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Sanctuary Earth in Ecological Science Fiction Cinema in the USSR: *Per Aspera ad Astra*

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My article analyzes the Soviet science-fiction film *Per Aspera ad Astra* [*Cherez ternii k zvezdam*, 1980] using the lens of sanctuary. Shot in the period of the Brezhnev Stagnation, shortly before the Chernobyl disaster, the film articulates a range of pressing ecological concerns, but displaces them from Earth and the USSR to the imaginary alien planet Dessa. In my analysis, I focus on the paradoxical

nature of this displacement and show how the representation of Earth as an unproblematic ecological sanctuary is haunted by its own contradictions. I also explore how this representational strategy responded to the technoscientific ethos of Soviet modernity that contributed to the destruction of natural environments in the twentieth century.

Keywords: anthropocene, ecology, science fiction, soviet ideology, USSR

Before the Space Age produced multiple documentary images of the terrestrial globe, humanity resorted to imagining Earth using available cosmological and geographical data, which was always interpreted ideologically. According to Denis Cosgrove (2003: xi), from antiquity on, European imaginings of Earth were often structured as the gaze of the sun god Apollo/Christ, pulling diverse life on the planet into a vision of unity seen from the cosmos. In the context of empires, which often used the globe in their symbolic arsenal, this 'divine and mastering view from a single perspective' helped to reinforce the messages of sacred centralism and divine sanction. While the view of the globe changed significantly throughout history, it has retained its historical layers, which inform our perception of Earth today.

In this article, I address the Soviet imperial imagining of Earth from ecological and Anthropocenic perspectives. I show how the popular science fiction film *Per Aspera ad Astra* [*Cherez ternii k zvezdam*, 1980], shot by Richard Viktorov in the decade of the Chernobyl disaster, depicts the globe. A rare example of cinematic science fiction about ecology shot in the USSR, *Per Aspera ad Astra* articulated the period's pressing ecological anxieties while presenting Earth as a pristine ecological sanctuary for both humankind and its alien guests. I address this paradox in the present article and unpack its subversive nature.

In my discussion of Earth in *Per Aspera ad Astra*, I use the lens of sanctuary. Historically, the discourse of sanctuary was intertwined with religious practices aiming to protect vulnerable individuals from violence within designated sacred sites.¹ In the film, Earth poses as a similar refuge for the protagonist, alien woman Nia, saved by communists from a destroyed spaceship in outer space. Nia is brought to Earth, where she finds a clean environment that contrasts with the ecological pollution on her native planet Dessa; here, she is also safeguarded from the aggression of her enemies on Dessa, described as capitalists. My analysis examines sanctuary dimensions of the globe in *Per Aspera ad Astra* that recycle Russo-Soviet imaginaries of Earth and space.

Per Aspera ad Astra uses various representational tropes to evoke the modern imaginary of Earth as a supranational unity; it also stresses the vulnerability of Earth as an organism that needs to be protected in order to survive ecologically. Following popular representational trends of the era, the film presents Earth as a visual spectacle producing a range of affective responses, from awe to environmental concern. The view of Earth as a fragile organism in need of environmental care stems from the visual iconography of the Space Age, showing our planet 'bare,' without the familiar grid of latitude and longitude lines. Along with pictures of the planet shot by Soviet cosmonaut German Titov in 1961, the photos taken on multiple Apollo missions by Americans established the globe as a unity that is primarily organic. In the words of Mark Dorrian (2011: 360), 'in their liberation of the globe from all cultural signifiers—borderlines, grids, and cartographic codes—the Apollo photographs seemed to show a unified and perhaps even redeemed world purged of conflict, a planet that could be thought of as a single organism.' Seeing the globe as a corporeal entity hovering in the wilderness of outer space inspired comparisons with an 'oasis' and also a 'tiny pea' which can be eclipsed by a thumb.² The photographic images of Earth taken from space were instrumental in inspiring the rhetoric of present-day environmentalists asserting humankind's collective responsibility for the planet. This totalizing, supranational and organicist view of Earth informs representations of the globe in *Per Aspera ad Astra*, which is concerned with the issues of ecology, even while displacing them onto distant alien worlds.

The view of Earth as spectacle is important for *Per Aspera ad Astra* as a film reflecting on modernity and its ecological costs. Apart from evoking the view of the globe as a vulnerable organism, the cinematic spectacularizing of Earth in the film echoes the performative presentation of the terrestrial sphere in modern era. In this regard, the practice of using sculptures of the globe as centerpieces at world's fairs facilitated the emergence of the perception of 'world as exhibition' which had distinct imperial overtones. Starting in the nineteenth century, world's fairs or global exhibitions, which Curtis M. Hinsley (1991: 344) describes as 'carnivals of the industrial age,' were held in major cities of Europe, the Americas and Australia, attracting participants from all over the globe. The fairs focused on showcasing western technological 'wonders,' contrasted to the 'primitive' techniques of colonized

peoples, whose cultures were showcased, too. Characterized by obvious imperialist posturing, these encounters were also highly performative in nature; they were accompanied by enactments of indigenous rituals and ways of living, effectively showcasing the world to curious (white) subjects. In Cosgrove's words, the fairs 'sought to concentrate and display places, peoples, cultures, and products from across the world at its metropolitan center, as spectacles in imperial Rome featuring exoticized peoples and animals had done in antiquity. They attracted spectators from across the world, even from those otherwise positioned for display, to witness the spectacle' (Cosgrove 2003: 227). Discussing world's fairs, Paige Raibmon (2000) describes their representational tactics as 'theatres of contact,' where indigenous populations performed their worlds, imagined by imperial subjects as static and ahistorical. The notions of theatre and masquerade are important for analyzing *Per Aspera ad Astra*, whose colonial aesthetic spectacularizes Earth and exoticizes its 'others,' represented in the film by troubled alien woman Nia, whose vulnerability alludes to the vulnerability of our planet.

