist using a mailbox that services a country that has long since faded into the mists of history.

Figure 11. Old mailboxes salvaged from apartment blocks in the Exclusion Zone were used as part of an interactive art installation for former residents. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 250, *f*/5.6, 1/500; September 29, 2021]

Figure 12. Close up of a salvaged mailbox from the Soviet Union used in the art installation in the Zone. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 250, *f*/5.6, 1/420; September 29, 2021]

Paradise Lost and Found

For former residents, such as my tour guide Natalia, who used to live in the now abandoned and mostly destroyed village of Zalissya, the Zone is constructed as a *poteryannyy ray*—a "lost paradise"—*à la* the Milton poem, which rests upon temporalities and topologies of the past. However, the definition of who counts as "us" for these former residents is narrower than a somewhat naïvely formulated humanist universality. Rather than "us" representing humankind, it is instead constructed as a moral community which is organically connected to the *Poles'ye* region. Through a cultivation and adoration of nostalgic affects, the Zone has been recast as an apophatic "world-for-us."

That moral community is intimately connected to the memories of a complicated Soviet past. Years have turned to decades since the Soviet Union's collapse, and enough time has now elapsed for comparisons to form between life in a Communist Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UkrSSR) and life in a capitalist Ukraine. If there was one common sentiment that I heard time and again from those who were over 40 years old, it was a lamenting fondness for the UkrSSR. Yet, this attitude was not a rose-tinted nostalgia, but rather it seemed to be a more nuanced "critical nostalgia" (an apophatic Marxism) in which there was a genuine questioning of why positive social goods—such as free health care and education, rights for women and minorities, a sense of common community, etc.—had disappeared along with the less desirable aspects of the late Soviet Union's "actually existing socialism" *(real'nyy/razvitoy sotsializm)* (Ghodsee 2018; von Eschen 2022). As Slavoj Žižek (2022) has acerbically asked: "Why did *perestroika* turn into *katastroika*?"

In the town of Chornobyl, Natalia led us down one of the few remaining Lenin Streets *(Volytsya Lenina)* within a "decommunized" Ukraine. Before continuing, it is important to give some background on "decommunization": starting in 2015, then President

Petro Poroshenko signed a contentious bundle of laws that initiated the rapid removal of

Soviet-era monuments, the banning of any symbols related to communism, and the mass

renaming of towns, cities, streets, and public spaces that were named after communists.[25]

Interestingly, none of these laws applied to the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone—a place,

incidentally, that may also possess the last publicly displayed statue of Vladimir Lenin in the

entire country (Figure 13). These kinds of frozen exceptions seem to only exacerbate

feelings of *toska* for many visitors.

Beyond the fact that nuclear power itself falls in line with Cosmist aspirations of

active evolution and the mastering of nature, the existence of the power plant at Chornobyl

is also partially due to the ideas of prominent (and native) Cosmist thinkers. For example,

Vladimir Vernadsky was one of the first Ukrainian/Soviet scientists to advocate for the use

of nuclear power and weapons—as well as one of the first to warn against its potential

ability to destroy humanity. He served as one of the early advisors to the Soviet atomic

bomb project, lobbied Stalin to begin uranium prospecting in Siberia, and began

experimenting with nuclear fission in his laboratories. In 1910, he wrote:

> We, the children of the twentieth century, have grown accustomed, with every step,
> to the power of steam and of electricity, we know how profoundly they have
> changed and continue to change the whole social structure of human society. And
> now before us are discovered in the phenomenon of radioactivity the sources of
> power which human imagination depicted to itself. Slowly, trembling and expectant,
> we turn our eyes to the new power being revealed to human consciousness. What
> does it announce to us in its future development?…With hope and dread we peer at
> the new defender and ally. (quoted in Shcherbak 1989, 142)

Chornobyl seems to not only be a microcosm of both the techno-utopian

aspirations and existential consequences of Cosmist philosophy, but it also serves as a

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[25] These laws also controversially stripped the Communist Party of Ukraine, the Communist Party of Ukraine (Renewed), and the Communist Party of Workers and Peasants of their right to participate in elections. It also outlawed any future far-left or communist parties (as judged by the courts) from ever being able to officially register themselves, a move that has effectively shifted the political Overton Window in Ukraine permanently to the right.

Figure 13. A crumbling statue of Vladimir Lenin—which stands near the last House of Culture in Ukraine—inside the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 100, *f*/5.6, 1/150; September 29, 2021]

poignant example of one of the first autochthonous instantiations of Cosmism: a distinct

Ukrainian Cosmism. Artist Yuri Leiderman has suggested that although Ukrainian Cosmism

emerged from the same combination of modernism and grassroots folk beliefs as its Russian

cousin, the fact that the Ukrainian variant emerged in the late 1970s, just as the modernist

project itself was beginning to collapse into late socialism, has rendered its characteristics

more rural, as opposed to Fyodorov's more urban-centric Russian Cosmism (Kadan and

Leiderman 2021). This is reminiscent of Lisa Messeri's (2018) argument for a "technological

terroir," in which she asks, "just as local differences between wines and cheeses are studied,

sought after, and even cultivated, might the same be true of technology?" (8). This led me to

expand upon this inquiry and ask: could there be a terroir for techno-utopic philosophies?

Indeed, these Cosmist variants seem to be heavily tied to the very root of terroir.

Where Fyodorov was obsessed with the need to collect, archive, and construct a living

museum, Ukrainian Cosmists—who were often artists, designers, and architects—were more

concerned with rearranging what was already present in their lives. Ukrainian Cosmism was

always more concerned with finding usefulness in the debris, not creating particular

conditions for the common cause—"global resurrection had already happened; there is no

death anymore; the only thing left to do is to realize it" (Kadan and Leiderman 2021). There

seems to be a distinction between Fyodorov's urban obsession with collecting snippets—the

ancestral dust of our fathers—and the natural existence of the lively, sticky black soil of the

countryside, which anticipates its moment to be sculpted. Dust can only exist in the city, for

dust is but a whisper—remnants of the lively rural soil lifted into the heavens by the wind to

be dehydrated and devitalized by the arid breeze. There exists no dust in the humid

sunflower fields of Ukraine, only damp earth.

This is not to say, however, that Ukrainian Cosmism exists in isolation. As with all Cosmist philosophy, each indigenous variation must exist in a relationship with other interpretations. They are each alternative trajectories that form a variety of cosmic orbits around the central ideas of the common cause. However, the ecological devastation caused by the Chornobyl accident did make a distinct mark on Ukrainian Cosmism, divorcing itself from some of the inevitability of humanity's domination over nature. This is demonstrated in a statement by a Cosmist-inspired artist Valentin Raevskii in 1993: "the 'natural' is inseparable from the historical, while 'ecology' is impossible to conceive of outside social and cultural activity" (Sklyarenko 2011, 97). Yet prior to the accident, in the 1970s, the utopian aspect of Cosmism was still alive and well in Ukraine. Architect and composer Florian Yuriev, for example, set out to design and build a cosmic space that would encompass both form and function, and would be a home for the development of an experimental new discipline he called "music of color," which would attempt to integrate the human senses of sight and sound (Radynski 2022). In 1972, the colloquially named "flying saucer building" in Kyiv was built to house his short-lived experiments (Figure 14).

"In the Soviet Union there was no private property, so apartments were free," Natalia says to our small contingent of mostly Western Europeans as we slowly made our way down Lenin Street to one of the last Houses of Culture in the country. A legacy of the Soviet Union, Houses (or Palaces) of Culture *(dvorets kultury)* were multi-purpose structures that hosted space for a variety of free leisure activities: cinemas, meeting rooms, theatre spaces, lecture halls, dance studios, music venues, classrooms, etc. A trio of Irishmen scoff beside me and Natalia senses it almost immediately. I get the feeling that she deals with this kind of Western chauvinism frequently on her tours. "You don't believe me?" she fires back,

Figure 14. The colloquially known "flying saucer building" in Kyiv. Today, it is outside of the Ocean Plaza Mall, an enormous Western style shopping complex. The owners of the mall—a triumvirate of Ukrainian and Russian billionaire oligarchs—have tried to tear down the building on several occasions, but their plans have been repeatedly defeated by local residents. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 200, f/8, 1/60; September 12, 2021]

in a forceful but polite manner, proudly puffing up her chest. "Well believe me! I'm a Soviet; it is true!"

The ontological identification with oneself as a "Soviet" is one of the many pathways connected to the kind of critical nostalgia I have introduced, and it tends to bubble up at particular sites related to Soviet importance, as we will see later. "Workers here still live like it is the Soviet days," she continues. "They are supplied free housing, free public transport, and they work fair schedules—15 days on, 15 days off. This is also one of the only places left in Ukraine without private property!" And it is true. The weird loops between past and present lasso more tightly in places like Chornobyl and I was unable to decipher whether the aesthetics of its Soviet past was informed by the people who were drawn to work here or if it was the other way around. Or, perhaps the weird loop is more like an ouroboros, and these two aspects are linked in a dialectical relationship rather than a cause-and-effect.

This kind of material and affective nostalgia is further sharpened in the way that *samosely*—self-settlers—are venerated. Around 180 former residents who are over the age of 50 have been allowed to resettle in areas on the outside perimeter of the Zone to live out the rest of their days in abandoned villages that are only supported with monthly deliveries of food and sundries, and have very sparse running water or electricity (or in some cases, none at all). Many of these self-settlers are nostalgic for their life as *kolkhozniki*—collective farmers. Many settle back into their old *kolkhozy* and cultivate their small gardens as they did before the accident. These self-settlers are often visited by tour groups passing through.

By contrast, many of the former residents speak with derision about the *stalkery*—a name appropriated from the Andrei Tarkovsky film *Stalker* (1979) which was adapted from the Strugatsky Brothers novel "Roadside Picnic" *(Piknik na obochine)*, which, in a rather uncanny ouroborosian loop, was inspired by the Exclusion Zone itself. These "stalkers" are

Figure 15. Natalia gestures to an enormous map of the Exclusion Zone. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 250, *f*/10, 1/80; September 29, 2021]

predominantly Ukrainians, usually under the age of 25, who illegally enter the Zone by car, bicycle, and even by foot, to live for short periods of time, to create street art, and to explore the abandoned infrastructure. Many of these stalkers create videos they post online that reveal the sublime decay of the region; or sometimes, to illustrate their masculinity (a majority of the stalkers are young men), they climb dilapidating structures, hang their bodies precariously over the side, and take pictures of themselves—a dangerous fad popular with young people in rural areas of Eastern Europe called "skywalking" (Cade 2012).

After we disembark at the most popular area of the Zone—the enormous abandoned city of Pripyat—Natalia began to tell us under what conditions these stalkers are usually arrested by the Ukrainian police for their illegal incursions. "You see," she said. "Most of the time, the stalkers themselves are the ones who call the police. The fines they must pay for trespassing into the Exclusion Zone are cheaper than taxi fare from here back to Kyiv. So when they are done exploring, they walk to a road and call the police on themselves. The police then have to drive them back to Kyiv in order to process their fines, so the stalkers are able to get back to the capital for a fraction of the cost!" She laughs and shakes her head.

Although this is certainly a demonstration of scrappy ingenuity, it left me questioning what happens if the stalkers' radiation levels exceed the maximum allowable exit requirements. When one exits the Zone, one must submit to a screening in which one must uncomfortably squat in a large metal apparatus with arms extended so that the machine can detect how much radioactive material is present on, or in, one's body. Most tours, which spend no more than a few days in the Zone, rarely have problems with people exceeding this level. However, a stalker that has trudged through the Red Forest for weeks might absorb far more radioactive isotopes than the average tourist or worker. I posed my question to Natalia

who replied plainly, "They would be detained until they produce a safe reading." I was not sure if I wanted an elaboration on the specifics of this detainment.

Despite Natalia's grim assessment of the hypothetical radioactive stalker, her feelings were mostly neutral on their presence in the Zone. What she did not like, however, was the abundance of street art and graffiti that adorned many of the buildings. There was a sacred quality to the structures that existed within the Zone to those who were morally connected to that place. It did not matter that they were being left to collapse and be reclaimed by the verdant fingers of the forest; the desecration of the buildings with artwork was something that she constantly griped about, and she informed me that this was how many other former residents felt about the art as well. That said, even these disagreements were not universal or consistent. "I have to admit, that one isn't bad," she said, pointing to an illustration of a bear that was painted next to a concrete staircase (Figure 16).

Despite their cost innovations and obvious artistic creativity, the stalkers' interaction with the Zone seems to be approached from a *present* temporality, one that is always based on individualism over collectivity, ego over the commune. This is not to say that the stalkers do not engage with nostalgia, however. Stalkers are chasing the magic of the past, a magic also within the lived experiences of the self-settlers, but they seem to never quite grasp it—it escapes like mist through their fingers. This is why the Zone is a perfect example to showcase the flexibility of critical nostalgia: it contains two communities reaching for the same otherworldly magic, utilizing a multitude of techniques.

Cannibal Dialectics

The various affective and discursive configurations of nostalgia, hope, and utopia described thus far could be understood as critical counterpoints to the hegemon of our day: namely, technocratic, capitalist reason. An intertwined relationship between the two still

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Figure 16. Street art of a bear and its cub on an abandoned building in Pripyat in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 320, *f*/5, 1/280; September 29, 2021]

Figure 17. Graffiti on a gate for an abandoned vehicle depot in the Zone. The graffiti reads: "Freedom to stalkers!" [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 500, *f*/5.6, 1/125; September 29, 2021]

exists, but I believe that while these spheres initially existed in a dialectical relationship with one another, the latter seems to have begun cannibalizing the former. This has eliminated the possibility of a synthesis. Instead of sublating the negation of the negation—as our dear friend Hegel (and Marx, and Engels, and Lenin, and so on and so on) would say—there seems to instead be a corruption, a cannibalization, of the negation. The dialectical spiral has been severed and annihilated; there no longer exists the possibility of "development" in the Marxist sense of the word.

