

Voyage through Space, Time and Utopian Modernism in *Ikarie XB 1*⁰⁰¹

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for Oriole Cullen

At the very beginning Thomas More designated utopia as a place, an island in the distant South Seas. This designation underwent changes later so that it left space and entered time. Indeed, the Utopians, especially those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transposed the wishland more into the future.

--Ernst Bloch⁰⁰²

In 1963, Chris Marker's experimental film *La Jetée* won the *Grand Prix* at the newly instituted Science Fiction Film Festival in Trieste. The award, evocatively titled "Golden Spaceship", was shared with the Czechoslovak film *Ikarie XB 1* (Ikarus XB 1), directed by Jindřich Polák. Marker's hauntingly enigmatic featurette has since come to be recognised as one of cinema's great masterpieces, which has influenced filmmakers as well as visual artists, and inspired countless philosophical and critical reflections.⁰⁰³ In contrast, *Ikarie XB 1*, one of the very few Czechoslovak science fiction films to enjoy considerable export success, has largely been forgotten and has only recently become the subject of renewed interest both within and without the science fiction community. With recent DVD releases for the Czech and international markets, *Ikarie XB 1* is now gaining something of a following. It is

001 With grateful thanks to Eliška Malečková at NFA Prague and Matěj Kadlec at Barrandov Studios for their patient assistance with my research.

002 Bloch cited in: 'Something's Missing. A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing' (with moderator Horst Krüger, 1964). In: Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature. Selected Essays*. Cambridge, MA – London: MIT Press 1988, p. 3.

003 For an account of *La Jetée*'s legacy, see Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker. Memories of the Future*. London: Reaktion Books 2004, p. 87.

being appreciated as a remarkable example of socialist utopia,⁰⁰⁴ and is regularly mentioned on blogs in connection with another science fiction cinema icon, Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which it possibly informed in more than one way.⁰⁰⁵ On the face of it, the joint festival award thrust together an unlikely pair of films. Marker's is a personal *ciné-roman* aligned with the progressive artistic and intellectual milieu of the French New Wave. In contrast, *Ikarie XB 1* is an expensively produced, state-sponsored space opera that has all the makings of soft communist propaganda.⁰⁰⁶ Where *La Jetée* is mournful in its tone, *Ikarie XB 1* is serenely optimistic. In form and content, *La Jetée* sits on the margins of conventional science fiction: told almost exclusively through still photographs, its means are almost iconoclastic. *Ikarie XB 1*, on the other hand, is a genre film that gives free rein to picturing tomorrow's world as a fully-formed reality.

And yet, despite all their differences, the "chance encounter" between these two films made in the middle of the Cold War, throws up a surprising correspondence. Both use science fiction fantasy to conjure multiple futures to ultimately speak about the desires and fears of the present. As the imagined time zones collide against each other, their utopian and dystopian visions intersect in fascinating ways. In this chapter I focus on Polák's film alone, and for the most part examine what Marker demonstrably turns away from: a fashioning of the future as a world to live in and a world to look at. It is the people, their environments and objects in

their everyday context that form the core of my analysis here. But in the final part I adopt *La Jetée* as a lens through which to look at the less visible, though no less significant, aspects of *Ikarie XB 1* that are to do with its figuration of time. Though thematically less vital than in *La Jetée*, time in *Ikarie XB 1* too becomes a prominent and recurrent motif which, similarly, serves as a means of posing questions of the human condition.

From Outer Space to Inner Space

The man-made satellite streaking soundlessly across the blackness of outer space. The dark, lustrous eyes of the dog gazing out of the tiny window. In the infinite loneliness of space, what could Laika possibly be looking at?

--Haruki Murakami, *Sputnik Sweetheart*

Ikarie XB 1 was loosely adapted from Polish author Stanisław Lem's novel *Obłok Magellana* (The Magellan Nebula), published in 1955 and translated into Czech in 1956. Lem was at this time a rising star of science fiction literature, especially popular in Eastern Europe, and would eventually gain international notoriety during the 1960s with the translations of his novel *Solaris* and its subsequent film adaptation by Andrei Tarkovsky. Set in the thirty-second century, *Obłok Magellana* envisages an idealised communist civilisation whose yearning for knowledge spurs them to travel into previously unimaginable reaches of the universe. Over 200 people board the gigantic space ship *Gea* in the hope of finding extra-terrestrial intelligence in the star system of Alpha Centauri thousands of light years away. The lengthy novel ends with the discovery of an inhabited planet.

At a first glance, Polák's film shares much with Lem's novel: the basics of the plot, including its optimistic ending, its faith in humanity's evolution for the better and its technocracy. It also pursues the philosophical perspective that defines Lem's early work, what Andrzej Stoff described as a belief in the "permanence of human nature [as] the last reference point in a world of constant change".⁰⁰⁷ However, at a closer look, there are important differences in the two. With the crew reduced to 40, the ship (called *Ikarie*) less colossal in its proportions and the time-frame compressed, the film portrays space, time and human interactions within them on a much more modest scale. It adds new personal and inter-personal conflicts and for the most part eliminates the book's expansive reflections on science, politics, history and man's aesthetic experience.⁰⁰⁸ There is also a shift in the overall ideo-

004 For recent analyses of *Ikarie*, see for example Ivan Adamovič, Stříbrné komety filmového plátna. In: Ivan Adamovič – Tomáš Pospiszyl (eds.), *Planeta Eden. Svět zítřka v socialistickém Československu 1948–1978*. Prague: Arbor Vitae 2010, pp. 174–193; Otto Beneš's BA Dissertation *Ikarie XB 1. Svět zítřka v socialistickém Československu. Neoformalistická analýza filmu Ikarie XB 1*. Brno: Teorie a dějiny filmu a audiovizuální kultury, Filozofická fakulta, Masaryk University 2013; the essay "Ikarie XB-1" and video "appreciation" by Michael Brooke and Kim Newman respectively, published in conjunction with the release of *Second Run's* DVD in 2013. For examples of comprehensive web magazine entries and blogs devoted to the film see also Glenn Erickson's review on <http://www.dvdtalk.com/dvdsavant/s1867ikar.html> [accessed 10. 6. 2016] and Todd Stadtman's thoughtful analysis from 2013: <http://teleport-city.com/2013/02/26/ikarie-xb-1/> [accessed 10. 6. 2016]. An interesting creative response to the film was the art installation "Report on the Construction of a Spaceship Module", organised by a group of Transit curators at the New Museum in New York (01/22/14 – 04/13/14). Available online; <http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/report-on-the-construction-of-a-spaceship-module> [accessed 10. 6. 2016]. See also Brenda Byrne's article *Ikarie XB 1 and the Socialist Sci-fi Spaceship*. Available online; <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/jan/23/Ikarie-socialist-spaceship/> [accessed 10. 6. 2016].

005 Kubrick's assistant Anthony Frewin claims that the director saw the film in preparation for *2001*, though he stresses he wasn't "inspired" by it: see BFI's web-exclusive article by Nick Wrigley *Stanley Kubrick, cinephile*, available online <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/polls-surveys/stanley-kubrick-cinephile> [accessed 10. 6. 2016]. Although there is no further evidence, Frewin's memory is likely to be true. Kubrick was famously a voracious researcher and it is documented in his archives he requested copies of little-known science fiction films. For a comparison between the two films, see for example Pablo Kjolseth's 2011 post on <http://moviemorlocks.com/2011/08/14/star-childs-from-soviet-union-era-czechoslovakia-to-kubrick/> [accessed 10. 6. 2016]. Thanks also to Simone Odino of @Kubrickmeets group for sharing with me his thoughts on the subject.

