



# SPUTNIK

## *The Odyssey of the Soyuz 2*

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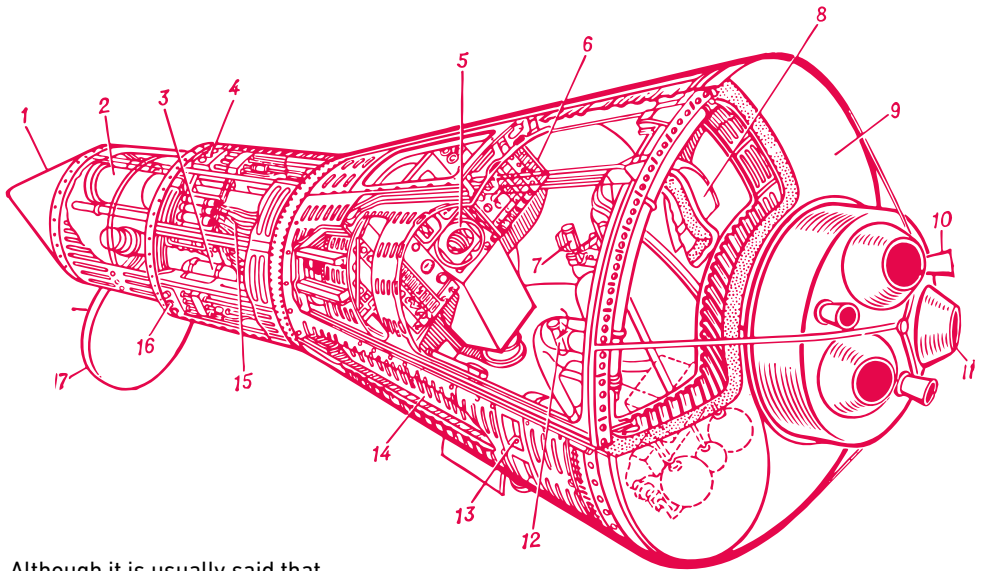
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AGENCIA PÚBLICA PARA LA GESTIÓN DE  
LA CASA NATAL DE PABLO RUIZ PICASSO  
Y OTROS EQUIPAMIENTOS MUSEÍSTICOS  
Y CULTURALES

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Although it is usually said that photography describes and cinema narrates, for me as an author and an artist who resorts to a camera as a means of expression, photography is fundamentally text. Let us not stop to analyze the shades of such a statement and let us accept that the narrativity of cinema, beyond the incorporation of words, emerges from the articulation among images. The effect of movement results from the perceptive fusion of the frames, but the thread of a story will depend on the linkages of those very same frames. Photos rarely come alone; they always belong to broader contexts that determine their sense. An identity photo in a passport is seen shielded by an objectual and informative support that tells about citizenship, name and physiognomic features. The travel photos taken by a tourist are shown in the context of an album that also contains the rest of the pictures of the report with a precise semantic structure (departure, arrival, inventory of the places visited, etc.), as well as other possible souvenirs such as brochures, postcards or bills).

In my case, I usually work with projects that consist of a series of photos whose arrangement and relation among the images deliberately create certain discursiveness. Occasionally, the project is in a book format, others are rather installations in a given institutional space (a museum, a natural park, some commercial galleries, etc.), and on other occasions, they deal with both options at a time. In each case, I find resources to emphasize the narrative dimension of the project. A publication involves the literary section, the sequentiality of images and the layout. In the installation, the space, the arrangement of the artworks on the walls, their relationship with the architecture and, even when photography is the heart of the project, the inclusion of showcases with supplementary information, as well as panels with texts or video screenings, will logically matter.

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All these make me certain that these projects are similar to those that are typically cinematographic in terms of their conception and conceptual structure, even sometimes in regard with a work process (to the extent that it requires a script, locations, actors, etc.); logically they differ in their presentation rhetoric. Motion pictures are made to be watched in theaters where moviegoers are aware that they will enjoy a dramatic work. In my projects, by contrast, there is an intention to subvert the spectators' expectations by presenting them with a material that "deconstructs" their functional routine: for example, by creating critical doubts about the authority of the institution or about the ways to disseminate knowledge. That is, my work aims to create genre confusion; the background narration is just a pretext. Thus, its similarity with cinema is in the form and rhetoric, but not in the epistemology. I myself like to consider my work pieces of conceptual art that pursue the parody, the criticism and the deconstruction of the institutionalized narrative and documentary languages.