In its place, within the distended dark sphere of future possibilities, spectral agents of "capitalism" (if that is still a worthy term to describe the socioeconomic system in which we exist, a point argued against by McKenzie Wark [2019] in *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?*) feast upon the ontological and aesthetic components of techno-utopic hope and progress, unsuccessfully attempting to nourish themselves on these seemingly intangible concepts. It is an attempt at reconciling with the second-order disenchantment unique to the 21st century. Following Weber's pronouncement of a 20th century disenchantment in which instrumentalized rationality ushered in an age of dehumanization, another layer of disenchantment seems to grip the 21st century, brought on by a failure on the historical stage of any Weberian alternatives (Traverso 2016).

I have chosen to name this severance cannibal dialectics, which may seem strange considering I am an anthropologist and should know more than most about the abundantly rare ritualistic practice of human beings eating other human beings, especially in how it has long been weaponized by North Atlantic imperial powers to dehumanize and justify the domination of both Black Africans and Indigenous peoples. Yet, as Nancy Fraser (2022) has also pointed out, cannibalism (and to cannibalize) holds many more useful conceptual meanings. For example, it can refer to the gravitational attraction between celestial objects

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which often ends up with the mass of the gravitationally weaker object being absorbed into the object with greater influence. Sometimes these cosmic cannibals can exert such violent forces that both of the objects are completely destroyed.

We can also look to world mythologies to find useful cannibal analogs. For example, in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, there exists a formerly human supernatural being caught between death and karmic reincarnation called a preta. Pretas are cursed with an insatiable, but forever unfulfilled, hunger and thirst, sometimes for cadavers. These creatures become an interesting heuristic when applied to contemporary techno-capitalism, for they perfectly represent the cannibal dialectic. Rather than the socialist transcendence from capitalism through what Marx (and Hegel before him) called *Aufheben*, cannibal dialectics, much like the preta, reinforces and extends capitalism through the colonization and destruction of not only its enemies, but also itself. Ernst Bloch's (2000) hopeful ontology of Becoming—that is, humanity's utopian engagement with the "not yet" *(noch-nicht)*—is forsaken for the Fisherian (2009) capitalist realism of the "eternal present."

And indeed, these seem to be the precise goals of our neoliberal age, in which a certain set of political decisions takes ultimate precedence over all other social or economic proposals; neoliberal capitalists have thus far made baffling economic decisions that seem to be counterintuitive to the health and longevity of the capitalist system itself. Increasing the precarity of workers by forcing nearly the entire workforce to become contract-laborers, while simultaneously decreasing pay and benefits to the point where workers must take on two or three jobs in order to survive, is not a very smart economic position—but it does speak to the cannibalizing nature of our current system. If there is one thing we can count on, it is that the neoliberal capitalist system—itself operating as a preta—will always choose outcomes that will make capitalism *seem* like the only viable economic system at the expense

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of any outcomes that would *actually* make it an even remotely practical system. As David

Graeber (2013) wrote:

> The combined result is a relentless campaign against the human imagination…We
> are talking about the murdering of dreams, the imposition of an apparatus of
> hopelessness, designed to squelch any sense of an alternative future. Yet as a result
> of putting virtually all their efforts into one political basket, we are left in the bizarre
> situation of watching the capitalist system crumbling before our very eyes, at just the
> moment everyone had finally concluded no other system would be possible. (30–31)

On one level, as some of Annie Hammang's (2022) work has illustrated, these agents

of capital—these preta stalkers—are earnestly seeking some form of "authenticity" by

moving into spaces in which they sense magic, such as the building I lived adjacent to in

Kyiv, covered in beautiful Soviet-era mosaics (Figure 18). Preta-like, they insatiably crave and

feed on what they perceive as the "authentic" or "artistic" or "magical." Unfulfilled with the

Bay Area, or Pacific Northwest, they have cannibalized the Other in order to transmute their

aesthetic around the world. However, unlike Marx's (1990) vampiric metaphor, they are not

draining away anything at all; rather, they are generating, reproducing, wandering to every

corner of the globe hoping that this time, this place will be the one that satisfies their desire

for the Real—yet, like the preta, they remain unsatiated.

After sending the photo below (Figure 18) to an executive at Nike, they confirmed

my suspicions: "Nike scouts retail locations like that—visually appealing 'doors' with cultural

significance for seamless local integration."

Yet, as much as it pains me to say, this cannot all be blamed on transnational

corporations. I am equally as guilty of this desire through my engagement in dark tourism

into the Exclusion Zone. I admit that I was looking for magic in that place. I wanted to see

with my own eyes, smell with my own nose, touch with my own fingertips one of the last

pieces of the Soviet Union. This is an impossibility, of course, and I knew that intellectually,

but affectively, I craved that authenticity—an authenticity that I did not feel I could find,

Figure 18. Soviet-era mosaics surround the entrance to a Nike store in Kyiv. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 400, f/5.6, 1/140; October 2, 2021]

Figure 19. Soviet-era mosaic tiles lay scattered on the ground of the Exclusion Zone. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 1000, f/5, 1/110; September 29, 2021]

even in other parts of Ukraine. And perhaps that is why I felt a little hollow and let down as we drove back to Kyiv over those damn washboard roads of northern Ukraine.

The official name of the Zone is the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant Zone of *Alienation* (emphasis mine). Perhaps the Zone itself tried to warn us all along. It will always be a magic site teetering on the edge of a world-without-us and a world-for-us—or perhaps it exists as a *world-in-between*, shimmering through its (un)human dimensions. But with increased tourism—and, unfortunately, the emergence of modern warfare—those scales may tip, and whatever magic is there may continue to dissipate, or conceal itself. Maybe I too was a preta—wandering through a land of ghosts and gamma rays.

Mosaic Apophasis

Throughout the former Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries, Adorno's warning of state engagement in degenerative apophasis—of "working through the past"—takes particular contested forms in the post-Soviet context, especially in Ukraine. A large part of Ukraine's decommunization process consisted of removing, or radically altering, the aesthetic landscape of cities, villages, and towns. These operations were carried out swiftly and without much consideration for archival preservation. However, there are some Ukrainians who have been attempting to document the wide scale destruction of public art created in the UkrSSR and preserve it as much as possible. I worked with an art collective in Kyiv called Izolyatsia[26] to assist in one of their projects called "Soviet Mosaics in Ukraine."

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[26] This is the Ukrainian word for "insulation" (ізоляція). In 2010, the art group was founded on the site of a former insulation factory in the city of Donetsk in the country's eastern Donbas region. In June 2014, Donetsk was one of the first cities seized by Russian-backed separatists in the opening salvos of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Due to the art and artists being deemed "perverted" and "degenerate" by the separatists, the group was forced to flee to Kyiv, where they now operate out of a building in the northern part of the city. Despite the relocation, they still maintain an artistic focus on the Donbas region and hope to return to Donetsk in the future.

The initiative's purpose is to "explore, preserve and popularize the unique and great heritage of the Ukrainian mosaics."

It is nearly impossible to travel through Ukraine without noticing an abundance of slipshod occlusions in public spaces—a hasty effort to bring about a totality of aesthetic apophasis. In metro stations, parks, apartment buildings, and libraries all across Ukraine, there has been an attempt to erase or cover over any symbol that may reference the UkrSSR. Until 2023, due to an enormous pushback from everyday Ukrainians, the only sites that were exempt from this widespread destruction were monuments to the Great Patriotic War (World War II). Interestingly, however, I noticed that the further east one went in Ukraine, the more inattentive local governments were to the decommunization laws. For example, in Kharkiv—the second-largest city in Ukraine and only 40 kilometers from the Russian border —there were many buildings, metro stations, and parks that displayed red stars, hammers and sickles, and even Stalin quotes, all of which are technically illegal and, in contrast to Kyiv and Western Ukraine, seem to be in defiance of the country's commitment to erasing its communist past (Figures 20 and 21).

Yet the attempts at this kind of apophasis seem to be directly tied to the cannibal dialectics of the last section. Today, Ukraine speaks of its process of decommunization as a step toward "decolonization" (Biedarieva 2023; Busol and Koval 2023). This is a semantic trend popular in many Eastern European countries, in which the Soviet Union is framed as a project of ethnic Russian colonization. And while there may be some meritorious arguments in favor of this reframing, it also cannibalizes and distorts the meaning of "decolonization" —not to mention that it essentializes an incredibly diverse socio-political socialist experiment. Whereas the first wave of decolonization following World War II was focused on the expulsion and destruction of European empires, it was also equally concerned with

Figure 20. A mosaic that prominently features the hammer and sickle—a banned symbol according to Ukraine's decommunization laws—at the *Istorychnyi Muzei* metro entrance in Kharkiv. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 3200, *f*/8, 1/15; September 21, 2021]

Figure 21. A platform in Kharkiv that used to support a statue of Joseph Stalin. Although the Stalin statue has been removed, the list of commendations he awarded the city is still listed, including an inscription of his name, which is technically banned under Ukraine's decommunization laws. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 500, *f*/8, 1/70; September 22, 2021]

the construction of systems meant to replace the exploitative imbalances of colonial economies. This often took the form of robust investments in the public sector, along with fully nationalized industries, in order to challenge the capitalist and imperialist basis of colonial projects—in other words: you could not have national liberation without social revolution.

Yet, as dissident Ukrainian scholar Volodymyr Ishchenko (2022) has argued, the enactment of decolonization in Ukraine is so irrevocably tied to the neoliberal project that it has completely corrupted the meaning of the word. The post-Soviet Color Revolutions—of which Ukraine's Maidan Uprising was one—were unable to achieve the barest of minimums for a decolonizing project: the removal of corruption and the consolidation of a liberal democracy. Instead, the common thread between neoliberal economies and Ukraine's "decolonizing" actions tended to be a weakening of the public sector, an increase in crime, rampant social inequality, and the return of ethnic tensions (Beissinger 2022; Ishchenko and Zhuravlev 2021). Arguably the first, and darkest, example of this kind of "neoliberal decolonization" occurred during the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991, which led not only to genocide, but also an enduring suffering of those on the Balkan peninsula. This has generated a unique Balkan critical nostalgia—perhaps an apophatic Titoism?—called "Yugo-nostalia" *(jugonostalgija)*, which shares many characteristics with what I have previously described as apophatic Marxism (see Luthar and Pušnik 2010; Volčič 2007).

Perhaps it is no surprise that the current project of Ukrainian decolonization—similar to the "decolonization" of Yugoslavia—is heavily invested in symbols and identity at the expense of social transformation. Comparable to Western interference in the Balkans following the breakup of Yugoslavia, many NGOs serve as conduits for disseminating a particular political hegemony that is often violently backed up by either predatory

International Monetary Fund loans, or, in the case of the recent hostilities in Ukraine, implicit imperialist *quid pro quo* relationships that take the form of direct military assistance in exchange for a (semi-)permanent Western military presence in the country. Ishchenko (2022) has argued that the core of Ukraine's decolonization is "thus reduced to abolishing anything related to Russian influence in culture, education and the public sphere…[so as to]… amplif[y] the voices articulating Ukrainian distinctiveness" (30–31). This anti-Russian bigotry is useful for the Western powers in order to create an indirect ideological base for its new Cold War against (primarily) China, through a targeting of the People's Republic's largest ally.

Yet, the sad irony inherent in this kind of neoliberal decolonial project is that it suppresses Ukraine's own cultural patrimony, unless it is deemed politically convenient to re-cast Soviet-Ukrainians as solely Ukrainians. This rearticulation has not escaped the web of Cosmist thinkers, especially the likes of Vladimir Vernadsky, whose image appears on the 1,000 *hryvnia* banknote, on kiosks in metro stations (Figure 22), and whose name now graces the national library of Ukraine. Vernadsky has been rebranded a "pure Ukrainian hero," despite the fact that during his life he was part of a small group of ethnic Ukrainians that chose to hold a "Russian-Ukrainian identity" (Torbakov 2015), considered Ukrainian and Russian culture to be necessarily intertwined, and even denied Ukrainian citizenship in 1918 (Girich 1996). This illustrates Ishchenko's (2022) argument perfectly, in that, for a modern Ukraine, decolonization exists solely as a "version of (national-)identity politics…a politics centered around the affirmation of belonging to a particular essentialized group, with a projected shared experience" (31).

An additional point of intensification is centered on public engagement with large monuments and other Soviet-era megalithic statuary. Even prior to the Russian invasion, monuments like the Peoples' Friendship Arch *(Arka druzhby narodiv)*, were flashpoints for a

Figure 22. An information kiosk in a metro station in Kyiv. The text announces that Volodymyr Vernadsky was a natural scientist, philosopher, and first President of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 3200, *f*/5.6, 1/240; September 17, 2021]

contested remembrance between the Ukrainian state and individuals. For the state, "the past is revisited almost exclusively through the prism of nationalism" (Traverso 2016, 17). These statues are often leveraged and fabricated as symbols of the many decades of Soviet "colonialism." These narratives have intensified since the Russo-Ukrainian War; for example, in May 2022, the Peoples' Friendship Arch was renamed the Arch of Freedom of the Ukrainian People *(Arka svobody ukrainskoho narodu)* and the Russian and Ukrainian worker statues were dismantled (Figures 23–26).

