



“A dream that failed. Like space”: Reframing Anthropocentric Space Frontiers in Gibson and Sterling’s *Red Star, Winter Orbit*

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Abstract:

The fine distinction between curiosity and fanaticism holds much power in space exploration. The genre of Science Fiction has always accommodated exciting tales set in/of space, be it exploration, conquest, war or first-contact stories. Positioned in this literary tradition are the gritty cyberpunk narratives that depict decaying space stations, scavenging astronauts and the powerful technology-corporate interface. The paper studies one such short story titled *Red Star, Winter Orbit*, written by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, first published in *Omni* magazine in 1980 and later in the Cyberpunk anthologies *Burning Chrome* (1986) and *Mirrorshades* (1986). The story, set in an alternate future, dramatises the decay of a Soviet space station named ‘Kosmograd’ when it is deemed valueless following serious Cold War geopolitics. The paper argues that *Red Star, Winter Orbit* demonstrates how the notion of space exploration, deeply rooted in humanist ideals of conquest, culminates in a collapsing epistemic project led by a space settlement. The study advocates for reconfiguring cosmic understanding through the posthuman conceptualisation of ‘minor sciences’, addressing factors of outer space’s ‘geontological’ agency, fluidity and affective entanglements that render the human and non-human equally vulnerable. By situating the thesis where human/non-human agents, technology and cosmos interact, the study ultimately accentuates

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how the approach to space must be reframed, from a failed human frontier into a relational threshold of becoming-with the cosmos.

Keywords: space conquest, space frontier, geontology, minor sciences, posthumanism.

Introduction

Fantasies of space exploration and conquest existed long before the term Science Fiction (SF) came into force. From Luciano of Samosata's space travels, through Kepler's lunar adventures, to Francis Godwin's utopian space journeys, a trait furthered by H. G. Wells, Edgar Allan Poe and Jules Verne, among other SF stalwarts, the genre witnessed the birth of narrations that treated the desire for space exploration as an inherently human desire. Contrary to these, fuelled by a serious concern regarding the ramifications of space travel, few writers urged recognising the difference between curiosity and fanaticism when it comes to space exploration. Created in such a historical moment of the Anthropocene (an epoch of human domination influencing the Earth the most), fuelled by Cold War politics, is the short story anthology *Burning Chrome*.

The primary objective of the study is to trace the foundational humanist attitude of space conquest in *Red Star*, *Winter Orbit*. It attempts to seek answers to these research questions: What happens when space is viewed as a resourceful and therefore exploitable frontier? What humanist notions drive such an imperialist approach to cosmic exploration and cosmic studies? How does the failure of space research demonstrate a need for posthuman ethics in considering relational agents on a cosmic scale? To answer these questions, the story is first subjected to a posthumanist framework that tests the narrative for symbols, traits and ideals of humanism that render space as a human frontier. Secondly, the decay of a failed space station is closely read in parallel with the epistemological failure owing to the cosmic insignificance of humans. This decentralisation of the

humanist position of the rationally-superior human opens critical avenues for inclusive, distributed, embodied modes of knowledge generation that align with what Deleuze and Guattari propose as the ‘minor science’. This posthumanist reconfiguration promises a generation of relations, entanglements and becoming that is strictly delinked from humanism.

The short story *Red Star, Winter Orbit*, written as a collaborative project by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, was published at a significant historical moment in space exploration. With the Cold War Space Race as the backdrop, the decades from the 1950s to 1970s witnessed the Soviet Union and America competing for superiority by demonstrating their technological, scientific, economic, and, most importantly, ideological prowess. Gibson and Sterling merely expose one fragment of such a space race, with its anxieties, ramifications, implications and ethics. The scholar Tatiani G. Rapatzikou analyses the Gothic motifs in the story by observing the collapsing space station as a “symbol of the tension and uneasiness the characters or readers experience every time they deal with the artificiality of their technological world” (63). Similarly, science fiction critic Takayuki Tatsumi identifies a J. G. Ballardian inner space/outer space dichotomy in his introductory comment on the Japanese version of *Burning Chrome*. This dichotomy represents the failure of space settlement dreams to highlight the psychological impacts of space exploration on cosmonauts. While the story remains uninvoked in critical discourse except for its rendition of a failed space experience, there exists a critical vacuum where its portrayal of a humanist conquest culminating in an epistemic failure demands scrutiny. Building on this research gap, the paper argues that *Red Star, Winter Orbit* exposes how space exploration founded on humanist notions tends to disintegrate and ultimately fail to meet its intended purpose. The failure of the Soviet space station named ‘Kosmograd’ necessitates a reconstruction of the approach and ethics of cosmic research, acknowledging the purpose of ‘minor science’ as opposed

to the deeply humanist ‘royal science’. It demonstrates the need for a posthumanist approach that foregrounds a mutual recognition of the geontological agency inherent in space, that entangles and affects humans with technology and the cosmos.

