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KOMAROV'S CADAVER AND THE PROBLEM OF CATASTROPHIC ARTIFACTUALITY

Vladimir Komarov's remains in an open casket, 1967. RIA Novosti/Photo Researchers Inc.

1.

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A misshapen three-dimensional object found in an archival photograph is the

protagonist of the scene.[1] It is a volume that could be described in several ways, none of which help me identify it. A dark, rounded stain with shiny, prickly edges; a crust-covered volume; a solid object of uncertain malleability; something twisted and fixed into a single unit; shards emerging out of concave recesses; a wavy, rocky form; a uniform conglomeration of uncertain material; a kind of opaque crystal; an inert, condensed thing; something reduced to its minimum; an amalgamated whole; a part of something larger; a corroded form; a barnacle; a crimpy-looking object; a disfigured volume; a burnt log; an uninteresting fossil; a moldy piece of bark; a strange lump of coal; a misshapen black nugget. I don't initially rule out the possibility that it came from space—a hefty-sized meteorite would be an object worthy of the solemnity of this scene.

2.

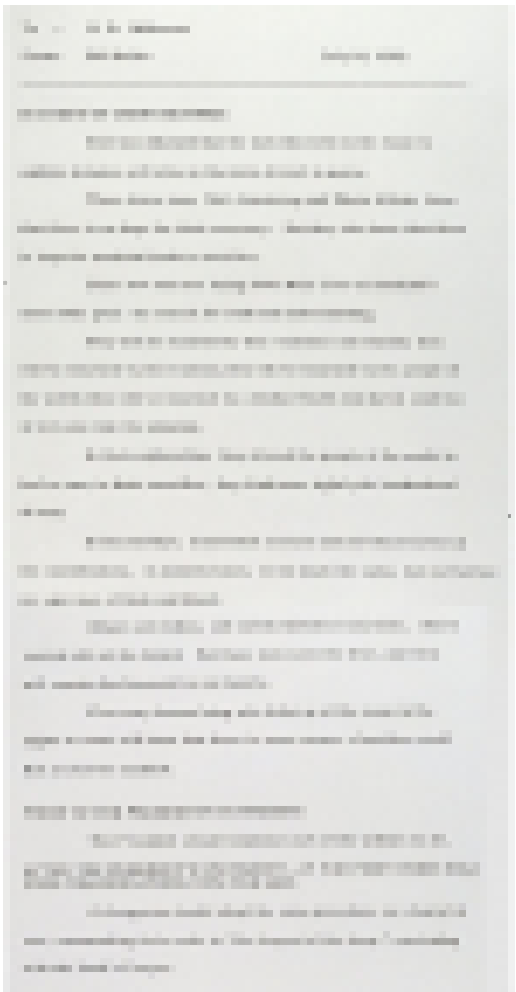
In 1967, Soviet cosmonaut Vladimir Mikailovich Komarov starred in the first spaceflight accident to ever kill a human being. The image I have just narrated illustrates the funereal moment when his remains were presented to the authorities—probably other fellow cosmonauts—as proof of the inappropriateness of an open-casket ceremony. The object described above is Komarov's cadaver.

3.

As part of the Soyuz-2 mission, two spacecrafts were to meet in orbit, exchange crews by means of a spacewalk, and then return to Earth together. The event would be held in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. The first spaceship would be flown by Komarov, and the second, completing the mission, would be launched the following day, with a crew comprised of cosmonauts Valery Bykovsky, Alexei Yeliseev and Yevgeny Khrunov. Technical problems started to arise as soon as the first spaceship reached orbit, leading to the cancellation of the mission and the order to return the spaceship back to Earth. The failure that killed Komarov was more modest than the countless problems which were overcome in orbit, a fact that does not diminish the scale of the tragedy: after a successful reentry, a

faulty pressure sensor prevented the activation of a parachute, and the

spaceship crashed near the Soviet town of Orenburg at a speed of 144 kmph, killing the cosmonaut on impact, at 7am on April 24, 1967. The explosion consumed Komarov's body. From inside the fuming wreck was recovered a compact, irregularly shaped heap thought to be a part of his charred body, and described by Air Force Lieutenant General Nikolai Kamanin as "a shapeless black lump."[2] Komarov's remains were cremated and his ashes were deposited in the Kremlin Necropolis in Moscow's Red Square. A memorial was erected near the site of the accident, where other parts of his body were later found and buried. Komarov was honored twice: first with the Order of Lenin, and then with the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. A crater in the dark side of the moon was named after him. We know now that the spectator-actors in the scene are looking at something they know to be a piece of a man who fell from space.



The Nixon White House prepared this letter in the event that American astronauts did not survive the Apollo 11 mission.

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4.

When else do we stand perplexed in front of an extraordinary object on display? There are comparisons to be drawn between exhibitions and funerals, museums and mausoleums, works and corpses. Komarov is a man reduced to a minimal form on a dais that is simultaneously a stage, a pedestal, and a coffin. The attention centered on him grants him back some of his physicality, more than fifty years after his death. His corroded body serves as a historical surfeit, as the reduced remains of a great narrative which returns, in fragments, from time to time.