However, for many individuals, including, for example, an older man whom I met at the (then named) Peoples' Friendship Arch, these monuments are sites which inspire feelings of "fruitful melancholia" (Traverso 2016, 20), an affect that in turn generates a desire to reclaim a lost community and place. "I am a Soviet," Andriy tells me on a beautiful early September day at the Arch.[27] "I remember coming here with my family when it was opened [in 1982] and we [ethnic Russians and Ukrainians] were brothers, not enemies. And I didn't struggle like this." He motioned toward a fleet of motorized scooters that he rents out to tourists and locals alike so they can ride around the monument. He stared off into the middle distance for awhile and, not wanting to disturb him, I stayed silent while he took deep drags from his unfiltered cigarette. After a few moments, he glanced at me as if he suddenly remembered where he was, gave me a small, but sad, smile and said, "Maybe one day we'll have friendship of the peoples *(druzhbu narodov)* again," signaling not only the monument's name, but also a staple of Marxist-Leninist epistemology, one which Andriy

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[27] Two points that bear mentioning: (a) all conversations referenced in this dissertation took place in conversational Russian and/or English. The use of Russian, as opposed to Ukrainian (which I do not know) may have influenced certain responses; and (b) much like Natalia (my tour guide in the Zone), Andriy's ontological identification with being a "Soviet" is something that I observed in many older Ukrainians and Russians. In one instance, I was jokingly referred to as an "American Soviet" *(Sovetsko-amerikanskyy)* because of my political proclivities and, most importantly, because I was born before the fall of the Soviet Union.

would have been quite familiar with after going through primary education in the Soviet Union.

Based upon Marx and Lenin's thoughts on building a class consciousness which would lead to a fraternity of workers of all nations, Joseph Stalin (1978) first coined the term "friendship of the peoples" in 1935 and launched a campaign of the same name in an effort to celebrate and promote cooperation among the incredibly diverse nationals and ethnicities that existed in the Soviet Union. The concept became ubiquitous, even appearing as the second line in the chorus of the Soviet national anthem: "friendship of the peoples—a reliable bulwark!" *(druzhby narodov nadozhnyy oplot!)*.

This kind of "fruitful melancholia" for programs that promote tolerance and community care continue to simmer within Ukrainian society, as exemplified by Andriy's statements. In fact, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology ran a poll in May 2020 on whether or not Ukrainians regretted the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even amid the growing anti-Russian sentiment following the uprisings in the Donbas in 2014, paired with the fallacious equating of the Soviet Union with Russianness, one in three of all Ukrainians still lamented that they regret the collapse (Hrushetskyi and Paniotto 2020). To give an even more accurate representation of people's sentiments, removed from current geo-political entanglements, in 2013, the same institution ran a poll in which 48% of all Ukrainians said that being a part of the Soviet Union brought Ukraine more benefit than harm.

Even though there existed this kind of widespread ideological support, since the early 2000s, there has been a tacit attempt by the Ukrainian state to fabricate continuities between Soviet and Nazi occupations of the country. For example, the Parliament of Ukraine *(Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy)*, on November 28, 2006, controversially labeled the Soviet famine of 1930–1933, which was caused by the Soviet Union's policies of rapid

Figure 23. The Peoples' Friendship Arch plaza. After hostilities broke out in the Donbas and Crimea in 2014, activists painted a crack in the arch to symbolize the fractured relations between Russians and Ukrainians. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 250, *f*/11, 1/300; September 28, 2021]

Figure 24. A close-up of the now dismantled symbol of Russian and Ukrainian friendship. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 100, *f*/8, 1/160; September 28, 2021]

Figure 25. The statues representing a Russian and Ukrainian worker raising aloft a Soviet emblem is dismantled prior to the monument's renaming, April 26, 2022, REUTERS/Gleb Garanich.

Figure 26. The head of the statue representing a Russian worker lies in the middle of the monument square, April 26, 2022, REUTERS/Gleb Garanich.

industrialization and collectivization of agriculture—and which heavily affected parts of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine—as a "genocide of the Ukrainian people." While the Soviet state—and Stalin in particular, as leader of that state—are certainly responsible for particular decisions which led to the famine, many historians agree that there exists no evidence of a deliberate motivation to kill Ukrainians (or Russians or Kazakhs, for that matter); instead, the famine was caused by a series of immensely fatal miscalculations while enacting particular Soviet economic policies (Kondrashin 2018; Kotkin 2017; Kuromiya 2008; Suny 2017).

In fact, the explicit evocation of the word "genocide" is especially suspect when we take into account Adorno's warning that states attempt to have certain histories "removed from memory" in a post-World War II world. In this case, it is the great elephant in the room of Eastern Europe—that is, the Shoah, or the Holocaust—in which the Nazi-established Ukrainian Auxiliary Police *(Ukrains'ka dopomizhna politsiia)* played an intricate and vital role in its execution (Rossoliński-Liebe 2016). In fact, the Ukrainian Auxiliary Police were *the* major native Holocaust perpetrators within Soviet occupied territory and were willing participants in the extermination of 150,000 Jews in the *Volyn'* region alone (Statiev 2010, 69). It was this kind of widespread and enthusiastic antisemitism within Ukraine that allowed for the Nazis to effectively murder 98% of all West Ukrainian Jews, with direct assistance from indigenous Ukrainian forces (Snyder 2003; Weiner 2001). Even more damning is the fact that many of those who initially joined the Ukrainian Auxiliary Police

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were veteran members of the fascist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists[28] *(Orhanizatsiya ukrayins'kykh natsionalistiv)*, who, as the Germans began their advance into Ukraine in June and July of 1941, quickly organized independent pogroms in Western *Volyn'* and eastern *Halychyna* (Galicia) (Pohl 2008).

By November 1942, "there were over 19,000 men in 53 indigenous police battalions, 14,163 men in the indigenous municipal police, and 54,794 men in the indigenous rural police…in all, over 100,000 men served in the RKU's [the *Reichskommissariat Ukraine*, the name of the Nazi-occupied government of Ukraine] indigenous police forces" (Pohl 2008, 55). The Ukrainian Auxiliary Police were largely in charge of registering Jews, conducting raids, guarding ghettos and, later in the war, corralling Jews from their towns or villages, loading them into convoys, driving them to killing fields, and cordoning off the scenes of executions. Aside from these administrative tasks, they were also often utilized in the direct execution of Jews, especially when it came to the killing of Jewish children (Pohl 2008). And this extraordinary participation does not even take into consideration the fervent rate of indigenous enlistment into the SS *(Schutzstaffel)*. By the end of 1942, the RKU employed 15,000 Germans in their SS division and 238,000 natives—a ratio of 1 to 16, which climbed to 1:25 or even 1:50 by 1944 (Burds 2013, 13).

Yet, none of this history of collaboration is discussed openly in Ukraine, not even at sites commemorating the Holocaust. In fact, the Ukrainian state uses sites of Holocaust memorializing in order to advance a narrative of non-collaboration. For example, at the site

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[28] Incidentally, the slogan coined by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists is one that many are probably familiar with at the time of this writing, since the call-and-response is heard all over coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War: "Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!" *(Slava Ukraïni! Heroiam slava!)*. As I have stressed before (Lincoln Center for Applied Ethics 2022a; 2022b), Nazism in Ukraine is incredibly complex, and I try to be as careful as possible in the current climate because of how it has been weaponized by the Russian government and Putin to justify a war which is absolutely criminal and illegitimate. That said, we should also not ignore the fact that there are real widespread problems with fascism and Neo-Nazism in Ukraine.

of Babi Yar (or Babyn Yar in Ukrainian), much of the didactic text on tourist signs decenter

the fact that on September 29–30, 1941, the Nazis, in collaboration with the Ukrainian

Auxiliary Police, murdered at least 33,771 Jewish civilians in a ravine just outside of Kyiv

(Prusin 2007). Over the remainder of the war, another 100,000–150,000 Jews, Soviet

prisoners of war, and Romani people were murdered there. However, the first sign that

greets you at the site reads: "Let us also honour tens of thousands of Ukrainians, Jews,

Romani and representatives of other ethnic groups whose lives were taken away here by the

Hitlerite regime during the Nazi occupation in 1941–1943." While there is no doubt

countless innocent Ukrainians lost their lives to Nazi savagery, to list this national identity

before the Jews, who were the overwhelming majority of the victims, particularly at the site

of Babi Yar, is telling.

The sign outside of the Museum in Memory of the Victims of Babyn Yar is even

more illustrative of the state's reorientation of historical facts—a prime example of

Adorno's (1998) warning of state manipulation in the name of "working through the past"

(89). It duly serves as a prime example for the neoliberal interpretation of decolonization.

> A division of the National Historical Memorial Area Babyn Yar, the Museum in
> Memory of the Victims of Babyn Yar is located inside a period building that once
> was the office of the former Jewish cemetery, on 44 Yuriya Illenka St (formerly
> Melnykova St.). It was established to ensure an unbiased, balanced, and consistent
> coverage of Babyn Yar's history, the place of tragedy in the memory of individuals,
> communities, **the Ukrainian society** [sic] and humankind as a whole. Its vocation,
> as the museum sees it, is to accumulate, preserve and disseminate unbiased research
> findings on the Holocaust, **Nazi and Soviet terror**, and resistance to both, the
> history of Babyn Yar and Kyiv, the history of Kyiv Jewry, **Ukrainians**, Romani and
> other affected ethnic communities. The Museum in Memory of the Victims of
> Babyn Yar aims to prevent the resurgence of totalitarianism, the spread of
> xenophobia, including anti-Semitism, Romaphobia and **Ukrainephobia** [sic], the
> recurrence of genocide and mass terror against any ethnic, religious, social and other
> groups. (bolded text mine)

Although the sign mentions that its location is at the site of a former Jewish

cemetery, it does not mention the fact that the Jews of Ukraine were among the first in

Eastern Europe to be exterminated—in fact, it mentions tragedies in "Ukrainian society," followed by "humankind as a whole" before it even mentions the Holocaust. This tactic struck me as not only a constructed articulation of Ukrainians as the ultimate victim, but by mentioning "humankind as a whole" before mentioning the Jews, it also resembles the "all lives matter" fallacy often deployed by racist groups in the United States to decenter Black voices. When the Holocaust is finally mentioned, it is immediately followed by "Nazi and Soviet terror," in an attempt to exercise the tired, unnuanced 20th century fallacy of "totalitarianism"—seemingly ignoring the fact that without the Soviets, the Nazis would have been defeated at a much higher cost to the Western powers.

The sign then lists the victims of Babyn Yar, sandwiching Ukrainians between the country's Jewish and Romani population, placing all these ethnic categories on seemingly equal footing. Again, while there is no doubt that the average Ukrainian suffered enormously under the Nazis, to add this national category as equally prominent to the two major ethnic minorities who were targeted and murdered during the Holocaust in Ukraine—while also ignoring the fact that they were historically persecuted and murdered by Ukrainians themselves—seems to be a darkly apophatic move that attempts to hide its collaborationist history. Finally, and in the same vein, the didactic text attempts to create a "Ukrainephobia" that is somehow on-par and as prominent as anti-Semitism and Romaphobia.

Finally, as I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, and will discuss further in Chapter 4, Canto 5 (as well as in the corresponding canto in my film *Stones in Cold Water*), the aesthetic landscape of Ukraine, thanks in part to the decommunization laws, has been irreversibly altered. These historical revisions are experienced daily, which has a profound impact on the generative melancholy felt by the everyday person. Because any symbol that has any kind of relation to communism has been banned, any public artwork that featured

any such symbol had to be censored. If the artwork was too overtly communist, or had far too many banned symbols, then the art itself was completely dismantled. In an ironic twist of fate, the Ukrainian state has engaged in a program of ideological purity in the name of "decolonial freedom" which has resulted in a kind of totalizing repression often levied against Communist states themselves. To add a further layer of irony, many of the censored artworks were expressing a message of hope that humankind's collective labor would help us strive toward a future of long-standing peace and prosperity, both on Earth and in the cosmos. The Cosmist future depicted in many of these mosaic pieces have now been silenced and annihilated. If a Ukrainian Cosmism is possible, it seems they have ignored Fyodorov's (2015) dire warnings: "the sickness of the age consists exactly in the renunciation of the past, the renunciation of a common purpose for all generations" (66).

