

By Matteo Emanuelli

The Cosmonaut, an Intimate and Fantastical Voyage into the Soviet Space Program



“The Cosmonaut” raised €400,000 through a crowdfunding campaign and it explores new avenues of distribution.

Credits: Riot Cinema Collective

The Cosmonaut,” a crowd-funded film produced by the Riot Cinema Collective, is a fusion of science fantasy and history inspired by the legends of the lost Soviet cosmonauts. The film is set between 1967 and 1976, and follows the life of three characters, Stas, Andrei, and Yulia, in the recently built Star City. They will be witnesses and actors of the successes and failures of the Soviet space program, fueled by passion and innovative technical ideas, but frustrated by political intrigues and power struggles. We contacted director Nicolás Alcalá to know more about this fascinating production.

The Soviet Moon Race

Andrei and Stas meet with Yulia, a telecommunication engineer, while they are training to become cosmonauts at Star City. They will both establish a deep friendship with Yulia, drifting towards love but never quite getting there.

“I fell in love with the space race, especially the Soviet part,”

During their training, they are surrounded by the prominent figures of the Soviet space race, from Gagarin to Korolev, living the epic of that pioneering era, focused on reaching the Moon before the US.

Back in the 1960s “the reasons to go to the Moon were not scientific or technological, although it served those purposes too,” says Alcalá. While the US government funneled all its efforts through a single organization, the newly founded NASA, in the USSR the space program became an internal political business, divided among four competing design bureaus: Korolev’s OKB-1, Yangel’s OKB-586, Glushko’s OKB-456, and Chelomei’s OKB-52. While Korolev was the main architect of the first successes of the Soviet space program, Chelomei managed to acquire the support of Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Soviet Union’s Communist Party. Chelomei loses political support, however, after Khrushchev’s fall in 1964, and the lunar program was put in the hands of Korolev, who was developing the powerful but flawed N1 rocket. Korolev died in

1966, and his successor, Mishin, was not able to fix the rocket, which failed in four consecutive launch attempts.

After the American lunar landing of 1969, Stas joins Chelomei’s design bureau and takes active part in the Apollo-Soyuz mission of 1975, while Andrei continues his training for a mission that could never happen. Here “The Cosmonaut” diverges from history, imagining Brezhnev, the new Soviet leader, giving Chelomei the secret mandate to develop his lunar rocket. Andrei is chosen for the mission, finally accomplishing his ultimate dream.

Lost Cosmonauts

The Cosmonaut” follows the history of the Soviet space program quite accurately, giving a personal and sometimes intimate point of view of the events. “Many of the stories that cosmonauts told me are in the film,” Alcalá says. “I fell in love with the space race, especially the Soviet part, and decided to tell my story in that period, with all those ▶▶



From left to right, the director, Nicolás Alcalá, Leon Ockenden aka Stas, Katrine Lister aka Yulia, and Max Wroottesley aka Andrei. – Credits: Daniel Mayrit

incredible achievements and conspiracies and epic stories.”

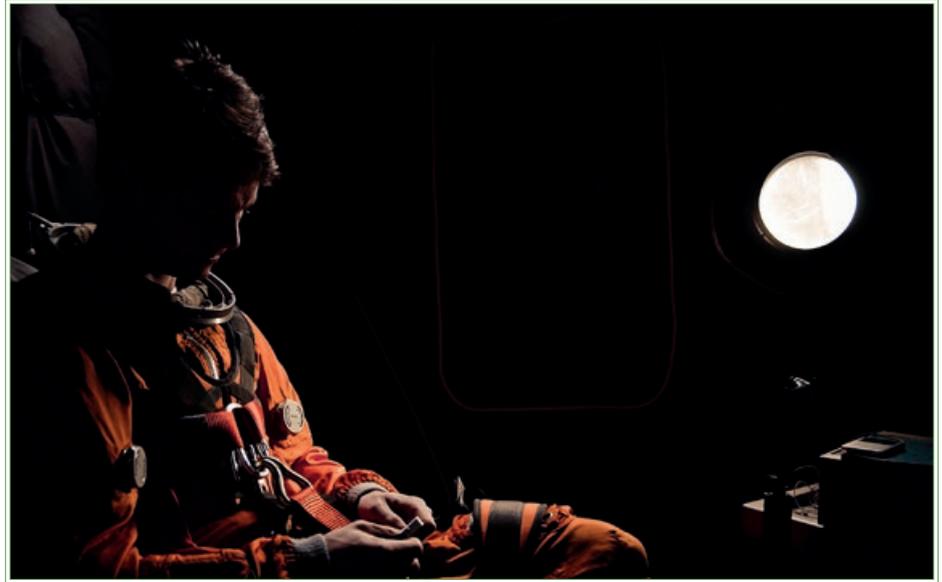
According to Alcalá, the inspiration for the movie came from stories and black legends about secret accidents and cosmonauts lost in space, never being able to return to Earth or dying during reentry. “The idea of a human being, alone, 400,000 km away from home, knowing he is going to die, just blew my mind,” says Alcalá.

