

Making the Most of a Past's Futures: Soviet Space Science Fiction between Projection and Recollection

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The flying worlds of science fiction films and series from the 1960s to the 1980s, popular on both sides of the Iron Curtain, today appear at least as alien to us, if not more so, than they did fifty years ago. However, their current alienness is usually described as "retro" or "nostalgic", sometimes even (naively?) humanist as opposed to futuristic. Apart from a certain design or aesthetic, [nostalgia for the space age of the twentieth century](https://slate.com/technology/2012/05/space-program-s-future-and-landing-on-the-moon-how-nostalgia-for-the-apollo-program-doesn-t-help.html) (<https://slate.com/technology/2012/05/space-program-s-future-and-landing-on-the-moon-how-nostalgia-for-the-apollo-program-doesn-t-help.html>) is often linked to assumptions about a brighter, happier future that were once widespread and now are gone for good. This kind of "nostalgia for the past future" is commonly associated with [Eastern European former socialist societies](https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780230274358) (<https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780230274358>) and their popular cultural production. As films, television series, and music videos become increasingly accessible to wider audiences on digital streaming platforms, they transition from the "archive" to the "exhibition window", inviting reassessment, including of collective memory, genre, and utopia. In this context, [Soviet space utopias](https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wrcn2) (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wrcn2>) attract a significant amount of attention, fuelling speculation about communism's projected futures, Amero-Soviet cultural exchange, and details about the production and reception contexts of famous films, such as Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972).

Popular-cultural references point to various aspects of the bygone space age, particularly its cultural and socio-political dimensions, and allow us to decode what kinds of philosophical, popular-scientific, aesthetic, technological, as well as the political and national imaginaries to which a particular space age belonged. At the same time, all of these imaginaries have evolved and been integrated into our [collective memory](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4885387?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents) (https://www.jstor.org/stable/4885387?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents), the assemblage of means or pathways into the past (media, technologies, and narratives) as well as the contents that these relate to (words, ideas, plots, and physical objects either coming directly from the past or commemorating it). To cut a long theoretical discussion short: what is socially communicated about an event does not necessarily coincide with the event's material ramifications. Collective memory and remembrance depend greatly on the policies and contingencies that allow certain texts to rise above the archives and other texts to be buried in them. Because of this, returns to the archives are particularly welcome during periods of debate over meanings and narratives, which are inevitably located at the crossroads of fiction and evidence, projection and historicization. It makes sense to reconsider the significance of science fiction cinema in the context of our collective memory of the space age, particularly as rumours about feats of [new space exploration](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/future-spaceflight) (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/future-spaceflight>) grow louder and are no longer reserved to national initiatives or governed exclusively by real-political agendas, and also as often nostalgic [film productions about the history of the space race](https://spaceneews.com/11-must-see-space-movies-for-anyone-serious-about-space/) (<https://spaceneews.com/11-must-see-space-movies-for-anyone-serious-about-space/>) multiply.

Where to Begin Excavating Past Futures?

Science fiction cinema offered images and narratives about the space age from long before the launch of the first space programs, let alone satellites. The long [history](https://raindance.org/the-history-of-sci-fi-films/) (<https://raindance.org/the-history-of-sci-fi-films/>) of this cinematic genre further suggests that the space age perhaps even needed to be narrated and realistically visualized before its inaugural events could take place, and that these events had to be recorded, that is filmed, in order to be at first [believable](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CX0pSjwLqI) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CX0pSjwLqI>) and then [disputable](https://sovietmoviesonline.com/fantastic/perve-na-lune) (<https://sovietmoviesonline.com/fantastic/perve-na-lune>) not long afterwards. Science fiction's imaginary depiction of the space age thus oscillates between belief (in technical, sociopolitical, and/or moral progress) and doubt. Furthermore, literary and cultural studies scholars have convincingly shown the persistence of certain overlaps or at least correspondences between existing societal problems and concerns, and the [preoccupations of science fiction productions](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244017723690) (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244017723690>) (books, films, series, videogames, etc.). It is therefore no surprise that utopian visions of *spacefaring* societies were a particularly common science-fiction trope of the twentieth century and its space age. The origins of the recent increase in popular and academic interest in past imaginaries of future societies are particularly interesting, as they coincide partly with a new interest in space exploration and partly with nostalgic [postmemories](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26304671?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents) (https://www.jstor.org/stable/26304671?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents) of twentieth-century utopias. All of these factors have contributed to a profound reevaluation of the symbolic, technological, aesthetic, and political significance of the once vanguard (or at least current) and now archived twentieth-century popular culture and its canons. Today these are being renegotiated at the crossroads of [fandom](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17503132.2020.1871191) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17503132.2020.1871191>), [technology](https://www.routledge.com/Russian-Aviation-Space-Flight-and-Visual-Culture/Strukov-Goscilo/book/9781138588202), drawing on newly available archival material, convincing academic case studies, and networks such as fan forums. Over the past two decades, these stakeholders have profoundly reshaped the international collective memory of twentieth-century space-age futures, creating space for an international polylogue between not only cinematic famous masterpieces – such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0062622/>) (1968), *Solaris* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1808482/>) (1968), *Solaris* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0069293/?ref=tt_sims_tt) (1972), and *Solaris* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0307479/?ref=tt_sims_tt) (2002) – but also between lesser-known productions from a range of national and ideological backgrounds. Finally, imaginaries of "the space-age future", once predominantly considered in chronological order as a reflection of technological progression and sociopolitical transformation, now form an estranged bricolage, a (media)archaeological site, and an exhibit of unexpected encounters between aesthetic styles, production contexts, and axiological positions. Perhaps most significantly, this rearrangement intervenes into one of the most influential discussions about the political potential of science fiction utopias initiated by Darko Suvin and embraced by Fredric Jameson. In an essay published as part of *The Blagoevgrad Theses*, Suvin (https://dl1.cuni.cz/pluginfile.php/849309/mod_resource/content/1/Suvin.pdf), for whom utopia is "the sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction", influentially remarked that:

...[w]e need radically liberating novums only. By 'radically liberating', I mean not only a new quality as opposed to a simple marketing difference, and I mean a novelty that is in critical opposition to the