Figure 27. An altered mosaic in Kharkiv. The banner reads "Glory to labor!" Just below the banner is an empty circle which once displayed a hammer and sickle. It seems that labor can still be glorified, but the symbol for collectivized labor must be negated. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 320, *f*/8, 1/200; September 22, 2021]

Figure 28. A steel plate is permanently installed over a mosaic of a hammer and sickle set inside of a red star in the *Palats Ukraina* metro station in Kyiv. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 3200, *f*/5.6, 1/50; September 17, 2021]

Figure 29. A permanent apophatic billboard in Kharkiv. A large mosaic depicting Lenin leading cryonic ("low temperature") workers was completely dismantled in 2016. Since then, there has been a large beige empty space left in its place. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 320, *f*/8, 1/320; September 22, 2021]

CHAPTER 4

STONES IN COLD WATER

"And the snow lies silent,	*(A sneg lezhit molcha,)*
The snow lies on the dark ground.	*(Sneg lezhit na temnoy zemle.)*
The Sirin[29] is over my head,	*(Ptitsa Sirin nad moyey golovoy,)*
What will you say to me?	*(Chto ty mne skazhesh?)*
Stones in cold water,	*(Kamni v kholodnoy vode,)*
Stones in cold water,	*(Kamni v kholodnoy vode,)*
The color of my love's eyes,	*(Tsvet glaz u moyey lyubvi,)*
Like stones in cold water."	*(Kak kamni v kholodnoy vode.)*

–Aquarium *(Akvarium)*, "Stones in Cold Water" *(Kamni v kholodnoy vode)*

"Field" Notes – February 25, 2022 (Tempe, Arizona)

Intense shelling and firefights have broken out in the *Shuliavka* neighborhood in Kyiv, where I would take evening strolls while I lived there. I'm watching a live stream of the city and an apartment building is on fire—waves of flame lick skyward, framed in a deep orange aura, the colors seem to float amid a crushing darkness. The video resolution is very low. Occasionally, the silence on the screen is broken by an echoing staccato of gunfire, the music of war, a deadly call and response of cracks and ricochets and sickly deep concussive thumps. Sometimes I see a bright flash followed by a shower of sparks as an artillery shell detonates.

The streets that are now being rocked by explosions and small arms fire were a mere four metro stops away from my apartment in the *Pechers'kyi* district. I think about those once peaceful neighborhoods where I would stop and talk with friendly dog walkers about what they were having for dinner or how their day was at work and pet the cats who lived in the courtyards of the apartment buildings, who would curl up inside of small shelters that the tenants built for them.

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[29] The *Sirin* is a creature of Russian folklore, imported from the sirens of Greek mythology. The *Sirin* is said to have the head of a beautiful woman and the body of a bird *(ptitsa)*, usually an owl.

Most nights, after returning from my walk, I would make a cup of tea and sit on my enclosed balcony that sat overlooking the incredibly peaceful, seemingly restorative, and thickly forested grounds of the Main Military Clinical Hospital *(Holovnyy viys'kovyy klinichnyy hospital')*. The atmosphere inside must be drastically different tonight.

I texted my ex-landlord K. to see how she is doing. I asked about her grandmother, a small, hunched stereotype of an ethnic Russian *babushka* with kind eyes and a wheezy laugh who, after I first arrived, showed me around the apartment and was the first person I had a conversation with in Russian who wasn't a government official.

K. hasn't responded.

The news coverage is filled with shouting and fire and confusion and gore and pain —so much pain. As I lie awake in bed, trying to find the willpower to sleep, I can't help but think that the sound of the blood pumping through my ears strikes an uncanny resemblance to the rolling rumbles of artillery in the distance.

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During my fieldwork in Ukraine, I shot roughly ten hours of 4K resolution video. I elected to use an iPhone XR (my personal cell phone) with a cinema application called Filmic Pro. I initially chose these tools as both a creative challenge and to save on luggage fees (my usual cinema setup takes up an entire suitcase). This pairing of an iPhone with Filmic Pro has been utilized by several successful Hollywood productions including Steven Soderbergh's *Unsane* (2018) and *High Flying Bird* (2019), along with Sean Baker's indie hit *Tangerine* (2015). The application allows the user to gain full manual control of the phone's optics, along with providing advanced cinematic features—such as the ability to shoot in a range of dynamic gamma curves, a godsend during post-production image processing. Paired with three Sandmarc hybrid neutral density/polarizer filters that clipped onto the

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camera lens (allowing me to reduce between 4–6 stops of light, while also providing me with glare and reflection reduction) and a DJI OM 4 gimbal (allowing me to shoot smooth camera movement), I hardly felt restricted at all during production.

In fact, I found the opposite to be true. I was suddenly unburdened—both of equipment and the curious stares of those around me. Everyone becomes interrogative when they see someone wheeling around a shoulder-mounted camera rig; no one bats an eye at someone holding a cell phone. This allowed me to critically engage with the "tourist gaze" (Chio 2014), a perspective I both embraced and challenged during this project. It is also a method I have employed and critically analyzed in past multimodal projects (see Genovese 2022b).

The end result was a 39 minute film entitled *Stones in Cold Water* (Genovese 2023), which has become a major component of this multimodal dissertation project.[30] In this chapter, I will give an overview of the film, explain its intellectual merits, and provide some behind the scenes context. It is part reflexive analysis and part director's commentary. I would recommend that the reader either watch the film before proceeding or read along while screening the film.

I arrived in Ukraine in September 2021 to shoot a very different film. After production, I returned home to witness the full-scale Russian invasion of the country in February 2022. It was then that I realized I needed to craft something quite different than what I had first envisioned. I sat on my footage for over a year before I started editing. I was gripped with nervous dread over how I could respectfully present the relationships between

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[30] The film produced for this dissertation is a 39 minute extended cut. There is also a 17 minute version of the film produced for the film festival circuit. This latter version premiered at the Hudson Valley Film Festival in Warwick, New York on August 16, 2023.

Ukrainian people, landscapes, and architecture—relationships that have once again been ruthlessly torn apart by war.

From the beginning, I wanted this film to contribute to the experimental tradition of artistic sensory ethnography, exemplified by the films of Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Véréna Paravel, J.P. Sniadecki, Libbie Dina Cohn, Ben Rivers, Stephanie Spray, and Pacho Velez, to name but a few—a style of filmmaking meant to encourage the audience to sit (perhaps even uncomfortably) within a variety of anthropological environments, allowing the images and sound to completely wash over them. Throughout this prolonged cinematic encounter, the audience may experience a range of emotions, from interest to boredom to irritation to frustrated anger. This kind of slow cinema is meant to help us reflect upon—and subsequently resist—the dynamically addictive neon-flash intensity that defines the attention economy experienced in our everyday lives.

My spin on this method was to include my creative partner Dick Powis from the beginning in order to have an original score that acts as a character, one that blends into the environment around it, while also aggravating the anxiety that hangs like a specter over the entire film: the ghost of inconsolable hindsight. As the audience, we understand that the people and places depicted in this film have been violently altered, or even viciously annihilated, by war. Yet, the images presented also tell a story of resilience. Violence has befallen this place many times in the past, yet the mycelium of vivacity has always spread slowly under the substrate. May this tranquil liveliness reemerge and bloom before too long.

Title Sequence: "Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, ché la diritta via era smarrita."[31]

Through howling wind, the film opens on a dark background with a title card of white text—a poem written in 1923 by Ukrainian author Pavlo Tychyna.

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[31] The opening lines to Dante's *Inferno*: "I found myself in a dark forest, for the straight way was lost."

Kharkiv, Kharkiv, where is your face?	*(Kharkiv, Kharkiv, de tvoye oblychchya?)*
To whom do you call?	*(Do koho tviy klych?)*
You have sunken into the clay of many rivers,	*(Uhruz ty v hleyke mnohorichchya)*
dark as the night.	*(temnyy, yak nich)*

I began with this poem because it represents the central duality throughout the entire film. Kharkiv is a city that, despite its sizable population, has always existed in a borderlands between east and west. This poem seems to have taken on new life 100 years after it was written because Kharkiv was one of Russia's primary objectives after initiating the invasion of Ukraine. Western pundits and Ukrainian scholars alike found themselves re-asking Tychyna's century old question: to whom do you call? This duality, the constant tugging between an eastern Russia and a western Ukraine, hangs like a specter over the film. This was also one of the primary reasons I chose to shoot in black and white—monochrome is a visual indication of this dialectic.

After the poem is displayed, we are suddenly hit with the visual and sonic rush of a massive wave rising into the frame, along with the incessant shrieks of swarming seagulls. This is on the shores of the Black Sea in Odesa, on a rather unusual day when massive swells were bombarding the coast. The noise of the gulls intermingling with the rush of the waves striking the jetties convey a sense of instability and unease. Although I was in Odesa before the war broke out, the tension in the air was palpable. Russia was just across the sea and there was a real affective feeling of melancholy that hung on me like a wet blanket while I was there. I felt it the moment my train pulled into the station at 3am and it did not lift until I was heading back to Kyiv several days later. I could not explain it at the time, but I am convinced it was from the collective feeling of impending doom felt by the residents. I wanted to try and communicate this feeling as best I could at the start of the film.

Stones in Cold Water is split into seven cantos. This is an homage to Dante. I wished to evoke the same power of seven as Dante did, for it holds the magic that can inspire the

climb from the seven circles of Hell to the seven terraces of Purgatory up into the seven celestial spheres of Paradise. Although much of the film is dark, I also hope to counter despair with its dialectical pair: hope. The choice to call each section of the film "canto" is also an homage to Dante, but it holds a dual meaning, for a canto is also the treble or leading melody in music—in fact, canto is derived from the Italian word for song, which itself is derived from the Latin *cantus*. The centrality of the film's score, and the lack of any voiceover or didactic speech, reenforced this deliberate choice.

Canto 1: The Center Cannot Hold

Despite the foreboding title card announcing the name of the canto, this scene opens with images of water and relaxation. The water looks refreshing (glimmering, sparkling, cascading) but it is also chaotic (whirling, splashing, shooting). Then we receive the context via text—a narrative mode that remains consistent throughout the rest of the film—we are witnessing a pre-invasion Ukraine. This introduces the ghost which haunts the remainder of the film. The chief source of tension is the fact that, as an audience, we know that five months after these images were shot, the entire country would be changed indefinitely. Yet this scene hopes to impart the duality of impending doom and resilience. This is exemplified by the water itself. In a 2009 Doctor Who special *The Waters of Mars*, The Doctor says: "water is patient…Water just waits, wears down the cliff tops, the mountains, the whole of the world. Water always wins." Amid the wildness of a centrifuge, the center indeed cannot hold—yet water will resolutely wait at the periphery only to eagerly flood the middle the moment the momentum begins to fade.

From a scene of fountains, we then cut to back-to-back street scenes. These are meant to subject the viewer to the pace of a sensory ethnography, which can be, at times, excruciatingly slow. But that is the point—to break us out of the media hegemony of instant

gratification. The first street scene is of the *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* (Independence Square), the scene of the uprising that took place in 2013–2014 that ousted Viktor Yanukovych. Vehicles pass slowly in and out of frame, along with people walking on the sidewalk. Flags flutter in the distance. A man asking for money to support the war in the east can be heard distantly on a loudspeaker. A drone lazily yo-yos up and down next to the Independence Monument victory column. We then transpose this scene of contemporary hustle and bustle with a scene of the crumbling past—we cut to an intersection in front of the Hotel Salyut, a cosmic inspired piece of architecture built in the mid-1980s that borrowed its name and design from the first space station program carried out by the Soviet Union in the 1970s and '80s.

We are then greeted with a very different scene. We observe a typical weekend in peacetime Ukraine. Friends, lovers, families—all walking, talking, and laughing together. An old man putters slowly across the bridge. A father with a broad smile tries to entice his daughter to stand on the clear plexiglass flooring so you can see your feet floating 100 feet above the tree line. Two proud *babushkas* in puffer jackets pass by in idle gossip. We end the canto with a group of teenage girls blissfully taking photographs for social media. One girl, raising her hands above her head, reveals a sweatshirt with a peculiar—yet prophetic—phrase emblazoned across the front: "FEAR LOVE."

Canto 2: A Hauntological Gaze

Now that we have been introduced to the pacing of the film, and presented with the affective quality that it wishes to cultivate, we are brought before a rather unusual Cosmist structure. Although a cemetery would be the opposite of Fyodorov's dream, the architecture and design of the grounds were meant to disrupt our typically rigid distinctions between life and death. The massive domed Halls of Farewell look out of place in a traditional cemetery,

yet in a place meant to mask the tragedy of death, they invite us to contemplate the cosmic collective. And, indeed, they are often compared to extraterrestrial spacecraft by local residents. As we can see in the film, even the cremators themselves are placed underground, so that the smoke and ash burp up through covered exhaust systems that are reminiscent of a rocket being primed for liftoff.

The haunting music during this scene was also intentional. It was designed not only to evoke the ethereal quality of the setting, but was also composed to bring out its Ukrainian character. As composer Dick Powis said to me while we were collaborating on this canto: "I'm playing with a lot of high pitched saw wave sounds in what sound designers call 'swarm,' because for some reason when I think of Ukraine, I think of bees" (Powis 2023, personal communication). Although it was approaching the end of the sunflower season, Powis' instincts were correct, as there were an abundance of bees still hoping for a last taste of sunflower nectar before the long, cold winter set in. The last winter before war.

In the next scene, a cackling bird is heard somewhere behind a statue of a weeping woman. I linger on this scene in particular because—as I edited this a year later, after the war had broken out—it spoke to me more than any other image. Not only does the woman seemingly represent the collective grief of a country being embroiled in yet another brutal war, but it also represents the melancholy of lost futures. If history had taken another route, what marvels could have emerged here? Could this site have been the *axis mundi* for the common cause? Maybe those domed buildings would have welcomed our resurrected ancestors into the arms of their devoted offspring and become instead, Halls of Greeting.

Yet, this is not the timeline we currently occupy, which is why I chose to transition to the rather startling scene of children playing on top of tanks. Before the war, this was not as shockingly depressing of an image as it may be today. With how many children have been

Figure 30. The Wall of Remembrance in the Baikove Cemetery took ten years to build, yet in 1982, when it was finally complete, authorities decided to plaster over it. Today, various methods are being employed to remove the concrete and uncover the reliefs hidden underneath. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 800, f/5.6, 1/900; September 17, 2021]

killed or injured in the Russo-Ukrainian War so far, the meaning behind this scene has shifted quite dramatically since it was first shot, similar to the shifting meanings of the Che Guevara image I discussed in Chapter 1. We sit with these children for awhile and wonder if any of them would want to come that close to a tank ever again.