Space Exploration: Humanist Fantasies and Failures

The Planetary Scientist Carl Sagan’s *Message to Mars Explorers* views exploration as an inherent human trait encoded as a result of evolution, “Maybe we’re on Mars because we have to be, because there’s a deep nomadic impulse built into us by the evolutionary process—we come, after all, from hunter-gatherers, and for 99.9% of our tenure on Earth we’ve been wanderers” (Popova). Another striking example of glorifying space colonisation in the name of exploration is observed in the case of the Space Frontier Foundation. The Space Frontier Federation (SFF), an American corporation advocating for human settlement in space, brandishes its inherently colonising perception of space. SFF’s credo proclaims that they are “an organization of people dedicated to opening the Space Frontier to human settlement as rapidly as possible ... creating a freer and more prosperous life for each generation by using the unlimited energy and material resources of space ... to unleash the power of free enterprise and lead a united humanity permanently into the Solar System” (The Space Frontier Foundation). The glaring problem here is the entitled hubris of corporations like these, with motives still deeply rooted in a humanist vision of space as something exploitable, colonisable, justifying prolonging human lifespan. It is such humanist entitlement that leads to the general perception of space as a resourceful, colonisable frontier in the short story. This centrality of humans in understanding the cosmos thus reveals a stark humanist affiliation in space exploration.

Red Star, Winter Orbit dramatises the limits of anthropocentric inclinations of space exploration through the decay of a Soviet space station named Kosmograd. This station is

envisioned as the emblem of the Soviet Union’s superiority in space exploration, demonstrating both military and informational advantage. It emerges as the manifestation of the Soviet technological splendour: “There were five docking spheres in Kosmograd, each with its three linked Salyuts. At opposite ends of the complex were the military installation and the satellite launchers” (Gibson and Sterling 79). An iron-fisted authority powers Kosmograd’s mission to further human knowledge by labelling space exploration as a patriotic duty.

Kosmograd celebrates historical human conquest of space. As a “Museum of the Soviet Triumph in Space”, it exists as a symbol of all space- and technology-related victories that emerged from the Soviet Union, going beyond terrestrial boundaries (Gibson and Sterling 77). But this transfer across boundaries must be viewed not as a triumphant settlement, but as an intruding colonisation. However, this understanding fails to surface in the story, because of the Anthropocentric traps that essentially entail the Soviet space project. “The gold-framed portraits of the great visionaries of space, at the faces of Tsiolkovsky, Rynin, Tupolev. Below these, in slightly smaller frames, were portraits of Verne, Goddard, and O’Neill”, represents how the historical colonisation of space was treated as another victorious event of a nation (Gibson and Sterling 82). The Soviet space project in the story repeatedly views space as a frontier to be conquered and colonised, to prove their might to the world in general. This is a strictly humanist craving to be at the centre of global and, in our case, cosmic systems. Capturing the essence of this anthropocentric human entitlement, Uli writes,

The main problem of this attitude is anthropocentrism, which manifests itself in science as a limitation of the possibilities of cognition: since the human mind cognizes, many problems are recognized as pseudoproblems, or problems that have

no solution ... Man not only “fitted” himself into the natural environment, but led it. (Uli 2)

Therefore, Kosmograd emerged as a symbol of human conquest of space, the Soviet Union’s scientific superiority, technological progress and ultimately mastery of space. It emerges as the epitome of what Deleuze and Guattari view as the ‘royal science’. This pedestals the human, allowing for humanist fantasies of space colonisation at the cost of the extraterrestrial boundaries.

