

Russian Aviation and Space: Technology and Cultural Imagination

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University of Leeds

Organized by John Etty and Vlad Strukov (University of Leeds)
and Candyce Veal (University College London).

Paper Abstracts

Helena Goscilo (Ohio State University and University of Leeds)

[‘The Aerial Ways of Aspiration and Inspiration, or the Chrono/\(r\)ope of Transcendence’](#)

The symbolic significance of flight derives from ancient concepts of the cosmic structure, inscribed in visual and verbal texts that provide a basis for the modern world’s vision of flight as transcendence. At the centre of this vision resides the verticality of religious thought (such as the Neo-Platonist strain of Russian Symbolism), which in a quasi-secularized mode fuelled the avant-garde’s faith in human rebirth through aviation and Soviet notions of winged Nietzschean supermen in space.

Aleksandra Idzior (University of the Fraser Valley, Canada)

[‘Flying City or Housing Freed from Gravity—Georgii Tikhonovich Krutikov’s Gorod budushchego \(City of the Future\) and the Idea of Space Travel’](#)

In 1928 Georgii Tikhonovich Krutikov, a Soviet student of architecture, in his diploma project Gorod budushchego (The City of the Future) proposed a “flying city“ as an ideal urban model for the newly established socialist state. In my paper I seek to explore the circumstances that prompted Krutikov to suggest concepts in which he employed metaphors associated with technology and a skyward trend applied to urban space. By examining Krutikov’s vision I want to demonstrate how relationships between the architect, the city, and its representation were generated not only by science but also by socio-political circumstances and specific ideologies.

Julia Vaingurt (Harvard)

[‘Anatomy of a Space Flight: Tsiolkovsky and Russian Modernism’](#).

This paper analyzes a range of scientific, aesthetic, and philosophical reasons for the homology between rockets and eggs in the works of early Russian science fiction, from Konstantin Tsiolkovsky's *Beyond the Earth* (1920) to Alexei Tolstoy's *Aelita* (1922). Focusing on the egg-like form of spacecrafts in early scientific designs and science fiction, I explore the complexity and ambivalence of the artists' views on such politically loaded concepts as progress and evolution as well as attempt to re-evaluate the very meaning of technology. The paper suggests that technology can be a vehicle of exploration rather than an instrument of control, and that its artistic application does not always reflect the artist's will to power.

Muireann Maguire (Oxford)

[‘Leaping into Nothing: Aleksandr Beliaev, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky and Pryzhok v nichto’](#).

This paper will discuss the influence of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935) over *Prizhok v nichto* (*A Leap Into Nothing*, 1933; 2nd edition, 1935), a novel by Soviet Russia’s most popular author of science fiction, Aleksandr Beliaev (1884-1942). Beliaev’s Communist fairytale of a voyage to Venus cites research on rocket propulsion and space-capable technology by Tsiolkovsky, Rynin, Tsander, Perel’man, and other early twentieth century engineers and astronomers; it is also, inevitably, derivative of Tsiolkovsky’s own works of popular science fiction describing interplanetary travel. This paper explores both the correspondences between Tsiolkovsky’s science and Beliaev’s fiction, and the actual correspondence between the two men in 1934-35.

Matthias Schwartz (Freier Universitat, Berlin)

[‘The Far Side of Cosmic Dreams: Aleksandr Beliaev’s Space Flight Novel *The Star Kets* \(1936\) in the Context of Stalinist Culture’](#).

In 1936 the most prominent Soviet Science fiction writer, Aleksandr Beliaev (1884-1942) published his second novel on space flight, *The Star Kets*, which takes place in a utopian Communist society. Beliaev was aware of the underlying philosophical and metaphorical meanings of the topos of outer space and knew about the “ban” on “cosmic” thinking in Stalinist culture. The numerous adventures of “Star Kets” can be seen as an example of how “cosmic dreams” in a literary and allegorical sense speak about the ambiguities and tensions of Stalinist culture of the 1930s and offer an imaginary escape from it. Scientific discourses and cosmic metaphors are remodelled, antedating literary devices which should become common features of Soviet Science fiction writing, when Gagarin successfully returned from the first manned space flight in 1961.