The theme of the globe as spectacle is evoked in one of the introductory sequences in the film, showing Nia and an international collective of scientists in the same conference room in Earth's orbit. The scientists and Nia are directly juxtaposed in the scene: seated at opposite ends of the room, they rarely appear in the same frame together. Except for one scientist—Sergei Lebedev—who specializes in alien contacts and who saved Nia from a destroyed spaceship found floating in space, no one dares to approach the mysterious alien stranger, who intimidates the humans. When one scientist finally attempts to come closer and touch her, he is thrown away by some unknown force—as the film progresses, we learn that Nia has a range of 'supernatural' abilities, including teleportation and telekinesis, manipulating things with the power of her mind. In the sequence, she is shown sitting with her back to the window through which we see Earth as a 'sublime witness' to the encounter of the humans with the alien; on many occasions, Nia and Earth are shown in the same frame (Figure 1). Nia is captivated by the vision of Earth: at one point, we see the alien woman attempting to glance behind her shoulder to see the planet. The presence of Earth haunts the entire scene in the conference room: as the meeting progresses, the globe is shown gradually increasing in size as the spaceship approaches the planet, culminating in the long shot where Nia, scientists and Earth are finally seen in a single frame (Figure 2).

The sublime *mise-en-scène* of the sequence emphasizes the aspect of 'world as exhibition' discussed earlier. The spectacle of Earth is accompanied here by the performance of Nia's 'exoticism,' both fascinating and horrifying to the onlookers. The scientists' ambiguous response to Nia echoes mixed reactions of white audiences to indigenous peoples at colonial fairs; the audiences were both fascinated by unfamiliar customs and 'shocked' by their 'brutality.'³ This 'shocked fascination' defines the scene in the conference room as well. On the one hand, the humans are apprehensive of Nia, calling her a 'source of danger' and 'a creature' possessing the 'power

of a robot.' On the other, they are also fascinated by her, something facilitated within the heteronormative logic of the film by Nia's feminine gender.

In the sequence, the research team consists almost exclusively of men (apart from one woman, Nadezhda). It is men who represent Earth in the scene; the male collective constitutes a unity in diversity—among the scientists, we see representatives of different nations. The unifying force that brings all these people together is science, which functions in the film as a formative element of terrestrial planetarianism asserting masculine values.⁴ The elevation of the research team above Earth alludes to the Apollonian view of the globe as a coherent unity, which is juxtaposed in the scene with the alone Nia, representing a different world. The juxtaposition of 'masculine' Earth and the 'feminine' alien establishes colonial hierarchy very early on in the film. The widespread science fiction trope which associates indigenous and alien worlds with the feminine and white humans with the masculine⁵ is found in the Soviet films *Aelita*, *Planet of Storms*, and *Solaris*, among others. According to Natalija Majsova (2021: 89–90), the device of conflating alienness and womanhood serves the identificatory ends of the genre of science fiction as a patriarchal force. 'Alien women allowed terrestrial men to reflect upon their societies, as if re-inspecting them from outside, from a more detached, and, at the same time, more sensitive, if not sensuous perspective.' In the interplanetary contact scene, this reflection is achieved through the spatial dissociation of the scientists from Earth and their encounter with the alien woman, the film's ultimate 'other.' While Earth is represented by male scientists in the scene, it also paradoxically participates in the representation of Nia's aloneness and vulnerability: appearing in the same frame as Nia, the planet poses as another object of the searching male gaze driven by an identificatory desire. In this regard, both Nia and Earth act as spectacular visions of 'otherness' that parallel each other and produce new, critical meanings within the film.



Figure 1. Nia in the orbital conference room. Earth looms in the background. Still from Richard Viktorov's *Per Aspera ad Astra* (1980).

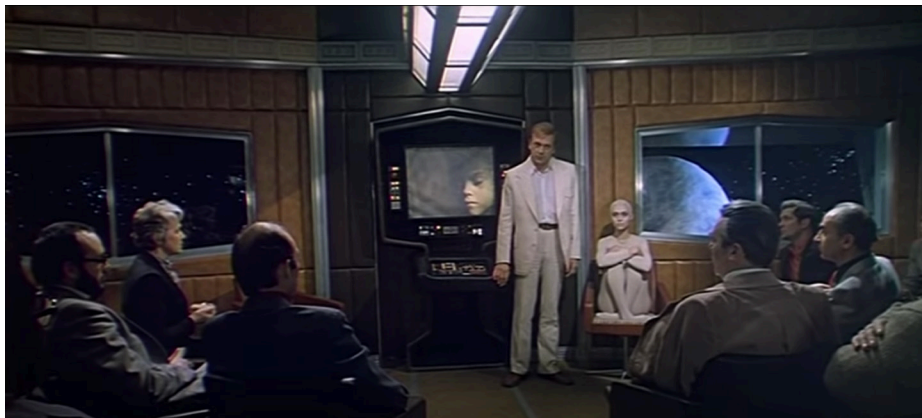


Figure 2. Nia and the scientists in the orbital conference room seen in a single frame. Still from Richard Viktorov's *Per Aspera ad Astra* (1980).

The identificatory play which characterizes *Per Aspera ad Astra* is rather complex and deserves separate consideration. This play points at the affinities between Nia and Earth; it also helps to unpack the sanctuary aspects of this planet, whose ecological status is shown in stark opposition to Dessa and other alien worlds. The juxtaposition of the male scientists and Nia in the introductory scene evokes Rosi Braidotti's theorizing that the normative subject of European colonial modernity was historically constructed in opposition to human and non-human 'others.' In her seminal book *The Posthuman*, Braidotti (2013: 13) shows that the subject of Humanism and the Enlightenment was always a 'He,' 'the classical ideal of "Man," formulated first by Protagoras as "the measure of all things," later renewed in the Italian Renaissance as a universal model and represented in Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man.' Braidotti goes on to demonstrate that this 'ideal Man' is embedded in the Cartesian concept of the subject, which places scientific reason above nature and proclaims rationality as a transcendental truth that defines the Human and elevates 'Him' above all other matter on Earth. In her theorizing of the subject, Braidotti (2013: 27–8) argues that 'He' was always constructed in dialectical opposition to modernity's 'structural others,' including woman as the sexualized other, natives as the racialized other, and non-humans—such as animals, insects, plants, Earth, and outer space—as the naturalized others. She explains, 'These others were constitutive in that they fulfilled a mirror function that confirmed the Same [the Human subject of the Enlightenment] in His superior position.'