006 As Ivan Adamovič stresses, the scriptwriter Pavel Juráček himself described the film as a political "commission": I. Adamovič, op. cit., p. 184. See also Pavel Taussig's commentary in *Slovo Historika*, in "Bonusové materiály", DVD *Ikarie XB 1* (Filmexport Home Video 2011).

007 Andrzej Stoff, Stanisław Lem. In: Bernard A. Cock (ed.), *Europe Since 1945: An Encyclopedia*. New York – London: Garland Publishing Inc. 2001, p. 778.

008 For a fuller comparison of Lem's *The Magellan Nebula* and Polák's *Ikarie XB 1* see Krzysztof Loska, Lem on Film. In: Peter Swirski (ed.), *The Art and Science of Stanisław Lem*. Montréal – London: McGill-Queen's University Press 2006, pp. 153–8.

logical tone. In transposing the book into a changed historical context, the film only reproduces some of Lem's soc-realist convictions while ostensibly modifying others.

Ikarie XB 1 was created at a particularly loaded historical moment. The years that separate its 1963 release from the novel's publication coincided with an increased frenzy in the "space race", as the Soviets and the Americans began to score their significant "firsts" in a quest for cosmic dominance. In 1955, the U.S. president Eisenhower announced plans to put into space the first artificial satellite, almost immediately followed by the Soviets' pledge to beat them to it. The work on the script began in 1958, in the wake of the launch of Sputnik 1 and Sputnik 2 (carrying Laika as the first living being in space) the previous year, and its preproduction at Prague's Barrandov Studios commenced only months after the first man in space, Yuri Gagarin, completed an orbit of the Earth in April 1961. This was a period that witnessed almost fantastical achievements of science and technology, one that in the words of a contemporary Czechoslovak documentary achieved a "breaking-through of cosmic frontiers".⁰⁰⁹ It was in this heady atmosphere of awe and anticipation that Polák and co-author of *Ikarie's* script Pavel Juráček presumably felt justified to move the temporal setting of Lem's future back by a whole millennium, to the twenty-second century, only 200 years away from their own present.

Literary tales of space travel containing elaborate accounts of science (or quasi-science) go back to Jules Verne's novel *De la Terre à la Lune* (From the Earth to the Moon, 1865). An interesting cinematic example of a "realistic" space excursion is the Danish silent film *Himmelskibet* (Trip to Mars, 1918) about a trip to Mars.⁰¹⁰ Turning the flight itself into an adventure, *Himmelskibet* is also considered to be an early cinematic space opera, a sub-genre of science fiction that in literature didn't establish itself until the 1920s, most notably with Edward E. "Doc" Smith's early interstellar novel *The Skylark of Space* (written by 1919 and published in 1928). Fiction pre-dated, and greatly stimulated, scientific research. At times, the two would meaningfully intersect, as for example in Fritz Lang's 1929 film *Die Frau im Mond* (The Woman in the Moon).⁰¹¹ But the space programme of the 1950s ushered in a radically new era of intensified scientific activity, in which dreams were being turned into reality in a sustained manner. This only further inflamed the public's imagination and appetite for discovery.

A golden age of science fiction cinema, the 1950s gave birth to an extraordinary array of space exploration films, both fictional and documentary (and occasionally mixed). Some of these openly proclaimed that in the future space travel

would become commonplace. Hollywood was the leading producer of thrilling space extravaganzas, many of which were in colour (*Destination Moon*, 1950, *Flight to Mars*, 1950, *Conquest of Space*, 1955, *This Island Earth*, 1955, *Forbidden Planet*, 1956). Soon enough, other countries outside of America also got in on the act, most notably Britain (*Spaceways*, 1953, *The Quatermass Xperiment*, 1955) and Japan 宇宙大戦争 (Battle in Outer Space, 1959). Towards the end of the decade, Eastern bloc countries began to trade on the Soviets' victorious position in the space race, with films including the Soviet *Дорога к звёздам* (Road to The Stars, 1958) and *Небо зовёт* (Battle Beyond the Sun, 1959), the GDR-Polish co-production *Der schweigende Stern* (The Silent Star, 1960), and *Muž z prvního století* (Man from the First Century, 1962), Czechoslovakia's first science fiction film featuring space travel.⁰¹²

With these films, the Moon, Mars and Venus became well-trodden territories of the big screen.⁰¹³ In comparison, *Ikarie XB 1's* journey was far more ambitious – the film was among the first to realise a mission beyond the boundaries of the Solar System.⁰¹⁴ Ironically, when American International Pictures released the film in the United States in 1964, under the title *Voyage to the End of the Universe*, it was given a new ending, swapping shots of *Ikarie's* destination, the "White Planet", with those of Manhattan (the mysterious "Green Planet" of the U.S. version).⁰¹⁵ This absurd scene of homecoming, which stripped Czechoslovakia of a symbolic cosmic triumph, nevertheless points to the film's own unusual approach to the genre. In contrast to most space operas which emphasise conquest though visual spectacle, *Ikarie's* epic odyssey, despite its heroic narrative, is largely a pretext for turning the gaze back at man – his own anxious response to the future, manifest though his everyday, earthly concerns.

Indeed, for the duration of the voyage, *Ikarie XB 1* demonstrates a remarkable lack of interest in the universe as a place. There are no planets with barren or picturesque landscapes to behold, no awe-inspiring arrays of flying saucers or alien beings. Beyond such attractions, the universe itself, much like the sea, is not a space in which the trajectory of movement can be clearly marked cinematographically; there is no path to follow, no visible trace to leave behind. Thus, with the exception of several brief "exterior" shots that punctuate the narrative, the universe figures largely within an iconography of longing: it is gazed at from inside, through an enormous observatory window, a sublime image of a star-studded black void. Instead of outwards, the camera is directed inwards, into the "inner space" of

009 *Před startem do vesmíru* (1960).

010 Brian Clegg, *Final Frontier: The Pioneering Science and Technology of Exploring the Universe*. New York: St. Martin's Press 2014, p. 16.

011 See Tom Gunning and Katharina Loew, Lunar Longings and Rocket Fever. Rediscovering *Woman in the Moon*. In: Joe McElhaney (ed.), *A Companion to Fritz Lang*. Chichester: Wiley 2015, pp. 554–586. See also Glenn Erikson's review of Vasili Zhuravlyov's *Kosmicheskii reys: Fantasticheskaya novella* (1935) on <http://www.dvdtalk.com/dvdsavant/s2151reis.html> [accessed 10. 6. 2016].

012 See Gary Westfahl's comprehensive study of this genre prior to, and during this period: *The Space-suit Film. A History, 1918–1969*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. 2012.