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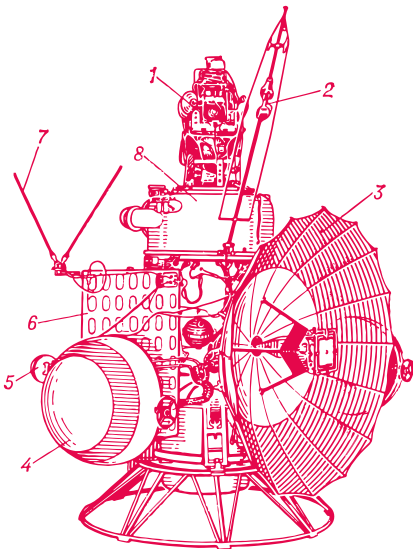


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Precisely, I would like to illustrate those premises with a project whose strong narrative component has made it the subject of a mockumentary or fake documentary by British filmmaker Stewart Jamieson. I am referring to **Sputnik: The Odyssey of the Soyuz 2**, an installation and a book that allegedly narrate a dramatic episode of the pioneer space travels. The installation consists of numerous and varied documentary materials, objects, space suits and uniforms, rocket replicas and capsules, videos, etc., as if they were displayed in a museum of technology and science. The book looks like a technical, functional and austere publication, even poorly printed to get detached from any "artistic" whims. Its content is a sort of collection of reports extracted from different archives and sources (from alleged scientific reports to others from intelligence services), all of which explain the same event from different perspectives. An event that when narrated succinctly would be as follows:

During the space race between the United States and the USSR, political reasons weighed more than purely scientific ones. The need to keep ahead of the adversary led to speeding up several missions recklessly, which had to be carried out without full guarantees. However, while NASA always kept a stance of informative transparency regarding media and public opinion, the Soviets protected their space program as the most impenetrable secret. Perhaps because, above the hypocrisy stirred up by the Cold War, they acknowledged that the exploration of the cosmos, which in that country was exclusively run by the Military-Industrial Complex, did not respond to the noble prospects of broadening humankind's horizon, as professed by capitalist propaganda, but it was a mid-term movement of geostrategic control. Let us not forget: rocket technology was nothing but missile technology.

The secrecy invoked, due to State reasons, cloaked the Soviet space program until the fall of the Iron Curtain. Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* corrected this situation gradually; a consequence of it, for example, was the creation of the Sputnik Foundation in 1987, precisely aimed at disseminating the achievements of Soviet cosmonautics, but without hiding anything, without disguising history. Thanks to the opening of secret archives and the declassification of documents, researchers have been able to bring several anecdotes to light. For instance, it is known today that the first manned flight to space, piloted by Yuri Gagarin on April 12, 1961, was on the brink of failure: the Vostok 1 started to rotate uncontrollably when reentering the atmosphere and the module failed to detach from the capsule; fortunately, the separation occurred miraculously in the last minute. Another memorable episode, only known recently, involved the dear dog Laika: she was launched into space in November 1957, but her capsule had poor thermal insulation against atmospheric friction and the unfortunate animal burned to death just a few seconds after takeoff. But desperate cuts must have desperate cures: the charred Laika was slyly replaced upon landing with a very similar dog and no one noticed the scam. The case was publicized as a great achievement of Soviet technology, when, at most, it was a feat of sleight of hand.



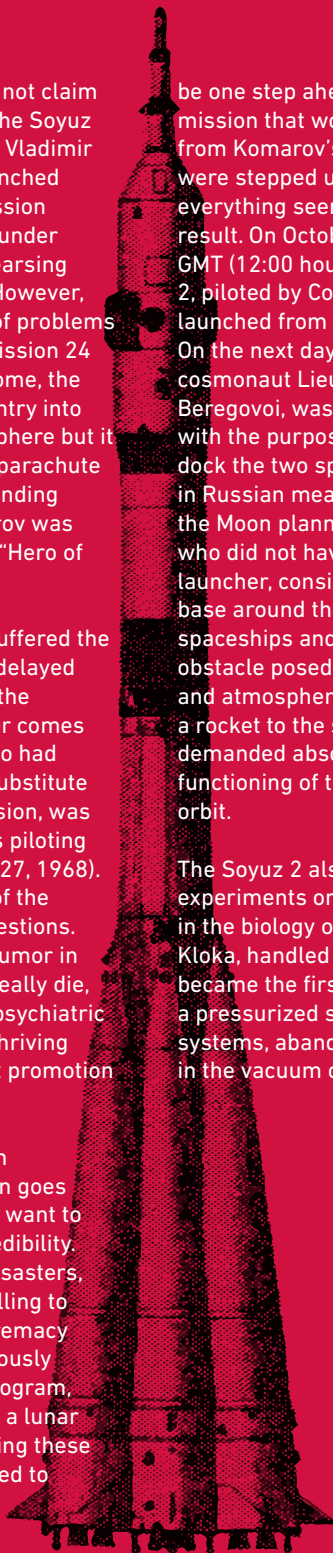
The Soviet space program did not claim any human life on flight until the Soyuz 1. Piloted by Engineer-Colonel Vladimir Komarov, the Soyuz 1 was launched on April 23, 1967, with the mission of testing navigation systems under real-flight conditions and rehearsing a docking maneuver in orbit. However, Komarov underwent a string of problems that forced him to abort the mission 24 hours later. While returning home, the spaceship made a correct reentry into the dense layers of the atmosphere but it crashed on the ground as the parachute that must have buffered the landing failed to open properly. Komarov was decorated posthumously as a "Hero of the Soviet Union".

