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By Artem Magun and Oxana Timofeeva

"Your apartments are nice and tidy, but the stairways are covered with shit. What can you call this but a cult of space?"

à some interesting reflections on space, ludic and insightful, from Chto Delat?/ What Is To Be Done.

http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?Itemid=127&id=267&option=com_content&task=view

Reads very well with Thomas Campbell and Dmitry Vorobyev's account of anti-privatisation/regen protests in St Petersburg elsewhere on metamute.org

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Another Space. A Little Tragedy

Artiom Magun

Aeneas descends into the underworld and talks to his father Anchises, telling him about the modern age and about his wanderings, including a recent journey to Russia.

Chorus of the dead: Men have lately become astonishingly rich. They have dug holes throughout the Earth, covered it with their anthills, and turned space into a complex labyrinth, increasing its surface billions of times. They have built themselves an aleph-a camera in a room with which they penetrate the most hidden corners of the world. The Russian people are particularly obsessed with interiors. The TV there doesn't show public squares anymore, but interiors where the heroes dash about, buried alive. Advertisements for medicine show the recesses of the body, and reports from outer space tell of the new sauna on board the spaceship.

Aeneas: Yes, it is a triumph. The monumental pyramids of this triumph rise higher and higher.

Chorus: Earlier, the wealth of each man was limited by a territory-by his land, by his family, by his work, by his nation-state. Now it's different: he looks for many small places, and into each of them he penetrates and curls up into a ball. In earlier times only the pharaoh had a pyramid, now everyone has one. Or almost everyone.

Long live Hades! Long live Persephone!

Aeneas: But those who are richer have spacious homes. Recently in Russia, a wealthy acquaintance of mine, who had just built a country house, told me, "Before, I would go to the Caribbean and sense the wide open space. Now, I have a country house of such size that I don't feel any awe when I go to the islands. But the good thing is, I leave work, get into my car, and I'm immediately at home!"

It's just as Novalis said of the philosopher: he wants to be at home everywhere.

Anchises: So, the new Russian bourgeoisie is the fruition of philosophy.

But yes, indeed, it looks as if the common Russian is possessed by a mania for assimilating and appropriating space, as well as for adorning it. There is a touching utopianism in this: earlier, people aspired towards the big country of the future; now, everyone digs themselves burrows. Some are more spacious than others, of course, but most people turn their fifty square meters into a communist paradise. Or a low-vaulted Orthodox temple.

Aeneas: But as wasn't the case with communism or the temple, they think they are masters of these houses: they try to "make them homey." While Soviet architecture expressed men's impotence in the face of technology, their alienation, today they build tall apartment buildings and adorn them with amusing trifles. One remembers what God tells Job about Leviathan: "Shalt thou play with him as with a bird, or tie him up for thy handmaids?"

This is simply naive: human beings can never be inside a place, at least as long as they're alive. Dwelling means not only that human beings are guests in their homes, but also that in a sense they can't even enter them. All they can do is look through the keyhole, as into a TV set.

Hence, the utopianism: one may live well only in a utopia, only in the future. Thus, for Russia to become a livable country, where humans could actually feel at home, we need a certain piety -I'm not afraid to use this word-with regard to space.

Anchises: That is, some techniques of distancing and estrangement.

Chorus (several voices):

-They seized the common space!

-They planted hedgerows on the revolutionary square!

-They subordinated the city to a giant state church!

Aeneas: Yes, again it is the question of the temple! Templum means "separate," "carved out." No one could enter our ancient temples but the priests-one could only walk around them!

Anchises: But there were market squares, where assemblies took place, but there were no temples there.

Aeneas: Any temple is a temple of space, which preserves its habitability. Just like a TV set, just like an Orthodox church.

Anchises: Have the priests seduced you, my son?

Aeneas: Sorry, dad! I know you've been always an Epicurean, but space is in general a religious and mystical concept, and a consistent materialist doesn't have a right to recognize it. We imagine "space" in the places and spaces we cannot enter. And then this fantastic space is projected back here, into our dwellings.

So there are temples that bring together believers, and there are some that remain impenetrable.

But all "temples" are eventually colonized and become places of power.

Anchises: Then the best temple is a ruined temple. One that's been blown up, for instance.

Chorus: Let us build roads instead of walls! Men will everywhere come as guests! Peace to the huts, war to the palaces! Glory to Saint January!

Anchises: One of our descendants, an Afro-Roman, Aurelius Augustine, and one more, a distant one, Tony Negri-they say outright that men are always on the road: they only need good roads, sleeping compartments, and cheap motels. (Here in Hades I accompany the souls that are preparing for birth and chat with my descendants.)

Aeneas: In Russia, they had enough of this travel romanticism in the 1970s. "My friend, believe in the road." Now, they dream rather of places: not only interiors but of a week on a paradise island. On an island you are indeed like a pilgrim.

Contemporary man wants both to decorate his house and go visiting. And places gape and beckon from all sides. You, our fathers and grandfathers, were seduced by the religion of large spaces, the

ocean wind and so forth, and we are seduced by the religion of the aura. See Ilya Kabakov's installations.

Anchises: Where are the large spaces, then?

Aeneas: Large spaces are now something like a bathhouse with spiders-dark and empty. Its pieces are captured and appropriated by tall buildings-inhabited temple-pyramids.

Though, of course, big deeds are done in the world, they also are done in front of screens and behind control boards, through networks and tunnels that connect separate places with each other. The workers are comfortable at their control boards. And terrorists, those who smash through walls, they hide in caves. They also cannot walk in the wind-the satellites hunt them.