013 At around the same time all these destinations were being reached off-screen, by Soviet unmanned probes.

014 G. Westfahl, op. cit., p. 240.

015 For a brief comparison between the Czechoslovak and American releases see M. Brooke, op. cit., p. 12; for a discussion of the U.S. promotion of the film, see Jindřiška Bláhová, "They've Seen the Impossible... They've Lived the Incredible..." Repackaging Czechoslovak Films for the US Market during the Cold War. *Illuminace* 24, 2012, no. 3, pp. 138–145.



the spaceship and the human mind that dwells within. It is here that Polák stages a spectacle of a technologically and aesthetically perfected world.⁰¹⁶

In this respect, *Ikarie XB 1* is a symptomatic product of the so-called Cold War “thaw”, an era marked by a “peaceful coexistence” between the East and the West, accompanied by an intense cultural and economic competition. In an effort to match the West, newly image-conscious countries of the Eastern bloc began to encourage highly visible displays of home-grown art, design and mass commodities that were to represent the socialist way of life on the international scene. In addition to technological and industrial innovation, the new political weapon became the more “innocent” domain of lifestyle.⁰¹⁷ Following a host of international exhibitions that encouraged a culture of comparison and exchange, *Ikarie XB 1* began its life immediately in the wake of the most important of them in recent history – the Brussels EXPO of 1958. Here socialist countries surprised the world by exhibiting architecturally progressive pavilions, among which the Czechoslovakian one was crowned with the *Grand Prix*.

016 Nota bene – the change of the title from Lem’s *Magellan Nebula* to “Silver Comet” of the first scripts, and finally, via several other titles, to *Ikarie XB 1* reflects the film’s own focus.

017 For an excellent account of this cultural competition see David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970*. London: V&A Publishing 2008.

With a widescreen format and a staggering budget of five million Crowns, which was to guarantee the film’s exceptional production value, *Ikarie XB 1* was undoubtedly conceived in this logic of international competition. It was to be a representative showcase of Czechoslovakia’s capability of impressive cultural (and, in cinematic terms, technological) achievements. Film, with its huge popular appeal, was in a privileged position to confidently assert an image of a small socialist country’s modernity. Like Oldřich Lipský’s earlier science fiction comedy *Muž z prvního století*, *Ikarie* presents cutting-edge technological wonders and futuristic objects of desire among visually striking modernist spaces. But its vision is more grown-up and sophisticated, promising to elevate the science fiction genre from its low-brow status.

Just Imagine... The New Man

In his 1905 novel *A Modern Utopia*, H.G. Wells provides a detailed account of an imaginary, more perfect society living in a parallel world similar to ours. In the first chapter, he outlines “very definite artistic limitations” to narrating utopia:

There must always be a certain effect of hardness and thinness about utopian speculations. Their common fault is to be comprehensively jejune. That which is the blood and warmth of reality of life is largely absent; there are no individualities, but only generalised people. In almost every utopia [...] one sees handsome but characterless buildings, symmetrical and perfect cultivations, and a multitude of people, healthy, happy, beautifully dressed, but without any personal distinction whatever [...] The thing that is merely proposed [...] however rational, however necessary, seems strange and inhuman in its clear, hard, uncompromising lines, its unqualified angles and surfaces.⁰¹⁸

The passage suggests that the utopian paradigm is in itself inherently vexed. And, as if to prove the point, Wells then proceeds to introduce precisely the kind of schematically virtuous, generalised characters in the book.⁰¹⁹ His later utopian novels *Men Like Gods* (1923) and *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) are similarly populated by perfected human species.

Like Wells, Pavel Juráček was keenly aware of the pitfalls of formulaic utopian imaginings. While working on the script, he made a point in his diary that he knew better than to imitate the “stupid”, overly virtuous ideals of the communist

018 H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* [New York]: Sheba Blake Publishing 2013, p. 11.

019 For more on this point, and a broader discussion of utopian writing, see Christopher S. Ferns, *Narrating Utopia. Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1999, pp. 5–7.

man, as had been outlined by earlier socialist films including *Der schweigende Stern* and *Heěo zoeěm*.⁰²⁰ Years later, however, the chronically self-doubting Juráĉek acknowledged his defeat, issuing a particularly damning remark on *Ikarie XB 1*:

[It is] stuck in a future which is awfully sterile. When I remember what rubbish I wrote in the dialogues of those noble puppets racing through the universe in a shoebox with five-point stars, I turn red and feel like hiding under the bed.⁰²¹

Juráĉek, it seems, felt particularly embarrassed at the instrumentalist use of the “noble human” within the context of Socialist Realism. Perhaps with a degree of personal and historical bias, Juráĉek saw what Lem saw when he too distanced himself from *Oběok Magellana*, rejecting it as “too sweet” an “extract of Socialist Realism”.⁰²²

The central premise of both the novel and the film was indeed one of Marxist-Leninist doctrine: in the future, capitalism will be eradicated and hand in hand with advances in science and technology, a communist society will become more enlightened. There will be equality and order, better material provision for all, and people will be generally happier, enjoying a better quality of life. Although ideas of scientific and human progress were essentially an inheritance of a broader myth of modernity, and shared by both socialist and capitalist regimes,⁰²³ they gained specific contours within the communist ideology. Communism identified itself with a radically new phase of history that had to be constructed from scratch while overcoming both the past and the present. In such a worldview, utopias became useful – not, however, for pure speculation but instead for fast-forwarding humanity into a more desired space and time. The opposing notions of utopianism and realism did not seem contradictory but, rather, more compatible than ever. Utopias offered themselves as a testing ground for possible iterations of the future in the process of its building.

So who are *Ikarie*’s utopians? Like the spaceship itself, the crew signifies an idealised world in miniature: it is multi-national, multi-generational and has a traditional gender divide. Its foreign-sounding names posit the future society as a community “built around international co-operation and notions of universal brother- and sisterhood”.⁰²⁴ This recurrent trope in socialist cinema of the time was already present in earlier science fiction films, including Kurt Maetzig’s *Der schweigende Stern* and Lipský’s *Muĝ z prvního století*, in which the world unites

via a spectacular multi-screen video-wall conference (putting to “good use” Josef Svoboda’s award-winning projection system, Polyecran). However, in contrast to the multi-racial communities in both of these earlier films, *Ikarie XB 1* is uniformly white. And despite its manifest egalitarianism, it is not a world without its internal hierarchy. The old and the young, men and women may all be equal partners in professional matters, but the old are gently patronised (astrologist Anthony is called “the granddad” and mocked for his sentimental relationship with his robot Patrik) and women’s roles are largely confined to supporting, if not “decorative”, ones, with little opportunity to face up to adversity, go astray or carry any decision-making responsibility. Thus the most “heroic” female character ends up being the pregnant Štefa, whom we see very little but who gives birth just before the film’s ending, in what is a vital, and near-mystical event, and one of the film’s two climaxes.

The group on board of the *Ikarie* is an elite one of highly educated, cultivated individuals – the scientist was, after all, the social ideal of the time. But it is impossible to ignore that this group is also one of predominantly youthful, gymnastic and good-looking bodies, flaunted in scenes showing exercise, showering and dances (Polák hired fashion models and other good-looking non-actors to play the extras).⁰²⁵ Though the emphasis on young, perfectly svelte bodies echoes the classical and traditional utopian bodily ideal, it should also be seen as the filmmakers’ re-focussing on the young generation (as subjects and audience), in a gesture of distancing from the previous era. The key concern for socialist utopias was the new man – his moral, rational, emotional and physical dimensions, and, above all, his relation to the wider collective. Thus Juráĉek and Polák’s script begins with a forward, in which the authors emphasize that it is a search for this new man that motivates their endeavour. Not only that, it gives their project a unique character within the science fiction genre:

What will people be like in fifty years? And what about later, in a hundred, or two hundred years? Our story won’t and can’t provide a full answer. It does nevertheless attempt to capture some of the characteristics of the people who will live in a classless communist society of the future. We deliberately didn’t foreground technologies as is the convention in science fiction.⁰²⁶

As is evident from the critical reception of *Ikarie XB 1* and especially *Muĝ z prvního století*, Czechoslovak commentators felt current science fiction productions were too obsessed with new technologies at the expense of re-drawing man. These foreign films were not, the critics felt, pushing the boundary of the human enough,

020 Pavel Juráĉek, *Deník (1959–1974)*. Prague: Národní filmový archiv 2003, p. 260. This passage is also cited in I. Adamoviĉ, op. cit., p. 184.