Essential to the critique of Anthropocentrism is the breaking away from any universal, overarching primary qualities associated with and endowed to the human species and towards an “ecological egalitarianism” (Naess 96). Kosmograd becomes what Povinelli identifies as “The Carbon Imaginary” (8). She defines ‘The Carbon Imaginary’,

The Carbon Imaginary lodges the superiority of Life into Being by transposing biological concepts such as metabolism and its key events, such as birth, growth-reproduction, death, and ontological concepts, such as event, conatus/affectus, and finitude. (Povinelli 8)

It foregrounds the “superiority of Life into Being” rather than the “scarred meeting place where each can exchange conceptual intensities, thrills, wonders, anxieties, perhaps terrors, of the other of Life, namely the Inert, Inanimate, Barren.” (Povinelli 8). The failure of Kosmograd embodies this Carbon Imaginary, in which life is viewed as a success over the inert, inanimate, barren space which serves as a mere backdrop. By privileging the biological aspects of life and being – ‘biontology’ – as Povinelli calls it, Kosmograd allows for a colonialist approach to the non-life frontiers of space. Kosmograd thus emerges as a “scarred space”, where the ontological is revealed to be “biontology” as it distinguishes between life and non-life, and where the mastery of anthropocentric notions is reinforced. (Povinelli 8).

The story follows the experience of “Colonel Yuri Vasilevich Korolev, first man on Mars!” through whom the writers showcase the failure of Kosmograd's missions (Gibson and Sterling 91). Once a respected Colonel in the Military, he inhabits Kosmograd among other cosmonauts in a repulsive condition. He suffers the ramifications of staying in the space station for decades, and his struggles are too visceral:

His arthritic hand had swollen again during sleep; the wrist was bird-bone thin from calcium loss. Twenty years had passed since he'd last known gravity; he'd grown old in orbit ... broken veins blotched his left cheek and temple, another legacy from the blowout that had crippled him. (Gibson and Sterling 77)

This somatic failure is a common thread connecting all inhabitants of Kosmograd, yet his is the direct dissolution of the image of the strong, intelligent man, signifying the dissolution of the humanist man. He repeatedly suffers nightmares of his experience with the Soviet war: “It had been fifty years, yet he was suddenly and very intensely afraid. He couldn't remember ever having been this frightened” (Gibson and Sterling 80). He is haunted by “[w]hispers of parasitism, of anti-Soviet activity, of the waiting chemical horrors of the psikuska” (Gibson and Sterling 80).

The somatic deterioration is coupled with a psychological breakdown when he understands that Kosmograd is being shut down. The news intercepts read:

PREPARATIONS AT BAIKONUR COSMODROME...PROVE RUSSIANS AT
LAST READY...TO SCRAP ARMED SPACE STATION COMIC CITY ...
BUILT AT TURN OF CENTURY AS BRIDGEHEAD TO
SPACE...AMBITIOUS PROJECT CRIPPLED BY FAILURE OF LUNAR
MINING.” (Gibson and Sterling 81)

This moment of recognising space exploration as a failure is not merely political. We understand through his disorganisation that it is also an ontological and affective defeat. Kosmograd, once a symbol of the Soviet Union's triumphs, is now a decaying grave of its glory. Kosmograd's decay is also proved to be an epistemological failure: “the Martian landscape reduced to the idealistic kitsch of Soviet Socialist realism” (Gibson and Sterling 83). With the announcement of scraping it off, the researchers are disheartened at how cosmic exploration was only an excuse to prove human sovereignty in space. When the Cold War politics subsided on Earth, Kosmograd was labelled useless, making it a meaningless meander. The Colonel is reminded of how “Kosmograd was a dream, Colonel. A dream that failed. Like space” and how “Kosmograd is finished” (Gibson and Sterling 84). Some inhabitants are relieved to escape the “prison”-like existence in Kosmograd (Gibson and Sterling 85). Meanwhile, others lament the cosmic insignificance of humans: “Why has it all gone this way, Colonel? Why is it ending now? When I was small I saw all this on television. Our future in space was forever –” (Gibson and Sterling 89). Even when the inhabitants execute a strike to voice their rejection of shutting the space station down, the authorities refuse to listen to them. So, they escape through Salyuts, while the Colonel chooses to stay.