The legend about lost cosmonauts in space was fueled by recordings made in the early 1960s by the Judica-Cordiglia brothers in Turin. Achille and Giovan Battista Judica-Cordiglia were two amateur radio operators who intercepted signals from various space missions, from Sputnik and the Vostok program to the Explorer-1 and Mercury, with amateur equipment. The brothers then set up their own experimental tracking station in a disused German bunker from the Second World War on a hill near Turin, where they claimed to have captured radio communications from secret Soviet space missions. Their recordings, from 1960 to 1964, include an SOS Morse code allegedly sent by a spacecraft leaving Earth orbit and an eerie recording of a female cosmonaut dying during reentry.

Although the veracity of these recordings has never been substantiated by evidence from the USSR archives, opened to the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the work of the Judica-Cordiglia brothers significantly contributed to the atmosphere of mystery surrounding the Soviet space program. The recent disclosure of the truth about Gagarin’s death leaves the doubt that something more may be revealed in the future.

An Era Lost Forever

Although “The Cosmonaut” is clearly a movie about space, space is not represented as it is usually done in Hollywood’s movies, full of explosions and “cowboy” dialogues. Most of the technical details of the movie come from historical reconstructions, with a notable exception: “The UR700 in the film was inspired by the original designs of Chelomei, while the Kolibri capsule was one of the few things that we have decided to not be historically accurate and it is nothing like the original LK700 module,” Alcalá explains. “We made a design that might have existed but it was inspired more in science fiction models



Stas alone in the Kolibri capsule. The model for the capsule was inspired by a science fiction model from the 1960s. – Credits: Miki Auvila

“People got bored about space. We need to turn it into a human story again,”

from the sixties than in something made by Chelomei.”

What makes the difference in “The Cosmonaut” is the representation of Space as a state of mind characterized by an overwhelming isolation, an intimate and fantastical voyage that wants to describe the condition of those men and women who dared to go beyond human limits for the sake of exploration, leaving their loved ones behind on Earth.

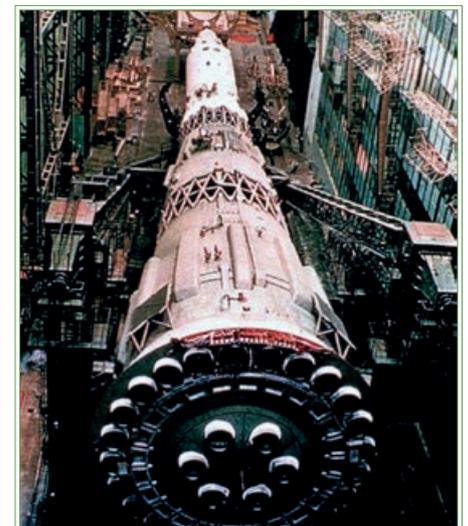
The movie tries to answer the question: is it worthwhile to explore space and go beyond our cradle, when the risk is never coming back? The answer is indeed controversial. “There is a moment at the end of the film where Andrei says he has had a dream where he asked Stas if it was worth it to have lost Yulia to walk on the Moon,” says Alcalá. “He dreams about Stas saying to him that it was not, but that, for just a fraction of a second, he felt alive.”

“The Cosmonaut” stands as a detailed canvas of the early phases of the space

age in Russia in an era, maybe lost forever, where the focus was on extending the boundaries of what was possible for humans, and not only for technology. “When that [era] ended, the next step was not Mars but just a lot of pretty intriguing scientific and technological stuff, interesting only for scientists and technological companies,” concludes Alcalá. “It was not about human beings conquering the cosmos anymore, and I think that is why people got bored about space. We need to turn it into a human story again.”

Check out “The Cosmonaut” experience for yourself at:

<http://en.cosmonautexperience.com/>



Korolev’s powerful, but flawed, N1 Rocket was meant to be the workhorse of the Soviet Moon Race. All four launch attempts ended in flames. – Credits: Russian Federation