The Soviet Union 1970 stamp, *Conquerors of the Space.*

Space nostalgia: the future that is only possible in the past

Why has the Day of Cosmonautics, April 12, never become a national holiday in Russia? by **Roman Privalov**

A popular video, *Russian Space train*, made by a comedian group Birchpunk, gathered more than 4 million views on YouTube. In the 8-minutes episode, a train conductor working on board a spaceship composed of Russian train carriages and operating on the line to Neptune makes a home assignment for her English class. In a peculiar mix of Russian and English words, she describes the happenings onboard her carriage, taking place against a view of the galaxy opening up through the windows. The episode is thoroughly nostalgic: it offers popular songs with a guitar accompaniment, tea-drinking from Soviet-style glasses, and a train station on another planet that is simply taken from any Russian provincial town. The comments to the video are thoroughly positive: this short piece simultaneously raises feelings of belonging and of wonder at a seemingly impossible assemblage of Russian realities, Soviet fantasies, and futuristic projections. These are commonly expressed in opposition to the state-sponsored mainstream movies that give their audience a bitter taste of lost future, with comments such as "at least someone can still make a great movie".

IS THIS SHORT EPISODE another case of capitalization on nostalgia? In modern Russia, space culture and space politics are commonly seen through the lens of nostalgia and commodification of memory that allows both economic and political capitalization.[1] The legacies of the Soviet space program, of Sputnik, of Gagarin's flight and of the first spacewalk are turned into a set of easily recognizable symbols that are put on pullovers for sale as much as they appear on election posters. To a large extent, the appropriation of Soviet space legacies seems to coincide with the

appropriation of the commodified memory of the Great Patriotic War. Through the post-Soviet decades, the latter has become an inexhaustible resource for extracting profit, for legitimation of the Russian political regime, and recently also for the market of political repression, with photos taken in wrong places at wrong times and posted later in social media functioning as motives for criminal prosecution. Sometimes, the War and Space appear together: such was the last parliamentary election booster campaign, conventionally titled "The Land of the Winners", in which the heroes of the Great Patriotic War were accompanied by cosmonauts and space program engineers such as Gagarin and Korolev. The recently renovated memorial sites of the Soviet space program, such as museums and monuments, also increasingly recall the sites of "patriotic education" erected around the memory of the Great Patriotic War. Finally, the recent set of historical space blockbusters: *Gagarin The First in Space*, *The Spacewalk* and *Salyut-7*, all glorifying the pantheon of Soviet space mythology, conjoins the profusion of historic movies and series resurrecting the heroic settings of the war. In general, the nostalgias of the war and space appear to have similar functions in modern Russian capitalism and the political regime accreted to it.

YET THE ANNUAL Victory Day on May 9 brings a climax of mobilization through commodified memory, while April 12 is nearly forgotten. On May 9, there is nowhere to hide for an urban dweller: in all news and all media, in all supermarkets and all parks, "from every smoothing-iron", as the Russians say, the message of great common victory will reach you. This message is supposed to be readily converted into loyalty and pride, – to be fair, this does not always happen smoothly – and also into some, often erroneously underestimated, money. What happens on April 12 is rather aimed at those directly interested in space. The space museums and planetariums provide some events. There may even be an opening of something extraordinary, such as the giant second exhibition hall of the oldest space history museum in Kaluga in 2021, on the 60th anniversary of Gagarin's flight, that was under construction for more than a decade. Markedly, President Putin was expected to perform the opening of Kaluga's new iconic landmark but changed his plans just a couple of days in advance. In many of my conversations with Russian space professionals and space enthusiasts, a bitter memory of the half-century anniversary of Gagarin's flight in 2011 was disclosed. According to many, the state has almost neglected the occasion. The point of this essay is not to give an explanation of why Russian officials make certain decisions and not others; there might be plenty of mostly profane reasons for this. Rather, the point is to use this observation of neglect as a point of entry to a view on nostalgia that is different from the mainstream, that would see it as a valuable resource that is potentially dangerous for the established order rather than a melancholy and readily-commodified resentment.

"WHAT HAPPENS ON APRIL 12 IS RATHER AIMED AT THOSE DIRECTLY INTERESTED IN SPACE."

Although the attempts to capitalize on space nostalgia clearly recall how the memory of the war is appropriated in modern Russia, it might be no less fruitful to compare April 12 with November 7 – the day of the Great Socialist Revolution, the uncomfortable memory of which seems both inextricable and dangerous. Its centennial in 2017 closely resembled how plenty

A view of a mural depicting Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, created by Italian artist Jorit in Odintsovo, near Moscow, August 21, 2019.