021 P. Juráĉek, op. cit., pp. 870–1.

022 “Lem’s Opinion” available on: <http://archive-pl-2013.com/open-archive/2682730/2013-08-22/79766616d7268a8f40d17f614cb27fba> [accessed 10. 6. 2016].

023 Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, Mass. – London: MIT Press 2000.

024 M. Brooke, op. cit., p. 4.

025 I. Adamoviĉ, op. cit., p. 186.

026 Barrandov Studio a.s., archive collection: Scripts and Production Documents, Pavel Juráĉek and Jindřich Polák, “Stříbrná kometa”, screenplay, february 1961, p. 2.



portraying him instead too conservatively, as a product of the present. A more transcendental approach was needed that would re-imagine man beyond the limited horizons of today.

To some, *Muž z prvního století* provided the answer. Pitched as a satirical comedy, the film derives its humour from a confrontation between a more mature society 500 years into the future and a self-centred, corrupted antihero who travels there from the present, only to expose his inadequacy. The critics received the film's exaggerated polarisation with surprising earnestness, interpreting it, tendentiously, as a biting attack on surviving remnants of bourgeois frivolity and vice. The director Oldřich Lipský was all too happy to confirm this was his intention, stressing the film was no attempt to predict the future.⁰²⁷ Still, the future man had to be given specific features, and *Muž z prvního století* shows him as a superior being – highly rational, cerebral and blissfully unaware of envy or self-indulgence. When asked about this,

027 See Jozef Vagadaj, Okolo Muža z prvního storočia. *Smena*, 1962, (12/4), p. 13. For further such readings see Ivan Bonko, Veselo o budúcnosti. *Predvoj*, 1962 (15/3), p. 18; I. Vlha, Súčasný film z budúcnosti. *Pravda*, 1962 (24/4), p. 2.

Lipský explained: “To portray these characters I consulted scientists. According to them the brain will in the future be more dominant than the emotions. People’s interpersonal relations will be colder. This was the departure point for our script.”⁰²⁸ Science could of course be mobilised to legitimise such thoroughly speculative thinking but, despite such official utterances, Lipský’s future perfect man was evidently conceived in a light-hearted spirit, as a caricature of futuristic stereotypes.

Critics were less forgiving when commenting on *Ikarie XB 1*, which to many revealed in a very concrete form the contrived nature and sheer banality of utopia-come-true. Concerns were raised already in “peer reviews” commissioned by the producers at Barrandov Studios to comment on various stages of the script. As one of their authors pointed out, *Ikarie*’s future man gives little opportunity for any development, rendering him effectively static (and thus non-cinematic): “everyone is essentially the same at the end of the story as they were at its beginning.”⁰²⁹ Later, several reviewers felt *Ikarie*’s characters were portrayed as lacking in depth, as overly pathetic, moralising and naïve.⁰³⁰ Unlike *Muž z prvního století*, *Ikarie*, with its earnest and “honest” approach, could not hide behind satire and hyperbole. To a degree, the critics had a point. The film plot contains little internally-motivated conflict, and the crew’s pervasive self-discipline and sobriety seems to preclude any interesting expressions of disobedience or deviance. Instead, it instils an almost inhuman sense of decorum where even amorous pursuits are conducted in a calm, chaste, sex-less spirit. Svenson’s and Michal’s momentary disease (and madness) are readily cured and suppressed, only to reinforce the idea that the future has eliminated any mental or physical blemishes.

Interestingly, critics internationally did not see this as an issue; it may have been the specificity of the Czechoslovak milieu at the time that local commentators were growing sensitive to anything that smacked of schematism, didacticism or preachy worthiness. And it did not help that *Ikarie XB 1* did considerably more than its predecessor to re-focus attention from future technological marvels to human concerns, and portray men and women as subjects with “real” problems, emotions, and occasionally even humour. After all, not everything is sterile on the Ikarie. Many of the crew tackle their anxieties, restlessness, alienation and boredom, faced as they are with the confines of an artificial environment and limited social interaction. Human nature is tested face to face with extreme conditions and external dangers. There are bouts of anger and moments of disappointment. Some fall in love, others seek comfort in classical music, yet others worry about “avitaminosis”. Above all, there is all the time in the world to reflect on one’s condition. What the local jour-

028 J. Vagadaj, op. cit., p. 13.

029 Dramaturgical Analysis of Draft Screenplay *Ikarie XB 1* by Pavel Juráček and Jindřich Polák, Assessment Signed by Jiří Procházka, 27/7/1961. Národní filmový archiv, prosím doplnit slozku/signaturu, Jiří Procházka, ‘Odborný posudek’, 27/07/1961:1.

030 See, for example, Jaroslav Boček, Malá česká sci-fi. *Kulturní tvorba* 1, 1963, no. 28, p. 13, or Vladimír Bystov, Mezi slepými jednooký králem. *Film a divadlo* 7, 1963, no. 18, pp. 9, 18.

nalists may not have fully appreciated – and what the Trieste festival’s highbrow jury (of prominent figures including Kingsley Amis and Umberto Eco) did recognise – was that a humanistic approach such as *Ikarie XB 1*’s was until that point unusual within science fiction cinema, and perhaps even ahead of its time.⁰³¹

A (Credible) Voyage through a Spaceship’s Interior

Any visualisation of the future involves a leap of imagination, a speculation about what the future will be like, and what it will look like. Such leap is an act of crossing the limits of the familiar world while at the same time never fully abandoning it. For it to speak to us, we must be able to recognise ourselves in the future; it has to show itself as an unfamiliar version of the present. Thus science fiction films are principally composites of already known elements, brought together in a manner that appears not so much new as *strange*. In the first blossoming of science fiction cinema during the 1920s and 1930s, production design famously derived much from – and ultimately, exposed to a wide audience – modern American architecture and European art modernisms, most notably cubism, futurism, expressionism, constructivism, Art Deco and Bauhaus style. The visually striking sets of films like *Aënuma* (Aelita: Queen of Mars, 1924), *Metropolis* (1927), *High Treason* (1929), *Just Imagine* (1930) or *Things to Come* (1936) translated for film some of these movements’ most forward-looking formal features, while adding to these new fantastic elements of architectural, urbanistic and technological utopias.⁰³² These films featured radical, but recognisable, visual idioms such as skyscrapers, expressionistic diagonals, stark geometric forms and shiny industrial surfaces, all of which had the requisite feel of futuristic otherness. Utopian or dystopian, they typically asserted a “modernist, masculinist and technocratic” vision of tomorrow’s world.⁰³³ Especially William Cameron Menzies’s *Things to Come* became an influential template for designing an optimistic, rationalised future in what Juan Antonio Ramirez has called a “Streamline Moderne” style.⁰³⁴