We proceed to cut to what was then the Peoples' Friendship Arch, which was discussed in Chapter 3. Due to the dismemberment of the Russian and Ukrainian worker megaliths in April 2022, the images in this scene may very well be the last time this monument was ever shot for a film. This was a popular gathering place for both local and visiting Ukrainians—as well as foreign tourists. I would sometimes spend my evenings here to listen to conversations and relax at the end of the day. There was always a bustle, and the enormous open square lended itself well to kids and young adults who wanted to ride their electric scooters around. There would also frequently be live music, which composer Dick Powis used in order to create the score that is heard during this scene. The rather unusual cadence of the soundtrack is due to the fact that he took music that appeared in the background of my footage and recreated it, thereby evoking sonic ghosts along with the visual ghosts of the statues themselves.

This audio-visual composition is, of course, a theoretical homage to Jacques Derrida (1994), whose concept of hauntology plays a prominent role in this canto. It becomes especially conspicuous when we begin to see a series of superimposed images. The first is an image of the former Peoples' Friendship Arch with the Motherland Monument superimposed to its left. Interestingly, these are both specters of their former selves, fitting quite nicely into Derrida's media concept of hauntology—the former has been completely dismantled, and the latter, in August 2023, had the Soviet emblem removed from its shield and replaced with the Ukrainian Trident. Both were unhuman victims of the war and

apophatic creations of Ukraine's decommunization program. But, as Derrida reminds us, we are never quite sure who is haunting whom. We are also not sure if this kind of historical repetition will ever end, or if we are doomed to submit to its uncanny ouroborosian will.

After seeing a third superimposition of the Peoples' Friendship Arch being dismantled, we are then shown another superimposition of a monument to Prince Volodymyr the Great and a cityscape. These series of superimpositions are meant to evoke the weirdly weird montages previously discussed in Chapter 1. These images distort and disrupt the barriers between past and present, while attempting to confuse the dualities that were established in the previous canto. The didactic text in this scene is from *Hamlet* Act 1, Scene 5, which also inspired Derrida's hauntology—in particular, Hamlet's line "the time is out of joint." *Hamlet* seems to be a wellspring for certain Cosmist thinkers, in particular Aleksandr Bogdanov (2022), who also found enormous inspiration in both the story and the character, particularly in the way that Hamlet must fuse the two parts of his identity: "the warrior and the aesthete pierce each other and begin to merge into a new unity: an active aesthete, a fighter for the harmony of life" (87). This interpretation of Hamlet greatly influenced the way that Bogdanov (2022) understood the mission of the working class, and, ultimately, the mission of his Cosmist experimentation: the working class must be "a fighter and a destroyer only out of external necessity—but a creator in all of its nature" (59).

Canto 3: The Bald Mountain

This canto focuses on the oft-ignored rural nature of Ukraine. In particular, it hopes to illustrate the fluctuations of Ukraine as a borderlands between Empires, ideologies, politics, and social stratifications. As Ukrainian scholar Kateryna Iakovlenko (2021) has argued, if a Ukrainian Cosmism is at all possible, then it must take seriously the country and not the city. The "urban" largely preoccupies Fyodorov's thoughts, yet, according to

Iakovlenko (2021), Ukraine "is not so much 'countrified' in nature, as it is one part anarchic and one part nomadic. Its anarchism is grounded in a synthesis of Christian and pagan cultures, as transmuted through the legacy of the Cossacks." And indeed, its pagan history is still vibrant and highly visible, despite the fact that its most prominent religion is Orthodox Christianity—although it should also be noted this kind of socio-cultural gradient is a prominent feature of borderlands in general (Genovese 2022b).

The Bald Mountain *(Lysa hora)* had always been rumored to be a site where witches would gather, but Kyiv's neo-pagan community has formally taken over a small clearing toward the summit—and the site is frequently put to use. While I was there, I noticed many fresh offerings, including flowers, candy, bread, and *kopiyka* coins. At the center is an enormous four-faced statue of the highest god in the Slavic pantheon, *Perun*. His face is oriented to each of the cardinal directions with accompanying stone altars *(trebniy kamin')* on which to place offerings. Further out from the altars are depictions of the golden, winged hound *semargl*, who brought fire to the world. Incidentally, this whole setting seems to be an attempt to re-create an historical description of a site established by Prince Volodymyr the Great in 980 AD—the same Volodymyr the Great whose monument made an appearance in the last canto.

> And [Volodymyr] began to reign alone in [Kyiv]. And he placed idols on the hill outside the palace: a Perun in wood with a silver head and a gold mustache, and Khors and Daždbog and Stribog and [Semargl] and Mokoš. And they offered sacrifices and called them gods, and they took their sons and daughter to them and sacrificed them to the devils. And they profaned the earth with their sacrifices, and Rus' and that hill were profaned by blood. But God the merciful, who does not wish the death of sinners, on that hill stands today the church of Saint Vasilij, and we will relate later. (Álvarez-Pedrosa et al. 2021, 278)

The next scene is the only time I inject myself into the story. It is a transcription from my field notes that I wrote while I spent several hours experiencing the site. The longer I sat there, the more I began to feel entangled. The weirdly weird weirdness that I introduced

Figure 31. The neo-pagan site on Bald Mountain. In the foreground, a wooden carving of a *semargl*'s head juts out of the ground. Behind the *semargl* is a bonfire pit to represent their bringing of fire to humanity. Behind the fire pit is the large depiction of *Perun* with an altar to his right. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 1000, *f*/8, 1/105; September 15, 2021]

Figure 32. An example of offerings left on the altar for *Perun*: bread, herbs, corn, grain, fruit, biscuits, candy, and beer. [Fujifilm X100F, ISO 200, *f*/8, 1/200; September 15, 2021]

in Chapter 1 was so affectively bombarding that I actually became existentially frozen. In particular, I became obsessed with the flies, bees, hornets, and wasps that were gorging themselves on the offerings left on the stone altars. The altar became a microcosm of our world—pure abundance, and yet, one wasp can be seen mercilessly murdering another, stinging it repeatedly until its victim stops moving. The murderer then manically soars to a gummy worm following its grisly task, leaving behind its own sacrificial offering. Meanwhile, the other insects do not notice and seem to be only interested in continuing their gluttonous feast. At a certain point, as I mention in the film's text, I actually began to hear their mandibles gnashing. After several hours, I had to pull myself away, despite the fact that I felt I had tapped into something interesting and numinous. It seems the same unhuman qualities that drew me to the hill felt it necessary to eject me as well. Perhaps I was not worthy—or not ready.

Canto 4: The Vestiges of Mundanity

The purpose of this canto is to highlight some of the banality of life which has become impossible, or at least has become much more difficult, under the current conditions in Ukraine. I chose to begin with two trains—the Kyiv metro and a regional train between Kyiv and Kharkiv—in order to highlight the previously discussed Ukrainian dialectic between city and country, urban and rural. Metro stations in Kyiv were built far enough underground to double as bomb shelters—a common Soviet city planning strategy —and this ended up becoming their primary purpose after the Russian invasion.[32] Trains to the more rural parts of Ukraine, particularly if one is traveling to the east, is another mundane activity that has become increasingly dangerous.

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[32] In fact, the second deepest metro station in the world is in Kyiv: the station Arsenalna on the Sviatoshnynsko-Brovarska Line. It sits at 105.5 meters (346 feet) below ground. This depth is, amongst other qualities, quite temporally felt when attempting to use the station—it took me 4 minutes and 28 seconds of standing on an escalator to reach the metro platform from the entrance at ground level.

The next scene shows a young couple wandering along the coast of the Black Sea in Odesa, another ordinary activity that is near impossible to do today without worrying about artillery, cruise missiles, or drone strikes. A container ship rests lazily on the horizon of a body of water that now contains multiple military blockades. Two hundred kilometers from the camera's lens lies the Crimean peninsula, today occupied by Russia. Although it may not be immediately obvious, we are observing layers upon layers of specters—a true hauntological topography—in this otherwise prosaic scene.

We then transition to the lapping waves of the Dnieper River against Trukhaniv Island back in Kyiv. The Parkovyi Footbridge and the enormous Peoples' Friendship Arch can be seen in the background while a man spends his afternoon fishing the river. The looming threat of air raids are not on his mind. They would be today; for there is nowhere to take cover on an open beach. Further afield, the ghosts of past issues can be seen haunting the graffitied walls on the far side of the river. One of the most prominent pieces reads: "who [do we] call when the police kill?" *(komu dzvonyty, koly vbyvaye politsiya?).*

The next scene is in a public park on a Saturday. Some park officials are using a vacuum attachment to collect leaves that have been swept up by a group of women from the neighborhood. In Ukraine, as in many former Soviet Republics, the tradition of *subbotnik*—voluntary labor on Saturdays, particularly to further revolutionary or community goals (*subbota* is Saturday in Russian)—is still widely practiced, particularly among the older residents. The group of older women raking leaves into piles are doing so as a part of this fruitful melancholic historical tradition.

Finally, I ended this canto with a scene of contractors that were renovating my downstairs neighbor's apartment. The workers are throwing bags of dirt and refuse into the bed of their truck. At the time, I thought the rhythmic thumps that the bags were making in

the bed of the truck were somewhat interesting and I was also partially irritated at the noise of it all, which had been going on for most of the day. However, when I returned to the United States and reviewed this footage, I grew morbidly horrified. I could not get the image out of my mind that today, it was more likely that these workers would be tossing body bags into the back of their truck. I was tormented by that image and felt compelled to include this as the last scene—a reminder that the mundane, like all else, is only temporary.

Canto 5: Spectral Daises

The title of this canto is an insufferable bit of wordplay. This canto focuses on Savytskyi Park in Odesa, which was renamed, as part of the decommunization program, from Lenin Komsomol Park. It served a pivotal role during the city's decommunization process, as it was the holding area for every statue deemed to be "communist" in the entire city of Odesa. For several months, the statues were stored in Savytskyi Park until they could be properly destroyed. However, what remains in the park today is an uncanny cemetery of pedestals and foundations that once held the statues. This is where the wordplay comes in. I have named each ghostly platform a "spectral dais," which upon first glance at the plural of the word may have viewers confusing it for daisies. The second "i" becomes spectral itself, and reminds us, following Rodchenko's (2005) provocations on the agential power of objects, that even *things* are capable of pushing up the daisies.

The images of these spectral daises are juxtaposed with a speech given by Vladimir Lenin at the end of March 1919 discussing the role of Soviet power during a particularly interesting socio-economic period. This speech was given at the height of Lenin's program of War Communism, an incredibly radical move to push the revolution forward despite being bogged down in the quagmire of civil war. While War Communism was marked by many regressive actions like mandatory requisition of food and the forbidding of worker

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strikes, it also attempted to enact many communistic goals like abolishing money, suppressing profiteers, and wide scale nationalization of industries and services.

Amid the melancholic platforms that are now peppered around the park—sitting silently as forgotten apophatic structural objects—Lenin tells us that socialism is "the true road" and is "invincible." Upon finishing his speech this way, we begin to watch the Lenin statue that once graced the square of the park slowly melt away, revealing the now empty dais on which he once stood. The generation of decommunization apophasis has drastically altered the landscapes of public spaces throughout Ukraine. It is up to us, as the audience, to decide whether they have created a space that is more or less aesthetically interesting or appealing.

Canto 6: Viscid Clay of Ashes and Bone

For the first and last time in the film, we are met with a voiceover—a reading of a poem by Yevgeny Yevtushenko. The melody of this particular poem is important to hear in the original Russian, so I made the decision to break the silence typical of artistic sensory ethnographies. These powerful words are initially spoken over images of a heartbreaking sculpture representing the anguish and resilience of Jewish victims of the Holocaust, which rests at the site of Babi Yar, discussed in Chapter 3.

We are then taken to a scene that looks like an ordinary forest trail. However, this is actually inside the ravine of Babi Yar, where tens of thousands of Jews were murdered over the course of 48 straight hours. The site is too massive to fully excavate, and there are still the bones of the "thousands and thousands buried here." Other than attempting to tell a nuanced perspective of the Ukrainian experience, I also wished to show the way that life and death can sometimes be compartmentalized and stratified. Some histories are portrayed as mattering more than others and Fyodorov's common cause must reckon with who takes

priority in a universal program. At what point do the Jews of Babi Yar get resurrected? Is it before or after the men who murdered them so mercilessly?

I mention this because the Nazis certainly prioritized their utopian visions. This site of Babi Yar, in fact, has been theorized as having been an optimized dry run for the hundreds of pogroms that would follow the Nazi war machine across Eurasia. It could have also been a test to see if the world would continue to turn a blind eye and allow Hitler to carry out his genocidal program without interference. This is a theory proposed by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau (2006):

> I am not a historian, but maybe, say, this Babi Yar was also a test for Hitler. If on September 29 and September 30, 1941 Babi Yar may happen and the world did not react seriously, dramatically, abnormally, maybe this was a good test for him. So a few weeks later in January 1942, near Berlin in Wannsee, a convention can be held with a decision, a final solution to the Jewish problem…Maybe if the very action had been a serious one, a dramatic one, in September 1941 here in Ukraine, the Wannsee Conference would have come to a different end, maybe.

This is an historic apophasis that will always, like Walter Benjamin lamented, leave us with the desire to commit to a program of militant remembrance.