Understanding Michael Zimmerman’s view on Deep Ecology, Uli concludes that “the responsibility for the environmental catastrophes of our time should be assigned to the anthropocentric attitude that prevails in modern culture” (2). Similarly, the environmental decay of the Kosmograd is due to an anthropocentric intent of knowledge production for the ‘greater good’, rather than addressing the needs of the inhabitants. They’re treated as corporate agents placed in the space station solely for a purpose, and their individualities are ignored as irrelevant. Kosmograd is found to be in a state of decay,

For forty years the inhabitants of Kosmograd had fought an antiseptic war against mold and mildew. Dust, grease, and vapor wouldn't settle in free fall, and spore lurked everywhere – padding, in clothing, in the ventilation ducts. In the warm, moist petri-dish atmosphere, they spread like oil slicks. Now there was a reek of dry rot in the air, overlaid with ominous whiffs of burning insulation.

(Gibson and Sterling 87)

The resulting decay of the Kosmograd is a mirror of the decaying humanist ideals that are barely winning at the hands of the post-anthropocentric relations. This decay is not merely physical, but a symbolic decay of the Vitruvian Renaissance perfection of humans. It is the epitome of bureaucratic stagnation, like the abandonment of Sergei Krikalev, when the post-anthropocentric reality becomes too unbearably complex – a reconfiguration – that posthumanists believe is very potent. One cosmonaut plays a recording of “Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture” upon hearing the closure of Kosmograd (Gibson and Sterling 88). Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's overture is a cinematic fusillade of cannons, intended to commemorate Russia's victory against the French invasion of the year 1812. This piece, holding great significance in Russian history, becomes a symbol of how the cosmonauts blast through the corporate system, similar to a Deleuzian ‘line of flight’. This gives a sense of desperate grasping for their historical identity amidst decay.

Colonel Yuri's solitude in space is reminiscent of Sergei Konstantinovich Krikalev, whose stay in the Soviet space station Mir was unexpectedly delayed by twice the planned duration. Sergei Krikalev was even called the “last Soviet citizen in space” (Sinelschikova) for staying in space during the period when the Soviet Union dissolved and Russia emerged. He survived in Mir, alone and with no connection to the authorities on Earth, because no government took charge of

the space missions during the break of War. His forlorn state of existence is mirrored in the case of Colonel Yuri. As the last man of Kosmograd, Yuri

spent uncounted hours screening the museum’s library of tapes. A fitting pursuit for the Last Man in Space who had once been the First Man on Mars. He became obsessed with the icon of Gagarin, endlessly rerunning the grainy television images of the Sixties, the newsreels that led so unalterably to the cosmonaut’s death. The stale air of Kosmograd swam with the spirits of martyrs. Gagarin, the first Salyut crew, the Americans roasted alive in their squat Apollo.

(Gibson and Sterling 94)

This situation of Colonel Yuri isn't a purely fictional exaggeration, but a reality when space missions still adhered to a humanist perception of space frontiers. Ultimately, these aspects demonstrate the decentering of human superiority, the failure of humanist cosmic exploration and the underlying desire for colonisation.

The Need for Posthumanist Reconfiguration

Igor Krtolica argues that the break from an anthropocentric perception of nature is fuelled by a competing “environmental ethics, which challenge moral anthropocentrism and substitute it with an ethics that is sometimes pathocentric, sometimes biocentric, sometimes ecocentric” (1). Space is not a failed frontier but rather a relational threshold of becoming-with everything. The paper argues that such a relational becoming can only emerge from “minor sciences” and not from the “royal sciences”, conceptions provided by Deleuze and Guattari (372).

Posthumanism demands a “non-anthropocentric” understanding of life (van den Hengel 3). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose two distinct sciences – royal and minor – as two

modalities of reasoning. They call “royal science” as “State science” (Deleuze and Guattari 21). They write that “the State always finds it necessary to repress the nomad and minor sciences ... it does so not because the content of these sciences is inexact or imperfect, or because of their magic or initiatory character, but because they imply a division of labor opposed to the norms of the State” (27). This is evident when the cosmonauts are shunned for trying to choose non-party-sponsored services, the party being the KGB. The story depicts the subversive acts of Kosmograd’s inhabitants when they utilise media, food, and fashion, whose circulation is not favoured by the government. They secretly share a “personal collection of samisdata, digitized pop music, his boyhood favorites from the Eighties. He had British groups taped from West German radio, Warsaw Pact heavy metal, American imports from the black market. Putting on his headphones, he punched for the Czesochowa reggae of Brygada Kryzys”, implying their rebellious ‘punk’ nature (Gibson and Sterling 79). This proves how Kosmograd is “a single field of interaction in which royal science continually appropriates the contents of vague or nomad science while nomad science continually cuts the contents of royal science loose” (Deleuze and Guattari 27). The cosmonauts’ refusal to blindly absorb the popularised, universalised cultural media and instead choosing to be loose from the iron fists signals their attempt to embrace minor sciences and avoid the grand narratives.