Despite that, Komarov's body is not a fragment. Its condition is that of a new thing, shaped by negation, which cannot harken back to an origin. It abandons totality and therefore moves away from a romantic formulation.[3] It is certainly a product of a broken world—the world of body-shattering modernity—which produces a feeling of "a loss of wholeness, a shattering of connection, a destruction or disintegration of permanent value that is so universally felt in the nineteenth century as to be often identified with modernity itself," as Linda Nochlin writes.[4] Even as we approach these iconographies of the fragment, it is difficult to find—in an art history so bent on representations of the body and of death—images of bodies and corpses that can be related to Komarov's condition. Because the image evokes a symbolic narrative, while the object is essentially void and antinarrative, the relation between sculpture and scene in this context makes the reception of the object more complex. It is the photographic image that supplies us with enough narrative elements to reach any conclusions to be drawn between the cadaver's theatrical presence and its catastrophic origin. The form of the fragment makes way for the tragedy of form.

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Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920

5.

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The symbolic construction of the communist cosmonaut echoes projects of

cosmic, political, and artistic imagination prior to the Russian Revolution.

Komarov's crash occurred at the height of the Cold War. He finds himself within a temporal arc that encompasses imaginings of new beginnings, followed by technical acceleration and the subsequent disasters that befell the twentieth century. He leaps out of temporal narrative and historical continuity. Perhaps for this very reason, he offers himself up as an object of culture, meaning that he has the power, as cultural objects do, to "arrest the flow of history, and to open up time for alternative visions," as Susan Buck-Morss argues.[5] Paul Klee's famous "Angelus Novus," which Walter Benjamin transformed into an allegory, announces the same historical-political context in which a history of destruction is bound up with the history of progress. According to Benjamin, the angel is blown out of Paradise while staring in bewilderment at the ruins History has produced; as the debris piles up before him, a storm called Progress propels him into the future. Benjamin frequently turns to allegorical images to make visible his ruinous concept of progress: the angel is the image—at once prophetic, messianic, and revolutionary—that Benjamin will employ to warn of the arrival of fascism in Europe. Komarov's cadaver, in a sense, flirts with this allegory, as an Icarus in the age of catastrophes. If he interrupts continuity, it is because we can perhaps picture him—like Paul Klee's angel—summoning forth a revolutionary messianism, in Michel Löwy's figuring.[6] But this is a gory messianism—a return from Paradise as monstruous, misshapen fallen angel.

The figures of the modern monster or the extraterrestrial are frequently portrayed in movies as amorphous masses, as all-swallowing or all-absorbing blobs, or as sticky chemical substances.[7] These depictions shaped the cultural imagination regarding worldwide horrors in the century of technical experimentation: atomic bombs, holocausts, genocides, nuclear accidents, industrial processes, and the manipulation, synthetization, and exploration of chemical elements. These new developments not only introduced destruction on a scale never before represented, as Nelly Schnait writes,[8] but also came to form a new repertoire in the imagination of human artifactuality—that is, new ways of making things, inaugurated by a new regime of technicality.

The creature from another world is the opposite of Komarov: it is unrecognizable because it comes from *outside*, and that is what accounts for its unknowability. Komarov is a part of this world—he is made by this world—and, being from this world, he is more inhuman than the out-of-this-world.

Freddie Francis, *The Evil of Frankenstein,* 1964*;* lobby card with Peter Cushing and Kiwi Kingston.

Let us think of a specific monster that could be, in this sense, closer to Komarov: the creature from Mary Shelley's 1816 novel *Frankenstein*—the monster of the technical age, conceived in the century in which the boundaries between the living and the dead were blurred by biotechnical experiments, galvanism, electricity, post-mortem photography, embalming, and funeral rites. Photography—by concretizing the image—and chemical experiments—by preserving corpses and giving them a "lifelike appearance"

courtesy of new embalming techniques—take control, respectively, of the

disappearance of memory-images and of the rotting of corpses, remodeling the concepts of dead and alive. John Troyer writes,