The binarizing of Nia and the scientists in the scene in orbit occurs along similar lines: Nia's femininity and her alien ('native') origin serve to define the 'rational male human' as the dominant subject in the cosmos. Similarly, the representation of Earth as a 'natural other' alludes to reason's mastery over crude matter and its superior status in this regard. In the film, Nia and her planet Dessa are presented as entities that still need to be rationalized and 'tamed,' while Earth functions as an example of such taming. *Per Aspera ad Astra's* Earth is fully rationalized: while the environment on Dessa is damaged due to exigencies of capitalism, the nature on communist

Earth is blossoming because it is managed by the rational political system. On the surface, *Per Aspera ad Astra* fully endorses the rationalist mythology of communism; however, the film's oneiric and carnivalesque elements seem to contest this endorsement, which complicates the film's politics.

In *The Posthuman*, Braidotti embarks on the project of rethinking the customary hierarchies of humanism and proposes a non-hierarchical model of posthuman subjectivity that incorporates non-human agents and is radically delinked from the rationalist premise. Her ideas of the posthuman are productive for the analysis of *Per Aspera ad Astra*, whose narrative revolves around non-humans, including Nia, other aliens, and planets Dessa and Earth, and whose politics destabilize these hierarchies, too. In the film, Nia's vulnerable body alludes to the environment of her native planet Dessa. Similar to her body, Dessa is vulnerable to internal and external influences and colonization; through oneiric displacement, Nia and Dessa reference the vulnerability of Earth as well.

In the scene in orbit, Nia is introduced to the scientists as an 'artificial human,' the result of a cloning procedure. She is referred to as a 'test-tube human' (*chelovek v probirke*), which emphasizes non-biological agents' role in bringing her into existence. As the film unfolds, we learn that Nia was a member of a large family of clones, created by Dessan scientist Glan to protect and transform the planet, which is experiencing ecological distress. Facing political repression, Glan and the family had to flee the planet in the spaceship, but their enemies on Dessa, interested in maintaining the ecological status quo, sent a bomb into space and destroyed the ship. Of all the passengers, only Nia survived the ordeal. After saving Nia from the ship, Sergei brings her to Earth, where she finds a temporary refuge, enjoying the planet's blossoming nature, clean ocean, and breathable air. Earth becomes a sanctuary for Nia, who is presented as a political and environmental refugee—on Earth, she finds protection from attacks by her father's enemies on Dessa. Presenting Nia as a clone whose brain can be manipulated from the outside (Glan created a 'control center' inside her brain) relegates her to the position of a cyborg, a biological organism with traits of a programmable machine. Nia's non-humanness serves two goals: apart from reflecting on the growing interpolation of technology into biological matter in the twentieth century, it connects her to another posthuman implicitly present in the picture—the New Soviet Man.

In their discussion of posthumanist legacies in Russo-Soviet culture, Coleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt (2018: 14–31) trace them back to the writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky and the Russian Cosmists. Examining the posthuman aspects of Soviet ideology, they draw connections between the Cosmist idea of active evolution and the notion of the sociobiological perfectibility of the New Soviet Man, whom they designate in their study as a 'socialist cyborg.'⁶ Further developing the idea of communism's New Man as the posthuman, Elana Gomel (2018: 40) highlights the 'uncanny' aspects of this ideological construct, pointing out that the Man's 'sunny exterior' hides a sort of "'sublime" subjectivity which is strange, unfamiliar

and frightening in its radical alterity.' She says, 'the Soviet New Man reflects the basic contradiction within the project of posthumanism: the contradiction between the posthuman as better than, and the posthuman as different from, the human.' According to Gomel (2018: 39), the 'better than the human' potentiality of the posthuman subject is embedded in the posthumanism critique of the forces of oppression which 'humanist' societies historically unleashed against their 'others.' In turn, the 'different from the human' expression of this subject may be seen as a denial of humanist ethics and morality. Here, the posthuman subject turns into 'Yeats's rough beast' that exists outside of our concept of good and evil.

I will apply these insights to my analysis of *Per Aspera ad Astra's* two principle posthumans—the New Man and Nia, who, in certain aspects, mirror each other. While the non-human status of Nia in the film is well articulated—she is both an alien clone and a cyborg—the position of the New Soviet Man as a posthuman subject is more ambiguous and contains cultural layers that need restoring. As the film unfolds, the portrayals of Nia and the New Man merge to a significant degree through mirror metaphors and allusions to Bakhtinian carnival. These metaphors and allusions point at the posthuman affinities which exist between Nia and the New Man; they also comment on the colonial nature of the communist project.

Despite the fact that in the USSR, the designation 'New Man' (*novyi chelovek*—new human) referred to citizens of both sexes, *Per Aspera ad Astra* largely presents the Man through the prism of maleness, which echoes the general trend in Soviet culture.⁷ In this regard, the gender aspects of the juxtaposition of Nia and the Soviet Man take on additional significance, already hinted at in the introductory scene with the scientists. Discussing the mythologies of the New Man in the USSR, Tijana Vujosevic (2017) points at the fact that these mythologies were never homogenous and entailed creative efforts of multiple actors who took on the labor of formulating what this ideal Man should be like. However, some persistent tendencies in these imaginaries do exist; they are key to the understanding of the construction of the New Man in *Per Aspera ad Astra*, which influences the ecological politics of the film.