Soviet authorities nervously suffered the consequences, as this failure delayed their expectations to conquer the Moon. And as misfortune never comes alone, the exalted Gagarin, who had been trained as a "shadow" (substitute cosmonaut) in Komarov's mission, was killed in an accident as he was piloting his plane shortly later (March 27, 1968). The death of this other "hero of the USSR" is still plagued with questions. There is still a non-refuted rumor in Moscow that Gagarin did not really die, but that he was "retired" to a psychiatric asylum in order to tackle his thriving popularity and his subsequent promotion to the leadership of the CPSU.

However, pilot-cosmonaut Ivan Istochnikov's strange epic even goes beyond the limits that we may want to impose on good sense and credibility. After those two consecutive disasters, Soviet authorities were not willing to admit a new fiasco. Their supremacy was beginning to be seen seriously compromised by the Apollo program, which was ready to undertake a lunar circumnavigation flight. Knowing these plans, the Soviet engineers tried to

be one step ahead with a high-impact mission that would allow them to recover from Komarov's tragedy. Safety measures were stepped up to the maximum level and everything seemed to augur a satisfactory result. On October 25, 1968, at 9:00 hours GMT (12:00 hours in Moscow), the Soyuz 2, piloted by Colonel Ivan Istochnikov, was launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome. On the next day, the Soyuz 3, piloted by cosmonaut Lieutenant Colonel Gueorgui Beregovoi, was launched at 9:34 hours GMT, with the purpose of resuming the intent to dock the two spaceships in orbit. "Soyuz" in Russian means "union". The route to the Moon planned by the Soviet scientists, who did not have the Saturn super-rocket launcher, consisted of establishing an orbital base around the Earth by docking several spaceships and, from there, without the obstacle posed by the attraction of gravity and atmospheric friction, they would launch a rocket to the satellite. But that mission demanded absolute confidence in the correct functioning of the docking maneuvers in orbit.

The Soyuz 2 also carried a dog on board for experiments on the effects of microgravity in the biology of live organisms; the dog Kloka, handled by cosmonaut Istochnikov, became the first dog in history that, wearing a pressurized spacesuit and life support systems, abandoned the capsule and floated in the vacuum of the cosmos.





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On October 26, the Soyuz 2 was waiting in the parking orbit for its twin spacecraft, which was in a transfer orbit. At 16:23 hours GMT, the two Soyuz spaceships tried to dock twice, but they drifted apart and lost contact later. From then on, Istochnikov stopped transmitting any messages and it appeared that he was having trouble with the SAU ("Sistema Avtomaticheskogo Upravleniya", a kind of automatic pilot in space navigation). On the next day, when the spaceships made contact again, Istochnikov had

disappeared and the spacecraft seemed to have been hit by a meteorite. The cameras and the measuring instruments on board did not register any abnormalities. The mission of the Soyuz 2 was aborted from the control center in Kaliningrad and the capsule was forced to return to Earth and recovered. Inside the spacecraft, the pilot's belongings, his notes, manual camera and black box were found intact. But there was no trace of either Istochnikov or Kloka.

It was never known what really happened and there were several conjectures about this enigma. However, Soviet authorities were not willing to admit another fiasco, so they fabricated their official version of the events: they declared that the Soyuz 2 had been an unmanned automatic flight. Officially, Ivan Istochnikov never existed. In order to quell any rumors, they banished Istochnikov's family to a *sharaga* in Siberia and threatened his colleagues; the archives were doctored and the photos were retouched. All of a sudden, the cosmonaut's life and work were erased; his body was lost in space and his memory was lost on Earth. The façade of history was remodeled at the whim of the darkest interests.

Notwithstanding, gradually, with *perestroika*, the pact of silence imposed on engineers, technicians and cosmonauts who knew about the events disappeared. The secret documents were accessible and researchers could, to some extent, reconstruct the events.



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Authentic memory erased the Machiavellian lies and Ivan Istochnikov's image was publicly rehabilitated. With the information available, the Sputnik Foundation was in charge of investigating this passionate and tragic episode in the history of cosmonautics in which, to parody Oscar Wilde, it is proved not only how nature is greater than art but how reality is greater than the most fantastic science fiction. None of the rational explanations (sabotage, accident, suicide, abduction) is convincing. Unless the pipeline systems of the State are still active; unless they continue to control tests and data, perhaps because they paternalistically think that we are dealing with excessively unbearable ghosts; unless some sort of secrecy still remains... it is certain that Istochnikov's case remains an irresolvable enigma.

Joan Fontcuberta

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