In an apparent shift, science fiction films of the 1950s began to turn away from exotic avant-gardisms and other overtly fantastical elements. Coinciding with the American and Soviet space programmes (though the latter was notoriously se-

cretive) was a new demand for verisimilitude and “authenticity” within the genre. Future-ness had to be not only believable but also convincing. An apparent contradiction thus arose: designers were attempting to envision dwellings, machines and gadgets that *could* function, while continuing to capture the “out of this world” moment of magic. Spaceship design especially was now routinely discussed with scientists and engineers, a tendency that culminated with Stanley Kubrick’s art director Harry Lange engaging NASA in a direct collaboration for *2001*.⁰³⁵ In this regard, *Ikarie* was no exception, with a team of scientific advisors⁰³⁶ and with art director Jan Zázvorka and Polák dispatched to Moscow with a suitcase of sketches, seeking approval from yet more experts there.⁰³⁷ It was later reported that *Ikarie XB 1*’s vision of the future was so well executed it “bordered on probability” and was taken to be “documentary”⁰³⁸ footage of the future. As Ivan Adamovič notes, “it is telling that *Ikarie XB 1* was not perceived as a work of art but, rather, a view of what life would be in a distant communist society.”⁰³⁹ Yet, with all the talk about “realism”, futuristic sets continued to rely on cutting-edge art movements and technologies for their raw material, especially where the two intersected.

During pre-production, Polák and Juráček visited Stanisław Lem in Poland, seeking detailed visual clues directly at the source. They saw the disparity between a book, which can work with abstraction or rough sketching, and cinema, a medium with closely established audio-visual links to reality. Whereas a book can rely on the imagination, cinema gives concrete form; it *describes*. As Polák later said: “In film even the greatest fiction is completely realistic. Something simply has to be placed in front of the camera.”⁰⁴⁰ Armed with a list of questions about the look of future fabrics and furniture, Polák and Juráček nevertheless met with a complete lack of interest on the part of the writer.⁰⁴¹

Ikarie’s spaceship was conceived not merely as a vehicle travelling from place A to B (or from time A to B) but also, and primarily, as a living space. Its exterior, a speedboat-like vessel equipped with three detachable explorer shuttles in the shape of flying saucers, is seen only in a handful of brief special effect shots. In contrast, its lavish interior is given ample exposure. It is fashioned as a self-contained world and a “total” scenographic experience of the future, in which an array of visual and aural expressions is synthesised in the manner of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

031 Writing a report on the Trieste festival, for example, a British journalist wrote about *Ikarie XB 1*: “Directed with great sensitivity, it is the most believable and dignified science fiction made anywhere since the war, and the only film on record in which passengers on a spaceship behave like adult, intelligent and sophisticated beings.” Elliott Stein, *Saucers Awe the Adriatic*. *Financial Times*, 9. 9. 1963, p. 12.

032 Donald Albrecht, *Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies*. New York: Harper & Row 1986, pp. 52–68, 153–174; David T. Fortin, *Architecture and Science-Fiction Film: Philip K. Dick and the Spectacle of Home*. Farnham: Ashgate 2011, p. 31.

033 Tim Bergfelder – Sue Harris – Sarah Street, *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in 1930s European Cinema*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2007, p. 113.

034 Juan Antonio Ramírez, *Architecture for the Screen: A Critical Study of Set Design in Hollywood’s Golden Age*. Jefferson, N.C. – London: McFarland & Co. 2004, p. 192.

035 Christopher Frayling, *The 2001 File: Harry Lange and the Design of the Landmark Science Fiction Film*. London: Rare Art Press 2015.

036 See M. Brooke, op. cit., for a listing of some of the collaborators.

037 Jaroslav Jiran, op. cit., p. 44.

038 See *Ikarie XB 1* v tisku švýcarském. Československá kinematografie ve světle zahraničního tisku, 1965, no. 10, p. 98–99 [clipping from *La Tribune de Genève*, (Genève, 6. 9. 1965, Feuille d’uille de Neuchâtel)].

039 I. Adamovič, op. cit., p. 184.

040 Jaroslav Jiran, op. cit., p. 43.

041 Ibid.

Architecture, furniture design, clothing, light, screens, kinetic objects and electronic music all come together to compose a monumental multimedial space that is at once a “machine for living” and a theatrical stage.

Jan Zázvorka’s set design is one of *Ikarie XB 1*’s most remarkable achievements, one that contributed to the film’s international success and continues to fascinate today. Before *Ikarie XB 1*, Zázvorka had already been the go-to film architect for over two decades, responsible for over 100 film and television titles. His portfolio includes other science fiction films, Otakar Vávra’s *Krakatit* (1948), where he met with Vávra’s then-assistant Polák, and *Muž z prvního století* released a year earlier. For the latter, Zázvorka produced kooky sets that evoked contemporary art movements as well as mid-century modern design (Umberto Eco, for one, compared them to the work of Bruno Munari and his disciples).⁰⁴² In the cacophony of playful forms and objects the film echoed the then-popular “Brussels style”. For *Ikarie XB 1*, Polák and Zázvorka opted for a more purist, structured, geometric style reminiscent of pre-war modernism, though some of the architectural elements from the previous film make a re-appearance.

The first third of the film is a parade of the ship’s impressive décor. One by one, we see a central navigation room, video-communication room, dining room, the “chlorellon” section, gymnasium, observatory, relaxation room, and, in between these, corridors. Together, they picture a highly technologised environment of glistening silver-painted surfaces and transparent plastics. All the common rooms are uncluttered, open-plan interiors, which Jan Kališ’s photography generously shows off. Corridors and walls are used as framing devices for actors’ actions. They either flatten space, forming magnificent, often luminous, backdrops, or offer a deep perspectival view for added drama, as is the case with the film’s “signature” octagonal corridor, which, shot from a one-point perspective, leads the eye towards the vanishing point. This is the most frequently mentioned detail of the film’s architecture, evoked for its similarity to the corridor in Kubrick’s *2001*.⁰⁴³

The extraordinary visual effect of *Ikarie XB 1*’s décor is created by a carefully orchestrated composition of opaque and transparent volumes, textured surfaces, high-contrast patterns and lights, all of which make a brilliant use of black



and white film. Like in the earlier *Muž z prvního století*, the décor is everywhere bathed in electric light and permeated with kinetic movement, accentuated by whirring and bleeping electronic sounds. Zázvorka was probably not immune to contemporary explorations of the expressive possibilities of movement (through mechanical means or illusion), light and time by the optical and kinetic art movements.⁰⁴⁴ In almost every interior of the *Ikarie* there are kinetic features that theatrically activate the space: large cylindrical tubes with bubbles travelling through clear liquid, turning and flickering video-eyes connected to a central monitoring system, revolving structures that cast abstract light and shadow formations à la László Moholy-Nagy’s *Light-Space Modulator* (1922–1930) or, more recently, Otto Peine’s *Light Ballets* (from 1959). Video monitors and screens are omnipresent, showing the inside and outside of the ship or, more interestingly, psychedelic moiré patterns (as when commander MacDonald loses connection with his wife Rena on Earth).