In her discussion of the cultural imaginary surrounding the New Soviet Man, Vujosevic makes several points relevant for decoding the posthuman metaphoric of *Per Aspera ad Astra* and addressing the representation of Earth as a sanctuary for Nia. First, she demonstrates that early concepts of the Man revealed cosmological and machinic inspirations that were intertwined. Citing the influential fantasies of Russo-Soviet Cosmists and their followers, Vujosevic shows that early Soviets imagined the Man as a 'winged creature,' a 'flying proletarian,' which corresponded to the period's enthusiasm for human mastery of space by means of aerial flight. This enthusiasm led to the construction of the Soviet air fleet, as well as to the emergence of idiosyncratic flying machines, such as Vladimir Tatlin's ornithopter *Letatlin*, which was meant to serve as the everyday means of transportation for new Soviet citizens (Figure 3). Commenting on the Soviet

enthusiasm for flight, Vujosevic (2017: 21) explains: 'The perpetual coexistence of two protagonists of the Revolution, the transcendental (celestial) self and the immanent (earthly) self, defines the protagonist of communist utopia as a New Man in becoming, the same way socialism, in Soviet theory, is communism in becoming.' In this picture, the emergence of the 'celestial self' was mediated by existing aeronautical technologies that turned the religious metaphor of 'ascension to heavens' into a tangible reality. The New Man was seen as a part of a human-machine assemblage, transcending mundane reality, *byt'*, and reaching a higher plane of existence, *byt'ie*, by airplane. The communist enthusiasm for flight did not stop at airplanes and led to the construction of powerful missiles that took Soviet men and a woman into space several decades later. These successes confirmed the persistence of the value of attaining *byt'ie* by technological means, which constituted one of the driving forces of the techno-messianic ethos of Soviet modernity.

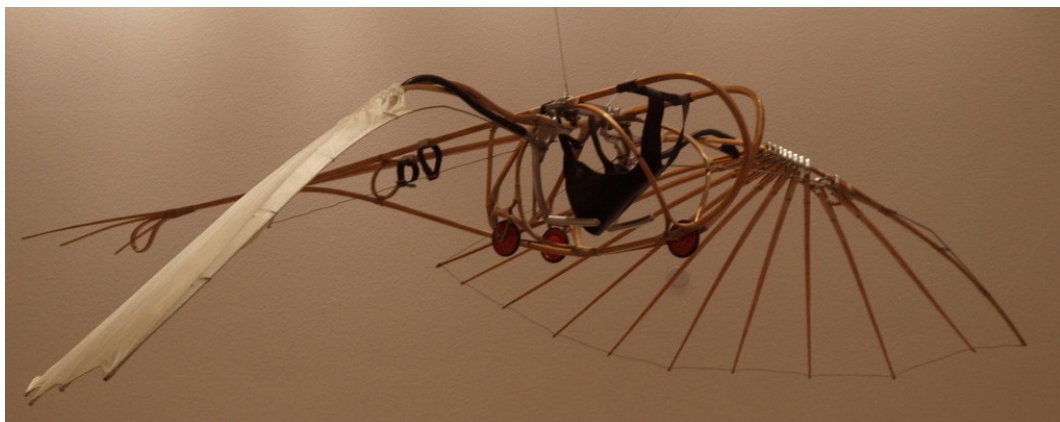


Figure 3. Vladimir Tatlin's ornithopter *Lefatlin* (photo by Tomislav Medak, licensed under CC 2.0).

Apart from the Cosmists' fantasies, which finally turned into the material reality of space flight in the USSR, Vujosevic also discusses the machinic fantasies of embodiment that accompanied early mythologies of the New Man. In particular, she mentions the biomechanical musings of Soviet ideologue of labor Aleksei Gastev and theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, who were prone to consider the human organism through the prism of industrial production, presenting the body as another factory 'machine.' Discussing the Soviet avant-garde more generally, she points out the prevalence of productivist logic, emphasizing labor as the key organizing principle of new communist life, encompassing not just work activities, but the domestic and private spheres as well. Stalinism continued the pattern of inscribing the human organism in the rhythms of industrial production, imagining the body as a 'product' of the disciplining power of the modern Soviet state. According to Vujosevic (2017: 161), this trope underlay the construction of the Moscow metro, whose electrical escalators and trains facilitated the technological regulation of human motion, which was meant to turn 'disorganized, peasant-like individuals into rational, efficient

creatures of socialist urbanity.' The electrified motion of the metro systems, especially the escalators, evoked the operation of industrial conveyor belts; similar to factories, the metro 'produced' and 'formed' model Soviet citizens by disciplining human bodies to fit into technological contexts.

The notion of the New Soviet Man as a 'winged creature,' part of an assemblage of a human and an airflight-capable machine, is central to the narrative of *Per Aspera ad Astra*, which revolves around space flights to and from Earth, Dessa, and other planets. Echoing the dreams of Russian Cosmists, in the film, humans are active in the universe: Earth's scientists collaborate with their colleagues from other planets, and Soviet spaceships routinely visit distant corners of the cosmos. In keeping with the messianic aspirations of communism, the Soviets embark on lengthy missions to help other planets to restore their ecosystems damaged by industrial production and nuclear activities. In one scene in the film, we observe planet Selesta exploding right before the eyes of the Russians rushing to the rescue—the planet accumulated too much nuclear waste in its storage units, leading to an uncontrollable chain reaction and eventual catastrophe. Similarly, the Soviets help to save Dessa, cleaning its atmosphere from pollution caused by the factories of local capitalist Turanchoks. Nia accompanies the Soviets on their mission to the planet, absorbing their ideological views and assisting in the implementation of their colonialist ends. In particular, she helps them to destroy Turanchoks and establish communist rationalism as the planet's new ideology. The narrative of a female extraterrestrial helping to establish the communist ideology on her native planet echoes the plotline of Yakov Protazanov's classical science-fiction film *Aelita* (1924). While the Martian princess Aelita only pretends to like communism, Nia is presented as a full-fledged disciple of her Soviet mentors⁸—the film's conclusion implies that she will stay on her planet and will be instrumental in building the new society.

The mobile nature of the Soviets is also emphasized in how fast they can reach any point on Earth: for instance, responding to a medical emergency in Mexico, Sergei's mother Maria Pavlovna departs from the USSR in the morning and returns the same day. This circumstance points to the Russian transportation successes and the interconnectedness of the globe that has been achieved by the twenty third century, when the film's events unfold. The notion of the connected world, characterized by international and interplanetary cooperation and travel, echoes the utopian plot of *The Andromeda Nebula* [*Tumannost' Andromedy*], the influential science-fiction novel written by Ivan Efremov in 1957. The novel presents Earth as a unified communist paradise connected to the universe via a complex system of satellite and transport networks. Unlike in the novel, which abolishes national divisions, in *Per Aspera ad Astra*, the Soviet Union still exists as a political entity. In the very first scene, where the Russians save Nia from the troubled spaceship, we see that the cosmonauts wear sleeve patches with the Russian abbreviation CCCP (USSR) denoting their country of origin. Still, state and national borders are generally deemphasized: throughout the rest of the film, the Soviets are mostly referred to as 'earthlings.'