Canto 7: God's Infinite Silence

The finale of the film takes a marked technical departure from the other cantos. Here I am practicing a craft—and performing an homage—to what Werner Herzog (2010) has called the "ecstatic truth." Often in Herzog's (2010) films, this ecstasy comes out in unlikely images, usually in statuary or more static scenes in which "the soul actualizes truth through the experience of sublimity: that is, it completes an independent act of creation" (11).[33] I hope to evoke this Cosmist actualization, this act of creation, through the use of images taken at an enormous complex memorializing those lost during the Great Patriotic

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[33] I had the immense privilege to speak at length, one-on-one, with Werner about his ideas—as well as to briefly workshop what I was thinking about for this canto—while on the set of his son Rudolph's film *Last Exit: Space* (2022), a film I had the incredible honor of being cast in.

War—a place that may have aroused Fyodorov's interest as a site of archival collection. The soundtrack for this canto is also a departure—the only music not composed by Powis. Instead, the music is provided by a monks choir from the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra performing the hymn "God with us," which creates another layer of apophatic duality when compared to the canto's title.

The canto then takes a beat to shift to additional montages and superimpositions, similar to Canto 2—and described in further detail in Chapter 1's discussion of the weird. Behind the frantic playing of bells, we see rapid ecstatic images from around Ukraine: an old Soviet bus stop outside the Peoples' Friendship Arch, a storage container in the Exclusion Zone, a dilapidated Kindergarten in the evacuated city of Zalissya, roaring waves smashing against a pier in Odesa, cranes working to move containers off of ships in a Black Sea dock, a military youth group (and stray dogs) performing marches and venerating the Monument to the Unknown Sailor in Odesa, a shot of the Potemkin Steps,[34] a scene of me eating *grechka* and eggs for breakfast,[35] a monument to the founders of Kyiv in the Maidan, the Cathedral of the Dormition in the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, a red squirrel, a pair of lovers holding hands in a park, a child ordering cotton candy from a vender, the now extinguished Eternal Flame Monument, a gutted warehouse, a park statue, the washed out Soviet emblem on top of the House of Culture in a small razed town in the Exclusion Zone, a man walking along the banks of the Dnieper, the enormous sarcophagus that covers the still highly radioactive Reactor #4 at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, the reconstructed Golden Gate of Kyiv, the painted and ornate roof of the central train station in Kharkiv, and finally,

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[34] I added this as an Easter egg for fellow cinephiles, as this was the filming location for that famous scene in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). If you know, you know.

[35] This is another, more personal, Easter egg. My father is an incredible painter, mostly of landscapes. One of his trademarks is hiding the figure of a person (usually himself) in every painting. This is an homage, and signal of artistic continuity, with his work.

to bookend the entire film, we end on the seagulls and the Black Sea—this time, the shot is wider, and even though the sea is turbulent and unpredictable, we can see a beautiful example of multispecies solidarity as a woman throws small pieces of bread to the swarming gulls.

Finally, just like the first shot of the film, the last one emerges from the sound of cold wind and a black screen. However, something is different. We are overwhelmed with saturation. We are met with the only shot of color in the film and we are blinded by it. Center frame, we see a massive blue and yellow Ukrainian flag as it struggles to unfurl in the wind. Slowly, but intensely, the unpredictable wind begins to grow louder and louder and louder until suddenly…

…darkness.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: DARK COSMISM

> "I'm waiting for an answer.   *(Ya zhdu otveta)*
> There is no more hope.   *(Bol'she nadezhd netu)*
> Summer will be over soon."   *(Skoro konchitsya leto)*
>   –Kino *(Kino)*, "Summer is Ending" *(Konchitsya leto)*

This dissertation has taken us through a tangle of multimodal cosmic (re)constructions: utopias, nostalgia, melancholy, war, placemaking, the uncanny. Through simultaneous rhetorical implosions and explosions, I have attempted to construct a pointillist image of Cosmism's temporal and ideological trajectories, which, at times, may have appeared more like the scattered experimental results of a particle accelerator. I have, however, reserved the most contemporary instantiations of Cosmism for this conclusion because I believe that it will begin to crepuscularly illuminate this concept I have termed *Dark Cosmism*. To that end, I wish to clarify that I am not succumbing to the academic endemic of neologiphilia by suggesting that the term Dark Cosmism is a novel philosophical analytic, but rather, as I hope to make clear in this conclusion, I am merely giving name— and bearing witness—to a fractal of occluded Cosmist thought that has been in existence ever since Fyodorov first gave his huddled lectures in that library in Moscow.

Likewise, and further afield, this apophatic journey into Dark Cosmism has raised, in my mind, particular epistemological and ontological limitations within recent anthropological and posthumanist engagements in the academy—in particular, any investigations into re-enchantment, realist magic, the occult, etc.—the likes of which are nested within the enticing, but academically dangerous, borderlands of the woo. I have noticed that there seems to be an ironic relegating of these domains to a kind of disenchanted distance with which they can be studied. Often, this technique seems to only generate frustration from researchers attempting to tap into some form of enchanted ontological truth. I have learned

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that these kinds of techniques will never yield results because it is ultimately the self that must be (re)shaped and transmuted in order to have the mystical occult rendered visible.

However, I also believe the self is not an isolated individual and must be reshaped in a dialectical *pas de deux* with one's social group(s)—family, friends, mentors, affinity groups, cadres, clandestine cells, Party chapters, *caracoles*, and yes, even doctoral dissertation committees. When I was finally able to cast off the desirous anchor that manifests itself as "academic respectability," I began to truly consider the apophatic question that lies hidden at the core of this project, and which will guide me into the next: what if the enchanted world never sunk into the shadows of the Enlightenment, but has instead been here all along— patiently waiting for a speculative ontology that might allow us to see it again? What if we cannot *seek out* enchantment—because *re*-enchantment can only emerge from the aporias of disenchantment—but instead, we can only work on ourselves to the point that we might have the enchanted world *revealed to us*? Part of what led me to this question was the appearance of a continuing and evolving global plague, which helped render into sharp clarity the core concerns of Fyodorov's common cause: death and the body politic.

Poetics of Pestilence

Michel Foucault (2007) famously theorized that the transmutation of the body politic that began to occur the 17th century—largely due to outbreaks of smallpox—generated a new type of power, an "apparatus of security" *(dispositif de sécurité)*, which allowed novel circulations and calculations of domination attuned to the probabilities of intervention. As Foucault notes, epidemics, and indeed pandemics as well, present new political challenges, particularly in a global capitalist system—namely, how do governing bodies prevent circulations of disease, yet continue to enable the flows of goods (and the people who source, manufacture, and distribute them)? The dialectics of intervention and circulation, the

messy middle in-between—or as Foucault (2007) frames it, the ability to see what is really going on by "standing back sufficiently" (46)—is how we properly observe this security apparatus.

But, as Eugene Thacker (2015b) astutely inquires, what happens when the figure of the body politic itself becomes threatened? Pandemics tend to shine light on what Thacker (2015b) calls a "plague" of "multiplicity," a necrology of the body politic that is a force which both constitutes and dissolves—passing through and between the problems of sovereignty. Much like the concerns of Cosmism, we are enticed to stand back sufficiently so as to see not only the necrological pathologies of the body politic, but also its poetics, for bodies not only decompose, but they are made to be resurrected and live forever among the stars from which we all emerged.

To illustrate this, Thacker (2015b) uses the example of the living dead in the City of Dis found in Dante's *Inferno*, in which the stratification of bodies are at once being divinely punished (sovereignty) and meticulously managed (multiplicity). As we have seen, Cosmist thought is concerned with similar problems (although, perhaps, we must first displace divine punishment with divinely inspired active evolution), but this spiraling of Foucauldian sovereignties and multiplicities is particularly prescient in our contemporary plague-ridden world. As such, this dialectical intertwining—one never dominating the other—reveals itself to be important and foundational to the uncanny loops and twists of Dark Cosmism.

The philosophy and poetics of Dark Cosmism point foremost to the necrological (that which is constituted must dissolve, that which is composed must decompose) but it also illumines the dialectical-theological implosion to this divine explosion of matter: namely, that which dissolves must be reconstituted, and that which decomposes must be composed again. Just as sovereignty is needed for the management of a certain pestilent necropoetics, it

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is also needed to manage the reconstruction and reintegration of those who had passed beyond. For Fyodorov, this took the form of a living museum. For Bogdanov, it was about a comradely exchange of blood. For Vernadsky and Tsiolkovsky, it was about developing ways of processing energy directly from the sun.

Ultimately, however, these poetics of pestilence help highlight the apophatic characteristics of Fyodorov's common cause. The goals of Cosmism spring from a root ball of apophasis—that is, the common cause seems to actually emanate from *negations*. The *raisons d'être* of the common cause are pursued not as a way to *achieve* eternal life, but rather as a way to *defeat* death; it is not about multi-species *coexistence*, but about the *domination* of nature; not about cosmic *exploration*, but cosmic *extraction* and *colonization*. This is a part of the darkness that exists within Cosmist thought. That said, as I discussed in the first chapter, darkness holds a tripartite character—it cycles through despair, mystery, and redolence. Yet this apophatic nature of the common cause should not be underestimated, for the elective affinities of this framing profoundly influenced its contemporary occurrences.

Engineers of Human Souls

I ended Chapter 2 using the case of Timothy Leary to introduce the two most prominent communities that make up the material and ideological base of American Cosmism: American economic interests and techno-libertarians. Starting in the 1970s, these two broad groups began to establish a constellation of (mostly) computer corporations which accumulated massive amounts of capital that, in turn, allowed Silicon Valley to become the premier site for techno-utopian visions for the next 40+ years. However, due to the bursting of the dot-com bubble, the proliferation of gig work, intensifying natural disasters from anthropogenic climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic, waves of

political crises have begun to crash upon the Valley—crises which have likewise profoundly

shaken the spiritual core of the apostles of American Cosmism.

Vladimir Lenin (1977) once wrote: "Every political crisis, whatever its outcome, is

useful in that it brings to light things that have been hidden, reveals the forces operating in

politics, exposes deception and self-deception, catch-phrases and fictions, and affords

striking demonstration of '*things as they are*', by forcibly driving them home" (274). And

indeed, these present crises have dredged some of the hidden histories of popular American

Cosmist projects, even if they are only popular within small circles of Silicon Valley

technologists. In particular, the overwhelming solution proposed by billionaire technologists

—the American Cosmists who have the enormous amounts of capital required to force their

techno-utopian ideas into existence—has been to develop private, individualistic outer

space(s) in order to retreat from human society at large. These escape strategies have varied

wildly. For example, some billionaire technologists hope to construct permanent off-shore

dwellings outside the reach of governments (e.g. "seasteading"); others construct luxury

bunkers on large estates in New Zealand in order to survive catastrophic climate change or

pandemics; still others develop their own private outer space corporations in the hopes that

they will be able to leave the entire planet behind (Rushkoff 2022).

Many of the biggest names in Silicon Valley are engaged in these escapist American

Cosmist projects—people like Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, and Jeff Bezos. Thiel, for example,

has backed The Seasteading Institute—an organization that can be traced back to

Discordianism co-founder Kerry Thornley, who hosted discussions of the practice in his

late-1960s libertarian zine called *The Innovator*.[36] Thiel has also invested in a company called

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[36] For more on this connection, see Davis 2019, 195–199. *The Innovator* is also responsible for fueling the right-libertarian obsession with "survivalism," which grew out of Thornley's belief that true liberty can only be achieved outside of society and the state. The movement, which continues to flourish today, ended up becoming a right-wing reflection of the center-left libertarianism of *The Whole Earth Catalog*.

Ambrosia, which began experiments very similar to Bogdanov's, testing the benefits of exchanging blood from the young to the old (Genovese 2019). However, instead of Bogdanov's "comradely exchange," they have opted to focus on bringing the capitalist ideology into the physiological by charging between $8,000–$12,000 for "young blood infusions." It is rumored that Thiel is already privately undergoing regular young blood infusions, despite the FDA calling for a halt on the practice, a story that has been spoofed in the HBO series *Silicon Valley*, which portrays a Thiel-like CEO that hires daily "blood boys."

Elon Musk has also visibly pursued several Cosmist goals. In 2016, he founded the company Neuralink, with the ultimate goal being the transfer of human consciousness into machines, which would achieve a level of cyber-immortality. He and Jeff Bezos have also been locked in a privatized version of a Space Race between his SpaceX and Bezos' Blue Origin. Both billionaires claim that the goals of their space programs are to make humanity a "multi-planetary species," yet they have not been able to address the fact that the parts of humanity that are able to afford their proposed ticket prices are infinitesimally smaller than 1% of the global population—not the mention that they have yet to overcome the enormously complex engineering challenges to accomplish such a feat. The furthest either of them have been able to send humans is low-Earth orbit, a task accomplished by the Soviet Union in 1961. However, it is important to note that these Cosmist connections *are* being pursued—and pursued quite seriously. Enormous amounts of capital are being sunk into these goals and it is perhaps the first time since the Soviet space program that Fyodorov's dreams—no matter the interpretation—have been pragmatically pursued beyond hushed lectures in a Russian library.