All the architectonic elements in *Ikarie XB 1* are designed to maximise an optical spectacle and intensify the sensory experience of space. Many of the walls are backlit transparent or semi-transparent plastic sheets. Other walls are dark, with perforated repeat patterns that allow light through its openings. One of the

042 *Corriere della Sera*, 13 July 1963, transcription in: *Zprávy z festivalu v Triestě*, 1963. Národní filmový archiv – signaturu prosím. Nota bene, Eco’s comparison was no throwaway remark. Earlier in 1962, he wrote about his friend Munari in an essay about electronic/cybernetic art, “La forma del disordine”, published in *Almanacco Letterario Bompiani*, and a catalogue essay for the kinetic art and “programmed art” exhibition *Arte programmata. Arte cinetica. Opere moltiplicate. Opera aperta* (May 1962), organised by Munari and Giorgio Soavi for Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan.

043 Indeed the corridor is subject to much Internet debate and appreciation. See, for example, Anorak, “The most unforgettable corridors in sci-fi – in photos” on <http://flashbak.com/the-most-unforgettable-corridors-in-sci-fi-in-photos-11857/> [accessed 10. 6. 2016]; see also “Kogonda’s” video tracing the one-point-view in all of Kubrick’s cinema: <https://vimeo.com/48425421> [accessed 10. 6. 2016]. But it is worth noting that *Ikarie*’s corridor has its own cinematic antecedents in King Vidor’s *The Crowd* (1928), and especially Alain Resnais’s *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (Last Year in Marienbad, 1961).

044 Both had been growing in prominence internationally since the 1955 “Le Mouvement” exhibition at Denise René gallery in Paris.

dining room scenes, for example, opens with a shot framing a partition of corrugated plastic, which becomes animated with heavily distorted images of bodies walking behind it. Here film camera optics finds an ideal match in living architecture, and vice versa – just as Siegfried Giedion noted about modernist architecture, “Only film can make [it] intelligible”.⁰⁴⁵

Imposing, the film’s scenography often threatens to upstage the actors.⁰⁴⁶ A gym scene opens with a giant revolving sphere encircled by a ring of plastic stencils (a sun lamp) before the naked torso of exercising Svenson moves into frame. With lights attached to its top, the sun sculpture creates moving patterns of light around the room.⁰⁴⁷ The birth of Štefa’s baby is first announced by amplified sounds of a crying infant, visually matched with a close-up of a flashing speaker, followed by another one positioned under a monumental constructivist ceiling. We eventually see the baby as an image within an image, as it is broadcast live via a large circular video monitor.

In this ultra-modern world, everyday life is saturated with technology, which performs human tasks and mediates human relations. This is perhaps most poignantly expressed in a scene when the crew fall into a temporary coma, caused by a mysterious radiation. As they sleep, their machines seem to render them redundant, as they continue to dispense meals, flash lights, make announcements and, in the case of robot Patrik, move freely around. There is a sense of ambivalence in the film’s attitudes towards such a future. Not only are the cool, efficient spaces of automation and surveillance in need of some humanisation, they can also become alienating and even hostile. In a delirious opening shot, the angular corridor suddenly lights up as it senses Michal entering it, highlighting his anguish as much as its own dramatic geometry. As Michal proceeds down to the “chlorellon” section, the image starts rocking and the room’s columns turn into a phantasmagorical jungle threatening to swallow him.

045 Andres Janser – Arthur Rüegg, *Hans Richter. New Living: Architecture, Film, Space*. Baden: Lars Müller Publishers 2001, p. 22.

046 MGM’s art supervisor Cedric Gibbons once made a similar observation about his work for the film *Grand Hotel* (1932): “motion picture settings usually serve the purpose of providing a background for the action of the picture. Here, however, the sets take the role of an actor, becoming one of the central figures in the story.” J. A. Ramirez, op. cit., p. 188.

047 Only from a later shot we learn the turning sphere is part of a larger exercising platform, a monument-like formation that recalls French visionary architect Étienne-Louis Boullée’s 1784 proposal for Isaac Newton’s *Cenotaph*.



Fashions Fit for the New Age

Within the science fiction genre, costumes and costume-related artifice are among the most effective means through which to convey future-ness. Whereas architecture provides compelling settings within which bodies move, dress and adornments attach themselves directly onto the body; they act upon it and visibly transform it. Through dress bodies not only inhabit the future but, more radically perhaps, the future also inhabits bodies.

Ikarie XB 1’s costumes were designed by Ester Krumbachová, Jan Skalický and Vladimír Synek. Both Krumbachová and Skalický had already enjoyed a successful career in the theatre while Synek had worked in film since the 1950s. Krumbachová especially was a prolific and well-established costume designer (among her many other talents), with a decade-long career that had included prestigious collaborations with director Miroslav Macháček (who plays Marcel Bernard in *Ikarie XB-1*) and scenographer Josef Svoboda at Prague’s National Theatre.⁰⁴⁸ Like Záz-

048 With a lack of accessible archival material related to the film’s production design, it is difficult to know how exactly Krumbachová worked with Skalický and Synek, and how she worked with the director (who himself admitted to a controlling personality). In later recalling some of the production details, assistant director Hynek Bočan mentions mostly Krumbachová, singling her out as the most significant contributor to the costumes. Rozhovor s Hynkem Bočanem, in “Bonusové materiály”, DVD *Ikarie XB 1*, (Filmexport Home Video 2011).

vorka, Krumbachová had already worked with Lipský on *Muž z prvního století*, her first foray into film. There she parodied the kind of futurist exoticism of pre-war films like *Аэлита*, employing asymmetrical geometric shapes, metallic fabrics and rigid plastic accessories (the film even features a futurist fashion show).

For *Ikarie XB 1*, Krumbachová developed a softer, more restrained look that would blend into the film's solemn ambience. The ship's crew wear near-identical outfits, though these are not the prerequisite utilitarian overalls popular within earlier space operas. The costumes here are two-piece, more casual daywear than workwear and seem to be partly derived from the fashionable youth styles of the late-1950s and early-1960s. They consist of a tunic, a prominent cowl neck collar (evocative of the spacesuit silhouette) and trousers in a contrasting shade. The tunics are worn with a semi-transparent organza over-layer, which reveals a big "Ikarie" logo on the back (and in women's dress cleverly shows off the female figure while at the same time obscuring it). As a small concession to futuristic gadgets, the crew sport two pieces of wearable tech – an unspecified monitor hidden under the top layer of the tunic, and a "personal transmitter", worn on the wrist like a watch.

Variations in individual garments are only minimal. The purpose of these costumes is not to demarcate the individual but rather to emphasise the individuals' subjection to the higher purpose of a collective project. Indeed, even gender differentiations are limited only to slight alterations in cut and detail – women's collars are made from more decorative black lurex fabric. In her "realistic", "civilian"



approach, Krumbachová located *Ikarie's* costumes not in the radical otherness of a far-off future but, rather, in a plausible, imaginable near future. The costumes are in dialogue with fashion, although perhaps ironically, fashion was about to get ahead of fiction. In 1964 the highly structured, white-and-silver "Space Age" look would be launched in Paris, instantly rendering *Ikarie's* version of modern elegance too conservative. Nowhere is the proximity between *Ikarie's* costuming and fashion more apparent than in Hopkins's 110th birthday party, where the crew suddenly transform into a soigné society. The men don identical "evening wear" of dark, tapered trousers paired with white collarless jackets that evoke the austerity of modernist architecture but also the sleek minimalism of Pierre Cardin's menswear of the 1950s. Traditional embellishments of men's suits such as lapels, buttons and bow ties have been discarded in favour of a black criss-cross strap motif at the neckline (as seen in Cardin's 1956 women's collection). But the party serves above all to showcase women's sophisticated cocktail dresses made in shimmering fabrics (which could be lamés, brocades and satins but also synthetic textiles). With cinched-in waists, partially exposed shoulders, asymmetrical draping and wide chiffon sashes and shawls, these dresses emphasize the chic femininity of the 1950s silhouette. They resemble what was seen of MacDonald's wife's dress, implying that material luxuries are commonplace back on Earth.

