

# Maximum Jailbreak (Original Edition Preview)

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**Abstract:** First formulated one hundred and fifty years ago by the heretical scholar Nikolai Federov, the doctrine of *cosmism* begins with an absolute refusal to treat the most basic factors conditioning life on Earth — gravity and death — as necessary constraints on action. As manifest through the intoxicated cheers of its early advocates that humans should *storm the heavens* and *conquer death*, cosmism’s foundational gesture was to conceive of the earth as a *trap*. Its duty was therefore to understand the duty of philosophy, economics and design to be the creation of means to escape it. This could be regarded as a jailbreak at the maximum possible scale, a heist in which the human species could steal itself from the vault of the Earth. After several decades of relative disinterest new space ventures are inspiring scientific, technological and popular imaginations, this essay explores what kind of cosmism might be constructed today. In this paper cosmism’s position as a means of escape is both reviewed and evaluated by reflecting on the potential of technology that actually can help us achieve its aims and also through the lens and state-of-the-art philosophy of *accelerationism*, which seeks to outrun modern tropes by intensifying them.

**Keywords:** Fedorov, cosmism, accelerationism, philosophy of space travel, design

*The greatest escape of them all is about to blow the future apart*<sup>1</sup>.

## 1. Introduction

Space travel produced some of the defining images of the twentieth century. Sputnik, the NASA logo, the shuttle’s friendly snub-nosed profile; the ratcheting tension of the liftoff countdown, a flag on the Moon that is never to flutter, the earth like a mica fleck against coal black. These were images capable of captivating a global audience, an effect enhanced by the setup of the so-called Space Race as a kind of decades-long international sports day. Then, just as things felt like they were getting going, the engines cut out. The flow of historically-new images that made space travel feel like the definitive project of the age seemed to dry up. The workaday job of transit to and from low earth orbit continued, of course, but in the relatively less charismatic forms of communications satellite maintenance and scientific research on board a sequence of space stations. The last picture capable of exerting massive popular fascination from what meant to be a beginning, not a Golden Age, dosed the wonder with horror: the crumbling arch of smoke hung over Cape Canaveral in the wake of the disappeared Challenger, which, in concert with the investigations that followed, helped to nix public enthusiasm for the enterprise as a whole.

But in the dog days that followed, the military-industrial complex morphed into the security-entertainment matrix, and grand strategy was swapped out for a riot of tactics. The Curiosity rover now commands a top-1000 Twitter account, and Virgin Galactic court the insanely wealthy with a voyage- of-a-lifetime tourist brochure. Billionaire

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<sup>1</sup> *Escape from New York* (John Carpenter, 1981), original theatrical movie trailer.

Denis Tito announces a plan to send a middle-aged couple on a long lover's jaunt into orbit around Mars (a sitcom premise pitched by a struggling screenwriter, eyes gleaming like his last dime), and Mars One top him by opening auditions for the one-way reality TV show trip to the same destination. Planetary Resources and Deep Space Industries invest in robotic asteroid capture mechanisms and graph kilo-to-dollar launch cost ratios against rare-metal

market price projections; sponsors prove keen to back a gold rush at the vertical frontier. China and India get in on the space game, kindling a predictable resurgence of defence talk. Staunch environmentalists, reviewing yet another new paper on Antarctic ice shelf cleaving, start to suggest that we don't even have to get into worrying asteroid trajectories, supervolcanic blowouts, or whatever else is buried out there in the trackless desert of the future, to think a civilisational backup on another planet might comprise a good hedge of our bets.

A sense of the proximity of the overhead vastness is once again the order of the day. We are in the midst of an epochal event, if one that has stretched out decades longer than had previously been suggested. What, then, are we to make of it? What *new* lines of thinking might be engendered by this sudden renewal of post-terrestrial projects? This essay will take up this question and elaborate one response, specifically pertaining to the connection between design and philosophy brokered by space travel. It is motivated, in the first case, by the way that space travel and settlement — as the Acme of the large-scale sociotechnical project — seem to suffer from a surfeit of significance. *Reasons to go* are multiple, diverse, and only becoming more so: national pride, entertainment dollars, the advance of science, the construction of an emergency exit on a planetary scale. The possibilities overflow their restriction to any one justification. All are unified somehow, as witnessed when they click together like Tetris blocks, strengthening the case of each and all through cross-reference to others. The common element and point of transit between them is the infrastructure that allows access to space, *a means* that earns its own legitimacy not by association with a singular end, but through the diversity of potential situations it precipitates. This, in itself, raises certain questions about basic connections between technology and freedom, which we will have cause to ...

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