Even though I am not claiming a direct connection between Fyodorov and American capitalists, we should still resist the immediate impulse to scoff at these Americanist utopian

projects. That said, we should also not ignore the fact that part of the justification by techno-capitalists like Peter Thiel and Elon Musk to build outer space(s) external to government influence is to accelerate development of techno-immortality technologies without interference from labor and/or ethics regulation. Yet, if we reach beyond the economic pragmatics of their motivations—and stand back sufficiently so as to glimpse their internal logics—the affective ontologies of Thiel, Musk, Bezos and their ilk is that the essence of the universe is *informational*, and the teleological, intrinsic value of that base information will always naturally organize itself into *intelligence*. Biology (human or otherwise) is merely the current platform—the current background technology—of that intelligence (Farman 2012). This ontological framework is how it becomes theoretically feasible to transfer human consciousness into machines. What Thiel, Musk, and other technologists are doing is merely purposeful acceleration—or, dare I say, an undertaking of active evolution—of the natural processes of an enchanted universe that will always organize information into intelligence.

These contemporary groups striving for human immortality and cosmic migration do indeed seem to perceive the universe as an enchanted place—one that is not cold and meaningless but instead intentional and profound (Farman 2012). One can find enchanted logics within Elon Musk's frequent diatribes about our universe being a simulation inside an alien supercomputer (Wall 2018). When the metaphysical, discursive boundaries of what is considered "scientific" and what is considered "religious" are transgressed and restructured, these two categories begin to collapse under the weight of their own constructed cosmologies. As Barbrook and Cameron (1995) argued, the Californian Ideology is not only about libertarian capitalist logics, it is also deeply infused with New Age spirituality.

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Particularly within the discourse of Silicon Valley, the techno-meliorist line of capitalist progress has been taken as divine gospel—innovation is good, more is always better, and the exponential power of computing cannot be stopped. But, as Gaymon Bennett (2019) has suggested: this "secularized spirituality of Big Tech" is one of "faith that admits no darkness"—all light, no shadow. Here Bennett is referring to the Jungian interpretation of "shadows" as the unconscious aspects of the human personality—one's repressed id. This eschewing of the shadow, according to Bennett, creates a dual deficiency of moral realism: 1) it generates unrestrained power; and 2) it blocks and justifies the lack of soul-searching (or facing the shadow) as an "opportunity cost." In these times of Anthropocenic crises, at least prior to the pandemic, techno-utopian capitalists seemed to subscribe to the lure that life can be all light and no shadow; to them, and to many of their users, that is, in fact, the point of technology. However, as Fyodorov's theology also makes clear, that denial of the shadow—that inability to tackle, reshape, and transmute the evil that is inherent in all human creation(s)—is one of the chief reasons why technologists, who are craving a connected world, feel so unfulfilled.

Bennett (2019) proposes that one of the theological mechanisms to resist the temptation to quarantine light from shadow is the concept of holy matter—"a radical proposition that the being of God is so deeply entwined in the world that divine presence imprints on materiality itself." Holy matter has similar analogs in the Orthodox (and Fyodorovian) tradition of "spirit-bearing" matter, discussed in detail in Chapter 2. Furthermore, the Cosmist syncretism of Christianity, occult doctrines, asceticism, and Marxism created a unique material morality that only becomes activated when individuals are aware of their solidarity with all peoples past, present, and future (Simakova 2016). Bennett (2019) argues that one of the ways Silicon Valley ignores the shadow is by turning all their

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attention to "spirit" rather than the "graceful nature of matter."   This is what motivates

technologists to create a digitally networked society. But unlike the Christian conception of

holy matter, the connections of our current networked society are "algorithmic: a step-wise

control of processes that reshape us through the play of information" (Bennett 2019). And

these algorithmic manipulations have very real, and very dark, effects.

For example, an historical analogy to this articulation of spiritual focus is told by the

Soviet writer Korneli Zelinsky, who, in 1932, attended a meeting at Maxim Gorky's house

between an array of Soviet writers and Joseph Stalin. While there, Stalin expressed to the

writers their purpose in this new Soviet society: "[Humankind] is being remade by life. But

you also help to remake [their] soul. This is an important manufacture—human souls. *You are*

engineers of human souls" (Joravsky 1978, 127, emphasis mine). The subsequent effects of

Stalin's dialectic between spirit and matter hardly needs to be explained. But in the present, it

seems that technologists in Silicon Valley also see themselves as engineers of human souls,

not only in the explicit transhumanist sense, but also in the Stalinist sense—by facilitating a

more "connected world." They are "remaking the soul" in a project of technological

subjectivation that, according to Bennett (2019) and others, has begun to rebound due to an

inadequate relationship with the generated shadows of their own creations.

(Neo)Eurasianism, (Neo)Reactionary Philosophy, and American Cosmism

Eurasian philosophies have long been exchanged with the West, even before

Cosmism's journey to the United States via the Soviet-American Exchange Program. Yet, at

the same time that "hot tub diplomacy" was swapping imaginaries of cosmic immortality,

adjacent Cosmist philosophies were also being discussed—in particular, a doctrine called

Eurasianism, a right-wing occult theory which espouses that certain cosmic events will

dictate the strengths and weaknesses of different races. One of the most prominent

adherents of this school of thought is a man who has been referred to as "Putin's brain," due to his close ties to the Russian leader: Alexander Dugin. Dugin's political activities—which center on esoteric, nationalistic fascism—spread from Russia to Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and have most recently been fervently consumed by alt-right ideologues in the United States. However, Dugin's reactionary ideas emerged directly from Cosmist philosophers. One of Dugin's chief ideological influences was the historian and self-ascribed "Eurasianist" Lev Gumilyov, who likewise based his work upon the research of Cosmists Alexander Chizhevsky and Vladimir Vernadsky. Despite the fact that Chizhevsky and Vernadsky's ideas were developed as universal, holistic pursuits, Gumilyov and Dugin's appropriation of these Cosmist ideas were built to serve rather nationalist ends.

Gumilyov adopted Chizhevsky and Vernadsky's ideas, discussed in detail in Chapter 2, and superimposed them over his pseudo-anthropological study of "ethnic history." Gumilyov took as a point of departure Vernadsky's insistence on the inseparability of humankind and nature in order to argue that ethnic categories emerged not from social or political institutions, but from the environments in which they lived. Gumilyov asserted that geological environments alone shaped and molded ethnic behaviors, physical characteristics, attitudes, cosmologies, etc. This line of thinking led to many reductions reminiscent of Spencerian social theory, as well as typically fascist beliefs, such as Gumilyov's insistence that Jews did not constitute an ethnos because they were primarily a parasitic, international, diasporic, urban mercantile class that operated outside of nature.

He then syncretized the ideas of Vernadsky and Chizhevsky to propose that cosmic or solar emissions—which he called "passionarity" *(passionarnost')*—created embodied micro-mutations within certain leaders of ethnic groups, resulting in their drive toward political domination and conquest (Bassin 2016). Unsurprisingly, Gumilyov saw Russians and other

ethnic communities from the Eurasian steppe to be "super-ethnos," capable of, and indeed destined to, conquer and rule those who were deemed to have weaker ethnos, or those who possessed "subpassionarity."

These latter ideas of Gumilyov's greatly inspired Alexander Dugin's philosophy of Neo-Eurasianism *(neoyevraziystvo)* and motivated his involvement in the founding of the political movement of National Bolshevism *(natsional-bol'shevizm)*. His tutelage under Gumilyov led to the development of what Dugin calls his "fourth political theory," which he claims is a political philosophy that supersedes the failings of Western liberalism and democracy by centering politics not on individuals, class, or nations, but instead on a kind of Heideggerian *Dasein* (Dugin 2012).[37] Dugin frames the manifestation of his philosophy as mirroring a mystical-cosmic battle between the forces of Light and those of the Antichrist (Heiser 2014). In particular, he premises this belief on the existence of the mythical, now submerged polar continent of Hyperborea. Sharing similarities with National Socialist Aryan myths, Hyperboreans (ancient Russians) were supposedly "white teachers" at the peak of human evolution—it was not until miscegenation with "more primitive and earth-bound dark-skinned peoples of the tropical south" that we began to see the emergence of the supposed inferior racial stock of the West—the "Atlanticists" (Shenfield 2001, 196–197).

Dugin's neo-fascist theorizations have been highly influential to a range of politicians and their advisors—from Vladimir Putin to Steve Bannon (Barbashin and Thoburn 2014; Hawk 2019). In fact, Bannon and Dugin famously met in 2018 and have since initiated many collaborations, attempting to find ways of reinvigorating fascist ideals under the guise of

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[37] Dugin is part of a long philosophical tradition attempting to develop what scholars of the political right have termed "The Third Position" or what is also sometimes referred to as "red-brown alliances"—attempts at blending far-right and far-left political philosophies which adherents claim is in opposition to, and transcends, both communism and capitalism (Ross 2017). National Bolshevism (a syncretic politics which draws from far-right ultranationalism and far-left Bolshevism) and Strasserism (an anticapitalist tendency of the Nazi Party) are the two oldest instantiations of this phenomena.

"Traditionalism" (Teitelbaum 2021). Interestingly, Bannon's link to Cosmist causes goes further back than the Dugin/Gumilyov connection. In 1993, he was hired by Texas philanthropist Ed Bass to reign in spending at the Biosphere 2 facility north of Tucson, Arizona.

The Biosphere 2 facility is an enormous experimental closed ecological system—essentially an enormous greenhouse—opened in 1991 in an attempt to re-create every biome on the planet with the hope that research at the facility could lead to wide-scale geoengineering programs. Several full-scale experiments took place, in which crews of "Biospherians" locked themselves into the facility to test the ability to live in an artificial closed system, similar to a long duration space mission. By 1994, Bannon had become CEO of Space Biosphere Ventures, the entity that owned the facility, and was so hated for his political and leadership style that the second and final lock-in experiment was disrupted by former crew members breaking into the facility to warn their colleagues of Bannon's ascension in the governing organization.

Duginist Cosmist affinities continue beyond the likes of Bannon if we begin to look at their relationship to Western accelerationism and neo-reactionary (NRx) philosophy, particularly that of Nick Land. Land's (2012) theory of "Dark Enlightenment" similarly rejects Western liberalism and democracy, but professes a need for capitalist acceleration to the point that corporate power becomes the only form of agentive power. Societies and nations, according to Land, should fracture into smaller communities, each governed by a tyrannical CEO that would subsequently enable the advancement of computing technologies until humans are able to merge with machines and become cybernetic *Übermenschen*. Of course, this privilege would not be extended to everyone—Land also advocates his belief that capitalist elites should have the ability to "enhance their IQs" through eugenics

programs in which they would only need to associate with other elites. This viewpoint is similar to the arguments that were made by Tsiolkovsky and that are currently being pushed by Elon Musk. It perhaps comes as no surprise that these schemes have resonated with the likes of Steve Bannon, Richard Spencer, and especially with many technologists in Silicon Valley, namely venture capitalist Peter Thiel (Goldhill 2017).

In fact, Peter Thiel has long been in close personal contact with an associate of Land's: computer scientist and tech entrepreneur Curtis Yarvin—perhaps better known by his far-right blogging alias Mencius Moldbug. Yarvin and Land worked together closely for years, jointly developing the philosophies and concepts that eventually became *The Dark Enlightenment*. These ideas attracted the attention of Steve Bannon—who admitted to being a long-time reader of Yarvin's blog—and while he was the White House Chief Strategist, he "opened up a line to the White House," allowing Yarvin to bend the ear of Bannon and his aides (Johnson and Stokols 2017). Thiel, meanwhile, funded several of Yarvin's start-ups, and in return, Yarvin has been "coaching Thiel" in his and Land's political beliefs (Tait 2019, 200). This fascist triangle between Yarvin/Land, Bannon, and Thiel may explain the reason why Thiel was one of the first people appointed to President Trump's transition team in 2016. The far-right influence of Land and Yarvin has likewise had a cascading effect within the exclusive corporatocracy of Silicon Valley. Thiel is a major funder in many of Silicon Valley's successful businesses, influencing the normative ethico-political order of its cultural and technological landscape.

In fact, as Tara Isabella Burton (2023) has shown, these connections have been decades in the making, with initial relationships being formed primarily through online rationality communities that emerged out of several blogs in the early 2000s, most prominently the site Overcoming Bias, founded by economics professor Robin Hanson and

the self-taught AI researcher Eliezer Yudkowsky. Yudkowsky is also known as the spiritual founder of the "effective altruism" movement, a kind of secular prosperity gospel that espouses that the way to save the world is to make a lot of money and then donate it to worthy causes (usually to Global South health care initiatives founded by their friends, which may or may not materially support the manufacture of vaccines, mosquito nets, etc.). Important connections and fallouts were made during this period; for example, Yarvin began his online persona Mencius Moldbug in the comments section of Yudkowsky's blog LessWrong, Elon Musk and his now-ex Grimes met bonding over a rationalist meme on Twitter, Peter Thiel gave Yudkowsky's Machine Intelligence Research Institute over $1 million in angel investing and was introduced to Yarvin through that deal, and, most recently, effective altruist megastar Sam Bankman-Fried was arrested and charged with fraud and conspiracy over his cryptocurrency exchange (Burton 2023).

An important shift was made in the 2010s, however—a shift that Burton (2023) has called the "postrationalist turn," in which many of the formerly rationalist obsessed minds of Silicon Valley came to the conclusion that effective altruism and individual optimization was too emotionally and spiritually taxing; it seemed that when their lives were being run with the soulless bureaucratic efficiency usually reserved for their companies, it had left them feeling hallowed out and empty. This is the crises that Gaymon Bennett (2019) discusses in his work, and is the beginning of many American Cosmists reaching for a more Fyodorovian solution—that is, a syncretic spiritual one. For example, there has been a sharp rise in influential pseudo-intellectual neo-Jungian charlatans such as Jordon Peterson, who point toward engagement with mysticism as a solution to postmodernist alienation. However, this swing toward the woo has also opened up new possibilities for alliances that would have previously been unthinkable. More specifically, today we are beginning to see a diversity of

relationships between alt-right fascists who are drawn to Nazi occult myths, right-libertarian survivalists and preppers, NRx philosophers like Yarvin and Land, artificial intelligence and longevity advocates, Catholic sedevacantists, and, importantly, the Traditionalist movement, whom Steve Bannon and Alexander Dugin are the most outspoken.