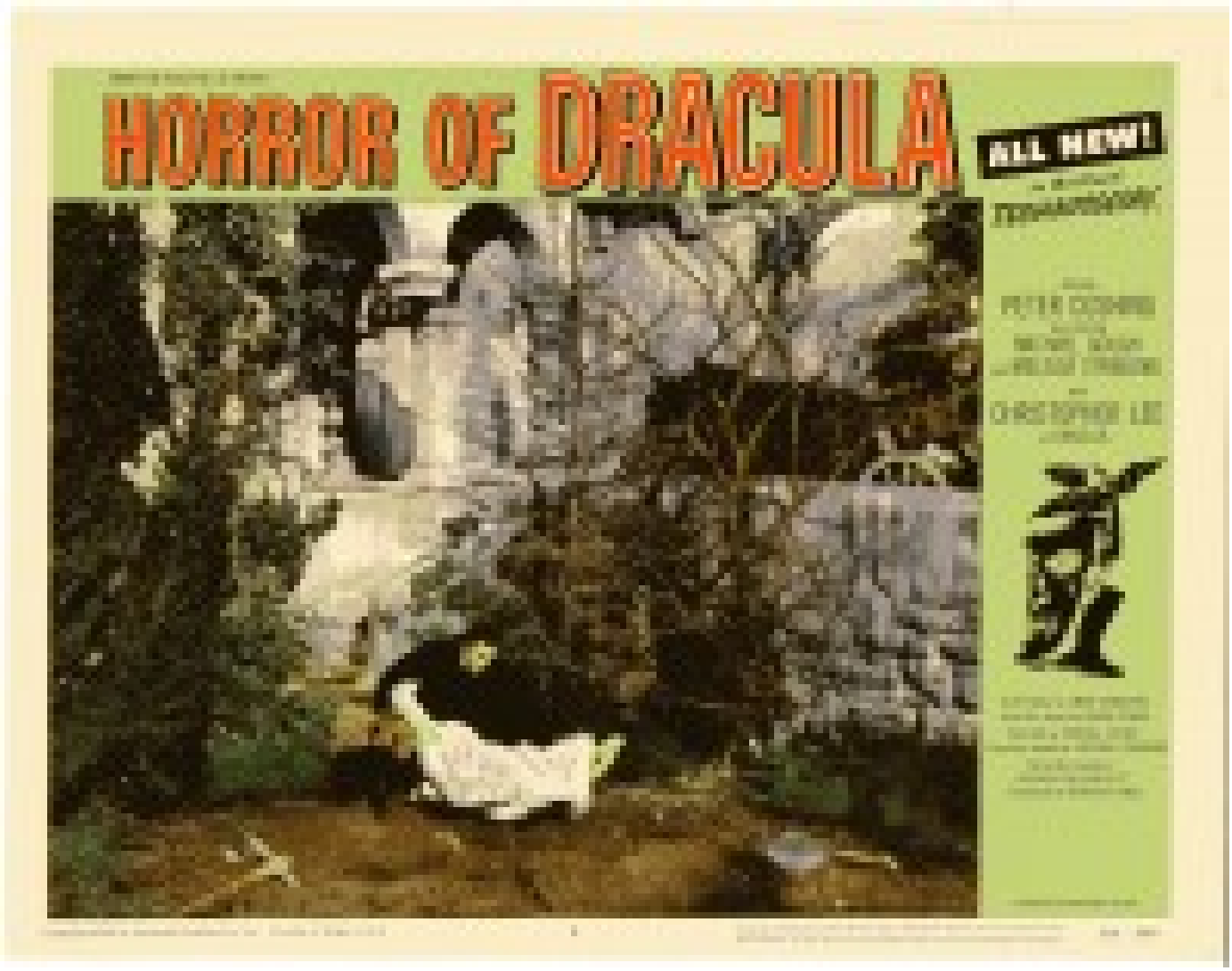
> Embalming, in a way similar to death photography, affected not only how the viewer observed the corpse's postmortem state but also radically altered the process of gazing at a dead body. This is the crucially important meeting point of photography and embalming: What embalming and death photography fundamentally changed was how the living observer viewed the postmortem conditions of the corpse. In effect, these innovations in embalming practices enabled the emergence of embalmed vision.[9]

It is in this technical landscape that Mary Shelley writes her novel, transforming Victor Frankenstein into a modern Prometheus, an icon that endures in the technical imagination. Plagued by curiosity, irresponsibility, and guilt, Victor produces a Creature made from parts of dead bodies, only to abandon the monster as soon as he galvanized it. The boundary between artifice, creation, and destruction is the novel's starting point: Victor's fascination with Nature's constructive power of destruction—which he witnesses in the form of lightning striking an oak tree, consuming it in flames and reducing it to thin slivers of wood—triggers the plot.[10]

From this point on, monsters are born in laboratories, factories, and doctors' offices, evoking the mythological creatures of modern metamorphoses. Frankenstein is also a metaphor for the literally disfigured body produced by capitalism when industrialization starts to brand factory workers' bodies with the marks of labor. When Franco Moretti identifies social categories in the characters of Frankenstein and Dracula, he sees in the former an exemplar of a new kind of laborer—the exploited monster, who "belongs wholly to his creator (just as one can speak of a 'Ford worker'). Like the proletariat, he is a collective and artificial creature. He is not found in nature, but built," and can

be rebuilt and saved by the same machines that exploit him: "Only modern

science—this metaphor for the 'dark satanic mills'—can offer them a future. It sews them together again, molds them according to its will and finally gives them life. But at the moment the monster opens its eyes, its creator draws back in horror."[11] Dracula, meanwhile, represents the capitalist—the property owner who sucks the energy out of those he exploits, keeping his fortune and passing it on to his inheritors. Moretti writes: “Frankenstein and Dracula lead parallel lives. They are two indivisible, because complementary, figures; the two horrible faces of a single society, its extremes: the disfigured wretch and the ruthless proprietor. The worker and capital.”[12]



Terence Fisher, *Horror of Dracula*, 1958; lobby card with Christopher Lee and Melissa Stripling.