The presentation of Earth as a supranational unity echoes the photographic images of the planet taken by the Apollo missions—free from the grid, Earth appears as a blue ‘oasis’ hovering in the darkness of space (Figure 4). In Viktorov’s film, Earth is shown as both a natural and ideological unity; apart from communism, we do not encounter any other ideologies on the planet. As in Efremov’s novel, national diversity on Earth is rather unproblematic: in the scene in orbit discussed earlier, the planet’s nations, represented by men, choose not to fight but to cooperate. The notion of a unified Earth correlates with the film’s presentation of the planet as a sanctuary for Nia. On Earth, the alien finds refuge from her troubles and undergoes a true spiritual transformation, learning the ropes of human morals and getting versed in communist ideology. The sanctuary aspects of Earth, emphasized in the film, contain religious overtones: during her stay on the paradisaical planet, Nia undergoes conversion to the faith of her ‘saviors.’



Figure 4. Apollo 17 view of Earth. © NASA, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Apart from its communist connotations, the idea of ‘one Earth’ also echoes the utopian view of the planet proposed by the ‘patriarch’ of Russian Cosmism, Nikolai Fyodorov. In his main work, *The Philosophy of the Common Task* [*Filosofiiia obshchego dela*, 1906], the thinker envisions a humanity that stops fighting and engages in productive cooperation, fulfilling the ‘common task’—the resurrection of all dead ancestors. This goal should be achieved

with the help of science, which would find a way to restore dead bodies from dispersed particles and explain how humans can attain immortality. In order to complete this 'task,' all humanity should unite under the auspices of messianic Russia and, together, develop scientific methods that make the resurrection of the ancestors feasible. According to Fyodorov (Fedorov 1906/1985: 292), after the resurrection is accomplished, modern humans would need to leave Earth to the risen ancestors, and depart for outer space, populating other planets. In Fyodorov's rendition, the resurrection is viewed through the religious lens of Orthodox Christianity: the idea of the unification of all humanity into 'brothers' and 'sisters' echoes the Orthodox philosophical concept of *sobornost'*, emphasizing the value of collectivity and rejecting (western) individualism. The whole concept of the resurrection of the dead is tied to the biblical narrative of the second coming of Christ, only for Fyodorov, humans should not passively wait for this event, but create the conditions for the fulfillment of God's plan. The messianic ethos of Fyodorov's ideas, which distinguish Russia as the leader in the process of the Christian resurrection, is evoked in *Per Aspera ad Astra* as well. The representation of communist Earth as an Edenic ecological paradise provides the USSR with a moral license to establish similar 'oases' anywhere in the universe, including on Dessa.

The utopian representation of Earth as a blooming communist paradise whose greatness is destined to be emulated on other planets of the galaxy operates in the film under the familiar banner of 'reason.' In *Per Aspera ad Astra*, rationality is presented as the most valued and prominent human virtue, which the film's non-human 'others' lack. In one of the key scenes, which takes place in the spaceship *Astra*, which is flying to clean Dessa, Soviet cosmonaut Viktor Klimov asserts that humans do not surrender to nature; according to him, outer space is an 'arena of struggle' whose ultimate goal is the 'triumph of reason.' On Dessa, Nadezhda, who is accompanying the expedition, tells Nia that the lack of reason is an 'illness' of Dessa's inhabitants, who polluted their own planet; she adds, however, that reason is something that can be cultivated.

The notion of 'illness' takes the discourse of rationality to the level of physical embodiment—the body without reason is 'sick' and makes atrocious mistakes. The theme of reason in *Per Aspera ad Astra* echoes the Christian ethos of the struggle with (sinful) nature, integrated into the ideological framework of Socialist modernity in the form of the rhetoric of 'the struggle with the elements' and 'taming nature' with the help of rational machines. In Fyodorov's Cosmism, nature is also perceived through the prism of embodiment and 'sin,' while the task of 'true' science and reason is to learn to manage and direct nature, which is devoid of rationality, for the common good. Fyodorov's writings frame 'reason' theologically, as a manifestation of the divine intelligence in humans. The notion of suppressing nature, both at the level of an individual person and within modern industrial enterprise, is important in the context of the discourse of the Soviet New Man, who, in *Per Aspera ad Astra*, embraces all of humanity.

In their analyses of the New Man as a cultural construct, many

scholars notice that this construct contains a trope of 'overcoming' bodily limitations for the cause. For example, Eliot Borenstein (2000: 9) observes that the Man was often presented through the prism of quasi-religious ascetism, replacing 'a conventional, "natural" existence with a life based on [socialist] theory.' In turn, Lilya Kaganovsky's psychoanalytic reading of the Man suggests that the 'war on corporeality,' waged in canonical Soviet novels written under Stalinism, aimed to 'castrate' the Man so that he did not overshadow the state leader, embodying the Lacanian 'Law of the Father.' In her analysis of the view of the Man's body as a machine promoted by Aleksei Gastev, Julia Vaingurt (2008: 212) draws parallels between the discourse of the disciplined and 'rationalized' body and the religious practices of bodily chastisement restricting and 'punishing' the body for succumbing to passions. In this picture, the New Man was modeled on religious 'saints;' indeed, the narrative of the Man in Soviet culture often included hagiographical elements.⁹ Along with the presentation of the Soviet Man as a saint, his presentation as a machine, inherited from the Russian avant-garde, poses the Man as a posthuman subject who is simultaneously 'better than' and 'different from' the human. In *Per Aspera ad Astra*, the tension between these two states is projected on non-human Nia, who is also presented as both sacred and machine-like.