Candyce Veal (SSEES, UCL)

[‘Gaining Wings: Love and Creativity at the Cusp of Stalinist film’](#).

By focusing on two case studies: Iurii Tarich’s *Wings of a Serf* (*Kryl’ia kholopa*, Sovkino, 1926) and Sergei Eisenstein’s *General Line* (*General’naiia liniia* (1926-1927; released as *The Old and the New* (Sovkino, *Staroe i novoe*, 1929), this paper will look at the way the idea of gaining wings, and flight is communicated on psychological, technological, and mythological levels, and will explore the importance this has in revealing creative invention in terms of nuances of autonomous and ideological voicing in the films.

Katerina Clark (Yale)

[‘Aviation and Internationalism: Soviet Long-Distance Flights in the 1920s’](#)

During the 1920s and 1930s the Soviet Union participated in international rivalries over long-distance flight. This paper will not address the rivalries per se, but rather will discuss the motive of socialist internationalism behind several of the long-distance flights made by Soviet teams of aviators in the 1920s. It will address the role of aviation in the tracts of a trans-national avant-garde in which the Russian Constructivists participated, but will focus on two long-distance flights, one made to China and Mongolia in 1925, and another to Ankara, Teheran and

Kabul in 1930, setting out the internationalist context of each flight and also analyzing the journalistic rhetoric each occasioned. In the case of the China flight, a documentary film made of it, ‘Velikii perelet’ (‘Light over Asia’), will also be analyzed.

Iina Kohonen (Aalto University, Helsinki)

[‘Picturing Cosmic Heroism: Soviet Photographic Practices’](#).

Using detailed case studies linked to broader themes and ideological frameworks my paper illustrates how paintings and photographs depicting the first cosmic triumphs produced and projected the idea of cosmic heroism. As a whole, this cosmic imagery was ambivalent. It was boldly heroic and, at the same time characteristically Khrushchevian: deeply commonplace, yet romantic, strikingly picturesque and sometimes – paradoxically perhaps – very earthbound. The basic argument of my paper draws from this contradiction: the materials examined seem to suggest that within the cosmic heroism there was as irresolute oscillation between sublime and commonplace.

John Etty (Leeds)

[‘Anglo-Russian Aviation in the Leeds Russian Archive: Co-operation and Conflict’](#).

The Leeds Russian Archive, part of the University’s Special Collections, contains 500 collections of archival materials relating to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russia. My presentation, which accompanies the exhibition in the Fay and Geoffrey Elliott Reading Room, will explore some of the LRA’s aviation-related material. Several individuals will be introduced, and their stories will illuminate the themes of Anglo-Russian aerial co-operation and conflict.

Birgit Beumers (Bristol)

[‘Imaginations of Space: Special Effects in Soviet Cinema of the 1950s and 1960s’](#).

This paper explores the way in which tricks and special effects inspired filmmakers to imagine flight, and spaceflight. Even before the birth of cinema, artists have tried to capture motion and flight, an interest continued with the advent of moving images in early animation: the first space flight was simulated by the master of film tricks, Georges Méliès. In the Soviet era, we see an interest in technology, but the representation of space flights remains marred by flaws until Pavel Klushantsev developed in the 1950s methods and techniques that allowed the simulation of space flight to a level that stunned filmmakers and scientists alike. His achievements of manipulating the viewer into forming an acquaintance with the still unknown weightlessness especially) in incredible detail is then compared to the approach adopted in the mockumentary *First on the Moon* (2005), where celluloid is used to fake a flight to the moon that has allegedly taken place in 1938: the film makes us believe in the falsification, insisting on the documentary quality of faked images. The filmmaker thus plays with the disillusionment of the contemporary viewer in the aspirations of the past, and in the danger of cameras, images and other “proofs”.

Sergei Kapterev (Scientific Research Institute of Film Art [NIIK], Moscow)
[‘Imaginings of Space’](#).