Both figures are imagined around the beginning of the nineteenth century by a horror literature that is “born precisely out of the terror of a split society, and out of the desire to heal it.”[13] Class identification, now made explicit by the

out of the desire to heal it. Class identification, now made explicit by the physical place each body occupies in the new society, constructs the radical difference between the two characters. It is the disfiguration of the worker's body, and no longer his clothes or his name that give him his class identity: social rank is now deeply inscribed "in one's skin, one's eyes, one's build."[14] The monster is the offspring of an era. His disfiguration a side effect of the machine: the laborer, the exploited monster, is *a product of the product* that the laborer himself produces. "Frankenstein's invention is thus a pregnant metaphor of the process of capitalist production, which forms by deforming, civilizes by barbarizing, enriches by impoverishing—a two-sided process in which each affirmation entails a negation."[15] Deformed and quartered, Frankenstein could not have been imagined in any other time but that of technical industrial catastrophes. He is the portrait of a new social man, full of "anguished greatness," who "can never be really free or have a future."[16]

Technical accidents form a distinct category in the history of technical progress. We live alongside the accident as we live alongside the automobile, but accidents respond in proportion to machines rather than to humans. Komarov, then, did not die in space, but as a result of the spaceship within space. To clarify this distinction, we turn to paleoanthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan, who writes, "The human hand is human because of what it makes, not of what it is."[17] If, in the evolutionary stage, the tool is an extension of the hand, and if the machine is an extension of the gesture, what results from the hand, then, is a succession of evolutionary leaps that accelerates technicity in an unforeseeable fashion. "The hand no longer intervenes except to feed or to stop the machine. The operator can increase the machine's power or distribute it among machine tools which will perform all the operations for which human intelligence has designed them."[18] Most popular accounts of Komarov's death[19] speak of its symbolic significance to the Soviet world but do not speak of a phenomenon that it inaugurated: the spaceflight accident corpse. Komarov's corpse is a product as specific to a technical endeavor as is the very machine that created it. This product asks to be "epistemo-technically" questioned, for, according to Paul Virilio, "every technology, every science should choose its specific accident."[20] In other words, as Virilio reminds us: "The invention of the boat was the invention of shipwrecks."[21]

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The spaceship accident ironically gives back to us a corpse in the shape of

coal, the element used as fuel for the steam engines responsible for humanity's arguably catastrophic evolutionary leap in technology begun in the Industrial Revolution.

Design variants for Lenin's sarcophagus by Konstantin Melnikov, who won the competition in March 1924.

6.

We have yet to mention the specificity of the fact that this body belongs to a cosmonaut, not an astronaut. Both terms mean the same thing: those who travel through outer space. But their difference reveals an implicit desire for distinction in the rivalry between the USSR and the US for the conquest of space. The American nomenclature privileges the term "astro," the Greek word for star or celestial body: the astronaut travels towards a concrete object where he might land. The Soviets adopt the word "cosmos," in reference to outer space, including its voids. The mythic figure of the cosmonaut – that

outer space, including its voids. The mythic figure of the cosmonaut—that explorer implicated in the social utopias that fueled the dreams of humanity's expansion into the cosmos—seems not to have survived the end of the USSR. Nowadays, the conquest of space reappears in the collective imagination, as it has been colonized by neoliberalism and directed towards cosmic entrepreneurship, privatized space travel, and corporate interplanetary exploration. This imagination of the conquest of space did away with the dream of a common universe—one of the great utopias of the early twentieth century—that was embedded in Soviet culture.

But cosmic-utopian visions show up even in pre-revolutionary Russia. The imaginative capacity brought forth by the euphoria of technical development and by the imminence of the revolution takes shape in several avant-garde artistic, political, and educational projects. Take, for instance, biocosmism—an artistic/scientific movement that proposed that technical and scientific development should have a commitment to the political and social ideals expounded by the revolutionary project. In *The Common Task*, Nikolai Fedorov defended the idea that the future should be oriented towards the creation of technological conditions for the conquest of the universe, with the main goals of reaching human immortality, the resurrection of the dead, the rejuvenation of the living, and the colonization of the universe as the ultimate realization of the communist project, which should be accomplished through a combination of revolutionary struggle and creative labor.[22] Death represents the last manifestation of private property to be overcome: the property of a personal, individual lifetime. In immortality, all time would be one collective time.

This pre-revolutionary biopolitics of time was sprinkled with the imagination that bubbled alongside new scientific discoveries, and even when it became indistinguishable from fiction, it still had results in everyday life: for example, the development of the technology that led to Konstantin Tsiolkovsky's three-stage rocket. The quest for immortality that pervades the Soviet scientific imagination has cultural ramifications for the work involved in the preservation of Lenin's body, still intact almost one hundred years after his death. Immediately after his passing, a frantic operation was set in motion so