In my analysis of the overlapping traits of the New Man and Nia, and also of their respective planets, Earth and Dessa, I use the lens of psychoanalysis and consider *Per Aspera ad Astra* from the perspective of Freudian dream-work and its mechanisms of displacement and condensation. I here rely on a relevant theorization by Christian Metz (1982: 124), who draws parallels between cinema and dreaming: 'Its [cinema's] signifier (images accompanied by sound and movement) inherently confers on it a certain affinity with the dream, for it coincides directly with one of the major features of the dream signifier, 'imaged' expression, the consideration of representability, to use Freud's term.' Building on Metz's theorization, Elizabeth Cowie (2004: 182) adds that the conditions of cinema inspire an easy analogy between film and dreaming: '[At the cinema] our cognitive state is not that of our normal waking life for, although we retain all our motor abilities, we are immobile, silent and in so far as we are attuned to only those stimuli arising from the film performance we become oblivious to other events around us, while the exigencies of reality, and the demand to test for reality, are placed in abeyance.'

The mechanisms at play in *Per Aspera ad Astra* resemble the mechanisms involved in the process of dreaming as theorized by Sigmund Freud. In the film, we encounter the work of displacement and condensation, defined by Freud as key mechanisms of the dream-work, which processes the events of waking life. Similar to the dream-work, Viktorov's film reflects on the facts of Soviet reality but does so in an indirect, oneiric fashion. Discussing the mechanisms of the dream-work in *Per Aspera ad Astra*, it is important to note that public debate on the key topic which Viktorov chooses to address in the film—the issues of ecological pollution—was restricted under Brezhnev (Josephson 2010: 223). In a way, the state's real-life repression

and censorship finds an echo in the distorted dream landscape of the film marked by displacement and condensation.



Figure 5. Nia in front of the mirror. Still from Richard Viktorov's *Per Aspera ad Astra* (1980).

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud defines displacement as a psychic mechanism that replaces high-intensity dream-thoughts existing in the unconscious with lower-intensity dream-contents, which, in an individual dream, can take the form of an object that is associated with a latent dream-thought. Freud (2010: 324–5) explains, 'The consequence of the displacement is that the dream-content no longer resembles the core of the dream-thoughts and that the dream gives no more than a distortion of the dream-wish which exists in the unconscious.' In turn, the mechanism of condensation is described by Freud (2010: 296) as a 'compression' of complex dream-thoughts into laconic dream-content, which provides an opportunity for a multifayered reading of the dream imagery.

In *Per Aspera ad Astra's* dream landscape, displacement functions doubly: on the one hand, the contradictions of the Soviet project embodied in the figure of the New Man are displaced on alien woman Nia; on the other, the ecological problems in the USSR are projected onto Dessa, which is eventually 'saved' by the messianic Soviets. In turn, condensation complicates the representations of both Nia and Dessa, combining in each of them a number of reflexive possibilities, some of which will be addressed below.

In the film, the dream-work mechanisms operate in conjunction with allusions to mirroring and the Bakhtinian carnival, which point to the main 'actors' of the film's dream-thoughts. Analyzing the film's displacement and condensation will help us better understand its presentation of Earth as a rationalized sanctuary and explore its connection to the Soviet cult of mobility, central to the plot of *Per Aspera ad Astra*.

Mirroring emerges early on in the film: in a key scene, which occurs on Earth, Nia is shown sitting in front of a mirror, experimenting with several wigs. The extraterrestrial is shot in a medium close-up, allowing for a better view of her face—in the scene, Nia seems to be enjoying her play, which involves a degree of meditative contemplation (Figure 5). Echoing the

notion of the Lacanian mirror stage, the episode emphasizes identificatory aspects of the mirror: trying on different wigs, Nia 'tries on' human identity, hiding her most distinct alien trait—her unusual hair—under the wigs. Nia's natural hair in the film points at her identity as an alien and also racialized subject. In her discussion of creating Nia's looks for *Per Aspera ad Astra*, the film's designer mentioned that the inspiration for the alien's hair was the hair of African people, except the color of her hair was made white (Viktorov 2019). By covering her natural hair in the scene, Nia pretends to be a Soviet (white) human. The scene evokes the notion of colonial mimicry, which, according to Homi Bhabha (1984: 126), constitutes a form of 'visualized power,' marred by a considerable degree of ambiguity due to the fact that the colonized subject, who mimics their colonizer, can never achieve complete resemblance—they are always 'almost the same but not quite.' Similarly, in the scene, Nia wears the last wig upside down, which reveals her 'otherness.' The scene is preceded by a concerted effort of the Soviets who surround Nia on Earth, including Sergei, his family and Nadezhda, to persuade the alien to adopt a more 'human' identity, both in terms of appearance and morals. The scene highlights the effort's success, posing Nia as a mirror reflection of her Soviet saviors, whom she will eventually come to emulate fully.

Apart from alluding to the completion of the work of 'taming' and rationalizing Nia's nature, the episode points to the affinities between Nia and the New Man signaling the work of displacement and condensation. Here, Nia embodies unspoken wishes regarding the Soviet regime and its Man. Her characterization as a cyborg whose brain can be manipulated from the outside reveals the sense of increasing fatigue from ideological brainwashing by means of state media that marked the Brezhnev era.¹⁰ The suffering Nia experiences when external commands enter her 'control center' condemns any form of mind control as an absolute evil, commenting, in a rather subversive manner, on the tactics of the communist regime. Nia's cyborg nature, combining the traits of the machine and the biological organism, shines the spotlight on another cyborg—the New Soviet Man—as a rhetorical construct that reflects the Soviet state's fascination with human-machine assemblage. His fantastical nature is amplified next to Nia as his dialogic counterpart.

The mirror scene, marked by Nia's experimentation with identity, alludes to another theme in the oneiric logic of the film—the theme of the Bakhtinian carnival. In his analysis of medieval and early Renaissance societies, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) formulated his theory of folk carnival culture, which, according to him, coexisted with the 'official' culture of the feudal elites and the Church. Unlike the official culture, whose narratives and rituals were emphatically 'serious,' the carnival one thrived in an atmosphere of 'folk humor,' which mocked official discourses, creating a 'second world' outside officialdom. This world was characterized by the egalitarian spirit and utopian unity of all people experienced during carnival festivities; such human relations were unconceivable in the 'first world' of normal life marked by social hierarchy. The main tropes of carnival culture consisted in the

material body principle, emphasizing various bodily functions pertaining to human existence; grotesque debasement of the elevated discourses of the Church and the state; and a sense of ambivalence, which reflected the ambivalence of life's consisting of both dying and procreating, the old and the new, etc. In his theorization, Bakhtin shows that folk humor predated the Middle Ages and constitutes a more or less permanent feature of human culture. I will use this insight in my analysis of the carnivalesque aspects of *Per Aspera ad Astra*.