An alliance between an "Hyperborean" and an "Atlanticist" may at first seem to be an unlikely and confusing one. Yet, when one looks at the convergences of ideas between American and Russo-Soviet publics, as this project has attempted to show, these logics begin to make a lot of sense. Thanks, in part, to Gorbachev's policies relaxing communication restrictions between the two superpowers, right-wing Americans and right-wing Soviet citizens were able to collaborate and bond over conservative nationalism, which both groups saw as a counterposition to Soviet internationalism and a way to garner support for their shared goals. By 1990, these right-wing alliances were able to form institutions like the American University in Moscow, the Center for Democracy, and the Krieble Institution (von Eschen 2022). Although these institutions may sound innocuous, they were bastions of rightist propaganda and were instrumental in materially and ideologically supporting Boris Yeltsin during his coup against Gorbachev.[38]

To return to the common drive to inject some form of Cosmist woo into everyday life, even less overtly political groups like a New York-based organization that practices a "Secular Solstice," in which Hanukkah-like rituals are carried out in the name of "secularity," have saddled up next to unlikely allies. Although they largely profess a belief in the finality of death, there is also an underlying Fyodorovian hope that science and technology will eventually prolong life to the point where death itself can be eliminated. Barton (2023) has

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[38] This practice of creating organizations that sound benign or dull, yet serve as insurgent launching pads for right-wing propaganda and corruption, continues to this day—see, for example, the Koch-funded Center for the Study of Economic Liberty at Arizona State University.

shown some overlap between groups like this and the rationalist movement, including its more fascist elements. Yet, the Cosmist influence is quite pronounced. For example, in one of their secular hymns entitled "When I Die," there are two verses which read:

> They may freeze my body when I die
> They may freeze my body when I die
> Though I may well be mistaken
> I would hope to reawaken
> If they freeze my body when I die
>   …
> I'd prefer to never die at all
> I'd prefer to never die at all
> Cheating death is such a rarity
> It would take a singularity
> To permit we never die at all
> (Secular Solstice Book of Traditions 2013, 53)

These kinds of ritualistic practices are no surprise to those who have been studying the processes of secularization—or those in the field of critical secular studies, as discussed in Chapter 1—but for those in Silicon Valley, the move toward "psychospiritual technology" is just the latest tack while gliding on the sea of the Californian Ideology. The novel addition to this syncretism is the sudden prevalence of explicit Cosmist philosophy, which seems to be permeating beyond Silicon Valley boardrooms and is now making its way into the halls of power, most recently in Trump's White House. Yudkowsky has recently written, for example, that one day "the descendants of humanity [will] have spread from star to star…[and]… won't tell the children about the history of Ancient Earth until they're old enough to bear it; and when they learn they'll weep to hear that such a thing as Death had ever once existed!" (Burton 2023, 17).

This is not to say that all Silicon Valley technologists, reactionary Russian Fyodorovians, and alt-right political personalities are reading Alexander Dugin and Nick Land (although many definitely are!), but rather that the dialectics between Land's dystopian corporate feudalism and Dugin's nostalgic nationalist conservatism are the ether within

which American Cosmist techno-utopianism is steeped. As Harrison Fluss and Landon Frim (2017) have remarked: "it is an ideology torn between technophilic Futurism and neo-Orthodox Traditionalism." Both philosophies rupture the dualism between the worldly and the transcendent—Land through his "bionic horizon" and Dugin through his mythical Eurasian utopia. Both theorists attempt to cleave away from, and ultimately reject, modernity in favor of an enchanted esotericism. In places that face existential and economic crises, such as Silicon Valley, Kyiv, and Moscow—which have been rocked by rapid infusions of capital, entrepreneurial ontologies, and neoliberal economics for at least the past 30 years—these philosophies provide reactionary techno-utopian visions for those that may be seeking alternatives to the modernist project, but still subscribe to Spencerian social theories. And unfortunately we are seeing the consequences of these philosophies being played out in Russo-Ukrainian War today.

Fyodorov's Ghost

Slavoj Žižek (2014) has made the claim that Cosmism was "the occult shadow-ideology, or obscene secret teaching, of Soviet Marxism" (6). At the beginning of this project, I was inclined to agree with him; now, I am not so sure. It seems to me that rather than Cosmism being an "obscene" front for Soviet Marxism, it is more probable that Soviet Marxism, beginning primarily with Stalin's ascendency, was Cosmism's rightful *successor*. As Sergei Prozorov (2016) has pointed out, Soviet Marxism, in its own way, succeeded where Cosmism failed—that is, it successfully translated proposals for grand transformational projects into actual governmental policies. And indeed, the Soviet Union, more than any other country, has the greatest number of cosmic firsts. Stalin was also responsible—granted, with terrible loss of life—for initializing Fyodorovian geo-engineering projects at a

scale never before seen.[39] In fact, other than his socialist beliefs, Stalin was an ideal Fyodorovian facilitator: a singular, strong leader who could unify (segments of) humanity to a common cause. The glaring absence in Stalinist policy, of course, was any kind of project for resurrection and immortality.

This Soviet-Cosmist legacy has outlived the Soviet Union, and has found resonances all around the world. Instantiations of contemporary Cosmism vary wildly from benignly educational to insurgently political to eccentrically mystical. Perhaps the most vocal contemporary Cosmist is Anastasia Gacheva, a second-generation Fyodorovian who runs the N.F. Fyodorov Museum-Library in Moscow. Some might consider Gacheva an Orthodox Fyodorovian, who believes that Cosmism holds a discrete and specific philosophy, as opposed to a loose set of ideas. In the past, she has been critical of my articulation of Dark Cosmism. And she has a right to do so. She and her mother have literally written the textbook(s) on Fyodorov. Yet some of the most wildly interesting Cosmist experiments seem to be happening not in Fyodorov's beloved Moscow, but rather out in the steppes of Siberia.

The Institute for Scientific Research in Cosmic Anthropoecology (ISRICA), under the auspices of the Russian Academy of Sciences, has been conducting Fyodorovian inspired experiments since the early 1990s. Located in Novosibirsk, the laboratory is engaged in a range of experiments on human perceptions of time and space, specifically telepathic communications between human subjects, inanimate objects, celestial objects, and unidentified intelligent forces in the cosmos (Young 2012). Alexander Trofimov, current director, and Vlail Kaznacheev, ISRICA senior scientist, have built a device not unlike a

[39] For example, see Stalin's plans to completely reverse Siberian rivers from draining into the Arctic Ocean so as to divert them toward central Asian agricultural centers (Josephson 2017), his plans to combat climate change (one of the world's first!) by planting 5.7 million hectares of forest in the Russian south (Brain 2010), and his plans to completely overhaul industrial farming to create more sustainable harvests that would reduce soil erosion (Shaw 2015).

shielded sensory deprivation tank for their experiments called a "Kozyrev Mirror"—named after a controversial Soviet scientist who proposed that time consisted of spiraling waves of energy. Some Western journalists have even participated in their experiments, and one British writer in particular, Susan Richards (2010), gives a simply psychedelic account of her experiences, despite not ingesting any foreign substances.

However, in the 2020s, the most visible Cosmist programs seem to exist in the geographical centers of both capital and technology—two spheres that seem to be slowly ingesting one another. Yet, as I have discussed, place matters; and there seems to be significant moral differences between, for example, Russian and American Cosmism. The main difference that I have observed is in the former's spiritual optimism. The shadow (to borrow the term from Carl Jung) of Russian Cosmism is filled with dreams of eugenics, authoritarian theocracy, and the violent elimination of human agency. However, as Russian Cosmist thought burrowed through time from its exile in the Soviet underground until its public reemergence in the 1970s, many of its tendencies have attempted to reconcile the light with the shadow in order to produce a more balanced synthesis. Or, to follow a more Fyodorovian Orthodox theology, contemporary Russian Cosmists have endeavored to approach the mystical consubstantiality of the Holy Trinity—to be "neither fused nor disaggregated" *(ni sliianno ni razdel'no)* (Young 2012, 48). However, within certain tendrils of Cosmist thought, especially in the American branch of Cosmism, there seems to have been no such explicit attempt at reconciliation. The interventions of people like Timothy Leary, and places like Esalen, and factions like the Human Potential Movement in the 1960s–70s, for example, seem to have only contributed to a neoliberalization of the body and mind.

In 1982, Leary wrote that "space migration is not another cycle of exploration/ exploitation. It's the only way our species can be assured a multiplicity of options in which

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the next series of experiments in human genetics can occur. When you've got new ideas you can't hang around the old hive." (233) You can hear echos of this in Elon Musk's insistence that we must become a "multi-planetary species." But to strive for these goals in a highly stratified world with rapidly increasing inequity is only betraying the core egalitarian universalism that has always remained at the core of the Russian Cosmist ideal. In the West, Cosmist geoengineering projects, like the hundreds of square miles of greenhouses constructed on the Almería Peninsula, in an attempt to increase the seasons of crops like tomatoes, have become not scenes of hope for food insecurity, but instead flashpoints for neo-Nazi attacks on the exploited (mostly) North African migrant workers (Scharmen 2021, 32). The spiritual bankruptcy of American/Western Cosmism, exemplified by Silicon Valley technologists and investors, begs us to reflect on a question posed by Fred Scharmen (2021): "What is the kind of world you are willing to allow to exist in order to get the world you want to make?"(91–92).

Perhaps this kind of reflection is so foreign to us because Americans tend to lack that quality of *toska*, discussed in Chapter 3. Maybe that is why we find the word so difficult to translate. The complex feelings of nostalgia, melancholy, homesickness, boredom, and anguish encourages particular affects, ontologies, and motivations. It has inspired a whole genre of music, Sovietwave, in which Eurasian artists tap into this kind of optimistic nihilism. As the music project *Klet* has defined it: "Sovietwave is the nostalgia for the past and also a future that has never been" (Van Nguyen 2022). Yet this is not solely a contemporary affect. This quality of *toska* existed during the Soviet Union as well, and inspired a level of tragic imaginative creativity that does not seem possible in the Western world. As David Graeber (2012) has astutely argued:

> It's often said the Apollo moon landing was the greatest historical achievement of
> Soviet communism. Surely, the United States would never have contemplated such a

feat had it not been for the cosmic ambitions of the Soviet Politburo. We are used to thinking of the Politburo as a group of unimaginative gray bureaucrats, but they were bureaucrats who dared to dream astounding dreams. (74)

Perhaps the ultimate failure of American Cosmist goals springs, ironically, from a strict ontological adherence to scientific materialism. This failure may also be the reason that enlightenment seekers are swerving into the postrationalist turn in Silicon Valley. Perhaps technologists and techno-capitalists are beginning to feel the crises that have long churned in the substrate of the Bay. That kind of existential pain has always been present, always felt, especially by the long-time residents of the gentrified Valley—just as it was felt by the Ramaytush, the Ohlone, the Tamyen, the Chochenyo, and all of the Indigenous peoples massacred and/or displaced from their ancestral homeland in what is now called the San Francisco Bay Area. But to truly feel and reflect on a feeling like *toska*, one must slow down, one must pause, one must hesitate. The technologists of Silicon Valley are not prone to hesitation—hesitating, after all, is death in a capitalist system—but it is within these moments of hesitation that gradients of cosmic truth are revealed.

Philosopher Tzvetan Todorov (1973), an admirer of Vladimir Solovyov, has suggested that when someone is confronted with an uncanny or strange encounter, there are two paths in which they can proceed: either (a) they are a victim of a sensory illusion and the laws of the world remain what they are; or (b) the mystical event has actually taken place, which means this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Todorov (1973) terms the brief moment in which one hesitates at the fork between these two paths "the fantastic." Eugene Thacker (2015b) has argued that the medieval monastic tradition is the predecessor for encounters with the fantastic, for the monastic cell is stripped to bare necessities in a mirror of the stripping away of the self that should be spiritually practiced for fantastic encounters—an *askesis*.

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Yet, this practice also led many monks to declare that they were suffering from *acēdia*, a complex term exemplified by affects that sound not unlike *toska*: listlessness, boredom, ennui, depression, torpor. Yet, instead of approaching this technique of the self as an opportunity to strip individuality and prepare for that moment of hesitation at the fork of the fantastic, many monks instead attributed this affect to the deadly sin of sloth. What might happen, however, if we sat in that discomfort? What if we work through the despair, engage with the mystery, so as to reach the redolence of Darkness? In a world in which hesitation is weakness, fast is good, and innovation is necessary, what kinds of cosmic magic are we missing? Or, what kinds of cosmic magic is being taken from us? Are we working on ourselves enough, committing ourselves to building a strong enough community, and leaving enough quiet openings in this cacophonous world to allow the dust of our ancestors to shimmer before us? If They are speaking, can We hear? With an opportune political will and affective spiritual realignment, with the mobilization of the realization that there are more of us than there are of them, could we begin to implement a reality which may allow us to truly glimpse some of the Fyodorovian fantastic? And if such a reality is ultimately possible and desired, then we are left with an age old political question that Lenin asked before us, and Chernyshevsky before him: *chto delat'?* What is to be done?

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