that his body would be preserved by means of techniques employed in the

funeral rites of Egyptian pharaohs, with the ultimate goal of keeping it intact long enough for the development of biocosmic solutions for the resurrection of the leader. A few years before Lenin's death, Leonid Krasin, who would be appointed supervisor of the preservation project, wrote: "I am certain that the time will come when science will become all-powerful, that it will be able to recreate a deceased organism. I am certain that the time will come when one will be able to use the elements of a person's life to recreate the physical person... [and] resurrect great historical figures."[23] The Funeral Commission was renamed the Commission for Immortalization, and the task of designing sarcophagi and mausoleums was entrusted to artists. Kazimir Malevich suggested the coffin should be shaped like a cube—alluding to his iconic Suprematist *Black Square*—a proposal which he justified thusly: "The cube is no longer a geometric body. It is a new object with which we try to portray eternity, to create a new set of circumstances, with which we can maintain Lenin's eternal life, defeating death."[24] But Malevich's *Black Square* already shows signs of a split intent: the new object with which the artist wants to represent eternity is certainly not a portrait of Lenin's finite body expanded into infinite space, but the spatial dissolution of the Suprematist cube in Malevich's creative imagination. According to Susan Buck-Morss, for revolutionary artists, progress entailed a "rupture [in] the continuity of time,"[25] opening up to a perceptual and cognitive experience that was radically different. For the political vanguard, progress was the scientifically deducible course of history, in which art would have a more modest and utilitarian role to play, in accordance with the forms of representation inherited from the past. The distinction between these expansions is subtle but precise: the symbolic forms of the revolutionary expansion of art and of political progress would end up being fundamentally distinct.

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Elon Musk's Tesla Roadster and Starman cruise away from Earth in this final photo from the car after its launch on SpaceX's first Falcon Heavy rocket on Feb. 6, 2018. Image: SpaceX.

The Tesla Roadster also had a message for any extra-terrestrial beings that it may encounter. Image: SpaceX

7.

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A very explicit example of post-capitalist libidinal reorientation toward the cosmos is the automobile driven by a dummy dressed as an astronaut named Starman. Sent to space by entrepreneur Elon Musk as a test payload for his rocket Falcon Heavy, Starman also served as a marketing ploy for Tesla, Musk's electric car manufacturing company. The artifact remains in orbit with no set date for its return or for its disintegration, even while on Earth we have not yet seen electric cars take over our fossil-fuel-based economy. Musk's SpaceX is the first private company to team up with government space programs such as NASA, inaugurating public-private partnerships for space exploration. This is made explicit in a statement by current NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine, in a brief interview after a panel discussion at the Farnborough International Airshow in 2018: "The goal is to commercialize low Earth orbit. NASA becomes a customer, and then we use the resources of the taxpayers to go further than we've gone before."[26] The message, inscribed in the vessel, that Musk's dummy-driver Starman carries in the automobile, meanwhile, says, "Made on Earth by humans."[27] If Komarov's corpse is the catastrophic artifact in free-fall, Starman seems to be his return to space as a stereotyped, narcissistic, plastic body bound to become space garbage. The crash test dummy—a sign affectively identified with the motorized society of the accident—symbolically updates the relationship between libidinal economy and the cosmos. Starman replaces the imagination of a common future and the political exploration of space with the current cosmic entrepreneurship and the privatization of celestial dreams. The fall of Komarov, Cold War hero, heralds the end of that pre-revolutionary creative investment.

Analyzing that century's early flirtations with dream and ruin, Susan Buck-Morss states that "Interplanetary travel was a preferred form of social utopian expression."[28] If that utopian expression now returns in the form of the catastrophe of an old dream, this does not mean that the dream itself, before its concretization and its failure, was not valid. "To submit to melancholy at this point would be to confer on the past a wholeness that never did exist, confusing the loss of the dream with the loss of the dream's realization,"

writes Buck-Morss.[29] The impasse which concerns us, and that finds in

Komarov's corpse its weak spot, is that the catastrophe responds in proportion to the destructive power of technicity, but not necessarily to the technical imagination that produces artifacts. In a certain sense, the impasse resides in this threshold between an imagination that redefines the limits of the possible and an imagination that is unable to anticipate its side effects. It is possible to think, as Ray Brassier states, that imagination redefines the limits not only of reason, but of imagination itself: "Reason is fueled by imagination, but it can also remake the limits of the imagination."[30] The problem lies in recognizing where the libido of this new imagination points to, and how many worlds it may destroy before it redefines its own limits.

Peter Brueghel, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, 1560.

8.

The cosmonaut is Icarus in the Age of Catastrophes. Not just any Icarus, but the one in Pieter Brueghel's 1558 painting portraying the demi-god as a tiny cluster of brushstrokes out at sea, his left leg splashing around in the water,

which poet William Carlos Williams described: “A splash quite unnoticed /

this was / Icarus drowning.”[31] What Brueghel appears to be painting is less the gravity of this tragedy and more the way in which catastrophe is so seamlessly integrated into landscape, always already a part of it, as if it were swallowed by it. Brueghel’s painting proposes a new way of representing that which is unrepresentable about catastrophe: it is not so much the tragedy of Icarus but the world keeping its course while catastrophe rumbles on, consumed by the sea.