In his discussion of the carnival, Bakhtin pays special attention to the metaphor of the mask. According to Bakhtin, masks worn during carnivals led participants to question their sense of stable identity, 'conformity to oneself,' and emphasized the transience of all hierarchies. The motif of the mask is significant in *Per ad Astra* as well: while in the mirror scene, masking is only alluded to through mimicry, it is more overt in the portrayal of Dessa, which, in the film, appears as a 'masked' Earth. When the Soviet scientists and Nia arrive on Dessa to help clean the planet from pollution, they are greeted by a peculiar delegation of the planet's residents wearing gas masks and protective suits (Figure 6). The delegation welcomes the Soviets with loud music streaming out of old-fashioned gramophones, which contrast with the futuristic ambiance of the landscape, populated by buildings made of concrete. The grotesque underpinnings of the scene are emphasized by the character of the music used for the welcome ceremony—a cacophonous jazz tune—which seems to be inappropriate for the occasion. One of the Soviets amply characterizes the ceremony as a masquerade, to which Nia responds that it is impossible to breathe Dessa's air without a gas mask. As the film progresses, we learn that many residents of the planet have to wear face masks in public to conceal their features deformed by the bad environment. The theme of the grotesque masquerade signals a carnivalesque aesthetic, presenting Dessa as a Bakhtinian 'second world' mocking the 'first world' of Earth.



Figure 6. Welcome scene featuring representatives of Dessa in gas masks. Still from Richard Viktorov's *Per Aspera ad Astra* (1980).

In their discussion of Soviet culture after Stalinism, Petr Vail and Aleksandr Genis (2013: 81–5) point at its distinct carnivalesque tonality. According to them, the preceding political epochs produced a sense of fatigue from the elevated ‘spirituality’ of the communist discourse, and citizens switched their attention to more mundane matters. This explains the period’s interest in the writings of Ernest Hemingway, which celebrated the simple things in life: eating, drinking, fishing, making love. The authors explain, ‘The Soviet person lived among ideas, not things, for too long [...]. With Hemingway, Russia gained the concreteness of being. The quarrel between the soul and the body was resolved in favor of the body. The top and the bottom traded places.’ In their account of the Thaw, Vail and Genis name this materialistic turn ‘the revolution of the 1960s’; indeed, the period was marked by the emergence of Soviet consumer culture, which reached its peak in late Stagnation, when *Per Aspera ad Astra* hit the screens.

Viktorov’s film endorses the era’s materialism wholeheartedly: the earthlings are shown wearing the period’s hottest fashions, including turtleneck sweaters and bell-bottom jeans. Earth is shown through the prism of consumerism and material abundance—for example, Sergei’s house is full of cozy home décor and boasts a private tennis court; his family owns a domestic robot, Glasha, who deals with house chores. The ecological costs of consumerism and abundance are never clearly stated when it comes to Earth; however, on Dessa, they cause the full-fledged ecological turmoil that is only contained by the communist saviors. The ecological disaster on Dessa is presented as a result of the capitalist activities of Turanchoks; when Dessa gets rid of the capitalist and receives the injection of communist rationality, it regains the clean environment forfeited under the wrong political system. The director’s version of *Per Aspera ad Astra* included a final title claiming that all scenes depicting polluted Dessa were shot on Earth, but Soviet censors edited it out. In reality, many scenes depicting the planet were shot even closer to ‘home’—in Soviet Tajikistan. Even without the title, the interplay of mirroring and masking reveals the film’s intention of addressing ecological issues existing in the Soviet Union by attributing these issues to a distant fantastical land.

The subversive, carnivalesque quality of this critique is emphasized by the writers’ intertwining of the discourse of base bodily functions with the discussion of Communism as a political system that is eventually emulated on Dessa. The spaceship *Astra* that the Soviets dispatch to Dessa is described in the film as a septic vacuum spaceship (*korabl’-assenizator*) dealing with biological waste. In his discussion of the film, Richard Viktorov mentions that the figure of a septic tank pumper was central to the initial concept of *Per Aspera ad Astra*: ‘When me and Igor’ [Igor’ Mozheiko is the real name of the film’s scriptwriter Kir Bulychev] initially decided to write a sci-fi script, our topic was “septic tank pumpers of the universe.” We were going to create a story about a young man who works on a spaceship that cleans out shitholes’ (Viktorov 2019).

By including the sewage motif, the writers create a humorous

effect that challenges the 'spiritual' aspects of *Per Aspera ad Astra* asserting the redeeming role of Communism in the universe. In essence, Soviet achievements in space are debased and resignified in this inversion. The bodily functions motif points to the subversive, carnivalesque qualities of *Per Aspera ad Astra*, which paradoxically combine with the propagandist pathos of the film repeating tropes of Stalinist cinema (most notably, the passing of the baton from the older generation of communists to the younger one—from Nadezhda, who dies on Dessa, to Nia). This corresponds with the understanding of Bakhtinian carnival as a way to reassert the 'official' values after a brief hiatus of holiday chaos. Overall, the presentation of Earth as a utopian sanctuary for Nia is significantly marred in the film by the carnivalesque ambiguity and humor, which is displaced onto the alien planet due to the fact that the direct and honest discussion of Soviet environmental policy was not yet a reality in the USSR. The science fiction alibi of the film allowed for a discussion of acute ecological concerns through indirection.