Anchises: But then my son, your desire is fulfilled. You, our descendants, have created a taboo temple out of space: you don't go inside it, but hide from it in your houses. Your apartments are nice and tidy, but the stairways are covered with shit. What can you call this but a cult of space?

This is the irony of dialectics. You complain that there is no open space, that there is nothing empty anymore, that all is privatized. Well, very good, so you liberated it entirely, and watch from satellites so that no one breaks in.

Space itself is so enormous that it deprives you of strength and scatters you throughout the world, and so that all you think of is rest. Space has turned you into its submissive slaves.

Aeneas: Yes, but that's because our religion is one that's protected, with a god who's a guard.

Anchises: Well, what is to be done, then? Create national parks? You're a mystic and an obscurantist! I'm telling you this as the soul of a man who saw much in his life.

Chorus: Men have built much and destroyed much! They have forced many to their knees and themselves sprawled at the feet of many!

But we love them not for this, but for the fact that they are utopian!

To be utopian means not to throw everything into one place, but to bring contradictory poles together, to combine what cannot be combined: sovereignty and democracy, resourcefulness and powerlessness, mastery and slavery. Not in the sense of reconciliation but in the sense of coexistence, side by side.

Only such an impossible image can open an unguarded space (the other space, the space of rupture and potential difference) because it does not attract or repulse, but dictates transformation and revolution. This does not mean that utopia will be reached, but that it establishes the utopian-revolutionary mode of dwelling in a country.

We need not piety but fidelity to an agonizing dream!

Artem Magun (born 1974) - philosopher, lives in St. Petersburg,
member of workgroup "Chto Delat?"
translated by the author (edited by Thomas Campbell)

Free Ad Space

Oxana Timofeeva

Mit deinen Augen, welche mich
von der verbrauchten Schwelle sich befreien,
hebst du ganz langsam einen schwarzen Baum

und stellst ihn vor den Himmel: schlank, allein.
Und hast die Welt gemacht. Und sie ist groß
und wie ein Wort, das noch im Schweigen reift.
Und wie dein Wille ihren Sinn begreift,
lassen sie deine Augen zärtlich los...*

Rainer Maria Rilke

Of all things, containing all things, space - res extensa - is given to us as a place that all things occupy, as things themselves that occupy places, and as gaps between things where the wind blows freely, interstices that contain nothing but unmoving air - the vaguest of all things, whose existence we often forget.

Depending on how one thinks the extension of space - as something empty or as something full - two opposing ontological perspectives arise. Whoever says that extension is an empty container for the subsequent agglomeration of things believes in the "fundamental unity of Being." Whoever insists upon the abundance of what not, sees the meaning of this abundance in abundance itself, that is, in the "multiplicity of beings".

Moreover, space is associated with the notion of freedom. Space is the wayfarer's great wide open, a space to be crossed in wandering. ** But is space really free? Does it even contain free places? Not empty, but free; empty space and free space are different things. What freedom can there be in emptiness, where there is nothing at all?

"Free ad space!", "This is a place for your ad!" "Your billboard could be here": the people who put up slogans like these to lease out any location that seems vacant are called "space brokers." But the places for advertisements are not free. They are empty.

Ad space may still be empty, but it is quickly filled: advertisements on tables and chairs, on cupboards and closets, on dishes and cups, walls, windows, the ceiling, on the roadside, on clothing, against the backdrop of a landscape, on a woman's body, and even on the face of someone who has been executed or is about to be executed. Open spaces (sky, mountain, forest, footpath, body of water, animals running wild) are fixed and frozen in photographic immobility, framed by ugly little logotypes.

This is how world appears in ad space. It fits fully into the capacious emptiness of an ontological unity: despite its apparent variety, advertising has an ontological guarantee. The uniformity of the money-mass guarantees the multiplicity of commodity forms.

Ad space presents itself as a wall, a flatscreen. On one side, there are commodities; on the other side, there is money. But money is not a thing, but a sign of other-sided emptiness, which is exchanged for a thing. Anything can be made into a commodity, gauged by the measure of this emptiness. The price of a thing, related to nothingness through money, is established by how much ad space it occupies.

The world packed and piled shelf-high with commodities belongs to the empty mass of money, since this mass is the unifying unity of nothingness in which this world hangs suspended like condensation. In it, not only movement but even breathing are impossible.

Space needs to be freed.

Guy Debord writes: "Proletarian revolution is the critique of human geography through which individuals and communities have to create places and events suitable for the appropriation, no longer just of their labor, but of their total history. In this game's changing space, and in the freely chosen variations in the game's rules, the autonomy of place can be rediscovered without the reintroduction of an exclusive attachment to the land, thus bringing back the reality of the voyage and of life understood as a voyage which contains its entire meaning within itself."

An insidious melancholia seeps from this critique, turning it about face to bygone times, to which it is necessary to return. But what if there was never such a thing as "the autonomy of place"? Didn't space always belong to someone: to the despot, the owner, the master, or other deputies of the emptiness into which things are placed?

To free space - not again, but for the first time - one needs to search for the fullness and freedom of

spaciousness. A space free of money-mass, things free of commodity form: this is the kind of world that we have yet to make together.

* With your eyes, which in their fatigue can just barely / free themselves from the worn-out thresholds,
/ very slowly, lift a single black tree / and place it against the sky, slender and alone. / With this you
have made the world. / And it is large / and like a word that is still ripening in silence. / And, just as
your will grasps their meaning, / they in turn will let go, delicately, of your eyes ...

** In the original, the author plays a Heideggerian game with the etymology of the Russian word
prostranstvo (=space), which is a prostor (=expanse) for stransvie (=wandering).