of my interlocutors remember the Gagarin celebration in 2011. Some light-hearted TV shows were brought in to close the apparent gap, to create an image of a difficult discussion of a topic that is currently impossible to discuss. However, such a comparison might not be very fair either. In fact, November 7 has been explicitly counteracted: the new Russian holiday of "People's Union" on November 4 was adopted specifically to replace its Soviet counterpart. The intensity of debates on the revolution is also hardly comparable to the ones on the Soviet space program. I make this comparison rather to elucidate the similarity of official attitudes, which may well be connected to how the official narrative of space exploration was constructed in the Soviet Union. The Soviet master narrative of space exploration, inevitably awakened at least in part through nostalgic capitalization, connected the conquest of outer space with the utopian victory of communism, making an explicit link between the revolution and the space program.[2] Both occasions seemed to offer a certain futuristic vision, even if this was worn out to an extent throughout the 1980s. Then, the ironic counter-narrative of space exploration placed official dreams of a communist future in space on a par with economic stagnation and frequent shortages of basic commodities. I would like to offer this remnant of a futuristic halo of the Soviet space program as a possible way to comprehend why April 12 never managed to become a full-fledged fantasy world of what Boym terms "restorative nostalgia" like May 9th, and to see which alternative ways to understand nostalgia it may open up. The future-oriented gaze of space nostalgia makes space memory a dangerous commodity for the current Russian elites, one that should be kept at bay and allowed only a certain degree of capitalization, in the same way as fake Lenins can pose as much as they want for tourist photographs on the Red Square, but no occasion should allow any substantial debate on the Revolution.

There is a common perception that nostalgia can be "bad" or "good", largely coinciding with Svetlana Boym's division of it into restorative and reflective types.[3] The bad, restorative, variety of nostalgia sees itself not as nostalgia, but as the truth. A world of traumatized fantasy that strives for its own mythological unproblematic past, it is obsessed with rebuilding the past – a place of wonders that never existed and the desire for which often provides the most malformed results stretching all the way into the future. It is to restorative nostalgia, says this common view, that we owe nationalistic upheavals and at worst, conspiracy theories. The good, reflective, type of nostalgia functions differently – it is an ethical, private and painful investigation of the lost past, an attempt to temporarily return there in order to distinguish the avoided possibilities but also to retrace the chosen path. Not surprisingly, it was suggested that the attempt to attribute the political dimension – the possibility of making forms of collective belonging – to reflective nostalgia, which functions rather as a personal or group therapy of sorts, is problematic.[4]

A MORE CRITICAL view on the restorative-reflective divide suggests that actual practices of nostalgia almost always combine elements of both, taking further Boym's own observation that restorative and reflective nostalgia can be connected to the very same objects.[5] The Russian Victory Day may offer some examples of how the two branches are intertwined. For example, the "Immortal Regiment", initially an initiative of local activists in the city of Tomsk where the locals marched with photos of their veterans, later taken over by Russian officials and turned into an all-national spectacle with nationalistic sentiments, does not necessarily preclude the possibility of ethical reflection on behalf of its participants. Seen from this angle, the common view of "bad" restorative nostalgia and the "good" reflective type appears rather shortsighted. What matters is rather the political and social context which gives particular nostalgic practices their meaning.

Importantly, in such a critical view even the nostalgic attempts labelled restorative should not confuse their critical readers: nostalgia is not a longing for a lost past, but a longing for longing itself, "a desire for desire",[6] for "the subject's memory of their own past investments and fantasies", for "the imagined futures these fantasies projected".[7] It is "a structure of fantasy" that is "perceived as lost",[8] not any particular fantasy as such. In this light, space nostalgia points not so much to the specific achievements of Soviet space exploration, as to the possibility to imagine such achievements in the future more generally. The colloquial saying: "Yuri [Gagarin], we f*cked up everything" – that became a popular motto in the post-Soviet Russia, points exactly at this difference. What is f*cked up is not a particular spacewalk or space launch or Soviet Moon program – about which general public tends to know very little, and which function as resources for political and economic capitalization – but rather a possibility of a particular imaginary and feeling of agency associated with it.

"THE FUTURE-ORIENTED GAZE OF SPACE NOSTALGIA MAKES SPACE MEMORY A DANGEROUS COMMODITY FOR THE CURRENT RUSSIAN ELITES."

STILL, CRITICAL READERS of nostalgia struggle to offer an alternative to the political dimension attributed almost exclusively to restorative nostalgia. Arguably, their reluctance to accept such conceptualization is mostly private and existential, and I share it too: I am nostalgic, and I don't feel agreement with the idea that it is worthless beyond my own self-therapy. In fact, my experience is very different: my nostalgia, not least that connected to the future-oriented Soviet space mythologies, allowed me to make many meaningful connections in different cities and towns, at conferences and during interviews, in railroad carriages and commuter buses. So I would like to try to offer an alternative that seems more plausible to me.

To do this, I would like to look more closely at how desire is understood in nostalgia scholarship and which political possibilities its understanding allows through a "desire for desire". Despite a turn from exact objects of desire to structures of fantasy, the critical takes on nostalgia still seem to operate with the conceptualization of desire most common in analyses of political discourse: a Lacanian-inspired idea of desire as a lack that can never be fulfilled. This view of desire is still object-oriented: it looks for an endless repertoire of replacements for an object that can never be replaced, putting emphasis on the hegemonic shifts of meaning in social and political practices.[9] From this point of view, "desire for desire" is marked by a certain "lack of a lack", and restorative nostalgia closes the possibility of any contingent arrangement which could function as a basis for political resistance and alternative political formations. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, aims at overcoming the first of two lacks, thus returning its subjects to normalcy.