The paper looks at some patterns of imagining outer space and space travel in the Soviet cinema of the late 1940s-1950s, a period during which the Stalinist cultural model was supplanted by a less rigid one – and in which the Soviet Union initiated the Space Age. In its emphasis on ideologically correct education (most prominently, in the form of numerous biographical films), the cinema in the last years of the Stalin period may be compared to this period’s initial stage, when such education was channelled mostly through the aggressively promoted genre of *kulturfilm*. However, the late Stalinist educational drive was more conservative and didactic, taking its inspiration primarily from the national cultural past. In this context, images of space exploration – linked to the prominent role of science and technology in the rapidly unfolding Cold War rivalry with the West – were largely defined by traditionalist tendencies, particularly by the privileging of the literary – or rather, bookish - mode.

Jan Levchenko (Higher School of Economics, Moscow)
[‘Empty Space: What Russians Make Instead of Science Fiction Film’](#).

The main peculiarity of (Post)Soviet film is lack of real action. In particular, films devoted to flight avoid showing it immediately. Even popular war films as *Chronicles of a Dive Bomber* by Naum Birman or *Torpedo Bombers* by Semyon Aranovich almost do not present an air battle as a show (comparing, for instance, to *Flat Top* or *Blue Max* or some other Hollywood classics). Films concentrate on relationships, conversations, thoughts and moods. Rare attempts to catch a spectators’ attention were doomed to failure because of poor technology. As a result, post-Soviet film simply rejected the topic of space voyage. Russians produce a lot of crime films, spy films and even thrillers, but have no science fiction.

Julie Hansen (Darlana University and Uppsala University Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Sweden)
[‘The Depiction of Yuri Gagarin and the Soviet Space Program in the Swedish Novel ‘Tredje flykthastigheten’](#).

This paper examines an example of the influence of the Soviet space program on the cultural imagination beyond Russia: the Swedish novel *Tredje flykthastigheten* (*The Third Flight Speed*, 2004; *Третья космическая скорость*) by Lotta Lotass. The novel depicts scenes from the life of Yuri Gagarin up through the launch of Vostok 1 in 1961, as well as other events from the early history of Soviet space exploration. This paper will analyse the depiction of Gagarin and the space program in the novel, focusing on narrative style. I will argue that the polyphonic character of the novel serves to both undermine and supplement official Soviet accounts of the space program.

Kevin Anding (Erfurt University)
[‘Agent of Progress: Structures of Knowledge and Discourse Around Iurii Gagarin’](#).

The first cosmonaut Iurii Gagarin served as a symbol in the socialist world. His semantics varied from progress and science to brotherhood and peace. Under which circumstances does he acquire these attributes? The presentation attempts to answer this question by examining the

process of knowledge transfer in the Eastern Bloc. Using children's literature written by Iurii Gagarin, and its distribution in the USSR and the GDR, the presentation demonstrates that the 'Hero' Gagarin and his narrations changed as they were transferred to other regions and languages. As a literary subject he did not appear as a homogeneous figure.

Andrei Rogatchevskii (CREES, Glasgow University; Uppsala University, Sweden)

[‘Representations of pre-1961 Manned Space Flights in Russian, British and American Cinema’](#)

The paper makes a comparative examination of certain fictional representations of pre-1961 manned space exploration, as well as Gagarin's flight, in search of their main recurrent and specific features. The prominence is given, on the one hand, to the Russian/Soviet and American sci-fi genre (as these two countries have been the chief competitors in the space race), and, on the other, to the British contributions to the genre, bearing in mind that Britain had opted out of the manned space programme because of its costs and could hypothetically hold a less involved opinion on the issue of whose achievements were greater.

Maria Engström (Uppsala University, Sweden)

[‘Neocosmism, Empire and Contemporary Russian Art: Aleksei Veliaev-Guintovt’](#)

В докладе будут прослежены тематические и смысловые связи между учением о супраморализме Н.Ф. Федорова (1828-1903) и творчеством известного московского художника и неоевразийца Алексея Беляева-Гинтовта. Особое внимание будет уделено идеям основателя космизма о «полноорганичности» и о приоритете исторического знания. Материалом для сравнительного анализа послужат работы Алексея Беляева-Гинтовта последних лет, представленные на выставках «Родина-Дочь» и «Парад Победы 2937».