After the evacuation of Kosmograd, Colonel Yuri finds newcomers to his station. They are the reason his ideals are completely reconfigured. This conversation Yuri has with one of them regarding their technology reaching Kosmograd fascinates how a minor scientific approach, instead of a state-approved royal approach, could be the farthest from a colonialist attitude towards space.

‘But you don’t even have a launchpad,’ he said. ‘Launchpad?’ the man said, laughing. ‘What we do, we haul these surplus booster engines up the cables to the balloons, drop ’em, and fire ’em in midair.’

‘That’s insane,’ Korolev said.

‘Got us here, didn’t it?’ Korolev nodded. If this was all a dream, it was a very peculiar one. (Gibson and Sterling 96)

Heidegger proposes a “back to things” maxim, where he demands humans “see the being as being itself in its being”, which urges one to break away from anthropocentric assumptions (Heidegger 93). The newcomers of Kosmograd propose and practice such a posthumanist view of space by respecting and treating the non-life inert aspects of it as participatory and not merely a backdrop to our understanding. When Yuri questions their intentions, they simply say,

We told you. To live here. We can enlarge this thing, maybe build more. They said we’d never make it living in the balloons, but we were the only ones who could make them work. It was our one chance to get out here on our own. Who’d want to live out here for the sake of some government, some army brass, a bunch of pen pushers? You have to want a frontier – want it in your bones, right? (Gibson and Sterling 96)

They do not observe space as a human frontier waiting for colonisation, but instead as a ground for relational becoming, life and non-life alike. Furthermore, they propose that they are attempting to understand space as non-life with agency, without the humanist assumption of “[n]onlife as a coldness of space” (Povinelli 1).

The newcomers claim that they were able to achieve settlement in sustainable solar balloons:

High above a fleece of stratocumulus floated five solar balloons, mirrored geodesic spheres tethered by power lines; they had been a cheaper substitute for a grandiose American plan to build solar-powered satellites. The things worked, Korolev supposed, because for the last decade he'd watched them multiply. (Gibson and Sterling 86)

This understanding of cosmic responsibility and ecological awareness stems not from them following the royal science, but from assembling a sustainable minor science for prolonging human life. This revamped approach to space promises the emergence of a relational, embodied knowledge “conceived both in relation to the parts that compose it and in relation to a larger whole of which it is itself a part” (Fischbach 42). This proves how a posthumanist reconfiguration of space research will produce an intelligence that is “heuristic ... finite, situational, and embodied” (Shaviro 85). Therefore, they treat the intersection of technology, human and cosmos not as incidental, but as constitutive. When they volunteered to repair the decaying Kosmograd towards the end of the story, much to Yuri's shock and awe, they prove their understanding of life and non-life interaction in space. Their arrival marks an epistemological turning point, when Yuri felt confident enough to reframe his understanding of space exploration as a royal science. Yuri proclaims, “‘Tell them...’ and every cliché came rushing to him with absolute lightness that made him want to laugh hysterically: One small step...We came in peace...Workers of the world...’ You must tell them that I need it,’ he said, pinching his shrunken wrist, ‘in my very bones’”, completely revamping his humanist notions for a more relational posthumanist perception of space, for the first time in decades (Gibson and Sterling 93). Therefore, the study demands a shift from a humanist conquest to a more relational, embedded and geontological perspective on space exploration.

Conclusion

The study of *Red Star, Winter Orbit* exposes how space is evidently framed as a frontier for human colonisation, when fuelled by a stubborn anthropocentric royal science, both monumental and state-sponsored. This allows for understanding the Kosmograd as Povinelli's Carbon Imaginary, where life is the determining factor of Being. The decay of Kosmograd is a dramatisation of the failure of humanist epistemological projects of space exploration, marking it as Povinelli's 'scarred meeting place' that is haunted by technological obsolescence and earthly politics. These call for a shift from royal science to minor science that allows for relational, fluid and embodied sources of knowledge, accepting and recognising the geontological agency of space. Ultimately, through this posthumanist epistemology of minor sciences of space research and approach, the study reframes space exploration as not a defeat, but an opportunity to become-with.

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