This is not the only way to approach desire. In fact, more affirmative views on desire can fit the elusive concept of nostalgia in more satisfactory ways. Through works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, for instance, lack is understood not as a primary basis of desire but as an effect of social production that renders desire a constant phantasmatic compensation for something that is missing.[10] But desire itself is not a desire for a lost object; rather it is a principle of differentiation that manifests itself in "the production of production", in continuously integrating what appears incompatible.[11] In this view, Lacanian desire appears rather reactive, as it is a desire that is desiring its own repression due to the practices of social production, a desire that is desiring a possibility to be managed and stabilized. Indeed, seen from this angle, the nostalgic "desire for desire" may be assumed to disallow desire's own arrest/suspension and to allow the continuation of "the production of production". In other words, Deleuzian accounts could attribute to nostalgia a possibility of reassembling the seemingly obvious identities into aggregations that can be foreseen only to a limited degree. This is because the apparently stable, although contingent, identities constitute the macropolitical level while nevertheless always possessing a micropolitical dimension, in which the fluidity of their pre-given forms becomes obvious and in which desire seeks what escapes them and from them, striving to make new connections.[12] The ways to such new connections are called, conveniently for the space dreamers, "lines of flight".[13] Crucially, such a view of nostalgia is also underpinned by Deleuze and Guattari's rejection of a linear conception of time and the introduction of a temporal logic of immanence, in which the past is never

Soviet poster commemorating Yuri Gagarin's space flight.

gone, but rather a part of the present, at the same time underlying and challenging the seemingly stable identities of subjects.[14] It is in this light that the futuristic visions of space nostalgia play a crucial role, as longing for a lost future may eventually light up paths to new futures, embedded in the current contexts. The thesis on a future that is only possible in the past, attributed to contemporary Russian space politics and space culture,[15] in this way becomes a revelation of a specific structure of fantasy rather than a statement on particularly sorrowful situation.

THIS IS NOT to say that space nostalgia is not used to legitimate current nationalistic upheavals by state-affiliated actors. To make such a statement would amount to extreme ignorance of the current political context. Rather, what I want to say is that such appropriations do not exhaust the political possibilities of space nostalgia, and that its political possibilities should not be seen as limited to what currently makes sense as "political". The profusion of grassroots connections, "rhizomatic" if one wants to put it in a more Deleuzian way, that space nostalgia opens up, possesses a no less political dimension than the state-sponsored practices of nostalgia. What are these connections and in which context do they unfold? In recent years, a team of Russian anthropologists has been documenting the practices of horizontal and amateur space exploration in Russia.[16] What they found were networks of space amateurs, launching satellites into the stratosphere, organizing space lessons in schools and maintaining hundreds of museums of cosmonautics throughout the country – very different from the shiny buildings of key and famous state museums, and sometimes located in village sheds with models of spacecraft that locals made themselves from the available materials. We might also consider the recent return of space projects to the domain of futuristic dreaming more generally, and the availability of information on them throughout the Internet. The revival of expansionist projections through neoliberal fantasies, such as Elon Musk's *SpaceX* and Jeff Bezos' *Blue Origin* plans for the Moon and Mars colonization plays with the ideas of futures that are green (as Bezos suggested relocating all industries to the Moon and asteroids) and politically alternative (as Musk noted, Earthly laws will not be applied in extraterrestrial settlements). The official Russian discourse on space does not seem to offer any alternative to these,[17] which causes significant dissatisfaction among the Russian publics interested in space exploration, related not least to a memory of the Soviet space program with its utopian visions. Such reactions are observable in the YouTube comments on the recent Russian space blockbusters, many of which draw a comparison between the Soviet, allegedly ideologically based, space program and the Russian one that seems to make no sense in terms of future projections. Even more so, they are observable in many social media groups related to space, whose members put a lot of energy into ironic mockery of Russian space officials. For instance, the infamous quote by the director of Roscosmos, Dmitry Rogozin, who suggested in 2014 that the USA could deliver their astronauts to the International Space Station with the help of a trampoline if they refused Russian services, led to widely-shared mockery of this key Russian space manager as a trampoline jumper, which continues to this day. In this light, fueling up space nostalgia for the sake of economic and political capitalization may be able to unfold "lines of flight" quite unforeseeable and potentially unmanageable by the current Russian elites.

These "lines of flight" might well reflect the very exact line of flight that a Russian spacetrain conductor takes. We leave her on the way to Neptune, seemingly on the outskirts of the Solar system, after an accidental love affair with a paratrooper which bore no fruit. She is moving on to her future, but given the time contraction that happens during space travel, for us the observers she always has one leg stuck in the past. I wonder if in this future, so thoroughly intertwined with the past, April 12 is still ignored – although not because it is dangerous, but because in such a composition of time, specific dates no longer make much sense. ✕

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