The shooting script specifically refers only to Eva's dress, describing it as "strange evening dress, more like draped fabric".⁰⁴⁹ This abstract idea may have been taken directly from Lem who, as Polák recalled, was not prepared to entertain the filmmakers' specific design-related queries:

say, now they are making lurex, it's a novelty. Do you think it would fit in? Mr. Lem didn't know what lurex was and said he saw costume as an idea, and that he had met filmmakers like us before who had really annoyed him with such specific questions and who didn't understand his artistic intentions. He said he sees the girl as a beautiful young creature walking through a birch park, everything is filled with fragrance, and it's as if her dress was floating on her. And I wanted to talk lurex or dyftyn or other loathsome materialistic things, and what's worse, I also wanted to stick something on top of it, or sew something on, and otherwise differentiate from contemporary fashion. Shock horror!⁰⁵⁰

049 Barrandov Studio a.s., archive collection: Scripts and Production Documents, Pavel Juráček and Polák, 'Za 200 let koncem června' (Stříbrná kometa), shooting script, january 1962:59.

050 Cited in J. Jiran, op. cit., pp. 43–44.



Just before the party, Eva comes to Brigitte's private cabin fretting over her dress looking good. With a prominent shawl collar forming a giant bow and sash on Eva's back, the dress has the exclusive look and feel of *haute couture* (something that Eva further reinforces by adopting mannequin-like gestures). Brigitte's comment, "Why, you did a pretty good job on them!", indicates that the women are themselves responsible for their own creations (though in this case, Eva's "draped fabric" would require her to possess expert seamstress skills), presumably to emphasize their nature as non-commodities.

What Polák's recollection of his visit to Lem captures most vividly is the close attention he himself paid to recent novelties in fashion and textiles, as they would become a springboard for *Ikarie*'s costumes. His reflection on the process of differentiating suggests a careful consideration of how to locate *Ikarie*'s particular future in time. Are current fashion novelties appropriate for 200 years ahead? And what kind of statement on future fashion would a close link with current materials, styles and details effect? Utopian narratives had always been keenly aware of the perils of fashion as a supremely precise dating device, and as a result typically pictured dress as classical, timeless and "outside of fashion". The popular nineteenth-century utopia *Voyage en Icarie* (Travels in Icaria, 1840), which may have inspired the title of Polák's film, was no exception. Its author, the French socialist Étienne Cabet, imagines Icaria's dress to be highly tasteful, diverse and even opulent but at the same time strictly rejects any "irrational" qualities of a capitalist fashion system, such as luxury, exclusivity or programatic change.

Fashion in socialist countries after the Second World War also made a utopian attempt to step outside of time, taking the form of a staunchly anti-fashion stance. As Konstantina Hlaváčková and Djurdja Bartlett have shown, Eastern bloc countries had during the Stalinist period rhetorically renounced Western fashion, deeming it too redolent of capitalist individualism and excess. At its crudest, the heavily ideologised socialist narrative rejected fashion's very essence: a constant self-renewal. A system based on permanence and utilitarianism was instituted in its place, making the figure of the worker its aesthetic ideal.⁰⁵¹

In the scene of Hopkins's party, *Ikarie* makes a demonstrative turn towards fashion, with all its connotations of refinement and glamour. This gesture is symptomatic of the thaw years that began in earnest after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956, and which witnessed a gradual repositioning of Eastern fashion in relation to the West. Somewhat amusingly, in 1961 one of the script's "peer reviewers" suggested changing this scene to one of a music concert, in order to avoid considerable expense with the sets, expensive choreography and evening extra-gowns.⁰⁵² Though his pragmatic advice may have been well-meant, it missed the point entirely. The party played an essential role – to show that future utopia needn't be unstylish, that it can uphold fashion as a necessary expression of taste, sexuality and, within given parameters, also individuality.

A clear distinction is nevertheless made between this version of high fashion and one more traditionally emblematic of the "excesses" of bourgeois "decadence". This is brought into focus during an inspection of a mystery derelict spaceship, the film's only extended scene outside of the *Ikarie*. Upon an unexpected discovery of a saucer-like craft, two of the crew are dispatched in an explorer shuttle to examine it. They enter into darkness and gradually aim their torchlights at an array of easily legible clues, pointing to a lifestyle of the rich and idle: a hand clutching paper money, scattered gambling dice, several dead bodies including men impeccably dressed in smart evening clothes, a posh-looking woman wrapped in a fur collar. Sure enough, it is the clothes that help date the ship, if rather vaguely. As one of the explorers announces: "Judging by their clothes, I'd say [they come from the] twentieth [century]", and "Women are wearing jewellery". Past expressions of luxury, then, are seen as anachronisms, as belonging to an out-dated idea of beauty and glamour. And as the scene gradually reveals further sinister imagery, all this material paraphernalia becomes directly implicated in a politicised image of human depravity and debauchery.

051 Djurdja Bartlett, *Fashion East: The Spectre that Haunted Socialism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2010, pp. 99–180. Konstantina Hlaváčková, *Czech Fashion, 1940-1970. Mirror of the Times*. Prague: Olympia 2000.

052 Národní filmový archiv, signatura, Šašek, "odborný posudek" for 'Stříbrná kometa' (shooting script), 2/12/1961.



Travelling through Time

*The end effect of oddly clad intellects semi-sleepwalking through the gangways of Polák's vast Hotel Cosmos is a sort of "Space Marienbad".*⁰⁵³

Let me return to the link I drew earlier between *Ikarie XB 1* and Chris Marker's *La Jetée*. Perhaps made opportunistically, the connection does nevertheless help illuminate a central, though rarely discussed, aspect of *Ikarie XB 1* – its fascination with the workings of time. *La Jetée* is a film *about* time, with a scenario that proposes the possibility of moving in time and re-living a moment. Its protagonist physically moves between different time zones, sent there by the scientific-fantastical means of a laboratory "experiment". In that regard, *La Jetée* belongs to an older tradition of time travel narratives. In contrast, *Ikarie XB 1* is patently a film about travelling through space. Indeed, Polák later specified that he tried to eschew the theme of time travel (which, he noted, had already been tackled in *Muž z prvního století*). Instead, he wanted to arrive at a "pure genre film" situated in a single point

in time.⁰⁵⁴ And yet, his film repeatedly engineers confrontations between different time zones and temporalities. In a manner similar to time travel film, he juxtaposes different points in time, in order to generate new insights and meanings. Except, here the juxtapositions are achieved not by fantastical means but through scientific speculation or various real objects-triggers.