1. The contemporary discourse and praxis of sanctuary, which contests the idea of national borders and focuses on the protection of displaced people from state violence and deportation, draws on the historic tradition of sanctuary that existed in the Christian church, which had the right to provide asylum to vulnerable individuals. According to Phillip Marfleet (2011), the religious roots of sanctuary predate Christianity: he begins his historic account of sanctuary citing ancient Jewish scripts that mention six cities of refuge in the region of the Jordan River, where fugitives, including those who committed unintended manslaughter, could find protection. Ancient Greek city-states and the Roman Empire practiced sanctuary as well: for example, Greek *poleis'* sacred sites and temples provided shelter to various fugitives, including alleged offenders, social outcasts, runaway slaves, and citizens of other states (Marfleet 2011: 443). In European modernity, the right of sanctuary was gradually transferred from Christian churches to nation states, resulting in the symbolic sacralization of the state and its territory. The reanimation of the ancient understanding of sanctuary occurred in the twentieth century in response to multiple immigration crises. The 1980s Sanctuary Movement in the US, which started as an evangelical initiative to save Central American refugees from deportation, soon turned into an effort to protect undocumented people within secular 'sanctuary cities' nationwide. Tapping into the biblical notion of 'sanctuary,' the movement created momentum for alternative justice, which was perceived as a threat to the existing policies "concerning refugees, information evaluation, and democratic participation," leading to the movement's legal prosecution (Pirie 1990: 416). The current contours of the Movement

are more internationalist: one of the Movement's slogans is 'sanctuary everywhere,' which asserts the global principle of universal human rights beyond national borders. The Movement envisions the globe as a unified and just world, which responds to the view of Earth in the twentieth century as a supranational entity, where humanity experiences a new sense of kinship. In *Per Aspera ad Astra*, we encounter this imaginary of the globe as well. In the film, Earth is also presented as a political and ecological sanctuary for the extraterrestrial female protagonist, which engages the religious and messianic underpinnings of sanctuary discourse.

2. Apollo 8 astronaut Jim Lovell made the comparison of Earth with an oasis after orbiting the Moon in December 1968: 'The vast loneliness up here of the Moon is awe inspiring, and it makes you realize just what you have back there on Earth. The Earth from here is a grand oasis to the big vastness of space' (Carlowicz n.d. a). Following the Moon landing in July 1969, Neil Armstrong compared Earth with a 'tiny pea': 'It suddenly struck me that that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth. I put up my thumb and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out the planet Earth' (Carlowicz n.d. b).
3. For example, describing the participation of the Kwakwaka'wakw tribe in the Chicago's World's Fair in 1893, Paige Raibmon (2000) shows that the tribe's rituals were perceived as 'brutal' and 'violent.' At the same time, Kwakwaka'wakw performances at the Fair enjoyed significant popularity and were described in the US press in minute detail.
4. Discussing the formation of planetary consciousness in European modernity, Mary Louise Pratt stresses the role of science in the formation of 'European planetary subject' as an imperial construct. According to Pratt (30), this subject was male, secular and familiar with print culture. Pratt shows that before the eighteenth century, Europe's global consciousness was largely a product of colonial circumnavigation and coastal mapping. In the second half of the century, however, the sense of planetary unity was fortified by the agenda of male natural science with its large classificatory projects carried out globally, including in colonized territories. In her study, Pratt stresses the role of international scientific expeditions as instruments of colonial inquiry and expansion and shows that the 'imperial eye' of science determined the perception of Earth as an ordered natural unity. As Pratt's work would predict, in *Per Aspera ad Astra*, Richard Viktorov presents science as a masculine force. As the film progresses, we learn that Nadezhda, the only female scientist that we encounter in the film, chose science over the traditional feminine roles of wife and mother. In the context of the conservative gender politics of the film, this disqualifies her as a woman, so she fits in the male collective of the scientists unproblematically. In this regard, Nadezhda and other scientists function in the scene in orbit as the bearers of male imperial gaze which embraces the globe as a utopian unity.
5. In his book *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, John Rieder (2008: 34–60) discusses the main tropes of early science fiction,

including the intersecting motifs of the lost race and of interracial romance, as expressions of a 'fantasy of appropriation' rooted in the experiences of European colonialism. In the context of cosmic science-fiction films and cinema, the colonial narratives are displaced onto outer space. In this regard, the theme of interracial romance transforms into the story of romance between a human man and an alien woman, a popular cliché of the genre. In *Per Aspera ad Astra*, this motif is present as well, when Nia and Sergei's son Stepan fall in love with each other during Nia's time on Earth.

6. According to McQuillen and Vaingurt (30), the notion of the New Soviet Man as a cyborg was promoted in Soviet production novels such as Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered* [*Kak zakalialas' stal'* 1936], where the protagonist overcomes his bodily limits by means of sheer willpower. This discourse often presented the New Man through the metaphors of progress and industrial production, signaling cyborg imaginaries of the merging of the human and the machine. In current posthumanism discourse, cyborg is used as a metaphor for the contemporary blurring of the boundaries between humans, animals, and machines (Haraway 2016: 15).
7. For more of the masculinist ethos of the mythology of the New Man, see Borenstein (2000).
8. The trope of 'mentor' and 'disciple' constituted one of the conventions of the revolutionary discourse in Russo-Soviet culture. The dyad was included in many literary and cinematic creations dealing with the theme of the re-education of the good, but 'elemental' protagonist into the 'conscious' communist leader—the New Soviet Man. According to Katerina Clark, this convention was sometimes accompanied by the narrative of the mentor's death, signifying the 'passing of the baton' from the older generation of communists to the younger one (1985). The narrative of death is present in *Per Aspera ad Astra* as well. In the film, Soviet scientist Nadezhda poses as a communist mentor for Nia, first, on Earth, and later—on planet Dessa. Nadezhda teaches Nia the basics of human morals and instructs her in communist rationality. On Dessa, the scientist tragically dies at the hands of Nia's enemies. This moment signifies the passing of the baton from Nadezhda to her disciple and means that Nia is ready to become a communist leader. Despite her feelings for Stepan, Nia stays on Dessa and helps to build the new, rational society on her planet.
9. Analyzing ghost-written biographies of Soviet cosmonauts, who were hailed by the official discourse as living New Men, Slava Gerovitch (2015: 13) shows that the biographies exhibited stark similarities, constituting a form of a unified hagiographical canon.
10. In his account of the cultural trends in the late Soviet Union, Alexei Yurchak (2005) points at the increasing ritualization of Soviet discourses and practices, which lost their mobilizing potential and turned into a congealed, 'empty' form, open for reinterpretation.

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