In *Toilers of the Sea* (1866), Victor Hugo describes the silent, obscure catastrophe of an accident at sea, shedding light on catastrophe’s more monstrous aspect and granting it human-like agency:

> Ordinarily the sea conceals her crimes. She delights in privacy. Her unfathomable deeps keep silence. She wraps herself in a mystery which rarely consents to give up its secrets. We know her savage nature, but who can tell the extent of her dark deeds? She is at once open and secret; she hides away carefully, and cares not to divulge her actions; wrecks a vessel, and, covering it with the waves, engulfs it deep, as if conscious of her guilt. Among her crimes is hypocrisy. She slays and steals, conceals her booty, puts on an air of unconsciousness, and smiles.[32]

But Brueghel’s sea is still the sea of 1558, while Victor Hugo’s has seen modernity’s infancy, with its new technologies for sailing, its compasses and telescopes—tools that liberated the sky and the stars to the speculations of science and fantasy. The sea monster slowly emerges as a strange, terrifying force, bearer of the powers of the deep, the unfathomable unknown that is replicated in other scales. Before outer space, sea and desert were the first unlimited expanses, our figures for the notion of the *outside*, the infinities into which humankind ventured.

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In *Shipwreck with Spectator*, Hans Blumenberg describes the shift in

Antiquity's paradigm of catastrophe, using the shipwreck as a privileged

metaphor for the Western understanding of the outside. Antiquity's conception of the outside saw it as a space where catastrophe befell the voyager. Blumenberg connects the quiet life on stable terrain to the position of a spectator who, from the safety of the shore, acknowledges the dangerous precarity of the castaway.

> Humans live their lives and build their institutions on dry land. Nevertheless, they seek to grasp the movement of their existence above all through a metaphorics of the perilous sea voyage. [...] Often the representation of danger on the high seas serves only to underline the comfort and peace, the safety and serenity of the harbor in which a sea voyage reaches its end.[33]

Lucretius, in *De Rerum Natura*, expresses this as such: "It is lovely, when on the sea the winds stir up the vast, dark waters, to look out from the land at the distant shipwreck; one rejoices, not in the spectacle of another man's ruin, but in the distance separating one from such evils."[34] This safe divide between land and away-from-land, from which one can experience sublime disaster from a safe distance, is what the acceleration brought on by technologies of expansion makes obsolete: earthly distances diminish as the universe expands. In Modernity, there is no longer a stable viewpoint from which we can merely witness a shipwreck from a distance. From this point on, we are all at sea. The infinity of the Ancient world is elastic, contracting and expanding, coming and going, from sea to dry land; in Modernity, by marrying technique with speed, we are knowingly caught in a continuously expanding space. From this point on, due to this increase in speed and humankind's voyages into the cosmos, the spectator is out at sea, because the entire Earth is part of the shipwreck. There is no *outside*.

Consequently, the dimensions and scale of the disaster change. Natural catastrophes used to cultivate their forms: their traces were visible. In 1866,

Victor Hugo narrated the meticulous work of destruction performed by the

forces of nature, for they were *marked*, set apart from man-made works, and it was therefore possible to make comparisons: “The ripping of the planking was edged here and there artistically. This peculiarity is common with the ravages of the cyclone. To chip and tear away is the caprice of the great devastator.”[35]

In attempting to salvage parts of a wrecked ship, the character Gilliat, from *Toilers of the Sea*, anthropomorphizes the traces of destruction wreaked by forces of nature as if they were the result of human gestures of violence:

> Its ways are like those of the professional torturer. The disasters which it causes wear a look of ingenious punishments. One might fancy it actuated by the worst passions of man. It refines in cruelty like a savage. While it is exterminating it dissects bone by bone. It torments its victim, avenges itself, and takes delight in its work. It even appears to descend to petty acts of malice.[36]

Natural catastrophe can still be compared with the forms made by humans. The artificial catastrophe is something else: modern forms of destruction leave no trace of the human and, yet, cannot be inhuman because there is not even a spark of human recognition to be glimpsed in them.

Post-industrial technical possibilities have expanded the spatial limits of humanity while giving us a vast range of technical materials and apparatuses to remind us that our escape from the world is equally, if not more so, bound up in the world itself, giving credence to Timothy Morton’s assertion that “Our very attempt to achieve escape velocity from our physical and biological being has resulted in being stuck to Earth.”[37] The technical modification of civilization has reached a point of no return due to the imbalance between technology’s capacity for destruction and life’s capacity for regeneration. The idea of infinity seems now more akin to a viscous plasticity—a space that

unfolds infinitely in proportion to our propulsive mechanisms—rather than to

a self-regulating elasticity—a space that advances and returns to its previous aspect. The dimensions of space are not given *a priori* but are defined by the constant stretching of its borders as humans and our technical world spread throughout it. Space and all the tools that expand it are bound in a viscous relation.

Copper engraving showing the fall of the Mauerkirchen Meteorite in 1768, from the 1769 booklet *Nachricht und Abhandlung von einem in Bayern unweit Maurkirchen den 20. November 1768 aus der Luft herab gefallenen Stein*. License: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International.

9.