Although the story of *Ikarie XB 1* unfolds within a single, coherent time zone, the very idea of time as a universal flow of events is immediately complicated, narratively as well as cinematically. From early on, time is conceptualised as subject to the scientific gaze while we are constantly being reminded of its unpredictability and aberrations. For example, *Ikarie*'s scientists have calculated the length of the crew's artificially-induced sleep, but their predictions are in the end marred by external forces. Then there is a video conversation between MacDonald and his wife after *Ikarie*'s departure which reveals that the spaceship and its crew will be subjected to considerable time dilation: when the crew arrives back on Earth, MacDonald will have been away for 28-months in which time his wife will have aged by 15 years, and their unborn baby will have grown to be a 15-year-old girl.⁰⁵⁵ Thus from the very beginning, the film proposes a dual time frame in which to consider the voyage. For the duration of the journey, time on the *Ikarie* and on Earth will be bifurcated: compared with his, hers will appear drastically accelerated; compared with hers, his will appear dramatically slowed down. Spatial distancing here goes hand-in-hand with temporal distancing, so in effect, space travel becomes time travel. Characteristically, though, in *Ikarie XB 1* this is shown less as a scientific wonder than a source of personal angst and sacrifice for the couple.

But there is another aspect in which *Ikarie XB 1* problematizes the notion of time as simply a linear progression of events. Structurally, the film is in large part an extended flashback, an "objective" recollection of events through the eyes of the ship's captain, Abajev. The film opens in medias res, with a scene showing Michal running amok around the ship, a scene to which we then cyclically return towards the end of the film. It is also interesting to note how the *Ikarie*'s journey through space is experienced in temporal terms, by its crew, and how this is then mapped onto cinematic time and the viewer's subjective experience of it. The film follows the long journey, which, demarcated by its start and finish, presents an otherwise empty itinerary that has to be filled (hence the gym, party and other pastimes). The first part of the film is marked by a distinct thinness of action, which deliberately foregrounds time as duration for both the protagonists and the viewer. Unfilled, time is experienced as slow-moving, monotonous and drawn-out. It becomes almost tangible, something to be endured, like boredom. As one crew member tells another: "Something should happen. It's taking too long." This is in sharp contrast to the condensed action of

053 Elliott Stein, op. cit., p. 12.

054 Jaroslav Jiran, op. cit., p. 43.

055 The theme of time dilation is yet another aspect *Ikarie* shares with *Muž z prvního století* whose original working title was "Einstein is to Blame".

the second part of the film in which time begins to move faster, and the initial contemplative mode is exchanged for a dramatic build-up. Time, then, is not a universal given but a felt experience, one that can be easily manipulated through cinema.

Throughout the journey, the future of the twenty-second century and its various pasts are brought into close proximity via a variety of material objects that represent other times. Some of these objects enable a mockery of the past's naïve ideas of the future, effecting a kind of retro-futuristic entertainment. In the dining room, everyone has a laugh at the idea of a meal-in-a-pill, a late-nineteenth century idea of progress (that was again gaining currency within space age-inspired mass cultural imagination).⁰⁵⁶ Anthony's robot Patrik too is deemed an amusing antique. A descendent of *Forbidden Planet's* anthropomorphic robot Robby, the technologically primitive Patrik is openly ridiculed at an age of a computerised central operation system. In contrast, Marcel's grand piano, also anachronistic, impractical and incongruous on the spaceship, gains a crucial importance as a reminder of the beauty of twentieth century classical music (Arthur Honegger, to be precise).

The most significant of such encounters is one with the twentieth-century spaceship. Its exploration is a crucial moment in the film, one which signals a shift from the journey's initial inaction to increasing drama. Through the derelict ship, the Ikarie's crew are "transported" into the late twentieth century. There they find a magnificent tableau of death, with all life paused at a single moment, all action frozen into a pose. By virtue of a "clean" destructive power of a poisonous gas called "Tigger Fun", bodies have been perfectly conserved so they look merely asleep. This is a place of a temporal paralysis, time stands still here. And it is a stillness of a photograph, an immobilised moment, a forensic record. The scene resembles a museum of a strange past civilisation. But such an excursion into history has a special *gravitas* for the perfect society of the twenty-second century which had deemed the past unwanted. The explorers approach the ship like a site of an archaeological excavation (indeed, one of them tells the Ikarie: "You should have sent an archaeologist"), an entertaining thought given we are only 200 years away.

All the objects seen on the derelict spaceship have a symbolic meaning, like in a traditional *vanitas* scene, only they do not allude to a general idea of life's transience but, more prosaically, to the transience of corrupt capitalist ways.⁰⁵⁷ Gradually, we see a more gruesome picture, with yet more bodies ravaged by age, strewn around the upper galleries of the ship – presumably, these did not have the benefit of Tigger Fun's mummification effect. The exploration then climaxes with the discov-

ery of the general, the main villain, a corpse in an advanced state of decomposition, but with his military cap and aviator glasses still in place. As the crew bend over him to get a better look, a dried-up piece of flesh falls off to reveal white skull underneath. While the scene downstairs was a perfectly preserved time capsule, here the explorers walk among history's ruins.

The found ship becomes a materialisation of a collective memory that, suppressed, comes back to haunt the Ikarie crew's own present. Visiting it is an act of remembering, and it is thoroughly appropriate that this finds its expression in an eerie, disorienting sequence which begins with stumbling in darkness. And of course, this particular "past" that is being remembered was a near future of *Ikarie XB 1's* and *La Jetée's* time of making – an anxiety-ridden climate informed by the horrors of the Second World War and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, which represented a real possibility of a nuclear war.⁰⁵⁸ The films of course speak about their own time, without doing so. As Fredric Jameson has it, science fiction acts to "defamiliarise and restructure our experience of our own *present*",⁰⁵⁹ transforming this (un-knowable) present into "the determinate past of something yet to come".⁰⁶⁰ In distancing ourselves from our own present, in making the present strange through the perspective of the future, we can render it more legible. But there is also a sense of warning in both films about the nature of time travel. Just like in *La Jetée*, *Ikarie XB 1* seems to suggest that remembering can be a violent deed, and, more specifically, that remembering by physically being there is a perilous act of transgression, akin to the opening of Pandora's box. The ship of the past may appear to be a wreck but it turns out to be a deadly trap that does not let go of what it once swallows. And as the past is reactivated (and its nuclear weapons with it), it causes the future and the present to collapse into it.

056 In the realm of cinema, the meal-in-a-pill was introduced in 1930 in the Fox Film Corporation film *Just Imagine*. Polák himself would later brilliantly elaborate on the idea in his 16-part television series *Návštěvníci* (The Visitors, 1983). For a more comprehensive historical account, see Matt Nowak, Meal-in-a-pill. A Staple of Science Fiction, *BBC online*, 18/11/2014, available online: <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20120221-food-pills-a-staple-of-sci-fi> [accessed 10. 6. 2016].

057 In Lem's novel the twentieth-century spaceship was specified as an American satellite filled with imperialistic warmongers. *Ikarie XB 1* is less explicit about its geographical provenance, although the English language branding connotes the original meaning.

058 For more on this in relation to *La Jetée* see Janet Harbord, *Chris Marker. La Jetée*. London – Cambridge, MA: Afterall books & MIT 2009.

059 Ibid.

060 Fredric Jameson, Progress versus Utopia. Or, Can We Imagine the Future?, *Science Fiction Studies* 9, 1982, no. 2, Utopia and Anti-Utopia, p. 151 (emphasis in the original).

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