In his book *Eupalinos ou l'Architect*, Paul Valéry uses a dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus to propose a distinction between the time of natural objects and the time of man-made objects. Valéry writes, "our actions participate in both times. Planning is well separated from action, and action from result," while nature "does not separate planning from its execution." He

gives the following example: “If a man shakes his arm, we distinguish the arm from the gesture, and we grant that the relationship between arm and gesture is one of pure possibility. On the side of Nature, however, the arm’s gesture and the arm itself cannot be separated.” In short, to build is to create by “separate principles.”[38]

This distinction is also made in Marx's *Capital*, when he relates the different constructive processes of human artifice and of nature: “A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.”[39] We understand, therefore, that the notion of failure in regard to form is excluded from the realm of possibility when it comes to the natural artifact, since there is no previously devised project from which the end result could deviate. “At the end of every labor process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally.”[40] According to Marx, the worst architect distinguishes himself from the bee not only because he alters the forms of natural elements, but because “this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it.”[41] Nature builds itself in a single temporality, while the worker plots before he builds. Kazimir Malevich also elaborated on the indivisibility of nature’s morphogenetic process: “Scientists say that a plant’s bud grows in a speed that is unmatched by anything in this world. But we do not perceive this, we do not see it; it is as if form kept its blueprint locked in itself and did not pass it on to us.”[42] This is to say, nature does not show us its project because it does not have one.

Let us return to the analogy of Komarov’s corpse as a hefty-sized meteorite in order to think about the conceptual problems that emerge when we think of artifactuality. Like Komarov’s corpse, a meteorite is also built during its fall, with the difference that, in its making, there is no gesture but the one that comes after—that of the rescue: the scientific legitimation that comes with naming. The gesture of the rescue is the human gesture *par excellence*, making clear the power that institutions bear in granting agency to objects.

The meteorite, on the other hand, is avowedly inhuman, made by nature, in a

single temporality, devoid of gesture. Unlike the meteorite, Komarov's corpse is, like "gesture and arm," a product of a planning-act-result chain, though it is the product of a planning-act-*accident*-result chain, stemming from a gesture that harkens back to the beginnings of technical humanity. The result of what happened to the cosmonaut is more a product of the planning that made the accident possible than of the fall itself.

The analogy between corpse and meteorite is made not only because of their formal resemblance, but also because of the antagonism between the procedures out of which they are constructed—the different means though which their physical resemblance and their shared inhumanity is achieved. That shared lack of humanity stems from distinct constitutive natures: while the meteorite is produced by a fall from infinity and is devoid of humanity, Komarov's corpse is a product of humanity that hides its artifice in its resemblance to natural images. In other words, it possesses an inhumanity which is not intrinsic, but man-made. There is, however, an interesting problem here: the morphogenetic problem of technical catastrophe.

It is possible to claim that technology molds the material response that we encounter in the final shape of Komarov's corpse. The shape of technical catastrophe is like the shape of natural catastrophe in that the distance between thought and action in the former is made apparent in the shape of the latter. Komarov's corpse, then, is the result of technical catastrophe camouflaged as natural disaster through the sublimity of its inhuman natural images. There is an absolute inhumanity to Komarov's corpse because it is an object produced through artifice with no purpose: it is a catastrophic artifact, a product of the taming of nature, the result of something made by accident that manifests itself as a fact of nature. Komarov's corpse is at once a product and a side effect of the will to tame. It is for this reason that it is incapable of humanity; it is no longer possible to impress any human marking on this residue since it has been returned to the realm of natural images.

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In closing, we identify a paradox in our object. With Komarov's corpse, we can contemplate the history of the genesis of an object which does not tell its own story, for it is a continuity which erases the traces of its continuity. The cadaver is a flow that is produced by instantaneity, cut off from its own temporality, and, all of a sudden, delivered into another temporality. The word "cadaver" stems etymologically from the Latin *cadere*—to fall, to drop—and is related to the Portuguese adjective *cadente*, employed to describe celestial bodies that break from their orbits and fall into larger objects, attracted by their gravitational fields. That is to say, meteorites. Komarov is quite literally *cadente*, a falling "star."

Revolutionary French communist Louis Auguste Blanqui drew the analogy between falling star and corpse in his 1871 treaty *Eternity by the Stars*, referring to meteorites and asteroids as "icy cadavers."[43]

While held in captivity in the isolated fortress of the Château du Toureau, all he could see were the stars in motion above his head. His cosmological treaty, full of metaphors and references to the insurrection, pictures a relation between the cycles of heavenly bodies and those of politics. What might seem at first glance a merely formal approximation between terminologies used in both fields shows an even closer relation between them: a call to organize revolutionary masses in accordance with the entropic organizational logic of the universe. Blanqui realized that the law of gravity—the same law that kept celestial bodies in harmonious revolution—was also what constantly threatened those bodies with the unpredictable trajectories of meteorites and asteroids. When these collisions did occur, Blanqui referred to them as "resurrecting shocks," acknowledging the critically generative aspect of these accidents: "When the Stars are atomized into a sidereal encounter, all their substances fuse into the gaseous mass that springs from the shock. Then, the organizing activity of the nebula slowly separates them, according to the laws of gravity."[44] For Blanqui, these "resurrecting shocks" are necessary to revitalize stable celestial bodies from their fatal destiny: their eventual cooling and thermal death. It is this "order," maintained by the laws

of gravity, that keeps the Universe from being “bored to death.”

> Such encounters between sidereal cadavers colliding into resurrection would easily come across as a disturbance of the established order. - A disturbance! But what would become of the world if the ancient and dead suns with their string of defunct planets continued indefinitely their funeral procession, reinforced every night with the arrival of new funerals? All the sources of light and of life that shine in the heavens would extinguish gradually, like the luminaries of a light show. Eternal darkness would wash upon the universe.[45]

The science-fiction hypothesis that microorganisms and bacteria are carried by meteorites and thus implant life in dead planets is an apt metaphor for Blanqui’s revolutions, tremors that light up new worlds. Komarov seems to express that a formal repertoire of revolutionary imagination has run its course, that the visible forms of this imagination were torn asunder as he fell from the sky. The fall of a world that pined for ideals of welfare, progress, creative imagination, and common social growth—a world that no longer retains its man-made contours, but whose remains are constantly peeking through, here and there. Could the return of the cosmonaut as celestial body, even in its morbid reappearance, somehow reignite a lost imagination of the future?

✹

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Funeral of Soviet cosmonaut Komarov, 1967, https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/337919/view. ↑

Asif A. Siddiqi, *Soyuz 1: The Death of Vladimir Komarov* (Spacehistory101.com Press, 2020), 45-46: "The coffin was opened, and as Kamanin later recalled 'on a white satin lay what was only recently, the cosmonaut Komarov; and now it has become a shapeless black lump.' Gagarin, Leonov, Bykovskii, Popovich, and other cosmonauts approached the coffin, and they very sadly inspected the remains of their friend." ↑

Linda Nochlin, *The body in pieces: the fragment as a metaphor of modernity* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 53. ↑

Ibid., 24. ↑

Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 63. ↑

Michel Löwy, *Messianismo e Revolução* in Adauto Novaes, *Crise da Razão* (São Paulo: CIA das Letras, 1996). 395. ↑

Some examples include John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), Irvin Yeaworth's *The Blob* (1958), and its remake, Chuck Russell's *The Blob* (1988). ↑

Nelly Schnait, "La muerte sin escena," *Debate Feminista*, vol. 21, 2000. ↑

John Troyer, *Technologies of the Human Corpse* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020), 132. ↑

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003):"As I stood at the door, on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained by a blasted stump. When we visited it the next morning, we found the tree shattered in a singular manner. It was not splintered by the shock, but entirely reduced to thin ribands of wood. I never beheld anything so utterly destroyed," 100. ↑

Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London/NY: Verso, 1987), 85. ↑

Ibid., 83. ↑

Ibid. ↑

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Andre Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 240. ↑

Ibid., 246. ↑

See, for example, the historically inaccurate and controversial book *Starman: The Truth Behind the Legend of Yuri Gagarin* (London: Walker Publishing, 2011), by Jamie Doran and Piers Bizony. For a solid historical reconstruction of the Soyuz accident, see Siddiqi's *Soyuz 1: The Death of Vladimir Komarov*. ↑

Sylvère Lotringer and Paul Virilio, *Pure War* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), 47. ↑

Ibid., 46. ↑

Boris Groys, *Russian Cosmism* (Cambridge / New York: The MIT Press / e-flux, 2018), 6. ↑

Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 119. ↑

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Ibid. ↑

Ibid., 67. ↑

Quoted in Jeff Foust, "Birdenstine discusses ISS future, exploration cooperation in Europe," *Space News*, July 17, 2018, https://spacenews.com/bridenstine-discusses-iss-future-exploration-cooperation-in-europe/. ↑

It's possible to see this in SpaceX's official video of Falcon X's launch: https://youtu.be/A0FZlwabctw?t=108. ↑

Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 63. ↑

Ibid., 68. ↑

Ray Brassier, *Prometheanism and its critics* in Armen Avanessian and Robin Mackay, *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (London: Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2014): "Prometheanism promises an overcoming of the opposition between reason and imagination: reason is fuelled by imagination, but it can also remake the limits of the imagination," 487. ↑

William Carlos Williams, *Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 212. ↑

Victor Hugo, *Toilers of the Sea*, ed. Ernest Rhys, trans. William Moy Thomas (Gutenberg Project, 2010), 554. ↑

Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Seven Rendall (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), 7–8. ↑

Lucrécio, *Da natureza das coisas*, Livro II, I-IV (Lisboa: Relógio D'água, 2015). ↑

Hugo, *Toilers of the Sea*, 557. ↑

Ibid. ↑

Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) 180. ↑

Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos ou o arquiteto* (São Paulo: Editora 34, 1996), 135. ↑

Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, *Volume I*, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress Publishers: 1887), 284. ↑

Ibid. ↑

Ibid. ↑

Kazimir Malevich, *Dos novos sistemas da arte*, trans. Cristina Dunaeva (São Paulo: Hedra, 2007), 88. ↑

Louis Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*, trans. Frank Chouraqui (New York/Berlin: Contra Mundum Press, 2013): "How many billions of icy cadavers are crawling like this in the night of space, awaiting the hour of destruction, which will be, at the same time, the hour of resurrection!," 97. ↑

Ibid., 107. ↑

Ibid., 105. ↑

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